

SEARCHING WAYS FORWARD FOR BANGLADESH IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC



Covid-19 and the Local Government Institutions in Bangladesh: Way Forward

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Introduction:

This is a policy brief sponsored by the Center for Governance Studies (CGS) on the role of Local Government Institutions (LGIs) during the Covid regime in Bangladesh with the following three issues as ToR for the study:

1. Impacts of Covid-19 on the local governments.
2. Major challenges that the local government faced during the pandemic.
3. The ways forward and the strategies to address the challenges that the central government should take.



Impacts of 'Covid-19' on the (LGIs)

The involvement of the LGI in the comprehensive corona combat such as 'tracking, testing, tracing and treatment' was not even outlined as necessary measures at the local and community levels. The LGI was perceived only as a tool for 'relief distribution' to the poor, vulnerable and displaced workers and the floating population who were worse affected by the 'lockdown' imposed to prevent the virus from spreading. The GOB relief goods came in the form of cash and kinds allocated by the office of the Deputy Commissioners (DCs). Relief operations were at the peak from April to June 2020.

The LGIs encountered various difficulties in handling relief goods as they were not aware of the quantity of the goods, in the first place. Besides, lack of storage facilities, additional management expenses and support staff for operational purposes, et cetera also stood in the way of conducting sound operations. The LGIs could not plan ahead because of the pervasive uncertainty both in terms of the timing and the quantity of supplies from central government. It created a lot of stress on the lone staff (Secretary) at the UP.

There were scandalous reports of 'mismanagement' in relief operations by the LGIs while they were the only ones that delivered services in their areas without any additional government expenses.

Under the circumstances, following are the impacts of the 'Covid -19' on the LGIs:

1. The UP as the lone LGI heavily involved in delivering services, at times beyond its capacity, it obviously could not do justice to many of the responsibilities that it duly required.
2. There were scandalous reports of 'mismanagement' in relief operations by the LGIs while they were the only ones that delivered services in their areas without any additional government expenses.
3. The GOB did not provide carrying cost and operational expenses and there was no official instruction regarding the expenses even in future.
4. At the receiving end, each sack of rice was 3-5 kgs short in net weight, while it is a customary practice to deduct one/two ton (s) from the original Delivery Order at the godowns during delivery.
5. The practice of nepotism, mis-targeting and misappropriation of materials remained a perennial problem at the LG levels. While Political rivalries of the past and future elections and satisfying 'vote bank' by the incumbent chairs and members were also a problem.
6. Total relief operation was non-transparent as no operational procedure was



formulated earlier at the UP and UJP meetings in a transparent manner. The whole operation was centrally directed and it ran purely on adhoc basis. However, the LGIs in question lost their face and positive public image though their role in the decision-making process was marginal.

7. The local ruling party cadres appeared very powerful in the resource distribution activities while LGI leaders and GOB officials made no serious effort to contain the cadre pressure because they too are dependent on them for supports.

The challenges the LGIs faced

1. The LGIs faced an ambivalent situation, for they shouldered responsibilities without defined role and authority.
2. The LGI system has not been considered to be a vital partner in the government efforts to address the Covid crisis. The services of the UPs and Pourashavas were utilized for implementing the central decisions while the UJPs and JPs were virtually bypassed in the decision making process.
3. Pressures from political opponents, local political cadres and vote banks at times compelled them to indulge in violation of, or deviations from the GoB orders, which in official terms were “irregularities”. All these “irregularities” were not corruptions as perceived by the local people. To the LGI leaders, these were rather ‘local adjustments and accommodations’, based on ground realities. The dichotomy of ‘irregularity’ and ‘local adjustment’ remains a big challenge in all relief operations.
4. The mandatory supervisory role of the GOB officials was often compromised due to political pressure. They overlooked ‘political excesses’ committed particularly by the ruling quarters at the local level. As a result, irregularities could not be checked.
5. Limited digitization and lack of skilled staff appeared to be a clear impediment in smooth functioning of the LGIs, especially at the UP level.
6. The Covid crisis made the LGIs aware of their importance during national crisis. It also made them aware of their challenges and limitations. The higher tiers of the LGIs—the UJP and the JP—felt their relative isolation and uselessness as the local officials bypassed them during the crisis.

Ways forward and steps to face the challenges

The Covid-19 has challenged the economic governance and social order to a large extent. The economic slowdown and its adverse impacts on life and living are enormous. Many of the age-old social norms and cultural practices have become obsolete. New economic and social orders have emerged under Covid compulsions. Considering these factors, the following are some of the ways forward within the objective reality of the LGIs in Bangladesh.



1. The GOB local administration, LGIs like JP, UJP, UP along with CSOs and voluntary sector, should meet in a series of review sessions to outline the challenges so far encountered and find out ways forward.
2. Both carrying out normal development activities and managing any special crisis, the people's institutions like the LGIs (UP, Municipalities, JP & UJP) should be treated as a single entity, in the first place. Despite their separate roles and responsibilities, they should chalk out their respective functions on the basis of mutual consultations.
3. The UNO should not issue direct orders to the UPs regarding distribution of any GOB grant or disaster relief. It should be discussed in the UJP meeting first, and then the order should be issued in accordance with the decision of the meeting.
4. The UP Chair with 'Tag Officers' should not prepare/approve any beneficiary list without the decision of the LG bodies. This is also the dictate of the existing LG laws which is often ignored.
5. Digitization in handling relief operations, preparation of budget, maintenance of accounts, household register and stock register is essential.
6. The Newly constructed Union Parishad Complexes have office spaces for all the 13 UP level GOB officials. All GOB officials should be accommodated at the UP complex and the UP should coordinate their activities.
7. The general UP meetings as well as Standing Committee meetings should be held regularly so that the local body does not remain a chairman- and mayor-dominated organization, which has become the usual practice.
8. The enhancement of skills of the Members/commissioners and the Chairpersons/Mayors is essential to make the Ward Sobha, Standing Committees, budget-making, financial transactions and development and service plans of the LGIs meaningful.
9. The Jila Parishad is kept at bay from governance and development process. Measures should be taken to enable the JPs to contribute jointly with the other LGIs.
10. A framework for intra-and inter LG cooperation and coordination mechanism should be developed.
11. The role of the DC and the UNOs need to be redefined with regard to the interventions in the affairs of LGIs.