

Covid Crisis and Local Government Institutions (LGIs) in Bangladesh

Introduction: Covid-19 is an unanticipated global crisis suddenly caught the whole world into surprise. The spread was very quick and all encompassing. It started in Wuhan, China in December 2019 and spread to all over China within 30 days and further spread all over the world within next forty five days. The WHO declared 'global health emergency' on 30 January, 2020 and further declared Covid-19 - a 'Pandemic' on 11 March, 2020.¹ The ferocity was unprecedented, responses of different countries were uneven and successes were dubious and mixed. The WHO expressed their frustration in a press meet and the statement of the DG was, the WHO is "deeply concerned both by the alarming level of spread and severity and by the alarming level of inaction".² A total of 222 countries and regions all over the world and so far over 80 million people affected and 1.8 million already died up to December 31, 2020. Only handful of countries such as South Korea, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan, China, New Zealand, Australia etc. showed some amount of success.³ The Europe, USA (in USA confirmed cases -1,30,83,877 and death 3,28,041) and Latin America and in Asia Iran and India (in India alone confirmed cases 10, 03, 223 and death- 1,90,488) are worst affected countries still could not tackle the crisis substantially and are witnessing a second wave or resurgence since October, 2020.⁴

Bangladesh as a country and nation was not at all prepared to combat a pandemic like Covid. The health governance in general is highly fragile and not equipped to cover the whole population of the country in normal situation with the existing strength and capacity. The sudden and thunderous blow of Corona exposed the already vulnerable sector to its utter helplessness and bankruptcy. The poor governance in all other allied bodies added more confusions and disarrays, The severity of infection was not recorded as it was expected or as predicted by various quarters. The infection was around 10 to 15 percent of the tested cases. Recovery rate was much higher about 88% and death rate on an average was 1.46%.⁵ Many of the affected people prefer not to avail hospital facility as the hospital system could not earn general public confidence. It does not necessarily mean that people did not go to hospitals, but a large number of unrecorded patients (remain outside Covid statistics) receive private treatment and distanced themselves from all formal system.

Local Government Institutions (LGI) are constitutionally mandated (articles 7, 59 & 60) sub-national level governing institutions to manage administration and services at their respective levels i.e. Unions, Cities, Upajilas and Districts. The 'Covid-19' since March 2020 created 'new reality' and brought a greater change in hitherto administration and governance practices and enormously challenged **everywhere**.⁶ Local government as part of general governance system of the country was also in an all-encompassing disarrays, confusions and lacked appropriate direction. The short study is going to address the critical evaluation of LGI's role and responses to 'COVID-19' and way forward issues- The study will be developed addressing the three following questions.

Key questions focused

- What are the impacts of Covid-19 in the local government of Bangladesh?
- What are the major challenges that the local government faced during the pandemic?
- What are the ways forward and the strategies to address the challenges that the government should take?

Method followed: The study combined the data generated day to day operations of covid combat efforts of the GOB as reflected in the newspapers . and for understanding detail at the grass root, one Upajila (Chowddaygram, Cumilla) and one Union Parishad (UP- Kashinathpur of Chowddaygram) were studied carefully. All memos and circulars issued and copied time to time to Upajila and Union were collected and analyzed. The Chair UP Kashinath Pur of and the lady Vice- chair of the Chowddaygram UJP, Cumilla were regularly monitored. They reported the activities, at their respective LGIs in each of the four months (April-July, 2020). The author also talked to seven elected officials of UP, Upajila, Pourashava, JP and local activists from Chuadanga, Mymensingh and Chittagong to fathom the situation from a comparative perspective. Hard data were received by post and conversations were conducted over cell phone.

Impact of 'Covid 19, on Local Government Institutions (LGIs)

The main impact of 'Covid Crisis' on the LGIs have been exposed from three different angles. (1) It is an age old service mechanism which can deliver services to peoples' door steps very quickly under all circumstances. (2) The second impact was that it is one 'of the most neglected, emaciated and less trusted organizations in spite of its usefulness. Last but not the least, (3) the central bureaucracy decides and acts, the general people including the media reacts and the poor LGIs take the blames; objective analysis and appreciation of problems at the LGI levels is conspicuously missing.⁷

The Local government Institutions (LGIs) and local community leaders in Bangladesh normally face natural disasters like flood, cyclone, storm surges, crisis like intrusion of saline water, water logging, droughts in some particular areas and food security problem of the poor and destitute as regular programme all over the country. The country in general and LGIs in particular did not encounter any big epidemic for many years. There were times, when Small- fox, Malaria and Cholera as epidemic used to take people's lives in the villages and towns. There are countries that faced SAR, Ebola and yellow fever in the recent past; we in this part of the world did not face any of those. In short, our local communities have not been aware of combating health epidemic except isolated seasonal outbreak of Dihorrial diseases, Dengue, Chickengunia and Malaria.

The GOB started adopting policies and programs to combat corona from March (2020) onward on 'trial and error' basis and still without clear directions. The involvement of LGI in the comprehensive corona combat such as 'trekking, testing, tracing and treatment' were not even outlined as an activity at the local and community levels while strategizing corona combat plan by the central government. The involvement of LGI was perceived only for 'relief distribution' to the poor, vulnerable, displaced workers and floating population worse affected because of the imposition of lockdown. The relief goods came in the form of cash and kinds such as, cash grants for specific households, rice, seed supply for farm households, eid presents, baby food, other food bundle, assistance for crop harvest etc. All these happened within three months (April-June,2020) of corona situation in Bangladesh.

The target households and individuals targeted for corona assistance belong within the geographical areas of one or the other LG unit such as Union Parishad (UP), Pourashava and City corporations. The responsibilities were fixed at the offices of Deputy Commissioners and Upajila Nirbahi Officers. All the central orders, circulars, memos along with the relief materials cash and kinds processed through them and again those are passed on to the UP and Pourashava for distribution on emergency basis. The relief goods came in irregular intervals even in five installments in one single month. The highest quantity of relief materials received at UP levels were received in three months (April, May & June) only and then it started waning and stopped. The Up was not aware of how much quantity of which goods/materials they are going to receive in one month. The total picture of month wise relief distribution of a UP may be seen in the annexure. They could not plan anything ahead because of uncertain time gap and even more uncertain quantity of supply. The required capacity to handle too many different types of materials to distribute among varied groups and clients under varied and separate rules and procedures were not simply exist there. One common problem almost all UPs and Pourashayas faced was the storage problem of the relief materials and dearth of adequate staff support. All 'distribution Orders' were time bound and emergency. Dateline for distribution were fixed at 12 hours, 24hours and, 36 hours etc. It created lot of stresses and strain on lone staff (Secretary) at Up. The study reviewed 30 circulars issued from 8 different ministries and local administration such as prime Minister's office, Cabinet Division, LGRD&C, public administration, Health Division, Disaster Management and Relief, Primary and Mass Education and last but not the least DC and UNO offices. Many of the circulars were issued from UNO office without having any discussion at UJP meeting. The relief operations at the UP were directly handled by UP Chairmen, Tag officers (officers designated for each UP from upajila) and respective local officials of the concern ministry under the direction and supervision of UNO. When anything directed to LGIs, it is inclusive of UP, Upajila parishad and Jila Parishad, Pourashava and city corporation. UP is a matter to be noted that in Corona Combat Strategy of the government, IJJP and JP were not effectively involved in any of the direct operational activities. They acted as any other voluntary agencies of the country. In the districts and Upajita, DCs and UNOs exercised all the *de jure and de facto* roles and authorities. The Paishads at all the three levels were marginalized in their role as LGI, only chairs of those three levels were visible in different meetings and discussions. During the relief operation ventures, UP chairs and tag officers were officially assigned the responsibility but in real term they were in most cases the

hostages of the local party cadres of the ruling cliques. They prepared list of beneficiaries, distributed the goods and partially appropriated (misappropriated!) by themselves in most of the cases. All Chairmen, Mayors, Members of Parliament (MP) and officials were either in agreement or succumbed to their crowd power.⁸ Under the above circumstances, the impact of 'Covid 19' on LGIs in short are the following:

1. The UP as the lone LGI was heavily involved even beyond its capacity and obviously could not do justice to many of the works that it duly required.
2. The 'mismanagement' in relief operation at UP and Pourashava level created a national hype. They were squarely blamed and it became a buzz word echoed everywhere. But it is often forgotten that these are the only institutions that delivered the services at their own levels without any additional expenses to the GOB. They grossly lack staff support and administrative capacity.
3. In spite of wide spread blames, no other alternative institution was found which can shoulder the responsibility.
4. The LGI in general lost its face and positive public image though in the whole operation though their decision making role was marginal.
5. It really exposed the mis-management and "hazy governance" of highly bureaucratic dominance that did not get objective attention of media.
6. Total relief operation activities were non-transparent as no operational procedure was decided earlier in UP or UJP meetings in a transparent manner, rather every operation was conducted with central instruction on purely adhoc basis.
7. The total operation was officially the sole responsibility of few officials and chairmen/mayors but ultimately swallowed by crowds of different types.
8. Political rivalries at local level also created deliberate chaos to discredit the incumbent chair and members by the aspirant candidates in the ensuing election and sitting chair and member were also mindful of their vote-banks as the election was approaching.
9. The local ruling party cadres are very powerful stakeholders in all resources distribution activities which no LGI leader can ignore, they too are dependent on them for their political support.
10. The resource hungry UPs and Pourashavas suddenly got a huge quantity of resources and a significant role to play in a national crisis. They played their roles though the appreciation were mostly in the negative.

The challenges LGIs faced

1. The LGI had to face a situation in which they are told that responsibility lies with them for everything though their role and responsibility was undefined.
2. The LGI'S roles kept limited in compliance of GoB orders; their role in policy decisions, local interventions and maneuvering were unclear.
3. The LGI system has not been considered as a vital partner of corona governing efforts. The UP and Pourashava are pacified and their services were utilized for implementing the central decisions. No coordinated effort of UP, UJP, Pourashava and JP were promoted. The UJP and JP were virtually bypassed. As a result LGIs in a unified way could not take any clear stand. They have to participate in the 'corona combat' under official control and direction.
4. The pressures from political opponents, local political cadres and vote banks at times compelled them to indulge in violation or deviations of GoB orders which in official terms are "irregularities". All these 'irregularities' are not corruptions and misappropriations the way the local perception prevails; these are to

them 'local adjustments and accommodations' based on the ground reality. The dichotomy between the irregularity and local adjustment is a big challenge in all relief operations.

5. The mandatory supervisory role of assigned GOB officials are compromised to anticipated political pressure. They kept their mouths shut and eyes close when local political excesses occurred.

6. Limited digitization and lack of staff is a great impediment in smooth functioning of LGs especially the UPs and Pourashavasi in all respects it has been exposed during the Covid crisis.

7. The covid crisis made UPs and Pourashavas aware of their importance during national crisis, at the same time made them aware of their challenges and limitations. The other tiers. UJP and JP felt their relative isolation and uselessness as they were “bypassed” during a great crisis.

Way forward

The Pandemic of Covid 19 challenged the world economic and social order to a large extent. There is economic slowdown and impact on life and livings are enormous. Many of the age-old social norms and cultural practices become obsolete. New economic and social orders came under corona compulsion. Considering the discussion in above two sections the following are some of the way forward.

1. The local administration of regulatory and service under DC and all service agencies, Jila parishad, Pourashava, Upajila Parishad, Union parishad along with CSOs and voluntary sector should sit together in a series of evaluation sessions to outline the challenges so far they encountered and find way forward. No such efforts are so far seen. There are complacencies in the bureaucratic circles, complaints and blames all around and LGs are in a depressive mood. All these have be exchanged openly for mutual learning.
2. In normal development initiatives as well as during crisis management times, peoples institutions i.e. LGs (UP, Pourashava, UJP&Jp) should be treated as a single entity. Later the roles and functions may be separated and they mutually can decide each others functional and financial assignments.
3. The UNO from Upajila should not issue direct order to UPs regarding the distribution of any GOB grant or disaster relief it has to be discussed in the UJP meeting first, then with the decision from UJP delivery order should be issued.
4. The UP Chair with tag officers cannot decide or approve any beneficiary list without the approval of full UP meeting. If it is done without discussion at UP meeting that clearly violates the existing UP law. That happened in most cases. This practice has to be stopped and relevant ministry may take it into book.
5. Bypassing UJP, JP and proper meeting at all levels encourages an environment of non-transparency and non-accountable decision making and its operation.
6. Digitisation at all levels in handling relief materials (cash and kinds), accounts keeping and stock register is essential. The UP and Pourashava Household(HH) register with categorisation of HHs into extreme poor, moderate poor, threshold level poverty, moderate rich, highly rich with their profession have to be digitised.
7. All UP level GoB staff and officials should be made accountable to UP for their local activities side by side with their respective departments. The LG (UP)Act 2009, madateted 13 officials of 9 ministries posted at Union level, 'transferable' to the UPs. The provision of that legal provision has to be implemented with immediate effect.
8. The Newly constructed UP Complex created office space for all 13 UP level officials, they should occupy office spaces and start their office from UP complex.
9. The UP should be provided with adequate staff support in addition to one lone Secretary.

10. The enhancement UP Members and Chair's skill is required to make the Ward Shobha, Standing Committees, budget and planning functions meaningful. The regular UP meetings are not effectively held and dominated by Chairmen to a large extent turned UPs a non-participatory single person dominated institution. The ways and means need to be found by amending law to make it more participatory and democratic.
11. The UJP has become ineffective due to the constant violation of law and rules due to ignorance, neglect, bureaucratic excesses and bureaucratic over enthusiasm, it needs critical reevaluation.
12. District Council (JP) is kept at bay from many of the main stream development process, that also need an assessment to enable JPs to contribute.
13. An effort is needed to unite all three tiers and Pourashava and a framework for inter and intra LG cooperation and coordination mechanism should be made functional.⁹

Conclusions: The role and functions of LGI at different levels are not properly evaluated and objectively addressed, even it is not very clear from different practices that whether they are treated as sub-national governance institutions of autonomous nature or as mere agents of government's service delivery mechanism. During the Covid crisis the ambivalence has been exposed to a large extent. Institutional incapacity, legal weakness, financial inability and lack of adequate staff support need objective evaluation and proper responsibility be delineated and decentralized with "functionary, function, fund and freedom" to these constitutional bodies of sub-national level governance.

Annexure

Table-1: Month wise Relief Operation at KashinathPur Union Parishad in Chowddayyagram Upajila of cumilla

SL No	Months	Total Rice in kg./cash flow/other materials	installments	Total no of persons/ households	Rice per person/HH got in kg	Source of Supply
01	March 2020	500	01	50	10	GoB
02	April 2020	7500	05	850	8+	GoB
03	May 2020	9820+ 65 packet Baby food+ TK.2500x670 =16,75,000 cash	05+1+1	1243+65+670=1978	7+	GoB (UNO office+DistRelief+PM office)
04	June 2020	6615+37 food packets+ Ups own relief	03	450+37+1000 =1487	14+	GoB/UP/ Jila Parishad/ Meghna Group
05	July 2020	No GOB allocation		**5000(excluded from total)		UP
06	total	Rice- 24,435		*4365		

Source: UP office memo (15/11/2020)

'The beneficiary only include GOB Relief materials and cash assistance. The Up arranged some of its own relief operations with local resources which include mask distribution, food support and treatment supports which is not recorded here. Normal Safety net continued as usual.

*GOB Corona relief stopped from July onward and the normal Safety net programmes delivery continues.

Reference:

1 Press conference of DG WHO, Mrarch 19-25, 2020

2 Statement made by DG WHO, April 2020

3 CNN on 30 December, 2020

4 WHO Covid status report December 31, 2020

5 Covid status dashboard December 31,2020

6 Tofail Ahmed, Human lives and economy; can there be at rade off, The Daily Star, 13/04/2020

7 There press report on the 'irregularities of relief operations at UP and Pourashava levels and LG Division suspended 126 LG Elected representatives.

8 These were revealed during our discussions with the local leaders from time to time and results of the analysis of memos and circulars.

9 The Association of UJP called press conference on 2 December at 2020 Reporters Unity, Dhaka and made a writ petition on December 10, 2020. The wnt in its content listed lot administrative excesses from which they sought redresses.