An Initiative to understand the situation of Indigenous Munda community facing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Narrative Report

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Background

The Indigenous Munda community who are locally treated as Buno (forest people), a small ethnic group living in a remote villages of Koyra Upazila of Khulna district, Bangladesh is transforming their lives by challenging the conventional norms. They have inadequate access to political and economic power. They are among the most vulnerable to this pandemic for a number of reasons. First, the geographic and community features of rural and remote indigenous communities, along with condition of economic and food insecurity and marginalization from services, can make them more vulnerable.

Simultaneously they experienced Super cyclone Amphan which has left a trail of devastation on the Munda community. They experienced a huge blackout due to power outage during the storm. During a storm surge that washed away several embankments near their living places. Their houses were damaged. Many trees being uprooted. Road communications were disrupted as huge trees were felled by the storm at various places. Koyra Sadar, North Bedkashi, South Bedkashi and Maharajpur unions have been flooded. A large number of trees, mud houses, roads and crop fields are feared to have been damaged. With the wind and water getting turbulent, dams broke at eight points in Koyra Sadar and South Bedkashi. Charamukha ferry area of South Bedkashi, Hajotkhali embankment sluice gate (on Kapatakho River) South Bedkashi was washed away. Gazi Para and Kashi Haat of North Bedkashi Union have suffered damage. Besides, water has entered the locality after the embankment broke in Harinkhola area of Koyra Sadar Union, submerging many homesteads. Storm surge of 10 to 15 feet high above normal astronomical tide under the influence of the storm. Till now during the high tide the water entered in the locality with 2/3 feet high.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic poses a grave health threat to them also. They already experience poor access to health care, significantly higher rates of communicable and non-communicable diseases, lack of access to essential services, sanitation and other key preventive measures, such as clean water, soap, disinfectant, etc. Likewise, most nearby local medical facilities, if and when there are any, are often under-equipped and under-staffed. Even when indigenous people are able to access health care services, they can face stigma and discrimination. Mundas are day labour and most of the male engage with brick kilns for seasonal work. Taking advance from brick kilns owners they went other areas leaving their family and now they are returning home with empty hand. This time they are coming back to home but no initiative for their health check-up or home quarantine have been taken which increasing vulnerability to their family health. No news reports has been published in the newspapers. Munda community people said that most of them are passing days under thatched shelters erected on their homesteads and were in serious need of support from the government or aid agencies. Most of them are day labourers and fishmongers. As they have no work for months due to COVID-19, Amphan and flood, they run up huge debts for their families and houses. Both COVID-19 and Super cyclone Amphan made their life miserable and very much vulnerable. They have been passing sleepless night and hard straggling days. So immediate Humanitarian support is very much needed for them.
Damage areas at a glance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zilla Upazilla</th>
<th>Union</th>
<th>Affected Village</th>
<th>House Hold</th>
<th>Damage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khulna Koyra</td>
<td>Koyra Sadar</td>
<td>Naipara (2 no Koyra)</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>• Damaged House Hold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tepekhal (6 no Koyra)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>• Uprooted trees</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Majerite</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>• Damaged pond/shrimp farm</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gatirghari</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>• Firewood for cooking</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Horihorpur</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>• Drinking water sources</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Iona dighir par</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ratnaghiro</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>Katkata</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>sk sardar para</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Borobari</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>Angthihara</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Jorshing</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Binapani</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>Uttar Bedkashi</td>
<td>Barobari</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Pasurtala</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Majerpara</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dokhin bedkashi</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>238</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Title of project**
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**Activities:**
**Vulnerable list preparation and advocacy with authority**
A Vulnerable list of the Munda community was developed and submit it to the local Union parishad chairman and local administrative office for support.

**On line meeting**
Online meeting was organized with Environment Protection Manch of Khulna regarding Information of their support situation, gap and discrimination of relief distribution.

**Social media mobilization**
For broader sharing of the problem and discrimination messenger group was developed with different stakeholders.
Situation report

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge the world has faced since World War-II. Poorest section are living a painful daily life. The COVID-19 crisis is disproportionately affecting marginalized communities around the world, including in Bangladesh. Minority groups such as Indigenous community live on the margins of society with restricted access to essential services, and are ill-prepared for a public health emergency. Such inequalities increase the risk of the health emergency spiraling out of control.

The same situation has been facing the Indigenous Munda community who are locally treated as Buno (forest people), a small ethnic group living in a remote villages of Koyra sub district of Khulna district, Bangladesh is transforming their lives by challenging the conventional norms. The community are often called "savage" and "ugly" because of their ethnicity and lifestyle. They have inadequate access to political and economic power. It is to be noted that the People’s Republic of Bangladesh currently does not recognize the indigenous peoples as indigenous. The 15th Amendment of the Constitution (30 June 2011) calls the people of Bangladesh “Bangalees” as a nation. Since then indigenous peoples by official sources have been grouped together with other minority communities - as “tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities” or as “small ethnic groups”. This is part of the problem as it is an obstacle to designing approaches and policies according to the specific cultural, economic and social needs of the communities, who in the area of coverage of this document mainly belong to Munda community. This small community is always frowned upon by locals for its distinct eating habits and appearance. They have drawn a low level of priority from the local government to deal with hazards, livelihood insecurity and mitigation. They are among the most vulnerable to this pandemic for a number of reasons. First, the geographic and community features of rural and remote indigenous communities, along with condition of economic and food insecurity and marginalization from services, can make them more vulnerable.
The majority of the Munda community members make their living as daily laborers (construction, brickfields, farms, prawn farms, motor cycle taxi drivers, vegetable sellers), to a smaller extent as farmers or as fisher folk. Some work in prawn cultivation. The average amount of income that is available to the money earner is little more than 1 ½ USD per day. Often there is only one person earning money in a family with households between 2 and 8 persons, at average a family has about 4 members. If work is available, even children work to contribute to the family income. This has an impact on school attendance.

For the past two decades the frequency and destructive power of cyclones from the Bay of Bengal has permanently increased. This was highlighted when in the middle of the COVID-19 crisis super cyclone AMPHAN hit land in West Bengal (India) on 20 May 2020 and moved along the coastal areas to Bangladesh for about 24 hours. Both COVID-19 and Super cyclone AMPHAN made their life miserable and very much vulnerable. They have been passing sleepless night and hard straggling days. They experienced a huge blackout due to power outage during the storm. During a storm surge that washed away several embankments near their living places. Their houses were damaged. Many trees being uprooted. Road communications were disrupted as huge trees were felled by the storm at various places. Koyra Sadar, North Bedkashi, South Bedkashi and Maharajpur unions have been flooded. A large number of trees, mud houses, roads and crop fields are feared to have been damaged. With the wind and water getting turbulent, dams broke at eight points in Koyra Sadar and South Bedkashi. Charamukha ferry area of South Bedkashi, Hajotkhali embankment sluice gate (on Kapatako River) South Bedkashi was washed away. Gazi Para and Kashi Haat of North Bedkashi Union have suffered damage. Besides, water has entered the locality after the embankment broke in Harinkhola area of Koyra Sadar Union, submerging many homesteads. Storm surge of 10 to 15 feet high above normal astronomical tide under the influence of the storm. Till now during the high tide the water entered in the locality with 2/3 feet high.

The cyclone warning systems that were established in the past 12 years worked well so that in Khulna and Barisal Divisions more than two million people and some of the cattle were evacuated one day earlier into cyclone shelters. However many houses were lost. At the moment of finalizing this report, most affected families live in temporary make-shift accommodations (plastic sheets) on high land places or on road sides, stay with family or friends or have even remained in the cyclone shelters; others are living on small fishing boats in absence of their houses. Social distancing had not been possible in

Known for their great work in agriculture in the local fields, the Munda have their own distinctive language, culture and customs. Their ethnic roots distinguish them from other groups. But due to heavy integration with surrounding communities, they have almost lost the thread of their own heritage and are on the verge of becoming a forgotten people.
the cyclone shelters as this cyclone and the following flood exceeded the impact of past disasters and more and more people had to be accommodated in the cyclone shelters (usually school buildings). Personal hygiene was a huge problem, which especially was felt by women. *Munda* community members complain that they were accommodated in the older cyclone shelters with less possibility to maintain personal hygiene. They report that they could not sleep in these shelters. Education materials of children were lost in the disaster. The food crisis beginning with the lockdown due to the pandemic was aggravated by the consequences of the cyclone. Adaptive reactions included reduction of meals to once a day or once in two days, sale of personal belongings (mobile phone) to get money, loans from friends or local shop keepers. This highlights how a (natural?) disaster pushes the *Munda* as a vulnerable community closer to ruin and into sustained dependency. Scarcity of safe water, inadequate sanitation and drainage systems, lack of hygiene, lack of knowledge of proper menstrual hygiene management, lack of solid waste disposal management systems, and congested and unhygienic living spaces are among the very serious problems and health hazards faced by them.

Government took initiative for rehabilitation of the embankments with the support of Bangladesh Army. Community members were contacted only in the week after 14 June 2020 while the pandemic is still evolving in the country. Community members in *Koyra* sub districts confirm that during the COVID-19 crisis they have not been contacted by health authorities concerning their health situation. This is an issue as the analysis shows that though their villages are remote, the community members are not completely isolated, but on the contrary, through their work as daily laborers and the search for work they are in regular contact with other persons outside their villages and therefore may be infected. No systematic testing happened in the *Munda* villages. This is illustrated by a community report in contradiction to the official statement: one young male *Munda* community member was tested positive when he crossed the border from India. He was treated in hospital. *Munda* community members hesitate to contact authorities on own initiative because they know they are considered as impure and uneducated. Trust to be treated with respect and dignity is very low. They remain reserved towards outsiders and avoid mixing with mainstream population. The following factors increase the risks of infection by COVID-19 or of severe developments of the disease in case of infection among *Munda* community members:

- Family relations across the border to India result in regular exchange and contacts while West Bengal (India) is among the hot spots of the pandemic.

To combat the economic and social crises and to ensure recovery of the economy, the government has announced 19 stimulus packages accounting for around 3.7% of the country’s GDP including (i) BDT 50 billion for export-oriented industries to pay the wage bill for three months. (ii) BDT 300 billion for banks to provide working capital loan facilities to the affected industries. (iii) BDT 200 billion for banks to provide working capital loan facilities to small (cottage industries) and medium enterprises (iv) A refinance scheme of BDT 50 billion for the agriculture sector. There have been some policy measures by the Bangladesh bank to increase cash flow in the economy.

Also, the budget 2020-21 provides some support measures for returnee migrants. There have been some social safety net programs to address the growing poverty and vulnerability of the population.
- Various outside village contacts happen for economic reasons: search for work, daily labour. The mobility and working conditions without any security standards increase the possibility of infections.
- Health conditions in the community are poor in general and health care systems are difficult for Munda to access because of their culture of avoiding contacts to outside of their community. This is especially true for senior community members.
- Involving with the health system is considered to be expensive for community members. Only in case of severe suffering they would frequent (preferably private) hospitals, selling their belongings in order to be able to pay the bills.
- The low levels of literacy and of formal education reduce access to information on protective measures.
- Unhealthy and contaminated drinking water because of increasing salinity of ground water due to climate change influence the well-being of community members.

Munda people have been surviving under adverse living conditions. The Munda people even lack access to decision makers on sub district level. Their opinion was not sought by the responsible authorities. Community members communicate with NGOs working in their areas and sometimes with the chairperson of the Union Parishad, however this being a level where no policies are designed. Even the Munda community leaders expressed that they find it unimaginable that they would be listened to and that their opinion could be taken into consideration (response: “not applicable”; another: “it is not possible”). When food aid was distributed after the lockdown was imposed on 26 March 2020, Munda cultural organizations submitted a list of vulnerable households to the local political, administrative and military leadership on sub district level which however they experienced was not taken into consideration. The distribution of relief was highly mediated and increased the feeling among the Munda that they are left out.

A state sponsored food aid distribution (four weeks after the lockdown was imposed) included visible examples of social distancing and wearing masks. In some areas information was spread through speakers (hand-microphone sound systems) in the roads. The understanding of community members about COVID-19 is generally basic but correct. As explanation for COVID-19 the following terms were frequently mentioned: fever, cough, breathing problems, cold, (deadly) virus, mask, people die. Protection measures (wearing masks, social distancing, no meetings, regular hand washing) are considered difficult to implement in daily life in the villages. The lack of material in Munda language is less a practical communication problem (many speak Bengali), but more a problem of identification with the message and of ownership of its content when the Munda community have experienced discrimination throughout their lives.
Although a significant part of the *Munda* population catches fish in order to enrich their families’ food supply, only few persons mentioned this during the survey. The reason is that in most cases *Munda* are not recognized as fisher folk (not entered into the official list) and therefore would not be allowed to sell fish on the market. This also means that they do not profit of government support during breeding times when catching fish is prohibited. They have no possibility to save money or to stock food for longer periods.

The most important impact of the COVID-19 crisis for the community was so far the loss of work and consequently income through the lockdown. This nearly immediately resulted in hunger (“hunger” and “food crisis” being frequent responses by the community members interviewed). Food relief distributed by administration and political actors did not reach the community (with very few minor exceptions). Less than 15% of the community members responded that that got temporary support from the Union *Parishad*. Most got some relief from humanitarian organizations, often too little for too short time. The composition of the relief has not been discussed with them beforehand. After the cyclone *Amphan* hit the region on 20 - 21 May 2020, river embankments broke, especially in *Koyra* Sub district. Involvement in the repair of the embankments provided some of the community members with work for a few days. However the disaster hit the *Munda* community disproportionally because their settlement areas are in the coastal zones of the sub districts and their villages were among those which were washed away first. Prawn farms and fishing boats were destroyed, cattle was only partly saved.

A part of the agricultural land was still under water, making cultivation impossible and increasing the salinity of the soil. Intersecting forms of discrimination the general discrimination of *Munda* people in every day’s life is high and touches all community members. They have no access to services, live on very low income, are neglected and considered uneducated, impure and outcaste and do consider themselves not part of local society with the same rights, in spite of their history of having been the first to make that land arable. COVID-19 served as a magnifying lens on the general deprivation of a community which at the same time increasingly has become victim of climate change effects.

Potential issues to be addressed in the report:
- Incidence, mortality rates and increased risk of infection in indigenous communities;
- Disparities and obstacles to adequate healthcare, water, sanitation and information, and lack of culturally appropriate and accessible services;
- Participation of indigenous peoples in the elaboration of State and provincial response to the pandemic as well as implementation of programs and policies developed by Indigenous programs and institutions;
- Impacts of lockdown, quarantines and other responses on access to food, livelihoods, education and justice;
Availability of correct and appropriate information dissemination;

Impact of the pandemic and related responses on indigenous women, elders, children and persons with disabilities.

Discrimination and disproportionate impacts of State restriction, confinement measures and other pandemic-related policies on indigenous peoples

Impact of national emergency measures on land security, land tenure and increased vulnerability to land grabbing and imposed development impacting indigenous people’s lands and waters during the COVID-19 pandemic

Indigenous communities living in voluntary isolation.

**Educating and Development awareness**

Most of the Munda community have been living in Kayra sadar, Uttar Bedkashi Dokhin Bedkasi. To make them aware about cleanliness and social distance and relevant health issues poster and leaflet were developed and distributed among them.
Media Mobilization
Local and national newspaper/media mobilized and published news and report in national dailies

https://www.newagebd.net/article/117510/mundas-struggle-for-survival-in-khulna?fbclid=IwAR0rvMrFVbUmzyGB9r92D75YelijRXPCD9dr7zmROAfEaA5y6CW2DQ9XYI