

UNHEARD VOICES: YOUNG PEOPLE'S STORIES OF STRUGGLE, HOPE, AND RESILIENCE IN A COVID-19 AFFECTED ECONOMY – BANGLADESH

As part of the crisis response, the government developed comprehensive short-, medium-, and long-term action plans to address the effects of the pandemic, aiming to revive the economy and bring it back to its previous growth rate.

- Bangladesh was able to capitalise on its previous experience responding to natural disasters and moved swiftly to try to control the spread of the virus while also providing assistance to poor and vulnerable populations.
- Government policies to tackle the pandemic included a package of support programmes for vulnerable households through cash transfers and food programmes. More than 25 million families in 496 Upazilas across the country received food aid, while approximately 5 million families received cash assistance.

Policies and stimulus packages focused mostly on the formal economy and on larger firms, missing opportunities to support key sectors and small businesses, critical to the economy and to employment creation for youth.

- Economic policies, including stimulus packages, focused mostly on the formal economy, benefiting mainly large businesses. These stimulus packages aimed to help businesses maintain employment levels in key sectors.
- Small-scale entrepreneurs had a hard time accessing stimulus packages due to the lack of information about their legal status and difficulty meeting banking compliances. Consequently, a significant part of the stimulus package funding remains undistributed.

Measures taken to combat the spread of the virus severely affected labour markets and economic opportunities for youth.

- Young people – many of whom work in the informal sector – have faced a loss of work, reduction in their working hours, wage cuts, and layoffs, significantly affecting their livelihoods.
- Young people have also been affected by disruptions in education and training and difficulties in transitioning from school to work and moving between jobs in a recession. School closures not only affected access to education but also to work opportunities, which for disadvantaged young people are a precondition to be able to afford schooling.

The economic progress sustained over the past years has been challenged by the on-going pandemic.

- The COVID-19 crisis is threatening the progress made by Bangladesh, with some estimates forecasting a doubling of poverty levels and an increase of existing inequalities.
- In order for Bangladesh to achieve its development vision and be able to fully take advantage of the demographic dividend the country is experiencing, the creation of more and better income-generating opportunities for youth needs to remain a top priority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and policymakers should:

- **Apply, design, and implement policies with a youth lens,**
- **Scale up existing social protection programmes and re-purpose them to protect young people,**
- **Provide access to education and training, ensuring support for the most vulnerable,**
- **Ensure young people receive financial assistance, and**
- **Provide support to keep building the evidence based on what policy approaches work best for youth.**

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Moriom is 23 years old. She lives with her husband and in-laws in the Sadar administrative region of the Satkhira district. She was in her final year of an undergraduate social work program at the National University of Bangladesh when the pandemic hit.

Moriom used to teach children at home before the COVID-19 crisis and earned 600 Taka (US\$7.10) per week as a tutor. Unfortunately, her work stopped due to the pandemic, as parents were reluctant to send their children to a tutor once the schools closed. Moriom's education was also severely impacted. She was unable to continue with online classes, as she did not have a good Internet connection. Moriom fears that the consequences of the disruption of her education may be felt for a long time.

COVID-19 affected not only Moriom's education and work, but also her life in many ways. Her husband lost his job and her family had to sell their property to deal with the financially strained situation. If the pandemic lasts for a long time, it will be very difficult for her family to cope and they might need to take out a loan to be able to pay for daily expenses. Neither Moriom nor her family have received any financial assistance or other forms of support from the government or non-governmental organization during the pandemic.

Moriom is also concerned about the impact of the pan-



demic on her community. Before COVID-19, many young men and women in her locality were involved in small businesses. However, since the pandemic started demand for goods has significantly decreased and income for many has declined or stopped. Moriom thinks that financial support for her and her community members might help them bounce back economically. She would like to start working as a tutor again and her goal is to finish her studies and get a job in social work.

The research

These findings are based on a research study exploring the effects of COVID-19 on young people's lives in Bangladesh, Kenya, Mozambique, and Tanzania with respect to income and employment opportunities. A youth-led research approach was utilised as part of the study.

The study outlines the evidence and provides recommendations to shape future crisis management's responsiveness to youth-specific issues and provide guidance on measures that can be taken to avoid exacerbating the exclusion and poverty experienced by many young people.

In Bangladesh, the research took place in the Dhaka, Chittagong, and Satkhira administrative regions or districts. The data collection process was conducted in Bangla.