

Managing migrant harvest workers: recommendations amidst Covid-19

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Boro accounts for 54% of total rice produced in the country, while Aus accounts for another 7%. Of total rice marketed by local producers, Boro and Aus (reportedly) account for 80% or more. Boro is harvested during late March to early May, and Aus during June-July. The period coincides with the ascending trend in Corona virus transmission in Bangladesh. This raises a double-edged problem:

(a) Boro harvest depends significantly on the use of 'migrant' labor (who come from outside the district/upazila where the harvest is done). This raises the possibility of faster and wider spread of the deadly virus.

(b) Bangladesh's food security depends heavily on a healthy Boro harvest. With an extremely limited choice to switch to reapers (machinery) in the short term, labor has to be allowed to move and ensure timely harvest of Boro and Aus paddy.

The problem remains one of managing movement and engagement of migrant harvest labor during the April-May period. While engaging in food distribution in a village in the northwest, several researchers at Economic Research Group (ERG) decided to undertake an action research on such management. Though the field work continues, the authors of this brief chose to share their experiences and instruments so that others, interested in similar engagements, may benefit.

The village (say) R has about 303 households with a handful of large farmers. A rapid census undertaken during early April 2020 (prior to food distribution to 80 households on Pohela Boisakh) reveals the presence of smart phones in about 16 percent of the households. The villagers own about 195 acres of paddy field. Here, Boro crops are harvested during the last week of April to mid-May. It is expected that about 15 groups of 20 to 22 workers will come from outside to harvest the crop and complete threshing. The local elders were consulted to find if people in the village could distribute workload among themselves and thereby reduce dependence on outside labor. It was reported that not everybody had the skill to cut the crops and do post-harvest activities. Recognizing the inevitable, the ERG researcher in the field identified the following activities to initiate discussion with a group of local youth, the elders and the Imams of several mosques located within the village. These are briefly discussed below.

- **Registering in-coming workers:** We realized that they come in groups and the group leaders had to be convinced to do this. We received positive response from the early entrants, and a questionnaire may be found at www.ergonline.org. Information is also sought on the origin of the workers, their travel path before reaching the village and their plans once the harvest in the village is complete. Each worker's underlying health conditions are also recorded for administering effective isolation policies.
- **Administering health check and monitoring:** We failed to procure a thermal detector to undertake safe monitoring. It was also found out that the workers would enter the field from many directions. Administering check-ups with regular thermometers would put the volunteers at risk. Thus, upon consulting with village elders and upazila officials, we fell back on two measures. The group leaders will be

persuaded to identify workers with symptoms and immediately contact emergency numbers provided by the volunteers. Second, approval from local school committee and upazila education officer was obtained to secure one or two rooms where persons with symptoms may be isolated/quarantined temporarily till Upazila health officer followed it up. Plans are also being made to ensure that the school rooms and premise are properly disinfected once the harvest workers are gone.

- **Wearing masks:** We wanted to provide it free, but it was not required. Phone numbers of group leaders were obtained ahead. Once contacted, they assured that all workers will wear masks. The employers were also motivated to enforce it, if needed, at their costs.
- **Handwashing:** Provisions of water and soaps are made nearby the piles of paddy so that each worker can follow the handwashing instruction.
- **Accommodation at a distance:** Farmers/employers of migrant workers agreed to house the workers at a safe distance away from residences of the local populace. Usually, few permanent domestic workers serve the needs of the migrant workers. Farmers/employers agreed to ensure that they would maintain a safe distance and follow the rules on handwashing and mask-wearing.
- **Fasting and prayers:** The area is yet to strictly follow the instructions given out by the Islamic Foundation. To avoid transmission between residents and outsiders (migrant workers), the elders and the Imams have agreed to assign an open area adjacent to the mosque for migrant workers to say their prayers. It is however learned that only about 5% of the workers find the energy to engage in mosque-based activities after toiling in the fields for the whole day.
- **Awareness:** The group leaders are being motivated to allow loading of few Corona-related songs (audio clips) in the mobile set of 4 or 5 workers. In order to ensure active learning of the dos and don'ts, we plan to hold quiz competition (15 minutes) on two evenings for each group where prizes will be distributed. Since gathering of local populace will defeat the purpose of ensuring physical distancing, no entertainment will be offered. The brief question-answer session will be held at the location where the workers will be housed.

Few critical elements may be mentioned in conclusion. Organizing the villagers, with diverse orientations, is often difficult. An alternative route is to make use of the youth volunteers under the direction of a local educated youth with no record of wrongdoings. General endorsements of local elders and authorities have to be sought, but the group has to take all initiatives. The employers need to facilitate the separation of locals from migrant workers, which they will do for their interests. However, most jobs – of registering, monitoring and enforcing practices – will have to be done through the active cooperation of the group leaders. Fortunately, we anticipated this early and were able to collect their phone numbers and motivate them over the phone.