Balancing economics and public health
Policy implications of COVID-19

July 2020

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic is far more than a health crisis as it is impacting poverty and inequalities at a global scale. Emerging and developing countries like Bangladesh are particularly vulnerable. The crisis is predicted to undo decades of development and growth that has helped to reduce poverty.

While the COVID-19 socio-economic risks can be ascertained by economic sectors, households or firms, a regional level mapping of the vulnerabilities provides significant advantages for the different ministries in the Bangladesh in targeting and allocating limited financial resources to the most vulnerable regions. This approach can complement the public health based zoning approach already adopted in some areas. Moreover, this approach can use already existing data from surveys (e.g. HIES, LFS) without having to wait for new, post-COVID-19 rounds of nationally representative data collection.

The regional vulnerability framework begins with two basic risk exposures to prioritize economic vulnerability (**Figure 1**): food insecurity and poverty risk; and, dependence on migration remittance. Food insecurity captures the ability of individuals and households to meet their basic needs. Our research shows that migrant-sending and remittance-dependent households have been among the hardest hit economically due to pandemic-related restrictions on. While these two criteria can provide a basic assessment of the risk exposure, a more comprehensive measure or economic risk vulnerabilities should also include, pre-COVID-19 poverty, dependence on social safety nets and susceptibility to natural disasters like cyclones and floods (**Figure 2**).

Measures of economic vulnerability should be tracked in order to guide regional policy for and confronting the health and economic effects of COVID-19. This type of surveillance will help reveal what's needed, where, and when, ensuring not only that the most vulnerable families are able to overcome the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic but also keeping track og whether that Bangladesh remains on track to reach SDG and growth goals to reach Middle Income status.

Key Insights

- Conditions and viable risk mitigation strategies vary not only by health exposure, but also underlying economic vulnerabilities
- Underdeveloped health systems interact with exposure to food security, poverty, migration prevalence and other factors to increase a region's vulnerability to COVID-19
- Key determinants of economic priority include the contribution to meeting basic needs, maintaining price stability, and ensuring income support for the most vulnerable households

Implications

- Conduct systematic data collection of indicators. For example, short, high-frequency phone surveys from a representative nationwide sample can be used to monitor food security and other measures of well-being in different regions of the country
- Build an online portal for data visualization with tracking of the key socio-economic variables that can be used by policy makers and legislators to ensure that Bangladesh is on track to provide support for its most vulnerable populations. This state-of-the-art for presenting data will also enable Bangladesh to present itself to global development community reflecting transparency and sophistication of its ICT platform that is in line with those in developed countries. ***Figure 3*** provides an example of COVID-19 track in the United States that can be used as a model for this exercise.
- Coordinate with NGOs throughout the country to make sure that their programs and resource allocations are sensitive to local needs
- Collaborate with research partners to conduct assessments

Recommendations for Specific Ministries

Ministry of Information and Communication Technology
- Set up of the COVID tracker

Ministry of Agriculture
- Tracking agricultural subsidies
- Tracking fluctuations in commodity prices at local level

Ministry of Food, Ministry of Disaster Management & Relief
- Targeting VGD, VGF, FFW and other safety nets

Ministry of Health, Director General of Health Services (DGHS)
- Tracking health resources at the local level

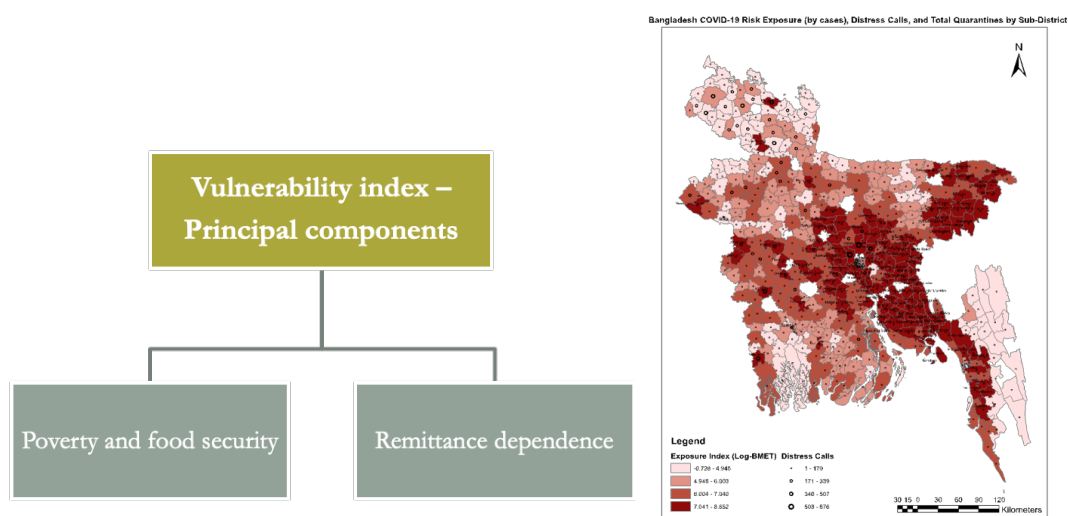***Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change***
- Tracking climate related incidences and impact on regions due to climate disasters like floods, cyclones
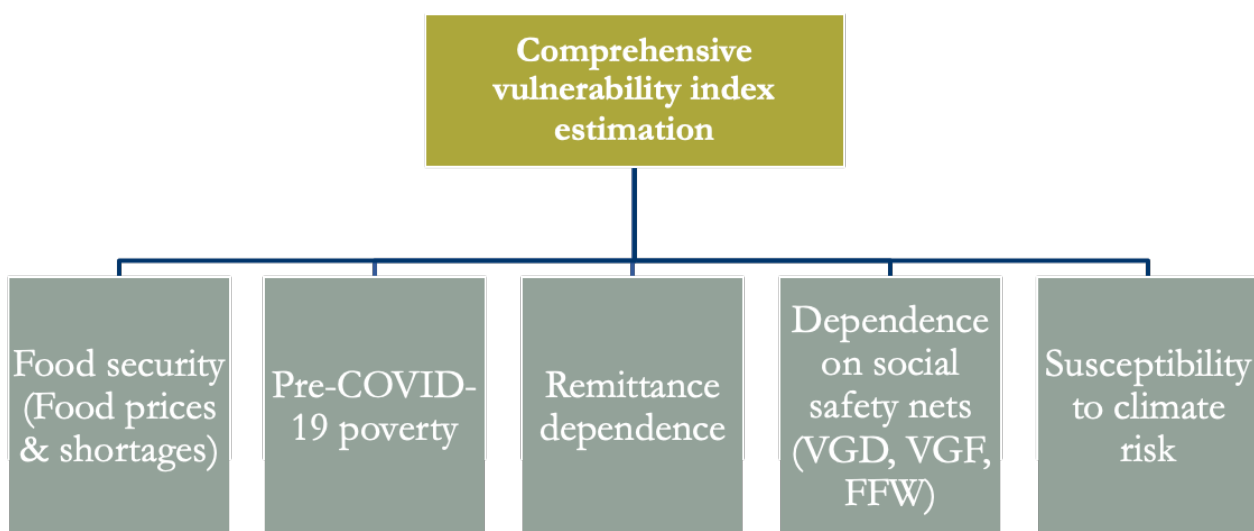
Contact Details

Research on the above is being conducted under the Yale Research Initiative on Innovation and Scale (Y-RISE). Please contact Dr Mushfiq Mobarak (ahmed.mobarak@yale.edu), Faculty Director at Y-RISE for facilitating further research and data tracking on topics related to those above.

Figures and Tables

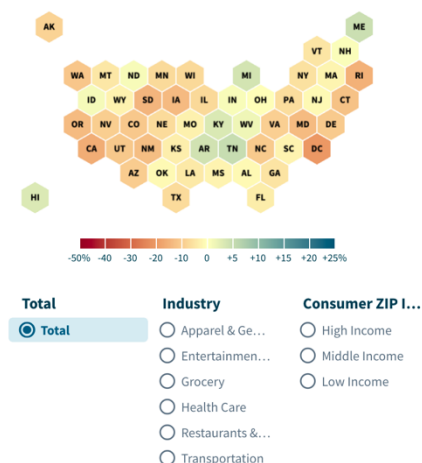## *Figure 1: Proposed Vulnerability Index – High Priority Starting Point*

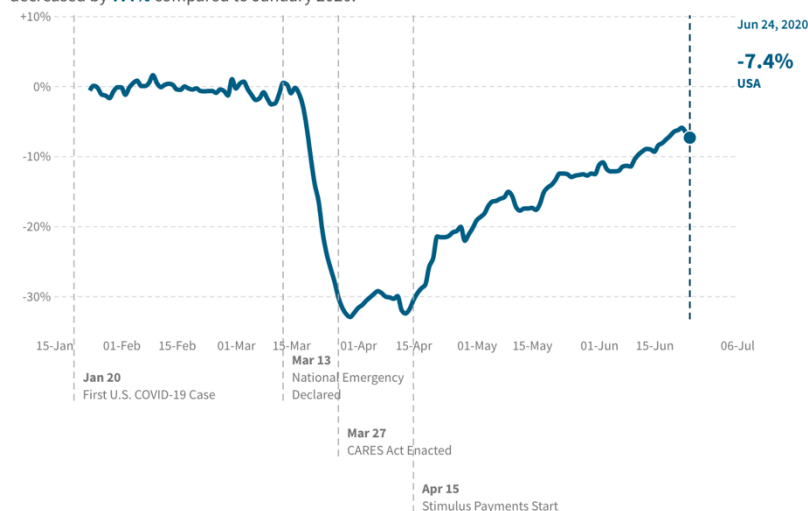## *Figure 2: Proposed Vulnerability Index – Comprehensive Measures*

Figure 3: Example of COVID-19 Socio-Economic Tracking in the United States

Table 1: Further Data Collection and Tracking

Govt Ministry/Agency	Data
A2i	Progress on SDG indicators
Ministry of Agriculture	Tracking distribution of food subsidies
Ministry of Food, Ministry of Disaster Management & Relief	Tracking safety net programs, distribution of relief aid
Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change	Tracking areas prone to climate risk (floods, cyclones)
Surveys (High Frequency Mobile surveys)	Health, Employment, Income, Consumption
Telecom Companies	Mobility and Movement, Money Transfers, Hotline Calls