

# COVID WORSENEED MATTERS IN SUNDARBANS: UN REPORT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

**Adverse impact:**The research pointed out that the main cascading impact in this region in the near and long term is due to economic distress caused by the lockdown.Shiv Sahay Singh

A study on the impact of COVID-19 funded by the UNDRR (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction) across five locations, including the Indian Sundarbans, has pointed out that the pandemic and measures to contain it had not only triggered cascading effects throughout societies but also reinforced pre-existing vulnerabilities.

The report titled 'Understanding and managing cascading and systemic risks: lessons from COVID-19' published recently presents cross-cutting findings from five case studies across the world.

Along with looking into a multi-hazard perspective in the Indian Sundarbans, the study looks at the fragile setting in Bangladesh's Cox's Bazaar; challenges on all fronts at the national scale in Indonesia; densely populated, urban setting in Guayaquil, Ecuador; and rural-urban and national-international interlinkages in the maritime region Togo.

In the Sundarbans, the people had to deal with the double burden of COVID-19 and Cyclone Amphan. The first months of the outbreak of COVID-19 from March to May coincided with one of the severest tropical cyclones that made landfall on May 20, 2020, with sustained wind speeds of 170 kmph, gusts of up to 190 kmph and storm surges of up to five metres.

It caused \$13 billion of damage, thereby becoming the costliest cyclone ever recorded in the north Indian Ocean (State IAG, 2020).

"The impact of two hazards occurring simultaneously manifested in the economic distress across sectors, actors and scales as reported in the workshops, media and publications. A significant proportion of the population in this area is dependent on natural resources for livelihood (fishers, crab collectors, honey gatherers, beekeepers, agriculturalists). Due to COVID-19 containment measures, restrictions were placed on accessing these natural resources, which themselves were directly affected by the cyclone," the study points out.

The research pointed out that closing schools as a preventive measure for COVID-19 resulted in the disruption in education.

"While the existing poverty was one barrier for families to pay for tools to access online education, unstable Internet connectivity in the remote regions was another barrier. When these barriers were coupled with the additional economic distress due to the pandemic and the cyclone, the disruption in education became conspicuous (Save the Children, 2020)," the study pointed out.

## Forced marriage

Incidence of forced marriage of underage girls increased during the lockdown and in the aftermath of the cyclone, and with economic distress and disruption in education, many families engaged their children, especially young boys, as child labour, the publication added.

The impact of the pandemic was not only on children but also severely on women. Many women had to additionally work in fields on top of their other existing workloads; to do work that was otherwise done by hired workers.

“Similar cascading impact on women's hygiene and safety was reported by residents as restricted access to sanitation services, resulting from infrastructure damage and inundation, compelled some women to resort to open defecation, which was further compounded by movement restrictions imposed due to COVID-19,” the study pointed out.

Researchers have pointed out that the twin blows of the COVID-19 pandemic and Amphan resulted in short-term loss of income which aggravated child marriage and human trafficking, which can have long-term impacts.

### **Cyclones common**

Sumana Banerjee, School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavpur University, who has contributed to the research pointed out that cyclones are common in the Indian Sundarbans but the co-occurrence of Cyclone Amphan within the pandemic restrictions reshaped the understanding of risk.

“Despite not being severely affected by COVID-19 between March and May 2020, the Indian Sundarbans faced a wide range of impacts across sectors due to its interconnectedness and its existing vulnerabilities, which when combined with the impacts of the cyclone led to compounding of impacts and cascading of those across sectors.” Ms. Banerjee added.

### **Economic distress**

The research pointed out that the main cascading impact in this region in the near and long term is due to economic distress caused by the lockdown. “The COVID-19-induced lockdown disproportionately affected poorer households of this region. One study revealed that 88% of poorer households' average weekly local income and 63% of average weekly remittance income were lost due to COVID-19 (Gupta and others, 2020). Not only did it increase poverty, it pushed certain people back into it. The reduction in income due to employment loss forced people to reduce meal portions and consume fewer food items, thereby affecting their food security (Gupta and others, 2020),” the report says.

Michael Hagenlocher, lead author of the report and senior scientist at UNU-EHS (United Nations University – Environment and Human Security), says the report reminds us of the importance of better understanding the interconnections in societies and the vulnerabilities within them.

“Before the pandemic, there was not much awareness that hazards, such as floods, droughts or regional disease outbreaks can have knock-on effects on societies globally. Only when COVID-19 started to spread and affect our daily lives, the true extent of how interdependencies in our highly interconnected world are causing impacts to cascade within and across societies became fully visible,” Mr. Hagenlocher added.

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