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Understanding rural local government response during COVID-19-induced lockdown: perspective from Bangladesh

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Abstract

This study intends to explore the responses of local government during the COVID-19-induced lockdown in the rural areas, with particular emphasis on Bangladesh. By adopting a qualitative phenomenological research approach and employing multi-method data collection techniques (for instance, Key Informant Interview (KII), Focus Group Discussion (FGD), participant observation, and content analysis), this study found that the local governments managed the crisis of the pandemic relatively well with its limited manpower and funding through adequate preparedness and prevention strategies; effective emergency responses; and consolidated post-lockdown measures. The study revealed that the Bangladesh local government promptly took some essential actions, such as preparedness and prevention, arrangement of home quarantine and isolation, the training program for readiness, and disseminated crucial information to the local people during the pandemic, such as using masks, hand washing and sanitizing, and social distancing. Besides, the local government delivered relief, such as food and non-food items and financial support. Furthermore, the rural local government took post-lockdown responses to tackle pandemic in rural Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the service delivery individuals from local governance encountered numerous challenges, like scarcity of manpower, less support, and superstition, while providing services during the pandemic.

Keywords Local government · COVID-19 · Lockdown · Response · Bangladesh

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Introduction

Coronavirus startled the world in the early years of 2020 (Nagel 2020) with an abysmal situation on earth, which continues to exist very much dominantly even today. The virus was initially found in Wuhan city of China caused by SAR-SCOV2N, but it quickly spread to the USA, Europe, Asia, Australia, Africa, and the rest of the world (Sohel et al. 2021a, b). It has already taken a million of lives, significantly disrupted business, and made thousands of people jobless. Moreover, it has affected human health by raising deaths and disabilities around the world, especially in least-developed countries (LDCs) where medical services and supports are limited. In order to contain the spread of the disease, different national governments introduced travel restrictions. More specifically, on April 07, 2020, 32 Asian countries and regions, 43 European countries and regions, 38 countries and regions in the America and the Caribbean, and 44 African countries and regions implemented lockdown restrictions (Mottaleb et al. 2020). Following the trend of these countries, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) also imposed country-wide lockdown on the 26th of March in response to the COVID-19 outbreak. So far, Bangladesh had imposed lockdown three times. The first was from 26th March to 30th May 2020; the second was from 28th June to 14th July 2021; and the third was from 23rd July to 5th August 2021.

Assumedly, national governments have been successful to a certain extent in terms of containing the transmission of Covid-19 through the adoption of these sort of strict policies; however, these are not without costs. In fact, it has had a devastating effect on the lives and livelihood of marginalized population especially in the lower middle-income countries, like Bangladesh, where many workers, both in the formal and informal sectors, have lost employment or have experienced decreased income. Furthermore, the COVID-19 has dimmed the economic outlook by causing disruptions in the domestic economy, a decline in exports and remittances, and an increased stress on financial sector. As a result, there was a 70% decrease in economic activity, particularly in urban areas, with severe consequences of poverty (Rahman et al. 2020). Therefore, in order to tackle such a challenging situation and mitigate the crisis, national governments both in the developed and the developing economies have offered stimulus packages and special budgetary allocations. In this regard, few scholars, for instance, Dutta and Fischer (2021), Gupta et al. (2021), and Kujur and Goswami (2020) opined that local governments (LGs) play a critical role in coordinating the pandemic response. This is owing to the fact that the LG units are located nearer to people and so they are in a better position to identify the specific needs of the people and to offer them the required services within the shortest possible time and in a cost-effective way (Panday 2011), which has been referred to as 'local rationality' (Ehsan 2020). Similarly, during the pandemic situation and other crisis events, LGs can play a meaningful role in addressing the health, social, economic, and livelihood challenges in both the urban and remote areas.

As a part of the response in addressing the socio-economic hardships that people of various demographic strata were enduring owing to the COVID-19-induced

lockdown in Bangladesh, GoB allocated separate budgetary allocation. On the one hand, a stimulus package of around 500 million BDT (approximately USD 589 million) fund was allotted for all export-based firms and the RMG sector so that they could pay three-month salaries to laborers (UNCDF 2020). While on the other hand, 120 million BDT was dispersed by the LG with the aim of supporting around 5 million low-income families (The Daily Star 2020). Nonetheless, the question remains on to what extent these funds have been utilized effectively and reached the target group at the grassroots level given the fact that existing literature, for instance (Khan 2008; Khan 2009; Haque et al. 2011; Osman 2011; Panday 2011; Waheed and Saminah 2012; Wahed and Mphande 2014; Wahed and Alam 2015; Osman 2015; Uddin 2019; Ahmed et al. 2016; Ehsan and Kamruzzaman 2019; and Ehsan 2021a), have pinpointed to various issues and challenges of local governance in Bangladesh. In other words, these studies have echoed a pessimistic overtone regarding the fact that local governance at the grassroots of Bangladesh suffers greatly from limited manpower and resources, lack of fiscal autonomy, ineffective monitoring, lack of accountability and transparency, elite power capture, political manipulation, and non-cooperation from Upazila-based bureaucracy (Ehsan 2020).

On this backdrop, this empirical study aims to understand, explore, and analyze how the LG in Bangladesh has responded to the challenges that emanated from the COVID-induced lockdowns in the rural areas. More precisely, this study based on empirical evidences will illustrate the different measures that local governments in Bangladesh have adopted for tackling the emergency situation. Having set the scene in the introductory part, the next section will provide a review of the existing literature on this area, highlighting how other countries LGs have responded to this crisis. The following section provides a brief overview of the local government system in Bangladesh. Having discussed the research methodology that has been adopted for conducting this study, the consecutive sections of this paper shed light on the empirical findings of this research, discussion of results, and concluding observations.

Literature review

Several studies have been conducted in this arena by the scholars where they have tried to explore how local governments have responded to this shock. For instance, Dutta and Fischer (2021), Gupta et al. (2021), and Kujur and Goswami (2020) investigated how the state authorities in three Indian states—Rajasthan, Kerala, and Odisha—have tried to bridge the gap between the need for a fast and robust response to the pandemic and local challenges. While Angel and Mudrazija (2020) examined the LG public assistance and the financial and health incentives for elderly individuals who stay in their homes throughout the epidemic in the USA. In another study, Pradana et al. (2020) found that the LG entities and community organizations, such as sub-districts or village offices, along with officially linked youth organizations, play an active part in maintaining the safety and welfare of vulnerable Indonesians. Meanwhile, Afonso (2021) in his paper discussed how counties and LG in North Carolina have prepared

their budgets for the fiscal year 2020–2021 in the face of COVID-19 uncertainty. Even, Gordon et al. (2020) provided a snapshot of state and LG budgets as of July 2020, when most governments and municipalities begin a new fiscal year. Similarly, Ahrens and Ferry (2020), through in-depth reviewing of official reports and the news media examined England's LG financial resiliency in the aftermath of COVID-19. Interestingly though, McDonald et al. (2020) in their study based in the USA revealed that new conflicts arose within the state–local intergovernmental system when state and local governments were trying to tackle the COVID-19 outbreak. On the other hand, Asuncion (2020) investigated on the public's communication preferences, their level of trust in the government, and the factors influencing their risk/crisis perception in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also compares federal help to previous recessions and suggests some reform options. Another study by Dzigbede et al. (2020) which aimed to draw the insights of LG officials and managers who were on the front lines of biological natural disaster response and recovery in the USA found that the LGs are taking innovative actions and strategic measures as a part of mitigating measures for controlling the pandemic.

In the context of COVID-19 research in Bangladesh, most researchers focused on mental health, depression, and anxiety (Islam 2020; Banna et al. 2020; Bodrud-Doza et al. 2020; Faisal et al. 2021). Some studies have emphasized income, occupation, socio-economic condition, and livelihood (Hossain 2021; Kabir et al. 2021; Paul et al. 2021; Shammi et al. 2020; Sohel et al. 2021a, b), while few studies were focused to investigate the issues of food insecurity that have resulted because of the pandemic (Das et al. 2020; Dev and Kabir 2020; Mottaleb et al. 2020; Ruszczyk et al. 2021; Sohel et al. 2021a, b). Similarly, scholars have also shown keen interest in conducting studies on the impact of COVID-19 on education and online learning (Emon et al. 2020; Ela et al. 2021; Rahman et al. 2021a, b, c; Dutta and Smita 2020). On the other hand, some studies concentrated on issues of suicide cases due to COVID-19 (Mamun and Griffithsc 2020; Bhuiyan et al. 2020; Mamun et al. 2020). Besides, studies were focused on examining COVID-19 relationship with climate, weather, meteorological factors, and what impact COVID-19 had on the mothers of Bangladesh (Islam et al. 2021a, b; Mofijur et al. 2020; Rahman et al. 2021a, b, c; Ehsan and Jahan 2021).

Upon reviewing several pieces of literature, it appears that a good number of research works have been conducted to cover different issues and challenges stemmed from COVID-19 pandemic. However, no academic study has yet been undertaken on the response of LG of Bangladesh during COVID-19. Therefore, in order to fill this void, the study aims to explore the LG response during the period of the pandemic in Bangladesh. The study will help the concerned policymakers and relevant stakeholders, for instance, ministry of local government and health workers of developing countries like Bangladesh in making decisions and formulating policies for dealing the crisis situation more effectively.

The local government system in Bangladesh: an overview

The term "local government" refers to delegating authority from the central government to local governments. In ensuring democracy, local welfare, and well-being, local authorities have played a key role (Cooke et al. 2010). In Bangladesh, the members of the LG are elected independently and are largely self-governing. They engage in a variety of activities and welfare actions (Fakhrul 2015). Particularly, the LG plays a vital role in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery in Bangladesh (CFE-DM 2020). A number of studies, for instance, Ahmed (2012), Panday (2011), and Ehsan and Kamruzzaman (2019) have well documented the evolution of the local government system in Bangladesh (Ehsan 2020). Over time, five types of local government institutions have been codified by law, including Zilla Parishads, Upazila Parishads, Union Parishads (UPs), Pourashavas (municipalities), and City Corporations (Ehsan 2020, 2021b), which are again broadly divided into rural and urban local governments. More specifically, rural local government is a hierarchical system composed of three tiers: Union Parishad (UP), Sub-district Council or Upazila Parishad, and District Council or Zila Parishad, whereas urban local government is composed of City Corporation and Municipality (Panday 2011) (See Fig. 1). Both the urban and rural local governments function alongside four sub-national levels tiers of local administration of the central government also referred to as the field administration (Ehsan 2020, 2021b). However, this needs to be mentioned here that local government bodies in Bangladesh (i.e., both the rural and the urban ones) operate with devolved authority, while the parallel local administration operates with de concentrated authority.
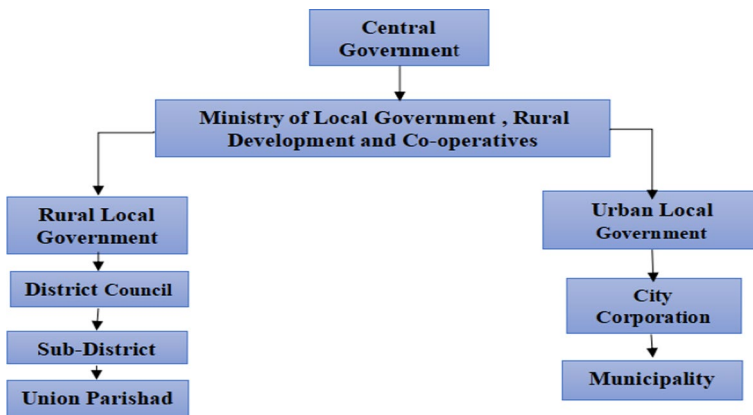
Fig. 1 An overview of local government system in Bangladesh. *Source* Developed by Authors

Materials and methods

Research approach and study area

The role of local government during COVID-19-induced lockdown was investigated using a qualitative phenomenological approach. A qualitative phenomenology research method is appropriate to understand a phenomenon from the participant's perspective (McCaslin 2003). Bangladesh is one of the most COVID-19-affected countries in the world. Approximately all districts in Bangladesh more or less have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Among the highly vulnerable and affected district in Bangladesh, the Jashore district is one of them (Dhaka Tribune 2021b). Jashore district is very adjacent to India and the biggest land port with India is also located with this district. This is also one of the fundamental causes of being more vulnerable, as India is one of the highest COVID-19-infected countries on the globe (The Guardian 2020). Particularly, Bangladesh suffered a lot for the Indian delta variant (DW 2021), particularly Jashore district (Dhaka Tribune 2021a). For this reason, the Jashore district was purposively selected as the study area. Therefore, the data for this study were collected from the government personnel and the representative of the rural local government and general people from the study area.

Study design and sample size

To create numerical and statistical results, quantitative analysis use a vast amount of data, whereas qualitative research use a small number of samples (Alam 2020). Sandelowski (1995) recommended that a sample size of 10 would be appropriate for qualitative research involving a homogeneous population. Arguing on the same vein, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) suggested that the researchers could increase caring and open conversation by developing and maintaining personal relationships with less than twenty participants. Therefore, we have used a non-probability purposive sampling technique for selecting the respondents of this study. 13 Key Informant Interview (KII) from local government personnel and representative, six Focus Group Discussion (FGD) from mass people, and 10 months of participant observation were conducted during and after lockdown to achieve study objective. We have taken in-depth interviews from district level *(Jashore),* sub-district *(Jhikorgachha)*, and union *(Navaran)*-level local government representatives and authority (Table 1).

Data collection and instruments

The study has used a qualitative multi-method tool which is very useful for social and rural exploration. To better grasp the practical challenges of the subject, we used a semi-structured interview schedule so that participants could provide responses from their knowledge and experience (Saunders et al. 2009). Furthermore, a semi-structured interview elicits more specific information about the investigated research question (Berg 2012). FGD is often used to extract a more detailed understanding of

Table 1 Rank of the key informant interviewees

Serial	Rank of the KII respondent
1	District Council Member
2	Upazila (Sub-district) Chairman
3	Upazila (Sub-district) Vice Chairman
4	Upazila (Sub-district) Social Welfare Officer
5	Union Council Chairman
6	Secretary of Union Council
7	Union Council Member (Women)
8	Union Council Member (Women)
9	Union Council Member (Male)
10	Union Council Village Police
11	Village Defense Party (Community Leader)
12	Youth Volunteer Committee
13	Youth Volunteer Committee

social issues as a qualitative technique (Nyumba et al. 2018). Data were collected in two phases—first, from 26 March 2020 to 30 May 2020 (when GoB declared first nation-wide lockdown), second, from 24 April 2020 to 6 June 2021(when GoB declared second nation-wide lockdown). All the data that were obtained through KII, FGD, and participant observations were recorded upon taking prior consent of the respondents which were later carefully transcribed and examined.

Quality assurance: data analysis, validity, and reliability

The NVivo-12 software was used to code the interview transcripts thematically, classify them, and organize them, making it easier to handle critical information and assured high-quality coding, boosting the findings' reliability and validity (Zamawe 2015). Instead of manually using paper and pen, this software enables researchers to use straightforward data management and analysis tools. Data were gathered and analyzed with code numbers in a separate file classified by subsequently, compiled, and occupation divided according to type, characteristics, and nature. To ensure the data's quality, validity, and reliability, we have used a multiple triangulation approach which includes method triangulation, data source triangulation, and investigator triangulation approach because these approaches are crucial to reducing bias in data collection, analysis, and reporting (Denzin 2010). In method triangulation, multiple data collection methods such as FGD, KII, and participant observation were adopted to ensure the highest possible quality of research. To maintain data sources triangulation guidelines, data were collected from two channels: the general people who receives services from local government and local government representatives and personnel. Furthermore, several researchers were involved in the data collection procedure in investigator triangulation. In fact, these researchers visited the field frequently, while the data were being collected to undertake investigations

without previous discussion to ensure accuracy. Thus, this method of data collection ensures a higher degree of data validation.

Approaches of measuring and coding

A data-driven inductive technique (Boyatzis 1998) was used to coding the data. Data analysis, processing, and coding were carried out concurrently using the approach described in (Graneheim and Lundman 2004) which is given below (Table 2).

Results

The coronavirus has caused a significant threat to Bangladesh as the country has minimal resources to tackle the outbreak. In rural areas, the local government played an important role in ensuring people's safety and well-being. It was found from the empirical evidence that the local government established an excellent and unique system to manage the pandemic situation promptly. Mainly, the UPs created Village Defense Party (VDP) and youth volunteer committee with the help of villagers for tackling the pandemic. In VDP, the senior citizen was involved, and young villagers were actively associated in the youth volunteer committee. While the UPs usually gave directions to the VDP, and the youth volunteer committee would get guidance and suggestions from the VDP. This system helped in managing the pandemic situation from getting worse in rural areas. Broadly, the COVID-19 responses and strategies that the rural local government in Bangladesh have adopted can be categorized into three types: (i) Preparedness and Prevention; (ii) Emergency Response; and (iii) Post-Lockdown Response (Fig. 2).

Table 2 Description of data analysis, processing, and coding followed in the thematic analysis

Steps	Description
1. Interview transcription	The interviews were taped and read again after hearing the recordings several times to comprehend the contents
2. Unit for the formation of meaning analysis	All interviews were analyzed as a single unit. Creating primary codes by abstracting meaning units
3. Comprehensive sorting of similar codes	The grouping of similar fundamental codes into more comprehensive categories
4. Comparison of codes and establishment of subcategories	In contrast, all codes and data identified similarities and differences. This process resulted in the formation of categories and subcategories
5. Comparing subcategories and establishing primary categories	The initial interviews yielded an initial set of codes, categories, and subcategories, and the emerging codes were considered the results due to the contents analysis methodology. Two independent researchers examined the category of data.
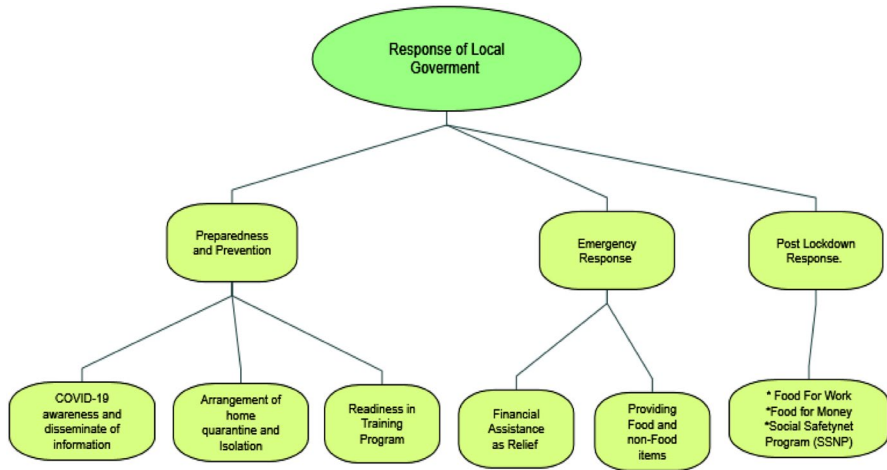
Fig. 2 Responses by the local government in Bangladesh

Preparedness and prevention

COVID-19 awareness and disseminate of information

Raising awareness among the mass people emerged as a vital initiative by the local government in the rural area. The UP, Village Defense Party (VDP), and the youth volunteers worked together to prepare and prevent the coronavirus from the rural village. They monitored the whole union in different groups, closed all the shops, and created awareness using loudspeakers and leaflets. The announcement was given three to four times a week. The announcement was given frequently for ensuring that the local people did not forget the rules and regulations during the pandemic. The administrators mainly explained the rules of washing their hands with soaps, detergents, bleaching powders, wearing masks properly, and maintaining social distance to the villagers. In addition, they made announcements to avoid public gatherings to resist the COVID-19 transmission. We found that spreading awareness has a positive impact on the local people's behaviors. "Instead of going to the mosques for prayers, people remained at their homes for saying their prayers," one of the key informants # 5 mentioned.

Arrangement of home quarantine and isolation

Usually, people of lower-income level dwell in the villages of Bangladesh. They are either involved in farming or other jobs that requires manual labor. As a matter of fact, the COVID-19 pandemic even could not prevent them from going out of their homes owing to the factor of sustenance. In fact, by ignoring the coronavirus, they went out to find work to feed their family. Moreover, there were other instances for why villagers moved from one place to another without following

the guidance of the UP. For this reason, the local government experienced dif-
ficulties in controlling the movement of mass people. In order to resolve these
issues, the volunteers made the bamboo fence beside the roads to prevent other
villagers from entering their village.

A question might arise about the execution of the local government's plan at the
village level. The UP chairman explained that they undertook the step to mark the
particular house or place with red flags. More specifically, the villagers were notified
if they came from outside the village or tested positive, they had to stay within their
homes for 14 days. The local government took this step for identifying the affected
homes. The red flags would remain at their homes as long as they fully recovered.
The other reason for setting the red flags was to alert everyone to keep social dis-
tance and stay away from the affected homes. The UP did not allow the affected
people to step out of their homes. The village police also helped the UP in their
initiatives.

Readiness in training program

We asked the respondents how the UP representatives and staff came to know about
the precautionary and preventative steps for the coronavirus. Most of them answered
that they had gone through some training on basic knowledge about the COVID-19
for which they could deliver accurate information about the pandemic to the local
people. During the lockdown, it was essential to ensure the practice of social dis-
tancing, maintaining hygiene, and wearing masks properly. So, the local government
trained the members of the UP and staff, guards, and village police on social safety
culture. This training prepared them for the upcoming challenges and informed the
mass people about the correct information. Through the training, the UP members,
guards, and village police learned about the health guidelines for COVID-19.

Emergency response

Financial assistance as relief

After March 26, 2020 and its onward, Bangladesh experienced unprecedented chal-
lenges due to the COVID-19. Many rural poor villagers could not access to proper
healthcare, daily meals, and other necessary goods because of their poor financial
condition. Under these circumstances, financial support could have made a differ-
ence to the most vulnerable families. Consequently, the government provided BDT
2500 (30 USD) through electronic fund transfers such as bKash and Nagad to the
helpless people.

One respondent said that this kind of support was very beneficial during the lock-
down. This support heavily contributed to the people who starved to eat one meal
a day. He said, "I got the chairman's 5-kg rice and TK 2500. Although the amount
was not enough for me, these were sort of life saving at that crisis moment. Other-
wise, I would have suffered much." (FGD#1, P#2). Another respondent shared the

experience, "I have received help from many places. Our chairman gave me rice, pulses, and oil worth 10 kgs." (FGD#3, P#5).

We found that the local government also raised funds from the public, particularly the UP, which played a vital role in financial aid to the poor. The UP chairman reported that "we have given most of these from private funds" (KII#5). He also added, "It gained the people's trust and respect, so poor people randomly used to go to their office to see the light of hope. The village people shared their problems and asked for help."

Providing food and non-food items

In Bangladesh, 30% of people live below the poverty line (New Age 2021). As it has been mentioned earlier, during the pandemic, Bangladeshi citizens faced several lockdowns. As a result, there was an adverse impact on rural people's life. They could not go for their field works, selling goods, or other informal works that ultimately reduced their food consumption. Some relied on remittances, but they did not get remittances due to the pandemic. The poor lead the deadliest life during a lockdown without income. To mitigate the sorrows of people, the local government took different effective initiatives, especially relief distribution. The head of the Upazila (Sub-district) chairman explained that while donating the reliefs, there could be a chance of facing a chaotic situation to mess up or any irregularity or chaos. So, they donated virus protections (sanitizers, masks, soaps, etc.) through the local political leaders, i.e., Upazilla Council (Sub-district), and the UP members to ensure transparency. The local government also ensured social distancing and distributed the reliefs at open fields.

Post-lockdown response

The Bangladeshi government has funded 7.83% of the total budget for Social Safety Net Programs(SSNPs) for the fiscal year 2021–2022 for addressing issues like eradicating poverty, health issues, education, disaster management, and low-cost accommodations for the poor (Sarwar 2021). As a matter of fact, during data collection, we tried to know from the respondents, especially from the social welfare officer that whether these SSNPs had any separate allocation for the COVID-19 or not. One of the key informants replied, "We had an allocation for the pandemic and that was the government grant which was BDT 500. So, the total was BDT one lakh, and the other was BDT 50,000 (KII#4)." The distribution procedure of cash was quite different from the donation process of reliefs. In fact, no specific requirements or condition was set for receiving or giving the allowances. Rather one of the Up members mentioned that we uniformly disbursed the amount among the local people.

We also came to know from the UP Secretary that the sub-district union has a regular monthly donation of thirty KG of rice. The primary purpose of this activity of government is to benefit the most vulnerable people. Since the vulnerable people led a more miserable life because of COVID-19, the sub-district union donated thirty KG of rice to those badly affected by the pandemic. That activity had not been

allocated separately by the government for the COVID-19; the Sub-district Union members donated the thirty KG of rice entirely on their initiative.

Another program named "Food for work" was executed by the local government during the pandemic. The local government recruited the poor and COVID-19-affected people to work in the construction side, irrigation channels, and river dams under this program. Instead of cash, they received food wages such as wheat. It is a way of reducing poverty and creating employment during the lean season or disastrous times.

Problems and challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted the livelihood of people and their works. Simultaneously, the local governments are being put to the ultimate test of their ability to find and implement solutions to the emergency. In various circumstances, this is the lowest level of government as it remains to the closest platform of the local people. So, it has even more accountability and obligations. The local government tried its best to support the vulnerable group with correct information, financial assistance and reliefs, and other social safety benefits.

However, the LGs faced various challenges while providing the services. More specifically, the UP faced two confrontations in containing the virus: ensuring social distance and separating the COVID-19-affected people from others. Village people were unaware of the causes and consequences of the coronavirus. So, some were barely obeying all the rules and regulations, and it was a daunting task in making them understand about the negative impacts of the virus. Consequently, some villagers broke the discipline by arranging weddings or taking part in Friday prayers at mosques. Moreover, due to the closure of schools and colleges, many parents married off their children at an early age. To avert the people from public gatherings, the LGs rushed to the spots whenever they got the news about the wedding or crowd for prayers. Moreover, we observed that villagers hold a belief that they would not be affected by the virus. This sort of perception might have been created among the villagers due to the fact that most of them are involved in informal jobs, such as farmers, hawkers, and rickshaw pullers. Under these circumstances, they had to do laborious work in the hot summer or heavy rain. So, their occupations might turn into the firm belief of having a high resistance ability against the novel virus. Another confrontation that the LG experienced while managing the pandemic was fund constraint. In fact, the UP chairman mentioned that they did not find any support from the NGOs or CSOs. And the support that they got from the government was also inadequate.

Discussion

During the lockdowns, the government initiated several plans and programs. The significant initiative was developing awareness among public about the prevention of COVID-19. Local counselors used loudspeakers to publicly announce the community, instructing people to keep social distance and obey safety rules (The Business

Standard 2020). Moreover, the government took the initiative to make available 6200 isolation beds around the country for COVID-19 positive patients. In addition, 323 establishments were accommodated for Institutional Quarantine (*Government's Initiative to Fight Coronavirus* 2020). On the other hand, Dutta and Fischer (2021) mentioned that Indian local governments implemented lockdown restrictions by threatening the violators, forcing mass people to stay at home, drawing lines in the markets, and arresting violators. In addition, the Indian authorities recruited Community Resource Persons (CRPs) to assure physical separation between recipients (Palandurkar and Patel 2020). In Nigeria, the government took initiatives of restrictions on travel, shut down institutions, trained representatives for health care sectors, proper COVID-19 guidelines, ensured 14 days of quarantine, and provided protective equipment (Uchechi Okoroiwu et al. 2020). Furthermore, ILO (2020) reported that it introduced an extensive training package in collaboration with the BGMEA and the BKMEA to help the RMG sector prevent viruses and observe workers during the pandemic. Similar findings were also found from this study that the guards, village police, and Union Council members received training on COVID-19 safety.

Alarmingly though, the financial condition of the poor people of Bangladesh went down during the pandemic. In early April 2020, per capita income declined from $1.30 (in February) to $0.32 (US) (Bhuiyan et al. 2020). The continuous lockdown also affected income and food security. To tackle the situation, the government donated relief items to 21.33% of the households in March–August (The Financial Express 2020). The findings of this study revealed that that the government, with coordination with the LG, donated relief, such as rice, pulses, oil, and flour, to support the poor. The government allocated USD 294.5 million for a free food donation to the poor, USD 29.5 million for trading rice of BDT10 per KG, and distributing money worth USD 148 million to the target group. In the case of India, Dutta and Fischer (2021) explained that the LG generated cash transfers and donated food and cash to poor people. On the other hand, the government of Brazil provided food kits, granted aid ranging from R$ 50 to R$ 179.10 to buy food, and prioritized distributing staple food baskets as an urgent procedure (Basuony et al. 2021; Gurgel et al. 2020). Furthermore, 72 Bangladeshi local governments received USD 169,000 from Sweden and the European Union, UNCDF, and the government. The local governments used the grant to buy health protection materials, like sanitizers, gloves, and masks.

Unemployment is another major issue in Bangladesh. It is estimated that between 12 and 17 million people had lost their jobs temporarily for two months in the nation-wide lockdown (Hossain 2021). So, the government announced two extra stimulus packages worth 15 billion Taka for the poor people's lifestyle development project and 12 billion Taka for the widow and aged people expansion project (IMF 2021). Furthermore, this study found about the thirty kg of rice activity and how the local government executed that during the pandemic. Similarly, Chowdhury et al. (2021) also mentioned that the Bangladeshi government did not ease the eligibility requirements for COVID-19; it did provide an additional 30 kg of rice accessible to the remaining respondents in March 2020. It did not add in extra beneficiaries. Besides, the Australian government offered a "Job Keeper Package" for COVID-19 (Rahman et al. 2021a, b, c), whereas the Malaysian government introduced wage

subsidies for the organizations. It appointed local laborers earning RM 4000 and provided a "Special PRIHATIN Grant." That grant is worth RM3000 for micro-companies (Ahmad et al. 2020).

Policy recommendations

We carefully noted that most villagers are autorickshaw drivers, small grocery or business owners, or day laborers. During the lockdowns, these people suffered severe income shocks and unemployment. Twenty million people who depend entirely on occupations in the informal sector have just lost their employment and many more are in danger of doing so (Riaz 2020). The poorer section of society, who either have little to no savings, is mainly the worst victim of the financial crisis. According to Islam (2020), COVID-19 has returned 16.5 million people to poverty, primarily rickshaw drivers, street vendors, day laborers, motor drivers, hawkers, construction workers, and staff members of hotels and restaurants. They were forced to obtain many loans from banks or neighbors and relatives. Hence, loss of income makes it difficult for them to repay the loans. Ultimately, the situation also affected food security. The government should first take the initiative for their employment. Through initiatives, like "money exchange of work" and "Food for work," the government should promote both partial and complete employment in order to lower poverty.

We further investigated that the rural residents could not perform their informal jobs, such as selling things or working in the fields. Due to the epidemic, some of the villagers who depend on remittances could not receive them. How can the poorest individuals in this situation live their darkest lives during a lockdown when there is no work and no income? Large families are prevalent in rural areas. Families with six or more members depend on one person. One villager stated, "We had to go without meals for days. We saw in the news that our government allocated many reliefs and money for poor people like us. Unfortunately, we did not get anything; neither did our relatives and neighbors." As we discussed in the study, the local government distributed many COVID-19 reliefs and funds. However, we got a different scenario from some local villagers. Actually, the reliefs were not sufficient to cover the village. At this point, the local government is highly encouraged to increase the amount of relief and include disadvantaged households in the social safety net programs for a long time. The social safety net process should be flexible and ensure women's participation in the program's selection. The local government should also provide small farmers and food workers a more secure social safety net. Besides, we discovered that the government did not allocate funds for motor drivers. One of our key informants said, "Those who are very poor in the society, have no work to survive, such as van drivers and tea shopkeepers, have received the donation." At that point, he added that the government did not allocate funds for the motor drivers. The drivers also lived very miserable lives as they could not drive during the lockdown. If anyone tried to get out from home, the police used to bet them or charge them with a fine. So, the local government should also consider poor motor drivers in social safety net and protection.

In our study, we also found that volunteers worked alongside Union members, law enforcement, and organizations to address the crisis brought on by the coronavirus. COVID-19 severely impacted the nation's economy, health, and particularly the needs and vulnerabilities of its most vulnerable citizens. Most younger individuals played crucial roles in delivering meals, daily necessities, and medications to needy people. Relying on long-term local volunteers also helps in filling the gap in vital services caused by the need. It is because the local volunteers are familiar with the dialects, beliefs, and customs of the areas they worked in and could apply their skills locally. Involving local volunteers and organizations run by the government improved capability for quick ramp-up to replace service shortfalls when future crises occur in addition to addressing COVID-19. For these reasons, the local government is suggested to organize training programs for the young generation on social responsibility and volunteerism. Also, it should set up several campaigns to motivate young people to contribute to society.

Although the Bangladesh government allocated vast amounts of COVID-19 relief and cash support for the needy and affected people, the selection process of low income and impoverished people was a big challenge. While COVID-19 spreading and prevention measures quickly reached urban populations, the rural people knew very little about the virus at the beginning. In these circumstances, the non-profit organizations can support the local government in acting quickly to close this gap and establish communication throughout the nation. In order to stop the virus from spreading and educate people about the value of social distance, these organizations can carry out an essential part of raising awareness. In addition, if NGOs/INGOs or other private/public organizations come forward jointly, it will be easier to donate emergency relief to the right person. For these reasons, the local government should collaborate more with these organizations to create long-term solutions.

In this study, we discovered that many rural individuals owned small- and medium-sized businesses, but Covid-19 undermined their ability to raise capital. Many of them are currently unable to manage their little business. Therefore, the government should give them cash to resume their occupation. We advise the local government to offer loans or credit to the farmers and SME business owners who are badly impacted by the COVID-19 lockdowns. The initial support might help them to tackle the resilience period and restart their employment. Moreover, most individuals who live in Bangladeshi villages have lower incomes. They either work in agriculture or other manuals, labor-intensive jobs. They suffered enormous economic losses due to the lockdown's market closures, trade delays, and transit prohibition. In order to help marginal farmers and seasonal farm workers, access to funds and agricultural supplies, like fertilizers, pesticides, machinery, and seeds, will be crucial. The local government can concentrate on the poultry, horticulture, plantation industries, and fishery to ensure food safety in the rural areas. Low-volume and high-value cash crops can contribute to economic boom and food security. However, there were travel restrictions in effect everywhere during the shutdown. The traders could not sell crops, vegetables, and goods to the major divisions. The restrictions negatively affected the rural people, so the local government needs to continue utilizing the transportation network. It will be relatively easy for the villagers to supply their goods outside the localities when a disaster occurs.

We revealed that the people believed they would not get infected by the virus. A majority of the villagers worked harder in low-paying professions than the regular officials and their professions might lead to the steadfast idea that they have great resistance to the novel virus. In this case, the local government must provide the villagers with the correct information about COVID-19. It can use the press media and news channels to spread various advertisements on social awareness. Besides, the local government can take the help of influential local people, school/college teachers, and village police to remove the misconceptions of local people.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused various levels of impacts on people's lives worldwide, particularly in developing nations such as Bangladesh. The poor population is more vulnerable in this scenario. To response to this pandemic and its impacts, various government, non-government, individual, or organizational initiatives have been taken. Bangladesh's local government has also played a crucial role with different crisis response strategies since the pandemic began, but there is very little academic scholarship in this domain. Considering this limitation, we think the current study will provide some new insights to the academic discussion.

This empirical study aims to understand, explore, and analyze how the LG in Bangladesh has responded to the challenges that emanated from the COVID-induced lockdowns in the rural areas. The authors used KII, FGD, participant observation, and content analysis techniques for gathering the data. This study reveals that the local government mainly executed three categories of responses. The first responses were focused on preparedness and prevention activities. In these responses, LG focused on awareness, dissemination of the information, arrangements of home quarantine and isolation, and readiness in training program. Second, the LG took some emergence responses, for instances, providing financial assistance as relief and providing food and non-food items. They distributed relief materials, such as rice, oil, potato, wheat, sanitizers, and masks. Financial support was another key role of local government. Third, LG took post-lockdown initiative for protecting citizen of grassroots level. The local government responded immediately to the post-lockdown situation and took the necessary initiative for the vulnerable community. One of the significant contributions of this study is that it has revealed the fact that the LGs in Bangladesh have performed relatively well in managing and mitigating the COVID-19 pandemic situation. The lower number of death rate at the grassroots level in Bangladesh further testifies the claim of this study. The effective performance and resilience that the Bangladesh LG have shown in managing the crisis is sharp contrast to the picture of governance at the local level that most of the earlier studies have portrayed.

Nonetheless, the findings of this study of this paper should be dealt with caution. This is because this study has adopted the qualitative research methodology, which limits the population scope. As a matter of fact, the findings generated form this research cannot be generalized. This, however, opens new avenues for researchers to further delve into this area that will result to successful evolvement of this topic. In

fact, further research can be conducted using large quantitative samples for testifying the claims that has been made in this research.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declared that there exists no conflict of interest.

Ethical approval The study was approved by Hohai university Ethical Review Committee, Nanjing China (Protocol No: HHSPA2021005). This study only focused on the social variables and conducted by qualitative interview schedule. No human and clinical experiment were done. The identity of the respondent has not been disclosed. A prior approval was taken from the respondents before each interview.

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