

The impact of Covid-19 on the poorest

Research Paper 3 - Volume 2 BANGLADESH

There is a sense amongst those spoken to of things returning to normal, and a belief that Covid is over. When combined with a desire to meet more immediate needs and pre-existing challenges in following guidelines to prevent the spread of Covid-19, such as the ability to afford soap or face masks, or following social distancing in crowded urban areas or workspaces, this has the potential to create an upsurge in infections. On a more positive note, participants identified a slight, but consistent improvement in their ability to earn an income, and as a result purchase food. People have been afraid to attend health facilities but are now more prepared to do so if they are sick, even though cost is a major factor in their decision to seek assistance. While schools remain closed parents struggle to provide any form of education for their children and identify the negative impact this is having on their behaviour. Respondents spoke about a number of incidents of violence within the home, which can be related to frustration caused by the new circumstances they find themselves in. While some support has been received, there is a great deal of frustration with how this has been targeted and distributed, with a widely held belief that people are not receiving the support that is meant for them.

Globally, the first case of Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) was identified in late December 2019; following rapid escalation in early 2020, it was declared a public health emergency of international concern at the end of January, and a Pandemic on 11 March, by the WHO¹. In Bangladesh, the first three known cases of Covid-19 were reported on 8 March 2020. When the first of our in-country briefs was produced, on the 18 June, there were 98,489 reported cases (with 26,853 recorded in Dhaka and 3,809 in Chattogram)², just over two months later, on 21 August this had increased to 287,959 confirmed cases and 3,822 deaths³. (Figure 1 illustrates the cumulative number of confirmed cases and deaths since March)

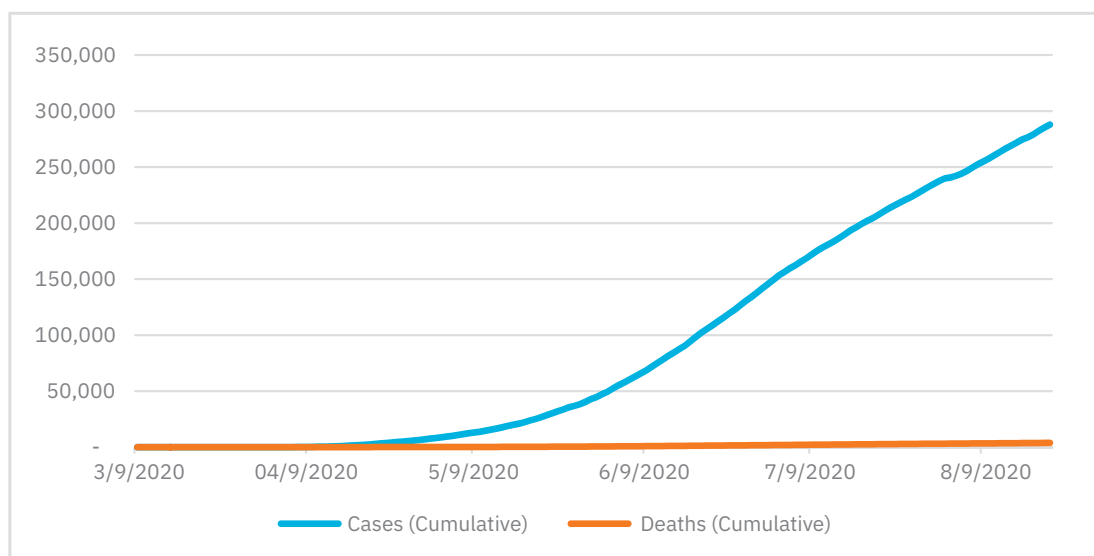


Figure 1 Number of confirmed cases and deaths from Covid-19 in Bangladesh

In response to the pandemic in Bangladesh, a 10-day shutdown effective from March 26 was declared⁴. This was described as a nationwide holiday, travel on water, rail, and air routes was banned, and road-transportation suspended, while all non-essential organisations, businesses, and educational institutions were to close. Following the declaration, many people from the cities started to leave the urban areas by various means, including overcrowded public transport services.⁵ People were advised to practice social distancing and the wearing of facemasks has been made compulsory. The army was asked to assist in enforcing this, with up to 290 teams of soldiers deployed across the country. Elements of the response have drawn praise, particularly in terms of the scale-up of social protection with an estimated 15.3% of the population covered⁶ though this is predominantly in rural areas. At the end of July, scheduled international passenger flights between Bangladesh and China, Malaysia, Qatar, Turkey and the UK were permitted, though the general restrictions to contain the spread of Covid-19 were extended, including a ban on rallies, meetings, and mass gatherings, though curfew hours were shortened to between 22:00 - 05:00.

It has been highlighted elsewhere how Bangladesh exemplifies the triple blow that many countries have suffered from Covid-19: domestic slowdown caused by the disease and the efforts to contain its spread, a sharp decline in exports, and a drop in remittances⁷. The restrictions have the potential to affect the key sowing and transplanting period for the Aman rice season (June-September) and lean season (September), while some estimates suggest that remittances, the second-largest driver of the Bangladesh economy, could decrease by 20 percent in 2020. The situation is further compounded by the onset of the monsoon season, which is increasing the chances of flooding, and the resumption of the cyclone season from October⁸. Combined this has the potential ultimately to double the country's poverty rate, pushing it to over 40 percent.

In this Brief, we look at how the response in Bangladesh has affected some of the poorest households living in Dhaka and Chattogram in terms of their food security and their access to basic services such as health and education.

Methodology

Telephone interviews were conducted with five Concern Worldwide programme participants (three men and two women) in the urban areas of Dhaka (three) and Chattogram (two). A first round of Interviews were conducted between 24 and 27 June 2020; the second round took place between 9 and 14 July and a third between 27 July and 15 August. One final round of data collection will be undertaken with the same households in late August / early September allowing us to track changes in their lives and livelihoods over a three-month period.

This builds on data collected in late April and early May as part of a larger piece of research looking at livelihood trajectories of pavement and slum dwellers in Bangladesh (which included the households on this more detailed study), that report is available [here](#). This is part of a four-country study looking at the impact of Covid-19 and the various responses put in place in Somalia, Sierra Leone, Bangladesh and Malawi.

Findings

The symptoms of Covid-19 were consistently well understood amongst those interviewed, and were generally associated with *“cold, fever, cough, runny nose and sore throat”*. This level of knowledge is to be expected – as one respondent observed *“it’s always on the TV”*, while many people receive more information from friends, local organisations and the radio. Initially, the amount of information received contributed to a high level of fear amongst those interviewed; with the following being illustrative of early responses in our exercise *“I think if we do not tread carefully, or neglect this, then death will be inevitable, no one will live through this”*. Another man described how he *“warned everyone starting from children, to tread carefully, otherwise you will die”*.

Notwithstanding, throughout the interviews we identified various misunderstandings in terms of how the virus spreads, in June a respondent explained how *“you should not take cold water or anything cold”*⁹. These misunderstandings seemed to increase between the rounds of data collection, potentially due to more and more information being provided to our respondents from a variety of sources. In July, we heard how *“if you eat sour things, that virus can no longer attack”* and that *“I am hearing from people talking in the shops that corona is slowly becoming weak.”* This was borne out further in the third round of data collection, where some of those participating identified that Covid-19 is no longer a threat to them, one woman in Dhaka identified *“The virus doesn’t seem to affect poor people like us, it is mostly spreading among the rich. Whenever I turn the television on, I see only rich people dying after being infected by the virus. These people are the ones advising us to follow health guidelines although they don’t follow guidelines themselves.”*

In the later interviews it was quite apparent that the levels of fear were declining, in July, one woman stated *“the fear that people had about Corona has decreased a lot, many people say that Corona isn’t a matter of worry anymore.* In August, one man who works as a rickshaw driver in Chattogram told of how *“now the fear of the people has lessened”*, another described how *“we have not heard of any new patients in our area after the Qurbani. Again, the number of people affected are now less in our country.”* Others explained how they were no longer worried as they *“Heard a needle [vaccine] has been invented to save people from corona. People are talking about it while drinking tea in the tea-shops and saying corona is over, the government is bringing everything back to normal”*.

In terms of preventative measures, all of those spoken to had a reasonable understanding of the basic guidelines on what needs to be done, answers such as *“to avoid that we have to wash our hands again and again. I have to wear a mask. I have to keep distance with people. To be protected from corona, we need to be clean”* were common across all rounds of interviews. Those who did not know the immediate answers were often able to identify where they had heard the different messages when prompted.

However, the people we spoke to have always faced challenges in adhering to the guidelines, often driven by more immediate needs. As one respondent explained *“Sometimes not everything can be complied with ... I have to work and provide food. If you don’t work, the family will starve. When it comes to work, you have to mix with a lot of people”*. Another described how *“it is not always possible to follow these [guidelines] when at work. We work from one area to another; we’re always at risk. But if I do not work, what will we eat?”* This issue was even more prominent in the second round of data collection as people were preparing for the upcoming Eid-el-Adha holidays. One man explained, *“People*

don't care for Corona now, people care about income now. Eid is ahead, there are many expenses ahead. Children need new clothes”.

As competing priorities are added to perceptions that Covid-19 is no longer the same kind of threat we observe a consistent downward trend in terms of following the procedures, as one man described *“I am not as cautious as I used to be. I have been alert for 3/4 months but I don't see any way to take care of my family that way. How long can I keep this up?”* While there was an initial upsurge in **Washing Hands** this is easing off, one man in Chattogram explained in August how *“I think I follow these less than I did before. Before I would not eat without washing my hands with soap. Now I use soap only after using toilet. Now I don't spray mixture [made of Savlon disinfectant] on my hand or feet”.* In the same round of interviews, one woman in Dhaka explained that as the *“Fear of Corona has decreased a lot, as a result, I don't wash hands and feet as much as before. If Allah gives disease; will washing our hands and feet will make any difference”.*

“Those who can afford it stay at home; those who cannot afford it go out”

(Male respondent, Chattogram, June 2020).

Maintaining **Social Distance** has been a more consistent challenge. In the early rounds of data collection, one of our participants who has a small rickshaw repair workshop described how *“Many customers come close to pay, to drop off their rickshaw, to take the rickshaw back”.* Another who sells fruit near the train station in Dhaka highlighted how he has to interact with a lot of people if he wants to do business *“a lot of customers come, I have to talk to the customer. Even if they don't buy it, they ask how much this fruit costs, I have to talk to them? It is not always possible to maintain distance”.* Those who work as rickshaw drivers particularly identified challenges in maintaining social distance from their customers, while one woman who works in a garment factory in Dhaka identified how *“During work where's the time to follow these guidelines? Those of us who work together bring one bottle of water and share it, drink tea from the same cup, by the grace of Allah, we haven't had any problems because of it”.*

Impact on Livelihoods

The five people included in the research in Bangladesh have a variety of livelihoods, all depending on manual labour or small scale trading activities. One man runs a small business fixing rickshaws; another worked as a butcher on a daily contract; one sells fruit near the train station and another runs a tea stall with her husband (who also drives a rickshaw van). Three of the people included have close links to the garment industry. The shock to all of their livelihood activities has been substantial, though some did speak of a slight improvement between June and July, and again between July and August.

In June, we heard how some of our respondents were adapting their small businesses to Covid-19, with one woman who runs a tea shop saying *“I keep spraying the shop periodically ... [customers] have to sit in gaps ... I stay far away from them. I don't give the cup in hand, I put it on the tray and they take it from there”.* One rickshaw driver explained how he had adapted by putting *“bleaching powder and Savlon mixture in a bottle under the rickshaw seat. When I find a passenger, before he or she gets on the rickshaw, I spray that on their hand, on the seat, on my hand and body and then start driving the rickshaw.”* When we spoke to these respondents again in July, they described how they have cut back a little

on their cleaning routine *“Due to lack of money, I can’t spray Savlon mixed with water as much as before in the shop. I had been spraying a few times a day before, now I spray once in the morning, once in the afternoon and again in the evening.”* By August, these actions had been further scaled back, with the woman who runs the teashop describing how *“people no longer want to drink tea in a one-time glass. Most people demand ceramic cups washed with hot water. Meaning, I don’t have to spend extra to buy one-time glasses.”*

For those who run small businesses, the amount of income they are generating from these has fallen – in June, the man who runs the rickshaw repair business highlighted how before the lockdown *“Some days I got 600 taka, 1000 taka, 800 taka, 500 taka, but today my wife and I worked for 144 taka together. Income is declining a lot; it is much less than before. The rickshaw pullers do not get a lot of business, so the rickshaw pullers do not want to come to have work done for fear of paying money”*. The woman who runs the tea stall pointed out how *“Our business is with the poor people. When the shop opens, the rickshaw pullers eat a little. People have no income, how will they eat?”* Another reported how, essentially, he had been out of work for four months and unable to sell fruit, which is more of a night-time business when garment factories and offices are closed.

This generally continued into July, with one participant describing how *“I did not bring any newer goods today ... [yesterday] four cartons of apple got rotten because it was not sold. People don’t have money in their pockets, how would they buy”*. However, some spoke about a slight improvement, with one man observing, *“Now the income riding a rickshaw is not bad. Even yesterday, after paying the expense of the company (50 taka) and my own spending of 60 taka I got to return home with 400 taka. I got out with the rickshaw at 5 o’clock in the morning, stopping at 2 o’clock. Now there is more customers on the streets”*

The responses in August continued to be somewhat mixed in this regard, even though some positive elements can be seen. One man explained how he had bought fruit to sell but that the rain and lack of customers meant he was unsuccessful, going on to say *“There is no sale at all, I don’t even know if the people have any money”* however, the same respondent did say that he expected his business to improve, once the railway reopened. On the other hand, one woman who worked in a garment factory identified *“Ever since the lockdown has been lifted, we are getting by quite well. I am getting a salary of 4500 taka at the end of the month by working in a garments house. My husband can earn 200-250 taka by selling cigarettes and betel leaves from a kiosk.”* However, one interviewee explained how workers were being laid off in the garment factory where his wife works, and if she were to lose her job he feared they would not be able to *“afford family’s expenses with his income only”*.

“Ever since the lockdown has been lifted, we are getting by quite well”

(Garment Factory Worker, Dhaka, August 2020)

In the earlier interviews, respondents highlighted how people were leaving the city, reducing the number of potential customers. One woman who runs a small shop in Dhaka mentioned how when we interviewed her in June, she had about 250 customers a day, but in July she had no more than 200, as *“many have gone to their village homes due to lack of work, they will return when the work situation is normal”*. It is less clear that this trend continued into August, one man identified how he *“used to see a lot of people around me, but not anymore. I heard that they have gone to the village. This way many people have left for village.”* But a woman interviewed in Dhaka explained *“We are also seeing people from*

the village starting to return to Dhaka. Compared to the last three-four months, the volume of work has increased a little“.

Amongst those we spoke to there is a sense that people will try to find any type of employment to make ends meet, but with many people seeking work and few looking for their services, there is an imbalance in the market. One man from Chattogram explained that *“Those who live here work as day labourers and do different works. Many people drive rickshaws. No one is sitting around. But now many people do not get work because of Corona. Those who do not get a job try to work in different ways”*. Another man highlighted *“There is no work of carrying cement, sand or bricks. People now hang out more outside, there’s no work”*.

Changing Prices and Access to Food

When our interviewers asked if there had been changes in terms of people’s access to food, they received a variety of answers across rounds, with a slight improvement more recently.

In June, one man felt that nothing much had changed in terms of their access to food, though when probed, they conceded, *“I used to buy meat once or twice a month, now I don’t anymore.”* Such changes in diet were mentioned frequently in June, with a respondent in Chattogram speaking of how they still ate three meals a day, but the type of food had changed, where the family used to eat fish or eggs we were told how they could no longer afford this. A woman in Dhaka described how she *“can’t eat vegetables as before. I can’t buy vegetables much because the income is less”*. Another man explained how he *“used to bring apples and oranges for the children but now ... I can’t feed them even half as much as before“*. At this time, respondents described how prices had been increasing in the local markets, with one man identifying how he had been buying rice for BDT30 for a while, but that he was now paying BDT60 for the same quantity. Other goods that had gone up in price included amaranth leaves, bitter gourd, potatoes, eggs and flour.

In July, a number of respondents highlighted how they felt things had improved, with prices falling slightly in the market, and people being able to afford fruit, such as mangoes – as one man in Chattogram said *“we’re eating fine for the last 3/4 days. Allah is treating us well”*. Some respondents spoke of how the price of onion, garlic and ginger had decreased, with one man also describing how the price of fish had decreased and how *“earlier I bought tilapia fish for 160 taka but yesterday I bought it for only 100 taka per kg”*. However, this was not universally identified, with a woman in Dhaka describing how *“the price of chilli is increasing, with 10 taka of powdered chilli I can only cook two portions of curry. We haven’t eaten raw chilli in a week. Now a quarter of green chillies costs 25 taka, at such a high price we can’t afford it, so we eat dried chillies.”* Another woman in Dhaka described how *“Now I can eat fish only worth 50 taka but I had never eaten it this way before. Before Corona, there was no such hardship”* and another how *“Because of the lockdown, I even bought rotten fish for 10/20 taka”¹⁰*. Others spoke of the fact they had not eaten meat or chicken for a long time¹¹.

In August, while some households continued to struggle with their access to food, we heard that the situation had continued to improve, one man told us *“I am fine with Allah’s mercy. I am doing well, I have some income, Allah is looking out for and feeding me with pulses and rice. I am in a better situation now than before”*. We were also told by one woman *“now it is possible to buy according to the needs of the family ... there is no shortage whatsoever.”* This appears to be driven more by an increase in purchasing power than by a reduction in prices, with one man in Dhaka describing the change in food prices in August as follows

“Brother the price is going up as before. The price of fish is now 160 taka again. The price never goes down. All vegetables prices are on the rise as before”. Respondents attributed price increases to challenges in importing produce from India and “that vegetables and fields have been destroyed due to floods in different parts of the country which has resulted in increase in prices of all types of vegetables”. The impact of even a small price increase can be devastating on the poorest, as one lady in Dhaka highlighted an “increase of 5-10 taka has no effect on those who have money, but those like us who have to run a family with a small amount of money, if they have to pay even a fraction of a taka for no reason, it hurts their heart.”

In its extreme form, households have had to cut back on the number of meals they consume. A frequent response we heard in June was along the lines of the following from a man in Chattogram *“I can buy food for one meal a day; I can’t buy for another one. I am in a lot of trouble with the children. I can’t feed them what I could before, not even half ... Sometimes, there’s no food for breakfast”*. This inability to provide food for their family is a great sense of shame for those we spoke to with one man from Chattogram highlighting *“Now I have to feed my children without eating. Not everything can be said, it is a matter of shame. Please change this topic.”* As we probed deeper on this in July, it is apparent that this burden falls harder on women, with one respondent in Dhaka describing how, *“I don’t let my father-in-law, [husband and child] understand that there is less food. My husband sometimes eats a little less when he understands there is less food. I eat after feeding everyone in the family”*.

“I eat after feeding everyone in the family”

(Female Respondent, Dhaka, July 2020)

As well as cutting back on certain foodstuffs, in our first round of data collection we heard how many households were resorting to consuming poorer quality staple food as a means of dealing with this. One woman whose husband works as a porter in a local market observed *“Besides doing this work, he also brings scraps of vegetables, due to which there is no need for us to buy vegetables.”* Another woman from Dhaka told of how her family *“used to eat fine rice but now we eat coarse rice”*. This trend of eating poorer quality food continued in July, with this woman expanding on her answer as follows *“before Corona, I bought medium fine rice for 30, 32, 35 taka. Now I can’t buy that rice anymore, I can’t say how much it sells for at present. Now we eat coarse rice for 48 taka per kg”*. Another woman spoke about how her daughter *“cries sometimes saying she doesn’t want to eat. She says I don’t like this or I don’t want to eat that. Then I explained to her, if I had money, I would have bought food that you like”*.

Accessing health Care

Amongst the people we spoke to, there was some early evidence of decisions being taken not to attend health facilities out of fear. One woman in Dhaka explained how *“Many do not go to the hospital for fear of getting sick”* and a man in Chattogram highlighted *“the date for vaccinating my daughter was a month and a half ago. Her third vaccine was due ... but I did not go for fear of Corona”*. However, by July, we could see a change in attitude towards this amongst some of our respondents, with the man from Chattogram explaining in our follow-up discussions *“Now everyone is going out for their needs, no one’s staying at home. If children need vaccination, people are going out to get it.”* While this more positive opinion

could be seen in our interviews in August, there is still a fear amongst some, with one man explaining, *“People do not go to the hospital out of fear. Everyone is afraid that they will get Corona if they go to the hospital.”*

“Brother, if you stay at home fearing Corona, your suffering only increases; the doctors in the hospital are seeing patients regularly, now the tendency of suspecting any patients as corona patients have also gone.”

(Female Respondent, Dhaka, August 2020)

At the same time, ability to pay is a major driver in the decision not to attend health facilities; one respondent in Dhaka explained why his wife did not go to the hospital for a routine check-up following a cataract operation, saying, *“I will not take her to the hospital now. If I take her, they will send her to Shahbag for blood test. So many tests, it will cost 5,000 to 10,000 taka”*. Another woman in Dhaka explained *“If I go they will give tests and I can’t afford that now. I don’t have that kind of money so I am not going to see a doctor”*.¹² This suggests that while the poorest were facing challenges before in accessing health care, the recent decreases in income is also affecting health seeking behaviour, and an increase in purchasing medicines from pharmacies. Notwithstanding, we were told about how some of our respondents have been able to access services from doctors who are not taking consultation fees.

The perceived challenges in paying for health care does mean that people are adjusting their behaviours and following the Covid-19 protocols, as one respondent in Dhaka highlighted *“this is a contagious disease. If people like me neglect this, I can’t spend money on treatment so I can’t get medical treatment, I can’t get well, then I will be taken to the hospital morgue to die”*.

Education and Children

Of those included in our interviews, four had children who should currently be in school, but had not been attending any education at any stage during the interviews. This is considered to have an impact on children’s ability to learn; with most unable to study from home and families unable to pay for access to online learning material, it is also seen to be affecting children’s behaviours.

In June, one man described how, now the schools were closed, his boys were watching a lot more TV. While one woman from Dhaka spoke of the challenges she has in getting her daughter to study, stating she *“doesn’t want to study like before because the school is closed”*. Another man in Chattogram described how his children are now *“playing around more”*, and while they receive some instruction in Arabic at the Mosque, he feared that now the school related studies were halted and the school is closed, the previous lessons would be forgotten. This man’s wife has taken on responsibility for home schooling, though she herself did not complete her school exams, an additional role for women in the household, which was mentioned in two interviews.

In our July round of interviews, one man in Chattogram identified how he had hired a tutor for his children *“so that they don’t forget their studies. She comes to our house and she has been teaching our sons from 1st day of this month.”* The children were learning Arabic, English, Bangla and math, and the man paid 1,200 taka per month to this woman to teach his sons. However, one of the women interviewed in Dhaka had the complete opposite

experience, explaining how *“Before the school closed she had private tuition but not anymore because it is not possible to earn the money that is needed to pay the teacher.”*

By August, we heard how Imams at the mosques had started their Arabic lessons again, and that children were being enrolled in Madrassas so that they would start to study again. One of the respondents highlighted how they *“don’t know when the government schools will open. Nobody called from school or anything to let us know when schools will open. They took all our numbers during admissions; they will let us know when schools open”*. Another respondent suggested they had been told the schools would reopen in mid-August. Another explained that even though her daughter is trying to study at home as *“the school is closed due to Corona, exams are not taking place, so it is not clear whether my child is studying or thinking about something else”*. This woman also explained how in the future *“many families will not send their children to school as the income has decreased. We have a neighbour who will not continue his daughter’s education anymore”*.

The additional impacts of children being out of school was identified more frequently in later interviews. One man explained how his children *“are having a little physical or mental problem, not being able to go out, not being able to play sports, not being able to talk to someone, not being able to chat, not being able to meet anyone outside, isn’t that a problem?”* This man also explained that the children are sometimes upset as they cannot go out. One of the woman in Dhaka described how her daughter is now *“not waking up before 9 or 10 am. Before the school was closed, she used to wake up in the morning and go to school; now she eats breakfast at noon. Which is why she doesn’t study in the morning at all.”* In August, one respondent described how her frustration with her daughter had led to a situation whereby *“If I say something to her, she talks back at me and that’s why I beat her up the other day.”*

Other Impacts

Throughout our interviews, people spoke freely about challenges in the home, as one man from Chattogram highlighted *“there is a lot of shouting in the houses, the husband has no income, so he gets in trouble with the wife”*. Another respondent explained how *“In the slum area, quarrels between husband and wife is not new, and it still persists. These cannot be stopped. No one listens to anyone”*. In our July interviews, one of the women from Dhaka explained how *“The house rent is due for three months, I have not been able to pay the rent of the shop. My husband also has a lot of worry about this. When I try to talk to him about rent dues or about shopping from the market he says “Do you want me to die?” He gets angry at me from time to time and speaks in a threatening tone.”* Issues of violence between parents and children were frequently mentioned in our August interviews, one example of this is from a man in Chattogram who highlighted *“I slapped my middle son because he got into mischief with his older brother, so I slapped him. He gets into mischief instead of listening to his mother that’s why I slapped him.”*

There has also been an increase in roles and responsibilities in some households for women who have taken on the additional tasks of home schooling children, where their own education levels allow. In addition to fulfilling their traditional roles this means there is a substantial burden on their time, as one man in Dhaka described *“My wife still does all the work in my house. When we come home from work, I stay in bed. She cooks and does all the work in the house. When the cooking is done, I eat. My wife cleans the house, and I don’t do anything.”* However, the situation was a little different as described by one of the women in our study in Dhaka *“because of my current job the pressure has increased on [my*

daughter] and her father. I wake up in the morning, cook, go to work, and come home for an hour to have lunch, and my work ends after eight o'clock at night. Before joining the work, I used to go grocery shopping; now my husband has to go for shopping. Although I cook in the morning, [my daughter] and my husband cook in the afternoon. Apart from cooking, they also do the sweeping and cleaning together." Throughout the interviews, we have seen men mention how they have taken on additional household chores, one man describing how *"If my wife is sick, I wash my sons' and daughter's clothes"*.

In the third round of data collection (in August) we also asked a specific question in terms of how people had managed to spend the Eid holiday this year, with four of the five respondents identifying things as being a little different this year. One of the respondents described how friends who usually gave meat were not able to do so as *"their financial condition isn't good either. These are close friends of mine. They usually give me 1/1.5 kg of meat each. In other years they offer sacrifice for Eid-ul-Adha and give me a share of meat, but this year they didn't offer sacrifice, they bought meat from shops instead. Their businesses are not doing well that's why they couldn't afford it this year"*. In a similar vein, another man said how *"in previous years, the rich people of the community used to help the poor with money or other means during Eid but this year the picture is different. He said that this year this is not the case."*

At community level, we also asked whether people were moving into or out of a particular area, perhaps as a result of them returning from working overseas, or migrating for work. Respondents described how many had returned to their village homes at the start of the lockdown; in some cases they have not yet returned but are expected to do so once the trains become fully operational again. Other identified how this had already started in August, *"Since the lockdown has been lifted they have been coming back to the city. Those who used to work in different homes have re-joined their work, those who used to drive rickshaws and work as day labourers are also able to work and earn good income"*.

Early on in the lockdown, there had been some considerable criticism of the police and their response¹³ but by the June round of data collection we saw a greater understanding of what the police were trying to do and why, in particular around making sure that businesses were closed by four. One lady from Dhaka told how earlier she felt *"she would be beaten and scolded by the police if the shop was open at that time, and she did not open out of fear of the army"* whereas in June she was opening at 6 in the morning and closed at four in the afternoon. In June, there was still a perception of a greater police presence in the areas, checking that people were obeying the rules. Interactions with those pulling rickshaws, a particularly important livelihood mechanism amongst the poorest, had been flagged as a contentious issue by a number of respondents, one explaining how *"Police do not allow you to stand at corners. About a month ago, a police punctured the wheels of my rickshaw"*. Another woman in Dhaka highlighted how her husband drove a rented rickshaw during the lockdown, but that the police beat him up for taking the rickshaw out. This led to her having to pay a substantial fine out of savings she had put aside from her business. However, by July, there was evidence of a relaxation of the police clampdown, with the lady who runs the shop mentioned above explaining how now she is allowed to keep the shop till 7 pm and that *"the police don't do anything if it is kept open till 11 pm"*. In August, none of the respondents made any comment of the police in their area or their interactions with them, with the aforementioned woman who trades identifying that *"Now even if I keep the store open all night, no one would say anything."*

How are people coping?

The loss of income earning opportunities means that people have had to -

- a) Take on new lower paid jobs or try to sell small quantities of low value goods, such as vegetables.
- b) Use up their savings, with potential longer term impacts on investing,
- c) Sell household assets, at a price well below what they consider they are worth and
- d) Borrow money, generally from neighbours that will not incur any form of interest payment, or from local shops and grocery stores

Many have also turned to prayer, and have told of how they “*said to Allah, Allah, keep us well, otherwise nothing good can happen*”. By the third round of data, collection there was a sense that some of our respondents were coping better.

Initial assistance came on an *ad hoc* basis from a number of sources; the most common seemed to be from neighbours and community members, as one woman in Dhaka explained, “*some people gave us meals such as pulses and potatoes. Someone gave one kg of salt, someone gave two kgs of oil, or one kg of oil The help I got from people is the only reason I have not starved*”. Others highlighted how they have received assistance from the better-off members of their community. One man in Chattogram noted how the shopkeeper who had provided him goods on credit told him he could pay him back slowly; another how his former employer had given him help. One of the women from Dhaka described how the better-off women from her daughter’s school gave “*15 kg of rice, four lifebuoy soaps, 1 kg of salt, 2 kg of pulses, 2 kg of sugar, 2 kg of oil and 2 kg of flour*” (this is equivalent to €17 and would support a family for around two weeks).

In later rounds of data collection, respondents identified they had received cash assistance from organisations such as the Sajida Foundation, Nari Maitri and SEEP, all implementing partners under Concern Worldwide’s ILUEP programme. This money has been used for consumption and supporting small businesses¹⁴. One woman descried how “*After talking the last time, we were provided with financial assistance of 3000 tk from the SEEP, so that we can survive and do business by compensating the loss caused by Corona. I bought 20/25 packets of cigarettes, 2/3 dozen seven-ups, Tiger, Speed at the store with that money which helped me increase my sales and earnings as compared to before.*”

“There is no one in the city to provide support or assistance. Nobody asks, even if you starve to death. When your corpse starts rotting and smelling then they will realize what has happened.”

(Woman Respondent, Dhaka, August 2020)

A very negative attitude towards formal support structures can be identified in the responses we received across all the rounds of data collected. In August, one woman in Dhaka described how “*There is no one in the city to provide support or assistance. Nobody asks, even if you starve to death. When your corpse will start rotting and smelling then they will realize what has happened. I have struggled a lot during Corona*”. This is reflected in the response of one man from Chattogram who described how “*Nobody helps out anymore. The people in the government are all thieves, all government officers are thieves. And local leaders embezzle everything the government allots for us. If the leaders did not embezzle*

all the government relief, that help would have been enough for us". A similar observation was made by a man in Dhaka, in an earlier round of data collection, when speaking about others in his community he described how officials *"have taken their cards, saying they will give them later again and again. But they have not yet received anything. I think the distribution wasn't done in a fair way, many poor got left behind, in many cases I have seen landlords getting it. Many actual poor people got left behind."* This point was also made by a respondent in Chattogram in July who claimed *"political leaders ... give that support to their relatives and friends. They are completely corrupt. Four leaders in our area got monetary support from an organization, but they didn't distribute those among us. And they have instructed us to say that we have gotten the help if anyone calls us and asks us about this"*.

In terms of the support people felt they would like to receive, there was sense that immediate assistance would be better provided in the form of cash that would allow people buy what they want and to support their small businesses. One respondent asked *"I don't understand why the government doesn't provide any help in our slum! If the government does not give us, can we insist"*. That said, the most frequent request was for longer-term assistance that would help them build up a livelihood, generally starting a small business, while others hoped to receive assistance to keep their small businesses going.

Conclusion and Policy Asks

After five months of lockdown and economic hardship, we are starting to see some signs of hope in the responses given by our interviewees, albeit tinged with a potentially premature belief that Covid-19 is over. That said, households continue to suffer from the secondary impacts of Covid-19, including reductions in the quantity and quality of food consumed, reduced income opportunities and potential longer-term impacts in terms of children's access to education. Based on our discussions with some of the extreme poor living in urban areas of Bangladesh, we recommend the following:

1. Continue with the delivery of clear and easily understood messages on how people can protect themselves and prevent the spread of Covid-19, as well as what they could and should do if they have symptoms. Efforts to dispel common myths and misinformation need to be maintained.
2. Ensure families have the means to feed their children to prevent them from becoming malnourished and to protect their health. The cost of doing nothing will be seen in a rise in malnutrition, rolling back recent progress globally. Cash assistance to urban communities with no other means of earning a living must be prioritised; in Bangladesh, cash transfers provide a viable option as the supply market for food, and basic necessities is still functioning, even if there are some variations in prices.
3. Even at this stage, some children will receive support and assistance too late to prevent them becoming acutely malnourished. To address this there is a need to scale up the screening, referral and treatment of malnourished children throughout Bangladesh.
4. In the longer term, the establishment of a social protection system that provides regular, needs based cash assistance in a clear and transparent manner to all of those who need it must be established. There are a number of social protection programmes for the rural poor that have received credit for the speed at which they have expanded as part of the Covid-19 response but there are few such programmes operating in urban areas, this disparity needs to be addressed.

5. Local and national authorities must recognise the scale of the issue they are facing and be proactive in ensuring that where help is needed, it is provided in a safe, dignified, respectful, transparent and equitable way, and that law enforcement are duty bound to protect the poorest and help them access support.
6. There is going to be a great need to ‘catch-up’ on certain key services, such as vaccinations (in health) and the loss of four months education. Response plans need to start thinking these through. Particular attention needs to be given to improved access to affordable health care in urban areas where costs are repeatedly mentioned as a barrier to accessing health services.
7. Beyond the immediate response, ensure a focus on scaling up activities to promote dignified, safe and secure livelihoods as part of the economic recovery, with a particular focus on ‘decent work’. There is an opportunity now to provide vulnerable groups with support to develop new skills and livelihoods

This report has been produced by Zakir Ahmed Khan, Gretta Fitzgerald and Chris Pain of Concern Worldwide Bangladesh and the Strategy, Advocacy and Learning Department. It has been produced as part of a series of briefings on the impact of Covid-19, and the responses implemented in a variety of countries, on the world’s poorest. More information on this programme of research is available at <https://www.concern.net/insights/covid-19-research>

The research has been supported by the Irish Government, however all opinions expressed are those of the authors The views expressed herein should not be taken, in any way, to reflect the official opinion of the Irish Government.

(Endnotes)

1. WHO Timeline – Covid-19 available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/detail/27-04-2020-who-timeline---covid-19>
2. <http://gis.corona.gov.bd/?fbclid=IwAROCvFHzcspbrS3pklpmT7fwkLLkkaTDTYwEYKfvj-6oThKY99EyESnzK54>
3. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>
4. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/03/23/govt-offices-to-remain-closed-till-april-4>
5. Anwar Saeed, Nasrullah Mohammad, Hosen Mohammad Jakir (2020) COVID-19 and Bangladesh: Challenges and How to Address Them in *Frontiers in Public Health*. Vol 8. URL=<https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00154>
6. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/COVID-19-Synthesis-report-Exec-Sum-Final.pdf>
7. <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2020/06/11/na-06122020-helping-bangladesh-recover-from-covid-19>
8. FAO and WFP. 2020. FAO-WFP early warning analysis of acute food insecurity hotspots: July 2020. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb0258en>
9. This is in line with findings from a number of quantitative Knowledge, Attitude and Practice (KAP) surveys carried out by Concern Worldwide in Bangladesh, that found 11% of respondents believed that Covid-19 is transmitted by drinking unclean water, and 20% understood that it is transmitted by eating contaminated food.

10. This is broadly in line with FAO's food security situation reports which found in urban areas food prices for essentials continue to rise, reducing consumption, having a devastating effect on poor households who struggle to afford the basic food basket.
11. The food security situation of households included on a recent cash distribution carried out by Concern suggests that 48% can be considered to be Moderately Food Insecure and 34% Severely Food Insecure
12. A recent article in the Lancet highlighted how the Bangladesh Government's approach to testing and surveillance, including charging patients a fee, is hampering the response. In late June, the government decided to charge 200 taka for testing done at government facilities and 500 taka for samples collected from home to "avoid unnecessary tests". The private sector charges 3500 taka per test. Since the decision, testing rates have fallen to around 0.8 tests per 1000 people per day, with a low of just 0.06 tests per 1000 people in August. This means that the poor are excluded. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31819-5/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31819-5/fulltext?dgcid=raven_jbs_etoc_email)
13. Early criticism of the, initial response came from a number of quarters, including Information Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud (see <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/03/27/covid-19-police-action-during-social-distancing-draws-flak>)
14. This was supported by Concern Worldwide and a post distribution monitoring survey revealed that while 29% of respondents spent some of the money received on food, 77% spent some money on water, sanitation and hygiene products but 98% invested in small businesses.

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Place of registration Dublin, Ireland. Registered number
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