

Life during the COVID-19 pandemic: A report from Ummulong Village, Meghalaya

Alacrity Muksor*

Ummulong village is in the Thadlaskein block of West Jaintia Hills district, Meghalaya. It is the second largest village in the block, with a population of 3220 individuals across about 514 households. According to the 2011 Census, there are 1565 males and 1655 females in Ummulong. Around 98.39 per cent of the villagers are from the Pnar tribe; Scheduled Caste (SC) households constitute 0.37 per cent of the population (2011 Census) and the rest belong to other communities.

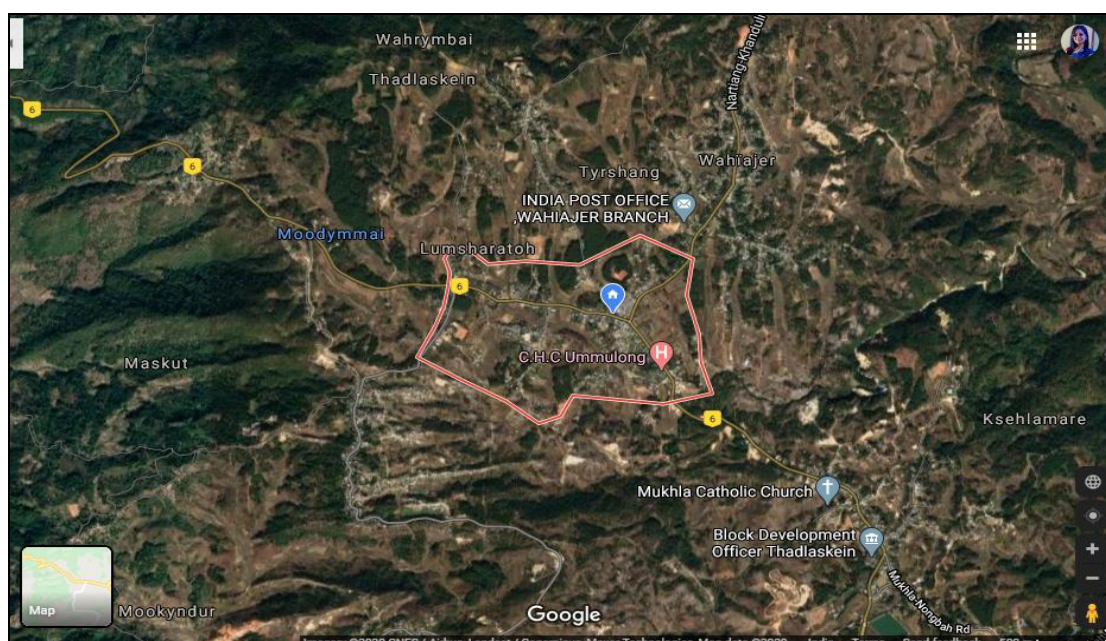


Figure: Location of Ummulong Village (Source: Google Earth)

Ummulong is located on the National Highway and provides easy access to the district headquarters, Jowai, which is about thirteen km away and Shillong, which is fifty-one km away. The village also has over ten schools as well as several grocery and other shops. These advantages draw many from nearby villages to live in Ummulong in order to access better schools and employment opportunities; about seventy to seventy-five per cent of villagers rent their houses to families from nearby villages. Most of the houses (including rental houses) in the village are pukka houses with two or three rooms.

Of the ten schools in Ummulong, four go up to the secondary level, while the remaining go up to the lower or upper primary levels only. Seven of the schools are owned privately, three receive support under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and one is a government-aided school. There is no government school in the village. There is no piped water in Ummulong—villagers rely on wells for water for cooking and bathing, while laundry is done by the riverside.

The villagers rely on weekly markets that are organized in different villages and towns in the area to buy essential supplies and sell their produce. The closest market is in Iawpynsin in Wahiajer village, which is adjacent to Ummulong. The weekly market day changes every week: for example, if a weekly market is held on Monday at Iawpynsin, it will be held on the Tuesday of the following week it, and then the Wednesday of the week after and so on. Iawmusiang is the biggest weekly market in the district, and it is located in Jowai. The market typically offers food items, clothing, hardware, electrical goods, medicines, agricultural implements, handicrafts, audio-video equipment and other goods for sale.

This report examines the impact of COVID-19 on Ummulong. I am a native of the village and have been here since March 18, 2020 due to the lockdown. In addition to informal social interactions, I conducted in-person interviews with key respondents in the village to gather the information presented below. My respondents were: three female domestic workers, two grocery shopkeepers and six daily wage labourers who are constructing a well in the village. I also conducted telephonic interviews with an ex-village secretary of the MGNREGS and the owner of a shop that sells seeds and fertilizers. The interviews were conducted between 10 and 18 April.

Enforcing the lockdown

When the lockdown began, a group of male and female volunteers from different localities (including some youths and some teachers) was selected by the local administration. These volunteers are helping to enforce the lockdown. Their main responsibility is to prevent the entry of non-residents into Ummulong and to ensure that the villagers observe social distancing guidelines. The volunteers also work in close collaboration with the police to prevent large groups from gathering. If anyone is seen outside their home without a valid reason, they are given mild ‘punishments’, such as having to perform frog jumps, or taken to the local police station.

Impact on agriculture

Agriculture is the main source of income for around seventy per cent of households in Ummulong. The major food crops are paddy and maize, while other main crops are potato, ginger, garlic, tomato, cabbage and cauliflower. The maize is standing crop that will be harvested in June/July. Other vegetable crops grown in Ummulong include chilli, cucumber, pumpkin, radish and carrot. Fruit such as orange, lemon, plum, pear, peach and local fruit such as sohshang (known as wild olive in English) and sohiong (a dark cherry-like temperate fruit known as black fruit in English) are also grown.

The two main issues facing farmers in Ummulong are a shortage of agricultural inputs and the inability to sell their produce. All the weekly markets have remained closed during the lockdown, including Iawpynsin and Iawmusiang. According to a seller of agricultural inputs, there is presently a shortage of fertilizer and hybrid seeds. Even where the seeds are available (for example, for tomatoes), farmers are unable to purchase the necessary fertilizers. The uncertainty over farmers being able to sell their harvests is also discouraging them from investing in new crops—for instance, crops like cabbage, which is grown during the winter, have been left to rot since the nearby weekly markets are not operational and the farmers have no storage facilities (this has

caused residents of the nearby town to face a shortage of vegetables). Thus, farmers are only growing vegetables for household consumption at present.

Also, most villagers have been unable to work in the fields during the lockdown due to strict surveillance and the enforcement of social distancing protocols by the village volunteers. Some farmers whose fields are close to their homes have been able to work in the early mornings, as the volunteers do not monitor all parts of the village at all times. In general, income from farming has fallen drastically during the lockdown, and so has consumption of basic food items such as rice and meat.

Recently, the chief minister of Meghalaya made an announcement regarding easing the restrictions on the agriculture sector. The district administration subsequently made a similar announcement. But no instructions have been issued yet regarding the reopening of the weekly markets.

Impact on non-farm employment

During the lockdown, some non-farm activity involving local workers has been allowed to continue. For example, a group of well-diggers has continued to work while practicing social distancing. All of them are from the neighbouring village of Wahrymbai, which is walking distance from Ummulong; the workers walk to Ummulong along lanes and paths that see low levels of traffic, and have thus remained unnoticed by the village administration and the volunteers. However, all construction work in the village has stopped, as have non-farm activities such as transportation, brick-making and mining. When work is available, men earn around Rs 350 per day for construction work and other manual labour. As in other parts of Meghalaya, woman of the lower socio-economic classes, or those who are from the poorer sections of the community, work as domestic help. They typically earn about Rs 300 per day for domestic work, which includes cleaning houses and washing clothes. The latter has been prohibited during the lockdown, and this, along with the restrictions placed on people's movements, has meant that most domestic workers have been unable to keep their jobs.

The owners of a grocery store in the village reported that they had stocked essential items in their home to sell to their neighbours. These stocks lasted until the first week of April.

There is no MGNREGA work available during the lockdown. Those who had done work under the scheme were seen queuing in large numbers outside the local Meghalaya Cooperative Apex Bank (MCAB) branch until April 18, 2020, seeking the wages they were owed.

Access to banking facilities/ATMs

The village has three banks: the State Bank of India (SBI), United Bank of India (UBI) and the Meghalaya Cooperative Apex Bank (MCAB). SBI and UBI also have an ATM each. All three have been operational during the lockdown

Availability and retail prices of main food commodities

To ensure that there is no shortage of food, the district administration has allowed small, temporary markets to operate in each locality for two days a week since

April 1. These temporary markets are very small compared to the weekly markets. The announcement of the market day is usually made by the village administration the previous day, and the volunteers monitor people to ensure that social distancing is practiced. The state authority has also issued curfew passes to vehicles carrying essential commodities. However, it was reported that people were being overcharged for food items at the temporary markets. The prices of certain essential items have risen during the lockdown (Table 1) although, as on April 18, there is no shortage of supply.

	Price before the lockdown	Price on April 16, 2020
Rice (Rs/50kg)	1250	1650
Sugar (Rs/kg)	45	50
Mustard oil (Rs/kg)	100	120
Onion (Rs/kg)	40	50
Potato (Rs/kg)	25	30

Interventions by the government/local administration

When the lockdown began, large numbers of people were seen rushing to grocery stores as they were worried about shortages. The police took action to prevent crowding and the government has also taken steps to ensure the availability of food. Some people continue to stock up on essential commodities whenever possible.

On March 31, 2020, the village administration announced that daily wage labourers—including domestic workers, construction workers, brick-makers—and owners of small shops would be paid a sum of Rs 1000 per week on the condition that they registered themselves with the village authority. People were asked to bring their voter ID, mobile phone number and bank pass book for registration at the village community hall. The registration was completed in the first week of April. However, it was reported that people had not received the money by the time this report was compiled (April 18). It was also reported that, the amount to be paid would actually be Rs 700 per individual per week. People with a ‘job card’ or those registered under the MGNREGS are not required to complete the registration process, as the amount will be directly transferred to their existing MGNREGS bank accounts.

Support from NGOs/civil society organizations/political organizations

One family in the village is providing poor households about ten kg of rice per family as well as one kg each of onion, potato and salt. They reportedly identify families that need these rations based on common knowledge of households’ financial circumstances. My respondents also reported that the MLA of the constituency planned to distribute rice to the poor about two weeks after the lockdown began. However, the criteria for identifying deserving households were vague. For example, a household with nine family members headed by a widow received only about ten kg of rice. Others received about six kg, but the quantity seemed to vary based on the decisions made by the distributors.

Some villagers tried exploring the nearby forest to find local edible plants. Some are also fishing in the rivers. However, the volunteers in the village are now preventing villagers from engaging in these activities.

To sum up, markets, especially weekly markets, are central to rural life in Meghalaya. The cancellation of these weekly markets during the nationwide lockdown has brought great hardship to both producers and consumers. Farmers have been unable to harvest and sell agricultural produce such as vegetables in Ummulong village while neighbouring villages and towns have faced shortages of the same. There is also a shortage of agricultural inputs. Fortunately, the villagers have not yet had to face a shortage of food, but the prices of some essential commodities have risen. For the poor, the lack of available employment during the lockdown is a cause for concern, especially among women domestic workers, agricultural labourers, construction and mining workers.

*** The writer is a Doctoral Scholar in Development Studies at the Indian Institute of Technology in Guwahati.**