

Covid-19 and its impact on the livelihood of indigenous peoples of Bangladesh



Kapaeeng Foundation

Covid-19 and its impact on the livelihood of indigenous peoples of Bangladesh

Introduction:

The global pandemic COVID-19 has had its effect from global, regional, country, community level to individuals in every aspect. From the onset of 2019 until now, COVID-19 has affected 16.96 million people across the world and claimed 3.5 million lives¹. Thanks to the globalization, that the pandemic has reached almost all the corners of the earth, from the big crowded cities to the remotest islands and mountains. People are effected health wise of course, but the social and economic impact of this pandemic has been phenomenal. The preventive measures such as social distancing and lockdown of public spaces has created enormous impact on livelihood, basic services affecting the social and economic security of life. Although the modern social media trolls identified the COVID-19 as a socialist one, claiming that it has affected people of every social tier equally, the situational reports and studies show a different scenario. Humanitarian crisis has its impact on all, but people who are marginalized receive most of it because of the existing socially unequal condition and discriminatory norms. Globally the indigenous populations are facing one of the gravest health threats due to the COVID-19 situation as claimed by the Economic and Social Welfare Department of United Nations². The effect is not only on health, but also on the aspects of livelihood and social security of indigenous population.

Bangladesh, is also dealing with COVID-19 crisis with much hurdles. The country has been remained in high alert since the first COVID-19 case was detected on March 8, 2020³. There are preventive measures like prolonged lockdowns, special COVID-19 sections in government and private hospitals. Still there are increasing infection rates. As of 9th June 2021, there have been 815,282 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 12,913 deaths reported by WHO⁴. Despite the government's efforts to aid the people who are marginalized, people in the country are at the face of loss of livelihood, unemployment, shortage of daily supply and health services. The situation is more crucial for the indigenous population living in the country. There are at least 50 indigenous and tribal populations (ITPs) living in different parts of Bangladesh that constitute approximately 1-2% of the total population of the country. The deprivation of the ITPs for socio-economic development is historical in Bangladesh. This challenging situation of the ITPs has been exacerbated by the global crisis brought by COVID-19⁵. In April 2020, Bangladesh Adivasi Forum, Jatiya Adivasi Parishad and Kapaeeng Foundation – three organizations working for the rights of Indigenous Peoples of Bangladesh – issued a joint press release which stated that various indigenous and tribal communities of the country are facing severe food and economic crisis due to the loss of livelihoods

1 (WHO, Epidemiological report#42, 2021).

<https://covid19.who.int>

2 (DESA, 2020).

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html>

3 (Women, 2020)

https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/in_the_shadows_of_the_pandemic_gendered_impact_of_covid19_on_rohingya_and_host_communities_october2020_0.pdf

4 (WHO, 2021)

<https://covid19.who.int/region/searo/country/bd>

5 Trimita Chakma, Pallab Chakma, (2020) The impact of covid-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples of Bangladesh. Kapaeeng Foundation.

resulted by the prolonged lock-down measures of the government. A huge number of families are depended on daily wage earning, and only a small proportion of them has received aid from the government. These communities were: the Hajong and Banai community in Nalitabari, Dhobaura, Durgapur, Kolmakanda, Maddyannagar and Taherpur, nearly 1.5 million peoples from 38 indigenous communities living in 13 districts in Rajshahi and Rangpur, tea garden workers in Sylhet, indigenous communities in Cox's Bazar as well as in the three districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts⁶.

This advocacy paper draws attention on the crisis of livelihood brought by the global COVID pandemic situation on the ITPs living in Bangladesh. It is crucial for the government of Bangladesh to address these issues to reduce the historical inequalities as well as the ongoing perilous situation.

Background:

Globally indigenous and peoples experience a high degree of socio-economic marginalization as well as disproportionate risk during public health emergencies. That is why; a majority of the population has become more vulnerable during this COVID-19 pandemic situation, because of the factors such as the lack of access to effective monitoring, early warning systems and lack of adequate health and social services⁷.

In Bangladesh, the ITPs living in both plains and the hilly areas have been deprived from social and economic development for a long time. A study conducted in 2017 claims that many socio-economic factors such as health, education, household level income, food consumption, participation and women's empowerment remain below the national average for the ITPs⁸. This claim is supported by the data that 80% of ITPs living in plains are living in poverty, where the rate is 65% for the ITPs living in hill tracts of Bangladesh. The average income rate is 26% less in hill tracts and 41% less in the plains for the ITPs compared to the national average⁹.

The livelihood of rural indigenous communities mostly depends on traditional methods such as subsistence farming. Families who depend on such traditional livelihoods have become highly vulnerable due to the increasing deprivation of land and resources caused by conflict between the ITPs and internal non-indigenous migrants, land grabbing and climate change¹⁰. The deteriorating economic condition caused a number of ITPs to migrate in urban areas where they often face discrimination in access to employment and livelihood options. Many of them depend on daily wage earning; seasonal or contractual work along with precarious working conditions forcing them to live in marginalization and acute poverty. There is also regular subjugation of discrimination and human rights violations towards the ITPs while providing employment. Such as, a major number of Garo women migrate to the cities for access to livelihood and end up working in beauty parlors or as domestic help where there are often wage gaps between the nationals and the ITPs for the same kind of works¹¹.

6 Coronavirus lockdown: food assistance sought for ethnic minorities. (2020, April 14). The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/country/news/coronavirus-lockdown-food-assistance-sought-ethnic-minorities-1893010>

7 Economic and Social Affairs department-indigenous population (2020).

<https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/covid-19.html>

8 Toufique. K.A., Mondal, A.H., Yunus, M. Chakma, S. & Farook, S. (2017). Report on Baseline Assessment of Skills and Employment of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and ILO.

9 Kapaeeng Foundation. Indigenous Navigator Bangladesh Factsheet (p.03).

http://www.nav.indigenoustravel.com/images/Documents/Factsheets/Bangladesh_Factsheet_Final.pdf

10 Toufique. K.A., Mondal, A.H., Yunus, M. Chakma, S. & Farook, S. (2017). Report on Baseline Assessment of Skills and Employment of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and ILO.

11 Vinding, D. & Kampbel. E.R. (2012). Working paper on indigenous women workers With case studies from Bangladesh, Nepal and the Americas. ILO

The above described perilous situation has been more exacerbated by the recent crisis of COVID-19 pandemic. Soon after the first case detection in Bangladesh on 8 March, 2020, the government declared a country wide lockdown to prevent the spread from 26th March, 2020 until August, 2020. After some months of flexibility in movement and opening of public spaces, the government has again imposed a lockdown from 5th April, 2021 extended until 16th June, 2021¹². Due to the lockdown, ITPs living in rural areas started facing a crisis of food shortage and loss of daily wage earning due to closure of public gathering spaces. On 8 April 2020, the media reported some 30 families in Kapru Para area in Lama Upazila of Bandarban district in CHT had nothing but to eat wild potatoes from nearby jungle as they were forced to undergo self-isolation¹³. In August 24, media reported that apart from petty jobs, the small capital enterprises that are run by both males and females of indigenous population are at risk to get stuck in the maze of uncertainties, and data that shows that the indigenous communities living in the plains are in far more worse condition than those living in the hill tracts¹⁴. According to the household survey of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, 10.3% household of indigenous populations has been affected by flood, 7% has been affected by the cyclone Amphan and 17.3% household faced multiple socio-economic shocks due to COVID-19 alone in the year of 2020¹⁵.

The whole situation has been followed by unprecedented crisis of food, social and economic insecurity spreading across all over the country and impacting the marginalized indigenous and tribal populations of Bangladesh.

Methodology:

This advocacy paper is based on the secondary data review of the international and national resources generated on the impact of COVID-19 crisis on indigenous population, specially the resources generated by the organizations working for the indigenous population living in Bangladesh. Its constraints therefore reflect the limitation of the resources including the coverage and analysis.

Key findings:

Loss of low- income occupations:

Due to the shut down and COVID-19 prevention measures, most of the activities of public spaces and gatherings are restricted now. According to UNPO, there are hundreds of indigenous peoples who are engaged with different low income occupation in different corners of the country including Dhaka, Chattogram, Sylhet, Savar, Narayanganj, Rajshahi, Mymensingh etc. Hundreds of families of indigenous population are living a miserable life now in Dhaka city alone as the major bread earners of these families are out of job now as they were working in beauty parlors, family houses as maids, house guards and drivers¹⁶.

12 <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/06/06/covid-bangladesh-again-extends-public-movement-restrictions-until-june-16>

13 Barua, S.K. (2020, April 13). Acute food crisis hits village in Bandarban. The Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/acute-food-crisis-hits-village-bandarban-1890694>

14 Sarker, Shihab. (2020, August 24). Revisiting Plight of plainland indigenous people. The financial express BD. <https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/revisiting-plight-of-plainland-indigenous-people-1598287139>

15 Debapriya Bhattachariya, Towfiqul Islam Khan, Estiaque Bari, Fahim Subhan Chowdhury, Sarah Sabin Khan (2021, April 26). Marginalised communities dealing with the COVID-19 fallouts. CPD.

<https://cpd.org.bd/marginalised-communities-dealing-with-the-covid-19-fallouts/>

16 UNPO (2020, April 15). Coronavirus: Food Crisis in Chittagong Hill Tracts. <https://unpo.org/article/21821>

Suspension on the works of the day laborers:

The low-income families and the families that are depended on daily wage are dealing with the most challenges in this lock down situation as such works have been completely suspended. Indigenous population who have been living in hard to reach areas are facing the major plights as they are off limit from the relief and aid services provided from the government. According to UNPO, in villages in the plains like Nalitabari, Dhobaura, Durgapur, Kalmakanda, Madyanagar and Tahirpur, majority of families of Hajang and Banai communities were depended of day laborers. Due to the lock down measure, these people are out of their earning source now which puts at least 30,000 people of at least 800 families at the risk of food crisis¹⁷.

Families depended on agricultural crop selling spend their lives in misery:

Indigenous families that are depended on agricultural crops for survival have received multiple shocks in the year of 2020 and 2021. The agricultural crop production activities have been severely hampered due to the imposed restriction on movement, lack of supply of fertilizers in the markets as well as the closure of local markets where they sell their produce. According to the report of Kapaeeng Foundation, the Mro community living in Baittapara, Bandarban was already forced to shift their traditional livelihood of Jhum cultivation to Mango farming due to lack of access to lands. The production were already hampered in Cyclone Amphan in 2020 and after that they were forced to sell their produce in a very low price due to the lack of buyers and the closure of local markets. On the other hand, there is a shortage of supply of necessary food items in the local markets causing the price of goods to go up, which means that the Mro farmers are selling their produce in a very low price but they have to buy their staple food items with twice the price in the market. Moreover, the shortage of supply of the fertilizers creates more challenge for the agro-farmers of this community¹⁸.

Same situation is being faced by the Pankhua community of Bilaichari, Rangamati district. The major families of this community depend on agricultural production of turmeric, beans, bananas, papaya etc. As the local markets are now closed, they are not being able to sell their agricultural produce and due to lack of storage, they are regularly facing the loss as these agricultural products are prone to decay. Due to the shutdown, they are also not being able to depend on their subsistence rice farming and having to buy rice from the market with twice the price from normal situation. They cannot afford to buy daily supply from the market anymore due to the loss of income¹⁹.

Work of informal sector suspended: day care facilities and beauty parlors:

COVID-19 has a drastic impact on informal sector and small sector entrepreneurs. Small artisan craft shops run by women and girls in Rangamati, Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and other spots targeted mainly for tourists shut down for a long time. According to the Rapid Assessment Report (RAR) conducted by Kapaeeng foundation, a big proportion of indigenous women who were engaged in

17 UNPO (2020, April 15). Coronavirus: Food Crisis in Chittagong Hill Tracts.

<https://unpo.org/article/21821>

18 Trimita Chakma, Pallab Chakma, (2020) The impact of covid-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples of Bangladesh. Kapaeeng Foundation.

19 Trimita Chakma, Pallab Chakma, (2020) The impact of covid-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples of Bangladesh. Kapaeeng Foundation.

informal sector and lacked social protection, such as in the beauty industry have lost their jobs during this pandemic. A few thousand Garo women have been reported to return to their villages in Madhupur, Tangail as they had lost their jobs in beauty industry. Some of them started working as daily wage earners²⁰.

Suspension of tourism related livelihood options:

Many indigenous peoples are now also working in the informal economy and have come to rely primarily on income from markets, handicrafts, seasonal work and tourism, which have also been impacted by COVID-19²¹. Although tourism in the hill tracts already created a lot of controversy as thousands of indigenous population faced exploitation, land extortion in the name of resort business and extension of tourism, it also created some earning opportunities for the indigenous peoples in forms of running small restaurants, tourist guides, small shops etc. These earning opportunities got closed as the tourist spots have all been shut down.

Closer of weekly markets, seasonal markets and exacerbation of debts:

A large number of indigenous families rely on subsistence farming. They usually sell the produce in the weekly markets, seasonal markets and during festivals. With the pandemic, such large gatherings have all closed down. As a result, most of the families are not being able to sell their produce to earn money. On the other hand, the price hike of goods in the markets makes them prone to taking debts. According to the RAR report, Kapaeeng foundation, many poor indigenous communities are entering debt by taking loans at high interest-rate from local loan sharks. A 45-year-old Santal woman from Dinajpur who depends on subsistence farming to feed her family had to sell her harvest to pay back to the money-lender and now does not have enough rice to feed her family²².

Delayed or no salaries in formal jobs due to lock-down:

Lack of social protection for the jobs even in formal sectors was also very evident during this lockdown in the country. Indigenous families that are engaged in formal jobs also faced this crisis. According to RAR report, Kapaeeng Foundation, A 27-year-old Tripura woman from Rangamati who works as a social worker reported that even though her workload increased due to the pandemic crisis, she has not been receiving her salary since the lockdown in March. As the breadwinner and the primary caregiver of her family of five members, she is anxious about the loss of income²³.

Lack of access to safety measures at work

Many of the bread-earners of the families of indigenous population cannot risk the survival of the family and thus having to work in environments where there is no access to safety kits such as face

20 Channel 24 (2020, June 17). পার্শ্ব বন্ধ থাকায় দিনমজুরের কাজ করতে হচ্ছে বিউটিশিয়ানদের। Retrieved from <https://www.channel24bd.tv/desh24/article/147724/%E0%A6%AA%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B2%E0>

21 https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/PB_70.pdf

22 Trimita Chakma, Pallab Chakma, (2020) The impact of covid-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples of Bangladesh. Kapaeeng Foundation.

23 Trimita Chakma, Pallab Chakma, (2020) The impact of covid-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples of Bangladesh. Kapaeeng Foundation.

mask, sanitizers, following of prevention measures etc. As the option of regular day laborer jobs are out now, these people are forced to go out of their house now to earn for their families. According to the studies, the people from Patra community and Khasi community in Sylhet reportedly have to work in conditions where the precautionary measures are very little. On the other hand, in Chittagong a 26-year-old Chakma woman garment factory worker reported she is continuing to go to work despite her exposure to the high risk of infection²⁴. The concern of safety gets deprioritized when the survival of individual and the family is at stake. Thus it is not only the workers, but also their families are being exposed to the risk of corona virus for their sake of survival.

Food crisis:

Due to the pandemic and the shutdown measure in the country, a huge number of indigenous populations have lost their access to livelihood and now the households are facing severe food crisis. According to UNPO, about 1200 Santal families in Gaibandha and 200 Santal, Pahariya and Oraon families in Rajshahi; around 30 thousand souls of 800 families of indigenous Hajang and Banai communities in Netrokona and Sherpur; 300 Koch-Burman family at Fulbaria in Mymensingh district; more than 200 Garo people of Kalighat Union of Srimangal Upazila under Moulvibazar district of Sylhet region; more than 50 Rakhine families of remote Baidyapara of Eidgarh union in Ramu upazila of Cox's Bazar; around 5,000 families of Mro, Khumi, Chak, Tripura and Marma in the remote villages of Lama, Thanchi, Alikadam, Ruma, Naikhyongchari and Rowangchari upazilas of Bandarban district; about 800 Tripura families living in different hills of Sitakunda in Chittagong district; at least 7,000 families of Tripura, Marma and Chakma in the remote villages of Panchari, Matiranga, Guimara, Mahalachari and Ramgarh of Khagrachari district including Rangamti's Sajek union are living in the severe starvation. Around 30 thousand souls of 800 families of indigenous Hajang and Banai communities in their villages of Nalitabari, Dhobaura, Durgapur, Kalmakanda, Madyanagar and Tahirpur police stations have been hit by food shortages. The Hajong and Banai family members are now taking one-time meal instead of three-time meal daily. Despite so, their little food reserves are running out. Hajong and Banai families are now fearful of the disease on the one hand, and the extreme calamity of the food crisis. It has been reported that more than two hundred poor people of 35 families in the Garo Tila area were forced to spend their days in starving in the wake of the undeclared lockdown to prevent coronavirus. The Rakhine family of Baidyapara, a remote village of Eidgarh union of Ramu upazila of Cox's Bazar, is starving for food shortages due to the coroner crisis. Most of the Rakhine families are hardcore poor, farmers and day laborers. The Rakhine family of Baidyapara, a remote village of Eidgarh union of Ramu upazila of Cox's Bazar, is starving for food shortages due to the coroner crisis. Most of the Rakhine families are hardcore poor, farmers and day laborers²⁵.

Lack of government aid and social protection:

Throughout the lockdown, the government of Bangladesh declared much needed aid support for the families who will become vulnerable due to this prevention measures. Various reports revealed that the indigenous populations of Bangladesh were the least receivers of such assistance. In the statement given by, Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum, Jatiya Adivasi Parishad and Kapaeeng Foundation it was reported that, due to the corona pandemic and lockdown, thousands of families of

24 Trimita Chakma, Pallab Chakma, (2020) The impact of covid-19 on indigenous and tribal peoples of Bangladesh. Kapaeeng Foundation.

25 UNPO (2020, April 15). Coronavirus: Food Crisis in Chittagong Hill Tracts. <https://unpo.org/article/21821>

indigenous peoples of hills and plain lands across the country, like the low-income people in the country, are suffering from a severe food crisis. Being the remote areas, no adequate government and non-government private relief materials have been provided to them²⁶.

Recommendation:

- Ensure timely distribution of information materials in indigenous languages, adequate food, economic support, safety kit assistance for the marginalized indigenous peoples.
- Ensure intersectional approach in selection of prioritizing aid receivers.
- Respect indigenous culture and values
- Ensure visible engagement of CHT Regional Council, Hill District Council and Traditional Institutions in the processes of all kinds of COVID 19 responses
- Mapping and listing of HHs which has lost their jobs during this pandemic and in need of livelihood and food assistance.
- Providing free devices and internet for the informal entrepreneurs for accessing the alternative market platform, such as online platform for the craftsman, boutique shops.
- Establishing corporate market linkage with the local indigenous farmers along with ensuring fair price.
- Establish an emergency fund for the ITPs to address the crisis of food insecurity among marginalized indigenous communities
- Establish a special fund to support and protect the employment of indigenous women working in the informal sectors such as beauty parlors and garment factories.
- Establishing a support fund for the subsistent farmers of indigenous people and tribes.
- Include Indigenous Peoples including youth to participate in designing, implementing and evaluating these government responses to the pandemic.
- Dissemination of the learning on the experience of the pandemic and using them as a reference for future policies relevant to the life of indigenous population.
- Develop policies to protect the labor rights of the indigenous women workers in the informal sectors.
- Promote indigenous women's empowerment, including through access to jobs, entrepreneurship support, and access to land and credit, protection against violence and harassment, and develop culturally sensitive policies that address care needs amongst indigenous groups.

Conclusion:

The global pandemic situation has worsened the socio-economic situation everywhere. The indigenous population of Bangladesh has experienced the socio-economic devastation due to this pandemic disproportionately as they were already facing an economic fall-out due to natural calamities and environmental conflict. The crisis that is being faced by the indigenous population and tribes of Bangladesh is crucial and required imminent humanitarian service and assistance.

26 UNPO (2020, April 15). Coronavirus: Food Crisis in Chittagong Hill Tracts. <https://unpo.org/article/21821>

Issues that have been mentioned above make it clear that the measures of the government of Bangladesh on relief distribution are lagging behind. Also, in practice, the families of indigenous population and tribes always get less priority under the social safety net programs, including the response to the crises regarding food crisis, support for the young entrepreneurs and subsistent farmers. Overall the social protection of the vulnerable indigenous communities has been inadequate. The government of Bangladesh needs to relocate the funds for the indigenous population, consider the recommendations as well as effectively include them in the decision making process. Also, for the long term approach and in consideration of the SDGs, the government of Bangladesh needs to extend the social safety net programs targeting the indigenous communities and more focus on empowering them by ensuring their meaningful engagement in all the processes of SDGs and Covid 19 response programmes to address the special needs related to ongoing pandemic and fulfill the Agenda 2030 and the ultimate goal "Leave no one behind".



Funded by European Union



IWGIA



AIPP



KAPAEENG
Foundation

This paper is prepared by Kapaeeng foundation in May 2021.
For further information please contact us at:

Kapaeeng Foundation

Salma Garden, House # 23/25, Road # 4, Sheikhertek, PC Culture Housing Society, Mohammadpur, Dhaka-1207
E-mail : kapaeeng.foundation@gmail.com, Website : www.kapaeengnet.org

