

SUPPORTING WITH TEA GARDEN WORKERS IN BANGLADESH DURING THE COVID-19 EMERGENCIES: A CASE REVIEW

Project title: Supporting with tea garden workers in Bangladesh during the COVID-19 emergencies: a case review

Central focus: COVID-linked information and training to address priority needs and build peacebuilding and community organizing capacities.

Country/region: Bangladesh, Sylhet's Moulvibazar District

Grant amount: 5,000 EUR

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Main activities: Seminars with youth on peacebuilding, distribution of supplies and materials, vaccination drives

Three lessons:

1. Interconnections among vulnerabilities affecting tea estate workers.
2. Specific challenges facing women and youth.
3. COVID-19 emergencies offer opportunity and impetus for reforms and grant activities highlight priority needs.

INTRODUCING THE CHALLENGE

The workers and families whose lives are tied to Bangladesh's large tea industry are among South Asia's most vulnerable communities. Their isolated locations and distinctive ethnic and religious histories have limited their ability to access many benefits of modernizing Bangladesh. The COVID-19 emergencies have worsened their situations, combining both the broad challenges of health risks and social and economic disruption and some distinctive threats specific to the tea estates community.

The European Union funded project, Awareness with Human Action (AHA!), supported the efforts of activist Mohan Rabidas, founder of the nonprofit Jagoron Youth Forum. Rabidas' involvement with the tea estate communities is well documented in Bangladeshi news media.¹ The AHA! project leveraged his leadership and deep connection to address distinctive threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic within tea communities. These include large gaps in awareness about COVID-19, the rise in hate speech and misinformation, an obvious fraying of social cohesion, and poorly coordinated and counter-productive health responses. It focused on 14 tea estates in Sylhet's Moulvibazar District with the goal of reaching more than 10,000 workers and their families. The effort can be viewed as part of the long-standing efforts by civil society groups working to strengthen these communities, alongside various programs supported by the Bangladesh government and the private owners of tea estates.

This case review highlights insights gained from Rabidas' work within the tea communities to communicate about the COVID-19 pandemic, and the potential of such direct community support to address the obstacles that stand in the way of the women, men, and children in vulnerable communities.

CONTEXT FOR THE CASE REVIEW

While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted lives and livelihoods everywhere, the impact on different parts of societies has varied in significant ways. Too little is known about how these different groups are affected by and will respond to and recover from the pandemic emergencies. It is clear, nonetheless, that communications of many kinds play crucial roles in positive and negative responses, planned and unplanned. The distinctive roles of women and youth, as well as the various entities in which support them, also deserve attention. Finally, religious actors play especially significant yet often poorly understood roles in responding

¹ <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/nation-builders-tomorrow/inside-the-cha-polli-1535293>

to the pandemic emergencies. The AHA! Project has provided 50 small grants in South Asia that aim to address these facets of the COVID-19 crisis. AHA! small grant recipients work in the areas of peacebuilding and social cohesion, addressing the societal effects of COVID-19 and engaging youth, women, and religious leaders in constructive dialogue and action. Their interventions target the most vulnerable communities. Each case yields insights for other actors engaged in peacebuilding and advocacy across South Asia to address the challenges of their particular context with innovative, effective measures. The case review series draws primarily on this experience with the goal both of providing narratives to help in understanding diverse situations and explorations of the experience under several programs supported by AHA! Project grants.

People experiencing multidimensional poverty: multiple and interlinked deprivations in health, education, and standard of living are likely to suffer² most acutely during a crisis, and this is indeed the case for the tea garden communities in Bangladesh. Alongside inequitable access to services that meet basic needs, marginalized populations face other forms of vulnerabilities that include poor nutrition, inadequate housing, hazardous working conditions, limited access to medical care and information, forced or early marriage, and gender-based violence. Such well-documented vulnerabilities are often compounded in South Asia by ethnic, religious, or gender-related minority status that have long roots in history, or membership in a stigmatized profession. During the COVID-19 pandemic, communities with a history of marginalization have been more likely to encounter significant barriers to medical care and social welfare. For example, access to services and resources is curtailed, or state-run health and relief programming might neglect them when faced by crisis circumstances.³

Identifying vulnerable communities early and assuring well designed efforts to assure equitable care and support is thus a priority.

TEA GARDEN WORKERS OF BANGLADESH

A large and distinctive community that has faced special challenges during the COVID-19 crisis is the tea garden community of Bangladesh. The pandemic has aggravated long-standing poverty, exploitation, social isolation, and health and environmental hazards. There is an urgent need for focused attention and action.

Tea is a billion-dollar industry and a pillar of Bangladesh's economy. By 2025, the total tea market of Bangladesh is estimated to reach \$2.87 billion in retail prices.⁴ Tea produced in Bangladesh is mostly used for domestic consumption. Bangladesh exported \$3.34 million in tea, making it the world's 58th largest exporter of tea in 2019.⁵ Despite the pandemic, the tea industry saw a steady growth in the last two years.⁶ Currently there are over 165 tea gardens mostly conglomerated in the Northeast districts in the Sylhet division. Largely run by foreign-owned sterling companies and proprietorship concerns, the government oversight on this tea estates (research, export/import, taxation, rehabilitation, etc.) is maintained through The Bangladesh Tea Board.

Commercial tea estates in Bangladesh's northern and eastern districts were first developed in nineteenth-century British India by colonial authorities. To clear and cultivate land, estate owners recruited cheap labor from poverty-stricken parts of India, including Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madras, Orissa, and West Bengal. Laborers entered a closed, coercive system administered entirely by the tea authorities: They lived on estate land, toiled in harsh conditions for low wages, and were culturally and linguistically cut off from the surrounding Bengali society. Their modern descendants—representing some 94 ethnolinguistic groups, and predominantly lower-caste Hindu—face similar circumstances despite decades of legislation to improve workers' rights.⁷ Estimates vary widely, but there are thought to be nearly 150,000 permanent workers, in addition to tens of thousands of unregistered workers and more than 350,000 family members living on the tea estates.⁸ The total population may be as high as 1.5 million.⁹ Roughly two-thirds of tea garden workers are women, thought by managers to be more reliable and more skilled at picking tea leaves.¹⁰

² <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-MPI>

³ <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/04/south-asia-covid-19-hits-marginalized-hardest-as-pandemic-used-to-escalate-repression/>

⁴ <https://www.marketresearch.com/Williams-Marshall-Strategy-v4196/Bangladesh-Tea-Impact-COVID-Medium-13618513/>

⁵ <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-product/tea/reporter/bgd>

⁶ <https://www.tbsnews.net/economy/industry/tea-export-sees-strong-growth-amid-pandemic-115876>

⁷ See, for instance, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/no-end-to-slavery-for-bangladeshs-tea-workers/89989#> and <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26536434>

⁸ See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/03/1087622>, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/08/25/survey-74-tea-garden-workers-still-living-in-poverty>

⁹ <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/nation-builders-tomorrow/inside-the-cha-polli-1535293>

¹⁰ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/--asia/--ro-bangkok/--ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_563692.pdf

Legally and economically, tea garden workers' status is precarious. National laws such as the 2006 Labour Act stipulate minimum safety standards, rights, and benefits, but weak oversight and enforcement enables tea companies to disregard these requirements or exploit loopholes.¹¹ Managers do not provide written contracts, and workers who have fulfilled the minimum time in occupation are often still classified as temporary, disqualifying them from benefits. The average tea garden worker makes only Tk. 102 per day (approx.1 Euro), significantly less than the minimum pay in comparable industries.¹² While tea executives argue that workers receive a fair wage when the value of other job benefits—such as housing and health care—is considered, unions reject this logic.¹³

The vulnerabilities of the tea garden community extend to families, which have few avenues of escape. Tea pickers' wages depend on meeting high daily quotas of 18–24 kg of tea leaves per worker, and pay is cut for any shortfall.¹⁴ Workers often need the help of family members, including children, to reach their targets and get a full wage. Most families raise poultry or livestock to supplement their meager income from tea garden work.

The absence of land rights perpetuates tea garden workers' vulnerability. Permanent workers live in makeshift houses in the “labor line,” on plots of land allotted by the estate. Although several generations of tea workers have occupied these sites, the land still belongs to the company, which tightly regulates construction and use. Houses are cramped, crudely built, and subject to flooding during rains; families often share space with their animals. Temporary workers receive no provision for accommodations.

Poor health conditions contributed to pre-COVID vulnerabilities. The tea garden community is exposed to numerous health and safety hazards. Tea pickers work long hours, six days a week, and are exposed to full sunlight or rain throughout the day without protection. Snakebite and insect bites are common, along with other routine injuries in the line of work. Laborers are also exposed to pesticides and other toxic chemicals during spraying and in the factories where tea leaves are processed.

Amenities provided by the tea companies are scarce and inadequate. Because wells and piping are poorly maintained, dangerous pollutants enter the community's water supply. The practice of defecating in the open—largely due to insufficient toilets built by the estates—introduces further contaminants, and tea garden residents suffer from related illnesses such as dysentery, diarrhea, and hookworm.¹⁵ Health facilities in the tea gardens are understaffed and undersupplied: a sample of ten tea gardens found only one credentialed doctor, and community members complain of being prescribed the same medications (e.g., routine pain relief medicine) regardless of the ailment.¹⁶ Pregnant women usually give birth at home, and those who deliver at a hospital or clinic receive only primitive care.

Inadequate services and facilities is also reflected in the state of education. One sample of tea gardens in Sylhet Division, a major tea production zone, found that nearly 40% of tea garden workers were illiterate and fewer than half had attended primary school.¹⁷ Schools and qualified teachers are scarce on the tea plantations. Tea workers' children often travel long distances to attend government schools, where they face stigma due to their ethnic identity and socioeconomic status. At home, their studies are hampered by lack of electricity and internet access.

Women, who represent a large share of the tea garden workforce, face multiple forms of abuse and exploitation. Employers guarantee maternity leave for women for their first two children but make no provision for subsequent births. They rarely offer child care, putting an untenable burden on working mothers with young children. Studies report frequent domestic violence, underage marriage, sexual harassment, and gender-based violence in the tea gardens, with little or no recourse for victims.¹⁸ Alcohol dependency and gambling among men contribute to poverty and domestic strife.

¹¹ See for example http://hrtr.law.columbia.edu/files/2020/11/372_Huq.pdf

¹² See, for instance, the minimum wage schedules at <https://wageindicator.org/salary/minimum-wage/bangladesh/archive/20200902/38599-textile>

¹³ https://www.academia.edu/10584787/Life_in_the_Labour_Lines_Situation_of_Tea_Workers_in_Bangladesh, p. 408.

¹⁴ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_563692.pdf

¹⁵ https://www.academia.edu/10584787/Life_in_the_Labour_Lines_Situation_of_Tea_Workers_in_Bangladesh, p. 395.

¹⁶ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_563692.pdf, p. 41.

¹⁷ <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/bb3b/8d55ff1f86926d0d5004e74b45fb674cead0.pdf>, p. 298.

¹⁸ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/307789002_Deplorable_Living_Conditions_of_Female_Workers_A_Study_in_a_Tea_Garden_of_Bangladesh

The power dynamics of the tea estates offer little bargaining power for tea workers with their employers. Powerful tea companies and their lobbies ensure that workers remain dependent on the estate for livelihood, housing, and basic services, with no realistic alternative outside tea garden work due to their social and linguistic isolation. Coercive practices are carefully built into the system, ensuring the continuation of cheap labor.¹⁹ Neither the workers' unions nor the network of panchayets—informal representative councils that mediate the relationship between management and labor—have yielded significant gains or protections for tea garden workers.²⁰

COVID-19 IN THE TEA GARDEN COMMUNITY

Tea garden activist and AHA! small grant recipient Mohan Rabidas, founder of the nonprofit Jagoron Youth Forum,²¹ reports several ways in which COVID-19 has affected the communities. The direct impact of the COVID-19 pandemic accentuated other vulnerabilities.

Tea garden workers are at increased risk of contracting a severe case of COVID-19 due to undernutrition, weakened immune systems, and a low standard of living overall. With only basic medical facilities available in the tea gardens, patients who exhibit respiratory failure or other critical symptoms are unlikely to receive life-saving care. Furthermore, the denial of paid sick leave by employers means that tea garden workers can scarcely afford to take time off of work to recover from an infection. While most industries in Bangladesh experienced pandemic-related lockdowns in 2021, tea workers were expected to continue working.

Broader Bangladeshi challenges in communicating information about the pandemic accurately and countering misinformation, deliberate and otherwise, are particularly significant in the tea garden communities. Skepticism, misinformation, and discrimination surrounding COVID-19 are rampant among the tea community.²² Many workers believe that the coronavirus will not affect them. Others say that the virus is a curse from God, or that performing certain religious rituals—lighting candles and offering flowers, for instance—will ward off infection. After infections were reported in the tea gardens, people experiencing fever or cough were shunned as potential COVID-19 cases. Harmful rumors and hate speech spread: Tea Garden workers belonging to the Dalit caste, already marginalized and excluded, were scapegoated as virus spreaders. Ethnic groups that eat pork were also blamed for the disease.

Thus, the COVID-19 crisis has the potential to exacerbate poverty and social tensions in the tea gardens. School closures, lockdowns, and pandemic-related supply chain disruptions leave disadvantaged families still further behind in educational advancement and even more economically needy. The strain on the health care system, overwhelmed by waves of COVID-19 infection, will make routine medical services harder for tea garden workers to access. Rumors and misinformation about the coronavirus prevent tea garden workers from taking effective health precautions, on the one hand, and drive hate speech and discrimination among different ethnic communities on the estates, on the other. In all of this, the root causes of tea garden workers' deprivation and vulnerability remain unaddressed.

PEACEBUILDING AND COVID-19 PREVENTION IN MOULVIBAZAR'S TEA GARDENS

Rabidas, the son of a tea garden worker, has spent years championing wage increase, literacy, health care, and other issues on behalf of the tea garden community. Since the majority of the workforce is female, many of Rabidas' initiatives focus on areas such as menstrual hygiene, family planning, and women's economic empowerment.

With the onset of the COVID-19 emergency, Rabidas tailored his outreach and advocacy efforts to address the unique threats posed by the pandemic. His intervention, sponsored by AHA!, aimed to raise awareness about COVID-19, counter hate speech and misinformation, and promote social cohesion and a unified health response in 14 tea estates in Sylhet's Moulvibazar District, benefiting more than 10,000 workers and their families.

¹⁹ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_563692.pdf, p. 41.

²⁰ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_563692.pdf

²¹ <https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/nation-builders-tomorrow/inside-the-cha-polli-1535293>

²² Observation highlighted in grantee discussions with communities

Rabidas’ team held a seminar on the role of youth in peacebuilding and social cohesion in each of Moulvibazar’s seven subdistricts. From a total of 210 youth participants—30 in each seminar—an ethnically, religiously, and socioeconomically diverse group of 14 were chosen as peacebuilding representatives for the COVID-19 initiative. Half of this cohort were women. The group’s mandate was to raise awareness of the coronavirus in the targeted tea estates and villages, distribute critical health supplies, manage isolation wards for infected patients, and collaborate with local religious leaders and panchayet members to promote harmony and reduce intercommunal tensions.

Scheduled to run for 13 months (November 2020 to December 2021), some programming had to be canceled or modified due to pandemic restrictions. However, youth participants implemented a number of important project activities, including distribution of informational leaflets, masks, and hand sanitizer to the target population to prevent the spread of COVID-19, procurement of oxygen cylinders, setting up and managing isolation wards, and administering food and medicine to inpatients. Youth leaders also organized vaccine registration drives and arranged transportation to vaccination sites, removing the major logistical and informational barriers to the vaccine for Moulvibazar’s tea garden workers. These interventions effectively reduced community spread of the virus and saved the lives of more than 50 critically ill COVID-19 patients who were dependent on oxygen.

In terms of social cohesion and peacebuilding, youth leaders participated in seminars and workshops on peacebuilding and held meetings with religious leaders to discuss interfaith harmony. In a time of heightened tensions and hate speech, the significance of this type of outreach should not be underestimated. As Rabidas’ team engaged in peacebuilding and COVID-19 prevention measures, they continued their longer-term advocacy and community development efforts in education, women’s health, and socioeconomic development.



Image source: Unsplash <https://unsplash.com/photos/mhJODzwwCtg>

ENSURING TEA GARDEN WORKERS' RIGHTS BEYOND COVID-19

As South Asian governments pursue policies and interventions to address the effects of COVID-19, they need to give priority to the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society. Rabidas' grassroots work in peacebuilding, health, and community development highlights the need for far-reaching policy reforms affecting the tea garden community. Tea garden workers are vulnerable primarily because a system of coercive labor isolates them, denies basic rights, and removes viable livelihood alternatives. This needs high level government attention, as to date the the state has not put significant pressure on tea companies to fulfill their legal obligations by providing fair, safe, and healthy conditions for employees.

Specific recommendations emerging from Rabidas's work with the communities include the following:

- Give priority to developing infrastructure and sanitation on the tea estates. Workers need safe, reliable water supplies and latrines.
- Meet urgent needs for schools and medical facilities on the tea estates are urgently needed, in number and quality, with qualified staff to provide services.
- Enforce required standards by companies for amenities; this calls for stronger, applied, regular monitoring mechanisms for health safety in the tea plantations and application of penalties in cases of employer negligence and noncompliance.
- Ensure that tea garden workers labor rights are protected. Significant steps could include expectations of written contracts, assurances against arbitrary wage deductions, overwork without pay, leave denial, and other exploitative practices.
- Address the violation of national labor laws whereby many long-term workers are classified as temporary, barring them from job benefits. Others are excluded from the Provident Fund, which all long-term workers are entitled to.
- Wages in the tea sector remain pitifully low in relation to other industries but could be addressed with state oversight and enforcement.
- Assure and uphold tea garden workers' land rights, including preventing illegal land seizures and restrictive company policies that prevent families from building adequate housing or becoming self-sufficient through land-based income-generation activities, despite having lived in the labor lines for a century and a half. Since tea plantations operate on land leased from the state, the state can and should institute reforms enabling workers to own and develop the land on which they live.
- Address systemic factors that create poor health, poor life chances, and heightened potential for group conflict.

The COVID-19 emergencies highlight matters that need attention and present an opportunity to address the root causes of tea workers' vulnerability.

This paper is one of a series of research elements produced by the European Union funded AHA! Awareness with Human Action project that seeks to contribute to the response efforts of the COVID-19 pandemic by preventing conflict and building social cohesion in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and broader South Asia. The AHA! project is implemented by a consortium of project partners, including the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers/Finn Church Aid, World Faiths Development Dialogue, the Center for Peace and Justice – Brac University, the Center for Communication and Development of Bangladesh, Islamic Relief Worldwide, the Youth Development Foundation, and Sarvodaya.

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