



# 3. COVID-INDUCED FOOD (IN)SECURITY IN SMALL CITIES ON THE GANGES-BRAHMAPUTRA-MEGHNA DELTA

The Living Deltas Hub research demonstrates that income and savings are critical for urban food security in the face of multihazard risks exacerbated by climate change. We have shown that empowering and strengthening local governments in small cities can play a key role in enhancing capacities to deal with risks associated with climate change and the global COVID pandemic.



Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office



Climate change & biodiversity



Science, research, technology



Humanitarian preparedness & response

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

2 ZERO HUNGER



3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES



16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS



## Achievements

Living Deltas has built on its strong partnership with the International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) in Bangladesh to understand the nature and impact of food insecurity of people in small cities in the Global South respond to transient and unexpected events, such as Cyclone Amphan which, combined with Covid-19, had a devastating impact on low-income communities living in small cities within the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) delta.

Living Deltas has drawn on current and previous research utilising interdisciplinary methods to demonstrate the prolonged lockdown resulted in reductions in both the quantity and quality of food consumed in delta communities. Our research demonstrated how middle-income households (without guaranteed income) suffered as much as, if not more than, low-income households in informal settlements, because they did not qualify for food relief or social safety net programmes. In order to cope, strategies involved curtailing consumption, relying on inexpensive starchy staples, increasing the share of total expenditure allocated to food, taking out loans and accessing relief. What is clear from our research is that food procurement and relationships with local governments need to be modified to reduce the precariousness of food and nutrition security in these small cities.

Our research explored: i) changes in food security due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown; ii) coping strategies utilised by residents; and iii) a comparison of food security during the pandemic between these small cities and large cities. We designed and executed a rapid assessment study using 30 remote telephone interviews between May 2020 and August 2020 to understand how low- and middle-income communities in small cities (population <200,000) were coping. The study focused on two coastal municipalities: Mongla and Noapara, located in Southwestern Bangladesh. Given the unprecedented circumstances we were innovative in designing the study using remote methods and appropriately collaborating with the right local partners to capture the lived experiences of residents in typically overlooked small cities. The COVID-19 pandemic has emerged as far more than a health crisis for the world's poor and

marginalised, exposing clear fault lines in food systems around the world.

An intersectional understanding of experience and position/power, and a commitment to gender equality and inclusion are embraced within the research. The case study represented, included and is of relevance to people of a wide range of ages and gender in the cities researched. Responses from interviewees were disaggregated by gender and age. Collected responses suggested that women remained at the forefront of household coping with food insecurity. For example: food and nutritional requirements of priority household members such as children were often met at the expense of the female members of the household.

## Innovation

Living Deltas researchers are one of the first groups to explore the lived experiences of residents in smaller cities and how food systems and food security in small cities are impacted by the pandemic. Small cities across the world are understudied, despite being home to a large proportion of the world's population, and small cities in deltas are growing, including due to changes triggered by climate change and biodiversity loss.

Our work has identified that:

1. Empowering and strengthening local governments in small cities can contribute to enhancing adaptive and absorptive capacities, but also to transformation (institutional strengthening, inclusion and empowerment). The shorter distance between the local government and residents in smaller cities enables local governments to act promptly and decisively. We are collaborating with ICCCAD to organise a multi-stakeholder forum in Mongla focusing on multilayering of hazards in small cities in deltaic environment to help municipalities and NGOs understand the interrelationship of social-cultural-environmental aspects to future and current risks.
2. Investing in social safety nets, savings programmes and urban agriculture could enhance absorptive capacities of the urban poor in smaller cities, meaning that they are better able to withstand shocks. For example, in Mongla prices of essentials such as rice, lentils and spices increased in the city during the lockdown as very little is grown in the surrounding area due to high salinity. We plan to collaborate with Paraa, a Bangladesh based organization who employ innovative and participatory approaches for promoting urban agriculture, to enhance food security and resilience of urban informal settlement dwellers.
3. Food affordability, as opposed to food availability in the market, contributed to the insecurity experienced during the lockdown. Low-income interviewees suggested that the local government's food relief provided them support, at least temporarily. However, lower to middle-income households without guaranteed income suffered as much as, if not more, because they do not qualify for food relief or social safety net programmes. Hidden or invisible food insecurity among middle-income households is a serious concern.
4. Covid-19 brought about food insecurity for the first time among some households (especially those with more than one member earning an income) in the informal settlements. This created a sense of dismay and humiliation among people who were accustomed to offering help rather than asking for it.

These findings have been presented to the Food Cities 2022 initiative implemented by the Food Foundation UK and Funded by the FCDO and presented to a number of international initiatives (International Food Policy Research Institute and the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition) discussing COVID-19 induced impacts in Bangladesh in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in The Netherlands. The interest of these global leaders demonstrates the importance and relevance of this work and it's potential to influence policy makers at a local and regional level.

Living Deltas will continue work with partners ICCCAD and Paraa and will help share these strategies with the municipalities and other appropriate government and non-government stakeholders.

## People involved in this work

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Andy Large	M	Water quality and land use	Delta baselines	Newcastle University	UK
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