

# Update: Impact of COVID-19 and monsoon rains in flood vulnerable communities of Bangladesh

Findings from Union Disaster Management Committees – August 2020

## Background

In April-May 2020, Concern Worldwide, Mercy Corps, and Practical Action, members of the Zurich Flood Resilience Alliance in Bangladesh, published a [report](#) on the impact of COVID-19 in flood vulnerable communities based on structured questionnaire surveys to understand the compound risks of the pandemic and the monsoon season. The assessment targeted 15 Union Disaster Management Committees (UDMC) in the three districts of Faridpur, Lalmonirhat and Gaibandha, home to 380,000 people. The research made clear that floods 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) reported 72% of the population to be unemployed due to movement restrictions and workplace closures. Moreover, 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.

Since the initial analysis, Bangladesh has been devastated with one of the worst and longest-lasting flooding in recent years with at least a quarter of the country under water. Officials reported more than four million people affected and a million homes inundated. COVID-19 cases are still rising, leading to health and socio-economic challenges. Mercy Corps conducted three remote online discussions with the 15 UDMCs to:

- Understand the current situation of flood vulnerable communities during this crisis;
- Facilitate conversation and knowledge sharing between UDMCs on the current situation;
- Share good practices and brainstorm actions of how to consider COVID-19 in disaster management planning.

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## Findings

### Lack of safe elevated space and COVID-19 transmission risk

Severe and frequent flooding in the past two months have left people under a “water lockdown” with homes, schools, temples, and mosques flooded. UDMCs report that the intensity of flooding has been around three times more than previous monsoon seasons. A majority of roads are underwater, and many people are without transportation means due to lack of availability and financial accessibility to boats. Many have evacuated to limited elevated spaces, and live in crowded conditions. The lack of land and space unaffected by flooding has forced people to live on boats. Families come to higher grounds to cook and go back to their boats to eat and sleep. Access to handwashing facilities is also very limited. With two of the unions reporting cases of COVID-19, mitigating transmission risk and preventing an outbreak is a concerning challenge.

### Closures of health facilities and lack of access to healthcare

Health facilities and community clinics are also closed due to the continuous flooding. Pregnant women, the elderly, and people with existing conditions are not able to access health care. Moreover, water-borne diseases, such as diarrhea, are increasing due to flooding. However, access to medicine is also very limited due to hospital and clinic closures. Communities will not be able to easily access health services in the case of suspected symptoms of COVID-19.

### Worsening livelihood conditions and food security challenges

The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 is worsening due to flooding, and pushing people into poverty. A majority of the population had become unemployed due to the pandemic, with vulnerable groups, such as daily wage workers, particularly impacted. Recent floods have left agricultural lands under water, and most of the crops have been damaged. People are not able to meet basic needs such as food and water due to income loss. UDMCs emphasize the need for relief support such as food, drinking water, medicine, and agricultural input and equipment.

Prolonged flooding has forced people to sell valuable assets such as domestic cattle at a minimal price since they are not able to evacuate them to higher grounds due to limited space. In some cases, they are only able to receive one-tenth of the usual price due to the economic environment. The most vulnerable populations are unable to access financial resources such as loans to recover because they do not have an income source. Unemployment, food security, and livelihood impacts, exacerbated by flooding, will likely push many people into a cycle of poverty, and will have long term implications for the communities.

### Good practices of community resilience

Despite the extremely difficult circumstances, UDMC and community members have been proactively working to support vulnerable groups through activities such as food distribution and mask provision. Moreover, UDMCs have taken initiatives to transport people who need medical support, such as the elderly, pregnant women, and children, to health facilities by boat as nearby clinics have been impacted by flooding and roads are also under water. They have also evacuated vulnerable populations to temporary

shelters in elevated lands. UDMCs do not have any funds and have been bearing the expenses of boat arrangement and maintenance. In another case, UDMCs in collaboration with community volunteers organized a medical team of two doctors and six health assistants for nine communities in remote riverine char areas most impacted by flooding in the Sundargonj Upazila, with support from the Upazila Health Complex and ZFRA implementing partner ASOD. UDMCs also help transport suspected individuals to Upazila health complexes for testing and treatment.

### Urgent need for full activation of disaster preparedness systems

UDMCs need to be fully active as functioning governance systems to be able to support communities fully in disasters, including flooding. In the unions that participated in the discussions, UDMCs are currently a large committee of around 20 members, with a majority from different government departments and agencies. UDMC activities tend to be deprioritized as members have competing tasks for their daily work, and UDMC participation and engagement is voluntary. As most of the 15 UDMCs are not fully active, systems and skills to respond to floods such as contingency planning, volunteer lists, first aid provision, needs assessments, and search and rescue, are not available during a disaster. Some UDMC members suggest the committee to include more community members who will have stronger incentive to conduct disaster risk reduction activities, and reduce the number of members to half so meeting will be easier. An inclusive environment where female members are represented and able to engage is also critically important to reflect diverse needs and perspectives. Moreover, UDMC members do not have clarity on how to access funds or resources to conduct activities, and rely completely on the Chairperson or Secretary for information and opportunities from district level offices. District/sub-national governments need to support UDMCs so they can participate in budgeting processes and access funds to conduct necessary activities and skills building.

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