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The Pandemic and Food Insecurity in Small Cities of the Global South: A Case Study of Noapara in Bangladesh

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Introduction[1]

The unfolding economic and social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed fault lines in existing food systems in both developed (Lawrence, 2020) and developing countries (Rahman et al, 2020). Bangladesh, a densely populated and rapidly urbanizing nation of roughly 180 million people went into a 'general holiday with restrictions on movement' (referred to internationally as lockdown) on March 26, 2020. The majority of economic and social activities within the country ceased as a consequence. The lockdown was eventually relaxed on June 1, 2020, with specific instructions to maintain social distancing. As of September 7, 2020, Bangladesh had 325,157 cases of COVID-19 and 4,479 people had died from the virus (Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), 2020). A rapid-response research conducted by the Power and Participation Research Centre and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development of Bangladesh (Rahman et al, 2020) in April 2020 in Bangladesh observed a steep drop in income leading to a contraction in food consumption as evidenced by reduction in food expenditure by 28 percent for urban informal

settlement respondents and 22 percent for rural respondents. Similar to experiences in other countries (Despard et al, 2020), the lockdown resulted in an income shock, particularly for the urban poor.

While there are reports of how communities in major cities have been impacted (Taylor, 2020), little is known about the lived experiences of residents in smaller cities and how food systems and food security in these towns were impacted. Indeed, small and mid-sized cities remain academically and professionally ignored and unexplored despite the fact that the world's urban majority reside in those cities (Satterthwaite, 2017; Ruszczyk et al, 2021). The relationship between food security, food systems, and sustainability also needs engaged consideration within these small cities (Mackay, 2019). Understanding this relationship is crucial because urban poverty and food insecurity are inter-related. Tacoli (2019) explains that most urban residents not only need to purchase the majority of their food but, unlike in rural areas, it is their main expenditure. Local governments in small cities also have curtailed capacity, minimal funding under their control, and often lack political power to fulfill their responsibilities. These pre-existing socio-economic conditions indicate that food security and food systems in small cities were also likely impacted by the pandemic-induced lockdown.

In order to address this knowledge gap, a rapid assessment study focusing on two small cities namely Mongla and Noapara in southwestern Bangladesh was undertaken. This chapter will share findings from the data collected from Noapara before, during, and immediately after the lockdown. In doing so, the chapter will delineate the challenges imposed by COVID-19 on food (in)security in Noapara and also identify associated coping mechanisms undertaken by affected residents.

Methodology

The study was conducted in collaboration with the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The study team conducted a rapid assessment to understand how low- and middle-income residents in small cities such as Noapara were coping. Between May and July 2020, the team conducted 15 formal, telephone-based, semi-structured interviews undertaken with selected key informants from Noapara to capture their lived experiences of the lockdown and the effect the lockdown had on food security of the residents in the city (Rahman and Ruszczyk, 2020; Ruszczyk et al., 2020). The study also builds on research (ICCCAD, 2020a) on life in small cities which is based on 200 surveys, 40 interviews and storytelling workshops conducted between September 2019 and March 2020. These key informants of the present study represent a cross-section of residents (from low-income households and from middle-class families, men and women), stakeholders, and government officials with whom we engaged during the autumn 2019 fieldwork.

Pre-pandemic food and nutritional environment in Noapara

Noapara is a thriving city, serving an important national transportation function. It has a national transportation road bisecting the city, and the railway links Noapara to the rest of Bangladesh as well as to India. The Bhairav River at Noapara connects Noapara as a river port to the seaport of Mongla and on through the Bay of Bengal to the primary Bangladeshi port of Chittagong in South East Bangladesh. The population of Noapara is 170,000 and its residents have a range of employment opportunities. For more detailed information on Noapara please refer to ICCCAD (2020b).

Figure 8.1 Here

During the initial household survey in September 2019, it was clear that the local market was the primary outlet for sourcing food for 95 percent of respondents. Only 17 percent of respondents indicated they grew rice or vegetables. It was also apparent that food-related

expenses constituted a major share of the total income of residents with nearly 60 percent of low-income and 35 percent of middle-income respondents spending over half of their total monthly income on food-related expenses (Figure 8.1A). The pre-pandemic household survey also indicated that 72 percent of the low-income and 49 percent of the middle-income respondents did not have any savings (Figure 8.1B). About 96 percent of survey respondents in Noapara indicated that they have at least three meals, however, consumption of nutritious food (for example meat, fruit, and vegetables) is less frequent among the low-income respondents compared to their middle-income counterparts.

COVID-19 lockdown's impact on food security and coping strategies

This section describes the changes in the food security situation in Noapara due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown and the coping strategies employed by the residents. The impact of the pandemic on livelihoods has been 'a disastrous situation for people from all spheres of life', according to a community leader and snack-shop owner in an informal settlement adjacent to the railway tracks in Noapara. Most interviewees reported a 75 percent to 100 percent loss of income. The severe and almost complete loss of daily income as a result of the nine-week lockdown has had a serious impact on the purchasing capacity of residents (even those described as middle class, with the exception of those who have a guaranteed income from the state or non-governmental organizations), and consequently on the quantity and quality of food being consumed. The majority of residents in Noapara lack adequate savings which explains the reported severe economic hardship after the first month of lockdown (Figure 8.1B). A female informal settlement resident from Noapara expressed her situation:

> We are consuming less food in both quantity and quality. Now I cook less rice than before. Sometimes we can manage [to purchase] vegetables or spinach. As foods are dependent on our income, and I am not doing any work – so our family is dependent on the small earnings of my son.

Respondents also indicated that they had curtailed the proportion of nutritious food consumed, especially animal protein items such as meat, milk, and poultry products because they could not afford them. Another female respondent explained:

> We can't afford meat or fish nowadays. We can hardly manage [to purchase] eggs each week. We collect arum spinach from places around us and try to buy vegetables that are cheap.

Informal food providers, including street vendors and vegetable/fruit peddlers (who usually go from door to door), play an essential role in the food system of Noapara. The strict lockdown meant shutting down these businesses, resulting in not only the loss of livelihood for the owners, but also limiting access to food.

Several forms of coping strategies were identified. These included: storing food immediately before and during the first month of the lockdown (at the most, enough for one month), skipping meals or curtailing their consumption, relying on cheap starchy staples, increasing the share of total expenditure allocated to food, accessing food relief or lastly, taking loans from neighbors, friends, or loan sharks during the second month of lockdown. Rahman et al (2020) also observed similar patterns during COVID-19 in large urban informal settlements and rural areas in Bangladesh.

To limit the effects of the emerging crisis, the local government and several private donors provided food relief parcels containing rice, potato, lentils, cooking oil, onions, and soap to vulnerable groups during the lockdown. Although this support was useful, it did not reach everyone in need. From interviews with (lower) middle-income households (including small businesses) without guaranteed income, it was apparent that they were suffering as much as, if not more than low-income households in informal settlements because they could reach out for and did not qualify for food relief or social safety net programs. This may lead to middle-income households suffering from hidden or invisible food insecurity. During the pandemic, interviewees also reported taking loans from their friends and neighbors, which substantiates the importance of social capital in small cities to cope with crises.

Conclusion

To create socially inclusive, economically equitable, and environmentally sustainable cities requires a closer, comprehensive look at where people live in the world. Small, urbanizing cities are often overlooked in academic and policy research despite residents who are struggling and trying to make do with very few resources. While strategies adopted by low-income households in Noapara to cope with the lockdown-induced food insecurity were similar to those in large cities, the study also observed a set of dissimilarities between the two types of cities. Residents in small cities typically have fewer options and diversity for procuring food compared with residents of larger ones. In large cities, there is more retail competition as well as cheaper options to procure food. Respondents of this study did not report any negative coping strategies (for example distress sale of assets) during the lockdown, while this was observed in informal settlements in Dhaka (Taylor, 2020). Lastly, local government officials in small cities may have limited capacity and financial resources compared to large cities, yet the greater proximity enables local governments in these cities to act promptly and decisively during the lockdown (Ruszczyk et al, 2020). In the coming

months and years, research and policy formulation need to address the relationship between structural inequality, food security, food systems, and urban sustainability. Understanding this relationship is crucial because urban poverty and food insecurity are clearly inter-related.

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Figure 8.1A) Food expense as a percentage of total income in September 2019

Figure 8.1B) Saving status of survey respondents from Noapara in September 2019. Source: authors

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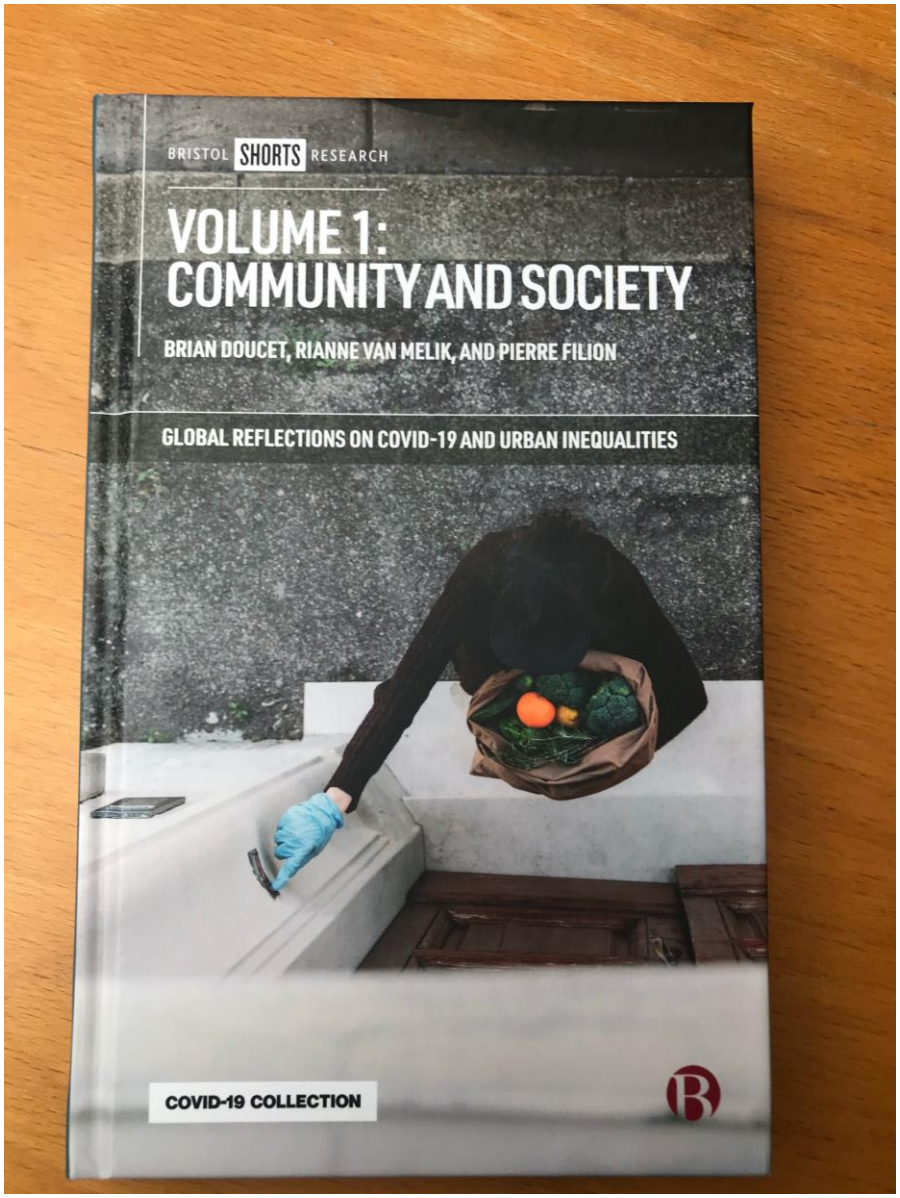
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