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ACTIVATING VILLAGE COURTS IN BANGLADESH PHASE II PROJECT

SMILE

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VILLAGE COURTS' RESPONSES TOWARDS COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Sujela's family not starving as Village Court stands by her with Covid-19's relief

The Activating Village Courts in Bangladesh Phase II Project (AVCB II), provides much needed access to justice for marginalized rural people. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the project demonstrated its dedication to caring for their beneficiaries by helping them enlist their names in the government's relief distribution database.

Sujela Begum (50), hailing from Jamalpur district has partial loss of vision and a mother of three visually impaired children. Her husband has also vision loss problem. Under this challenging situation, Sujela's brother blindsided her for 2 decimals of land that was registered in her name. To get her land back, Sujela had sought supports from local elites, to no avail. One day, Sujela stumbled



upon an awareness meeting of 'One Homestead, One Farm', a project run by the Government of Bangladesh. At that meeting, she came to know about the services of Village Court from a

Village Court Assistant, a front level staff of AVCB II.

With their support, she managed to get her land back and has also built her own house. Unfortunately, Sujela's

happy life was disrupted by the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, as her family was forced to stop begging, the only means of their survival. Unable to even manage a meal a day, she sought supports from the Village Court Assistant of her union, who was assisting Union Parishad in COVID-19 relief distribution. Considering her extreme poverty and vulnerability, her name was enlisted in the relief distribution database. She was provided a pack of relief consisting of rice, potato, pulse and soups immediately. Awaiting her next relief pack, Sujela remarks, "Village Court did not end their responsibility at just ensuring justice for me. During these trying times, they also saved my family from starving".

UNsung HEROES OF VILLAGE COURT: VCAs

Village Court Assistants (VCAs), front players of Village Court mostly support union parishads for registering cases along with raising awareness about its services. In response to Covid-19 pandemic and country wide lockdowns, in 27 districts of Activating Village Courts in Bangladesh Phase II Project, VCAs are assisting union parishads and communities in preparedness services including relief distribution works. They are working to raise awareness through miking, poster distribution, developing and cross-checking relief distribution list for ensuring services to the most needy and vulnerable peoples including poor beneficiaries of Village Court.



Managing a meal daily was a big struggle for Tuni Pahan, a day labourer of Noagaon. She is now happy having a packet of relief as the VCA assisted to enlist her name in the Covid-19 relief distribution list of her union.



In Moulvibazar, 11 families of tea garden workers lost their jobs due to sudden lockdowns. VCA of their union stood beside them by communicating Chairman of the Union Parishad and ensuring relief.



VCAs of Bagerhat assisted Union Parishads to cross-check the relief distribution list, also ensured names of the poor and vulnerable beneficiaries of Village Courts as well as community people there.

PUBLICATION



For raising awareness on prevention of Covid-19 pandemic among community people, AVCB II Project printed and distributed 25,000 posters at local level



Need of children also counted

Village Court Assistants (VCAs) deal with parents, making them aware about services of Village Court and supporting them with cases are their main priority. When responding Covid-19 pandemic, fulfilling basic needs of children also drew their attention and importance. Spread of Corona virus has made Mizanur Rahman, a day labourer of Barguna jobless, as soil cutting jobs in his village totally stopped. Anxieties of his wife Sheema, a housewife became endless in managing baby foods for their one-year daughter beside

two sons. She begged support from her neighbors, but they were also passing hard times to response her need. Sheema, who attended a court-yard meeting of Village Court earlier, contacted VCA of her union as a last measure. Her worries wiped off as the VCA could assist her in managing enough baby foods in next day from the fund of his Union Parishad with support of its chairman. Mizanur and his wife became thankful to Village Court as their family was also included in the relief distribution list, an assurance their children would no longer go to bed hungry in future.

No more food crisis for Sufia and her elderly mother

At the age of 10, Sufia Begum's right hand and right leg became paralyzed. After death of her husband, she started begging to survive and taking care of her elderly mother. Due to country wide lockdowns for preventing Covid-19 pandemic, movement in public places also restricted in her district Gopalganj. Days were appearing harder for her to manage food, as she could not roam around villages for alms, even, people were not willing to welcome her with assistance, due to fear of spreading corona virus.

In this situation, one of her villagers contacted Village Court Assistant (VCA) of her union to assist the family. As response, VCA collected details information of Sufia and consulted Chairman of Union Parishad to include her name in priority list for relief. "Without the food package I received consisting of rice, pulse, oil, salt and spices my mother and I would starve more. A relief card also decreases my worries in managing meals during this bad times" remarked Sufia.



Resolving cases not enough, Village Court stands by during hard days



Ismatara Begum, a day labourer of Kurigram is the only earning member in her family of four members. She could hardly earn BDT 3,500 (US\$ 42) monthly by working as a house maid. During country wide lockdown her major concern was having food rather than chances of being infected of Corona virus, as nobody showed interest to employ her as house maid recently. Her challenge soared taking care of her mentally retarded husband during the hard times.

In 2019, Ismatara could recover BDT 10,000 (US\$ 118) loan from one of her neighbours through Village Court. Her neighbor scolded her and denied paying back the amount which she could

not resolve with supports of local elites. Through Village Court she could solve her dispute within 16 days. This experience encouraged her to communicate Village Court Assistant (VCA) of her union in getting financial assistance during recent lockdown situation for preventing Covid-19 pandemic. "I had trust I would get relief support with assistance of Village Court's people and I received so. Within a week I got a food package and waiting for next relief from the union parishad" said Ismatara. VCA of her union also assisted many poor and vulnerable beneficiaries of Village Court in registering their names in the relief distribution list of the Union Parishad.

AVCB II Project responded to cyclone Amphan in coastal districts

To response super cyclone Amphan, struck in coastal areas of Bangladesh on 20 May 2020, UNDP supported 8 seaside districts including 6 districts of AVCB II Project. Some coastal districts were in great danger as hoisted highest danger signal number 10. For preparedness, UNDP joined hands with local administration and Union Parishads of Satkhira, Khulna, Bagerhat, Bhola, Barguna and Patuakhali districts, AVCB II working areas.

VCAs who mostly support union parishads for registering cases in Village Court along with raising awareness about its services, assisted union parishads and communities in preparedness of cyclone Amphan. As a member of Union Disaster Management Committee, they attended in preparedness meetings and supported in preparedness works. They collected information of local cyclone shelters and their capacity, assisted to hoist danger signals and miking for awareness, took initiative to



clean and disinfect the cyclone shelters, carrying elderly and vulnerable peoples to shelters, distribution of food, cleaning and sanitization materials (e.g. soap, mask, bleaching powder,

match, candle, dry food etc.) among the evacuated people, guiding people to maintain social distance as a preventive measure of Covid-19 pandemic in the shelters etc. District

representatives of the project also maintained close coordination and ensured stand by supports to the local administrations to minimize casualties, saving lives and livelihoods.

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