



Building to last:

Creating a platform to tackle urban poverty

Bangladesh's Growing Cities

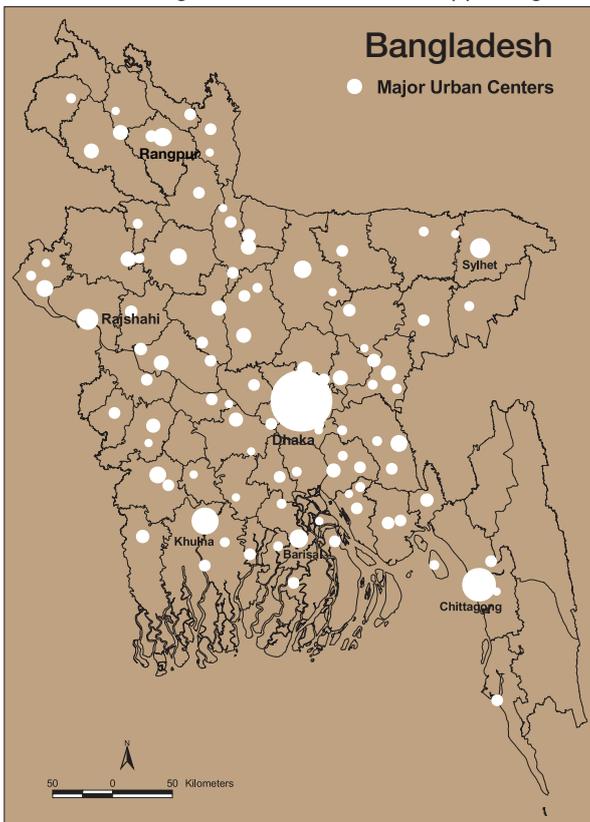
Once a country of villages, Bangladesh is fast urbanizing. With its megacity capital of Dhaka, nine growing second cities, and over 300 municipal areas, change is everywhere. Some of the movement is due to “push” factors—poverty, land scarcity and climate change force many to head to cities seeking jobs in the fast-growing service economy. But cities have their own allure: for Bangladesh's young women in particular, the garment industry has created myriad opportunities to work and gain independence.

The transformation is not without its dark sides. Sprawling slums provide space to stay but without land rights—evictions are common and can occur without notice. People often live with absence of basic infrastructure and services because even NGOs are reluctant to make investments in this climate. A

significant number of slum dwellers remain highly transient, moving between slums or shuttling back and forth between their village home and the city (Statistics, 1997). Familial ties remain strong, but local communities are less vibrant. In the absence of provision of public services, informal forms of power have grown strong. Mastaans, as these local leaders in slums are called, mediate with government officials and provide services to slum dwellers while simultaneously engaging in intimidation, extortion, violence, and other means of maintaining power.

Clearly, the absence of a comprehensive, national urban policy and strategy remains a critical need. People continue to migrate in great numbers to reap the economic benefits that are possible, but risk their health, safety, and well being in the process. Strong implementation plans and empowered municipal governments can create inclusive cities with the ability to grow and flourish. BRAC and other NGOs can participate in efforts to advance national dialogs about urban issues and provide leadership in developing innovative delivery models for the urban poor.

Across Bangladesh, urban areas are appearing



Source: Center for Urban Studies (2005).

BRAC's Existing Urban Presence

Since launching its first urban program in Dhaka in 1998, BRAC has established its flagship programs including health, education

BRAC's activities in urban areas

- Empowering entrepreneurs through microfinance
- Creating access to quality primary and pre-primary education
- Combating sexual harassment in schools
- Providing community-based health services and referrals
- Standing up for the poorest and most marginalized by filing public interest litigation
- Creating a space for girls to build positive relationships with peers
- Promoting building measures to reduce the impact of earthquakes

Examples of vulnerable populations in urban areas

Target population	Profile	Key challenges	Examples of BRAC programs reaching this population
Garment factory workers	Constitute nearly 70% of the total female employment in the country's manufacturing sector (Azad, 2009)	Lack of awareness of occupational hazards and diseases, need for better monitoring in factories, lack of accessibility to healthcare, exploitation of labor rights, wages	BRAC's tuberculosis program partners with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association to provide on-site testing and treatment services to factory employees
Slum dwellers	Accounts for approximately 1/3 of Dhaka's population (Khairul Islam, 2011)	Fear of Mastaans, lack of public services, threat of eviction	BRAC's microfinance program, health program, program targeting the ultra-poor and others provide services in slums all over Bangladesh
Street dwellers	Up to 20,000 people are estimated to be living on the streets, railway platforms, constructions sites and other open-public spaces (Islam, 1997)	Unsanitary living conditions, social-political unrest, unemployment, lack of access to basic healthcare	Advocacy against new anti-vagrancy laws; proposed project to provide temporary shelter and services to mobile populations

and microfinance in 10 city corporations, including Dhaka. Several pilots, tackling everything from sexual harassment in schools, holistic needs of children in the slums, and strengthening community empowerment, are also underway.

Many slums lack the social cohesion seen in rural villages. BRAC's focus on building community, creating platforms for collective action, and promoting efficacy among the poor are greatly needed, along with the "hard" services that it can provide. However, BRAC's approach is one where the benefits accrue over time; it best serves stable populations and builds on existing social mechanisms. With the constant threat of eviction and transient lifestyles, BRAC will be challenged to both find ways to reduce these dynamics and better work with mobile populations. In addition, there is a great need to engage and mobilize authorities and local leaders with the community. Urban poverty reduction programs require challenging the state to make political reforms in order to recognize the urban poor. Participatory approaches which encourage communication between government and communities has proven to be key to successful urban poverty reduction programs (Banks, 2011).

Recently BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division conducted a study on Dhaka's street dwellers, with a sample of 2,000 respondents (BRAC, 2011). The study revealed that illiterate women, including divorced and abandoned women with children,



were most at risk for short and long-term street dwelling. Finding food, housing, and jobs were their top priorities, with children voicing interest in opportunities to attend school or receive vocational training.

BRAC's work in urban Bangladesh spans 15 years and a number of sectors. Our learning has been great; our understanding of the power dynamics, living conditions, and types of community continues to grow. To keep pace with the rapid rate of change experienced by urban dwellers and the continual flow of arriving migrants, programs must continuously evolve and when possible, scale, to address the growing needs. Increasingly, BRAC is designing integrated packages tailored to a set of unique vulnerabilities experienced by a specific population.

When confronted with the challenges presented by urban contexts, programs have chosen a number of strategies. Three are briefly highlighted here to demonstrate the breadth of existing activity and opportunity to create systemic change, through innovative forms of mobilization, service delivery, and partnerships with the public sector.

Adapting a Rural Program to the Urban Context

In 2002, BRAC launched an innovative program "Challenging the Frontier of Poverty Reduction (CFPR)," with an emphasis on providing an integrated package of services designed to help ultra-poor households of rural Bangladesh climb out of extreme poverty. Through a combination of community mobilization, income-generating asset transfers, grants, skills and confidence-building courses, sanitation and health services, participants show significant increases in productivity and economic status at the end of the 24-month program. Graduating members often move into the mainstream microfinance groups and continue to engage with BRAC's programs. Membership is rigorously determined through a participatory appraisal, with priority given to those not reached by other NGO activities: households without land, without productive assets, dependent on irregular sources of income and with school-age children working.

In 2010, BRAC began a pilot CFPR program in Dhaka in recognition of the growing number of ultra-poor living in urban areas. Currently 200 households are participating. BRAC uses the same criteria to choose participants, with the additional requirement of two years of stable residency, since mobility is far higher in urban areas. Though the duration of the program remains 24-months, much of the program activity has been adapted to reflect the distinct attitudes, behaviors, and aspirations of the slum dwellers. For example, the assets provided are much more entrepreneurial in nature, including: materials for selling fish, fruit vending or selling clothes. Experts provide extensive enterprise training to participants to help them develop basic business acumen. Through partnerships with local health providers, participants can access care at no cost. However, the living conditions of the slums create many public health concerns. Addressing sanitation and hygiene remains an urgent challenge to the health and dignity of urban poor.

Accounting for Local Power Structures in Urban Health Delivery

BRAC's Manoshi program began in 2007 to improve maternal, neonatal, and child health (MNCH) in Bangladesh's urban slums. It creates a presence in slum communities through *shasthya kormi* and *shasthya shebikas* (community health workers) and the establishment of woman-friendly delivery centers. Initially, it was difficult to find spaces for its delivery centers, largely because BRAC lacked the necessary legitimacy and trust from the community. Team members identified local leadership, public officials and influential community members to participate in "MNCH committees" to guide BRAC's activities carefully and build relationships. Though time-consuming, engaging consistently with local leaders in locating delivery centers offered important insights into local political dynamics. MNCH committees are comprised of BRAC's health workers, local leaders, public officials, and respected community members. Two of its critical roles are supporting women with high-risk pregnancies to quickly access appropriate facilities and in allaying community anger when a woman does not survive childbirth. By keeping local leaders informed about the programs objectives and activities, it hopes to ensure the safety of the delivery center and community health workers.

One family's story

As the income from tenant farming proved too meager to support a growing family, Fatema and Aladuddin migrated to Dhaka in February 2012, landing in Korail slum thanks to advice from a relative. Their three children, 9-year-old Moushumi, 7-year-old Shahjalal, and 6-year-old Brishti, came as well, and enrolled in a nearby public school. Fatema has found work providing house help and earns about Tk 1,500 (USD 18) per month. Her husband secured a job with a cleaning service provider. The position, though requiring 13 hour days, six days a week, allows him to bring home Tk 4,500 (USD 55). Moushumi takes care of Shahjalal and Brishti after school while their parents are out working.

The family rents one room that is furnished with water and electricity. The water comes from a government-installed pump, whereas the electricity connection is the result of an illegal tap into the state-owned power supply cables. Fatema uses fire wood for cooking, but often does not boil the family's water because of the cost and time it takes. Along with many other families, they share a crude latrine next to the Gulshan Lake.

The family has noted that there are many non-government organizations operating in the slums, particularly with health and microfinance services. As recent migrants, they've found it difficult to access many of the services that are provided. Moushumi recently suffered an illness and the cost of seeing a doctor was difficult for the family to manage.

Fatema and Aladuddin consider themselves fortunate to have found employment opportunities that enable them to cover their living expenses. Yet recent evictions in the Korail slum have them worried about the safety of the family. Slum evictions take place frequently, are often announced and usually



Fatema and her three children in front of their rented room in Korail, Dhaka.

“

Thank God because now my family has the opportunity to stay in this place. My children's education, our livelihoods and a shot at a better future all depend on it. We don't know where else to go and we have nothing to go back to. Nothing.

”

Fatema

target the easy to reach areas on the perimeter. The more secure rooms come at a cost; the family cannot afford the 50% hike in rent that it would require.

Despite the clear challenges, for the moment, the family remains grateful for what they have.



Urbanization in Bangladesh at a glance

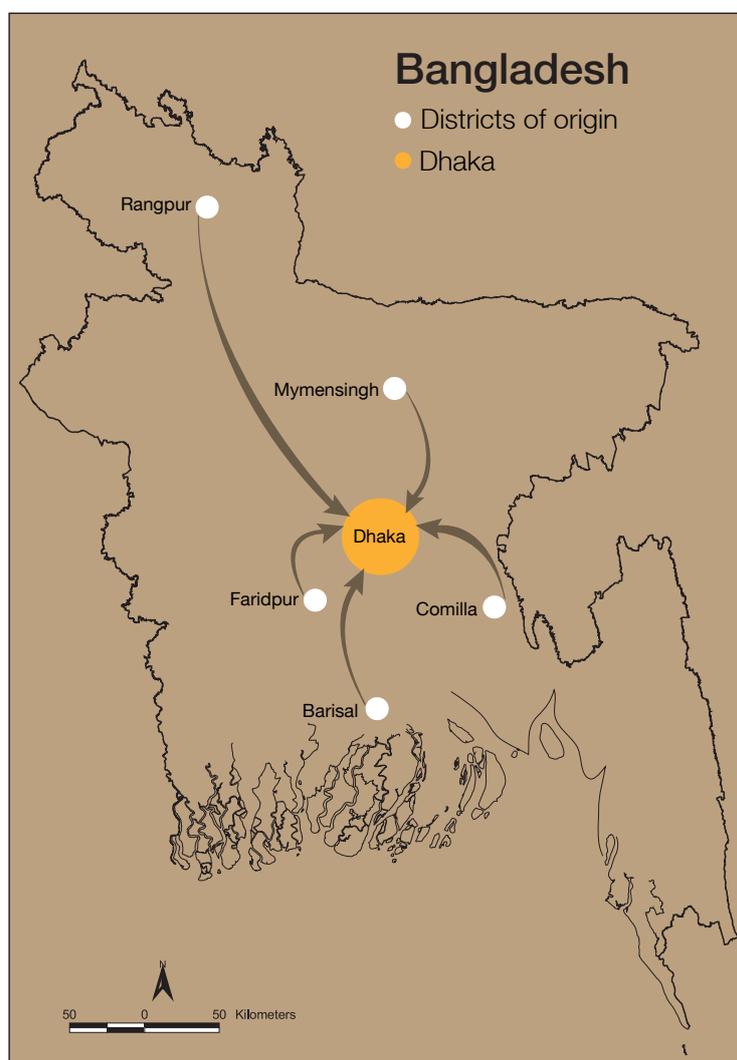
- About 28% of Bangladesh's total population are living in urban areas. Dhaka and Chittagong holds over 85% of the country's urban population (calculations from CUS et al 2006).
- In 2005, nearly 35% of Bangladesh's urban population lived in low-income settlements, or bustees, across its six city corporations (Banks, N 2011)
- Close to 80% of slums in Dhaka are located on privately owned land (World Bank, 2007).
- Dhaka alone attracts between 300,000 and 400,000 new migrants each year (World Bank 2007).
- Approximately 10,000 to 12,000 road traffic fatalities occurred in Bangladesh in 2011.

Population of cities in Bangladesh, 2011	
City	Population in millions
Barisal	2.3
Chittagong	7.5
Comilla	5.3
Dhaka	12
Narayanganj	3
Khulna	2.3
Rajshahi	2.6
Rangpur	3
Sylhet	3.4

Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Population and Housing Census, 2011

Dhaka City has an overall population density of 30,000 people per square kilometer. In the slums, the population density reaches a staggering 220,000 per square kilometer. Compare that to New York City, where the average density is just 10,500 per square kilometer.

Major districts of origin of Dhaka slum dwellers



Source: Center for Urban Studies (2005).



What's Next

BRAC has demonstrated significant achievement in its engagement with urban communities. Yet with the continuous rate of urban growth, the scale of the required solutions also widens. Increasingly, service delivery will be impeded by a lack of robust “top-down” policies and “bottoms-up” mobilization. Many of BRAC’s programs already experience this through the consequences of eviction, persistent water and sanitation issues, and other drivers of poor health and poverty. Working with the public sector to create and implement comprehensive strategies to address urban poverty is pivotal for creating lasting change. National policy is urgently needed, though city-level leaders are also seeking local solutions simultaneously. Working through coordinating mechanisms may prove a productive opportunity for NGOs like BRAC to constructively shape the development and implementation of a national policy.

BRAC is still adapting the mobilizing and organizing principles that proved so powerful in rural Bangladesh. Those living in urban poverty are often described as voiceless, community-less. But what are the natural communities? BRAC’s increasing attention to population-led approaches—such as those reaching adolescents, the ultra-poor, and slum-dwellers—raise important questions about what the latent unifying characteristics are.

In addition, BRAC is increasingly looking at hidden pockets of extreme vulnerability. BRAC’s research projects exploring the living conditions of street dwellers and motivations for becoming domestic servants, can lead to new, evidence-based approaches.

Partnering with City Leaders for Better Urban Design

In 2011, professors of BRAC University’s Department of Architecture had a novel idea. They would run a “studio” and engage students in creating solutions to the pressing urban challenges cropping up around them. In year 2, they decided to experiment again. The best way to make Dhaka livable, they hypothesized, was to invest in Bangladesh’s second-tier cities, which could divert migration from the megacity and create new poles for economic vitality. The class chose to focus on Rangpur, a northern-lying city that had grown from a municipal area to a city corporation.

Student groups chose thematic areas to focus on, with input from Rangpur’s mayor about his priorities and needs. They visited the city to speak with local officials and community members, observing first-hand the importance of education institutions, competing needs of urbanization and agriculture, and the neglected canals. Using a variety of mapping tools, research methods, and disciplines, they created visions of an ideal Rangpur in 50 years, with attention to balancing industry, livability, environmental sustainability, and communications. They looked as far as Thailand’s floating markets and Cambridge’s campus on a river for ideas of how to marry the city and its surroundings. The results are crisp ideas with thoughtful explanations to create a roadmap for city planning.

In April 2012, they presented their recommendations to local leaders and hope for subsequent opportunities to support city policy and planning. Each year, the studio course will focus on a different city corporation in Bangladesh.

Check out [Bangladesh on the move: reflections on urbanization](#), a video on how “urbanization” and migration are changing both cities and villages, on the BRAC youtube channel.



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