

The State of Governance in Bangladesh 2020-21

Governing COVID-19 in Bangladesh: Realities and reflections to build forward better

COVID Collective Webinar
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Outline

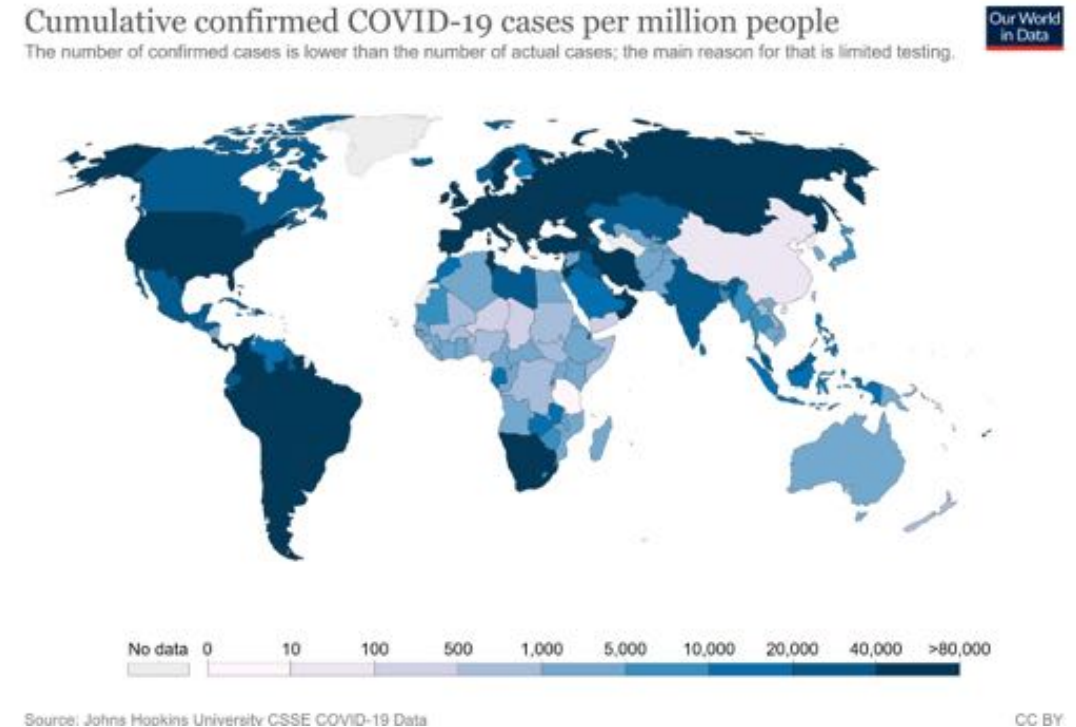
1. Why COVID governance matters
2. The political economy of the pandemic in Bangladesh
3. Health sector governance
4. Lockdown
5. Economic stimulus & relief
6. Impact on the RMG sector
7. Implications
8. Recommendations



People waiting for relief, Dhaka May 24 2020
Picture credit: UN Women / Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

Why governance matters for managing COVID-19

- Unprecedented test of health, social, economic & political institutions
- Endangers Bangladesh's development achievements
- **Governance & politics have shaped national COVID responses**
- Stronger governance can help Bangladesh protect citizens & mitigate economic effects



The political economy of pandemic governance

State capacity & political legitimacy determine COVID-19 response

Shaped by:

- Dominant party state; concentrated power w/out electoral accountability
- Performance legitimacy pressures
- Weak state in a strong society



Dhaka police officer, 2020

Picture credit: UN Women/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

The political economy of pandemic governance

The **dominant party state** means:

- No electoral accountability; ruling party in power since 2009
- Strong imperatives to satisfy party supporters
- Control of policymaking apparatus, politicized civil service
- Restricted civic space, implying:
 - exclusion of independent experts & civic groups
 - restrictions on media & free speech
 - limited capacities / incentives to collaborate with organized civil society



Trained Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) volunteers raising awareness of COVID-19 March 2020. Picture credit: UNDP Bangladesh

The political economy of pandemic governance

Performance legitimacy over liberal democratic legitimacy

- Prioritizing livelihoods & subsistence – local economic performance
- High growth narrative – national & international economic performance

Political incentive for growth narrative led to stimulus package biased towards growth orientation - relative neglect of social & public health protection-oriented policies



Police Sergeant, Dhaka, June 2020.

Picture credit: UN Women / Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

The political economy of pandemic governance

Weak state in a strong society

Bangladeshi state is stronger than before in terms of administrative reach of the state ('infrastructural power') but still has **uneven enforcement power** due to:

- Increasing capture of central state by economic elites
- Growing power of local political machine



COVID emergency response – UNDP project workers in Basabo, Dhaka, May 20, 2020
Picture credit: UN Women/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

The political economy of the pandemic

Citizen perceptions survey in January 2021

- **Overall trust is steady** in government's development and COVID management performance
- Less consensus about specific policies—**public health messaging, testing, lockdown, relief**



Dhaka police officer, 2020
Picture credit: UN Women/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

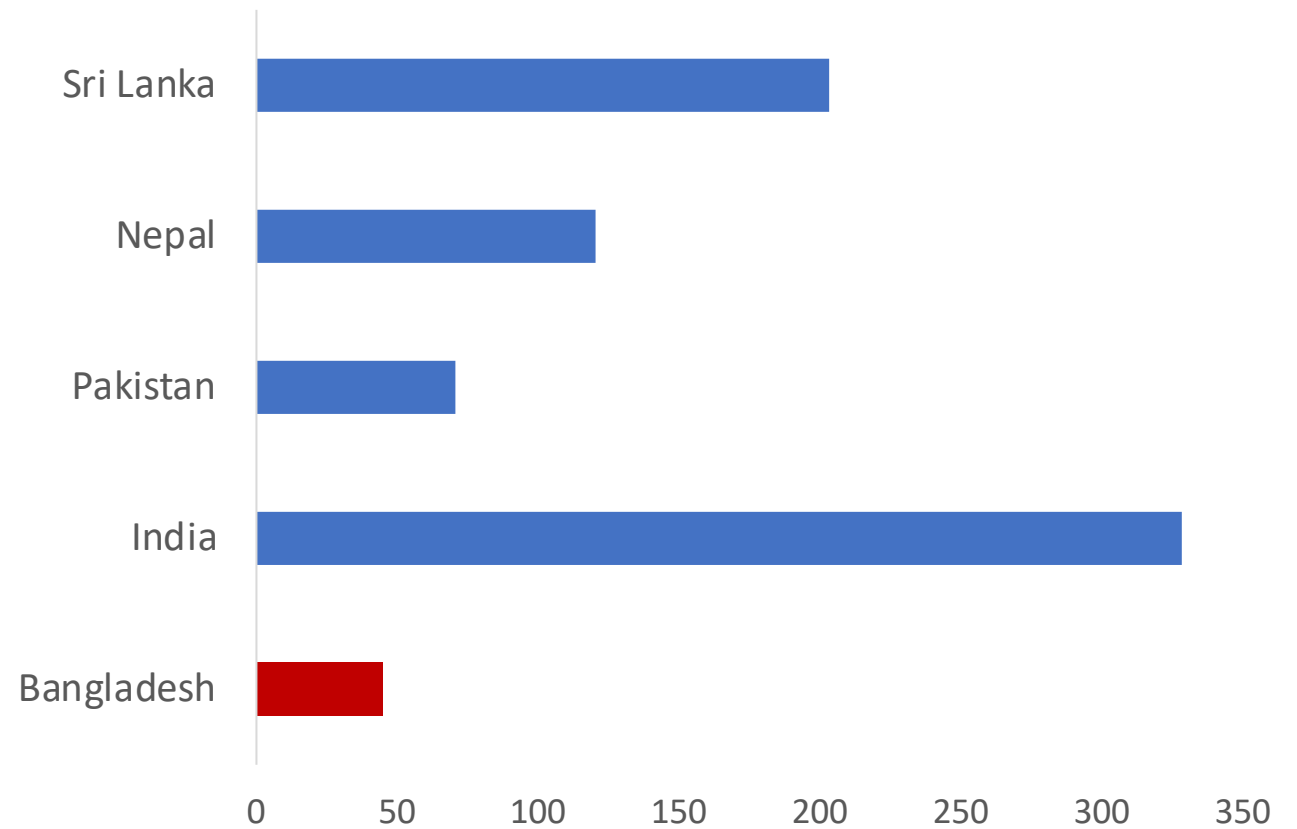
Health sector governance

- Bangladesh lacked policy framework & infrastructure for pandemic response
- Health system is grossly under-resourced
- Public health messaging was effective—less trust in COVID-19 statistics
- Pandemic preparation was centralized, uncoordinated, non-transparent; public procurement slow & allegedly corrupt
- Will political commitment to health increase, post-pandemic?

A cleaner at the Narayanganj-based Sajida Foundation hospital's isolation unit
Photo: UN Women/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

Health sector governance

Covid-19 testing rates in South Asia, total per 1000 population, July 2021



The governance of the lockdown

- Fearful of the virus, Bangladeshis welcomed 2020 lockdown
- Official communications were confusing & inconsistent
- **Strong public consensus:** lockdown was viable if people received relief
- Officials, army, police enforced lightly, knowing people needed to eat
- 2021 lockdown showed the government learned some lessons



DHAKA (28 March, 2020) Notredame College Road, Motijheel
Photo: Engr. Ikhtiar Hassan Shobuj

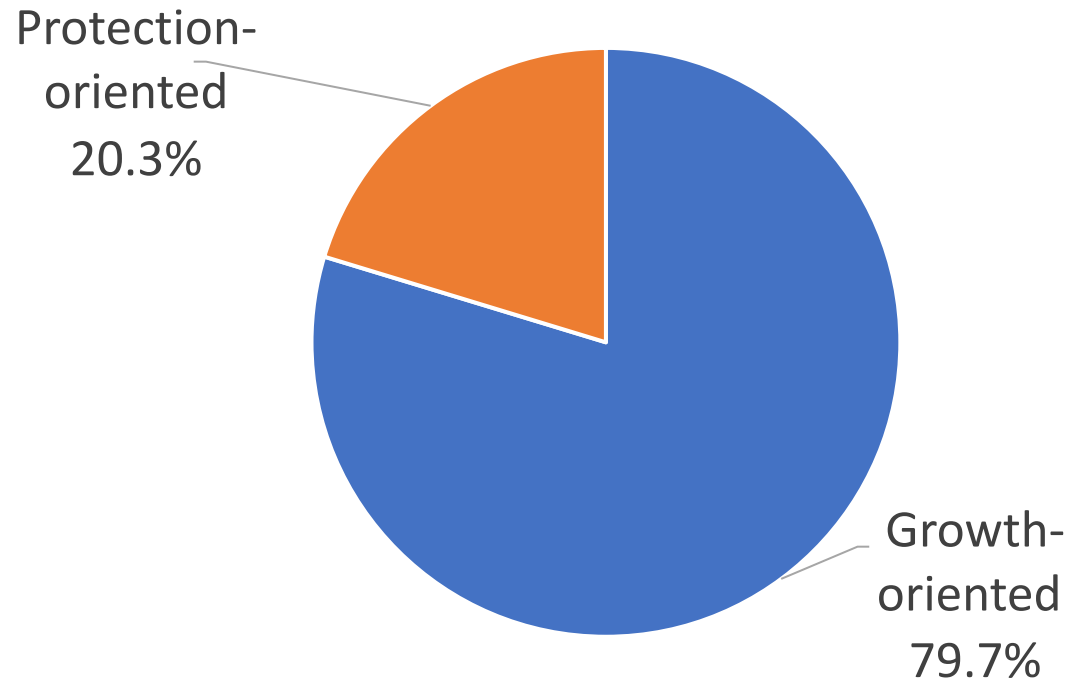
Governance of the relief program

- Government committed to major relief initiative in 2020, tried to improve delivery & accountability
- But public information about entitlements was limited
- Beneficiary selection & delivery processes were opaque & unaccountable
- Digital complaints & communications measures proved ineffective against the political economy of relief



COVID-19 emergency response activities,
Madartek, Basabo, Dhaka
Photo: UN Women/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

The political economy of pandemic stimulus



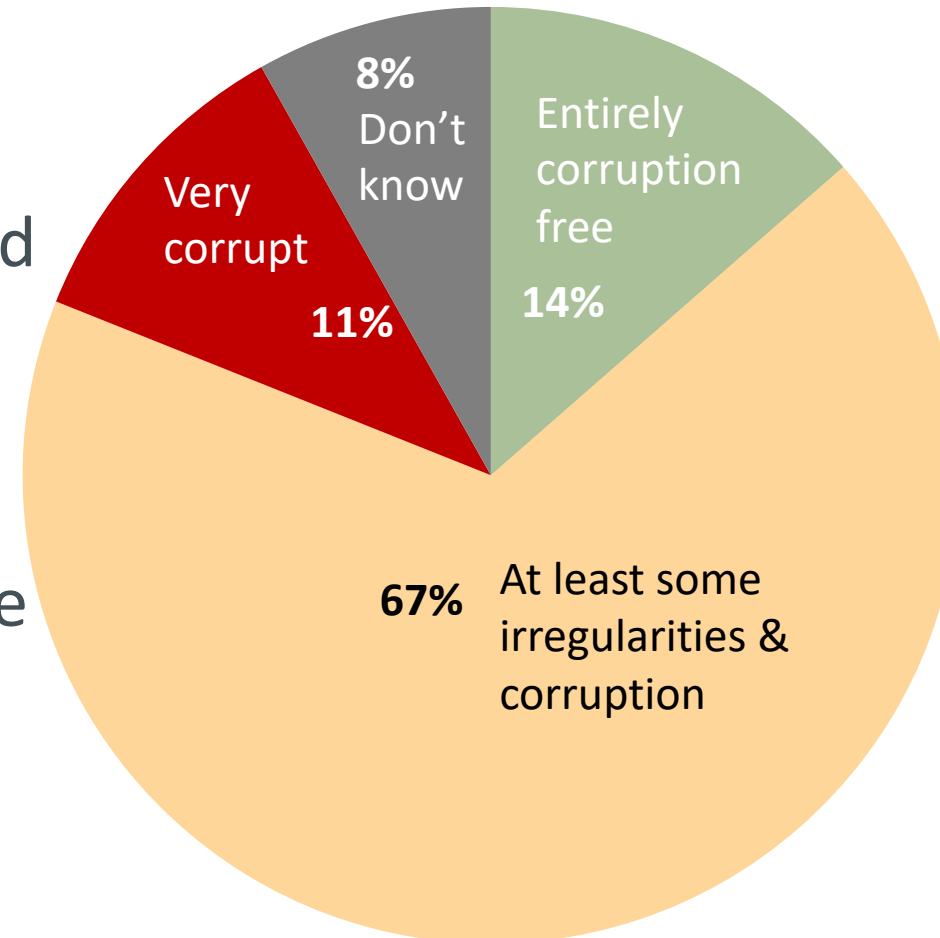
- Economic stimulus policies focused heavily on growth-oriented sectors
- Spending on social protection lower & slower
- Emphasis within growth sectors on large-scale business
- Spending on smaller enterprises lower and slower

From SR Osmani and M. S. H. Siddiquee (Chapter in the Report) Economic Support in response to COVID19 and the Quest for Political Legitimacy'

The governance of the relief program

Citizen's perception about corruption in relief distribution

- 92% citizens knew of government relief; only 12% had seen NGOs help
- Many believed nepotism & corruption left deserving people off beneficiary lists



Source: BIGD
Citizen
Perceptions of
COVID
Governance
survey, January
2021

The impact on the RMG sector

- Crisis highlighted Bangladesh's over-dependence on RMG
- International brands and local owners of factories treated Bangladeshi workers as disposable
- Factory owners benefited from rapid stimulus package, in theory, to pay workers' wages



Garments workers protest in Dhaka, 2021
Picture credit: Gerry Popplestone

The impact on the RMG sector

- Directives & public health provisions for RMG workers were unclear, inadequate & unenforced
- Pandemic laid bare vulnerabilities of workers that lack voice & organizational strength



Happy Akter, garments worker, Dhaka, 2021

Picture credit: UN Women/Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

Recommendations: Build on our strengths

- Resource, empower, & incentivize government agencies & actors to **strengthen disaster management capacities & institutions** across a broader range of potential shocks
- Realize a bold vision of **social protection for all Bangladeshis**, to avoid undoing years of progress in economic development
- **Tackle corruption in social protection** by making it transparent & accountable

Implications

Beyond resilience: Building antifragile institutions

- Bangladesh's strong track record in natural disasters & food crisis management should inform its broader policy response
- Merely coping will endanger Bangladesh's human development gains
- 'Anti-fragile' institutions will rebound stronger from crises, learning & improving as they cope
- De-centered, learning institutions that operate in synergy with social actors
- One-size does not fit all

Implications

What political dominance means for pandemic management

- Electoral pressures do not influence pandemic policies
- Imperative to demonstrate performance in key areas has shaped pandemic policies and practices
- Civil society & media are silenced or 'chilled', but some space for scrutiny & critique remains
- Broad societal acceptance is vital to overall policy direction

Recommendations: Build on our strengths

- Build on Bangladesh's long successful history of state-society partnerships to **leverage social capital assets**, providing space, freedom, & active support to non-state actors.
- Scrutiny & criticism are necessary to improve performance. **Relevant civic groups & experts should be empowered** to monitor & shape public policies

Recommendations: Plug the Gaps

- Prioritize **economic policies for people, not merely for GDP growth**
- Establish principles & practices for inclusive and sustainable economic stimulus packages during crises
- **Invest heavily in health** to reduce vulnerability to future pandemics
- In the short term **prioritize vaccines, test & containment systems**
- **Create a health system that is accountable to citizens**
- **Improve governance of health system** through improving staff incentives & working conditions & holding powerful interest groups within government accountable over procurement, licensing, etc

Recommendations: Practice statecraft for the 21st century— build ‘antifragile’ institutions of governance

- **Establish effective, meaningful channels for organized citizen participation** in policymaking, monitoring, and feedback
- **Empower local governments, independent agencies, & ministries** to operate flexibly based on local needs
- **Develop a functional system of feedback** so that state actors can learn & adapt their practices with flexibility and authority, with politicians informed & enabled to make effective policies

For further information

Research Brief | Governing COVID-19 in Bangladesh: Realities and Reflections to Build Forward Better

<https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/publications/governing-covid-19-in-bangladesh-realities-and-reflections-to-build-forward-better/>

BRAC Institute of Governance & Development:

<https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/>

Accountability Research Center, School of International Service,
American University: <https://accountabilityresearch.org/>