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## **The COVID-19 pandemic: The price Bangladesh pays**

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## ABSTRACT

In order to protect its people, Bangladesh has been making efforts to mitigate COVID-19's long-term socioeconomic and humanitarian consequences. COVID-19 has had substantial social, political, and economic consequences throughout the country. The social vulnerabilities and concerns that emerge from lockdown measures, as well as the economic outcomes, varies based on the gender, disability, age, ethnic origin, migrant workers, and income level. The idea of social distancing rules has compelled the general people to reimagine their surroundings and engage with them in ways that conform to those standards. This article examines the costs (social, economic and health, education) of COVID-19 Bangladesh pays, and shows how COVID-19 has influenced societal practices in a variety of settings. The study further illustrates the political repercussions, such as amplified and ongoing political debates that damage confidence and political participation in the democratic process.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Health, Education, Social, Politics, Bangladesh

## 2. Introduction

The pictures we see in South Asia today are unlike anything the rest of the world has ever seen. The patients and their families lamented for help as the region suffers from a severe lack of medical-grade oxygen. Exhausted medical personnel were on the verge of crumbling (Unicef, 2021). The COVID-19 epidemic has triggered most catastrophic public health and economic crises in recent years. The crisis has resulted in an economic downturn that pushes millions of people into poverty and exacerbates inequality. Severe disruptions in the delivery of normal services, such as crucial health and nutrition services, have been one of the most serious consequences. In the face of growing human and economic costs, governments have stepped up efforts to address the health crisis, safeguard their citizens, and lay the groundwork for recovery (Islam, et al, 2020).

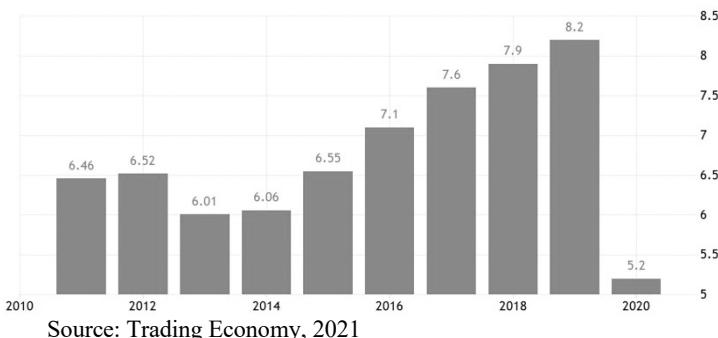
Not only have people been affected by the pandemic, but also the economy and the society. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on all aspects of society, including demography, religious views, culture, education, and political life. People's lives and health systems have been put in peril as a result of the exponential expansion of the virus' attack (Ullah and Ferdous, 2022). More telling is that some vulnerable groups (economic, ethnic or religious) were hit harder than anyone else (Kumar et al., 2021; Ullah, et al, 2021; Sifuentes-Rodríguez, Palacios-Reyes, 2020). Since March 8, 2020, Bangladesh has been infested with this virus. People getting infected at such a rapid rate that the country may have risen to the top of a list of the worlds most impacted countries (Rahman et al., 2021).

Bangladesh has been making tremendous progress in reducing poverty as a result of economic growth (Figure 1).

This has been possible due to economic expansion, strong readymade garment (RMG) exports, and a stable economic environment. Bangladesh was upgraded to lower-middle-income level in 2015 and is on target to leave the Least Developed Countries (LDC) list by 2026 (World Bank, 2021).

Bangladesh is now undergoing a very critical time implying that any stagnation in education, trade and business sector has the potential to bring havoc to Bangladesh economy. As a measure to thwart the spread of the Virus, the lockdown wreaked havoc on the garments industry on which Bangladesh economy is founded. Growth is slowing and poverty level is rising, which will have a detrimental impact on education and health. Reduced female employment participation, educational deficiencies, and increased financial market instabilities are all potential consequences of the epidemic for industry (World Bank, 2021a).

Figure 1. Economic growth in Bangladesh from 2010-2020.



Economic development slowed due to a significant drop in production in the readymade garment (RMG) industry.

Because of the insecurity in transportation, commerce, resorts, and cafes, the service industry's expansion has been stalled. Despite the gradual lifting of border controls in the first half of FY21, preliminary signs of progress occurred. However, supply chain disruptions and unanticipated spikes in commodity prices exacerbated agricultural market volatility in FY20 (GoB, 2020). As imports fell and legal capital movements increased as a result of weaker output, the trade deficit widened. The implementation of nationwide lockdown, contact tracking, isolation, and separation proved futile. The already overburdened health-care system took a long time to respond to this emergency situation (Rahman, 2021). We attempt to portray the overall COVID-19 condition in Bangladesh and the impact that the pandemic has on economy, health, politics and education.

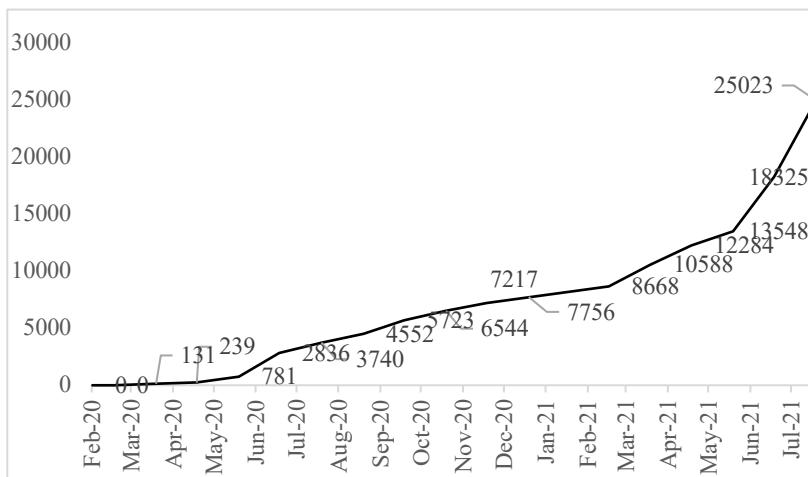
## **2. Bangladesh during the Pandemic**

The COVID-19 outbreak with the alarming rise in cases and a high mortality rate, continued to be a major public health concern in the world. Given the disparities in vaccine distribution, concerns about new variations, and illness progression, it is uncertain when this trying time will come to an end (Ullah, Chattoraj and Ibrahim, 2022). During the second quarter of 2021, we expected certain countries to make headway toward normalcy. Because of the fresh surge of cases, a comparable transformation is unlikely to occur very soon.

Governments had to implement lockdowns to prevent exposure and protect public safety due to the growing number of patients and the virus's high transmissibility. In low- and middle-income countries, however, lockdowns have both immediate and long-term effects. Bangladesh is one of the countries that has implemented lockdowns in order to reduce

spread and mortality rates at the expense of socioeconomic consequences. The first wave of the pandemic began in April 2020 and lasted through the beginning of July 2020. Although the incidence of infections decreased since then, there was a risk of comeback, and it did as the figure 2 shows. In February 2021, a country-wide COVID-19 immunization programme began, and it is projected to gain traction as Bangladesh receives doses under the COVAX Initiative. Of course, establishing broad vaccination programme and herd immunity would take time (Ullah and Ferdous, 2022).

Figure 2. Total reported deaths from COVID-19 until 27 July 2021



In the agriculture sector, 95 percent of jobs are categorized as informal, while 72 percent of total employment in the service sector is classified as informal, and 90 percent of total employment in the industry sector is classified as informal (Danish Trade Union Development Agency, 2020). Informal employment accounts for 85–90% of total employment in

Bangladesh and 68% of the jobs lost in Dhaka, Chittagong due to COVID-19 (Islam et al, 2020). Poverty levels soared as a result of major job losses and reduced income. Despite the increase in liquidity, private sector loan growth remained low due to increased uncertainty. Long-standing vulnerabilities in the financial system, such as insufficient capital buffers and bank undercapitalization, have been exacerbated by the crisis. At a point of time, the economy is likely to recover, mobility restore, enterprises reopen, and exports resume, but we do not know when. As a result, GDP growth is expected to reach 3.6 percent in FY21, driven by (i) a manufacturing rebound fuelled by robust export demand, (ii) a construction rebound fuelled by increased public investment, and (iii) sustained services growth powered by advancements in the immunization programme (World Bank, 2020b).

Financial risks include high levels of non-performing loans (NPLs), insufficient capital buffers, and weak banking governance and risk management existed before COVID-19, but the epidemic exacerbated them. Reduced profitability, deteriorating asset quality, and delayed credit expansion can all have serious economic ramifications. External risks are exacerbated by the uncertain future of global economic recovery, particularly if it has a negative influence on demand for RMG products and employment of Bangladesh's workforce overseas (World Bank, 2020b).

### **3. The challenges**

The pandemic has pushed the world to multifaceted challenges. It has presented countries with unprecedented difficulties, putting mankind and world resilience in jeopardy. Because of their inadequate health infrastructure, financial and human resources, and government response capabilities, low-income and developing countries face a more difficult

situation than others. The interrelated nature of the COVID-19 pandemic problem demands a comprehensive approach and coordinated response, and absence of which further complicates decision-making. For a long-term recovery from the pandemic, identifying the right blend of policies and instruments to address COVID-19 problems and linking them with broader social goals will be vital (Ullah, 2022; Rasul, 2020). The education, health and financial challenges the world is facing directly due to the pandemic. Bangladesh is no exception. The following sections exemplify the challenges and sufferings (Figure 3) brought on by the outbreak in Bangladesh.

This pandemic shows many underdeveloped countries' inadequate health-care systems, notably Bangladesh, which is riddled with corruption (Naher, 2020). Bangladesh, one of the world's most densely populated countries (1,115 people/km<sup>2</sup>), with 21.8 percent of the population living in poverty, has a healthcare system that lacks dependability, responsiveness, and empathy, and has repeatedly been proven insufficient to provide proper health care to the public (Al-Zaman, 2020). The COVID-19 has left with unprecedented health issues and it will continue to cause a variety of long-term health problems, including persistent lung damage, post-viral tiredness, and chronic heart irregularities, in addition to its immediate negative psychological implications (Ferdous and Ullah, 2022; Lewin, 2020) as result, there has been an exponential growth in the suicide rate (Sher, 2020). This pandemic has implications for age, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. For example, it is generally known that elderly are more likely to have COVID-19-related complications than the younger people and death rates appear to be influenced by gender as well. Even though the

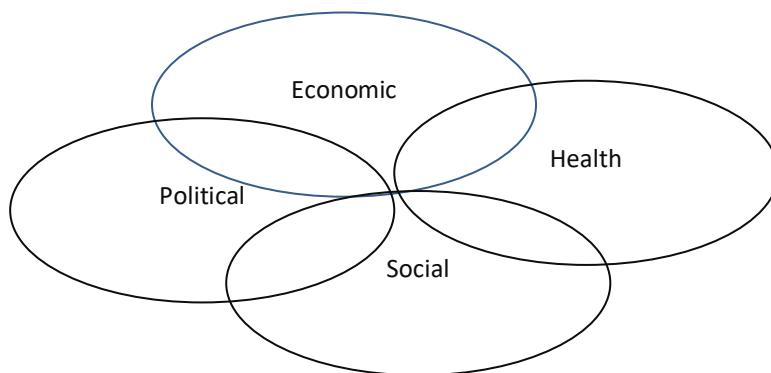
causes are unknown, men are far more likely than women to die from COVID-19 (Bonotti & Zech, 2021).

Many countries have decided to close schools, colleges, and universities (for the appropriate reasons). The situation encapsulates the difficulty that authorities have in deciding whether to close schools (to reduce contact and save lives) or to keep them open (allowing people to work and maintaining the economy) (Ullah and Chattoraj, 2022; Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Many families around the world have been experiencing a significant disruption such as home schooling is a tremendous shock to the students, as well as to children's social lives and learning. On an unprecedented scale, education has been moving to online. However, majority does not have internet access or cannot afford. Student assessments are as well migrating online, resulting in a lot of trial and error and uncertainty for all involved.

There are around 200,000 educational institutions in Bangladesh, with approximately 40 million students. According to a World Vision poll in 2021, 55 percent of children were unhappy at home, and 40 percent were unwell (Antara, 2021). Approximately one-fifth (22.7%) of poor households' school-aged children have not continued their studies since the lockout began. More than three-quarters of the children in recipient households are self-taught (78.1 percent). Only two percent of children in foster care participate in academic television programmes or virtual classrooms run by government or non-profit organizations (2.2 percent). According to studies, 38.5 percent children have a medium to low chance of finishing their schooling once the COVID-19 pandemic is over, potentially resulting in a catastrophic loss of social capital accumulation (HDRC, 2020). Students began to endure anxiety, sadness, and self-harm as a result of the hostile environment. About 58 percent of college students felt

psychologically stressed, 30.2 percent nervous, and 58.8 percent depressed. Due to a lack of resources, a poor internet connection, financial restraints, and mental instability, many students were unable to attend online classes (Rahman et al., 2021).

Figure 3. Multifaceted challenges Bangladesh faces



COVID-19 has had a profound impact on society all across the world. Government policies on social distance restriction, stay-at-home orders, company shutdowns, and curfews have undermined community bonding in many cases by drastically reducing possibilities for face-to-face physical engagement (Ursin et al, 2020; Ferdous and Ullah, 2022). These processes have had a significant impact on family life, both in terms of increased proximity among individuals confined to shared limited places during shutdowns and in terms of separating families to avoid the danger of disease (Fitzgerald, 2020).

There was much worry before the first case from Bangladesh was revealed such as familial relationships were

strained, and staff and patients were evacuated from a hospital when someone was admitted with flu-like symptoms. Bangladeshis experienced panic, tension, societal condemnation, and animosity during the lockdown. Disinformation, rumours, and exaggerated and fake news propagate across multiple social media platforms caused alarm among the general public. In addition, family doctors, clinics, and hospitals in residential and outlying locations have been shuttered due to infection concerns (Rahman et al., 2021). Only a handful of people have the resources to maintain social distance policies, have health issues, stock up food, get health care, sanitation, and cleaning supplies (Reeves & Rothwell, 2020).

In most developing countries, child marriage has long been a significant hindrance to development. Recent research on the interplay between the pandemic and child marriages show an unabated growth in child marriage, primarily because the efforts to eliminate it have slowed down due to the pandemic. Unicef (2021) has warned that COVID-19 has put 10 million more girls at danger of underage marriage. As academic institutions have become increasingly reliant on online learning, new concerns have arisen (Pedersen, 2020). During a phase of social distancing, some people reported higher levels of emotional support, instrumental support, and loneliness, as well as lower levels of friendship and perceived hostility (Lindsey et al, 2021; Ellison, 2020) in both developed and developing world. Also, people have become closer as a result of more schedule flexibility, various employment relationships, and less possibilities for other social activities (Selinger-Morris, 2020).

As mentioned earlier that the economy of Bangladesh has grown rapidly since the early 1990s (Chakravorty, 2019).

However, almost overnight, a substantial percentage of the population fell into poverty. Anyone who was previously poor has had their level of living drastically reduced. The fall in investment, external sector performance, employment, and poverty weighing heavily on the country. By the end of 2021, the level is expected to double (Salim & Kabir, 2020). It is highly likely that a large percentage of them may not be able to quickly transcend poverty line, implying that the current crisis will have far-reaching ramifications (Hossain, 2021).

Economic outputs and activity are not the only factors that cause concerns for Bangladesh. Bangladeshi farmers have been subject to a range of vulnerabilities for a long time. They began to lose shock resilience when the agriculture industry began to lose dominance during the early 1990s structural upheaval (both natural and economic). About 65 percent of the households are smallholder farmers (those who own less than 0.5 acres). They have been stuck in a debt and loss cycle for a long time. Their vulnerabilities were worsened by the COVID-19 epidemic, which resulted in a financial shock (BRAC, 2020). On top of this, the price of agricultural products plunged (Bhosale, 2020). Every day, the service and farming sectors of Bangladesh's economy lose Tk3,300 crore (USD353,919,000) (ADB, 2021). Farmers are now facing extra hurdles due to labour shortages and the need to conform to new social distance standards (Talty, 2020). The related restrictions have stopped food supply chains and caused meat shortages in various meat-processing businesses (Gray, 2020).

A spate of domestic political difficulties has resulted from the global epidemic. Political unrest, internal military action, and political instability are all possibilities as a result of the pandemic. Despite the Bangladeshi state's increased bandwidth over the last decade and strong political incentives

to manage the epidemic without jeopardizing economic wellbeing, Ali et al. (2021) claim that the state and frontline actors were forced to endure lockdown rule-breaking in order to maintain popular legitimacy. Due to its incapacity to influence local political leaders, the state was unable to ensure a fair and timely distribution of relief. The potency of widely held societal "moral economy" beliefs, which gave convincing ethical and political explanations for people's rejection to engage in the lockdown and the authorities' reluctance to enforce it, contrasted sharply with the Bangladeshi state's fragility (Ali, et al, 2021). According to Bari and Naz (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted citizens' relationships with governments in numerous countries.

The COVID-19 outbreak put pressure on governments all around the world to act fast and forcefully. Their policy responses, on the other hand, differed greatly between countries (Farboodi, Jarosh and Shimer, 2020). To keep the cases under control, some governments rapidly implemented tight lockdown policies (e.g., Australia, New Zealand or Argentina). Others chose flexible strategies to mitigate the pandemic's economic impact (e.g., Brazil, Sweden, or the US) (Alvarez et al. 2020).

People became increasingly dissatisfied, and the information-confidence gap widened. Companies were shut down, curfews were imposed, people's movements and travel were restricted, economic activity was directed toward meeting critical medical needs, and critics and dissidents were suppressed. Governments did very little, if anything, to alleviate popular outrage and combat corruption. Bangladesh's ruling government used the COVID-19 outbreak as a pretext to limit free speech and crackdown on dissidents. Journalists, artists, students, doctors, members of the political

opposition, and activists who spoke out against the government's reaction to the pandemic or criticized the ruling party were detained (HRW, 2021).

#### **4. Combatting this crisis**

It is critical to have a strategy in place for revitalizing the economy. A paradigm shift in thinking is required to solve the COVID challenge. In the post-COVID age, Bangladesh will require a new implementation strategy for its economic drivers. Simultaneously, the time has come to implement changes and action plans that would have been difficult to implement prior to COVID but are essential for inclusive growth (Hossain, 2021). With the right policies and quick action, Bangladesh's economic recovery may be expedited and its path to upper-middle-income status maintained. Bangladesh's logistics performance has deteriorated, limiting exports. As the COVID-19 outbreak reshapes trade and supply chains, the logistics industry may help Bangladesh recover and increase its competitiveness. The COVID-19 outbreak revealed vulnerabilities in the system, such as a lack of automated processing systems, which hindered cargo transit through ports and imposed immigration restrictions. In the medium term, reforms should focus on ensuring business continuity and boosting resilience. In the long run, improved logistics may help Bangladesh to maintain its RMG manufacturing dominance while expanding its export profile (World Bank, 2020b). Despite the lockdown policy, a number of stimulus packages, including BDTk 50 billion in various sector was declared. Throughout history, hardship has taught us that crisis provides an opportunity to think differently. One of the benefits of this crisis is that it encourages us to re-examine the growth and development strategies, economic

philosophy, and long-term plans. That new ideas should be centred on shifting away from a concentration on economic expansion and toward a more holistic approach to development.

As wealthy countries expand their vaccination programmes and begin to emerge from lockdown, a second lethal wave of the virus has invaded South Asia, along with more contagious and dangerous variations, and it is eclipsing efforts to limit and prevent it in many cases. The inherent health and social disparities of the COVID-19 pandemic are widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots. To combat COVID-19, Bangladesh's government has taken a number of significant steps, including forming a national COVID-19 response committee led by the Minister of Health; closing all government and private offices; closing all educational institutions in the country; suspending all domestic and international flights; and suspending all domestic and international flights.

Of course, additional hands are needed to mitigate the crisis, given the country's current situation. What needs to be done right now is to raise public awareness of the magnitude of the crisis; reopen all sectors of the economy; vaccinate all classes of people in accordance with COVID-19 standards; ensure that government aid reaches the most vulnerable citizens; strengthen the safety net for the most vulnerable; and successfully implement the government's stimulus package.

There are worrying discrepancies in education and healthcare, in addition to the economic inequality (Matin, 2015). Many individuals who rely on government health care suffer in many ways, whereas the wealthy have access to treatment both at home and abroad (Joarder et al., 2019). For

prioritizing policy decisions and allocating resources, four practical criteria can be applied (Rasul, 2020): protecting people's lives and livelihoods; efficiency and effectiveness; fairness and equity; and sustainability and resiliency. These four principles (Rasul, 2020) may differ by country, and different countries may place emphasis differently on them depending on their socioeconomic conditions, existing health facilities, financial capacity, and environmental conditions, as well as their specific social, economic, and environmental concerns.

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