COVID-19 PANDEMIC Bangladesh
Reflections from SAJIDA Foundation

SAJIDA Foundation is a non-profit organization, dedicated to ensuring health, happiness and dignity for all by serving people from across the social strata through three categories of interventions: Financial Services, Development Programs and Social Enterprises. The Foundation has primarily partnered with Renata Ltd. to combat the Covid-19 pandemic in the country and to support the Government of Bangladesh in tackling a challenge of such scale and magnitude.
A nationwide “lockdown” in Bangladesh comes with profoundly challenging implications on the livelihoods of people, with the economy heavily reliant on daily wage earners and 90% of jobs coming from the informal sector. Daily wage earners not only hold up our economy, but do so while living marginally and with little to no savings. For them, an economic pause is a threat to their very survival, cutting off access to basic necessities including food, health and hygiene supplies.

Recognizing the magnitude of the crisis that looms over us, development organizations have partnered with the Government to ensure support for the most vulnerable sections of society. While the government has promised funding for the affected families in all 64 districts for six months, the implementation challenges are significant and require strong coordination and collaboration with all stakeholders under a unified platform. The garments industry (largest in Bangladesh) which employs more than 4.1 million workers has been critically affected by this pandemic with cancellation of work orders resulting in loss of livelihoods for more than a million low-wage workers (Survey Research Report, Penn State University, April 1, 2020). These high rates of unemployment will be further exacerbated once the SME industry is forced to shut down, with dire consequences for the unemployed who will no longer have the means to pay rent, utilities or afford basic sustenance.

The economic stagnation has also gravely affected cottage enterprises that account for 88% of the 7.8 million enterprises in Bangladesh, employing over 13.16 million people (Bangladesh Economic Census 2013). These small cottage enterprises target and depend upon festivals and holidays (such as Bengali New Year or Eid) to run their businesses. The lockdown has diminished their primary source of income and completely drained SME investments.

The Dhaka City Corporation has taken the initiative to list and track the ultra-poor and daily wage earner families. Similarly, North and South City Corporations are also aiming to track and distribute food and hygiene materials in collaboration with NGOs, private sector and volunteer organizations to ensure coordinated distribution of essential material. The same framework will be used in all other municipalities across Bangladesh. In other parts of the country, such as in rural districts, the administered structure is better equipped and organized to undertake such measures.
RISKS AND CHALLENGES:

- Lack of adequate awareness about Covid-19 and hygiene practices in urban and rural areas.
- People in remote areas of Bangladesh are still unaware of the Covid-19 pandemic. The common practice of relying on rumors and myths in rural areas has inhibited awareness of important information related to the pandemic.
- Implementation of basic guidelines of social distancing and personal hygiene is a challenge in rural areas due to the environment, lifestyle and social customs. A key example is the persistent continuation of public religious gatherings despite warnings and government regulations.
- Public indifference to government guidelines and protocols are thwarting government efforts to enforce safety practices and aiding the spread of the virus.

- High population density in urban areas with congested housing conditions make containment of the virus severely challenging.
- Lack of protective supplies such as the significant shortage of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs). The WHO standard disposable and reusable gowns, N95, FFP2 masks, goggles, face shields are vital necessities for frontline workers. 26 medical professionals have already contracted the virus. Although many RMG factories are producing PPEs, quality and approval mechanisms for PPEs are still not in place. Coordination mechanisms are still in progress and SAJIDA is working closely with the consortium along with the Government to explore alternative solutions to address the shortage of PPEs.
RISKS AND CHALLENGES:

- Synchronized and systematic distribution of food and hygiene material is challenging with beneficiaries increasingly falling under complete lockdown zones. While innovative distribution methods are constantly innovated to ensure proper distancing, it remains difficult to avoid crowding of people during distribution.

- The majority of the ultra-poor population do not have National Identity Cards (NID) and mobile banking accounts and agent booths for mobile banking such as Bkash are mostly closed.

- Repetitive distribution of resources to the same people has resulted in the deprivation of others.

- Vehicles transporting agricultural products, food products, medical supplies, and other daily necessities are declared part of essential services and are being taken advantage of by a considerable number of people are who are using these essential services for personal and nonessential activities, thereby disrupting emergency protocols.

- Mental health issues arising due to prolonged lockdown is disrupting daily activities. Anxiety and depression disorders are developing among people due to the continuous state of uncertainty, stress and confinement they are experiencing as a result of the pandemic. The current state of lockdown may also be significant with regards to the increasing rates of suicide in Bangladesh.

- Ensuring adequate protection for children and the elderly is a challenge. The absence of a social protection system has left children and the elderly in poor communities particularly vulnerable to a number of economic, health and social hazards during this time. Thousands of children previously under the auspices of various NGOs, are now left to their own devices after NGO activities in poor areas were suspended due to the lockdown. With as many as 4.8 million children engaged in livelihood activities (UNICEF, Child Labour in Bangladesh, 2010), and vulnerable to physical and mental abuse, a strong protection and safety net system for them at this time is crucial.

- Those with special needs are particularly disadvantaged. Adults and children alike with special needs who are reliant on others for daily functions face significant difficulties in coping during a lockdown where there is limited external recourse and professional help. Not only is this challenging for those with special needs, but also for family caregivers who bear the mounting physical and mental pressures of caregiving from home.

- Rising domestic violence has emerged as an adverse consequence of the lockdown with increasing number of reports of domestic violence in the households. Local and national dailies have also reported sexual abuse, and the number of child abuse cases are also on the rise at this time due to inadequate safeguarding measures in place.
Conclusion:

If ever there was a time to unite, it is now. Well-coordinated and collaborative government action is imperative at this time to bring together all major stakeholders under a multi-dimensional action plan. While it is undoubtedly a time to remain hopeful, we must acknowledge the magnitude of the humanitarian catastrophe that lies on the other side and we must act before this crisis escalates. It is a time for foresight, planning, resource mobilization and strategic vision. Task forces must be formed, combining national and international experts to reduce health risks and mortality rates. Preemptive measures are crucial and local solutions must be explored to cope with the new realities that we find ourselves suddenly confronted with. Densely populated, high-risk areas such as urban slums must be targeted with health interventions and sustainable development activities to curtail potential outbreaks and reducing hardships. Strategies must be informed by proper assessment and evaluation to ensure that those facing the worst effects of the pandemic are not left behind. In addition to being prepared, we must be versatile with our solutions and rapid with our action, for it is a developing situation that demands our constant attention and long-term commitment.