

CITIZEN'S PLATFORM  
Working Paper

1

# Are We Asking the Right Questions?

Choices and Challenges in Assessing  
COVID-19 Impact on the Vulnerable in Bangladesh

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Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

*Citizen's Platform Working Paper 1*

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The paper puts forward a framework to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable population groups in a developing country context. Bangladesh has been used as a case study. The pandemic has not only exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities of these groups but has also induced new ones. Policy actions towards recovery and resumption—both immediately and over the medium-term—need to be informed by genuine and disaggregated evidence based on realities on the ground. The paper urges a need to have conceptual, analytical and methodological clarity on the relevant issues. Towards this end, it explores the current state of knowledge on the topic and digs deep into the existing literature to analyse these issues. The paper offers a set of analytical questions to construct the assessment framework. The resultant framework presented can be adopted and replicated across national contexts.



*Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh* was formed in June 2016 with the objective of providing a policy stage to the non-state actors (NSAs) in Bangladesh to contribute to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Platform seeks to enhance transparency and accountability in the SDG process at the country level. It particularly aims to promote the 2030 Agenda's pledge to *Leave No One Behind* in the process of development.

Since its inception, the Platform has emerged as the largest forum for the NSAs that include a unique blend of non-government development organisations, civil society organisations (CSOs) and private sector associations in Bangladesh. The Platform currently has over 120 Partner Organisations. These organisations work on knowledge generation as well as monitoring of national development policies towards delivering SDGs by 2030. Moreover, the Platform undertakes policy advocacy and stirs new conversations on relevant challenges and solutions. All these are accomplished through regular conferences and dialogues at national level, capacity development workshops, international events and webinars.

At the beginning of its journey five years ago, the Platform sought to outline the scope of partnership between the government and NGOs and explore the role of private sector in implementing the SDGs. It emphasised the importance of SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) as central to the overall delivery of the 2030 Agenda. The Platform later provided intellectual inputs to identify the population groups at risk of being left behind in attainment of the SDGs in Bangladesh. Subsequently, one of its highlighted focus was youth—a systematically vulnerable community in Bangladesh—in view of the country's journey through a window of demographic opportunity. The following years saw the Platform bringing together more than 50 Partner Organisations that actively contributed in documenting Bangladesh's progress towards attainment of selected SDGs for review during the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). The Platform along with a dozen of its Partners also prepared a set of thematic policy briefs with a view to contribute NSA perspectives towards the Voluntary National Review (VNR) of Bangladesh.

Since the scourge of COVID-19 unleashed itself in the first quarter of 2020, the Citizen's Platform realised the advantage and potential of its substantive network. It immediately engaged in conceptualising initiatives that could address the crisis and particularly uphold the interests of the "left behind". Thus the year was marked by the Platform's many activities widely discussing the implications of COVID-19 at the grassroots level, on the SDGs, and on the pathways towards an inclusive recovery and resilience. Towards this end, the Platform along with its Partner Organisations embarked on a flagship research and outreach programme titled "Strengthening Citizen's Engagement in Delivering SDGs in view of COVID-19 Pandemic". A number of knowledge products will be created under the programme, to be followed by policy advocacy.

In view of the above, the Citizen's Platform is introducing a Working Paper Series which will feature pertinent research on issues related to SDG delivery with particular focus on the marginalised and vulnerable communities in Bangladesh. The present paper is the first of this new series.

**Series Editor:** *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya*, Convenor, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh.





## Preface and Acknowledgement

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As the title suggests, the present paper introduces the analytical and methodological choices and challenges related to the design of a proposed research to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the left behind and pushed behind population groups in Bangladesh. The research will be undertaken under three streams—lives and livelihood during the pandemic; effectiveness of public policy for resumption and recovery; and, tackling the new pandemic-induced challenges concerning SDG delivery—with exclusive focus on the marginalised and vulnerable communities. The present paper, along with the proposed research streams, is part of a broader initiative by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh titled “Strengthening Citizen's Engagement in Delivering SDGs in view of COVID-19 Pandemic”. The programme seeks to contribute to improving public policy intervention outcomes towards mitigating the COVID-19 induced impact in Bangladesh.

The authors of the present paper appreciate the valuable research support received from *Ms Tamara-E-Tabassum*, Programme Associate, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in reviewing the existing studies on the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups in Bangladesh. Useful research assistance was also rendered by *Mr Fahim Shahriar*, Research Intern, CPD.

The authors are also pleased to register their deepest gratitude to all the participants of the expert and stakeholder consultations undertaken in the course of preparation of this paper. Special thanks are extended to the esteemed panelists and special commentator at the webinar which corroborated the first full draft of the paper (see Annex 1 for the full list). Their inputs have been critical in shaping and improving the paper.

The authors are particularly grateful to Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, CPD, as well as to the CPD colleagues for their intellectual and organisational support.

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Dr Debapriya is engaged in high-level policy designing and advising for the national government and various bilateral and international development agencies at home and abroad. He has published extensively on trade, investment and finance related issues of the least developed countries (LDCs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). He serves in the boards and working groups of a number of national, regional and international development organisations and networks, and in the editorial board of reputed journals.

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8FYP	Eighth Five Year Plan
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CHT	Chittagong Hill Tracts
CMSME	Cottage, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
DFID	Department for International Development
DFQF	Duty-Free Quota-Free
EGM	Expert Group Meeting
ESID	Effective States and Inclusive Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HCTT	Humanitarian Coordination Task Team
HIES	Report of the Household Income & Expenditure Survey
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LDC	Least Developed Country
LMIC	Lower Middle-Income Country
LNOB	Leave No One Behind
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
PNOB	Push No One Behind
PwD	Persons with Disability
RMG	Readymade Garment
SANEM	South Asian Network on Economic Modeling
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SME	Small and Medium Enterprise
UN	United Nations
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund



## 1. CONTEXT AND OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

The COVID-19 pandemic has derailed countries across the globe off their development trajectories and disrupted progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Inspired by the developing countries, the Agenda 2030 embarked on a 15-year-long journey to eradicate poverty, reduce inequalities, ensure equal opportunities, tackle climate change and offer a life of dignity, among many other aspiring goals. At the heart of these goals, laid a commitment to “Leave No One Behind” (LNOB) in the process of sustainable development, with a special recommendation to prioritise the “furthest behind” (UN, 2015). However, it is now apprehended that COVID-19 will wipe out years of progress, particularly towards ending poverty (SDG 1), and reducing inequality (SDG 10)—goals that are most relevant to the “Leave No One Behind pledge”.<sup>1 2</sup>

Least developed countries (LDCs), with their initial structural weaknesses, face much of the brunt of the unprecedented scourge (Bhattacharya and Islam, 2020). For an LDC like Bangladesh, compounding challenges are manifold. Extreme population density in urban areas, poor healthcare infrastructure, vulnerability to natural disasters and climate change, and sheltering more than a million stateless Rohingya refugees—all add to the nation’s dismay. From an epidemiological perspective, the country has already reported more than 350,000 confirmed cases with over 5,000 deaths, making it the 16th worst affected country in the world as of September 2020. Economically, Bangladesh is enduring what many refer to as the “triple blow” of the pandemic on emerging markets—domestic slowdown, declining exports particularly of readymade garments (RMG), and a fall in remittances (IMF, 2020).<sup>3</sup> With a forewarning of a global and national second wave, COVID-19 will not only exacerbate old vulnerabilities and fault lines but also introduce new ones, disrupting the pursuit of the SDGs.

Within the country, marginalised and vulnerable population groups face greater adversity in safeguarding their lives, as well as livelihoods.<sup>4</sup> A multitude of systemic drivers contribute to this disproportionate impact of a pandemic on the left behind groups. These include systematic exclusion from being adequately represented and acknowledged in society, politics, and policies, coupled with a weak enabling legal and regulatory environment, inadequate implementation capacity of institutions, and a lack of awareness and availability regarding scientific evidence in general (Bhattacharya et al., 2017). As such, pre-existing vulnerabilities of chronically left behind groups, or the LNOB groups, are likely to be accentuated.

New forms of vulnerabilities will be induced by the pandemic. Moreover, the crisis will push new groups of people into assuming old and new forms of vulnerabilities. As will be discussed in greater detail in

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<sup>1</sup>The World Bank’s latest projections estimate that COVID-19 could push 88 million people into extreme poverty (World Bank, 2020). The World Food Programme has warned that the number of people facing acute food shortages could double this year (World Food Programme, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>Although many commentators suggested at the outset that the pandemic was going to be a great leveler, COVID-19 has emerged as a disease of the poor with fears of a reversal of progress made in reducing poverty and exacerbating inequality (Wilton Park/Development Initiative, 2020).

<sup>3</sup>Although there were record inflows of remittances in the months of July and August, whether this will continue remains debatable given that many migrant workers had returned and are unable to go back. The total number of lost migrant jobs stands at 400,000 and is likely to grow in the coming months (Riaz, 2020).

<sup>4</sup>This was also recognised by the Needs Assessment Working Group Bangladesh, the platform for government and non-government humanitarian agencies under the Humanitarian Coordination Task Team (HCTT). They suggested that “the humanitarian vulnerabilities and needs emerging as a result of lockdown measures, and its resulting economic implications will be nuanced for specific clusters of at-risk populations. The impact will also be most pronounced for people who are already suffering from multiple vulnerabilities and deprivations.” (Needs Assessment Working Group Bangladesh, 2020, p. 5).

later sections, the new vulnerable groups are referred to as the *Push No One Behind (PNOB)* groups.<sup>5</sup> While it is expected that the LNOB and PNOB groups will be in dire need of policy support for resumption and recovery of their economic activities and social development, they are also most likely to be among the most overlooked and ignored groups in the said policy design.

### *The research-outreach programme*

The Citizen's Platform for SDGs Bangladesh has thus embarked on a new initiative titled "Strengthening Citizen's Engagement in Delivering SDGs in view of COVID-19 Pandemic". Research under this programme will have three distinct streams in overlapping and interlinked phases with reference to COVID-19, focussing on the marginalised and vulnerable groups: i) Dealing with lives and livelihood during the pandemic—new benchmark for the "new normal"; ii) Assessing effectiveness of public policy for resumption and recovery in the context of the "new normal"; and iii) Tackling the new pandemic-induced challenges concerning SDG delivery.

The above-mentioned three work streams are to generate necessary evidence and knowledge to contribute to improving public policy intervention outcomes towards mitigating the COVID-induced economic, social, environmental and governance-related vulnerabilities faced by marginalised and vulnerable populations in Bangladesh. The engagements of the programme intend to also support devising macroeconomic, monetary, and public finance policies in attainment of SDGs by 2030 in Bangladesh. As the largest network of non-state actors (NSAs) in the country, the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh has the capacity to play a substantive role in addressing the current pandemic-induced crisis, particularly by upholding the interests of those who are usually left behind.

The core objective of this paper is to discuss the conceptual and analytical issues relating to the design of the research streams introduced as above. It aims to elaborate on the empirical choices and challenges involved in designing these research streams. The approach delineated in this paper has been firmed up through a round of consultations with experts and stakeholders including in-house experts, members of academia, researchers from think tanks, and experts from international development agencies.<sup>6</sup> Besides that, the paper also solicited inputs on pertinent issues from the partners of the Platform as well as from grassroots-level NSAs, small businesses, and the private sector.<sup>7</sup> Representatives of the youth community were specially consulted in connection with the preparation of this paper. These virtual dialogues convened by the Platform focused on real life experiences triggered by COVID-19. Finally, the paper did an extensive literature review on the current state of (mainly) local knowledge on the topic thus far as well as on the conceptual categories used to define the problematique. Given the relatively short span of time that has elapsed since COVID-19 has emerged, a lot of grey literature was also consulted alongside purely academic ones.

### *The layout of the paper*

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 explores the current state of knowledge on the implications of COVID-19 for vulnerable groups in Bangladesh. It highlights the gaps in local literature to identify key research questions/areas with policy relevance. The next few sections deal with relevant conceptual categories underpinning the research including identification of vulnerability criteria and selection of groups (section 3); understanding benchmarks and shocks (section 4); differentiating

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<sup>5</sup>The *Push No One Behind* nomenclature was first used to emphasise the recognition of populations across the globe who are not only being left behind but also pushed further behind to irreversible levels of reduced well-being (Elson, 2018).

<sup>6</sup>See Annex 1 for details of the consultation rounds.

<sup>7</sup>See Annex 2 for details.

among coping responses from adjustments to adaptation to resilience (section 5); assessing public policy interventions (section 6); addressing the political economy aspects (section 7); and employing an SDG lens (section 8). The final section discusses the analytical issues including the design, strategy, methodological approach, and interpretation of results (section 9).

## 2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In the relatively short time since COVID-19 has emerged, the volume of research initiatives that have been mobilised beyond epidemiology or public health, is indeed overwhelming. This is as true for local- and national-level literature as it is for global resources. A myriad of published knowledge products in the context of Bangladesh are already available in public domains. For the purpose of this paper, studies relevant to the LNOB theme and vulnerable groups were prioritised, particularly ones involving primary data collection. As of 30 September 2020, a total of 24 (mostly published) studies from academia, think tanks, research institutions, and non-government organisations were reviewed to assess the current state of knowledge, the gaps in the literature and critical questions of policy relevance that are yet to be answered.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 State of knowledge

What is evident from the available knowledge thus far is that *marginalised and vulnerable populations have been disproportionately facing the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of maintaining their livelihoods*. The first case of COVID-19 in Bangladesh was confirmed on 8 March 2020, and a lockdown (officially announced as a “general holiday”) was made effective from 26 March. Since then, whatever repercussions spiralled, whether on the already strained health sector or the supposedly “strong” economy, the poor and the vulnerable faced much of the brunt. Suffering of the traditionally left behind groups was compounded when they were also systematically excluded from government-provided support measures, participating in policy discussions and being adequately acknowledged for their hardships.

*Low-income population groups living in the urban areas, the majority of who are employed in the informal sector, emerged among the most vulnerable to the crisis*. The majority of them lost all or some part of their income. Moreover, an excess supply of returnee labourers significantly lowered the wage rates in both rural and urban areas. Between February and June 2020, earnings in the informal sector dropped by 49 per cent compared to an average of 17 per cent drop for the formal sector. Despite the significant income loss, there was hardly any recovery plan reported. Even after the lockdown was lifted by the end of May, the modest retrieval in earnings could not significantly pull back the “new poor” populations groups out of poverty by June 2020 (Rahman et al., 2020). Needless to say, women—who comprise a large part of the urban informal sector (as domestic house help and other care workers)—were among the worst affected.<sup>9</sup>

*The impact of loss in income in (already) low-income or vulnerable to poor households have ubiquitously translated into hardships in arranging adequate and nutritious food* (Right to Food Bangladesh/ICCO Cooperation, 2020). It was found that the fear of death from hunger superseded the fear of contracting

<sup>8</sup>See Annex 3 for the list of studies.

<sup>9</sup>This is true for many South-East Asian countries where women are more likely to be employed in un-contracted work. Caregiving, the vast majority of which is performed by women, was already underpaid or unpaid prior to the pandemic. The COVID-19 crisis has further exposed the essential and undervalued nature of household labor. Informal laborers often work in unfavorable conditions for social distancing and without means to work remotely. As such they are forced out of work when lockdowns are imposed. Uncontracted daily wage-earners are also less likely to have savings or alternative income stopgaps in an economic downturn (Lai, 2020).

COVID. Moreover, food insecurity has been higher for urban poor compared to the rural poor. The most common coping mechanisms have been reducing the number of meals and cutting down on protein intakes (Rabbani, Saxena, and Islam, 2020; Innovision, 2020; Rahman et al., 2020).

*The cottage, micro, small, and medium enterprises (CMSMEs) were also hit hard as a result of the shocks affecting both factor and product markets.* A large proportion of these business owners are still not included in the formal financial systems which often keep them outside the purview of government support. Larger businesses have comparatively better access to commercial bank loans and stimulus packages compared to CMSMEs.<sup>10</sup> The majority of CMSME owners were forced to suspend their business operations during the lockdown phase and resumption of business activities was only partial by the end of June (post-lockdown) (Islam and Rahman, 2020; BUILD, 2020).<sup>11</sup>

*Poorer firms were disproportionately affected in terms of closing down, loss of income and profitability, access to support measures, and recovery from the shock.* A number of factors are systematically excluding poorer CMSMEs further during the pandemic. Ad-hoc and insufficient support measures from the government, the lack of a central database for quick identification of pandemic-affected businesses, biasness of stimulus packages towards small and medium enterprises (SMEs) who have a financial history of bank loans, and the bureaucratic and lengthy process of accessing bank loans or government stimulus packages—all contribute to the added vulnerabilities of the CMSMEs (Pain and Devereux, 2020; SANEM/The Asia Foundation, 2020). Notwithstanding the initial shocks of the COVID-induced lockdowns that came from the supply side, the tepid recovery of CMSME operations even after the lockdown was lifted may indicate longer term demand shocks needing different kinds of policy intervention (Islam and Rahman, 2020). Increases in concessional financing and grants, mobilising more micro-finance, reduction in taxes, bailout packages, easing of regulatory barriers, bureaucratic processes and accessing formal credit, digitalisation of transactions and services, were among the recommendations with regard to helping CMSMEs stay in business (Lightcastle Analytics Wing, 2020; Innovision, 2020c).

*Migrant workers who were forced to return or remain back amid the pandemic also found themselves newly vulnerable in their home country.*<sup>12</sup> Studies suggest that vulnerable migrant workers who do not have savings, who are yet to pay back their loans used for migration, and who do not have food stocked at home are more susceptible to the adversities caused due to the pandemic. The returnee migrants used to remit three-fourths of their monthly income back home making their households highly dependent on their income abroad (Innovision, 2020a).<sup>13</sup> The post-pandemic income drops have resulted in livelihood uncertainties in both urban and rural households with returnee migrants but the intensities are much higher in urban households with significant contraction in consumption and food expenditure reported (Rahman et al., 2020).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>The majority of large industries (86 per cent) are heavily relying on commercial banks for loans as it is established that they have better liaison with the banks. Moreover, 77 per cent of the total Tk 30,000 Crore packages for 1002 beneficiaries of large industries and services sector have already been disbursed. But the disbursement of CMSMEs stimulus is very poor; only Tk 1491 Crore has been disbursed out of Tk 20,000 Crore which is 7.45 per cent of the total CMSMEs package. (BUILD, 2020; Byron and Habib, 2020).

<sup>11</sup>May not be representative of the whole CMSME group given the small sample size in both studies.

<sup>12</sup>The vulnerabilities of migrant workers at the host country, before and after the pandemic, is a different issue not discussed in this paper.

<sup>13</sup>Families of the migrant workers are facing income depression arising from COVID-19. These situations may erode their savings which would constrain their ability to migrate once the situation is normal (Innovision, 2020a).

<sup>14</sup>Rapid emergence of a class of 'new poor' was addressed where 'new poor' indicates the informal sector occupations with income above the poverty line but within a band of vulnerability that saw 77 per cent of this vulnerable non-poor group falling below the poverty line income. Less food consumption, especially protein and dietary items; reducing rental expenses, bills, etc., were addressed as the main coping mechanisms and strategy to fight the pandemic (<https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/publications/livelihoods-coping-and-support-during-covid-19-crisis-report/>).

*Persons with disability (PwD) are facing “double jeopardy” due to the pandemic on top of their pre-existing vulnerabilities.* Persons with multiple functional difficulties experience more barriers than others due to the lockdown and social distancing measures as they need to heavily rely on other persons for their day-to-day activities (ADD International, 2020). The individual and household income of the PwD was already lower compared to the income of people in other low-income similar occupations like rickshaw-pullers or RMG workers (Innovision, 2020b). The major coping mechanism for this group has been skipping meals with implications for health and nutrition.

*Vulnerabilities of transgender and Hijra communities, who suffer from identity crises and lack of social recognition on a daily basis, have been accentuated.* Many of their income sources were restricted due to social distancing measures (Waliul, Fatima, Noor, Kamruzzaman and Sharmin, 2020). Mental anxiety regarding income and food as well as mental and verbal abuse while receiving aid was exacerbated during the pandemic. Another study suggested that about 91 per cent of Hijra and 49 per cent of female sex workers of their surveyed respondents faced gender based violence in the community, from clients and other people (Light House, 2020).

*The impact of COVID-19 on education, particularly of young learners and the apparent digital divide in online education has emerged as a new crisis of this pandemic situation.*<sup>15</sup> Dropout rates in schools have increased, which has direct implications for higher rates of early marriage and early pregnancy (CAMPE, 2020).<sup>16</sup> Teachers are also facing new sets of challenges with digitalisation of education platforms after the lockdown. Many teachers lack expertise in information and communications technology (ICT) and are not able to or willing to teach remotely, making them vulnerable to losing jobs. Besides the huge strain on resources, the health sector is confronting an increased number of communicable diseases as well as increased morbidity/burden of non-communicable diseases as consequences of COVID-19 (CARE, 2020).<sup>17</sup>

*Increase in violence against women and children have been the most inevitable and fearfully anticipated impact of the lockdown.* Reports suggested drastic and alarming surges in physical, sexual, and mental abuse. A study revealed 26 per cent of their surveyed total victims/survivors had been subjected to violence for the first time during the pandemic. Around 48 per cent of the children and 20 per cent of women surveyed were new victims (Manusher Jonno Foundation, 2020).<sup>18</sup> It is also revealed that child labour as well as child marriage has also increased in the past six months, indicating school dropouts.

From the forgone discussion, an obvious trend of further marginalisation of already vulnerable groups during the pandemic is apparent. However, a few other patterns are also evident from the state of primary knowledge thus far. *First*, new groups of people and new sources of vulnerabilities have emerged out of the crisis that need to be distinctly acknowledged. *Second*, the poorer cohorts and women are worse-off across all groups. *Third*, the disproportionate impact on marginalised groups is more of a structural issue than policy-induced phenomena. *Fourth*, more than concerns for health risks,

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<sup>15</sup> According to figures compiled by the International Task Force of Teachers for education based on data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics and the International Telecommunication Union, almost half of the world's students face significant barriers to online learning. Globally, some 826 million—50 per cent—do not have access to a household computer, while 43 per cent—about 706 million—do not have access to internet at home. In low-income countries, rates of access are even lower (International Taskforce on Teachers for Education, 2020).

<sup>16</sup> As the income of the households has decreased significantly, children are being withdrawn from education due to other priority household costs and resulting in an increase in child labour to support the family income.

<sup>17</sup> Health professionals has warned regarding increased number of communicable diseases among children, increased unwanted pregnancy, increased morbidity, mortality of maternal and child health and increased health expenditure.

<sup>18</sup> Survivors were not willing to share information over phone due to insecurity and social stigma. Moreover, husbands and other family members were trying to interfere/pose threats while surveying the women of the households.



the loss of income induced by the global and local halt in economic activities and ensuing poverty and hunger have been the greatest drivers of vulnerability for the different groups. *Fifth*, although triggered by the lockdown, there will be a depression in demand lasting much longer than the lockdown and compounded by apprehensions regarding future shocks. The resulting slowdown can be dire for small businesses (as already apparent) without external interventions. *Finally*, addressing structural injustices will require more concerted efforts beyond the current generalised, one-size-fits-all policy supports to more tailored interventions in terms of design, targeting and execution.

## 2.2 Gaps in the literature

While the efforts to capture and bring out the plights of the vulnerable within a short time are commendable in seeking policy attention, the rapid nature of such research initiatives is not without caveats. There are often trade-offs involved between being very timely and ensuring quality, representativeness, analytical and scientific rigor, comprehensiveness, and effectively informing policy design. On the other hand, the quick turnaround does help in creating awareness, gathering momentum around issues at risk of being overlooked and paving the way for more in-depth future work.<sup>19</sup> In this context, there are several gaps apparent from the current state of knowledge that the Platform's research programme intends to mitigate.

*First, given the restricted circumstances, a vast majority of the reviewed studies lacked any sampling strategy or were not scientific enough in their sampling.* In some instances, sample sizes were too small and in others, respondents were selected on a random basis to avoid biases. This implies that results from these studies may not be entirely representative of the groups they focused on and as such, unfit for any inferential analysis.

*Second, most of the reviewed literature did not base their design or analysis on any explicit theoretical or analytical framework.* They were based more or less on arbitrarily set research agendas and objectives.

*Third, there seems to be no study involving a primary data collection component that focused exclusively on the sources and manifestations of vulnerabilities of the left behind people.* These vulnerabilities related to life cycle (e.g. children, youth or senior citizens), religious minorities (indigenous, dalit) or remote and hard-to-reach areas (e.g. *char*, *haor*).

*Fourth, there is yet to be a study that comprehensively focuses on a broad spectrum of vulnerable populations and draws comparisons among them.* Such an exercise would have been valuable in identifying the most marginalised population groups at the risk of being left furthest behind with vital policy implications.

*Fifth, the timeframes of most of the surveys in the studies did not allow collection in person and were instead conducted remotely (online or over the phone).* Such methods, although efficient, often fail to capture the nuances of a face-to-face interaction.

*Sixth, a political economy angle was widely missing among the studies.* There was hardly any attempt to explain the underlying implicit factors contributing to marginalised populations continuing to be among the worst affected and being unable to access policy support.

*Finally, none of the studies have exclusively linked their findings with implications for the SDGs and broader public policy frameworks.* This is partly due to the lack of attempts to establish macro-micro linkages of COVID-19 impacts and policy support at the household level.

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<sup>19</sup>Some of the studies had multiple rounds of surveys on the same respondents.

## 2.3 Research questions

Review of the currently available primary literature and the lacuna presented by it gives important cues for the research questions and the analytical framework of the Platform's intended study. One of the initial queries, before delving into broader conceptual issues related to answering the research questions, would be identification of the marginalised and vulnerable population groups in the context of COVID-19 in Bangladesh. This will be dealt with extensively in the next section. But the broad research questions that emerge related to the marginalised and vulnerable population groups are:

i. What were the specific health related, economic, and other social challenges due to the pandemic?

The answer should ascribe the immediate and sustaining, common and different consequences of the pandemic to different variables of wellbeing related to health, income, consumption, education, employment, security, empowerment, and agency, etc., for each vulnerable group. This will also be an opportunity to generate disaggregated epidemiological information regarding the disease by vulnerable groups and cross-match with data from official sources.

ii. Which old and new vulnerable population groups were more susceptible to the pandemic?<sup>20</sup>

Answering this question would not only entail comparing the consequences of the pandemic across the groups but also mapping the extent of consequences to the sources of vulnerabilities. The purpose is to identify the furthest behind and inform policies to protect against similar future shocks. Were new groups more affected than old groups or vice versa?

iii. Which aspect(s) of COVID-19 induced shock(s) has been most concerning?

The answer should explore the different types of shocks (e.g. public health shocks; lockdown induced production shock; fear induced depressed demand shocks; and supply chain driven shocks etc.) and their channels of transmission for different vulnerable groups. Understanding which shock has the most lasting adverse effects on which vulnerable group would help in devising fitting policies.

iv. What were the coping responses (adjustment and adaptation) used at individual and household levels (supported by expanded and new public policies) to cope with the challenges?

This should examine the coping mechanisms used by individuals and households to mitigate the consequences of the shocks. The support measures available in the form of expanded and new public policy, community efforts and non-state channels will have to be taken into cognisance. The answer should differentiate between short and temporary measures and long term, permanent changes as means to cope with shocks induced by COVID-19.

v. What were the supports available to mitigate impacts of COVID-19 at community levels, through public policy interventions and through non-government channels?

The answer should seek to exhaustively list the policy and institutional support extended to marginalised populations through expansion of old programmes and introduction of new ones. Support measures made available through non-state channels including community efforts and non-

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<sup>20</sup>The interest towards this question was first raised during individual consultation with Professor S R Osmani as a potential value addition of the proposed study to the current state of knowledge from the perspective of policy.

government organisations will also have to be considered in this regard. Whether or not the available support measures were adequate and effective in delivering the intended outcome to the marginalised populations would be under the scope of a separate research question.

vi. How effective were public policies in addressing and mitigating the impact of the pandemic?

The query would encompass assessing public policy interventions in response to mitigating or coping with the COVID-19 induced crisis to lives and livelihood, in particular for marginalised and vulnerable population groups. The measurement exercise would ideally address the different aspects of public policy starting from design strategy, execution, to intended outcomes for beneficiaries.

vii. How has the pandemic affected the disaggregated progress made towards achieving the SDGs in favour of marginalised and vulnerable groups?

The answer would seek to narrate implications for SDGs and its principles including the pledge to leave no one behind, following the disruption caused by the pandemic. This would entail decomposing linkages between micro-level consequences with macro-level outcomes. The question should also attempt to make projections regarding the disaggregated achievement of select SDGs and areas by 2030 and what they imply for policy choices.

The next section addresses the issue of identification of vulnerable groups by explaining the conceptual lens employed in selection of the target population groups for the purpose of the Platform's study.

### **3. UNDERSTANDING VULNERABILITIES AND THE VULNERABLE**

The new study will follow the Platform's earlier work that focused on conceptualising the SDG principle of LNOB and identifying the "left behind" groups in the context of Bangladesh (see Bhattacharya et al., 2017). Thus, in our study, this prism of "vulnerability" will be used in selecting and understanding the predicaments of the left behind population groups during the pandemic.

#### **3.1 Conceptualising LNOB through vulnerability**

*The concept of "vulnerability" is treated differently across various disciplines.* For instance, economic literature associates "vulnerability" with the likelihood of falling into poverty. Sociological and development literature extends that definition to include multidimensional aspects of poverty, the environment, climate change and natural disasters among others (Alwang, Siegel and Jorgensen, 2001). Scholarly literature often highlights the importance of contrasting "vulnerable" and "vulnerability" from "poor" and "poverty" (Chambers, 1989). They associate vulnerability with lack of security, inability to defend, and exposure to "risks, shocks and stress". Risks are also seen as asymmetrical in the discussion on vulnerability. They have varying impacts on people's capabilities in coping with them depending on their socio-economic circumstances. The variations in exposure to risks are induced by unequal "opportunity structures" in the society and perpetuate vulnerabilities (Sobhan, 2014).

The International Red Cross (n.d.) defines vulnerability as the "diminished capacity of an individual or group to anticipate, cope with, resist and recover from the impact of a natural or man-made hazard". Identification of "vulnerable" groups can thus depend on the variance in terms of exposure and responses to hazardous events. Repercussions of such an event can be expected to be much more severe for the supposedly vulnerable group or individual, compared to the non-vulnerable ones due to their reduced capacities.

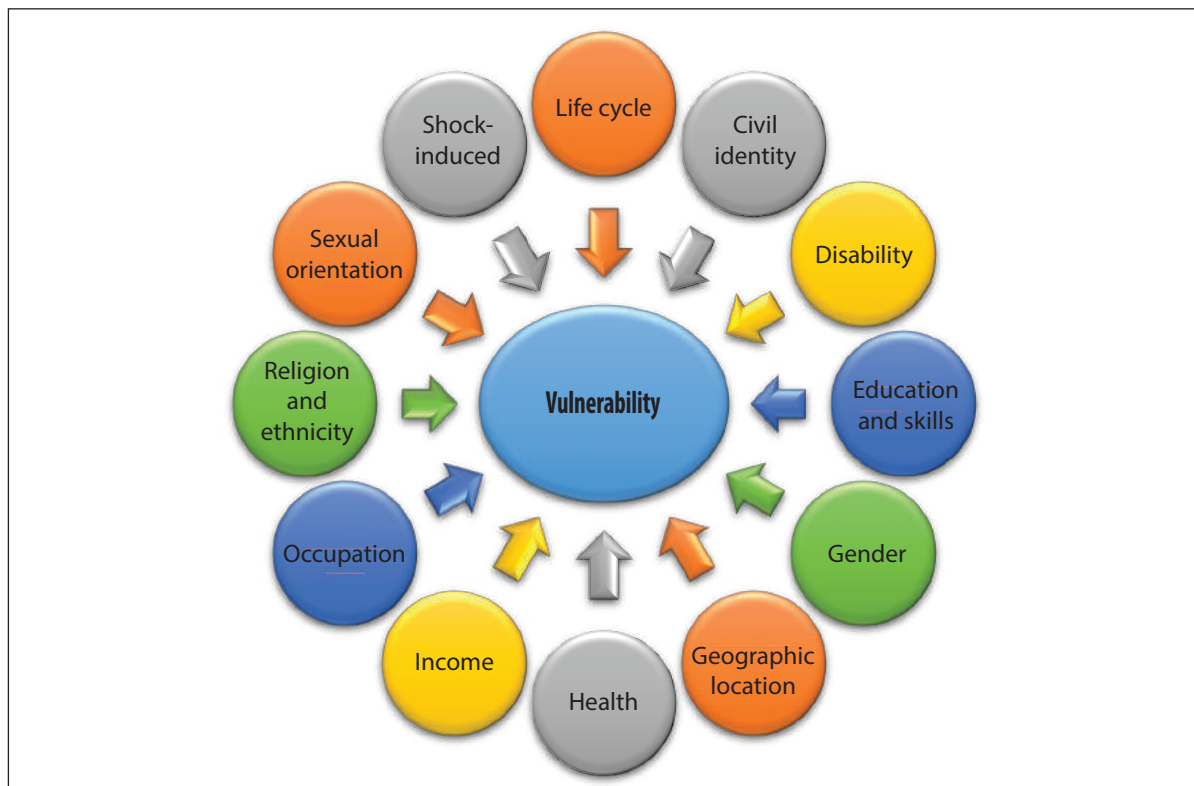


Within the purview of the myriad conceptual literatures on vulnerability, and keeping in mind the issue of identification and contextualisation, the operational definition for the new study of the Platform is in line with its earlier work. The proposed definition is thus “*vulnerability is an individual’s or group’s susceptibility to risks in terms of exposure and adaptive capacity, while the state of vulnerability is the condition of being pressured into becoming marginalised, discriminated or excluded and eventually becoming deprived or left furthest behind*” (adapted from Cardona et al., 2012; Chambers, 1989; and Ahmed et al., 2011 cited in Bhattacharya et al., 2017).

In accordance with the definition, Bhattacharya et al. (2017) used a combination of consultative processes including expert group meetings and workshops with researchers and development practitioners to narrow down a set of twelve criteria to identify the vulnerable groups in the context of Bangladesh (see Figure 1). They include” (i) Life Cycle (e.g. child, youth, senior citizen); (ii) Civil identity (e.g. Rohingya refugees, Urdu speaking stranded Pakistani families); (iii) Disability (e.g. physical, mental, autistic); (iv) Education and skill (e.g. with religious education, low quality); (v) Gender (e.g. women, transgender); (vi) Geographical location (e.g. *char*, *haor*, coastal, river erosion); (vii) Health (e.g. HIV, communicable diseases); (viii) Income (e.g. hard core poor, low-income group without social security); (ix) Occupation (e.g. hazardous work, child labour, sex-worker); (x) Religion and ethnicity (e.g. Dalit, minority); (xi) Sexual orientation (e.g. LGBTQ); and (xii) Shock-induced (e.g. Climate induced, price related, health hazards (see Figure 1). These are the core criteria that will be used to assess the LNOB groups in the context of COVID-19 as well.

*It is important to note that an individual or household may be subjected to multiple, overlapping, and often reinforcing vulnerabilities. According to the data from the national household income and expenditure*

**Figure 1: Vulnerability criteria**



Source: Bhattacharya et al. (2017).

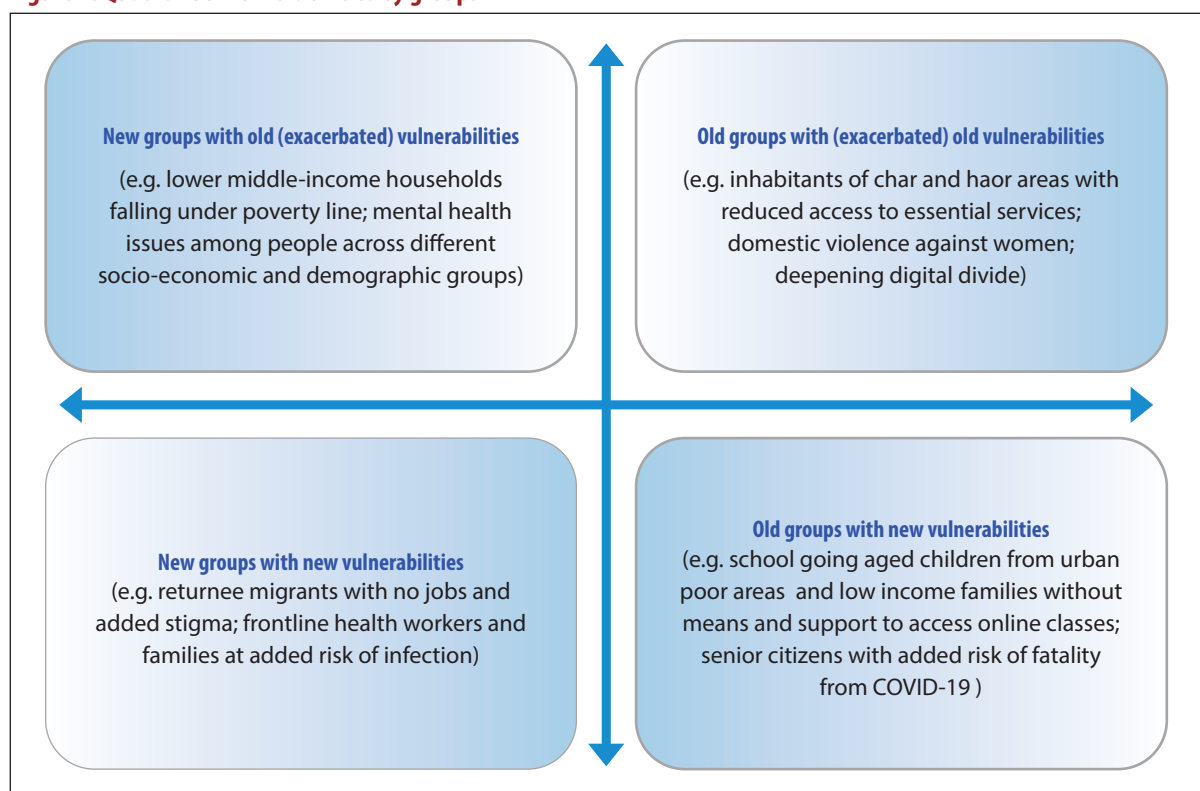
survey of 2010, almost 55 per cent of the share of population in Bangladesh is vulnerable due to their educational attainment, over 50 per cent due to their gender, 40 per cent due to occupation and 47 percent due to their age. However, almost all vulnerabilities are manifested through income vulnerability. The higher the number of vulnerability criteria defining a person the higher their vulnerability in terms of income (Bhattacharya et al., 2017).

### 3.2 Vulnerability and vulnerable groups in the context of COVID-19

COVID-19 has brought forth two important issues in the discussion on vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups. *First, the chronically vulnerable, or the LNOB groups had their chronic or persistent vulnerabilities accentuated by the pandemic and increased their risk of being left behind. Second, there are the transient groups who have been pushed behind to a vulnerable state owing to the unprecedented nature of the crisis. These groups will be henceforth referred to as PNOB groups.* Both LNOB and PNOB groups have been subjected to old and new forms of vulnerabilities. Figure 2 illustrates this novel phenomenon of the COVID-19 induced crisis using a quadrant of vulnerabilities and vulnerable groups.

*The vertical axis represents (old and new) vulnerabilities while the horizontal axis represents (old and new) vulnerable groups.* Accordingly, the *first* (top-right) quadrant depicts old/existing vulnerable groups with exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities. Examples from this quadrant would include inhabitants of remote areas who had their already strained access to essential services further reduced due to the pandemic induced restrictions; heightened risk of domestic and other violences against women; and increase in digital inequality.

**Figure 2: Quadrant of vulnerabilities by groups**



Source: Authors' deliberations.

The *second* (bottom-right) quadrant represents old/existing vulnerable groups with new forms of vulnerabilities. Examples from this quadrant include school-going children, particularly from urban poor areas and low-income families who were at least going to school before the pandemic, but are now without means or support to access online classes; and senior citizens with added risk of fatality from COVID-19.

The *third* (bottom, left) quadrant shows the new vulnerable groups with new vulnerabilities. Examples include migrant workers who had to return at the onset of the pandemic and could not return. Not only are many without income or savings but the once regarded remittance heroes are now facing stigma and joblessness. Frontline health workers and their families are also among the new vulnerable groups with additional health related risk of infection.

Finally, the *fourth* (top-left) quadrant represents the new vulnerable groups exposed to old vulnerabilities. Examples include lower middle-income households who fell under the poverty line and face income vulnerability or mental health issues becoming prevalent among people across different socio-economic and demographic groups. The third and the fourth quadrant constituting the new vulnerable groups embody the PNOB groups defined earlier as products of the COVID-19 induced shocks.

Based on the conceptual framework of identifying the left behind populations in the context of COVID-19 in Bangladesh, a round of consultations with relevant experts and stakeholders have helped in the selection of specific LNOB and PNOB groups. Table 1 exhibits the ten groups listed against the primary vulnerability criteria defining them. It may be noted that each of these groups face multiple vulnerabilities to varying degrees. Moreover, as mentioned before, “income” is often considered an intermediary variable or a common criterion through which other vulnerabilities often manifest. As such, it is often debated whether this should even be a separate criterion.<sup>21</sup>

**Table 1: Selected LNOB and PNOB groups**

Primary Criteria	Focus Group
Income	Low-income urban employees/self employed
Life Cycle	Youth Children Senior citizens
Gender	Women
Religion and ethnicity	Indigenous communities Dalit communities
Geographical location	People of remote and hard-to-reach areas e.g. <i>char</i> , <i>haor</i> ; coastal areas
Disability	PwD
Identity	Transgender communities
Occupation	CMSME entrepreneurs
Shock Induced	Returnee migrant workers New poor

Source: Authors’ calculations.

<sup>21</sup>This issue was debated in the consultative discussions with in-house CPD researchers and Professor S R Osmani.

### 3.3 LNOB groups

#### *i. Low-income urban employees/self employed*

*The group primarily contains people living in slums of urban areas surviving on minimum or daily wages, working in the informal sector.* According to the slum census 2014, they comprise more than six per cent of the urban population.<sup>22</sup> Occupants are mostly rickshaw/van pullers, street vendors, garment workers, services, construction workers, day labourers, and transport workers. More than eight per cent of the low income urban dwellers reported to be landless without any homestead or agricultural land back in their villages (BBS, 2015). Besides their cramped living conditions that made them particularly vulnerable to getting infected by COVID-19, the lockdown also left them largely unemployed. This resulted in initial mass reverse migrations. Most rapid and primary surveys conducted found these groups of people to have significantly reduced income, savings and consumption as a result of the pandemic, more so for those employed in the informal sector, and in the urban areas outside the capital (CARE, 2020). Concerns regarding food security came out on top even after the lockdown was withdrawn (Pain and Devereux, 2020). People, who were barely above the poverty line before the pandemic, fell into poverty and could not recover as yet (Rahman et al., 2020).

#### *ii. Women*

*Women represent approximately half of the population in Bangladesh* (BBS, 2019). However, they have systematically faced greater obstacles to their development relative to their male counterparts. Participation of women in both tertiary education and the labour force has been lower than that of men. The proportion of non-agriculture employed women in the informal sector is greater than 85 per cent. Women spent thrice the amount of time in unpaid labour work compared to their male counterparts before the pandemic. Moreover, incidences of early marriage and domestic violence against women have always been on the higher end in this country. Notwithstanding the recorded success of Bangladesh in issues of gender-equality, the existing vulnerabilities of LNOBs disproportionately affect women across all socio-economic, demographic and identity groups. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis in Bangladesh, women and girls were at the risk of being pushed further behind in their access to formal opportunities at household, community, and state levels. Not only are women comparatively less informed compared to men regarding how to manage an infection, the more vulnerable cohorts among women (e.g. older, less educated) are even less aware about its risks (BRAC, 2020a; Anwar et al., 2020). They have faced greater reduction in incomes, consumption and savings, greater loss of employment, increased time spent in unpaid care work, and greater incidences of domestic violence (Islam and Rahman, 2020; Manusher Jonno Foundation, 2020; World Bank, 2020b; BRAC, 2020b).

#### *iii. Children*

*Children constitute over 40 per cent of the population in Bangladesh,* according to UNICEF.<sup>23</sup> A large number of these children come from low income or other vulnerable households depriving them of adequate health, nutrition, education, and healthy social environments for development. Children, regardless whether from urban or rural areas, face multiple barriers, starting from being unable to afford and access proper educational facilities, or gaining an education, to forgoing education due to forced child labour or marriage. Children with disabilities face additional vulnerabilities in many aspects

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<sup>22</sup>A slum is a cluster of compact settlements of 5 or more households which generally grow very unsystematically and haphazardly in an unhealthy condition and atmosphere on government and private vacant land. Slums also exist in owner-based household premises.

<sup>23</sup>According to the Children Act 2013 in Bangladesh, a child is a person under the age of 18.

of their lives including not attending public schools due to the lack of infrastructure and accessibility measures. Moreover, children are often subject to physical and psychological violence at home, in the workplace, institutions, and public spaces. COVID-19 has intensified these pre-existing vulnerabilities that many children are subject to on a regular basis, particularly those suffering from poverty. Early rapid assessments indicate aggravated instances of severe hunger, malnutrition, increased diseases, lack of access to proper sanitation, physical and emotional abuse (World Vision International, 2020). In the absence of means and support to access and continue education, and especially digitalised education, there are heightened risks of children dropping out of school and being forced into exploitative activities such as child labour and early marriage.

#### **iv. Youth**

*With more than one-third of the population representing youth, Bangladesh is currently in the midway of a “demographic dividend”.*<sup>24</sup> However, the youth in Bangladesh are subject to multiple sources of vulnerability that leave them with little scope to contribute effectively to the socio-economic development of the country.

Among the myriad areas of concern, employment, education, and a looming digital divide come out on the top. The share of unemployed youth is almost 80 per cent of total unemployed according to the latest Labour Force Survey (BBS, 2017). Youth from low-income households often resort to working in the informal sector instead of continuing their formal education. Lack of opportunities for employment or any other meaningful engagement was tagged as one of the reasons behind increased instances of substance abuse among the youth population (Bhattacharya et al., 2017). The youth also voiced their dissatisfaction with the lack of sufficient ICT training within the educational system which makes them inadequately prepared for the job market (Graner, Yasmin and Aziz, 2012). Lack of access to computers and the internet was recognised as a cause of youth unemployment in focus group discussions (FGDs) with youth who are currently disengaged i.e. not in education, employment or training (Khatun and Saadat, 2020). The resulting digital divide among young people belonging to different socio-demographic groups is becoming even more evident since the COVID-19 breakout. The pandemic has fast-tracked the digitalisation of many essential services including education and employment opportunities. As such, a big proportion of the youth population that was previously “disengaged” has become further marginalised. A large number of students are expected to drop out, new graduates will find themselves without jobs and many younger employees will be laid off (Citizen’s Platform for SDGs Bangladesh, 2020).

The *female youth populations* are likely to face the brunt of the pandemic given their already disproportionate pre-COVID dropout rates from tertiary education, low labour force participation, gender-based wage gaps, lay-offs, informality of occupations, early marriage, and instances of violence and abuse (BBS, 2019).

#### **v. Indigenous communities**

*The indigenous communities in Bangladesh represent a broad spectrum of different ethnic groups speaking different languages, representing approximately 2.5 million people or 1.7 per cent of total population.*<sup>25</sup> They primarily live in the delta region of the country or “the plains”, as well as in the South-Eastern part of the country known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

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<sup>24</sup>The National Youth Policy in Bangladesh defines youth as people between 18 and 35 years of age (Department of Youth Development, 2007).

<sup>25</sup>The number is widely debated as underrepresentation of the indigenous population.

Critical socio-economic indicators of wellbeing such as health, education, household level income, food consumption, participation, and women's empowerment have remained below the national average for indigenous communities (Toufique, Mondal, Yunus, Chakma and Farook, 2017). The communities face an acute form of land vulnerability, and continue to be dispossessed and displaced from their lands—the mainstay of their subsistence—due to land grabbing, conflict and climate change. A large number of indigenous populations living in the plains have no homestead of their own. Their residences in isolated or remote areas lack basic infrastructure and public utilities, such as water, electricity, and access to education or medical clinics. Deprivation of access to quality education is a major factor contributing to social marginalisation, poverty, and dispossession.

Indigenous women are also subject to violence and harassment at an alarming rate owing to the lack of access to legal services. COVID-19 and the lockdown has exacerbated all of these concerns for the community and especially those related to livelihoods and income sources, food security, access to health services, violence against women, and growing debt (Chakma, 2020).

#### ***vi. Dalit communities***

*It is estimated that there are about half a million to 5.5 million Dalits in Bangladesh with more than 100 sub-castes, although there are no official statistics* (Halim, 2015; Chowdhury, 2009). In fact, one of the major concerns affecting Dalits pertains to the lack of steadfast figures on their population and presence. A culture of deprivation has persisted among these communities because of their castes, which permeates all levels of society. Dalits are often subject to systematic caste, work, and social discrimination in all aspects of their lives. They exist far below the poverty line, with limited access to health services, education, landholdings and mainstream employment opportunities (International Dalit Solidarity Network, 2015). The community's low socio-economic and political status also segregates them physically from the rest of the society. Their colonies typically consist of cramped quarters that generally comprise of open sewers, lack of sanitation, and close proximity to garbage dumps. In addition, the handling of unhygienic and toxic substances in their professions results in exposure to a plethora of illnesses and diseases. Dalit women suffer gender-based discrimination and violence even within their own households and communities resulting in child marriages, exchanges of dowry, and violence. COVID-19 has compounded all of these issues for the Dalit community. They have been especially susceptible to infections from the virus due to the nature of their work. This has also accentuated all their pre-existing vulnerabilities, further marginalising them from the mainstream society and opportunities.

#### ***vii. Persons with disability (PWD)***

*Given the definitional challenges, statistics on PwD remain ambiguous.* The national household income and expenditure survey found the prevalence of disability to be 6.94 per cent of the total population (BBS, 2017). Data on children with disabilities remain even more variable and unreliable. The lack of accessibility to essential services has been the primary source of vulnerability for the majority of PwD. This includes the inability to physically access health, educational, employment, financial, transportation and other public institutions and facilities due to a lack of enabling infrastructure. These perpetuate significant barriers in enjoying basic opportunities.

A crucial aspect of vulnerability faced particularly by women with disabilities includes being victims of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. COVID-19 has substantively added to the miseries of PwD. A recent survey (not necessarily representative) indicates that more than 70 per cent of PwD who were engaged in some sort of economic activity before the pandemic lost their source of income during the



lockdown (Innovision, 2020b). There is also evidence of loss of income by almost 65 per cent leading to concerns regarding food security. Furthermore, PwD report being disproportionately excluded from COVID-19 support (ADD International, 2020). Whatever relief was received did not meet the basic needs, let alone special needs of this vulnerable group. The group also reported difficulty in following COVID-19 advice. The most vulnerable and excluded are the ones who have multiple disabilities.

#### **viii. Residents of remote and hard-to-reach areas**

People living in remote and hard-to-reach areas e.g. *char*, *haor*, hill tracts and coastal regions in Bangladesh face multiple vulnerabilities due to their disadvantageous geographical locations with some of the poorest road communication networks and connectivity to the mainland. *Over 23 per cent of the country's total population live in such vulnerable geographic locations* (Bhattacharya et al., 2017). *Haors* (wetlands) are deeply flooded, low lying basins that remain under water for about six to seven months of the year accommodating around 19.37 million people (Rural Development and Co-operative Division, n.d.). *Chars* (riverine islands) are mid-channel islands that periodically emerge from the river bed as a result of accretion and are home to over 5 million people according to estimates by different sources (Ashley, Kar, Hossain and Nandi, 2000; Kelly and Chowdhury, 2002). The residents of *char* and *haor* areas are fraught with inadequate infrastructure, unsafe drinking water and sanitation, and overall lack of access to essential services and economic opportunities.

The regions are also identified as disaster-prone and most susceptible to the impact of climate change in the country. Given that these communities primarily rely on agriculture, fisheries, and livestock for their livelihoods, the incidence of frequent flooding, droughts, and the general lack of government assistance translates into a large percentage of the population suffering from extreme poverty. The COVID-19 induced lockdown has further hindered access to markets, livelihood opportunities, and health, education, and other social services. For people in the region, risks of food insecurity may be a greater concern than the risk of infection given higher chances of them being left out from awareness campaigns, relief activities, and public policy support.

### **3.4 PNOB groups**

#### **ix. Returnee migrant workers**

*Since the onset of COVID-19, over a hundred thousand migrant workers have returned to Bangladesh since April, either at the end of their tenure or due to lack of work in host countries.* BRAC's migration program estimates that the number of people returning to the country would be around 2.75 lakh if those who were stranded before April are considered (The Daily Star, 2020). Many more are in constant fear of being sent back due to the impacts of COVID-19 in their host countries. The once considered "remittance heroes" as well as their dependents have been pushed to a socially vulnerable and economically difficult situation as a result of the pandemic. COVID-19 has intensified numerous socio-economic crises for these families starting from joblessness, consumption of reserve funds, and debt to local lenders, not to mention the associated mental stress induced by it (Karim, Islam and Talukder, 2020).

According to several recent rapid surveys, returnee migrants have raised issues regarding the stigma they are facing from the community, the lack of support from authorities, reduced income, and food insecurity (USAID/Winrock International, 2020). The majority of the returnee migrants expressed their wish to go back to their host countries and pre-COVID jobs. Less than 30 per cent of them reported being engaged in some economic activities in Bangladesh (Innovision, 2020a). It is important to note here that households that are dependent on remittance earnings are also vulnerable to the possibility of their

family member working abroad facing unemployment challenges in the host country. Vulnerabilities of such households will need to be taken account in the study as well.

#### **x. CMSME entrepreneurs**

*Around 7.7 million CMSMEs comprise over 99 per cent of the country's private sector and contribute to around an estimated 25 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) and significantly to creating employment (BUILD, 2020). Small and medium enterprises in Bangladesh alone create employment for 7.8 million people directly and provide livelihoods for 31.2 million (SME Foundation and BBS 2017 cited in Lightcastle Analytics Wing, 2020). Much to the dismay of entrepreneurs and associated workers, COVID-19 has pushed this substantial sector into unprecedented vulnerabilities. The lockdown forced the majority of CMSMEs to shut down or reduce their business activities extensively. The businesses are yet to sufficiently recover despite months since the lockdown had been lifted (Islam and Rahman, 2020).*

Poorer and smaller enterprises are at greater risk of marginalisation as the economic distress has compounded existing challenges of lack of access to finance, market linkages, skilled labour, and access to export markets (ADB, 2015). Many of the CMSMEs still remain outside formal financial systems and as such formal support, access to credit, stimulus packages, and other government policy support. Many also lack the skills to be oriented with digitalisation of financial systems and market places that could have helped them during the lockdown. Moreover, lengthy bureaucratic processes often become deterrents for these entities to even seek support. Female entrepreneurs are often worse affected due to stereotypical prejudices against women and assumptions regarding their support structure.

The concepts of vulnerability, the new and old dynamics therein against the context of COVID-19, the selection of old and new vulnerable groups and the sources of vulnerabilities for these groups discussed in this section will play an integral part in designing nuanced queries and concerns for the research study. The next few sections will discuss the logically sequenced conceptual categories in analysing the evidence coming from the LNOB and PNOB groups.

## **4. GENERATING BENCHMARKS, ASSESSING SHOCKS**

Whilst the ongoing pandemic will dent the progress achieved so far in terms of socio-economic developments of the LNOB and PNOB groups, commentators have also deemed the pandemic as an opportunity to reshape development strategies in reducing inequality and improving lives of marginalised groups (Mazzucato, 2020; Sen, 2020). In order to do that, it is important to understand exactly how far behind COVID-19 has thrown these people off their development trajectories. Such an understanding would entail setting up reference points, or as suggested in this paper, "benchmarks" against which the post-pandemic circumstances can be compared. Moreover, the outbreak of COVID-19 as well as the responses to contain it across the globe have transpired a series of intertwined and often reinforcing shocks to almost all—macro, sectoral and micro—levels of the economy. Understanding these shocks and transmission channels will be critical in understanding the impact on LNOB and PNOB groups.

### **4.1 Choices for benchmarking**

Benchmarking, in the most commonly used sense, may refer to the exercise of comparing performance metrics with standards or "best practices" in the same area/field/industry. Benchmarks could also be status of initial conditions before an incident to understand the implications of that incident on those conditions. In the context of COVID-19 and its implications on LNOB and PNOB groups, the best or ideal comparative situation for presumably all vulnerable groups would be if the pandemic had not happened. As such, the benchmarking exercise in this case would entail comparing post-pandemic



circumstances of vulnerable groups with their pre-pandemic/counterfactual conditions in terms of endowments, entitlements, capabilities, and policy status. However, choices for the appropriate benchmarks of comparison will essentially depend on the following three pertinent questions.

**(i) Who to compare with?** The initial question deals with the reference or standard group to compare individual LNOB and PNOB groups' performances with, in the aftermath of COVID-19. There are *two options* in this regard.

The *first option* is to see how the LNOB and PNOB groups are faring against the average person in the country i.e. comparison of outcomes of LNOB and PNOB groups with that of the national average for the same outcome. However, there are considerable challenges or disadvantages to this approach. It either requires the availability of a nationally representative household survey similar to the scale of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) or the conduct of Platform's survey with a sample size large enough to automatically allow randomness. The other concern is whether the national average is even a desirable standard in this context. Comparing with aggregate outcomes reveal little about the effects of the pre-existing vulnerabilities or initial disadvantages on post-COVID outcomes.

The *second option* is to have more disaggregated comparators i.e. to see how the LNOB and PNOB groups are faring under different circumstances than they would have in the absence of the pandemic. The benchmark for each group would then be themselves in a situation where the effect of the pandemic is not felt (e.g. a different time point or counterfactual). This approach entails focusing on having sufficiently large samples of each of the disaggregated LNOB and PNOB groups and choosing them as their own benchmarks. The latter approach is more feasible in terms of execution. It is also likely to better isolate the implications of the pandemic on vulnerable groups.<sup>26</sup>

**(ii) When to compare with?** The next question involves decisions regarding the points in time that will be used as the references for comparison. The first instances of COVID-19 emerged in December last year in Wuhan, China but with little anticipation of the big blow that later transpired. However, a series of travel restrictions involving China, a major trading partner of the country, did follow with some implications for related businesses. Soon after, as major European countries and the United States staggered significantly in the face of an outbreak, migrant workers started to return to Bangladesh for an indefinite period of time. As mentioned earlier, the first case of COVID-19 was officially confirmed on 8 March 2020 with an official lockdown being made effective from 26 March 2020. The lockdown was eventually eased in phases with a final lifting at the end of May 2020. All these events took place even before the lockdown could have had some implications for one or more of the LNOB and PNOB groups.

This makes the choice of a single reference period for comparison difficult to effectively understand the implication of the pandemic, or the lockdown, or both. Moreover, consideration of the length of time that has elapsed since the choice of "pre-COVID" point in time is also relevant. For instance, whether queries should seek a year-on-year change in circumstances i.e. same time last year at the time of the survey, or use the beginning of the calendar year, or refer to a national holiday/event around the same time need to be decided.<sup>27</sup> To better differentiate the implications of the pandemic from that of the lockdown, although difficult as they are quite intertwined, multiple reference points may also be used in the post-COVID period. Moreover, it may be more useful to look at trends before and after the pandemic rather than static levels, to better understand the effects of the crisis and responses.

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<sup>26</sup>Taking a more disaggregated approach to sampling and benchmarking was also suggested in consultation rounds with Prof. S R Osmani, Dr Iffat Sharif, and participants of the expert group meetings (EGMs).

<sup>27</sup>Keeping in mind the predicaments of the "memory recall" method used during the survey, reference to a public holiday/event around the same time may help respondents to recollect their conditions better.

**(iii) What to compare with?** The final question concerns the indicators that may be used for the benchmark comparison. Given the objective of the study and the research questions outlined in the beginning, it is safe to assume that the choice of indicators will broadly be in the domain of socio-economic development with elements of environment and governance related aspects. There will be some common indicators of assessment across all groups in areas of income, consumption, health, employment, education, living conditions, financial inclusion, digital infrastructure, and policy support, etc. In addition, a set of differential indicators will be deployed to assess issues specific to sources of vulnerability of the different LNOB and PNOB groups. These will include indicators on nutrition, the digital divide, peace and security, violence and abuse, natural disasters, climate change, and social exclusion, among others.

Another important aspect to consider regarding *what* to compare with is how the change in values in the indicators in the post-COVID/post-lockdown period will be interpreted. One way to interpret the implications of COVID would be to compare to the post-COVID/post-lockdown values with that of the pre-COVID period. Another more complicated, albeit meaningful alternative interpretation could be if a counterfactual could be produced in terms of how the indicators would have fared if the shock of COVID-19 never happened i.e. how far off the vulnerable groups are from where they would have been had there been no pandemic or lockdown. Such a counterfactual is difficult to produce and as such, the study will resort to the first interpretation of change.

## 4.2 Types of shocks and channels of transmission

Shocks, in the economic sense of the term, bring about unexpected, often unpredictable changes in exogenous factors with (significant) implications for one or more endogenous variable. The pandemic is one such unprecedented event that has invariably induced different types of covariant shocks at all levels of the global and national economies including at sectoral, local, and household levels. From a macro perspective, the crisis has affected global value chains, trade, prices, growth, migration, employment, and the financial and banking sectors, among others. Evidence suggests that lower- and middle-income developing nations are more vulnerable to external shocks given their poorly diversified economy and export sectors.

In the context of Bangladesh, the *major transmission channels* of the shock into the country have been through the slowdown in global trade and international financial flows owing to the slowdown in global economic activities, fall in demand for manufactured goods, and cross-border restrictions (CPD, 2020; Rahman, Razzaque, Rahman and Shadat, 2020; World Bank, 2020a). According to the IMF, declines in domestic economic activities, exports of readymade garments and remittances particularly from the middle-east countries facing price shocks for oil, are among the top three economic concerns for Bangladesh (IMF, 2020). At the household level, shocks are usually transmitted through both factor and product markets resulting in loss of income and/or productive assets.<sup>28</sup> Examples include loss of employment, reduced remittances, loss in business, and difficulty in buying inputs and selling outputs (Santos, Sharif, Rahman and Zaman, 2011).

The outbreak of COVID-19 as well as the responses to contain it across the globe has resulted in a series of *intertwined and often reinforcing shocks* to almost all economies of the world. Besides mitigating risks to public health and peoples' lives, the most concerted policy responses have been towards protecting livelihoods. Despite significant efforts by governments and central banks around the world, there are substantial macroeconomic effects of the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown measures and rules

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<sup>28</sup>In economics, factor markets refer to the market where factors of production, such as labour, capital and land are bought and sold. On the other hand, product markets refer to the market where finished goods and services are bought and sold.

regarding social distancing. There have been considerable debates in academic and policy circles on whether economic repercussions of the crisis have been pushed by demand side or supply side issues. The discussion has particular relevance in terms of public policy choices.

Most commentators agree that elements of both an *aggregate supply shock* and an *aggregate demand shock* have been at play. Notwithstanding, the magnitude of effects varied across different sectors of the economy (Baldwin and Mauro, 2020). Initially, features of a supply side shock were more pronounced amid widespread lock downs and cross border restrictions and their impact on complex global value chains (Triggs and Kharas, 2020). Production of goods and services were severely halted in contact with intensive industries. Guerrieri, Lorenzoni, Straub and Werning (2020) argue that asymmetric sectoral shocks caused by the coronavirus have the potential to turn into a 'Keynesian supply shock'. That is, a negative supply shock that eventually causes greater shortages on the demand side. Such a shock can especially propagate when there are sufficient complementarities across sectors and when markets are incomplete. The other major force affecting demand is the loss of income of workers in shut down businesses in the absence of insurance that reduces their spending in every sector (Brinca, Duarte and Castro, 2020). The marginal propensity to consume is also low for people who are seemingly unaffected due to aspects of uncertainty surrounding their circumstances. There are also obvious direct demand shocks pertaining to consumer services industries requiring close contact with others especially tourism, hospitality, and travel (Triggs and Kharas, 2020).

There is also the *uncertainty shock* that has hit all aspects of life, be it in terms of future epidemiological outlook, availability of vaccines, the "new normal", or future of the economy, that effects all—macro, meso and micro—levels. Looking at real-time forward-looking uncertainty measures and deploying an estimated model for disaster effects, a study found statistically significant effects of the uncertainties induced by the pandemic on macroeconomic variables, particularly GDP. The exercise concluded that about half of the forecasted output contraction reflects a negative effect of COVID-induced uncertainty (Baker, Bloom, Davis and Terry, 2020).<sup>29</sup> The uncertainty shock also passes through to households and individual outcomes and subsequently the demand side. Firms are found to provide, at best, partial insurance to their workers in face of COVID-19 induced uncertainty. As firm-level uncertainty increases, total compensation to workers declines, especially in cases of variable pay structures. Thus, uncertainty shocks result in increased financial fragility among lower-income earners and reduced consumption (Maggio, Kermani, Ramcharan, Yao and Yuk, 2020). The psychological aspect of confronting a massive Knightian uncertainty (the unknown-unknowns) like that surrounding COVID-19, affects both producers and consumers (Baldwin and Mauro, 2020).

*Aspects of demand and uncertainty shocks may have bigger impacts in the medium term and can be expected to linger longer than supply side issues in the context of COVID-19.* This is evident from the spending patterns in countries that either did not impose any strict lockdown measures or who have now lifted all restrictions. For instance, Andersen et al. (2020) found that consumption expenditures in both Denmark and Sweden fell by similar amounts even though the latter did not have any lockdown measures imposed by the government. In Bangladesh, CMSMEs found their sales to be at low levels even months after the lockdown was officially lifted (Islam and Rahman, 2020). Reduced consumption, besides affecting welfare at the individual level, has implications for aggregate demand in the economy.

Zooming into more *sectoral shocks*, COVID-19 seems to have exposed different social sectors to significant vulnerabilities, especially in low and middle income countries like Bangladesh. The crisis has

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<sup>29</sup> Although the study focused on the US economy, the direction of effects of uncertainty would most likely be the same for most other economies, especially those with highly volatile markets.

pushed health systems at the brink of collapse even in the most developed countries. Despite sufficient forewarnings of a looming pandemic even before the crisis had hit Bangladesh, the poor readiness, inadequacy and weaknesses of the soft and hard health infrastructure, and years of systemic negligence towards the sector were brutally revealed. With high incidences of other non-communicable health issues and comorbidities, the stakes have been extremely high for the health sector of the country. The education sector of the country faced a different blow altogether with almost a complete halt of educational activities among the majority of population groups. The need for social distancing, together with a lack of widespread digital capacity, has created a massive divide among different segments of the society receiving, providing, or associated with educational facilities. Another hard-hit sector has been the informal sector in urban areas with large scale *employment shocks*. The shock has resulted in drastic fall in both demand for and supply of labour occupied in informal economic activities before the pandemic. As a result, a large section of this vulnerable population, particularly women, will be pushed to face additional vulnerabilities (Bidisha and Faruk, 2020).

At the household level, there was first the *health shock* of the pandemic in general. In low and middle income countries like Bangladesh health shocks or unpredictable illnesses that reduce health status, often result in households bearing out of pocket medical expenses as well as diminished productive capacities or loss in income (Leive and Xu, 2008; Alam and Mahal, 2014). The out-of-pocket spending is often met from their income, savings, borrowing, loans or mortgages, and selling assets and livestock. Health shocks also cause significant reductions in labour supply and consumer spending. Moreover, in the context of COVID-19, it was found that consumer spending is particularly sensitive to shock when the number of new infections is strongly increasing with low income households exhibiting a significantly larger drop in consumption than high income households. As such, consumption inequality increases resulting from the health shock induced by COVID-19 (Finck and Tillmann, 2020).

Households were also inevitably exposed to *income and unemployment shocks*, often leading to drastic repercussions for consumption of essential products including food. Workers in both formal and informal sectors faced reduced demand for their labour which resulted in significant loss in incomes. Workers in CMSMEs and self-employed in the urban informal sector faced much of the brunt of the loss in employment and income. The resulting reverse migration from urban to rural areas, as well as the return of migrant workers from abroad resulted in double jeopardy at rural households who now had no income, and depleted savings with additional mouths to feed. Female workers were among the worst affected, losing their jobs in the urban area garments factories, domestic work, and other informal activities. The lockdown measures also restricted the flow of inputs and market for final produce for households involved in small holding economic activities. In the absence of entitlement transfers and adequate social protection, food security becomes a concern beyond the supply side issue.<sup>30</sup> This holds true for consumption of all other essential household goods and services as well.

In understanding the interplay of different shocks of COVID-19 and associated transmission channels, it will be important to keep in mind that the risks of exposure to the regular idiosyncratic and covariant shocks during pre-pandemic times were also omnipresent during COVID-19. If anything, impacts of the regular shocks have been accentuated due to the crisis of the pandemic. For instance, it is likely that addressing non-COVID related health shocks would have been more challenging given the already strained health system tackling COVID-19 cases. Mitigating and coping with asset or harvest shocks would be far more difficult due to lack of available help from the usual channels of family,

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<sup>30</sup>Amartya Sen's entitlement approach may provide a good lens in understanding this issue as a socio-economic problems rather than food availability problems and is well-suited to assessing the food security consequences of COVID-19 (Rubin, 2016; Devereux, Béné and Hoddinott, 2020).

friends, or relatives. Furthermore, natural disasters are recurrent phenomena affecting thousands of families residing in disaster-prone areas. This year has been no different. Vulnerable communities were simultaneously hit with natural calamities like floods and cyclones, e.g. Amphan, and rising cases of COVID-19. The pandemic not only impeded the preparatory measures towards these disasters but also affected relief work and resources flows in managing impact.

*From the perspective of policy choices, interpreting the nature of the shocks and transmission mechanisms is essential in comprehending impact and designing more effective interventions that particularly target vulnerable groups.* While conventionally monetary and fiscal policies are used to address aggregate demand shocks, stabilising the economy following supply side shocks may require other forms of policies (which will be discussed in a later section). There is also the issue of balancing the mitigation of shocks to public health with those to the economy. A meso-level understanding of shocks is crucial in targeting appropriate responses to sectors that are directly affected and those that get exposed to the aggregate shocks. Finally, recognising the differential household level shocks of vulnerable groups will facilitate designing of shock-responsive social protection and safety net programmes tailored to the needs of the LNOB and PNOB groups.

## 5. UNDERSTANDING ADJUSTMENTS, ADAPTATIONS AND RESILIENCE

Following the appraisal of benchmarks for LNOB and PNOB groups and their exposure to the different pandemic-induced shocks, it is important to understand how these individuals and households are responding to the shocks. Responses are usually in tandem with the expectation of smooth consumption but vary depending on the nature and source of shocks. For instance, shocks can be idiosyncratic to individual households or covariate affecting whole communities. They can also be paralleled by other shocks e.g. floods and cyclone Amphan in the case of COVID, that makes attribution to the “shock” difficult. In the context of Bangladesh, covariate shocks were found to have larger impacts for people belonging to relatively poorer and more vulnerable households (Azam and Imai, 2012). The uncertainty aspect further compounds the need for response strategies to address longer term issues beyond temporary arrangements. As such, in the context of COVID-19, shock responses entail coping by immediate adjustments to harnessing more adaptation strategies and finally moving towards a path of recovery and resilience.

### 5.1 Coping with shocks: Immediate adjustments

In literature looking at shocks, *coping* mechanisms are usually defined as responses (often short term) or remedial actions and adjustments made by affected actors whose survival and livelihood have been compromised or threatened (Davies, 1993; WHO, 1998). Coping is also explained as managing of resources to “solve problems, handle stress and develop defense mechanisms” in the face of adverse situations (Bhrami and Poupone, 2002, p. 10). In general, literature differentiates coping from *adaptation*, particularly with regard to the timeframe involved in the visions for the *adjustments* made. Coping entails more reactive, immediate, and ad hoc or temporary adjustments with a shorter-term vision in order to survive and mitigate impact of an experienced shock (Care, 2010; UNOCHA, 2012). Adjustments based on coping can often lead to inefficient use or depletion of resource bases. They imply less control over a situation than “managing” and are typically intended towards smoothening consumption (WHO, 1998). Coping strategies also vary across socio-economic, demographic, and spatial population groups and are influenced by prior experience. As vulnerabilities get higher, adjustment strategies get more drastic e.g. from simple reduction in variety of food consumed to more erosive measures such as divestment of liquid or productive assets in extreme cases (PEP, 2011).



In the context of Bangladesh, it was found in a nationally representative survey that coping strategies used by households against (mostly idiosyncratic) shocks broadly include reduction of non-essential and essential consumptions, savings, loans, divestment of assets, and support from community, government and non-government channels (Santos et al., 2011). *Reduction of essential consumption was used as the coping strategy in poorer households in case of severe economic shocks, while savings and borrowings were more commonly used to cope with health shocks and asset related shocks. Public assistance, or any form of formal social protection, was found to play a negligible role in coping.* Over 40 per cent of the households in the poorest quintile (that experienced shocks) were found to have failed in making necessary adjustments to cope with shocks. As it appears, rural households were more likely to rely on mechanisms that could negatively affect welfare e.g. depletion of assets. In another nationally representative study on coping mechanisms in rural Bangladesh, the authors argued that *whether households adopt potentially harmful erosive coping strategies depended on their access to microcredit, remittance, and opportunities for engaging in non-farm activities.* In the context of COVID-19, access to all such support and opportunities remain difficult (Osmani and Ahmed, 2013).

At the outset of the pandemic-induced lockdown in Bangladesh (during April 2020), the most common personal coping strategies in urban and rural poor and vulnerable households included savings, borrowing or grocery shop credit, and adjusting food consumption. Sale of assets was yet to be resorted to. Even though negative coping in terms of food consumption was reduced by June (after the lockdown), it did not get reversed. Social and institutional support to facilitate coping was minimal throughout the study period (Rahman et al., 2020).<sup>31</sup>

Rapid surveys on low income professionals, CMSME entrepreneurs including female entrepreneurs, indigenous communities, PwDs, female sex workers, and transgender communities reveal that besides using up savings and borrowing money (often at high interest rates), affected groups also reduced food expenditure compromising on protein and other nutritious food intake to cope with their loss in income (Innovision, 2020c; Islam and Rahman, 2020; BRAC, 2020b; Rahman et al., 2020; Chakma, 2020; ADD International, 2020; Manusher Jonno Foundation, 2020). There is also the risk that households may resort to taking children out of school, force them into child labour or early marriages as measures to cut costs and cope with continued economic downturn (CAMPE, 2020).

The uncertainties revolving around the COVID-19 induced shocks make it difficult to assess the required vision or timeframe to continue with existing coping strategies in a sustainable manner. As mentioned before, *coping mechanisms and short-term adjustments can have negative implications for welfare in the long run particularly in relation to productive assets. There are also long-term implications of curbing nutritional varieties from diet or dropping out of school on long term growth and skills development on children development and youth.* With risks of a second wave looming large and the availability of vaccines remaining elusive, the time may be right to start discussions on more *adaptive* measures to the “new normal” with more sustainable strategies.

## 5.2. From adjustments to adaptation

*Adaptation* is more often used in the development discourse in relation to climate change and natural disaster related shocks (Ayers and Dodman, 2010; Schipper, 2007; Huq and Reid, 2004). Fitting the definition of *adaptation* in the current context could thus refer to the changes in “natural or human systems” in response to actual or expected effects of COVID-19 induced shocks, “which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities”.<sup>32</sup> *Contrasting with the more short term and immediate stances*

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<sup>31</sup> Results were not nationally representative.

<sup>32</sup> Modified version of definition for adaptation used in the context of climate change in CARE (2010).

*of coping and adjustment strategies, adaptation involved longer term visions for the security of life and livelihood.* Adaptation strategies entail more efficient use of resources through more anticipatory, planned and proactive actions. Adaptive actions are expected to build adaptive capacities, thus resulting in more sustainable outcomes for affected individuals, households and communities (CARE, 2010). In the COVID-19 context in Bangladesh, processes of adaptation to climate change impacts and disaster risks remain an ongoing and complimentary effort to the adaptation related to shocks of COVID-19. Adaptation strategies are also in the interest of the overall economy that is struggling to absorb the influx of migrant workers who face substantial uncertainties in terms of their return to work. Examples of adaptive measures would include re-skilling, re-employment and re-integration of returnee workers into the economy.

It is quite obvious by now that the pandemic, whether or not a one-off shock, has regressed progress made in socio-economic development by decades with continuing long-lasting impacts. This implies that adaptation to the COVID crisis, like in the case of climate change, will also have to be a continuous process with provisions to evolve, uptake innovation, and alter with changing circumstances. *The process of adaptation can also not centre solely on affected actors.* It involves interventions by multiple stakeholders at different levels. Most importantly, it requires rigorous assessment of current and future exposures of groups with different vulnerabilities. Adaptation efforts also require more social, institutional, and structured support compared to coping and adjustment measures. Involving a multiplicity of heterogeneous actors in this process also creates opportunities for structural change and long-term prosperity or “building back better” (Hu and Hassink, 2017).

*The departure point of adaptation is thus addressing the sources of vulnerabilities of the LNOB and PNOB groups of concern.* Evidence suggests that existing vulnerabilities, often manifested in poverty and other structural issues, inhibit adaptation action. As such, vulnerable communities are at risk of further marginalisation and induction of additional vulnerabilities through adaptation activities of others. Reducing socio-economic vulnerabilities by addressing the structural challenges and building capacities to address adaptation deficits has been suggested to be documented as adaptation (Duncan, Tompkins, Dash and Tripathy, 2017 cited in Tompkins, Vincent, Nicholls and Suckall, 2018). The concept of *transformative adaptation* further highlights the relevance of governance, social capital, and adaptation policies in propagating inequality (Farber, 2007).

Although there is consensus on the need for adaptation, capturing the extent of adaptation is often difficult with regard to who is adapting and what drives adaptation due to conceptual and empirical ambiguities. While it might still be too early to assess adaptation actions in dealing with COVID-19-related shocks, household level queries should embed elements of adaptation actions.

### 5.3. From adaptation to recovery and resilience

Arguably, *resilience* to and *recovery* from shocks do not emerge from scratch and are rather extensions of adjustment and adaptation. The process of successful adaptation can lead to attainment of adaptability which consequently contributes to a state of resilience and recovery. Adaptability or adaptive capacity is also complimented by novel approaches of entrepreneurial agents to fit into changing contexts (Sensier et al., 2016). In the long run, adaptability represents a constructive capacity to change and transform to make communities robustly resilient (Hu and Hassink 2017). In essence, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its call for “transformative” change, besides having explicit targets on resilience, is a framework embodying the notion of resilience, particularly for the left-behind populations.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup>The 2030 Agenda acknowledges resilience both explicitly in targets (SDG 1.5 and 13.5) as well as implicitly (9.1, 2.4, 11.5, 11.b).

*Resilience*, like adaptation, most commonly appears in the development literature in relation to climate shocks and disaster risks. The DFID defines *resilience* as the ability (of nations, communities and households) to “manage” change, by “maintaining” or “transforming” standards of living without forgoing long-term welfare when faced with shocks (DFID, 2011). Resilience is also often contrasted from adaptation to including the acquiring of new capabilities and emerging stronger, whereas adaptation entails preserving existing resources (Wong-Parodi et al., 2015).

However, there is no standard or consensus on the concept or measurement of resilience in the current literature. The concept may consider both the capacities that enable people to be resilient, as well as the outcomes of resilience in terms of development gains and improvements in well-being despite multiple shocks and stresses. A particular population group's resilience can be considered in terms of a set of interrelated capacities—absorptive, anticipatory and adaptive—to different kinds of shocks and stresses (Bahadur et al., 2015). In the context of COVID-19, resilience may thus entail attainment of capacities through processes of transformation and changes that enable systems (including individuals and households) to be able to absorb (and cope) with shocks, adapt to the adversities of shocks as well as anticipate shocks so as to reduce impact. However, there is need to account for the implications of transformation on aspects of inequalities and negative externalities.

A related concept in tandem with resilience is that of *recovery*. Literature defines recovery from a crisis as (sustainable) restoration of pre-crisis conditions, improvement on the pre-crisis conditions, or improvement on the pre-crisis situation along with increased resilience (PEP, 2011). The latter definition is aligned with the narrative on “building back better”. In understanding and assessing recovery from the COVID-19 induced shocks of LNOB and PNOB groups, it is thus important to make the choice on what will be the contours of a successful recovery and attainment of resilience. *Revisiting the conceptual question posed in Section 4 on what will be the benchmark comparator in assessing impact of the pandemic, a similar conundrum is faced when measuring what recovery means for the old and new vulnerable populations of the country. Do recovery and resilience entail going back to their left behind or vulnerable states prior to the pandemic or does it mean coming out stronger from the experience (by individual accounts as well as supported by policies and institutions) so as to have resilience against future shocks? What about recovery of aspects that are comparatively difficult to restore and usually have lasting trends (e.g. nutrition, mental health or education)?* It will be also vital to note the macro implications of recovery at the household level. *Does recovery at the micro level translate into recovered macro variables in terms of trade, remittances, debt sustainability, and growth?*

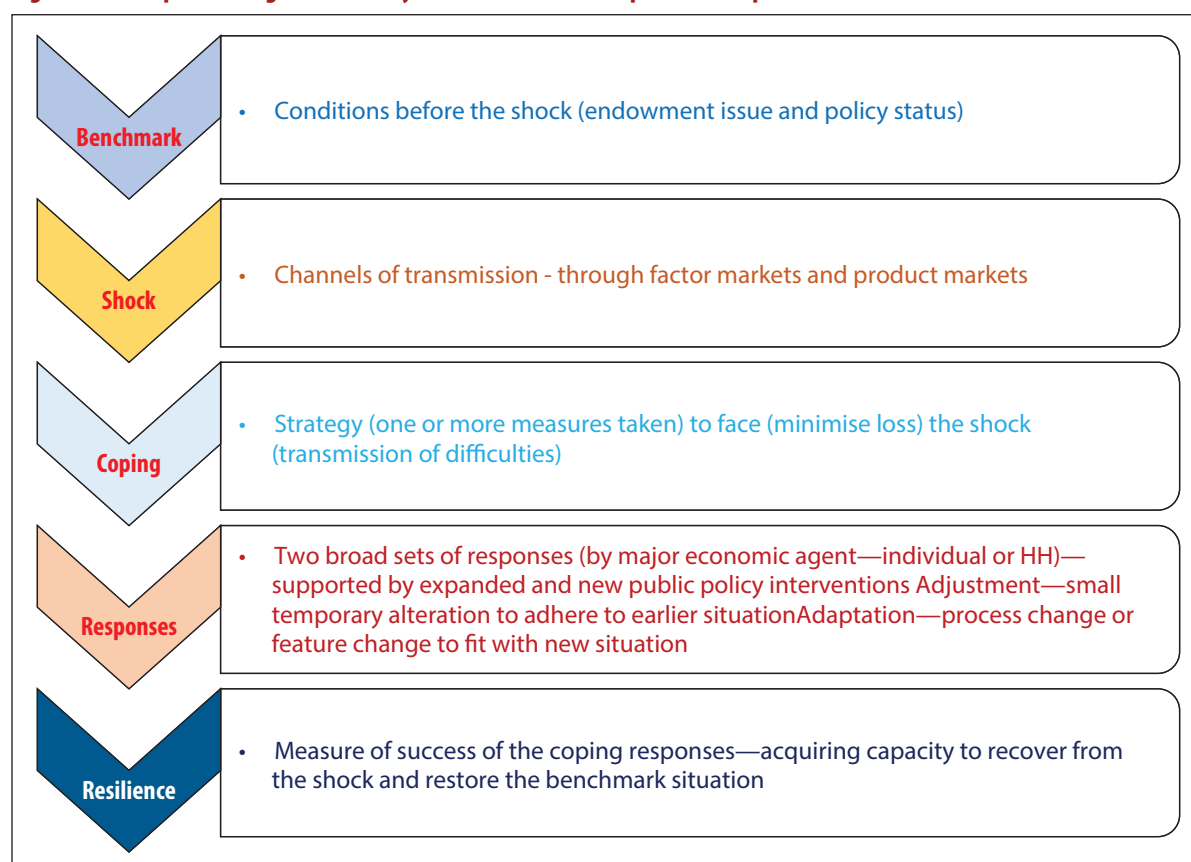
Whatever the chosen yardsticks for assessing the rebound and resumption from the COVID-19 crisis are, what is essential to note is that the measures will ideally vary by the different vulnerable groups. This is because success at the different stages of coping—adjusting and, adapting—that leads to resilience and recovery should be interpreted as a combination of both individual/group characteristics as well as the extent of tailored opportunities that have been made available to them (Osmani, 2020).<sup>34</sup>

The foregoing discussions elucidate the conceptual categories to help understand the impact of an unprecedented event like COVID-19 at the household level and how they are handled. Figure 3 summarises these categories in a chronological flow that follows the journey of a household from its pre-COVID situation to getting exposed to the shocks induced by COVID-19 through different transmission channels. As coping responses, households adopt both immediate and short-term adjustment strategies while also preparing for longer term adaptation actions and transformation to manage recurrent shocks. In the observed process, households acquire new skills that reduce their

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<sup>34</sup>Individual consultation with Prof. S R Osmani. See Annex 1.



**Figure 3: Conceptual categories to analyse household level impact and response**

Source: Based on authors' deliberations.

vulnerabilities and improve their adaptability over time making them more resilient in the face of future shocks. *The journey from being exposed to shocks to attaining resilience thus helps households to not only restore their initial conditions but also recover with improved conditions from before.*

The above depiction may appear to focus more on individual endowments and efforts. However, *institutional support and public policy interventions play a key role in each stage of the entire process of confronting the challenges of the pandemic and "building back better".* The next section focuses on the role of public policy in defining the coping strategy and attaining recovery by the LNOB and PNOB groups in the face of the pandemic.

## 6. ASSESSING PUBLIC POLICY INTERVENTIONS

One of the major systemic drivers behind the marginalisation of vulnerable population groups is how they are grossly overlooked in public policy domains. Bangladesh suffers from similar oversight of its LNOB and PNOB population groups in the country's policy landscape, a trend that has remained unchanged even in the COVID-19 context. Moreover, policy responses, regardless of being fairly targeted, are often subject to ineffective processes and outcomes. Assessing effectiveness of public policy interventions in response to COVID is thus a crucial aspect of the Platform's new exercise.

## 6.1 LNOB and PNOB groups in public policy landscape

In an earlier study by the Platform, Bhattacharya et al. (2017) extensively reviewed the relatively underexplored avenue of how vulnerable groups are addressed and referred to in policy discussions in Bangladesh. The study found that the policy landscape of the country has rarely been in favour of these marginalised groups. These groups remained outside the purview of public policy documents both in terms of horizontal (number of groups identified) and vertical (extent of issues identified) coverage. In rare times when policies did specifically target a vulnerable group, implementation challenges remained abundant. Moreover, it was found that historically, *policies that address the needs of shock-induced vulnerabilities were developed more as a response rather than a precaution to shocks*. This was despite good reasons for policymakers to have anticipated the shocks. *This absence of need-specific proactive policies has further perpetuated marginalisation of communities within the country*. One of the contributing factors as to why issues relevant to LNOB and PNOB groups are inadequately captured in the country's policy environment is the *lack of representative data* on these groups at the necessary level of disaggregation. *This has systematically left these groups underrepresented in both national statistics as well as the specific policy discourse*.

The pandemic has further unveiled the systemic biases of the policy interventions that often ignore specific vulnerabilities of the LNOB and PNOB groups. Public policy responses to COVID-19 thus far seem to have been painted with a broad paint brush—vaguely targeting the income poor, albeit with relatively better access to public services. The policy responses could be classified into four categories—fiscal, monetary, hybrid policies combining fiscal and monetary elements, and institutional measures.

The initial fiscal stimuli announced by the government primarily included expansion of existing support programmes through revision of the fiscal budget for FY2020. The stimulus packages broadly targeted the “poor”. Several new schemes also followed to safeguard workers in export-oriented sectors from being laid off or getting compensated for the loss in their jobs (IMF, 2020). The Prime Minister's special cash transfer programme providing a one-off transfer of BDT 2,500 (approximately USD 30) to supposedly 5 million poor families was also fraught with allegations of poor targeting, leakages, and challenges of transparency and accountability (The Business Standard, 2020).

From the monetary policy side, the Bangladesh Bank created several refinancing schemes, a special repo facility, and a credit guarantee scheme for exporters, farmers, and SMEs to facilitate the implementation of the government stimulus packages (IMF, 2020). The government also announced funds for banks to provide subsidised working capital loan facilities to CMSMEs. However, poor and small businesses and particularly women entrepreneurs were found to have faced substantial challenges in terms of information about and access to subsidised credit facilities (BRAC, 2020; Platform's Dialogue on CMSMEs, 2020).<sup>35</sup> Informal microenterprises such as small street vendors in urban areas also remain effectively ineligible for the government stimulus package for CMSMEs. The people residing in disaster prone *char* and *haor* areas have been ignored in terms of proactive state action despite the known risks of recurrent cyclones and floods in those areas. LNOB and PNOB groups including urban poor, poorer SMEs, PwDs and women in general have also expressed their discontentment in different rapid surveys regarding available policy support (BUILD, 2020; ADD International, 2020; Pain and Devereux, 2020; Right to Food/ ICCO Cooperation, 2020). Although, the government has set up funds towards cash incentives and subsidised loans for returnee migrant workers, it raises concern about whether it takes international visibility and relevance of an issue to be able to attract such targeted policy actions.

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<sup>35</sup>See Annex 2 for details.

There were also policies that involved institutional responses including modification, improvement or innovation of processes to fight COVID-19. These ranged from drives towards improving awareness and knowledge regarding the spread of disease and containment measures and enforcement of social distancing rules, to putting embargos on laying off workers, mandating factories to pay workers in full and relaxation on regulatory reporting etc. The distribution of the Prime Minister's stimulus packages through digital financial services was also among an example of innovation in delivery mechanism that incentivised digital inclusion. The digitisation drive of data and information on marginalised population group has also been hailed as an effort towards inclusive institutional responses. However, some of these processes have also been known to overlook vulnerable categories e.g. women and people residing in *char* and *haor* areas in terms of generating awareness or perpetuate vulnerabilities related to the digital divide.

Thus, the disaggregated approach (i.e. going beyond averages), as espoused by the SDGs, is yet to find necessary moorings in public policy frameworks in Bangladesh.<sup>36</sup> The need for this was acutely exposed by the experience of COVID-19.

## 6.2 Capturing the effectiveness of policy interventions

The dimensions of effectiveness of public policies that were extended as COVID responses is another area of analytical interest to the Platform's new study. The discourse on effectiveness of policy intervention is vast and inconclusive. The concept of "effectiveness" has evolved over the time, going beyond the previously understood limited definition of attainment of specific policy goals (Nagel, 1986). Rather, it now encompasses articulation of policy problems, identification of alternate solutions, and design of deliberate policy actions. Effectiveness thus refers to both effective processes as well as successful policy outcomes (Mukherjee and Bali, 2019). There is also consensus in literature regarding the need for context specificity of policies (Howlett, 2018).

When assessing ex-post effectiveness of COVID-19 responses through public interventions in the context of Bangladesh, three forms of policies are relevant—existing policies (e.g. safety net programmes) in their original forms that have been supporting coping with the crisis; old policies that have been modified or expanded to fit into the new circumstances; and finally, newly designed or formulated policies especially to respond to the new shock. *Given the relatively short time that has elapsed since both the crisis and policy interventions have been rolled out, the idea is not to get so much into impact evaluation and attribution issues.* Rather, the purpose is to track interventions for their capacity of being fit for purpose, particularly in favour of the LNOB and PNOB groups in Bangladesh. As such, in line with the understanding of effectiveness delineated above, effectiveness may be judged along every stage of the value chain of policy formulation based on quantitative, qualitative, and perceptive aspects. Several indicators could contribute to this discussion.

*First, the appropriateness of policy instrument* in proportion to the crisis at hand needs to be checked. For instance, whether the increased focus on monetary instruments amid an already liquidity-crunched financial sector have been in the right direction or should more fiscal stimuli have been put into place to counter the lingering demand-side effects? Whether institutional policies were designed keeping in mind the specific context and local realities or were they adopted from practices in western countries? Assessing aptness would also require delving into the shock responsiveness of existing and expanded social protection and safety net programmes.

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<sup>36</sup>One observes a certain level of disaggregation in the safety net programmes i.e. separate provisions for elderly people, destitute women etc.

*Second*, adequacy of the magnitude of policies in proportion to the deficits caused by the different shocks would be a vital assessment criterion. This is precisely why it is also important to estimate the impact of the pandemic-induced shocks on different vulnerable categories.

*Third*, design of policies needs to be gauged based on their potential to meet specific needs of the targeted groups of beneficiaries. A precursor to this exercise would be to understand the context-specific and differential needs of different vulnerable groups.

*Fourth*, there should be consideration of whether the policies have been targeted to the neediest of population groups (prioritising the furthest behind) or whether they indiscriminately cover sorts of income poor groups. Such an assessment would in turn be based on the query regarding which vulnerable groups have been most susceptible to the effects of the COVID-19 induced crisis.

*Fifth*, the quality of the policy delivery process in terms of metrics of timeliness, speed, identification of target beneficiaries, cost efficiency, transparency and accountability, and attainment of intended deliverables need thorough scrutiny and evaluations.

*Finally*, without some sort of measurement of achievement of short-term objectives and medium-term outcomes, the assessment exercise may remain incomplete.

*Another avenue for nuancing perspectives on policy effectiveness is with regard to their purposive deployment in the different stages of coping responses.* Managing the impacts of shocks require an integrated and holistic approach across the spectrum of coping—adjustments and adaptations to resilience and recovery. The time dimension is of critical importance given that longer term adaptation and resilience-focused policies often contrast the preference for instant results in policymakers. Nevertheless, institutional support at each stage is crucial and in the interest of vulnerable populations. Criteria for assessing effectiveness in this context would range from being responsive enough and providing sufficient insurance against erosive coping (short-term adjustments) to measures of efficiency, flexibility, equity, consistency, potential in order to build capacity, and adaptability (adaptation and resilience).

Besides these, more observable or measurable forms of assessment criteria, there also includes more underlying and contextual political economy factors that have significant implications for the effectiveness of policy responses. The next section addresses this issue in some detail and gives cues for aspects to include in the empirical investigation.

## **7. ADDRESSING POLITICAL ECONOMY ASPECTS**

Discussions on the effectiveness of public policy responses to COVID-19 may remain incomplete without consideration of the associated political economy aspects. At the micro or group level (e.g. households and communities), accounts of *power*, *participation*, and *agency*, particularly in relation to the LNOB and PNOB groups, hold pertinence. These concepts remain among the most important and intuitive ones, but are often less clear and difficult to measure. On the other hand, *political settlement* issues at the state or national level have significant bearings on success of policy responses—at both macro and micro levels.

### **7.1. Power participation and agency**

There is no singular definition of power. In sociopolitical literature, *power* is understood, *inter alia*, as the ability of an entity to influence the conduct of others or to exercise its will and realise its interests,

or to have control over resources (Weber 1922; Schein and Greiner, 1988; Cairney, 2019).<sup>37</sup> Robert Dahl's definition hinges on intuitive interpretation of relations among people where discussion on power is only relevant together with insights on its source, *means, exercise, extent, and scope* (Dahl, 1957). In public policy discourse, discussions of power seek to explain the dynamics behind changing policies in the face of resistance or opposition, as well as how unequal powers among different groups result in disparate social outcomes. There are also discussions surrounding implications of power when it is elitist i.e. concentrated among a few e.g. the government, or pluralist i.e. diffused among competing groups in society (Cairney, 2019).

The most common understanding of power innately assumes a negative connotation as "power over" something as experienced in the form of dominion.<sup>38</sup> However, the concept is also positively distinguished by expressions such as "power to" (agency, effective choice, capability to decide to act on), "power with" (collective action) and "power within" (self-confidence) in different analyses and approaches to empowerment (Veneklasen and Miller, 2002; Rowlands, 1997, 2016). Power is often seen as capability in right-based approaches, often by international non-government organisations or INGOs championing bottom-up transformations (e.g. ActionAid), but may also be complemented by top-down "power over" approaches to "empower" the vulnerable and excluded populations (Chambers, 2006).<sup>39</sup>

The notion of power further relates to concepts of *participation* and social change (Eyben et al., 2006). While "visible" power manifested in discriminatory laws and policies can weaken *participation* of vulnerable groups, the more "hidden" forms exercised at different levels can also prevent participation at a more primary level e.g. setting policy agendas at the cost of disengaged groups (Veneklasen et al., 2004; JASS et al., 2006).<sup>40</sup> Rights-based approaches to development regard participation in governance as a human right (UNOHCHR, n.d.; UN, 1966; Theis, 2004; Hickey and Bracking, 2005; McMurry, 2019). This treatment of the concept makes participation a more empowered form of engagement compared to the notion of participation by invitation from policymakers.<sup>41</sup> Indeed more engaged participation of stakeholders entails a shift in focus from being consumers of policies as "users" and "choosers" to assuming roles of "makers" and "shapers" of policies that have direct implications for their lives. In this regard, consideration of the changing contexts is critical to recognise the "entry points" for vulnerable groups or civil society actors working closely with them. Challenges of representation for marginalised groups will also be of concern given that not all spaces for participation welcome pro-poor change. (Gaventa, 2004). Whilst, equal participation is often impeded based on vulnerability criteria defining population groups, lack of access to other human rights can also hinder exercise of participation rights effectively (UNOHCHR, n.d.)

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<sup>37</sup>Power with legitimacy results in authority.

<sup>38</sup>There are also differing views that do not perceive power 'over' others as inherently bad, but it rather depends on the "use" (Chambers, 2006).

<sup>39</sup>In this regard, different concepts of power complement the capability approach as espoused Amartya Sen, particularly the notion of asymmetric power and the preference for empowering another, rather than dominating others or cooperating only for mutual benefit (Patrón, 2019). However, the author also suggests furthering the capability approach by recognising the importance of symmetrical participation among citizens in shaping effective public deliberation and building a more collective notion of power.

<sup>40</sup>The authors' use Gaventa's "power cube" where different forms of participation are explained through the dimension of space—*closed space* (controlled by elites and not open to public participation), *claimed space* (created by civil society after challenging closed spaces), *autonomous space* (created by civil society without interference or control by elites), and *invited space* (controlled by elites with invitation to a select few from civil society). Although invited spaces have room for some participation, the opportunity to bring any real long-term social change on critical issues is doubted and may divert civil society attention on more fundamental problems.

<sup>41</sup>See the above footnote for related concepts.

Citizens' *participation* is also a critical aspect in governance as a manifestation of people's *agency* (Mahmud, 2004; Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). In the context of sociology or political economy *agency* is often understood as the ability or capacity to act independently, make free choices and shape conditions and trajectories of life either individually or collectively in concert with each other (Cole, 2019). Agency of individuals differs across age, gender, income, education, position in social networks, and many other dimensions and usually favours the less vulnerable (Otto, 2020). The capability approach to development perceives *agency* of individuals as instrumental in bringing about change in line with their own values through participation in economic, social, and political actions (Sen, 2001; Alkire, 2005). This view of agency also emphasises that besides well-being, empowerment, participation, democratic practices, and public debates are essential in fostering capabilities. However, agency in practice is often more expensive and less straight forward for chronically vulnerable categories. These groups are usually the most lacking in resources and have high trade-offs in exercising political voice or gaining political representation. They are susceptible to giving up their *agency* in protecting subsistence livelihoods and security to more powerful and potentially exploitative political actors (Hickey and Bracking 2005).

*The foregoing conceptual treatment raises critical questions regarding how effective policies have been in improving the political positions of the LNOB and PNOB groups in terms of empowering them, representing their participation, and improving their agencies. Did the imbued power dynamics underlying policy processes increase participation of the vulnerable groups in policies where they had direct stakes? Did the responses revive or worsen agencies of particular LNOB groups such as women, children, and youth across vulnerable categories? The COVID-19 crisis is believed to be a crisis of capabilities (Anand, Ferrer, Gao, Nogales and Unterhalter, 2020). Like other diminished capabilities, did the pandemic and policy responses disproportionately reduce positive freedom and capabilities for the left behind populations? These are some of the queries that need to be considered through ground-level substantiations.*

Moreover, COVID-19 response in Bangladesh has been criticised for importing a model to contain infections from developed country contexts with stronger economies and better social safety nets (Rashid et al., 2020). In fact, this has been a pattern in many other developing countries. Experts have compared this worrying trend of developing countries adopting the same lockdown approach as most developed countries, to 'isomorphic mimicry', despite warnings regarding how a one-size-fits-all approach can have dire consequences (Hickey, Kelsall and Hulme, 2020). Notwithstanding, the unprecedented nature of the crisis may have compelled the state to respond fast in their initial actions and without granular consideration of contexts. But contextual assessments with adequate representation of LNOB and PNOB groups would be essential in design and execution of future and mid-term policies.

## 7.2 Political settlements

COVID-19 responses across nations have proved that more than a country's regime, i.e. characterisation of country politics in terms of democratic or authoritarian forms of rule, it has been the *political settlements* that have contributed to the success of policies and shaped whether institutions delivered in practice or not (Fukuyama, 2020; Kleinfeld, 2020). *Political settlement* can be defined as the underlying balance of power among competing elites and excluded groups within a society that inform the distribution of economic opportunities by a set of institutions. Settlements can be observed both in the structure of property rights and entitlements as well as that of the state's regulatory environment (Di John and Putzel, 2009; DFID, 2010; Khan, 2010)

Democracies and authoritarian regimes of developing countries have both been among the best and worst performers in their response to containing the impacts of the pandemic. Rather, many factors related to political settlements are believed to have had a role in determining the effectiveness of



initial responses. These factors include, state capacity to intervene competently, trust of citizens and legitimacy of political systems, political leadership in implementation, and previous experience of managing epidemics/pandemics (Fukuyama, 2020; Kleinfeld, 2020). The crisis also demanded more politically-attuned responses, rather than “best practice” approaches followed by other states. In this regard, country *context*, state *capacity* and *coalitions* (national and international) have been identified as critical elements for inclusive responses in both dominant and competitive settlements. These elements not only contribute to reducing immediate negative health and livelihoods impacts of COVID-19, but also strengthen long term structural dimensions by enhancing state capacity and mobilising more effective pro-poor coalitions (Hickey, Kelsall and Hulme, 2020).

Experts of political settlement analysis have described the current political settlement in Bangladesh as one that is characterised by a dominant party of an authoritarian variant that lacks inclusivity and depends on coercive apparatuses (Riaz, 2020; Hassan and Raihan, 2017). The current ruling party has assumed power in three consecutive national elections since 2009 with the last two alleged to be rigged by domestic and international observers (Riaz, 2019; 2014). This has also kept the government under pressure to enhance its legitimacy among the citizens. The party also dominates all national and local bureaucracies and elected local government. (Ali, Hassan and Hossain, 2020). Local elites and political groups often use beneficiaries’ selection and resource distribution under social safety net programs as tools to establish political settlements (Rezvi, 2020). Furthermore, a systemic class bias is apparent which has been reinforced in recent years by businesses and elites increasingly capturing the electoral politics and state policymaking processes. Particularly evident is the dominance and collective power of owners of RMG factories as foreign currency earners and mass employers (Hassan and Raihan, 2017; Khan, 2013).

Within this context, Ali, Hassan and Hossain (2020) have examined how the state has fared in responding to COVID-19 in Bangladesh through its coercive capacities, control of lower political factions and with the intention to strengthen its legitimacy among the masses. Following a seemingly reluctant official recognition of community transmission of the disease, a lockdown (in the guise of a general holiday) was ordered and a range of relief programmes and stimulus packages were announced. However, compliance by people towards any restrictive rules was short-lived along with diminishing faith over the efficacy of implementation of relief measures. Non-cooperation from local administrations and unwanted intervention of local influential people were identified among major challenges that hindered relief work and other essential services delivery by grassroots organisations in response to COVID-19 (Citizen’s Platform for SDGs Bangladesh, 2020b). Moreover, a sense of injustice was becoming prevalent after it became obvious that stimulus packages meant to pay workers’ wages were more to protect RMG factory owners’ interests above those of workers or even other industries (Sultan et al., 2020). Consequently, enforcement of lockdown orders were also slowly and tacitly withdrawn culminating in an official end despite rising COVID cases. The turn of events was perceived as the state’s prioritisation of sustaining legitimacy and livelihoods of the poor amid failures to overcome weak capacities over national public health concerns (Ali, Hassan and Hossain, 2020).

The Effective States and Inclusive Development’s (ESID) framework for analysing political settlements (in 42 countries) also identified Bangladesh as having a narrow social foundation with high power concentration.<sup>42</sup> Such settlements, by definition, are likely to possess substantial coercive potential

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<sup>42</sup>According to the ESID classification, whether a *social foundation* is broad or narrow depends on the share of powerful population groups (characterised by their defining identification criteria) that is co-opted (as opposed to repressed) by governing elites. The broader the social foundation, the more inclusive will be development benefits. On the other hand, how power is arranged and organised within a state defines the configuration of power. Power is said to be concentrated when the top political leaders and their closest allies are strong, relative to their own followers and opponents (Kelsall, Hickey and Hulme, 2020).

with a rather smaller health sector with elite bias. There is less regard for larger mass with imminent repression of the broader population. On the other hand, due to the resultant lack of legitimacy, citizens are also more likely to disobey public health directives and regulations that impede their economic activities. As such, inclusive responses from development partners in such settlements would entail supporting government in quickly rolling out innovative social protection modalities targeted toward marginalised population groups. Moreover, diplomatic influence should be channeled towards reducing state repression (Kelsall, Hickey, Hulme and Schulz, 2020).

What is coming out strongly from the above account on political economy dimensions is that the current context of the country is far from being optimal for LNOB and PNOB groups to thrive amidst a pandemic and combat its multi-faceted repercussions. Have the exclusionary political settlements at national and local levels and ensuing uncertainties decreased their faith in state apparatuses and increased dependence on market apparatuses? More nuanced understanding of these issues at the grassroots level will be crucial in understanding the overall coping process of the vulnerable groups and the required interventions at different levels. This will be important to ensure resilience and sustainable recovery of the left behind groups and highlighting the effective support required, particularly at community levels and through non-state channels.

Conventionally, evidence on political economy aspects is usually captured through focus groups discussions or key informant interviews. However there is also scope for understanding issues related to participation and agency through household surveys. In this regard the platform's study may include queries regarding the household's or individual member's perception regarding the status of their post-pandemic economic and social empowerment. Issues about local level political settlements may be captured through an understanding of a household or individual's social networks through questions regarding their affiliations with community organisations, the utility of such networks, and primary sources of information regarding policy interventions, relief programmes, and support from non-state channels.

## **8. EMPLOYING AN SDG LENS**

It is now obvious that the scourge of COVID-19 has catapulted a health crisis into economic and social fallouts with disparate effects on the most vulnerable population groups. There are also fears of worsening inequalities long after and in spite of vaccines becoming available. The poorest and most vulnerable will likely bear the brunt of the damage well into the future regardless of the halt in the spread of the virus. Needless to say, policy discussions in a developing country setting with substantive shares of vulnerable population groups will need to look beyond immediate and short-term crisis management and prioritise mid-term plans and strategies. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a comprehensive guiding framework towards that end. Employing a disaggregated SDG lens in assessing consequences of the pandemic and effectiveness of policy responses in the Platform's study can add significant value to the country's policy discourse by contributing to the understanding of micro-macro linkages of public policy interventions.

Besides the SDGs, the pandemic has also unleashed itself at such a time when the country is at a crossroads of meeting two other distinct yet inter-dependent development milestones in the coming decade. *First*, following the accession to lower middle-income country (LMIC) status in 2015, Bangladesh is currently transitioning towards gradually losing access to more concessional forms of financial assistance and accepting harder terms on its loans. One wonders whether reduced access to external concessional finance will affect the government's capacity to extend fiscal support to the LNOB and PNOB groups. *Second*, the country is approaching its timeline of graduating from the group of LDCs by 2024. The



graduation, while much coveted, comes with the caveat of forgoing a number of international support measures, particularly in the area of trade (e.g. duty-free quota-free or DFQF market access). A related concern in this regard is the possible impact of this transition on employment and income of the LNOBs and PNOBs, particularly in the export-oriented apparel sector. While COVID-19 has compounded the challenges of all three journeys, stakes remain highest for the delivery of the SDGs.

That is not to say that achievement of the SDGs were really on-track before the pandemic. Globally, delivery of the SDGs was already derailed which may also partially explain the disproportionate impact on the vulnerable (UN/DESA, 2020). The same was suggested in the context of Bangladesh—that even partial achievement of the SDGs prior to COVID-19 would have significantly mitigated its impact (Sakamoto, Begum and Ahmed, 2020). While the pandemic has, on one hand, dented the progress achieved so far; on the other hand, it will also provide an opportunity to reshape development strategies in favour of the LNOB and PNOB groups. The post-pandemic adjustments and adaptations made across the world are expected to bring about important changes in human understanding and conduct. Any vision for recovery would thus entail not just going back to where things were, but also rectifying the course towards recovery and resumption by getting back on track with more agility, momentum, and resilience. This would also mean more disaggregated achievement by all left behind groups.

Bangladesh would also need to fine tune and accelerate its development journey in order to achieve the SDGs by 2030 at a granular level. As mentioned at the outset, progress towards achieving the SDGs has been severely disrupted at the country level. Sen et al. (2020) have examined the impact of COVID-19 on SDG 1 (eradicating poverty) in Bangladesh, albeit with limited disaggregation. One of the critical conclusions of the study is that four years of effort of poverty eradication has been lost due to the pandemic. Similar projections, if done for some of the other critical areas like health, education, and employment, could reveal significant value to the policy discourse of the country. Such an exercise could contribute towards revising the government's list of priority SDG indicators, taking note of the COVID-19 impact on different groups of the vulnerable in Bangladesh.

There is also reasonable apprehension that the LNOB and PNOB groups may not get adequate attention in the forthcoming Eighth Five Year Plan (8FYP) (2021-25) of Bangladesh, following suit of its predecessor. However, the Platform's new study has significant potential to substantially contribute to the elaboration of the plan targets by generating disaggregated knowledge and evidence on the required structural and policy adjustments in favour of the marginalised and vulnerable populations of the country.

In sum, notwithstanding various analytical and data challenges, the potential of the envisaged study remains considerable, particularly in terms of generating a set of evidenced-based enlightened perspectives on the state of the LNOBs and PNOBs in the context of pandemic-related public policy interventions.

Finally, the Platform's new study does not only intend to apply the SDG lens to analyse repercussions for the goals and targets or use its indicator list. It wants to capitalise on the comprehensive and transformative nature of the agenda in understanding and explaining development challenges through the triangulation of economic, social, and environmental pillars. One may even add a fourth pillar of governance to add a political economy dimension to the issues. Furthermore the SDGs champion a set of core principles to address these development challenges through a contextual approach which can guide policymakers and development practitioners in the right direction. The study wants to embed some of these different principles in its approach, conduct and interpretation of the findings emanating from the process. The programme already anchors itself on the Agenda's central pledge to *leave no one behind*. Apart from this, the SDGs talk about *interconnectedness and indivisibility* among the 17 Goals and warn against treating them as silos without considering the associated trade-offs, synergies, and spin offs. The agenda calls

for *inclusiveness* in implementation i.e. participation from all segments of the society, particularly from the left behind groups. Finally, the need for *multi-stakeholder partnerships* is emphatically highlighted in mobilising finances, knowledge, expertise, and technological innovations (UNSSC, n.d.). These principles will guide the overall research process and the three streams with dedicated focus in the third study that explicitly deals with a disaggregated outlook on the progress on SDGs.

The following section summarises and connects the content of the present paper to that of the design of the empirical investigation envisaged. It will further clarify and elaborate the concerns related to the research problematique, key development issues, identification of groups, methodological approach to addressing the research questions, data analysis and the utility of the overall analytical approach of the research.

## **9. THE RESEARCH DESIGN: CHOICES AND CHALLENGES**

The foregoing sections have put forward an array of conceptual and analytical issues under a framework to guide a set of research questions. These research questions directly focus on a number of immediate, short-term, and medium-term development issues emerging from one of the greatest global crises faced in a century, i.e. COVID-19. The usefulness of such an approach in applied research are to have clarity on the research problems, develop relevant and realistic research questions, identify the key concepts, categories, factors and variables, and establish a linkage with the policy discourse in the country context.

Alongside establishing the conceptual and analytical issues, it is also pertinent to translate these into empirics for addressing the identified research questions. This is necessary to draw relevant recommendations to objectively guide the policy actions by the state and non-state actors to mitigate the fallouts of COVID-19. This concluding section attempts to present the overall research design and implementation process, starting from conceptualisation to outlining the scope and focus followed by carrying out the empirical analyses. *This approach involves the nine steps explained below.*

### ***(i) Identification of the research problem and framing of the research questions***

The COVID-19 scourge appeared as a global health risk at an unprecedented scale compared to all recent pandemics. The health risk soon translated into a multifaceted development challenge involving a wide range of economic and social difficulties. Certain quarters termed the pandemic as a “great leveller”. However, it did not take much time to realise that it has disproportionately affected marginalised and vulnerable population groups. These populations groups are generally more susceptible to any form of risk—be it natural or human-made—compared to others. The *Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh* has always put the development issues pertaining to marginalised communities at the forefront of its agenda. Hence, the Platform sought to trace the impacts of COVID-19 on marginalised and vulnerable groups in Bangladesh and how policy actions can be influenced to safeguard their interests.

However, these broad objectives were required to be transformed into a set of relevant research questions. As mentioned in Section 1, a broad-based participatory research approach was undertaken to service these objectives. A consultation process under this research programme engaged a wide range of stakeholders including academia, researchers from think tanks, professionals engaged in development fields, representatives from international development partners, and policymakers. These consultations were complemented by an extensive literature review including rapid survey

reports, past academic articles, policy documents, and thought pieces. The aforesaid process helped to identify the lacuna in the prevailing literature, map the interests of the stakeholders and have an initial understanding of the ground realities. Finally, the identified research questions, which are presented in Section 2.3, were finalised considering the existing knowledge gaps and policy interests.

### ***(ii) Defining the concepts***

As is common in social sciences, many concepts and categories involved in research are subject to contexts and interpretations. Hence, defining the key concepts (e.g. vulnerabilities) and categories (e.g. coping responses through adjustments and adaptation) in the research problem and process is a critical prerequisite. Conceptualisation at the early stage of the research limits the ambiguity, and ensures linkages between established theories and applied policy analysis. Indeed, conceptualisation is influenced by the prevailing country context as well as the gravity of the development challenges involved in the research. Nonetheless, conceptualisation contributes to guide and identify the scope of the research process both in terms of understanding of the research questions and applications of the analytical tools to address them. In view of this, the present paper dedicates five sections (3, 4, 5, 6 and 7) to clearly defining the key concepts and categories involved in the research.

### ***(iii) Identification of the target groups***

The driving motivation for the study is to highlight the impacts of COVID-19 on the marginalised and vulnerable groups. While identifying these groups, the present paper puts forward two such sets—the traditional LNOB and the PNOB groups. While some of the existing literature recognised the emergence of ‘new poor’, the present study perceives the importance of acknowledging the new vulnerable groups as well as their vulnerabilities beyond income or consumption criteria.

Besides, the identified groups will be different from country to country, even among the group of Southern developing nations. Some of these groups are often very small in terms of size and invisible in the mainstream development policy discourse. Indeed, identification of the LNOB and PNOB groups for such a study would require considering that these groups are heterogeneous and often have specific development needs, both in general as well as in the face of the pandemic.

The critical challenge in this context is to keep the number of such groups manageable from the operational perspective of a research endeavour. Reaching a consensus among the stakeholders regarding the selection of the list is indeed a significant challenge.

### ***(iv) Identifying key development issues for the target groups***

If the motivation for the study is the LNOB and PNOB groups, their development needs will be the centrepiece of this research framework. Indeed, the development issues are channels through which the impacts of COVID-19 on the aforesaid LNOB and PNOB groups take place. These development issues can be categorised in four broad groups, based on health, economic, social and climate issues. It is not difficult to recognise that the vulnerabilities originated from a pandemic would primarily be related to health concerns. Hence, the study may cover the constraints faced by the marginalised in accessing healthcare and emergency support for both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 cases (e.g. testing, treatment, intensive care, insurance coverage, etc.); implications for mental and physical well-being; and restricted access and maintenance of water, sanitation, and health-related facilities.

However, as has been mentioned above, the health-related challenges quickly translated into economic challenges. In this context, the study needs to cover the constraints faced by the LNOB and PNOB groups in the following:

- Continuing economic activities and accessing opportunities (e.g. reduced demand for labour/production/service; higher cost of production/operation;
- Increased interest rates by local lenders, restricted distribution channels, mobility; skill gap, dis-savings, increased debt etc.);
- Maintaining consumption (e.g. increased price of necessary goods and services, restricted access, etc.), nutrition (e.g. starvation, stunting, wasting, malnutrition, under-immunisation, etc.).

The social constraints faced may include a wide range of issues, including the following:

- Access to education (e.g. transport, infrastructure, facility, digital literacy, and etc.);
- Access to shelter (damages and loss during natural calamities);
- Compliance with gender rights (domestic violence, additional work burdens), mobility (restricted movement), financial services (cashless transactions, transaction costs, access to credit, digital illiteracy etc.);
- Provision of security (incidence of crimes especially against women and children, lack of law enforcement etc.), legal support (delayed justice), religious services (restricted access to practice sites);
- Recreational facilities (e.g. community activities, sports, etc.) and others.
- While these issues mostly have horizontal relevance for all LNOB and PNOB groups, some of the issues will also be uniquely relevant for specific groups. *Hence, the research may need to go beyond a common set of development issues and also look into the specific needs of certain development issues.*
- For carrying out the research, the key challenge is to limit the scope and focus on a limited set of development issues to keep it at a manageable scale. To this end, both the consultation process with the stakeholders and the review of literature will be extensively drawn upon.

Finally, climate change and its impact have been among the most worrying development challenges in Bangladesh, even before the pandemic, for many of the vulnerable groups and their vulnerabilities described in section 3. The pandemic is expected to accentuate these vulnerabilities related to climate change not only for people living in geographically vulnerable areas but even more so for the other vulnerable categories living there e.g. women, children, youth, PwDs, etc. Besides the exacerbated economic and social constraints faced by the climate-vulnerable people due to the pandemic, the study will also need to consider the implications for exposure to climate-related risks and progress regarding adaptation and mitigation efforts to tackle climate change.

#### ***(v) Tracing out the key public policy interventions***

The outbreak of COVID-19 forces countries to design policy responses to counter emergent pitfalls. These policy responses include specific measures such as support to people in need in the forms of food and income. Besides, there have been several public policy interventions in the forms of economic stimulus packages. Several broad-based (economy-wide) policies were undertaken with a view to mitigating the negative impacts of COVID-19. These policy measures used fiscal and monetary instruments separately or combined through hybrid policies, as well as institutional mechanisms.

Thus, the present research will seek to review policy interventions and their effectiveness in view of the impact of COVID-19 on LNOB and PNOB groups. The primary purpose of this exercise will be to

understand to what extent the policy interventions are suitable to the needs of the aforesaid groups. Such a review may include a number of aspects.

*First*, there is a need to assess the design of such policy responses from the perspective of objectives, scope, and choice of instruments and institutional mechanism. Often, the policy responses were designed within an existing framework. However, the needs of LNOB and PNOB groups oftentimes require a departure from comfort zones and thinking out of the box. The research may investigate if there has been an innovative approach taken by the government. *Second*, as the study assesses the implementation of policy responses, the issues related to administrative capacity, timeliness, and good governance must be taken into consideration. *Third*, the review of policy actions may also be assessed from the perspective of adequacy in terms of resources and institutional capacity. *Fourth*, the review may also look into the issues related to the effectiveness of such policy interventions for LNOB and PNOB groups. The review of policy interventions should also consider a monitoring system to understand who are involved in the delivery process and how it is done. Further, the scope for grievance redress and follow-up mechanisms has to be included in the envisaged review. Finally, assessment of policy interventions will take note of the underlying political economy factors including the impact of and on political settlements.

Accordingly, this 'policy interventions' block would try to draw lessons for future policy responses in favour of the LNOB and PNOB groups as the economy seeks to counter the negative impacts of COVID-19 and attain resilience.

#### ***(vi) Priority setting: Short-term vs medium-term issues***

In the present context, the development discourse, both in terms of impact and policy interventions (responses) is mostly concentrated on immediate and short-term issues. This is perhaps largely due to the prevailing uncertainties amid COVID-19. It is understandable to have a focus on safeguarding a sustainable turn around in health, economic and social areas. Admittedly, it is critical to ensure the participation of all population groups, including the identified LNOB and PNOB groups in this process.

However, the discourse should also keep an eye on recovery, resilience and rebound, i.e. accelerating progress. The research programme will make an attempt to trace out how impacts of COVID-19 on LNOB and PNOB groups—as manifested by the health, economic and social indicators—will have an impact on a select set of relevant SDG indicators. This will contribute to a better understanding of how medium-term policies and priority settings need to be adjusted to accelerate the progress towards the attainment of the SDGs.

#### ***(vii) Addressing the research questions***

The foremost challenge in implementing the present research programme concerns delineating the scope of the study. As has been recognised in this paper, its ambition level has been set relatively high in terms of the target groups and their issues of interest. In order to match the stated ambition with operational realities, it is critical to have a prior clarity regarding the data and information needed, sources of such data and information, tools for collection of (primary and secondary) statistics and methodological approach for analyses of these data and information as against each research question. In this connection, the present paper proposes (as presented in Table 2) the methodological approach to be followed and focus to be maintained while addressing the corresponding research question.

**Table 2: Methodological approach to address the research questions**

Research question	Focus of the analysis	Methodological approach
What were the specific health-related, economic and other social challenges due to the pandemic?	Identified development issues under three-four pillars, i.e. health, economic, social and climate change related (where applicable), both cross-cutting and specific to identified LNOB and	A review of the literature will be conducted to identify the development issues as well as the targets groups for the study. Stakeholder consultations will guide the identification of scope.
	PNOB groups, will guide in this context. Comparative analyses will be carried out for pre-COVID-19 (benchmark) and post-COVID-19 periods.	A survey at the household and individual levels will be carried out to collect data. This will be validated through selected FGDs.
Which old and new vulnerable population groups were more susceptible to the COVID-19 pandemic?	A comparison will be made among the LNOB and PNOB groups to address the research question.	The survey at the household and individual levels provides necessary information to this end. Standard statistical tests will be carried out based on the survey data.
Which aspect(s) of COVID-19 induced shock(s) has been most concerning?	A comparison will be made among the identified issues to address the research question.	The survey at the household and individual levels provides necessary information to this end. Standard statistical tests will be carried out based on the survey data.
What were the coping responses (adjustment and adaptation) used at individual and household levels (supported by expanded and new public policies) to cope with the challenges?	Descriptive analysis will be done based on survey data. The results will be validated through FGDs.	The survey at the household and individual levels provides necessary information to this end. Standard statistical tests will be carried out based on the survey data. This will be validated through selected FGDs.
What were the supports available to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 at community levels, through public policy interventions and through non-governmental channels?	A review of the policies and support measures will be carried out to identify public policy interventions. The FGDs and stakeholder consultations will help identification of the supports provided through the non-governmental channels.	The methodological approach will involve the review of secondary literature including, but not limited to policy documents, guidelines, stakeholder consultations, and FGDs.
How effective were public policies in addressing and mitigating the impact of the pandemic?	The analysis on coverage, timeliness, and usefulness of policy interventions made directly at the household and individual level will be carried out based on survey data and FGDs.	Analysis of secondary data will be carried out. The approach for addressing this research question will also include analysis of survey data and FGDs. Stakeholder consultations and

(Table 2 contd.)



(Table 2 contd.)

Research question	Focus of the analysis	Methodological approach
		key informant interviews (KIIs) will also be conducted to extract the nuances.
How has the pandemic affected the disaggregated progress made towards achieving the SDGs in favour of the marginalised and vulnerable groups?	A meta-analysis on the impact of the pandemic for all LNOB groups will be conducted to understand the probable impact on the progress of SDG targets which are relevant (directly linked) to the development issues covered under the research.	A meta-analysis will be done based on a survey conducted under the research, along with an analysis of available secondary data. The results will be validated through stakeholder consultations.

### **(viii) Data Sources and Surveys**

As has been discussed above, the research programme will rely on data from multiple sources. The methodology will involve the generation, collation and analyses of both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data collection will include a survey to be carried out at the household level with specific modules for individuals within the household. Ideally, the survey should be large enough to be representative at the national level along with sufficient coverage of all identified LNOB and PNOB groups.

As is known, many LNOB and PNOB groups are very small in size and covering these groups with a national-scale investigation will need a vast scope for the survey. Indeed, this will entail a high cost. Against this backdrop, the envisaged survey design will be built from a micro approach where the identified target groups will be reasonably covered with a purposive sampling frame. Further, small satellite survey clusters will be added to generate average estimates involving all such groups. Hence, the study will not focus on national trends, but primarily try to bridge the knowledge gaps as regards the LNOB and PNOB groups.

Alongside the survey, data will be accessed from secondary sources. Moreover, the qualitative approach will be deployed, particularly by organising FGDs with the LNOB and PNOB groups. Such FGDs are to complement data needs where the survey outputs may not be adequate.

### **(ix) Data Analysis**

The analysis of data will involve both “descriptive” as well as “analytical” methods. The descriptive approach will inform as regards “what” is. Such analyses will involve classification, measurement, description, and comparison to highlight what the existing phenomena are. The analytical methods will try to establish the “cause and effect” relationships among the variables. The analysis for the research will also include standard statistical tests to infer conclusions. The qualitative data will be recorded and analysed in a systematic way to validate the observations as well as provide adequate explanations of the observed phenomena.

In conclusion, it may be recalled that the present paper presents a conceptual, analytical and methodological approach which is to be applied to understand the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic from the prism of marginalised groups. The protracted pandemic has undoubtedly broad-

based negative implications for almost all sections of people in terms of health, economic, and social aspects of their lives. The research seeks to address the gaps in the existing knowledge system and guide future policies in favour of the marginalised groups in the country.

The paper establishes a conceptual framework to identify the development challenges, the marginalised groups—both traditional and new, provide an assessment framework for the future path of recovery and extract policy recommendations for both the short- and medium-term in view of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. *It also proposes an opportunity to trace out which groups are more vulnerable and which areas will help policymakers to set the priorities as they devise policies.* Besides, it also recognises the need to translate the immediate impacts on medium-term development targets in the form of the SDGs.

Although the study has been designed mainly from the perspective of Bangladesh, the present conceptual framework can easily be contextualised for other developing countries. The derived scope of the current framework does not allow it to address the complex issues related to international policy architecture, although it is recognised that issues related to global governance may have a significant influence on the post-pandemic development outcomes at country level.



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## ANNEXES

### Annex 1: Consultations undertaken in the course of preparation of the paper

#### A. Individual Discussion with Experts

1. Professor SR Osmani, Development Economics at the University of Ulster, United Kingdom, 25 August 2020
2. Dr Iffath Sharif, Practice Manager, World Bank, New York, 28 August 2020
3. Dr Binayak Sen, Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), 13 September 2020

#### B. CPD In-house Discussion (04 August 2020)

1. Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, CPD
2. Processor Rounaq Jahan, Distinguished Fellow, CPD
3. Professor Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow, CPD
4. Dr Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, CPD
5. Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem, Research Director, CPD
6. Mr Avra Bhattacharjee, Joint Director, Dialogue and Outreach, CPD
7. Mr Syed Yusuf Sadat, Senior Research Associate, CPD
8. Mr Mostafa Amir Sabbih, Senior Research Associate, CPD
9. Mr Muntaseer Kamal, Senior Research Associate, CPD
10. Mr Md Sarwar Jahan, Senior Dialogue Associate (Web)
11. Ms Tarannum Jinan, Senior Administrative Associate, CPD
12. Ms Sayeeda Jahan, Research Associate, CPD
13. Ms Tamara E Tabassum, Programme Associate, CPD
14. Ms Fareha Raida Islam, Programme Associate, CPD
15. Ms Tamanna Taher, Programme Associate, CPD
16. Mr Abu Saleh Md. Shamim Alam Shibly, Programme Associate, CPD
17. Mr Md. Irtaza Mahbub Akhond, Programme Associate (Communications), CPD

#### C. Expert Group Meetings with Academics and Researchers (24 August 2020)

1. Ms Arpeeta Shams Mizan, Assistant Professor, Department of Law, University of Dhaka
2. Dr Kazi Iqbal, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)
3. Mr Kazi Faisal Bin Seraj, Country Representative, The Asia Foundation
4. Mr Mohammad Ali Nause Russel, Director (Research, Outreach and Capacity Development), Governance Innovation Unit (GIU), Prime Minister's Office
5. Dr Ramiz Uddin, Head of Results Management and Data, Access to Information (a2i)
6. Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, Associate Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka
7. Dr Sabina Faiz Rashid, Dean and Professor, BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University
8. Dr Shafiun Nahin Shimul, Assistant Professor, Institute of Health Economics Institutes, University of Dhaka
9. Dr Wameq Azfar Raza, Economist, Poverty and Equity, The World Bank
10. Mr Zeeshan Abedin, Country Economist, International Growth Centre (IGC)

***D. Expert Group Meeting with International Development Partners in Dhaka (13 September 2020)***

1. Mr Ashekur Rahman, Head of Poverty and Urbanization, UNDP
2. Mr Issam Mosaddeq, Economic Adviser, DFID
3. Ms Khadija Khondker, Programme Officer, ILO Country Office
4. Ms Mahal Aminuzzaman, Sr. Adviser, Royal Danish Embassy
5. Mr Morshed Ahmed, Senior Advisor-Development Affairs, Royal Norwegian Embassy
6. Mr Md. Mazedul Islam, Development Coordination Officer / Economist, Office of the UN Resident Coordinator
7. Mr Md Mozammel Haque, Policy and Coordination Specialist, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
8. Mr Muhammad Imam Hussainm, Economist, International Monetary Fund (IMF)
9. Mr Mashfique Ibne Akbar, Private Sector Development Adviser, DFID
10. Mr Muhammad Moinuddin, Program and Development Specialist, USAID
11. Mr. Sydur Rahman Molla, Programme Manager, Embassy of Switzerland
12. Ms Subhra Bhattacharjee, Strategic Planner, United Nations Resident Coordinator's Office
13. Ms Sheela Tasneem Haq, Governance Advisor, DFID
14. Ms Simeen Sabha, Senior Program Manager, Australian High Commission
15. Mr Tanvir Mahmud, Adviser, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), DFID

***E. Webinar on: The COVID-19 Discourse: Are We Asking the Right Question? (03 November 2020)***

*Panelists*

1. Dr Shantanu Mukherjee, Chief, Policy and Analysis Branch at Division for Sustainable Development, UN-DESA, New York
2. Dr Ibrahima Hathie, Research Director, Initiative Prospective Agricole et Rurale (IPAR), Dakar
3. Ms Elisabeth Bollrich, Programme Head on the Global Economy, FES, Berlin
4. Dr Lorena Alcázar Valdivia, Senior Researcher, Group for the Analysis of Development, GRADE, Lima
5. Dr Munshi Sulaiman, Regional Research Lead in Africa, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, Kampala
6. Ms Shannon Kindornay, Director, Research, Policy and Practice, Cooperation, Canada

*Special Commentator*

7. Professor Rounaq Jahan, Distinguished Fellow, CPD, Dhaka

***Annex 2: List of dialogues and meetings feeding into the study***

1. Conference on Voluntary National Review (VNR) 2020 of Bangladesh: Positioning Non-State Actors (Wednesday, 11 March 2020)
2. Virtual Dialogue on "Experiences from the current situation at the grassroots level: Achievements and challenges" (Wednesday, 8 July 2020)
3. 14th General Meeting of the Partners (Thursday, 06 Aug 2020)  
Policy Dialogue on "Post-Pandemic Status of Cottage, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (CSMEs) and Effectiveness of Stimulus Packages" (Wednesday, 30 Sep 2020)
4. Dialogue on "COVID-19 and Bangladesh: A Youth Agenda for Recovery" (Saturday, 10 Oct 2020)
5. Dialogue on COVID-19 and Bangladesh: A Youth Agenda for Socio-Economic Recovery (Sunday, 01 Nov 2020)

### Annex 3: List of COVID-19 related studies reviewed (March 2020 – September 2020) for state of knowledge analysis

- ADD International. (2020). *COVID-19: Double Jeopardy for Persons with Disabilities*. ADD International.
- BRAC. (2020a). *Rapid Perception Survey On COVID-19 Awareness and Economic Impact*. Dhaka: BRAC.
- BUILD. (2020). *Stimulus Packages for Large & CMSMEs- Reforms for Better Utilization for Recovery from COVID-19*. Dhaka: Business Initiative Leading Development (BUILD).
- CAMPE. (2020). *COVID-19 Impact on Education: Field Findings and Implications for the Future. Webinar Presentation*. Dhaka: CAMPE.
- CARE. (2020). *Bangladesh: Rapid Assessment Findings on Covid-19 Effects on Urban Health*. Dhaka: CARE, Bangladesh. <http://careevaluations.org/wp-content/uploads/Rapid-Assessment-Report-on-COVID-19-effects-on-Urban-Health.pdf>
- Innovision. (2020a). *COVID 19 Impact on low income population – Migrant Male Workers*. (Innovision Digest no. 4). Dhaka: Innovision.
- Innovision. (2020b). *COVID 19 Impact on Vulnerable Groups – People with Disabilities*. (Innovision Digest no. 5). Dhaka: Innovision.
- Innovision. (2020c). *COVID 19 Impact on low income population. Micro-Merchants*. (Innovision Digest no. 9). Dhaka: Innovision.
- Innovision. (2020d, May). *Impact of COVID – 19 on low-income professions*. (Innovision Digest no. 12). Dhaka: Innovision.
- Islam, A. and Rahman, A. (2020). *Rapid Response Research to COVID-19. The Effects of COVID-19 on Small Firms: Evidence from Large-Scale Surveys of Owners and Employees*. Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD).
- Light House. (2020). *COVID-19 impact assessment report among key populations (Hijra and FSW)*. Light House.
- Lightcastle Analytics Wing. (2020). *COVID-19: Impact on Bangladesh's SME Landscape*. Dhaka: Lightcastle Partners.
- Manusher Jonno Foundation. (2020). *Violence against women and children: COVID-19. A Telephone Survey: Initiative of Manusher Jonno Foundation*. Dhaka: Manusher Jonno Foundation.
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- Rabbani, A., Saxena, S. B. and Islam, M. F. (2020). *The Impact of COVID-19 on the Lives of the Workers in the Bangladesh Garment Industries*. Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED) and BRAC James

P Grant School Public Health of BRAC University and the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies, University of California at Berkeley.

Rahman, H. Z., Das, N., Matin, I., Wazed, M. A., Ahmed, S., Jahan, N. and Zillur, U. (2020). *Livelihoods, Coping, Recovery during Covid-19 (second round survey)*. Dhaka: BIGD and PPRC.

Rahman, S. H., Razzaque, A., Rahman, J. and Shadat, W. B. (2020). *Socio-economic Impact of COVID-19 and Policy implications for Bangladesh*. Brac Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)

Right to Food Bangladesh/ ICCO Cooperation. (2020). *Impacts of Covid-19 on Food-intake and Nutrition of Poor People: A Rapid Appraisal*. Dhaka: ICCO Cooperation.

SANEM/The Asia Foundation. (2020). *COVID-19 and Business Confidence in Bangladesh - Results from the Firm-level Survey*. Dhaka: SANEM and The Asia Foundation.

Waliul, M. M., Fatima, K., Noor, I., Kamruzzaman and Sharmin, S. (2020). *Quick Situation Analysis of Transgender & Hijra community in COVID-19 Lockdown in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Bandhu Social Welfare Society. <https://www.bandhu-bd.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Covid-19-Quick-Survey-for-Community-Response-for-TG-and-Hijra.pdf>

World Bank. (2020b). *COVID-19 Monitoring Survey in Poor and Slum Areas of Dhaka and Chittagong - Labor Markets Impacts from Round 1*. World Bank.





It is rightly apprehended that COVID-19 will have dire consequences for the traditionally “left behind” population groups. The pandemic will also “push behind” new groups of people. In Bangladesh, these left behind and pushed behind communities will be in particular need of policy attention to recover and rebound sustainably. However, evidence on these two vulnerable groups in Bangladesh has been scarce for policy decisions to be sufficiently informed. The new initiative of Citizen’s Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh seeks to address this lacuna. A study has been undertaken to assess the differential impact of COVID-19 on the economic, social and health related outcomes of marginalised people in the country.

The task is, however, not so straightforward. It entails a mixed method of data collection including nationwide household surveys and focus group discussions (FGDs), besides desk review of literature. An array of conceptual and analytical issues underpins such an ambitious research agenda. The present paper provides the framework to navigate through these choices and challenges. How to identify vulnerable groups and what are their vulnerabilities? Which shocks—demand, supply or uncertainty—will have for more lasting impact on these people? How to conceptually distinguish between adaptation and resilience? What may be the implications of more intangible political economy factors on impact and recovery?

These are just some of the queries through which the paper hopes to inform an analytically robust research design. The framework presented can be adopted and replicated across national contexts. It will also be a valuable read for both policy makers and policy activists.



Citizen’s Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

#### Partnership and Collaboration



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