

COVID CRISIS AND CHAR LIFE

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HOW DOES COVID-19 AFFECT BANGLADESH ?



Jakir Howlader came to Dhaka with 4 children and his wife for better livelihood in January 2019 from Char Shahjalal under Dashmina Upazila of Patuakhali District. He lived on the harvesting fish from the river and sea. But, the income was not much to feed his family as per their needs. Upon coming to Dhaka, he managed to take a job of driving three-wheeler cart to transport goods for a whole-selling shop. That job paid him BDT 10k per month.

He admitted his two child to school near the Shani-rakhra area of South Dhaka. His dedication to work pleased his employer and increased his monthly payment to BDT 15k. Apart from that he rode his three-wheeler cart for another 2/3 hours daily upon finishing the job assignment for BDT 300-400. That extra labor paid him another BDT 6k to 8k per month. Life was going in full swing of earnings with some savings at hands.

After starting the country-wide lockdown from end of March, Jakir became jobless because his employer

With the deepest global recession, the pandemic shook Bangladesh economy significantly similar to other countries lowering economic activities, declining RMG exports, causing short-fall of foreign and domestic investments of the different projects, Apart from the mentioned consequences, the influx of returning migrants has been witnessed due to economic shut-down in the Middle-East and European countries that issue caused serious down-turn in the remittances earnings during the lock-down period. Not only people's fear on the new disease but also the income uncertainty in the urban areas pushed them to leave their current working place.

15 Million
Job Loss

74%
Income Falldown

1.4 Million
Returning Home

50k
Tanents
Left Dhaka

17 Million
Became
New Poor

5%
Taking One
Meal A Day

forced to temporary shut-down of business activities due to government safety measures against corona virus. He started to ride the cart on the street to get the opportunities to transport goods or passengers. But, there was no business activities at the market. He could manage only BDT 200-300 per day which was not enough for maintaining the family needs. Upon failing to manage anything, he return to his Char Village with his family . He said, "Both my livelihood and my children's education has been gone due to this virus'.



The number of the new poor has increased by at least 9 percentage suggesting that about 1.64 crore people have already become new poor by the end of June (Sen, 2020). According to a joint survey conducted by BRAC, DataSense and Unnayan Shamannay, the pandemic has put 10.22 crore people at financial and economic risk. About 34 per cent family responded that at least one of the family mem-

bers has lost their job. Whereas, Policy Research Institute (PRI) estimated that at least 1.5 crore people had lost jobs in the pandemic as of last April. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) reported that about 13 per cent people became unemployed in the country due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

MULTIFACETED IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHAR PEOPLE

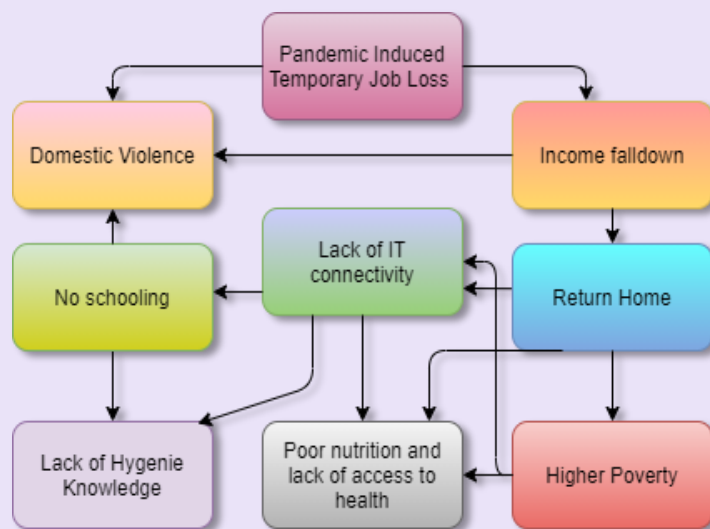
Pandemic induced shocks affected significantly the economic activities in the urban areas. The decline in economic activities pressurized people to force home return due to income uncertainty. As a consequences, the influx of people of lower income group from cities to rural areas caused to decline in labor wages. Hence, multiple associated shocks directed from the economic integration. Char areas are relatively less integrated with the mainstream economy, however the multiple issues have been emerged due to the spread of COVID-19 in the country-wide. The figure in the right showed how the pandemic induced shocks related to the lower income group with multifaceted effect on the life, livelihoods, and social cohesion.

Income and Livelihood

Char people generally lives on the agricultural activities. But the climate threat like floods forces them to search for some transitory income in urban areas. The COVID-19 pose serious threat on informal sector economic activities such as agricultural laborers, daily transport workers, house made etc. Hence, char people who came to urban areas for their income and livelihood opportunities for some transitory income, they lost the opportunities due to the cease of people movement countrywide and slow down of economic activities. The supply of agricultural inputs got disrupted in the char areas which greatly hampered the production of agricultural productivity. Consequently, the people suffered failing to cope with the new economic threat on income and livelihood opportunities. Apart from these, the incidence of borrowing money from the lenders has increased notably. That means the char people felt the vibration of the economic slow-down.

Reverse Migration

Employment opportunities are comparatively very poor in the rural areas whereas char areas are the remotest of the remote in the rural areas. Hence, the people generally migrated to urban circle to manage some works for their income sustainability during the lean seasons. But, the pandemic forced them to leave the cities or urban areas due to declination of mobility and income opportunities. On the other hand, char people are much more vulnerable to the economic shocks literally. That means the pandemic caused serious opportunity cost for the char people by damaging



the apparatus of continuous income which resulted the reverse migration from cities to rural areas including char areas.

Access to IT Connectivity

Char people usually lives on the edge of the remoteness, the physical connectivity with mainstream life and livelihood is rough and tough. That remoteness and segregation isolated from mainstream getting access to information technological facilities such as radio signals, enjoying TV programs, mobile connectivity, internet connectivity etc. Therefore, the pandemic isolated them more badly, because they deprived of the information on COVID-19 disease and its prevention measures.

Child Education

The education system in the char area is neglected than that of the mainland. Corona situation has made it even worse and leads it near to collapse. Due to very poor access to IT connectivity in the char areas, the school can not be possible through online platform or radio or even through TV. Besides that, if there is TV in someone house, there is a shortage of electricity supply. Thus, home school for remote char areas are not possible. That means the children education being totally stopped due to poor facilities in the char areas.



Hygiene Knowledge and Access to Health

Since mentioned children schooling in the char areas have been stopped due to corona virus pandemic, the people awareness through school campaign for prevention against the contagious is not be possible. Even so, the local NGOs are trying to aware people about the hand-washing practices before meals and caution about wearing masks, but still the coverage is not satisfactory. On the other hand, people access to health facilities during the corona pandemic became more hard because of their low level of awareness specially for the old-aged patients from the char areas. Moreover, the poor income opportunities keep them more adverse situation for nutritional intake. That's why the remote char people became relatively more vulnerable for proper nutritional supplements and accessing to health facilities.

Domestic Violence

That pandemic period greatly influenced the overall social issues as such incidence of women abuse and child marriage has been increased. The job loss created pressure on the household heads while the stop of children schooling also caused the uptake of child marriage. Besides that the domestic disputes and divorce in the rural char villages are increasing. This psychological issue become serious issue in the increase of domestic violence centering on the downturn of income and livelihood opportunities

Way Forward

- ⇒ To control spread of corona virus it is prescribed to use mask whenever people go out for any purpose. However, char people are not aware of the fact. Local administration and the public representatives can supply mask and make them aware of the benefit of using it in corona pandemic.
- ⇒ Char people are struggling to supply their agricultural produce such as milk and vegetables as the agricultural supply chain got disrupted due to country wide restrictions on movement due to COVID-19. Immediate intervention from local law enforcing groups such as Ansar, police can render support to the distribution of the surplus of char produce. Government health care centers in nearby locality of char areas can also use the surplus of char produce and support the market distribution.
- ⇒ Besides, absence of sufficient raw materials including fertilizers and seeds in char areas may also pose threat to food value chain. So adequate supply of raw materials can play a role to minimize any crisis in food value chain.
- ⇒ Infrastructural development work needs to be extended to char areas, which might add to the limited livelihood options in char areas as corona pandemic has made them unemployed. Besides, people who lost their earning source due to disasters such as flood will not migrate to urban areas as they can be employed as infrastructural labors.
- ⇒ Grant to renovate housing structure or emergency food and medicine for families affected due to covid-19 induced fallout in income might play a role for their sustenance in pandemic situation.
- ⇒ Local law enforcing groups such as police, ansar or army as well as public representatives should be aware of the fact that incidence of borrowing money from the lenders has increased, and should assist people to pay the money back without any pressure.
- ⇒ Alternative modes of education is absent in the char area which is now in practice in urban areas. So, in mainland sustenance in education system is ensured however in char almost no schooling facility is present after corona pandemic. Immediate government intervention is needed to improve the situation.





National Char Alliance is a national platform aimed for creating better life for char people through national level advocacy and research

works. This platform consist of likeminded development partners, international and national development organizations, civil society representatives, researchers, journalists, entrepreneurs, representatives from women and farmer organizations. For the last one decade, the alliance has been performing advocacy works for the rights of the char people.



Shamunnay is the secretariat for the National Char Alliance. It is a non-profit non-government think tank focused on pro-people research and advocacy. For

more than a decade, it has been conducting such activities to ensure fair share of development for the people living at the bottom of the social pyramid.



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“Alokito Char” is a project of Shamunnay

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