



In face of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Sylhet City Corporation (SCC) is disinfecting roads by spraying bleaching solution.

Photo credit: Daily Star, March 23, 2020. Photo reused with permission.

Local Democracy in Health Emergency

Local Governments and Community Response to COVID-19 in Bangladesh

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Introduction

Like other countries, Bangladesh declared a lockdown in late March 2020, and the country has been facing a tough period. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought multiple challenges (GoB, 2020) and new responsibilities for the local governments:

- Ensuring lockdown, social distancing, quarantine, and testing for people with symptoms and their treatment, and reducing the population's fear.
- Additional challenges have become apparent because of lockdown including disruption of food supplies, unemployment, and saving the poor from hunger.
- The culture and beliefs of people made it difficult for local governments to ensure compliance with health guidelines. For example, people went to mosque and gathered in marketplaces despite restrictions on mass gatherings.
- Influx and return of Bangladeshi expatriates and migrant workers from different parts of the world increased the burden of local governments in terms of ensuring quarantine and providing information to the government authorities about their whereabouts.

Local governments are facing these challenges with limited institutional capacity in terms of budget constraints, lack of manpower, skills, and logistics. However, the local governments, voluntary organizations and NGOs have long experience on disaster management. Moreover, there is a cultural tradition among communities of helping disadvantaged people. All these factors have both positive and negative impacts on local responses. The paper aims to analyze how local government along with local communities have responded to COVID-19, their shortcomings, and the way forward to strengthen local democracy with the local governments.

Abstract

This paper analyzes how local governments along with local communities have responded to the health emergency during the pandemic COVID-19. We conducted both content analysis and in-depth interviews to gather data. While the government followed a regulatory approach to enforce lockdown and health measures, we found that an inclusive and resilient community model may be more effective as a soft measure.

We found that local governments have become the focal point in response to the pandemic, which includes ensuring testing for the people with suspected cases, ensuring quarantine, social distancing, wearing masks, relief work and essential supplies for people under lockdown. They have worked closely with the civil administration, law enforcement agencies and health workers.

About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.



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Data and methods

Qualitative data were collected from digital contents of electronic medias (newspaper and television reports and social media). Data were cross-checked and triangulated using multiple sources of evidence. Simultaneously, in-depth interviews – in person and online using mobile phone (whichever was convenient for the participants) were conducted with local government representatives (05) and residents (10) to reveal local governments responses, what challenges they face and how to strengthen local government response.

Limitations of local democracy response

Overlapping and duplication

Because of lack of coordination – while in some areas multiple organizations or individuals provided free essential supplies, other areas remained untouched.

Moreover, people with disabilities could not come out and they received less support. In addition, since many NGOs are working in Bangladesh, there was lack of coordination with NGOs.

Widespread corruption

Especially among local government representatives and officials. Many of them misappropriated relief funds and goods and the instances were widely circulated in all medias.

Transparency International reported massive corruption in Bangladesh during pandemic outperformed any country in the world (Iftekharuzzaman, 2020; TIB, 2021).

Dependence on central government for funds

LGs are to work under budget constraints as they are dependent on central government for finance (Chowdhury & Al-Hussaine, 2012). Government provided some funds to LGs to take measures during pandemic. As government provide directions on how to use these funds, LGs cannot decide to spend

Findings

- 1 In response to COVID-19, Bangladesh so far has **followed a regulatory approach**, where law enforcement agencies, health professionals and administrators are deployed to control the situation. While the government followed a regulatory approach to enforce lockdown and health measures, we found that an inclusive and resilient community model may be more effective as a soft measure.
- 2 **Local government's role becomes pivotal** in response to the pandemic including providing testing for the people with symptoms, ensuring quarantine, ensuring food supply for those under lockdown, arranging funerals for COVID-19 victims, and ensuring social distancing, and awareness building. Here we discuss the measures taken by local governments and communities during the pandemic including some innovative practices.
- 3 **Funeral team** - People were so fearful of those who were dying from COVID-19 none were coming out for their funerals. Even the family members kept themselves away and stopped performing traditions such as having the deceased at their premises prior to burial. Some local governments formed teams with volunteers for conducting funerals.
- 4 **Oxygen bank** - Oxygen is essential for COVID patients, supplies of which become decreased due to high demand. People were also storing oxygen at their homes. This situation created a humanitarian crisis. To overcome the shortage of oxygen, some local governments along with volunteers formed teams to supply oxygen at home on demand any time (Ghosh, 2020).



Oxygen Bank by voluntary organization.
Photo credit: Prothom Alo, June 22, 2020
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5 Common free kitchen - Some individuals and social organizations distributed cooked food among disadvantaged communities in the streets during lockdown. The funds were raised through collecting donations and food items were produced in unused plots in urban areas. Moreover, they bought food items from farmers directly when they were unable to sell their produce .

6 Understanding the local context - Is an important factor to cope with any crisis or emergency. Therefore, knowing how people understand and perceive a crisis, or an emergency is critical to efforts to overcome it. For example, in the case of COVID-19, foreign language (pandemic, quarantine, isolation, social distancing) has been used, which local people do not understand. This created confusion and jokes among people resulting in negligence in compliance with health guidelines.

7 Ensuring social distancing and hygiene - LGs have worked to ensure social distancing, mask-wearing, and hygiene in public places. For example, in Sylhet City, street vendors were rearranged in open areas and school playgrounds instead of the congested marketplace. LGs actively worked with the business community to ensure shutdown of all the shops except those providing essential goods, which was a successful initiative.

8

Ensuring essential supplies

LGs provided essential supplies and medicines for affected communities. When some areas declared lockdown, residents of those areas were supported by the LGs through ensuring their quarantine, and the provision of food and essential supplies. Moreover, individuals and several social organizations distributed free supplies of essential commodities (Islam, 2020).



Free supplies of essential food by the House of Humanity (a community initiative). **Photo credit:** Dhaka Tribune, April 4, 2020
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The Way Forward

From a regulatory model to an inclusive and resilient community model for a post COVID local democracy

For central government, local governments, and communities, who are interested in developing a strong local democracy and building an effective response system for emergencies, following policy recommendations have been suggested:



Localization of response

Local governments can make things easier and acceptable using native language, increasing understanding and acceptability among local residents.

Local government representatives and community activists need to work closely and decide on what approach works best for their communities



Making local government financially and organizationally stronger

The central government should take measures to transfer directly and allocate a part of the national revenue to local governments as a policy to lessen central government control, as is done in Japan for instance (Chowdhury & Al-Hussaine, 2012). Local governments in Bangladesh are not motivated to collect income from their own sources because of dependence and fear of losing votes in local elections. They need to take measure to strengthen their financial base from their own sources.



Developing an inclusive, effective, and efficient coordination system

In Bangladesh, there are disaster management committees from national to grassroots level, which could be more inclusive through accommodating all stakeholders including local governments, local communities, political parties, individual philanthropists, voluntary organizations, and NGOs and representatives from marginalized and vulnerable groups. The central government in collaboration with local actors should provide the committees all types of logistics so that they can respond promptly. Consequently, the initiative will also lead to the reduction and prevention of corruption through ensuring accountability, transparency, and participation.

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