



Initially started with a health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted the livelihoods of people living in extreme poverty in Bangladesh. People with low economic capacity in both rural and urban areas are losing their income because of the shutdown and also facing a decline in their purchasing power as stockpiling, and panic-buying has triggered a price increase. Therefore, the pandemic is pushing poor households into severe food insecurity.

In response to COVID-19, BRAC's initial focus was on prevention from the spread of the deadly virus through community engagement, behaviour change and mass campaigning. In parallel, it is now strengthening systems through providing information from ground collected by front-line staffs and relevant researches, volunteers and resources to government and civil society organisations. As BRAC realises that the economic impacts of the pandemic will be protracted, it has been focusing on livelihoods and developed a mid to long-term strategy for economic revitalisation of those living in extreme poverty. To know about BRAC's response to COVID-19 visit [here](#).

BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) Programme, initiated in 2002, works for the socioeconomic sustainable livelihoods of people living in ultra-poverty, the most vulnerable subset of the extreme poor population in Bangladesh. Currently, they are facing severe livelihood crisis due to the pandemic. Hence, to align with BRAC's strategy on COVID-19 response, the UPG programme is playing a critical role to fight against COVID-19 by developing a coping mechanism for its participants during and after the pandemic and took various initiatives such as: raising awareness among its participants, ensuring food and livelihood security, mobilising village communities for support, and assisting participants in receiving emergency supports from the government.

KEY INTERVENTIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

1. Programmatic support

The UPG programme ensured that knowledge and information on the preventive measures from COVID-19 reaches all its participants and communities, therefore the programme took different measures to raise awareness among them. Since the participants belong to the lowest subset of the population, as a part of BRAC's initiative, the programme provided emergency economic assistance as food stipend to ensure their household resilience.

i) Raising awareness



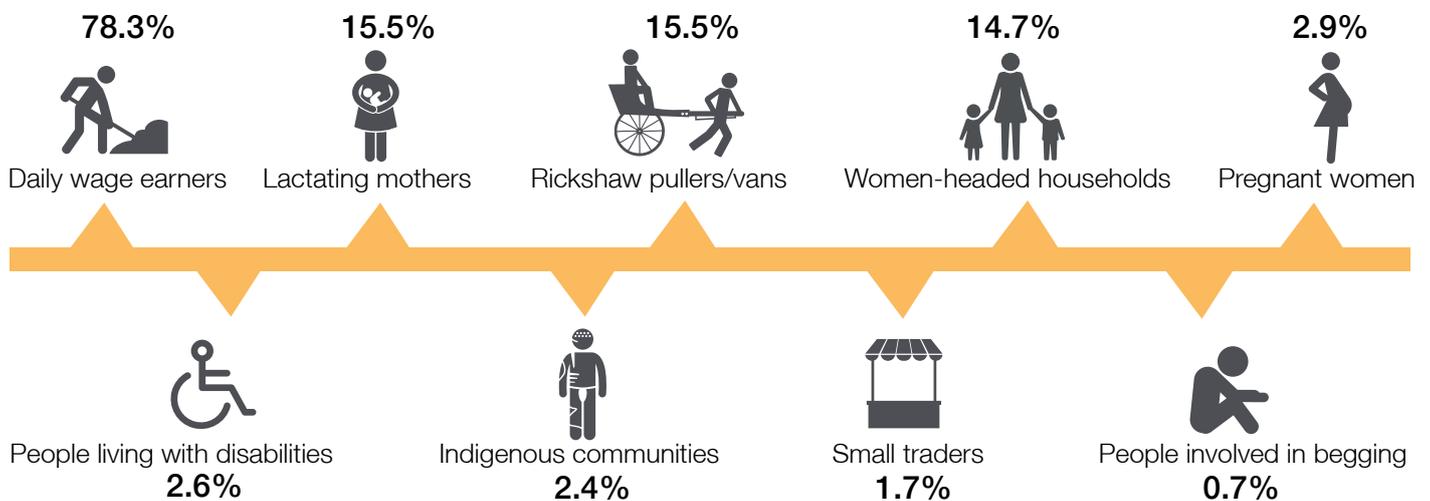
- 120,740 participants and their households received awareness on COVID-19 and proper hand-washing techniques
- 250,000 soap sachets and stickers on COVID-19 awareness were distributed
- 163,880 awareness leaflets were distributed among the participants and community people

ii) Distributing cash stipends



- 118,242 participants received cash support of BDT 1,500 (USD 18). Among them, 51,242 participants received money through mobile financial services for the first time

Recipients of cash support:



Coping mechanism initiatives undertaken for the ultra-poor participants

The UPG programme has taken several initiatives to support participants for coping up during and post COVID-19 crisis.

- Provided agricultural inputs of vegetable seeds to 90,281 participants for home-stead gardening to ensure food security, enhanced nutritional intake and earn additional income from selling or consuming the produce.
- Established linkage between participants and government to avail agricultural support (seed, fertilisers and procure participants agricultural crops) to continue with the income generating activity.
- Established linkage between participants and local government to avail livestock aid support (vaccine, fodder etc.) for rearing.
- Enhanced knowledge on improved storage techniques for non-perishable crops and trading information for perishable items to attain fair market price.
- Hands-on coaching for participants were provided to strategically plan for their assets (livestock, farm and non-farm enterprises) during this pandemic and to keep them on track for graduation.



2. Resource mobilisation through Village Social Solidarity Committees (VSSC)

Village Social Solidarity Committees (VSSC) are voluntary committees formed with the key members of a village, that contributes to social integration and works as a bridge between participants and the community to protect their assets, gain access to government and other services, build confidence, and grow their social network. Currently, 2,681 VSSCs in 2,560 villages are playing an active role to provide support to these vulnerable communities with the motivation and support from UPG programme.



80,963

received hygiene products (masks, gloves, etc.)



47,144

received dry ration such as rice, lentils, potatoes etc.



5,063

received cash support (total BDT 2,109,671)



5,337

received general medical support



29,681

received livestock fodder, medicine, etc.

3. Government engagement and support

The UPG programme informed relevant government officials about all COVID-19 response activities of BRAC and made an effort to involve them in BRAC's regular activity. The programme in collaboration with VSSC have provided a list of 117,635 participants with the local government officials to avail government relief and stimulus support for all participants and ensure better outreach. Among them, 49% (57,296) participants have received various supports from the government.



44

districts engaged with local gov.



117,635

participant lists shared with local government



50,277

received food items (rice, lentils, oil, etc.)



4,915

received cash support (total BDT 6,732,506)



1,581

received seed and fertiliser



6,354

received livestock fodder, medicine, etc.

Digital cash transfer

Cash transfers through door-to-door visits are becoming increasingly challenging amidst lockdowns and poses a risk to staff and participants. To ensure safety, reliability and faster outreach, the programme piloted and scaled up digital cash transfers to the UPG participants via bKash, a mobile money platform. A pilot campaign was launched among 242 participants to test the digital cash transfer and understand the level of acceptance among participants. Based on the success of the pilot initiative, programme scaled-up the campaign by gradually reaching 50,500 participants in 43 districts.

- Over 90% participants responded positively about cash transfer through bKash due to instant cash out service and choices for small transactions to meet their needs.
- Both participants and staff have increased confidence and interest over using the digital platform over bKash wallet as it requires less time for transferring money.
- Community members and neighbours cooperation were instrumental to avail the stipend to participants without mobile phones as well as bKash account.

Read our [latest blog](#) to learn more about our digital cash initiative

48-year-old Rahima was a daily wage earner who lost her job due to the pandemic. She was the only earning member of her family.

Rahima lives in Bagmara of Rajshahi, northern Bangladesh. Her husband, who has been suffering from a prolonged illness, has been unable to work for years. Her daughter, who returned home after being divorced, has a five-year-old child.

Rahima was selected as a participant of the Ultra-Poor Graduation programme in the 2020 cohort. She was receiving her training on enterprise development when the pandemic started, right before the programme temporarily suspended its activities.

Rahima suddenly found herself with no opportunities to earn and support her family. She had to rely on collecting leftover potatoes from nearby farms to feed her family, but that too ran out.

She started worrying about how she would manage their next meal for her young granddaughter. She worried about buying the medicine her husband needed.

BRAC's staff then informed Rahima that she was selected as a recipient of BRAC's emergency cash support of BDT 1,500 (USD 18). Rahima opened a mobile wallet with bKash (BRAC Bank's mobile money subsidiary) with the help of a programme staff and received her cash from a nearby bKash agent. She spent the money to buy stock up on rice, lentils and medicine for her family.



Publications

[Meeting Basic Needs of the World's Poorest During a Time of Crisis: Part I](#)
[Meeting Basic Needs of the World's Poorest During a Time of Crisis: Part II](#)

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Global response to COVID-19

BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative (UPGI) team is working with other global actors across the world to provide COVID-19 responses. To know more visit: [Ultra-Poor Graduation website](#)

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