



COVID-19: IMPACT ON READY-MADE GARMENT WORKERS IN BANGLADESH

Table of Contents

Introduction and background	1
A sector in limbo	3
The challenges of reopening	5
Support needed by the RMG sector	6
Practical occupational safety and health measures	9
Reopening factories: Measures and guidelines	11
Case study: Insights from Mothers@Work and BB4C partners on the effects of COVID-19	14
Conclusion and key messages	16



This report was researched and written by: Zahidul Hassan, Fundraising and Partnership Specialist (email: zhasssan@unicef.org) and Mayang Sari, Nutrition Specialist (email: msari@unicef.org), UNICEF Bangladesh.

Images: Drik Photo Agency

Cover image: Garment workers at a partner factory – staff are wearing face masks and doing their utmost to observe physical distancing guidelines.

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Garment workers queue to have their temperature checked before they enter their factory.

Orders worth USD 3.17 billion have been cancelled or suspended, threatening the employment and financial security of millions of workers – the majority of whom are women.

Introduction and background

The coronavirus pandemic has had a devastating effect on the Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) industry. In recent years, it has been the driving force of the country's economy, accounting for 80 per cent of its export earnings.

Revenue generated by RMG factories was a key factor in predictions that Bangladesh would reach middle-income status by 2021. However, with the arrival of COVID-19, it is no exaggeration to say that the industry has 'fallen off a cliff' as many factories have closed and cannot pay wages.¹

Orders worth USD 3.17 billion have been cancelled or suspended, threatening the employment and financial security of millions of workers – the majority of whom are women. Media reports suggest that by June 2020, 70,000 workers had lost their jobs and up to one million jobs were likely to remain at risk until the end of the year.²

While many factories began gradual re-opening in late April 2020, others remain closed, and the medium to long-term consequences of the crisis remain unclear.

¹ Daily Star (online), 7 April 2020, <www.thedailystar.net/opinion/rmg-notes/news/world-needs-use-or-lose-bangladesh-apparel-industry-1890208>, accessed 10 June 2020.

² Asia News (online), 8 June 2020, <www.asianews.it/news-en/Some-70,000-garment-workers-lose-their-job-because-of-the-pandemic-50288.html>, accessed 10 June 2020.

Mothers@Work is a national programme created by UNICEF Bangladesh to support government efforts to strengthen maternity rights and encourage working mothers to breastfeed. Officially launched at the national level in 2017, the programme was rolled out to 80 factories by 2020 in partnership with Better Work Bangladesh, an initiative supported by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). Mothers@Work also involves civil society organizations such as BRAC and Phulki.

The gravity of the crisis has prompted this report which assesses how the pandemic is affecting the situation of workers and their children linked to two factory-based UNICEF programmes in Bangladesh: Mothers@Work and Better Business for Children (BB4C).

To prepare this assessment, discussions were held with a number of RMG partners who implement the Mothers@Work and BB4C initiatives, as well as other partners. Senior and mid-level management staff were also consulted for insights about the scope of new interventions and reprogramming needed if various partners are to deliver on their core commitments. The focus of the discussions was the impact of the crisis on the rights of children, especially those connected with the largely female workforce in big and medium-sized garment factories.

A car is sprayed with chlorine bleach solution at a Lintas factory, the site of a UNICEF-supported workplace programme.

Better Business for Children (BB4C) is a partnership between UNICEF Bangladesh and leading garment manufacturing companies which seek to integrate children's rights into their core business operations. Launched in 2017, and supported by international brands, it runs in over 30 factories with the aim of improving working conditions for parents in factories and strengthening access to basic services for workers and their families in the community.





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A garment worker washes her hands before entering a factory to minimize COVID-19 risk.

“I also find that not being able to interact with other workers is stressful.”

A sector in limbo

The fear of economic shock and inability to feed their families is palpable among RMG workers who still cannot return to work. Sector experts argue that the social order will be under threat if factories remain closed for much longer and wages are not paid.

One RMG sector managing director said the pandemic had triggered not only a sharp reduction in orders but also uncertainty about shipment. Skilled workers have also become scarce because many women fear taking their children to workplace childcare facilities where they might be exposed to COVID-19.

A machine operator who is still breastfeeding her child said the quality of her diet had dropped since the crisis. “I used to receive milk and eggs when I was at work and was able to bring my young child to the workplace,” she said. “I also find that not being able to interact with other workers is stressful.”

An additional pressure on the RMG sector is a general expectation that it can repurpose its production to supply personal protective equipment (PPE) to the health sector. At the same time, factories are, of course, also expected to provide PPE for their own workers and medical staff. Currently, however, only a handful of factories have enough PPE for their own needs. This comes at a time where many factories have demands from fashion brands to ship clothing orders for the summer season. They are also under pressure to start capturing orders for the coming autumn and winter fashion seasons, fearing that if they fail buyers may desert Bangladesh for other garment-making countries such as China and Viet Nam.

Although most factories closed on 24 March 2020, many made a commitment to pay wages for the full month. The government has also promised soft loans to the RMG industry so that, in theory, wages can be paid for longer. These loans are paid directly to employees through mobile financial services. However, only companies which export at least 80 per cent of their production are eligible for such loans.

Most factories started to reopen from 26 April, with the caveat that they must follow government guidelines and the sector's own health instructions. However, the fear is that export orders will not return to pre-crisis levels which will threaten the long-term job prospects of the industry's workers. The Ministry of Labour recently announced that RMG workers who did not work in April cannot expect to receive full salaries and this may exacerbate financial hardship for them and their families.³

Physical distancing coaching for garment workers at a UNICEF partner factory.

³ Dhaka Tribune (online), 4 May 2020, <<https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2020/05/04/apparel-workers-to-receive-65-wages-for-april>>, accessed 10 June 2020.





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The overwhelming majority of garment workers now wear masks.

Interviewees said that while good hygiene practice was relatively easy to maintain in the RMG sector, physical distancing was more difficult.

The challenges of reopening

Before the shutdown, some companies had provided handwashing facilities at factory entrances and instructed factory doctors to give employees hygiene and coronavirus awareness training. However, health-care providers at one factory observed that it would clearly be difficult to ensure that employees were putting this training into practice when they returned to their communities.

Perhaps the most critical need identified by managers was the provision of PPE for health staff at factory medical centres. Even when there was enough PPE, they said, it was often not reusable and poor quality.

Interviewees said that while good hygiene practice was relatively easy to maintain in the RMG sector, physical distancing was more difficult. The requirement of physical distancing is being met in some factories with a two-shift system. Others have switched factory sitting arrangements so that machine operators sit back-to-back instead of face-to-face.

Maintaining the recommended two meter physical distancing guidelines is challenging for RMG workers, and not just in their factories. In their communities and homes, living arrangements are crowded and confined. It is therefore important that factories take a holistic approach to prevention and raising awareness of COVID-19, and that messages are adapted to give realistic advice that RMG workers can follow both at work and at home. Although it is difficult to put total protection in place in Bangladeshi society, this does not mean the effort should not be made.



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*A renewed emphasis on hygiene:
A garment factory canteen worker
cleans the communal washing point.*

*There is also a need
for stimulus from
the government to
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Support needed by the RMG sector

Factory managers are making sustained efforts to keep channels of communication with clothing brands open in the hope of recapturing lost business or finding new outlets. Many RMG managers say they can resume normal production without significant delay now that most factories have reopened. However, respondents from smaller factories say that levels of production may be dependent on how many workers have PPE.

Factory managers have suggested that food support for pregnant women and breastfeeding mothers and their babies through international organizations would play a vital role in improving their nutrition levels.

Clarity of communication around COVID-19 risk can also play an important role.

The immediate needs of working mothers and their families are:

- Health check-ups
- The provision of handwashing facilities
- Awareness-raising through digital platforms
- Clear risk communication as all factories reopen.

A comprehensive approach will also demand preventative measures in the communities where RMG workers live. While relief work is being delivered by local councillors and district administrations, in many communities campaigns led by different stakeholders aim to make non-essential workers stay at home and follow health instructions. This calls for additional support from RMG factories and local administrations to extend support in the communities where workers live.

Factory managers sometimes engage with leaders in the communities where RMG workers live to familiarize themselves with the welfare programmes being delivered by locally elected representatives. Many consider such social support to be vital for their workers, especially since many are the sole earners for their households and any additional income helps cover the significant extra costs they have incurred during the coronavirus crisis.

There is also a need for stimulus from the government to rejuvenate business and provide short-term financial loans for small businesses in particular. Managers say that business networks need government input to encourage more dialogue between established brands and prospective customers and the sector's key stakeholders, such as garment associations and other key influence-wielders, to re-establish lost or delayed business.

UNICEF and its partners have health and safety bulletin boards in some factories to raise COVID-19 awareness. The material has been adapted from recommendations by UNICEF, ILO and UN Women on "Family-Friendly Policies and Other Good Workplace Practices in the Context of COVID-19", <www.unicef.org/documents/family-friendly-policies-and-other-good-workplace-practices-context-covid-19-key-steps>



One managing director warned that, in turn, this could lead to greater food insecurity at household levels and higher malnutrition.

Help of this kind could be combined with delivery by local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of awareness-raising programmes on basic hygiene, and of food supplements for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers and food packages for their families.

When asked to assess the long-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, many managers thought that it would squeeze business, reduce regular work and wages for employees and deplete the workforce. As a result, this could lead to a reduction in worker capacity while also contributing to higher levels of unemployment.

One managing director warned that, in turn, this could lead to greater food insecurity at household levels and higher malnutrition.

Small businesses in particular could suffer worsening relations between management and workers amid a harsher economic climate.

If and when the RMG industry returns to full capacity and orders are once again consistently high, then higher rates of operation can be considered. Meanwhile, Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands have assured Bangladesh that orders from their countries will continue, and that they want to see minimal disruption to the international supply chain.

Masked garment factory employees on their way to work in Adaamjee EPZ, Siddhirgong, Narayanganj.





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Most bigger garment factories have health care centres and employees are encouraged to visit for check-ups.

If risk cannot be eliminated, then the aim is to minimize exposure to the virus.

Practical occupational safety and health measures

Good practice on occupational safety and health measures can offer support and reassurance to workers returning to the workplace and safeguard their health.

Before workplace measures that limit exposure to COVID-19 can be put in place, assessment of the likely risks is needed, followed by the introduction of appropriate controls. If risk cannot be eliminated, then the aim should be to minimize exposure to the virus. For working mothers, three areas of support are particularly important:

1. Safety in the workplace and in childcare facilities

The Mothers@Work programme aims to design and implement a system of care and protection for pregnant and breastfeeding mothers in line with national guidelines. Where workplaces have childcare facilities, measures to minimize the COVID-19 threat have to be tailored to the needs of the mothers and children who use them.

2. Managing psychosocial risks

Work arrangements and community care for working mothers should protect and support their mental health through the maintenance of healthy lifestyles – including diet, rest, sleep and exercise – as well as social contact with friends and family. Information channels, such as telemedicine, could be used to alleviate the stress and worry caused by the pandemic, and can be put in place in the workplace or digitally shared with workers.

Various types of training on safety and health can offer important benefits, and managers made clear their willingness to share online training modules and messages.

While all workers are urged to respect physical distancing rules, implementation can be challenging in the factory context.

3. Mobile clinical support for working mothers and their children

The Mothers@Work programme could introduce mobile clinical support for garment workers, offering sound advice and nutritional support, particularly for working mothers and their children.

Various types of training on safety and health can offer important benefits, and managers made clear their willingness to share online training modules and messages. Mid-level managers were particularly keen to do this. They were also happy to find ways to collaborate and share training and communication materials where workers do not have digital options. Non-digital options – such as flyers and posters – will be vital because many workers do not have smartphones.

Where workers have access to smartphones, video or online messaging may be more practical and effective for many workers in the short term since face-to-face training sessions will clearly be difficult while so many factories remain closed. Where digital communication is possible, webinars and infographics with voice messages could be shared through company websites. The provision of telemedicine support would be highly appreciated and a great help in many communities; in some cases, it could ease a lot of the worry and concern caused by the coronavirus.

A few of the managers said they wanted materials like UNICEF's Meena cartoon⁴ to be available for upload onto company websites so that employees could access this kind of material through their smartphones.

⁴ See: UNICEF Bangladesh, 'Meena and UNICEF: Entertaining and inspiring children', United Nations Children's Fund, Dhaka, <<https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/meena-and-unicef>>, accessed 31 May 2020.





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 There are fears international clothing brands may take their business to other garment-making countries such as China and Viet Nam.

Reopening factories: Measures and guidelines

Amid much confusion and delay in payment of salaries for April and May, thousands of RMG workers had returned to work by June 2020. There is uncertainty about the fate of thousands of other workers who come to the capital, Dhaka, from different parts of the country seeking jobs.

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Of the country's 7,602 garment factories, 2,916 of them reopened on 28 April. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) expects more to reopen soon. This may well be great relief to workers whose wages for March were delayed and who are worried about being without work for even longer.

The BGMEA has developed a set of guidelines for members that cover workers' health and safety, medical facilities, the establishment of a COVID-19 taskforce, physical distancing in the workplace, and the setting up of suitable quarantine and self-isolation facilities.⁵

The guidelines state that a factory should have permission from local and national government agencies before reopening. Factories in coronavirus epicentres will only be able to reopen during the second phase of restrictions being lifted.

⁵ BGMEA, *Guidelines for Factory Opening/Running*, <https://www.bgmea.com.bd/home/activity/Guidelines_for_Factory_OpeningRunning__>, accessed 10 June 2020.

The BGMEA's directive to members on reopening factories

- “To keep the economy running and considering the overall situation, BGMEA will advise you on opening of factories.”
- “Until this direction is received, you are kindly requested not to ask workers (who are in their villages) to return to Dhaka.”
- “A zone-wise staggered approach will be adopted to open the factories in a limited capacity. In the first phase, you are advised to ask only the workers who are living nearby your factories to join.”
- “Regarding retrenchment, BGMEA is requesting you are not to retrench any workers on humanitarian grounds. If under any circumstances the workers residing outside return to Dhaka in an unsupported and irregular way, then BGMEA will not be able to help you as an association in this regard. Your factory opening date will be communicated to you through email.”

Source: https://www.bgmea.com.bd/home/activity/Guidelines_for_Factory_OpeningRunning_ (accessed 10 June 2020)

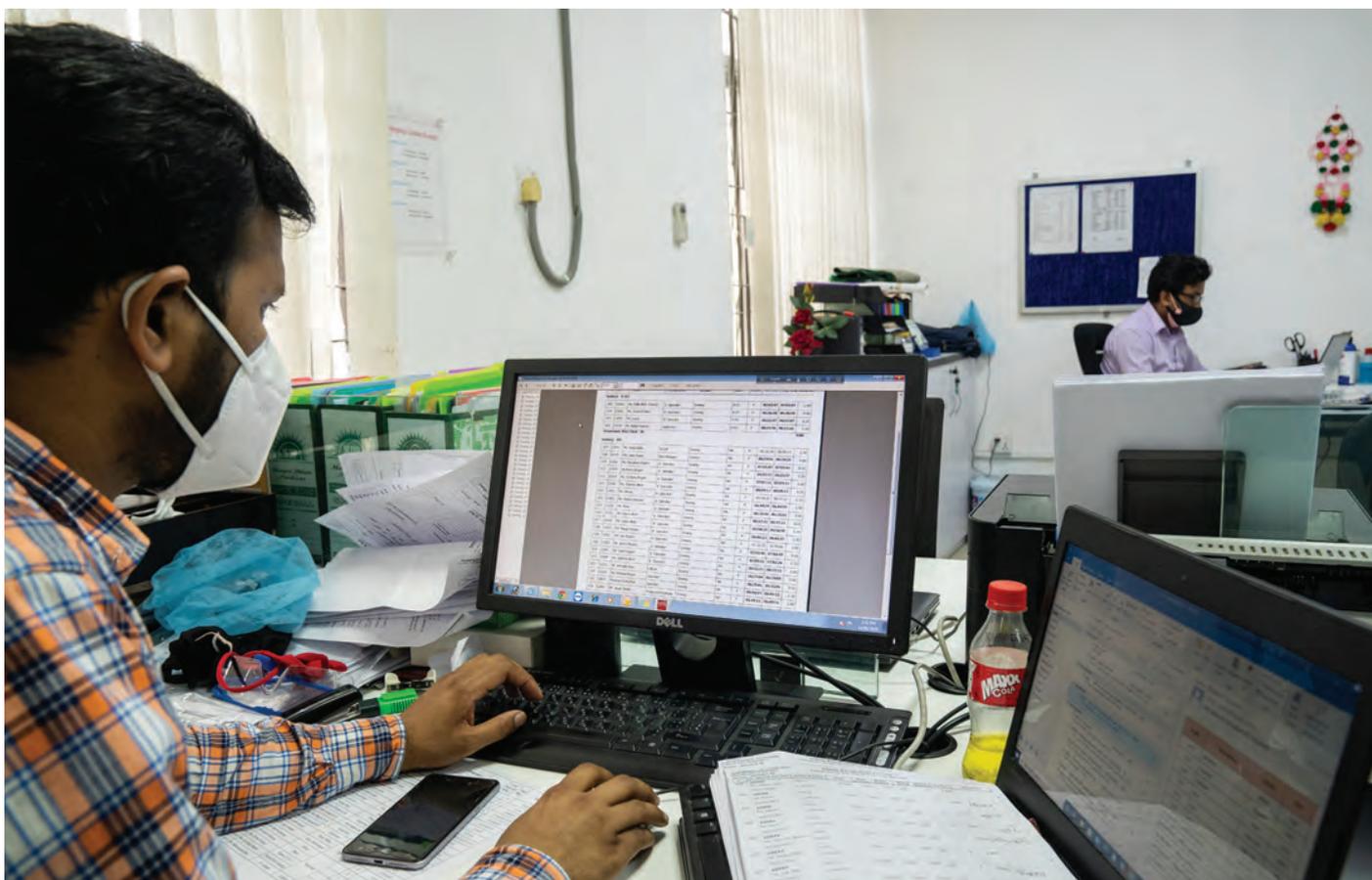
The guidelines advise that factories should create one-way flow of movement through premises to the most frequented areas to ensure physical distancing, along with staggered working hours and lunch breaks.

Businesses should provide transport for their workers, making sure that passengers are masked and sit in alternate seats and rows of vehicles and have their own handkerchiefs. As they enter premises, their temperature should be checked and anyone with an above-normal temperature should be returned home.

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) is expected to issue a directive on how permission to reopen is to be granted. This is likely to include meeting numerous criteria such as the creation of a COVID-19 taskforce of a size appropriate to the number of employees, provision of an on-site medical team and creation of a separate area to assess and quarantine suspected patients.

RMG factories have had to respond swiftly to the COVID-19 crisis with new management procedures.





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Factory management have made clear their willingness to share online training modules and messages, particularly for mid-level management.

“Most factories have no residential facilities,” a high-level denim textile official explained.

Factories should provide PPE to workers and dispose of used equipment in a safe manner, and surfaces must be cleaned regularly. A residential quarantine area should be set up and workers reassured that they will not face any punitive action from management if they show COVID-19 symptoms and need to take sick leave.

However, some interviewees said full compliance with these guidelines was likely to be difficult.

“Most factories have no residential facilities,” a high-level denim textile official explained. “It can be possible only for the textile and spinning mills, as about 70 per cent of their workers live inside their mill premises. Creating a quarantine or isolation facility is also very tough for every factory. There is another risk: if anyone is identified with COVID-19, the full dormitory would be locked down.”



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*A working mother is at work in a factory during the COVID-19 pandemic. The factory, run by Ha-meem Group, implements the Mothers@Work programme developed by UNICEF for supporting breastfeeding mothers in the workplace and keeping working mothers closer to their children.
Savar, Dhaka, 14 June 2020.*

Some garment workers do not have even the most basic knowledge about the coronavirus and are living in congested areas.

Case study: Insights from Mothers@Work and BB4C partners on the effects of COVID-19⁶

Most of the 4.1 million RMG workers in Bangladesh, the majority women, have been affected by the coronavirus crisis. According to BGMEA, an estimated 2,916 factories reopened between 26–28 April 2020, although many female workers remained absent largely because they had no transport to return to Dhaka from their villages. Ten years ago, industry estimates put the percentage of female workers in the sector at around 80 per cent, but that figure has dropped to around 61 per cent.

This drop may be an indication that the garment industry does not offer an attractive or safe environment for women workers, especially for those who are pregnant, breastfeeding or have children under the age of 10. This demonstrates that Bangladesh urgently needs a child safety programme in all industrial sectors.

⁶ *Insights from Senior Management from three companies participating in the Mothers@Work programme.*

Some garment workers do not have basic knowledge about the coronavirus and are living in congested areas. In many communities they go about their daily lives as before, avoiding thinking about the pandemic.

In Bangladesh 22 per cent of the population lives in poverty, and nearly 1 out of 10 workers live on the equivalent of less than two US dollars a day. A garment worker's average monthly salary is USD 96 a month.

The government has announced a stimulus package, the first part of which targets export-focused sectors and offers more than USD 580 million to help mitigate the impact of the enforced shutdown. This money is being distributed in the form of loans at 2 per cent interest with a six-month grace period. Overall, however, government support is not sufficient to help the industry to survive the recent pandemic.

*A breastfeeding mother using a mask while breastfeeding her child in a child care center in a garment factory in Ha-meem Group garments. The factory is implementing the Mothers@Work programme developed by UNICEF to support breastfeeding mothers in the workplace.
Savar, Dhaka, 14 June 2020.*





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The recommended six feet (1.8m) between people is difficult to maintain among garment workers.

Conclusion and key messages

The socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on Bangladesh – and many other countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia – has been severe, mostly due to the large proportion of low-wage workers. The situation is likely to worsen unless there is renewed focus on investing in policies, practices and programmes that support workers and their families while also promoting more resilient business models. Collaboration between key public and private sector stakeholders – in Bangladesh and globally – will be critical to supporting workers and their families in the world’s second largest RMG sector as they cope with the COVID-19 crisis. Efforts will need to focus on:

- Helping factories meet the government’s reopening requirements;
- Distributing evidence-based, accurate public health and hygiene information, along with guidance that echoes government guidelines on how best to stay safe at work; and
- Prioritizing environmental, social and governance issues going forward, while aiming to rebuild the post-pandemic RMG industry using sustainable and resilient business models.

The impact of COVID-19 on Bangladesh – and many other countries in South Asia and Southeast Asia – has been exacerbated by the large proportion of low-wage workers.

Within a framework of ‘recover and reimagine’, UNICEF will pursue post-pandemic efforts based on these urgent priorities:

- Providing continuity of services – including supporting the vital links between health, nutrition and WASH – to increase the resilience of workers and their families in the workplace and at home.
- Developing better social protection mechanisms that offer a basic living wage and assistance for the most vulnerable workers and families, not only during this crisis and its aftermath but also beyond to build resilience to such shocks in the future; and
- Placing human rights and children’s rights at the core of our efforts, understanding that the return on investment in addressing social issues and fostering sustainability is a better future for everyone.

An emphasis on cleanliness and hygiene is likely to be prominent in RMG factories post-pandemic.

