

Poverty during Covid-19 in Bangladesh: Response, Resilience and Way Forward

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has proved itself to be one of the most vital challenges to overall development both locally and globally. The worldwide crisis has drastically worsened global poverty with the number of additional poor reaching up to 100 million by 2020. For developing countries like Bangladesh, economic stagnation has pushed a large population back into poverty. The country's national poverty rate rose to 29.5 percent in the first couple of months after the first case was detected. Using secondary literature - mostly newspapers, online data sources and journal articles, the study portrays the new dimension of poverty during the pandemic. It also highlights responses from people and policies employed by the government to tackle the loss. Though the government has taken a number of initiatives to stabilize the economy, the results are yet to show impact. Considering the present findings, it is essential to implement the national development strategies initiated already, and introduce time-oriented policies to help manage the pandemic as well as meet the goal of eradicating poverty in all its forms by 2030.

Key Words: Poverty, New Poor, Economy, Sustainable Development, Covid-19

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Introduction

In recent days, poverty inclination due to the pandemic stands as one of the most vital challenges to overall development not only here in Bangladesh but also around the globe. Hence, it is high time to investigate reasons behind the sudden steepness of poverty curves. Challenges can be overcome easily only if they are identified correctly and the faster the problems regarding any issue are identified, the easier the solutions become.

Once the pandemic started, countries around the world imposed restrictions on mobility of people and material across borders and also within national boundaries. Though movement restrictions on materials were lifted shortly after initiation, mobility of persons beyond national boundaries is yet to return to normalcy. These unusual restrictions certainly disrupted the economic activity, leading to a slump in growth all over the world. Frustratingly, the world economy is likely to take a good number of months, if not years, to come back to stability and then experience growth. Most countries in the world are already facing or assumed to face a recession due to the pandemic and it might be the worst possible one globally since 1870. In early 2020, the estimated number of extremely poor people globally was 700 million. Moreover, the World Bank projects that a further 88 million to 115 million people are likely to be pauperized by the end of this year. According to this projection, the number of potential poor may reach up to 150 million by 2021 (Abed, 2020). President of the World Bank Group, David Malpass, states, "The pandemic and global recession may cause over 1.4 percent of the world's population to fall into extreme poverty" (World Bank, 2020).

Developed economies are suspected to shrink by around 7 percent and as such the effect of the same shall resonate over to the outlook for emerging markets and developing economies (World Bank, 2020). This economic break down is likely to make the whole world suffer for years. The situation is not different here in Bangladesh. The situation being faced now is definitely more critical than in the past few decades. A good number of people have lost their jobs, some have been given with temporary layoffs and other groups continue working with reduced payroll, with no other alternatives to resort to.

On the other hand, the processes of eliminating hunger and ameliorating health conditions are also affected adversely. The country's national poverty rate rose to 29.5 percent by mid-2020 with the impact of Covid-19. The aftermath also cost tens of millions of people losing their jobs and forced them down below the poverty line (Ovi, 2020). The people living in both urban and rural areas of Bangladesh, mostly below the poverty line, are considered here as the

target population for the investigation. It should be mentioned that, while the country is facing a devastating situation in the field of unemployment, both in the formal and informal sectors, the informal employees or workers have been suffering the most. In countries like Bangladesh, a majority of workers are in the informal sector and live hand to mouth, with very little or no savings. However, to depict a broader and more comprehensive poverty situation of the country, a few other segments of people who do not live below the poverty line but have become underprivileged significantly due to the pandemic are included in this research. The paper also contains the remedies and policies that have been adopted by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to combat the sudden undesirable impoverishment.

Setting the Context: Analyzing the Trend of Poverty in Bangladesh

Though declining, the incidence of poverty in Bangladesh is one of the highest in the world. Elimination of poverty is a fundamental challenge for Bangladesh and has been seen as one of the major hindrances to national development (Ferdousi & Dehai, 2014). In recent years, Bangladesh has gained notable achievements in fighting against poverty, although, relative poverty and depth of poverty are still very high. According to the Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016, the standalone data source for estimating household income, expenditure, consumption, income inequality and incidence of poverty in the country, the incidence of poverty in Bangladesh is 24.3 percent. It means that, every one person in four is poor considering the universally accepted concept of poverty line income (HIES, 2016). In this context, like many other countries, poverty still remains a vital concern for Bangladesh. Hence, the issue gets immense priority in all kinds of development planning.

Comparison of and discussion on Incidences of Poverty

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) conducts an estimation of poverty once every five years. The latest survey was done in 2016. According to the report, the rate of poverty reduced substantially in the last two decades. The poverty rate reduced from 31.5 percent to 24.3 percent, and, extreme poverty reduced from 17.6 percent to 12.9 percent during 2010-2016. It should be mentioned here that, the incidence of poverty is measured using the upper poverty line and extreme poverty is measured using the lower poverty line income. The poverty gap which measures depth of poverty using the upper poverty line was 6.5 percent in 2010, and fell to 5.0 percent in 2016. Again, the poverty gap using the lower poverty line reduced from 3.1 percent in 2010 to 2.3 percent in 2016. The following graph shows the declining trend in the incidence of poverty in the last two decades.

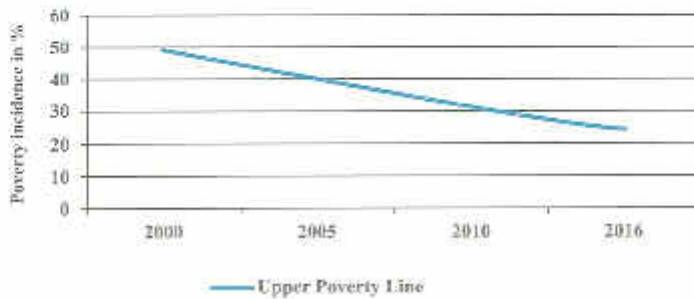


Figure 1: Incidence of Poverty in Bangladesh from 2000 to 2016

Source: Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES), 2016

The figure above shows a consistent declining trend in incidence of poverty which has been possible because of enormous efforts done by the GoB and different non-government organizations (NGOs).

Trend in National, Urban and Rural Poverty

Using the upper poverty line, in HIES 2016, the Head Count Rates (HCR) of incidences of poverty were estimated at 26.4 percent in rural areas and 18.9 percent in urban areas. In HIES 2010, these rates were 35.2 percent and 21.3 percent in rural and urban areas respectively. The findings show that, poverty rate declines more rapidly in rural areas than in urban areas. The reduction in HCR was 8.8 percent in rural areas and 2.4 percent in urban areas during the period 2010 to 2016. In rural areas, the reduction was 3.7 times higher than than in urban areas and the possible reasons include rural area concentrated poverty reduction strategies such as Safety Net Programmes (SNPs). Figure 2 shows the comparison between rural and urban poverty in Bangladesh.

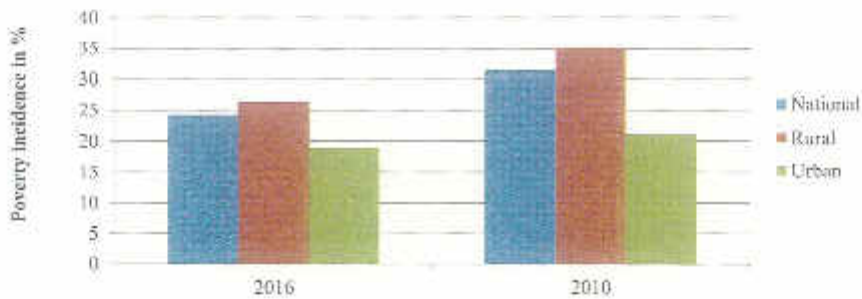


Figure 2: Comparison between Rural and Urban Poverty in Bangladesh

Source: Household Income Expenditure Survey (HIES), 2010 and 2016

Triumphs in Alleviating Poverty

Increased access to the safety net programmes contributed substantially to the reduction of poverty. Both the number of beneficiaries and volume of safety nets increased in recent years (Rahman, 2012). The country has just passed the era of the 7th Five Year Plan (2016-2020), where the primary target was to reduce poverty and extreme poverty to 18.6 percent and 8.9 percent respectively at the end of the planning period. The new five year plan, 8th Five Year Plan (2021-2025), has been prescribed to continue achievement of further targets. Despite substantial reduction of poverty in the last two decades, the issues of inequality, unemployment and emerging dimensions of poverty are still a matter of immense concern.

New Forms and Dimensions of Poverty in 2020

Prior to 2020, Bangladesh saw great progress in poverty reduction, both relative and extreme poverty, and above all, in economic growth. The economy was growing at a steady rate and the benefits trickled down to the lowest quintile income group of people. However, the unfortunate tale for the country is that while it was achieving targets on poverty and hunger elimination, the crisis deepened due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A huge bulk of new poor, who were previously non-poor or were potentially vulnerable to becoming poor, have been added to the already poor group. The prolonged lockdown has halted all the major development activities and the country is facing its worst poverty incidence with new dimensions of poverty; including food poverty, non-food poverty, multidimensional poverty, among others (Bangladesh Bank, 2020).

Objectives and Methodology

The present investigation has an objective to portray the new poverty situation during the pandemic Covid-19, to lay bare the responses from people and policies taken by the government in tackling the loss. The study has been made on the basis of secondary sources of data. In this regard, content analysis was the method of the study. It holds an important place in the methodology of investigation, capable of accepting unstructured data as well as analyzing observed phenomena (Aminuzzaman, 2011). The nature and availability of data along with the information collected from the secondary sources were the reasons behind choosing content analysis as the method of the study.

The sources of relevant data and information were books, articles, reports, editorials, journals, interviews, and open source online platforms. However, as very few academic investigations have been done to assess poverty dynamics in Bangladesh during the pandemic, mostly literatures of newspapers along with few scientific studies were consulted. Collected data and information were arranged in line with characteristics of the study and were presented following statistical tools, citation, quotes, etc.

Discussion and Analysis

Poverty during Covid-19 in Bangladesh

The economic growth in Bangladesh was encouraging over the past few years but has been unfortunately undermined to a great extent for the turmoil induced by the pandemic. It has mostly affected the country's primary earning sources e.g. trade, the garment industry, remittance and so on. It is very pathetic to imagine that, while the country was getting ready to achieve SDGs including zero poverty and had already made a stronger foothold than before, a deep crisis evolved due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The sudden lockdown, restriction to movement and other changes adopted jeopardized achievements of Bangladesh in reducing poverty. The country has now started facing the worst poverty incidence with new dimensions. In different studies it has been revealed that, the deficiency or vacuum created by the pandemic is undoubtedly responsible for presenting us with not less than 20 million new poor in the country (Jamal, 2021). Moreover, due to an enormous number of people in urban areas, especially in the informal sector, employees have lost their jobs, experienced salary reduction and as a result urban poverty has increased 3-fold. In fact, the crisis is making poor people poorer and they are not only suffering economically but also being deprived of nutritious food.

basic medication, treatment, and to an extent even of suitable shelter to live in. The news portal DW published that out of 100.22 million people, 53.64 million people are extremely poor and at high risk of economic and health vulnerabilities. This bulk of people can manage to earn not more than 160 taka even after working throughout the day (Ahmed, 2020).

In the year 2019, a total of 135 million people around the world suffered from severe food insecurity (Mottaleb, Mainuddin & Sonobe, 2020). In the same year, Bangladesh frustratingly ranked 83rd out of 113 countries in the Index of Global Food Security whereas the ranking of Bangladesh was 102 out of 119 countries as mentioned in a study from 2006 (Wiesmann, Weingärtner & Schöninger, 2006). A World Bank report referred that almost 68 percent of the urban habitants of Dhaka and Chittagong faced layoffs with the turmoil of the pandemic. Worse is the prediction of income loss to be experienced by the daily and weekly workers than the salaried ones (Jamal, 2021).

A New Paradigm of Poverty - A New Challenge

Besides the traditional poverty frontiers we have come across, a few more dimensions of impoverishment have emerged since the pandemic commenced. It is known that a certain portion of the society remains underprivileged and are the main driving force behind poverty generation within any society or country. Moreover, poverty is usually assumed as a result of gradual development of lack of resources or privileges among certain groups of people, less or more in number. Unfortunately, Covid-19 changed these assumptions to a great extent socially, economically, psychologically, physiologically, psychographically and in other ways by presenting drastic and sudden impoverishment worldwide. The pandemic welcomed severe damage to every sector of the world economy as well as education and the unemployed youth now find themselves in boundless misery. Bangladesh is not an exception to these aspects.

Lockdowns to contain the virus are the biggest disruptions to economic, social and job related sectors that the country has seen in decades. With the government announcement of general holidays, from March 26, around 1 crore mobile phone users left the capital as revealed by the National Telecom Monitoring Centre (NTMC). Assuming that a good number of members of the families who left the city did not have phones; the total number of people leaving Dhaka might have been more than the number calculated by the NTMC. Roughly the number is assumed to be more than half of the total population of the city which is 21 million officially (Rashid & Khaled, 2020).

People in Bangladesh are mostly employed in the informal sector than in the formal ones. To be specific, according to the news published by The Daily Star, more than 5 crore people are involved in informal sectors whereas, only around a crore is involved in the formal sector. Though they contribute more than 40 percent to the GDP, as they work on a daily basis and receive cash as their payment, they hardly enjoy any job security (Jamal, 2021). The boundless misery of poor people living in city slums has become worse, and they are suffering from financial difficulties as well as health and sanitation problems. A daily laborer Imran Hossain, known as a jack-of-all-trades at his area in Cumilla, works as an electrician, as a mason and as a plumber also. With all these jobs, he manages to earn around 500 taka per day. Unfortunately, after lockdown in March he could hardly find any work as nobody called him for work. Consequently, he is now facing considerable difficulty to maintain his family expenditure. He can not even ensure the basic human needs including food and shelter for his family. The locally renowned all-rounder Hossain is one of the 80 to 90 percent people in the country involved in the informal job sector and the worst victims of the pandemic in terms of unemployment (Ahmed, 2020).

The noble peace prize laureate, Dr. Yunus, also opines in the same line, that the impact of the pandemic on people in the informal sector is more devastating. He urged upon recognizing the informal sector workers as entrepreneurs. He further mentioned about the necessity of establishing "social business micro-entrepreneurial banks" to assist them financially so that they can stand back up again (Dhaka Tribune, 2020). Though all the societies including different segments at all levels are affected by the prevailing pandemic, its aftermath is largely damaging the most underprivileged group. Mentionable are the cases of garments workers mostly at lower levels, seasonal workers in private sectors, newly graduates hunting for jobs, workers in the tourism and hospitality sector at all levels, small and medium entrepreneurs (SME) and last but not the least the day laborers. According to a study on national food security by BRAC, farmers of Bangladesh reported facing a loss amounting to 565.36 billion taka as a result of the 45 day lockdown imposed in March and May 2020 (BRAC, 2020). Subsequently, under the circumstances, these segments of poor people are hardly being able to pay attention to their other human needs like education, comfort, social security and so on.

In the field of export, the manufacturing sector of the country has also faced a huge blow particularly the apparel sector, which accounts for nearly 80 percent of the country's entire export earnings and ensures the livelihood of at least 4 million workers. Export Promotion Bureau of Bangladesh (EPB) stated that,

in March 2020, the earnings from export were Taka 44.14 billion. It was Taka 256.66 billion in March 2019 (EPB, 2019-2020). The remittance sector has also collapsed heavily due to the pandemic. In March and April, remittance of the country dropped by 12 percent and 25 percent respectively. A good number of migrant workers have returned and some were in the queue for the same as a result of losing their jobs. The overall remittance dropped roughly to 22 percent in 2020 due to the pandemic (Ahmed, 2020).

Post Pandemic Poverty Situation

It has been almost a year since the virus began spreading around the world. Though a lot has been learnt about the virus, about the ways to live and work in lockdown and comprehensively about the so called new normal, its aftermath is yet to be realized. As learnt from previous experiences of epidemics around the world like HIV/AIDS and Ebola, pandemics always emerge along with catastrophes in food security caused by a sudden price hike of food stuffs in affected countries. The catastrophic effect becomes more disastrous to the vulnerable including women, children and marginal people than to others. History reminds us that more than an additional 13 million people went below the poverty line due to the food price hike during 2007-08 (Mottaleb et al., 2020).

Under these circumstances, according to the World Bank, the goal of ending poverty by 2030 seems beyond reach if a swift, significant and substantial policy action is not adopted with an immediate effect. Poverty rate could be around 7 percent by the end of the year 2030 (World Bank, 2020). However, if viewed in an optimistic way, Covid-19 may be considered as a temporary shock to economic growth. In fact, China may be considered as the inspirational example for many other countries around the world as they had a V-shaped recession and recovery, establishing the possibility of a quick economic return (Kharas, 2020).

Response and Resilience of New Poor to Covid-19

The bombshell effects of Covid-19 compelled people around the world to change their lifestyle to the now widely known 'New Normal'. People started maintaining social distancing, changing food habit, and increasing health consciousness. The poor and even many of the lower middle class families started struggling with economic instability or insecurity to some extent. Many exhausted their total savings in the initial months of the pandemic to mitigate joblessness and other economic thrusts that arrived due to Covid-19. Some started doing lower graded jobs to at least be able to live hand to mouth.

However, it did not take long to turn around. Besides many others, community savings groups in rural southwest Bangladesh have been working as trump card in reviving the devastated local economics. In the said area of the country 25 to 34 percent households earn less than 160 taka a day. World Vision carried out an impact assessment on Covid-19 in June 2020. In the assessment 84.9 percent of households are found participating in the village savings and lending associations, though the same households had suffered from economic instability in the previous month (CDKN, 2020).

Finally, after living with the Corona Virus for more than a year, it is now time to capitalize the few opportunities derived out of the pandemic itself. With the change of life style, food habit and even culture, the business and the economic mechanisms are also modified. As such the overall economic and business environment and culture have also changed a lot. In this pristine environment, individuals, groups, companies and even countries are trying to capture the new opportunities with a view to regaining their economic stability and moving beyond.

The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Global Threat to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 1- No Poverty

As it is well known, the world has been pursuing the most inclusive and comprehensive international development agenda - Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) from the middle of the last decade. SDGs are posited and conceived as “a plan of concerted action for people, planet and prosperity” (UNDP, 2015). All the signatory countries and stakeholders have promised to implement this plan in collaborative partnership by 2030. There are 17 specific goals in this universal development prescription covering almost all the areas including economy, society, and environment. Among other goals, the one related to alleviating poverty and hunger gets the supreme attention.

According to the new universal agenda - Agenda 2030, eradicating poverty from all its forms and dimensions is considered to be the greatest global challenge. Hence, the very first goal of SDGs is about “No Poverty” meaning to “end poverty in all its forms everywhere” by 2030 (UNDP, 2015). Under this goal, there are five specific targets where it has clearly been mentioned that all the signatory countries have promised to eradicate poverty in all its forms and poverty-induced discrimination everywhere within the end of this decade. The global standard mentions that people living below \$1.25 and \$3 per day are considered as extreme poor and moderate poor respectively (World Bank, 2016). Countries have agreed upon halving the proportion of all people living in poverty along with eradicating extreme poverty from everywhere

within the stipulated time. As a plan of action, all the countries are directed to have appropriate social protection systems and equal rights for all its poor and vulnerable citizens through building their resilience (Khan & Sultana, 2020).

However, the ongoing pandemic Covid-19 assumes global recession to be worse than the 2007-09 financial crisis and poses a major threat towards achieving the UN SDGs by the stipulated time (Behravesch & Rocha, 2020). The global economy collapsed in the first quarter of 2020 due to massive shutdown, fear and uncertainty. In 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) estimated the global economy to shrink by 3 percent and the global trade by 13 to 20 percent. The World Bank made a forecast on the GDP growth of the South Asian region saying that it might be between the ranges of 1.8 to 2.8 percent (Sumner, Hoy & Ortiz-Juarez, 2020). The current trend suspects that the process of the implementation of the SDGs worldwide might be delayed (Behravesch & Rocha, 2020). Global economic downturn and loss in social and institutional capacity of states might linger execution of development targets related to SDG 1 whereas it is more important now than it was before (Filho, Brandli, Salvia, Rayman-Bacchus & Platje, 2020). It is quite obvious for any economy to go through crises e.g. a shortage of elementary needs including food, clothing, and medicine, loss of jobs, economic and financial loss, food insecurity, famine, social conflicts, and deaths during a pandemic (Truog, Christine Mitchell & Daley, 2020). Considering the global hard-hit, the claim is evident for the economy of Bangladesh as well (Shammi, 2020).

Policy Implications and Way Forward to Combat Covid-19 Induced Poverty: Stabilizing the Economy

Bangladesh, currently, is pursuing a few development goals. The Perspective Plan, which targets to graduate the country to a developed one, is to be achieved by 2041. In the year 2021, the country already achieved the status of a developing country, as announced by the Committee for Development Policy of the United Nations (UN CDP), after meeting all three eligibility criteria i.e. income per capita, human assets, and economic and environmental vulnerability for LDC graduation. However, the exit from the group is set to be in 2026, even though it was in 2024 prior to the advent of the pandemic (The Daily Star, 2021). Hence, the pandemic has lingered the process of development by creating multidimensional threats for the economy of Bangladesh.

The 8th Five Year Plan (2021-2025), titled "Promoting Prosperity and Fostering Inclusiveness" of the country, has set a target to attain 8.5 percent GDP growth and reduce the poverty incidence to 15.6 percent by the end of

the period (Khatun, 2020). As Covid-19 has deteriorated economic and social conditions, the GoB has taken a comprehensive plan to stabilize the volatile economy. The plan includes four basic strategies: a) discouraging luxury expenditure and increasing government spending, b) creating loan facilities at subsidized interest rates through commercial banks, c) expanding the coverage of government's social safety net programmes targeting ultra-poor and d) increasing money supply to the economy. The government has declared a number of stimulus packages worth Taka 103,117 crore, which is equivalent to 3.7 percent of the country's GDP, to finance different strategies to re-stabilize the economy (MoF, 2020).

As it is already mentioned that, the trade and commerce has faced a drastic fall at the onset of the pandemic, jobs of about 5 million workers in export industry were threatened. To tackle this crisis, a fund of Taka 5,000 crore has been allocated for the export oriented industries. Two working capital loans of Taka 30,000 crore and Taka 20,000 crore have been created at a subsidized rate for large industries and Cottage, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (CMSMEs) of the country respectively. However, a special focus of the comprehensive plan is to reduce new poverty and make the ultra-poor survive in the pandemic. Government has widened the social safety net programs to protect this ultra-poor section of the population from unpredicted unemployment. Direct cash transfers of Taka 2,500 each has been provided to 50 lakh selected families countrywide. Moreover, for the homeless population, Taka 2,130 crore has been allocated to construct new houses. Besides these welfare activities, another policy has been taken to expand low-interest credit facilities to the poor farmers, unemployed youths and repatriated overseas workers (MoF, 2020). All the initiatives are targeted to combat the pandemic induced economic loss and bring the overall economy to the pre-covid phase, if not better than that.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic made all the nightmares against development come true or nearly true in reality. Many have already started labeling this little virus as the biggest monster that has ever evolved on the red carpet of the world economy, along with the overall development and prosperity of humanity. Besides consuming millions of lives, the monster has already ensured that more than 120 million people suffer physically after getting infected. This is on top of the economic and other damages it has brought, along with presenting the world with a huge number of new poor. Identifying the exact economic damage faced by the world economy from the pandemic Covid-19 is a complex matter. However, economists around the globe are opining in the same line, forecasting

a severe adverse footprint on the global economy. Undoubtedly, Covid-19 has already established itself as one of the biggest global challenges that has ever happened to the world; it might be the biggest after World War II. Restrictions on mobility and forcefully adopted other new normal activities starting with the social distancing, in response to the advent of the new virus emerged like a bombshell on the world system, most importantly on the economy. The corona virus outbreak has severely disrupted the global economy. All the economies, be it developed or developing, are suspected to shrink and it might take quite a long time to overcome the losses and sufferings induced from the pandemic.

The sudden lockdown and restriction in movement adopted due to the pandemic jeopardized all achievements made by Bangladesh in reducing poverty. Consequently, the country started facing the worst poverty incidence with new dimensions which will delay in the achievement of development goals by the stipulated time. It is quite obvious that, if a swift, significant and substantial policy action is not adopted with an immediate effect, the goal of ending poverty by 2030 seems beyond reach. However, the government of Bangladesh has taken the issue of recovering the economy with the highest concern; thus a number of recovery strategies have been adopted. A continuous persuasion in the planning and implementation strategies is necessary to meet development goals, especially the global development agenda - SDG, by the promised time. Hence, in this regard, further research should be done to examine the speed of recovering the economy to meet all the goals and targets related to eradicating poverty.

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