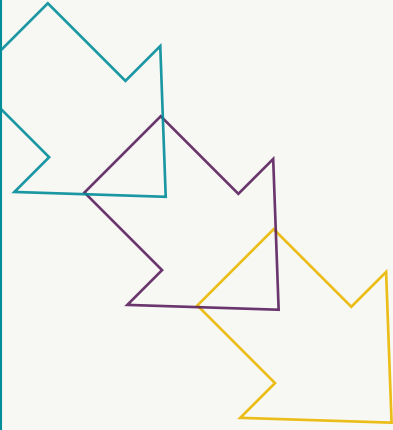
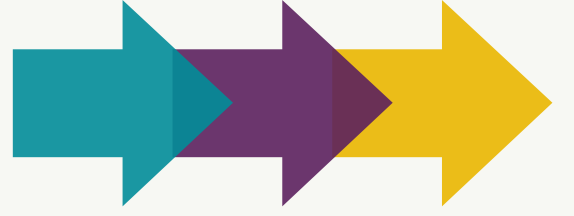


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Covid-19 Learning, Evidence
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Research Briefing

Accountability and Responsiveness in the Covid-19 Response in Bangladesh

April 2022

Accountability and Responsiveness in the Covid-19 Response in Bangladesh

This briefing summarises priority areas for future research and stakeholders with whom to engage as identified in the scoping paper ***Accountability and Responsiveness in the Covid-19 Response in Bangladesh*** by Shuvra Chowdhury, Department of Public Administration, University of Rajshahi and Naomi Hossain, Accountability Research Center, School of International Service, American University. The paper and this briefing were commissioned for the Covid-19 Learning, Evidence and Research Programme in Bangladesh (CLEAR). CLEAR aims to build a consortium of research partners to deliver policy-relevant research and evidence for Bangladesh to support the Covid-19 response and inform preparation for future shocks.

With the aim of identifying gaps in the state of knowledge of the mechanisms of accountability and responsiveness, the scoping study reviewed the conditions for accountability and responsiveness in the Covid-19 response by exploring how the government listened to and gathered information about citizens' needs during the pandemic. It situated these findings in the context of the rising political dominance of the ruling Awami League party and rising restrictions on political and civic space, but also in the light of the pressures on government to earn 'performance legitimacy' through effective policy responses.

The scoping paper, on which this Research Briefing is based, provides an overview of the mechanisms of accountability and responsiveness in operation during the Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh. It describes and assesses official and informal mechanisms and processes, including both political and administrative channels and civil society and the media, through which the government listened to citizens' concerns.

Government response during the Covid-19 pandemic

Like most governments, the government of Bangladesh has attempted to be or appear to be in control of the virus, of the directions of the policy response, and of the narrative about both. As has been seen in many countries, heavy-handed efforts to silence critics or rig official statistics have had the opposite effect, by engendering scepticism about the official policy response. Rising political dominance has been reflected in growing domination of the policy process. In previous crises, the government has shared its policymaking spaces with civil society and other groups in ways that were absent during the pandemic.

Accountability mechanisms

The government invested substantially in mechanisms and institutions designed to hear and respond to citizen voice. These include a range of formal systems for citizen participation, feedback, and grievance redress, established under law.

Over the past decade, the Bangladesh state has adopted a number of accountability reforms that have shaped the conditions for accountability and responsiveness in relation to the Covid-19 response. These include social accountability mechanisms institutionalised in local government institutions in the form of:

- participatory planning and budgeting processes;
- participation in public procurement processes;
- public hearings;
- the right to information;
- the application of a citizens' charter; and
- a whistle-blower law, among others.

Mechanisms through which citizens are able to hold the state accountable for service provision include a number of independent commissions and statutory bodies which have a role to play in ensuring public accountability mechanisms. Very little information is publicly available about how successfully (or not) these operated during the pandemic.

Role of civil society and the media

Organised civil society and the independent media have also shaped the political context for accountability and responsiveness in the Covid-19 response. However, the overall space for civil society and the media to play a watchdog role with respect to governance is clearly constrained.

Despite the overall closure of the policy space, there were nonetheless specific instances in which the media and independent civil society produced information or evidence that directly challenged or informed the government's response.

While the current government displays little acceptance of independent scrutiny in the public space, a lack of capacity to gather and process evidence for policymaking has encouraged some use of non-governmental organisation (NGO) and thinktank data and analysis in the design and delivery of policies and programmes across a wide range of sectors and issues.

Policy-making during the pandemic

Key public health policy decisions were reportedly taken in mostly closed spaces, with the authority to take and implement decisions increasingly concentrated high among the political leadership within the Prime Minister's Office in the first year of the pandemic. Despite talk of a 'whole of government' and 'whole of society' approach to the crisis, there was little actual effort to include non-state actors in the design or delivery of the pandemic response.

Existing data gaps and research opportunities

Key issues on which knowledge gaps remain are as follows:

Service delivery, accountability, and governance

- How effectively did the official complaints systems, including in-person, hotlines, and online mechanisms, function to gather, assess, and respond to citizens' needs? How did other institutions of accountability (the Anti-Corruption and Information Commissions, for instance) function?



Tanzima Akter, a community facilitator under the LIUPC project of UNDP Bangladesh, distributes anti-bacterial and disinfecting soap to a family in Dhaka as part of the Covid-19 response.

PHOTO: UN WOMEN/FAHAD ABDULLAH KAIZER

- The extent to which ministries and agencies have sought and used data to inform policies has been uneven. How much has an evidence-basis for policymaking been mainstreamed across government?
- How did the reliance on customary systems of identifying social protection beneficiaries work in the crisis engendered by the pandemic? What are the prospects for digital beneficiary databases to reduce (perceived) corruption and leakage and to improve transparency about social protection programmes?

Innovations

- Social media platforms have been used to a greater extent than in previous crises. How have politicians and the administration been using social media, and to what effect? How much are these transmitting – rather than listening – platforms?
- How has the government evaluated its own policy response, and what learning has been absorbed by key actors within the government? How have citizens and civil society evaluated the official Covid-19 response?
- To what extent has the 'Aspire to Innovate' (a2i) government agency been able to institutionalise its innovations, so that it is in position ready to help Bangladesh manage the next crisis?

Reference

Chowdhury, S. and Hossain, N. (forthcoming, 2022) *Accountability and Responsiveness in the Covid-19 Response in Bangladesh*. Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, DOI: [10.19088/IDS.2022.027](https://doi.org/10.19088/IDS.2022.027)

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Any views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the UK Government, CLEAR, or any other contributing organisation.

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