

Monsoon, floods and COVID-19: building community resilience in Bangladesh

Findings from Union Disaster Management Committees – June 2020

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Introduction

As COVID-19 cases nearly double in two weeks to surpass 110,000,¹ flooding and cyclone season has relentlessly begun in Bangladesh. In the end of May, Cyclone Amphan swept through the country, killing 26. More than 2.4 million people were evacuated to permanent and temporary shelters before the cyclone hit, and over 200,000 houses were fully or partially damaged.² Yet, the monsoon rains have only just started. Bangladesh is at the forefront of the fight against climate change, with sea level rise and temperature increase exacerbating the impacts of hazards like floods. Two-thirds of the land is less than five meters above sea level, and 30 percent of the population live along the coast. Annual floods inundate 25 percent of the country on average; and every four to five years, severe floods affect 60 percent of the land.³ Floods lead to riverbank erosion and salinization of coastal lands, causing loss of agricultural lands and devastating livelihoods of the most vulnerable populations.

This year, hazards such as flooding will magnify the socio-economic and health impacts of COVID-19. The rapid increase of cases is already straining the limited health resources of the country. Bangladesh ranks 113th in the Global Health Index and has only 8 hospital beds per 1,000 people. Crowded living conditions in densely populated areas pose high risk for transmission; there are 1,240 people per square kilometre, compared to 455 in India and 287 in Pakistan.⁴ Two major sources of the economy, exports of ready-made garments and remittance inflows, are projected to significantly decline. The national lockdown has also disrupted domestic economic activities in a country where 85 percent of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, and one in three survive off of daily wages.⁵

Without urgent action by the government and donors, the impact of monsoon hazards will compound the effects and risks of COVID-19, and increase the chances of transmission in already highly vulnerable populations. Floods and their resulting impacts, such as loss of housing, inundation of agricultural lands, damage to critical infrastructure including health facilities, congregated sheltering, and exposure to contaminated water, can further exacerbate the socio-economic and health conditions of communities already under considerable strain.

Concern Worldwide, Mercy Corps, and Practical Action, members of the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance in Bangladesh, conducted an assessment of 15 Union Disaster

¹ Government of Bangladesh (2020) *Bangladesh Covid-19 Update*,

<<https://www.iedcr.gov.bd/index.php/component/content/article/73-ncov-2019>> [accessed June 23, 2020].

² Needs Assessment Working Group (NAWG) Bangladesh (May 31, 2020) *Bangladesh Cyclone Amphan Joint Needs Assessment*, <<https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/bangladesh/document/cyclone-amphanjoint-needs-assessmentfinal-draft-31052020>> [accessed June 10, 2020].

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (2019) *Climate Change Profile: Bangladesh*,

<<https://www.government.nl/binaries/government/documents/publications/2019/02/05/climate-change-profiles/Bangladesh.pdf>> [accessed June 10, 2020].

⁴ World Bank (2020) *South Asia Economic Focus, Spring 2020: The Cursed Blessing of Public Banks*,

<<http://hdl.handle.net/10986/33478>> [accessed 28 May 2020].

⁵ International Monetary Fund (2020) *Bangladesh: Request for Disbursement Under the Rapid Credit Facility and Purchase under the Rapid Financing Instrument-Press Release; Staff Report; and Statement by the Executive Director for Bangladesh*,

<<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2020/06/03/Bangladesh-Requests-for-Disbursement-under-the-Rapid-Credit-Facility-and-Purchase-under-the-49483>> [accessed 10 June, 2020].

Management Committees (UMDC) across three districts to understand the state of flood vulnerable populations during the pandemic; and provide recommendations for governments, donors, and communities to better prepare for the compound risks of COVID-19 during the monsoon season. Specifically, the government and donors must:

- Better prepare communities for the compound risks of COVID-19 and the monsoon season by activities such as: building additional evacuation centres, informing communities about how to prevent COVID transmission, and providing essential items like hand soap, water, and hygiene kits in evacuation sites.
- Strengthen the capacity of UMDCs, including through personnel and funding support, and detailed guidance on how to consider COVID-19 in disaster management planning.
- Provide support to the most vulnerable populations and start planning for livelihood programs that integrate disaster and climate resilience to strengthen communities' abilities to withstand additional shocks and stresses.

Methodology

The assessment targeted 15 Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMC) in the three districts of Faridpur, Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha (Annex 1). Around 380,000 people in 80,000 households live in the 15 unions.⁶ In Bangladesh, UDMCs function as the local governance structure for disaster management mandated by the Standing Order on Disasters. Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Prime Minister designated UDMCs to coordinate with Deputy Commissioners and Upazila Nirbahi Officers, and conduct activities such as food distribution for vulnerable groups; and public hygiene and sanitation promotion initiatives at the community levels.

The assessment was conducted through a structured questionnaire over the telephone with UDMC representatives and members between May 1st – June 8th. The Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance implements programs in the communities of the 15 unions. The unions were selected considering geographic and socio-economic conditions, as well as the availability of officials during this crisis. This report has been developed after analysis of subjective survey responses of the 15 UDMCs, and the findings and recommendations may not be applicable to all areas of Bangladesh.

⁶ Reported numbers by the surveyed Union Disaster Management Committees.

Summary of findings

- Flood and landslides from the monsoon season will impact communities more severely this year by compounding the socio-economic and health risks from the COVID-19 crisis. Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMC) report 72% of the population to be unemployed due to movement restrictions and workplace closures. All UDMCs report challenges in access to basic needs such as food, in a population where one in three are in poverty, and half of the population is identified as being food insecure. UDMCs also observe competition to access essential services, with political affiliations influencing access in some cases.
- Nearly 90% of UDMCs perceive that people are not fully aware of proper hygiene and sanitation practices to prevent COVID-19 transmission, including during flood events, although awareness activities are being conducted. Dissemination of information through leaflets and microphone announcements is necessary for flood vulnerable areas which lack electricity and internet connection. User-friendly messaging that provides guidance on the risks and specific prevention steps is critical for all people to take necessary action.
- All UDMCs have designated or pre-identified evacuation sites for flooding and landslides in coordination with the local government. These sites vary from schools, mosques, and embankments. However, distancing in boats to reach the sites, as well as distancing in the sites themselves, are a major challenge. Maintaining good hygiene is also difficult as none of the evacuation sites have handwashing facilities. UDMCs note their role in adapting the sites to consider COVID-19, but need specific guidance on how to do so.
- Lack of access to clean water and items for sanitation and hygiene, such as hand soap, is also apparent at the household level. 40% of UDMCs report lack of access to hand soap due to income loss, price increases by 10-15%, and limited supply from supply chain disruptions and market closures.
- UDMCs note limitations to access healthcare facilities during floods and landslides. Health services such as vaccination programs have already been halted due to COVID-19. Vulnerable groups, such as people with chronic illnesses, may face further difficulties in addressing medical concerns during the monsoon season. Coordination with local governments and health facilities is critical for communities to seek advice on how to enable access to health services.
- All surveyed unions do not have quarantine facilities and home isolation is the only available option. UDMCs expressed concern over community transmission without such facilities.
- 75% of UDMCs report they are not fully functional, mainly due to lack of resources in personnel and budget. Many UDMC members also serve as members on other committees and do not have the time and resources to fully conduct the mandated activities for disaster management planning. Although a majority of the UDMCs have supported COVID-19 awareness raising campaigns led by the union parishads so

far, UDMCs will need to work closely with local governments and related committees to be able to respond to both COVID-19 and disasters caused by the monsoon rains.

Detailed Findings

Awareness and action for COVID-19

- At the time of the survey, Dheukhali reported 7 cases of COVID-19, while other unions did not have identified cases. Cases have been reported at the district level in all of the surveyed unions.
- All UDMCs are aware of COVID-19 and taking actions such as social distancing, handwashing, and mask wearing. UDMCs are providing support to local governments and law-enforcement agencies to conduct awareness activities on hygiene and sanitation, social distancing, and prevention of mass gatherings.
- Although public hygiene awareness activities are being conducted through radio, television, microphone announcements, and leaflet distribution, nearly 90% of UDMCs report that the general population is not fully aware of proper sanitation and hygiene practices to prevent transmission. UDMCs mention the need for user-friendly awareness messaging and guidance materials that provide specific steps for handwashing.
- Communities living in coastal and riverside areas have limited electricity. Char Nasirpur, Decrearchar, North Channel, and Dheukhali unions in Faridpur district do not have access to the Internet. Communication methods such as microphone and speaker announcements and leaflet distributions are critical sources of information for these populations. UDMCs also report that people are receiving information on COVID-19 through religious leaders and mosques.
- All surveyed unions do not have quarantine and isolation facilities. Although such facilities exist at the upazila level, UDMCs express concern on access during the flooding season due to transportation disruption. UDMCs also worry that the lack of quarantine facilities at the union level could lead to rapid transmission in communities as cases rise in the country, and facilities at the upazila level will not have enough resources to handle the increased caseload.
- Messaging from television, radio, microphone announcements, and the government are considered to be trustworthy sources in the unions.

Vulnerability profile for hazards and COVID-19

- UDMCs possess data on vulnerable groups in their unions due to their role in risk mapping for hazards, which identify such households and populations. Such data can be utilized to consider vulnerable groups for COVID-19.
- According to the UDMCs, more than one in three people are living in poverty, totaling 133,000 individuals across the 15 unions.

- 45,000 are over 60 years old across the 15 unions and compose 12% of the population while 89,000 children account for 24% of the population. 6,600 pregnant women comprise 4% of the female population.
- Half of the adult population (146,000) is reported to be daily wage workers.
- 46% of the population (173,600) is identified as being food insecure.

COVID-19 impact on livelihoods and basic needs

- 72% of the population is unemployed on average across the 15 unions. Daily wage workers, such as rickshaw and transport drivers, masons, garment workers; small scale traders; and farmers have been especially impacted. Individuals who were working in Dhaka returned to their homes following factory and workplace closures when the lockdown started at the end of March and have not been employed since then.
- The COVID-19 crisis is limiting peoples' access to food in all unions. Daily wage workers, who account for half of the adult population, do not have sufficient sources of income to meet essential needs such as food. UDMCs report that food prices have risen by around 15%. Loss of income, increase in food prices, and limited availability of products due to market closures, are impacting food security for the population.
- Half of UDMCs report that cultivation of agriculture products is not possible due to lack of seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides in the market and the lack of labor from the lockdown. Farmers and workers in the agriculture sector are also not able to sell their products due to limitations in transportation services and market closures.
- UDMCs report that poor households have received a relief package of food (10 kilograms) and cash (2500 taka, approximately 30 USD), distributed by the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief. However, the relief has not reached all vulnerable families, and is also not enough to meet urgent needs.
- UDMCs report that 80% of the population has access to water for handwashing through sources such as tube wells, ponds, and rivers.
- 40% of UDMCs report lack of access to hand soap. The main reasons are lack of purchasing capacity due to income loss, price increase by 10-15%, and limited supply due to supply chain disruptions and market closures.
- All UDMCs report competition to access basic services due to socio-economic impacts from the lockdown. UDMC members observe that political affiliations are influencing relief distributions for food and non-food items in some cases. Although conflict is not predicted due to the competition, the limited availability of resources will likely make access to support programs especially difficult for marginalized groups.
- UDMCs observe that regular health services have been disrupted such as vaccine programs and birth registration due to movement limitations and precautions for COVID-19. Social protection programs for the elderly have also been halted. The monsoon season will likely further exacerbate peoples' access to health services due to disruptions in transportation and communication.

State of Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMC)

- 75% of UDMCs report they are not fully functional, mainly due to lack of resources in personnel. Many UDMC members also serve as members on other committees and do not have the time and resources to fully conduct mandated activities such as disaster management planning. However, a majority of the UDMCs have supported COVID-19 awareness raising campaigns led by the union councils.
- 75% of UDMCs report they are coordinating with different groups or stakeholders on COVID-19 preparedness and response, such as COVID-19 Coordination Committees at the union parishad level, religious leaders, local NGOs, and local politicians. 14 out of 15 UDMCs have established coordination mechanisms with local health authorities such as the upazlia health complex to seek advice and receive support.

Identified risks of COVID-19 in the monsoon season

- Cyclone Amphan had minimal impact on the 15 unions and the communities did not need to evacuate. However, the event has heightened the risk perception of UDMCs.
- Evacuation during flooding will be a major challenge as many people will gather in shelters with limited space, and social distancing will not be possible. Maintaining distancing in boats, which are used by flood vulnerable groups to reach the sites, will also be difficult.
- All UDMCs report that there are no handwashing facilities or hygiene materials at the evacuation sites. Nearly 90% of UDMCs report that people are not fully aware of proper sanitation practices to prevent transmission. Communities are not prepared to deal with COVID-19 in flooding.
- Although UDMCs are tasked with considering COVID-19 in disaster management planning, only 13% have started to do so due to lack of specific guidance and knowledge. Members lack information on how to identify possible cases, refer such individuals to necessary health care services, and take preventive actions to mitigate transmission risk. UDMCs expressed discomfort and worry in taking initiative of COVID-19 response in a disaster context due to lack of knowledge and protective equipment.
- The monsoon rains and floods lead to increased risk of water-borne and vector-borne diseases. Although access to health care is a constant challenge during this period as a result of damages to roads and infrastructure, lack of transportation services in a lockdown context will make it even more difficult for people to access such services.
- This year, flood vulnerable communities face multi-dimensional risks during the monsoon season. They are already suffering socio-economic impacts from COVID-19, such as loss of income and inability to buy and access essential items such as food. The impacts of floods on livelihoods will further accelerate such vulnerabilities and likely push numerous families into poverty.

Role of UDMCs in the monsoon season with COVID-19

UDMCs recognize their role in helping to mitigate the aforementioned risks, and have identified the below actions. However, UDMCs cannot conduct all of the activities themselves and need support from government and trusted community structures.

- Disseminate user-friendly leaflets and posters on COVID-19 risks and prevention, such as Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials, to ensure all people, especially vulnerable populations, understand the risks and necessary actions to mitigate transmission; and work with community members such as teachers and group leaders who can amplify the messages to strengthen awareness.
- Coordinate with the local government, community volunteers, emergency response team, and health authorities, to plan for disaster management considering COVID-19. Planning is especially necessary on how to reduce transmission risk during evacuation and at shelters/sites, and how to identify and respond to potential cases. Confirmation of budget allocation and financial resources for identified activities is also crucial.
- Search for or consider construction of temporary evacuation sites that can be used to avoid crowding and also isolate people with suspected symptoms.

Recommendations

- **Strengthen capacity of UDMCs:** The COVID-19 crisis highlights the importance of existing governance structures, especially at the community levels to prepare and respond in an emergency. Coordination mechanisms, networks, and operating procedures need to be prepared before a crisis to be effective. The national/sub-national governments need to further support UDMCs so they are properly staffed, budgeted, and functional to be able to respond to disasters and additional shocks like COVID-19. Surge support for UDMCs should be considered especially for the monsoon season.
- **Immediately increase user-friendly prevention outreach:** National governments and donors should provide existing Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials on COVID-19 awareness and prevention to UDMCs to ensure that all people, especially vulnerable populations, have timely access to user-friendly risk communication materials, and understand the necessary steps for prevention.
- **Consider COVID-19 in union level disaster management plans:** UDMCs urgently need support from upazila/district/national level Disaster Management Committees to consider COVID-19 in their disaster management plans. Support and guidance is especially necessary on:
 - How to prevent crowding in transportation means for evacuation and at evacuation sites.
 - How to adapt evacuation sites to consider COVID-19.

- How to ensure proper hygiene and sanitation practices for transmission prevention in evacuation sites.
 - How to identify and provide health care to people with suspected COVID-19 symptoms during flooding.
- **Increase multi-purpose cash distribution, and food and WASH support before hazards:** National/sub-national governments and donors need to provide support to vulnerable populations so that they can meet immediate essential needs like food and water, before hazard events. Such support mechanisms, which will be even more necessary following monsoon induced floods and landslides, will be difficult to access after hazard events. WASH items such as handwashing facilities, hygiene kits, and hand soap must also be provided to flood vulnerable communities ahead of the monsoon season. Stakeholders must work with UDMCs to enable access to such items in evacuation sites.
 - **Construct additional evacuation sites:** Similar to the national government's actions in Cyclone Amphan, the government and donors should immediately start investing in the construction of temporary evacuation sites in flood vulnerable communities before hazards to minimize crowding and transmission risk. Depending on the state of COVID-19 in the communities, such structures can also be used as quarantine/isolation facilities.
 - **Ensure social justice and equal access to assistance:** UDMCs need to work with local governments and community leaders to ensure that vulnerable groups are able to access essential items like food, water, and hand soap, following the Standing Order on Disasters (SoD).
 - **Prepare livelihood programs that integrate climate and disaster resilience:** Considering the severe economic disruption and extremely high unemployment caused by the lockdown, the government, with the support of donors, should prepare now for income generating activities for impacted communities. The activities should consider climate and disaster resilience so that communities are "building back better" to withstand shocks and stresses that can further exacerbate precarious conditions, such as cash-for-work or cash-for-food disaster risk reduction programs and nature-based solutions in flood prone areas.
 - **Include food security indicators, such as agriculture output and input in community risk assessments:** UDMCs should consider the impact of COVID-19 on the agriculture sector in community risk assessments to understand food security and livelihood needs, and the underlying capacities of communities to deal with hazards like flooding.

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Annex 1:

District	Union	Total population*	Number of households*
Faridpur	Char Nasirpur	15375	2965
Faridpur	Decrearchar	18646	4601
Faridpur	North Channel	23750	5042
Faridpur	Dheukhali	25754	5054
Lal Monirhat	Singimari	28513	5700
Lal Monirhat	Dauabari	29600	5444
Lal Monirhat	Patikapura	19682	3900
Lal Monirhat	Sindurnah	25700	4800
Lal Monirhat	Goddimari	22008	4400
Lal Monirhat	Soniajan	14419	2800
Gaibandha	Belka	35000	8000
Gaibandha	Kapasia	25000	5500
Gaibandha	Haripur	22100	6500
Gaibandha	Tarapur	45000	8900
Gaibandha	Sundorgonj	28000	6030
Total		378547	79635

*As reported by the surveyed Union Disaster Management Committees.