

COVID-19 mitigation measures for the Sundarbans

Special COVID mitigation funds

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating health impacts on Bangladeshis, as with people around the world. It was a double blow for impoverished members of the country, however, as they suffered from lost incomes and fell further below the poverty line. This was also true for beneficiary communities under GIZ Bangladesh's Management of the Sundarbans Reserved Forest Project (SMP II). These communities, living on the edges of the Sundarbans, suffered under the impact of a severe storm (in 2020) at the same time.

The Sundarbans Reserved Forests came under increased threat because of sick frontline workers and restrictions on mobility. The Sundarbans, a natural World Heritage Site, are shelter of the last big population of the Royal Bengal Tiger and many other endangered species. 3,500,000 people are benefitting from the protection against storm surges and the rich natural resources such as fish, shrimps and honey.

The poverty rate persisting in these communities is high at 32% and many people are completely dependent of the primary resources of the Sundarbans. During the pandemic, the fishing communities were suddenly cut off from markets and restricted in their mobility. Members of these communities were pushed further and further into desperation, and they were tempted to increasingly access the forests' protected resources. Children of these communities were deprived of their education because of school closures and seemed almost "cut off from the world". To this kind of unprecedented scenario, also the Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD) rangers were not prepared.

The German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) supported in this situation by provision of special funds (950.000 EUR) for "COVID 19 mitigation measures for the Sundarbans" which were implemented by facilitation of the project "Support to the Sundarbans Reserved Forest (SMP II)".

The mitigation measures aimed:

- To support the suffering people around the Sundarbans who are poor and highly dependent of natural resources

- To support the Forest Department to cope with the impacts of the pandemic and to ensure monitoring and law enforcement
- To support children and youth in the pressing times

The measures were undertaken from 16 September 2020 to 31 November 2021.

Sanitation facilities set in place for 20 ranger stations and 2,000 sets of PPE distributed. Patrol boats were repaired for rangers to resume night patrol duties.

7,000 extreme poor families received food and cash support. Two areas provided with supplies to sources of fresh water.

1,500 students and teachers engaged in arts and crafts, and taught creatively of the need to conserve the Sundarbans with the support of local youths. These children also received education packages

10,000 mangrove saplings planted in two temporary char areas in Mongla.

Impact of mitigation measures

SMP II's COVID mitigation measures:

- Increased resilience of the Bangladesh Forest Department (BFD), forest dependant communities, and local students in dealing with COVID-19 and other disasters
- Encouraged conservation and sustainable management of the Sundarbans and its vital natural resources



L to R : a handwashing station, established under the project, for the safety of BFD officials

Mangrove Eco-cottage at Bajikarer Khando VCF

COVID-19 support measures in the Sundarbans

Support for the BFD

The Khulna circle of the BFD oversees the overall management of the reserved forest. The circle is composed of 2 divisions, the Sundarbans East Division in Baggerhat and the Sundarbans West Division in Khulna. BFD maintains 16 range stations, and 64 posts, and hosts 1,000 BFD staff across all offices. The BFD staff had to continue with their duties even during the pandemic. They were responsible to patrol (also at night!), to issue resource permits, check equipment used in harvesting resources, collect revenues, and review harvests throughout. The threat of contracting the virus and the inadequate sanitation facilities meant that the BFD team were left particularly vulnerable to the pandemic. Mitigation measures thus involved:

- Distribution of **850 sets of high-quality PPE** and other protection equipment to rangers
- **Installation of 21 sanitation facilities** across 17 forest station and 4 range offices
- **Provision of wildlife monitoring equipment** including night vision monoculars, infra-red trail cameras, and long-range wireless handsets for communication
- **Installing 70 solar (street-) lights posts** in 56 forest range stations and patrol posts for safer working at night
- **Repair of 10 SMART patrol boats** urgently needed for patrolling and monitoring
- The project also repaired three destroyed sections of **embankments**, which were left almost in tatters by the cyclone Amphan, to protect the Khulna range office in Nolian and the Baniakhali Station offices

Support to the communities dependent on Sundarbans

- **Food and cash support** and the **provision of freshwater supplies**. The economic damage to poor forest adjacent communities was further exacerbated by the devastation of the cyclone Amphan. 7,000 ultra poor households in Chandpai and Sarankhola were selected for support under the covid mitigation measures. They received a relief package of finances and food, along with PPE and awareness products on staying safe during COVID
- The communities were also suffering from a lack of access to clean potable water. The project supported the communities thus with the **installation of 3 ultrafiltration systems for pond water**, and a **rainwater harvesting system**
- **Upgrading eco-tourism facilities**. Eco-tourism is on the rise in Bangladesh, and more and more people are eager to visit the Sundarbans in the future after the pandemic. To aid sustained incomes, and encourage responsible tourism practices, the project developed eco-tourism cottages and trained local members of the community to act as tour

guides. These have incredible potential to launch a cottage responsible tourism business in the region

Support for children

The pandemic also took a toll on the mental health of children in the project area. The mitigation measures considered this aspect and undertook a series of arts and crafts events, along with educational events and treks on the need to conserve the Sundarbans. 1,500 children from Classes 5 to 8 were selected from 36 primary and 20 secondary schools for this support:

- Organised story writing and art competitions (oil painting)
- Published a book titled “The Sundarbans in the eyes of the children” containing the art works of children
- Published a children’s Sundarbans booklet containing rhymes and drawings related to Sundarbans
- Launched a new dice game where players travelled across the Sundarbans
- Printed awareness raising posters on the adverse effects of deer poaching and fish poisoning
- Published a leaflet titled “The role of students and community coping with COVID-19”
- Students produced Sundarbans biodiversity sculptures. These sculptures included tigers, crocodiles, turtles, irrawaddy dolphins, Ganges dolphins, and masked finfoot
- Conducted events to raise awareness on the critical importance of mangrove biodiversity through study circles, celebration of world mangrove day, social artwork and guided street drama shows on deer poaching and poison fishing.



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