

# International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment

Vol 3, No 1 (2024)

International Journal of Non-Profit Sector Empowerment



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*Mohammad Sajedur Rahman, Nurul Huda Sakib, Jasmin*

doi: [10.12681/npse.35837](https://doi.org/10.12681/npse.35837)

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Volunteerism and Civic Engagement during COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh

**Mohammad Sajedur Rahman**

Associate Professor, Department of Government & Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka.

**Nurul Huda Sakib**

Professor, Department of Government & Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka.

**Jasmin**

MSS Student, Department of Government & Politics, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka.

### Abstract

This paper investigates the patterns and impact of volunteerism during the COVID-19 period. Bangladesh's economy toiled hard during the COVID-19 pandemic due to its nature as an informal economy. The nation, which is on the trajectory of becoming a middle-income country, is faced with the dual challenge of imposing strict lockdowns on economic operations to stop the spread of the virus and moving the economic wheel for economic growth at the same time. In the fight against the pandemic, people are seen to extend help for others' causes. As economic activities shrank, the people living below the poverty line were inappropriately affected, and the government had limited capacity to extend help. The paper, through content analysis, has found that volunteer activities at the community level play a significant role, along with government initiatives to extend health support for the pandemic and provide food for the poor in emergency situations. This research identified three types of volunteer activism during the pandemic time in Bangladesh: spontaneous individual volunteerism, activism of volunteer organisations, and community collaboration with NGOs and corporate organizations. Observations indicated that all three types of community activism were considerably functioning as volunteerism in the fight against COVID-19 by reaching the most vulnerable individuals with basic necessities and providing basic health services for the pandemic. In the process of volunteerism, social media plays a significant role in communication among the volunteers and receivers. However, there is another side to the story. It has been observed that several fraud events under the guise of volunteer activism deceived people due to inadequate monitoring of government administration.

**Keywords:** Civic Engagement, Volunteerism, Covid-19 Pandemic, Community Help

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic posed severe challenges to Bangladesh, a nation on the trajectory of becoming a middle-income country. The pandemic disproportionately affected the economy of the

country compared to countries in the developed world due to the dominance of the informal-based economy of the nation. With 21.8 percent of people living below the poverty line, it was feared that a humanitarian crisis might occur as a result of the shutdown of the economy for a long time due to the pandemic (Soros, 2018). The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the country's premier think tank, projected an increase in the national (upper) poverty rate to 35.0% in 2020 from 24.3% in 2016. The gross domestic product (GDP) growth of the nation abruptly fell to 3.5% in 2020 from 8.2% in 2019 (Khatun et al., 2020). The GDP growth recovered to 5.5% in 2021; however, the economic scarcity of the pandemic was visible in the loss of jobs for 5 million people (WHO, 2021). The economic breakdown started at the very beginning of the pandemic. According to research published by BRAC in June 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic resulted in income losses for 95% of Bangladeshis due to the government closure (BRAC, 2020). After two months of the pandemic, this survey indicated that "3% of households had no food, 16% had food for 1-3 days, and 22% had food for 30 days or more" (Said et al., 2020). Concurrently, the nation's healthcare system is extremely vulnerable due to a lack of doctors, nurses, hospitals, and equipment to address a protracted health crisis. Nevertheless, Bangladesh's 0.38 percent GDP expenditure on healthcare is the lowest in South Asia (Osmani, 2020).

Though Bangladesh has achieved some public health success, including a decrease in child mortality, maternal care, etc., by adopting low-cost solutions, the nation needs to spend more on public social spending (Mahmud, 2020). The concentration of health care facilities in the cities and the poor public health situation at the root level make healthcare inaccessible to the poor. Thus, the pandemic posed twin problems to the nation: a strict lockdown of economic operations to stop the spread of the virus by regulating people's movement, or keeping the economic wheel turning to speed growth in order to feed the population. The country declared two months of national vacations as a lockdown measure and then gradually resumed economic activity. The country's economy is seriously impacted. Ready-Made Garments (RMG) ventures, the nation's primary source of income, became highly alarmed about declining orders from developed nations. Many migrant workers who lost their jobs in the Middle East were forced to return home (The Financial Express, 2020). There is uncertainty over the informal economy's growing momentum (Hasan, 2020). People from the vulnerable sector who earn on a daily basis, such as rickshaw pullers, garment workers, and street vendors, were badly affected and required emergency food aid. The government came up with existing social safety net programmes to provide money to the population as well as soft loans to garment owners. Incentive and stimulus packages totalling \$22.1 billion were disbursed by the government (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

However, along with government initiatives, voluntary initiatives from people by extending help reached a lot of affected persons during the first wave of the emergency. Government initiatives nevertheless failed to reach the people in need of the state's weak institutions. The volunteerism of people in the pandemic period appeared in many forms, functioned in different organised structures, and focused on different goals (Ali et al., 2021). Volunteerism as a form of social behaviour and an act of civic engagement contributed immensely to coping with the emergency situation of the pandemic, and people's power showed its strength in this difficult time. This study is a systematic attempt to investigate the nature, types, and functions of volunteer activities during the COVID-19 pandemic and evaluate the role of volunteerism as civic engagement in the country during that time.

### **Voluntarism and Civic Engagement: A Conceptual Lens**

Volunteerism is commonly defined as the act of extending help for free. It is defined as '*helping behaviour*, which includes "*any activity in which time is given freely to benefit another person, group, or cause*" (Wilson, 2000). Volunteering involved "*more commitment than spontaneous assistance but narrower in scope than the care provided to family and friends*" (Wilson, 2000). Volunteering is, in its broadest sense according to Smith;

*"[...] any activity of any individual, alone or with others, as a solitary act or as a member of some informal group or formal organisation that is performed without compulsion or coercion and mainly without direct remuneration or payment that directly or indirectly attempts to improve the satisfactions and quality of life of one or more others outside the boundaries of the immediate family and household"* (Smith et al., 2016).

Though the term is widely used in academia, there is a debate on the defining criteria of volunteerism—which will be considered voluntary activities and which are not (Smith et al., 2016). It is argued that a "culture of benevolence" is crucial to being involved in voluntary activism (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Nevertheless, mostly both individual and community behaviour aimed at extending help to others can be termed volunteering (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Self-interest-free motive is considered a criterion for volunteering from a general point of view, while 'any monetarily uncompensated, wilful action' is considered volunteering in a broader sense (Wolensky, 1979).

Volunteering can be performed within a structured organisation or in an informal way involving no organisational format and is considered a part of civic engagement that is motivated by community behaviour (Wilson, 2000; Cnaan et al., 1996). As voluntary activities are driven in the interest of the

future of the community, they are considered part of active civic engagement. Volunteering works within citizen relationships and enhances social ties (Adler & Goggin, 2005). For that, charitable giving and volunteering played a distinctive role in civic engagement and had implications for civic life; therefore, they are ways of performing citizen responsibilities. Putnam analysed volunteerism as an important part of community activism as it is closely linked with social capital, trust, and the public good (Jones, 2006). It can be argued that “community-based involvement encouraged by volunteering is tied to active deliberation in public life by those who have a tangible stake in collective outcomes and is more likely to induce additional care” (Putnam, 2000; Jones, 2006).

Volunteerism arises in different types and forms within different social and cultural circumstances and backgrounds. Therefore, the nature of volunteering is seen differently in different cultural contexts (Whittaker et al., 2015). For example, volunteerism is linked with leisure activities and political mobilisation in Scandinavian countries, not extending help (Henriksen et al., 2018). Volunteerism can be formal, informal, organised, or spontaneous. Volunteering can be defined in two types: informal volunteering and formal (organisational) volunteering. Wolensky recognised four types of volunteerism in respect of volunteering for public and private interests: public interest emergent volunteerism, public interest organisational volunteerism, private interest emergent volunteerism, and private interest organisational volunteerism (Smith et al., 2016). One of the important types of volunteerism is informal volunteerism, which is performed outside of formal arrangements. Whittaker & others analysed the voluntary activities during disasters and emergencies and categorised informal volunteerism into two broad categories: ‘Emergent volunteerism’ that responded to urgent needs during emergencies and “Extending volunteerism” for the post-emergency or disaster period (Wolensky, 1979). They also identified a new mode of volunteerism called ‘Digital volunteerism’ that involved social media and digital communication. Therefore, different types of volunteerism exist in different social circumstances. Volunteer activities are motivated by social circumstances, gender, race, the socialisation process, and the types of available resources. (Wilson & Musick, 1997). In this context, the research is designed to understand the types and nature of volunteerism in Bangladesh as a developing nation during the pandemic.

## Methodology

This study is grounded in secondary sources and aims to thoroughly examine the significance of volunteer activities in combating the pandemic in Bangladesh. The research specifically focuses on several features of volunteer engagement and their associated effects. Document analysis is a prevalent

research method employed to comprehend the essence and extent of volunteers during the Covid-19 outbreak in Bangladesh. Data was gathered from many sources, including academic journals, research reports, government records, newspapers, and social media content, spanning the time frame of April 2020 to December 2021. In order to identify pertinent cases, we employed specific keywords such 'COVID-19', 'volunteerism', 'civic engagement', 'community activism', 'non-government initiatives', and 'Bangladesh'. Next, we will categorise these news articles and determine their relevance based on our study themes and objectives. In addition, we incorporated noteworthy instances of volunteer action to bolster our assertions. To do this, several sources from both digital and print media are consulted. We monitored the Facebook pages of several voluntary organisations in order to observe and analyse the patterns of their activism.

### **Worldwide Community Involvement during Pandemic**

During and after the outbreak of COVID-19, as a new phenomenon and threat to human existence, a good number of studies have been conducted, especially on its origin, spreading, and medication. However, very little research has covered community efforts and volunteerism in fighting the pandemic outcome on human life. Gilmore, Ndejjo, Tchetchia, et al. (2020) pointed out that community engagement has been considered a fundamental component in past outbreaks, such as Ebola, Zika, and SARS. They broadly categorised six engagement actors involved in infection prevention and control. They are: 1) community leaders (traditional, religious, and/or governing); 2) community and faith-based organisations and community groups; 3) health management committees; 4) individuals and key stakeholders; 5) which included students, survivors, women representatives, the elderly, and 6) the youth.

The importance of community leaders in preventing the pandemic is significant. Local groups earn deep community trust that governments may not be able to effectively reach, and he mentioned how community engagement played an effective role in previous outbreaks like the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa (Owoyemi et al., 2021). Local organisers are vital to ensuring information and opportunities for preparation, safety, and treatment for everyone (Gharaibeh et al., 2022) and focused on community-based (official, non-governmental, and volunteer) responses and measures to fight COVID-19 in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Family protection policy and the National Policy for Senior Emiratis implement the UAE's community development policies, which include healthcare, community involvement, active life, effective civic participation, infrastructure and transportation, financial stability, safety and security, and quality of future life. In the UAE, volunteer groups and

people stepped forward to prevent COVID-19 by fostering public-private collaboration, enhancing community awareness, establishing volunteer organisations and individuals, and fund-raising.

In the context of France, Julia et al. (2020) showed challenges in disadvantaged areas of community primary care during COVID-19. Coordination between hospitals and community primary care has been key to sustaining appropriate health services throughout COVID-19. They also suggested that primary care professionals must handle chronic illnesses, emergencies, and epidemics since hospitals can't handle a huge number of patients. They provided solutions on how community primary care can effectively work in disadvantaged areas. (Jewett et al., 2021) argued that a 5-step community engagement process was developed from the Ebola crisis, including understanding the community, providing relevant information across communities, feedback engagement, understanding changing needs, and centring communities to lead and codevelop programmes. They suggested communities and the government engage with community leaders and co-identify vulnerable groups in their communities during COVID-19.

Wilson et al. (2022) studied the emergence of a mutual help network formed using virtual media and digital technologies in response to the COVID-19 epidemic in Boston. They explore employing mutual help as a community organising and activism strategy in modern times amid a public crisis. The COVID-19 public health catastrophe has drastically affected social and civic engagement worldwide. In 2020–2021, more people appeared to be paying attention and even becoming active in community activism, as well as expanding collaboration and sharing initiatives in digital media such as Twitter, Facebook, webinars, conferences, training tools, and crowdsourced online papers (Corpuz, 2021). Most of the aforementioned literature focused on the preceding trend of community action and how the community played a significant role in numerous outbreaks. Volunteers in Bangladesh were engaged during COVID-19. But there is a lack of in-depth research on how community efforts (individuals, volunteer organisations, and corporate organisations) played an active and crucial role in preventing coronavirus in Bangladesh.

### **Civic Engagement and Volunteerism during COVID-19 in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has a long track record of effectively managing coastal cyclones through the active participation of people of all ages, making it a noteworthy example of successful disaster governance in building resilience. According to Nasreen (2021), individuals residing in the country have a significant level of social capital, as evidenced by their active engagement in providing assistance during natural disasters and emergency situations. During the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic,

governmental authorities implemented measures to restrict economic activity, resulting in adverse consequences for individuals, particularly those residing below the poverty threshold (Masud-All-Kamal & Hassan, 2018). The phenomenon of unemployment emerged, leading to a decrease in income among various demographic segments. The daily struggles of individuals in the community, such as day labourers, garment workers, rickshaw pullers, small farmers, and the unemployed, hinder their ability to meet their basic needs. Under these conditions, members of the community took the initiative to offer assistance to those in need. The volunteer efforts encompassed a wide range of tasks, including the provision of daily sustenance and the provision of medical assistance specifically related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The commencement of the community's engagement can be traced back to the onset of the epidemic, subsequently proliferating throughout the nation, accompanied by a wide array of techniques and responses that exhibit diversity.

The aforementioned projects can be categorised into three distinct groups: individual-level spontaneous volunteerism, initiatives undertaken by volunteer organisations, and collaborative efforts including community participation and the joint involvement of non-governmental organisations and business entities. This study demonstrates the presence of three distinct forms of voluntary actions observed during the pandemic as a means of civic involvement aimed at providing assistance to individuals in need.

### **Spontaneous Volunteerism at Individual Level**

It is observed that a lot of people offered individual aid throughout the pandemic and were seen contributing voluntarily and spontaneously. This form of participation is observed in various parts of society, from the poor to the rich, and in both urban and rural settings. It is facilitated by distributing masks and personal safety equipment (PPE), purchasing food for the needy, or conducting awareness campaigns. Individuals feel collective duties, and they step forward to assist those in need. The majority of these types of community involvement can be classified as part of the typical community behaviour of people helping one another. Furthermore, there is no question that in the patron-client culture of Bangladeshi society, the patron was expected to assist the client due to the nature of the relationship. Nonetheless, spontaneous individual voluntary involvement from many social backgrounds has been observed. In a Muslim-majority country, the practice of Zakat as a religious obligation to help the destitute is woven into the social fabric and serves as an essential source of assistance at the individual level as well during pandemic time. However, the marginalised people were interestingly seen to help with their limited capacity at the time. Nazimuddin (80), a beggar from Sherpur district, came forward to donate all his savings of 10,000 taka (12 US dollars approximately)



for the COVID-affected people, which generated huge media attention in the country. Later, the Prime Minister of the country, Sheikh Hasina, allotted (UNB, 2020) a house for the elderly poor man for his noble gesture. An eight-grade student from Netrokona district is seen distributing relief to 200 people from her stipend money (The Daily Jugantor, 2020). Rina Akter, a former sex worker in Dhaka city, with help from people, provided food to 400 sex workers per day who are clientless in the Corona situation (Karim, 2020). She is recognised on the list of the BBC's 100 most inspiring and influential women in the world for 2020.

Spontaneous responses are also noticed from all segments of the population. Nafisa Anjum Khan, a young lady from Mohammadpur, Dhaka, began by supplying food to the underprivileged in her neighbourhood with her own funds (Islam, 2020). She rented a three-wheeler to distribute food to the people because transportation was suspended in the country during the early phases of the pandemic. Later, she formalised her efforts by establishing "Ekjon Bangladesh," and her wonderful work continues. Similarly, an official from the Anti-Corruption Commission has a great example of a spontaneous initiative in Bogra. Wahid Manjoar Sohag, a deputy assistant director at the regional office, volunteered to feed 250 street people per day with his own money (Pers. Communication, December 7, 2021).

During the pandemic, rumours, half-truths, and misinformation saturated the social media landscape, causing uncertainty and worry among the public and complicating the situation in dealing with COVID-19. Some UNICEF-trained young volunteers were critical in protecting online users from inaccurate COVID-19 information. Fariha Busra, one of the volunteers, watched medical misinformation on social media platforms, particularly Facebook, and reported to the attention of undiscovered COVID-19 remedies such as homeopathy, Ayurveda, and miracle traditional medicines (Chowdhury, 2020). Another volunteer, Sultan Mehjabin Tusi, helped identify false content on Facebook and reported back to the system once a week (Sarkozi, 2021). Volunteers Sadman and Mukta, on the other hand, went door to door in vulnerable neighbourhoods to speak with elderly people, slum families, and those without access to a mobile phone or the internet. Sarkozi points out that the primary goal of those volunteers was to raise awareness of the COVID-19 immunisation platform. Their actions had an essential influence on raising vaccination awareness among these people. Many people were afraid to get vaccinated during the inauguration of the vaccination programme, which hampered the vaccination pace among communities (Sarkozi, 2021). Dr. Manisha Chakraborty, who is a leftist political leader, founded "Manobtar Bazar" (House of Humanity) with the assistance of her party to supply all daily supplies and medicine to those who lost their livelihoods

during the pandemic. She also took part in further initiatives such as raising public awareness, supplying baby food, food, and medicine to those in lockdown, offering free oxygen cylinders, and ambulance assistance to sick persons (Prothom Alo, 2021). Asaduzzaman Asad, counsellor of Dhaka South City Corporation (ward no. 21), assisted rikshaw pullers, labourers, the impoverished, and those in need on the Dhaka University campus during the epidemic. People were skeptical about joining the funeral of their relatives who lost their lives in Corona at the beginning of 2020, making the process of burying the dead bodies more difficult. Anayet Karim, a CID officer, purchased land in his village of Manikganj to be used as a burial site for those who perished as a result of the coronavirus (The Daily Star, 2020a).

Not just ordinary Bangladeshis, but even celebrities and students, have pledged to assist the country in its fight against the pandemic, and celebrity cricketers were pioneers. Tamim Iqbal, the captain of the Bangladesh cricket team, stated on Facebook that the national cricket team will donate half of their monthly income to a government fund to battle the pandemic. The whole payment, excluding taxes, was 2.5 million Bangladeshi taka. Without a doubt, the national cricket team's fight against Corona was a fantastic idea (Sakib, 2020). Sakib-al-Hasan, a Bangladesh cricketer, has stepped forward to aid the underprivileged and needy. He established a foundation in his honour with the purpose of saving Bangladesh, and the organisation reached out to 2000 families, providing them with all of the necessities during difficult times (Banerjee, 2020). Celebrity cricketer Mashrafe Bin Mortaza's Narail Express Foundation provided mobile medical services to coronavirus patients as well as those suffering from other diseases across the country (The Business Standard, 2020a), and Bangladesh wicket-keeper batsman Musfiqur Rahim auctioned off his most prized bat to raise funds for relief efforts to combat the coronavirus pandemic (The Business Standard, 2020b). There are numerous examples of individuals offering assistance on an individual basis and assisting people in overcoming the poor's food crisis. We interviewed a couple of individuals who extended help just because they felt a social responsibility to respond to the needs of others (Majumdar, 2020). Even though these initiatives are dispersed, they are making a significant difference in the country's fight against the pandemic.

### **Initiatives of Volunteer Organizations**

Volunteer organisations have made the most significant and visible contributions to the fight against the pandemic. These activities were organised primarily at the neighbourhood level and play an important role in dealing with the first wave of pandemic repercussions across the country. Philanthropic foundations, associations, youth group projects, and local clubs are examples of

volunteer organizations. These organisations created differences in communities across the country by providing food and other supplies and encouraging citizen participation. Some of these groups existed before the outbreak, while others began their journey in response to the pandemic. Many organisations, including the Bidyanondo Foundation, the Manush Manuser Jonyo Foundation, Pay It Forward Bangladesh (Let us Spread Kindness), Bangladesh Youth Initiatives, and others, offered free food, money, personal safety equipment (PPE), masks, and launched awareness campaigns. Some of these groups function at the national level throughout the country, while others began at the local level. These volunteer groups' structured community activities are critical at the start of the pandemic. Because the government's response to the pandemic was initially disorganised due to the advent of the novel virus, these organisations responded with food emergency assistance and various local remedies to the epidemic.

The Bidyanondo Foundation is one of the most notable community-based groups that contribute considerably to the fight against the pandemic and assist those at the bottom to live with the new normal scenario. The organisation is well-known throughout the country for its creative policy of distributing food to the needy for 1 taka (less than one cent) as a gesture of not giving the receivers the impression of receiving charity from others. The charity accepted public donations and reached a large number of people in Dhaka, the country's capital, as well as around the country. Kisore Kumar Das started the group, which has a large number of volunteers and receives donations from a variety of sources, including corporations, government organisations, and ordinary residents. The organisation conducts orphanages throughout the country and is highly known for several innovative methods to address various social challenges. Bidyanondo prioritised its volunteer operations of providing food to the needy because the epidemic disproportionately affected the poor. In addition, they have given hand sanitizers to public locations, sprayed disinfectant in vehicles, manufactured and distributed masks and PPE to doctors, and put up portable sinks for handwashing. (Bakhtiar, O., 2020) With the assistance of the metropolitan police, they erected a 50-seat field hospital for COVID-19 patients in the port city of Chittogram, the country's second-largest city, in June (The Business Standard, 2020c). The hospital was closed towards the end of the first wave of the epidemic but had a significant number of patients at that time. All demographic groups have come to trust the organization, and many people are willing to donate and help with the humanitarian effort of providing food and other necessities to those who are suffering from the disaster. Army, navy, and coast guards also assisted the organisation in distributing food and other basic requirements in many remote areas of the country.

In the early days of the epidemic, two volunteer organisations, Pay It Forward Bangladesh and Manush Manusher Jonno, came forward to manufacture PPE for doctors amid a critical shortage of safety equipment (Mirdha & Suman, 2020). These two initiatives are partnerships among professionals, primarily from the alumni network of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), the country's flagship engineering university. These two organisations felt compelled to assist in the situation by manufacturing quality PPE at a time when doctors were being gravely affected by the virus as the market was saturated with low-quality protective equipment. Later, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) joined the campaign (Mirdha, 2020). They were the first project for locally manufactured, safe PPE, and the entire procedure was the result of volunteer community efforts.

Songjog (People Connecting) is a community project that was formed in response to the COVID outbreak. Ahmed Javed Jamal, a BUET alumni, founded the volunteer organisation as a Facebook platform to link potential donors with those in need. (Kabir, 2020). Soon, people from various backgrounds join the community initiative, and the platform transforms into a vibrant environment to provide various types of assistance in corona situations, such as providing PPE to doctors, oxygen cylinders and refilling for corona patients, managing medicine and plasma for patients, connecting patients to doctors, searching for employment for corona affected people, and, of course, reaching out to the affected people with food and money assistance (Kabir, 2020). As time passed, this platform became more organised, with additional participants from all backgrounds, and it has now expanded its activities into numerous disciplines.

Shishuder Jonno Foundation has been assisting children from low-income households and decided to extend help to all distressed people in need within their capacities. Mueed Hasn, the organisation's founder member and director, stated that they simply wish to help everyone in their capacity. (Bakhtiar, 2020). His organisation had raised public awareness about coronavirus infection while also distributing hand sanitizers. 500 filter masks have been distributed to the homeless and day laborers. The foundation's Dhaka, Tangail, Rajbari, and Rangpur-based organisations sprayed germicide in different places, drains, roads, and vehicles (Bakhtiar, 2020).

In addition to community organisations at the national level, activities can be found at the local level. Youth groups, in particular, stepped forward to gather funds, distribute food, and create awareness campaigns to encourage people to stay at home. These local organisations are established around a single place and are aimed at serving a small number of people in the neighborhood. Typically, these

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organisations compile a list of disadvantaged people and deliver food packages to their doors for three to ten days.

In Sirajgonj, a local club began distributing food to the area's underprivileged craftsmen (Priyo, 2020). In certain cases, young groups gathered free food in an open space so that disadvantaged people could pick food based on their needs. Some community involvement also assists their community in maintaining social distance through community lockdown. In the Laksmipur area, a local club stepped forward to distribute flyers to raise awareness about the pandemic (Muktokontha, 2020). To avoid a pandemic, the Mro ethnic minority in the Bandarban district imposed community-wide isolation (Barua, 2020). Local community groups construct bamboo walls at the village entrances to prevent strangers from entering the hamlet (Barua, 2020). They are also encouraging people to handwash and sterilise roads and vehicles on a regular basis (Majumdar, 2020).

Several working-class organisations (teachers, service workers, bankers, physicians, journalists, etc.) also participated in community action to combat COVID-19 by donating a portion of their monthly income to the Prime Minister's relief fund. Additionally, these types of organisations involved aiding people in a variety of ways, and some were unique and innovative. The National Press Society in Sylhet, for instance, has established an ingenious initiative called "House of Humanity," which is a shop stocked with food, clothing, and masks where people may acquire necessities depending on their needs. National Board of Revenue (NBR) officials in Dhaka also created the "Wall of Humanity" in front of their main office in Dhaka, where individuals can come to collect donated necessities put on the wall based on their needs (Hossain, 2020). Mehmankhana (Gourmet Dining Place), a non-profit organisation that gave food to pandemic victims Mehmankhana fed hundreds of jobless or underemployed workers, as well as homeless children. During the Muslim feast of Eid-al-Adha, around 10,000 people dined at this street kitchen (Hasan, 2021). Shonge Achi Foundation, another group, stepped forward to feed poor people, stray dogs, and even monkeys in Dhaka (Al Jazeera, 2021).

The university students wing of the political party of the country came forward with different initiatives. Shyamjit Pual (Bakhtiar, 2020), a student in the Department of Pharmacy and a core member of the Dhaka University Students' Union, collected funds using the help of social media to meet the need for hand sanitizers. They prepared sanitising bottles outside TSC's Munir Chowdhury Auditorium when they were granted permission to turn the auditorium into a makeshift lab. They have moved into food distribution, successfully delivering meals in Dhaka, Sylhet, and Barishal. They prioritised employees, journalists, and medical personnel during goods delivery since they were the

most vulnerable. In addition, the organisation has organised an awareness programme in a red-light district in Daulatdiya, Khulna. In Dhaka, Chottogram, Shariatpur, Sylhet, Mouloubazar, Gopalgan, Rangpur, Naugaon, and Kishorgonj, they make and sell hand sanitizers (Bakhtiar, 2020). Dhaka University students created the Pashe Achhi Foundation to help the poor. Tahmid Hasan, the founder, and his friends started contributing meals with their own money. They turned to social media to raise money for people in need. The donation was well-received and used to feed deserving families around Dhanmondi, Shankar, Mohammadpur, Jurain, Shyampur, Gorum, Mugha, Merul Buddha, Rayerbazar, and Shaheanbagh. They also distributed meals to the transgender and sex worker groups in Savar and Jurain. The organisation also sprayed disinfectants in several Dhaka slums and supplied PPE to hospitals through a local importer (Bakhtiar, 2020). The World Youth Army, a voluntary organisation, stepped forward to assist those in measurable need. Ayesha Akhter Eti, a Janhaniragar University student and the founder of this group, discovered that many of her neighbours were experiencing hardships as a result of COVID-19. She founded the World Youth Army with her teacher and others to assist them. This organisation was able to effectively organise several projects, including 'Mask Up Bangladesh,' which distributed face masks to the public, and 'Rapid Relief Response,' which distributed money and food supplies (The Daily Janakontha, 2020).

Volunteer initiatives are observed in the youth initiatives. Satkhira district from the southern part of the country witnessed a combined initiatives of 800 young people from 24 youth organisations with the common objective of fighting the pandemic (Faisal Nafiu, R., 2021). They stepped up to help affected patients by providing essential oxygen support. They later merged with 24 youth organisations that had been active since the first wave's inception. In order to streamline the procedure, a single telephone number was introduced (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). Among the major parts of the network, Green Man and the COVID-19 response team were prominent. Other organisations in the network were Tala Blood Bank, Shohanovuti, Manobsheba Blood Foundation, Patkelghata Blood Foundation, Alokito Chargram, Srimontokathi Satrokollan Parishad, Pathok Forum, Shyamnagar Blood Bank, Utsharga Society, Gabura Ruktadan Sanstha, and more (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). In the district, Uttaran had four warehouses with 94 oxygen cylinders. 92 volunteers received technical training and were taught the fundamentals of delivering oxygen assistance by doctors from the Upazila health complex (Dhaka Tribune, 2021).

Volunteer organisations used social media platforms successfully during the pandemic. Baunbairar Kota, a Facebook-based volunteer organisation, has stepped forward to assist hospitals in Brahmanbaria that are running low on oxygen because of an alarming increase in COVID-19 cases in

the region (Shonchay, 2021). This social initiative, with the slogan 'Nishhash Nebe Brahmanbaria' (Brahmanbaria shall breathe), has established an oxygen bank to satisfy the increased demand for medical oxygen, a life-saving factor for COVID-19 patients (Shonchay, 2021). When clients needed oxygen cylinders, volunteers went to their homes, responding to the organisation's hotline number. Aside from this endeavour, the organisation also provided nutritional assistance to the population when the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic first struck the country (Shonchay, 2021).

### **Community Collaboration with NGOs/ Corporate Organizations**

The third type of voluntary involvement is a collaborative effort by the community and various non-governmental or corporate entities. These initiatives are typically spearheaded by an individual or group of community members. These were later backed by non-governmental or corporate entities, as was noticed in the first wave of the pandemic. NGOs were seen involved in community-driven initiatives on a large scale after the initial time; however, at the outset of the pandemic, collaboration between individuals and NGOs was noteworthy. A doctor called Dr. Biddith Barua advocated on Facebook for the creation of a temporary Chattogram Field Hospital. The Navana Group, one of the country's largest private companies, has shown interest in donating their manufacturing facilities to construct a 100-bed isolated field hospital in Chattogram for the treatment of coronavirus patients in Faujdarhat (The Daily Star, 2020b). In Chottogram, the hospital plays an important role in facilitating Corona treatment during the first wave of the epidemic. However, due to the end of the first wave, the hospital was closed, which had a strong impact on the initial days of the pandemic.

Corporate groups also contributed to fund-raising initiatives. For example, Footstep Bangladesh, a non-profit organisation, launched a fundraising drive to generate cash for the deployment of 100 oxygen cylinders to address the COVID-19 situation. Several companies, including Robi, Buro Bangladesh, Onitred Group, Lalteer Seeds Ltd., and hundreds of donors, contributed to the initiative (Reza, 2021). In just two weeks, the campaign has earned enough money to purchase 113 oxygen cylinders. In the northern districts of Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Kurigram, and Thakurgaon, 45 cylinders had been placed, and another 40 cylinders and one oxygen concentrator had been deployed. Footsteps was collaborating with local partners such as Uttaran Humanity Foundation, and its own local teams to offer vital oxygen assistance for COVID-19 patients (Himi, 2021). Non-profit organisations with corporate collaboration are also seen at this hard time of the pandemic. Renata Limited joined hands with the Sanjida Foundation to extend medical help and food to the people, and the hospital of the foundation was used as an isolation centre at the time. Additionally, they have issued 9,000 items of

personal protection equipment (PPE). On the other side, approximately 10,000 individuals have received food and sanitation kits. (Maliha, Akthar, Huda, 2021). In addition, they have established a 24-hour telephone counselling service via which they have delivered information to 120,000 individuals (Maliha, Akthar, Huda, 2021). It has been observed that disadvantaged people faced more hardship during the pandemic. Sheba.xyz, in conjunction with The Daily Star and The Daily Samakal, launched the social initiative "Mission Save Bangladesh" to aid the disadvantaged. The primary objective is to provide food to the city's underprivileged, such as rickshaw pullers and day labourers (Bakhtiar, 2020). Tajdin Hasan, the head of marketing at the Daily Star, and Adnan Imtiaz, the co-founder of Sheba.xyz, established a budget of BDT 1,000 per rickshaw puller, with the initial goal of helping 1,300 rickshaw pullers (Bakhtiar, 2020). Mission Save Bangladesh was able to raise around 60 million Bangladeshi taka (BDT) owing to contributions from numerous organizations. It spent all of its funds on assisting the disadvantaged (Bakhtiar, 2020).

In the new normal period of the pandemic, the normal mobility of people was hampered by the risk of spreading the coronavirus infection. In this situation, the Food Panda app provided an opportunity to gather and deliver food from restaurants to customers. The app introduced a new function titled "Donate now." With their contribution, they assist organisations such as Footsteps, Give Bangladesh, Biddyanondo Foundation, Sajida Foundation, JAAGO Foundation, ActionAid, and its Humanity Foundation. One can give for one daily meal for one family, seven days of meals for one family, meals for several families, five to ten days of groceries for one family, groceries for multiple families, PPEs for physicians, a family food pack, lunch for one family, etc. Some of the contributing packages are package 1 for 5 kg of rice, package 2 for 2 kg of flour, etc. In this manner, Food Panda assisted the impacted individuals (Maliha, Akthar, Huda, 2021).

### **Fraud Practices in Disguise of Volunteerism**

It is apparent that volunteerism, such as contributing to healthcare facilities and providing food and other necessities, effectively covers a large number of individuals in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, people's volunteerism can be seen as the distinct practices of communities sharing responsibilities in Bangladeshi society. There is, however, another side to the story. The pandemic presents an opportunity for certain groups of people to make money by deception under the pretence of voluntary activism. The Regent Hospital Scam, masterminded by hospital owner Shahed Karim, is one of the country's most heinous events of the COVID-19 battle. When most of the main private hospitals were unwilling to provide COVID treatments in the early days of the epidemic,



Shahed and his two branches of hospitals in Dhaka stepped forward to provide medical support and provide COVID test facilities. In the early days of the pandemic, the hospital owner's decision was praised for demonstrating a dedication to society. However, the promise was quickly dashed when law enforcement raided the hospital and discovered major irregularities. Among the 10,500 COVID PCR tests performed in the hospital, 6300 test results were given without the test being performed (Al Jazeera, 2020). Furthermore, the hospital charged COVID patients who were supposed to be free under the deal with the government. The Regent Hospital swindle made national headlines and revealed the government's lack of monitoring activities in pandemic management.

Another incident that occurred during this time period was the case of Dr. Sabrina Scam. The government hired JKG Healthcare, a charitable organization that aids the underprivileged, to carry out COVID-19 tests. The organisation was discovered to provide results without conducting tests. Dr. Sabrina Sharmin Hussain, the chairperson of JKG and a well-known doctor, was detained in connection with the case (The Business Standard, 2022). These two incidents clearly demonstrated that the pandemic provides an opportunity for some people. According to a TIB report, the corona situation in the country has produced a new scope of corruption (The Business Standard, 2020d), and some possibility has been created under the premise of voluntary community support.

### **Social Media as a Heart of the Local Solutions for Volunteerism in Pandemic**

Despite various difficulties in mitigating pandemic effects among people, residents in both rural and urban parts of Bangladesh came closer virtually using social media. It should be mentioned that around 20% of the population of Bangladesh is young (according to the UNFPA), and they are particularly engaged on social media. In Bangladesh, Facebook is synonymous with social media because the majority of social media users are mostly engaged on Facebook. Social media (particularly Facebook) played an important role in making all types of community events successful. Not only young people, but a large number of individuals of all ages are connected through social media in the country, as over 30 million people, or 12% of the population, use social media (Financial Express, 2022). People were seen using the Facebook page, group, and live video streaming to raise money, share their experiences and activities, and foster awareness throughout the pandemic.

While these projects were being shared on Facebook, others began to organise similar efforts in their own communities. Even religious and faith-based organisations use social media to raise funds and organise their activities. Furthermore, Facebook activities generate public demand and pressure on the government in response to a certain event. In the case of the Bangladesh pandemic, both mainstream

and social media played an important role in compelling the government to take urgent action. However, Facebook sometimes became a source of misleading news and inaccurate information, causing widespread panic and harming individual health (Panday and Kaioum, 2020). For example, a physician posted claims on Facebook that the government had hidden 18/19 dead bodies in order to conceal the truth about COVID-19 killings, and the doctor was eventually imprisoned (Panday and Kaiom, 2020), and the video went viral. However, this type of digital misinformation did not become mainstream but rather had limited impacts on people. Social media played a role in connecting people for volunteerism. Community activists on Facebook receive motivation from their fellow citizens for their wonderful activities, and they obtain the required support and funding through social media. However, some people involved in volunteerism have been observed making rude or dehumanising statements for no apparent reason. In a Facebook status, Wahid Manjoar Sohag, the Anti-Corruption Commission official who provided dinner with his own money, expresses his dismay at receiving demotivating comments from unknown Facebook users (Pers. Communication, December 11, 2021).

## **Concluding Remarks**

The multifaceted approach used by Bangladesh in combating the COVID-19 epidemic encompasses various dimensions, such as preserving human lives, generating employment opportunities, ensuring human security, and mitigating poverty. During this pivotal juncture, the active engagement of individuals in volunteerism during the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly contributed to addressing the prevailing circumstances by providing sustenance and essential amenities to underprivileged populations. A significant proportion of the nation's population currently resides below the poverty threshold, and the ongoing pandemic has compelled even more individuals to join this demographic, exacerbating the already dire food security situation faced by the impoverished. The pandemic led to a period of economic stagnation in a nation that had previously demonstrated consistent economic progress, resulting in disproportionate hardships for individuals experiencing poverty. The implementation of lockdown measures was primarily motivated by the objective of preserving human lives, however it also exerted significant strain on the economy. The government, in isolation, proved insufficient in mitigating the immense burden. The phenomenon of volunteerism, regarded as a cultural essence, has exerted a significant influence on the various factors contributing to societal suffering. The voluntary efforts made by individuals played a crucial role in bridging the gap in providing assistance to the impoverished population during the emergency crisis, in conjunction with the activities undertaken by the government.

Bangladesh, as a developing nation, faced significant challenges in its ability to effectively respond to the epidemic throughout several sectors of its economy. Voluntarism has emerged as a significant component of civic engagement, serving as a vital means of survival for a substantial portion of the population. Notably, volunteerism is deeply ingrained in the cultural fabric of the nation and has proven to be instrumental in fostering collective resilience in the face of the pandemic. However, it is important to acknowledge that there have been instances of fraudulent activities masquerading as volunteers over time. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that volunteerism has played a significant role in empowering individuals to support causes during the epidemic.

Bangladesh has a well-documented history of effectively managing coastal cyclones through the active participation of community members, making it a recognised exemplar of disaster governance in attaining resilience. According to Nasreen (2021), individuals residing in the country have a significant level of social capital, as evidenced by their active engagement in providing assistance during natural disasters and emergency situations. During the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, the government implemented measures to restrict economic activity, resulting in significant challenges for individuals, particularly those living below the poverty threshold (Masud-All-Kamal & Hassan, 2018). A significant number of individuals experienced unemployment, leading to a decrease in income across many demographic segments. The day labourers, garment workers, rickshaw pullers, small farmers, and unemployed individuals within the neighbourhood encountered challenges in fulfilling their daily needs. Under these conditions, members of the community proactively offered their assistance to the affected individuals. The volunteer efforts encompassed a wide range of tasks, including the provision of daily sustenance and the provision of medical assistance specifically related to the Covid-19 pandemic. The commencement of the community's engagement may be traced back to the initial stages of the epidemic, subsequently proliferating throughout the nation, accompanied by a wide array of techniques and responses that exhibit diversity. This study demonstrates the presence of three distinct categories of voluntary activities (individual-level spontaneous volunteerism, initiatives undertaken by volunteer organisations, and collaborative efforts involving community participation as well as activities conducted by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and corporations) observed during the pandemic as forms of civic engagement aimed at providing assistance to individuals in need.

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