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The Urban Governance Conundrum: Meeting the Challenge of Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas

Dr Nicola Banks¹

Abstract

Within this generation, Bangladesh's poor population will become predominantly urban. Given the scale and severity of urban poverty, the country faces momentous governance challenges. Current systems of urban governance have paid inadequate attention to the urban poor, with obstacles at both the national and the municipal level creating barriers to greater recognition of the urban poor. At the national level, a number of political, social, and cultural factors underpin the neglect of urban poverty and the unwillingness of central government to decentralise power and resources to the municipal level. These reasons, including Bangladesh's national identity and image and the political economy of urban poverty, prevent urban poverty from being accorded a higher priority at the national level. Until now, there remains no government agency, department or Ministry mandated with responsibility for urban poverty reduction.

At the municipal level, improved urban governance for urban poverty reduction requires not only strengthened financial ability and effectiveness, it also requires changing the relationship between the state and low-income residents. A lack of representation and accountability to the urban poor in local governance structures has created a situation in which the sole access of most low-income residents is through politically-affiliated local leaders who provide access to services and other problem resolutions, but at a social and financial cost. The mobilisation of low-income urban communities through BOSCO has led to significant advances in terms of political participation of the urban poor, but its impact has been limited by its scale of operations and an ongoing lack of national commitment.

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1. Introduction

Shifting population dynamics in Bangladesh mean that the country is at the verge of an important tipping point. Bangladesh's poor population will become predominantly urban within this generation. Bangladesh's increasingly urban future and the growing magnitude of urban poverty must also be contextualised by the relative neglect of urban poverty in national policy and action. Until now, the Government of Bangladesh have proven unable – and even unwilling – to meet the urban challenge, but given the scale and severity of urban poverty, the country now faces momentous governance challenges.

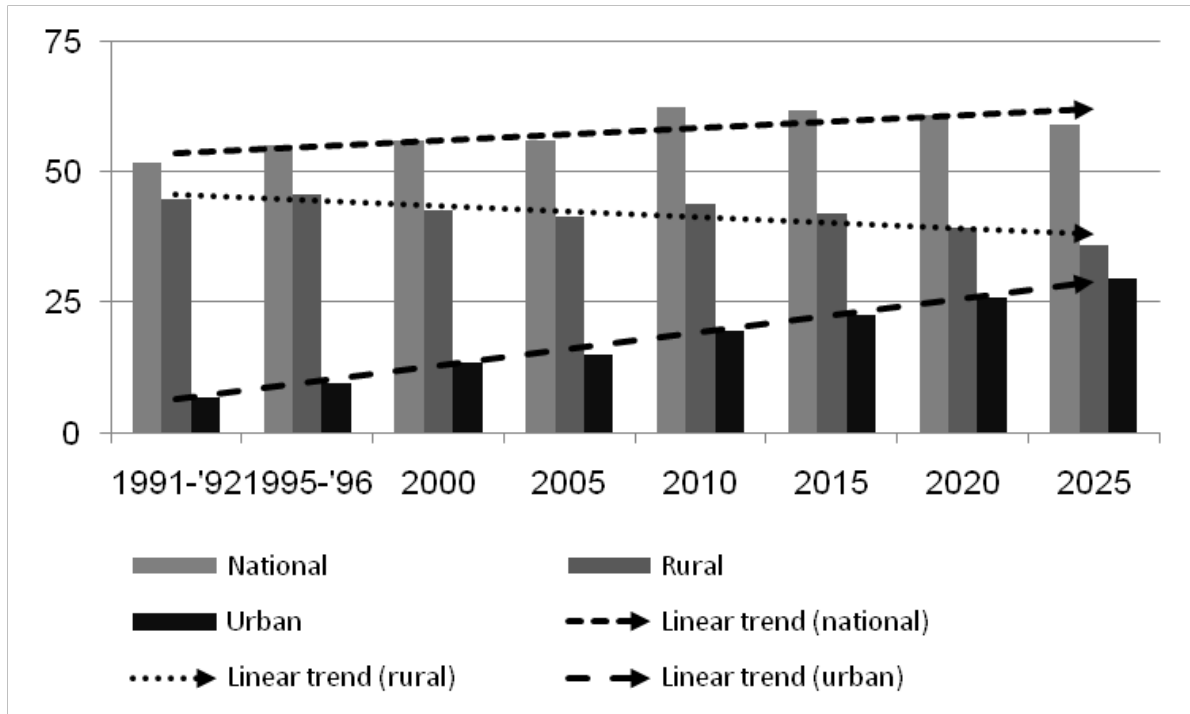
It is important to frame future efforts in urban poverty reduction within the current system of urban governance, including the existing institutions that underlie the current urban poverty agenda (or lack thereof). Without adequate knowledge of these institutions and institutional constraints, any efforts for improved urban poverty reduction will come up against a number of policy-oriented obstacles. Political, social, and cultural factors underpin the relative neglect of urban poverty in Bangladesh, in addition to providing continued obstacles to greater recognition of urban poverty in the governance agenda. Understanding this relative neglect requires tracing back development debates within the country since Independence. After a brief introduction to Bangladesh's urbanisation and subsequent increases in urban poverty, Sections 3 and 4 discuss the neglect of urban poverty. Sections 5 and 6 discuss recent progresses in political participation of the urban poor and recognition of urban poverty at the national level, before Section 7 concludes.

2. Urbanisation and Urban Poverty in Bangladesh

Urbanisation is a major contributor to economic growth and poverty reduction, as well as to the structural transformation that allows low-income rural societies to modernise and join the ranks of middle-income countries (Satterthwaite 2002; Stren 2008; Clarke Annez and Buckley 2009). Economic growth is a major driver of poverty reduction, but given inadequate attention to urban poverty reduction, across the developing world, urbanisation has helped to reduce national poverty, but done little for urban poverty reduction (Cohen 2001; Ravallion et al 2007).

Rapid urbanisation is a key feature of Bangladesh's recent development, and shifting population dynamics mean that the country is at the verge of an important tipping point: within this generation, Bangladesh's poor population will become predominantly urban. By 2005, Bangladesh had an urban population of around 35 million, just over 25 percent of its total population (CUS et al 2006). With rural population growth stagnating from 2010, population growth occurs predominantly in urban areas (Garrett and Chowdhury 2004), and these changing dynamics are accompanied by a subsequent increase in the urbanisation of poverty. As Figure 1 shows, projections indicate a declining share in rural households living below the poverty line, and a subsequent large increase in the number of urban

households living under the poverty line. In Dhaka, the capital city and one of the fastest growing countries of the world, over 35 percent of the population live under the poverty line (CUS et al 2006).



Data from 1991 to 2005 are actual reported in the BBS- HIES and from 2010 to 2025 are projected with data obtained from UNPD.

Source: (Eusuf 2010)

Urban poverty is a distinctive feature of cities in Bangladesh, with one report stating that the human development situation in urban areas is either stagnating or actively deteriorating (World Bank 2007). Large proportions of the urban population live in inadequate and unsafe housing, lack access to land and basic service delivery, face inequality and underrepresentation in political issues, and remain vulnerable to eviction. This is particularly the case in Bangladesh’s six city corporations, in which nearly 35 percent of city residents live in low-income settlements, or *bastees* (CUS et al 2006). It is the urban poor, therefore, that suffer most violently from poor urban planning and governance (Banks 2006). While official urban poverty rates have been declining, as Figure 2 shows, the absolute number of urban poor residents has risen dramatically given the scale of urbanisation.² Given the growing magnitude of urban poverty and its typical underestimation, there is an important need for a better

² It is also important to recognise that more often than not, official poverty lines are widely overestimated in urban areas, given the monetisation of the urban economy and higher costs of living associated with urban living (especially monthly rental costs). One estimate, cross-country study, for example, finds that urban poverty lines are, on average, 30 percent higher than those in rural areas (Ravallion et al 2007).

understanding of urban poverty. The hidden extent of urban poverty contributes to the continued emphasis in policy, action, and research on rural manifestations of poverty (Banks et al 2011).

Table 1: Urban Poverty in Bangladesh (1983-2005)

		1983/84	1988/89	1991/92	2000	2005
HIES	Urban	40.9	35.9	33.6	26.4	
Poverty						
Headcount						
(%)					35.2*	28.4*

N.B. Estimate for 1995/1996 excluded due to gross overestimation of average urban per capita expenditure
Source: (Sen et al 2007) *(Narayan et al 2007)

The low political priority given to the urban poor across the developing world is now widely recognised (DFID 2001; Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2007; DFID 2010; Banks 2011). While policies and actions to tackle poverty have been part of policy debate within Bangladesh since Liberation in 1971 (Banks et al 2011), urban poverty has remained overlooked in key policy debates and documents. The exclusion of urban poverty from national policies is most evident in its exclusion from Bangladesh's first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which placed poverty reduction efforts firmly in rural areas. Initially excluded from the first draft of the PRSP, urban poverty was incorporated into the final document after last-minute advocacy work by concerned stakeholders, but received only a half-page summary, insufficient to outline the distinct vulnerabilities of urban poverty nor the strategies necessary to address it (Banks et al 2011). Given that this crucial document guides and directs subsequent government policies and budgets, urban poverty has since been neglected in policy and spending for national poverty reduction: no policies exist and no funds are earmarked for the urban poor (Banks 2008).

For the urban poor to benefit from wider processes of urban governance is dependent on a system where their votes count, the municipal government has some capacity to deliver, and a dynamic civil society which can press the case for the urban poor (Devas 2001). Understanding a lack of recognition of urban poverty by national and local governments requires a better understanding of the development debates that have occurred since Independence, including the formation of national image and identity, the emergence of the current system of urban governance, and the complex political economy of urban poverty in Bangladesh, as the following sections discuss.

3. National Image and Identity

Originating as a predominantly rural economy, and remaining so until the late 20th Century, Bangladesh, like many other countries with agrarian histories, remain loyal to a rural-oriented model of development (World Bank 2007). The generation that currently governs Bangladesh continues to envision the country as ‘rural’ (Van Schendel 2009), and these perceptions play a role in maintaining a focus on rural poverty reduction. The shift towards increasing urbanisation, therefore, has not been accompanied by recognition of what this means for policy and programmes for poverty reduction (Banks et al 2011).

Different perceptions of rural and urban areas also contribute to a neglect of urban poverty: while rural areas tend to be associated with ‘social harmony’, the urban poor are more commonly associated with crime and squalor, with emphasis placed on their removal rather than assistance. The PRSP, for example, reveals that neglect of the urban poor has been due to, “a tendency...to equate the problem with that of a big city slum life’ (GoB 2005). Traditional perceptions of the urban poor vis-a-vis the rural poor have led to the latter being viewed as more deserving of support and investment (Hossain 2005b).

A focus on rural poverty reduction is also grounded in ongoing perceptions that rural areas are the legitimate place for the poor (Banks et al 2011). Early beliefs that investment in the urban poor would encourage further rural to urban migration remain and this contributes to a lack of investment in urban poverty reduction.³ Greater investments in infrastructure, services and human capital in rural areas mean that the 1990s was categorised largely as the decade of escape from poverty among the moderate poor in rural areas: initial disadvantages in the capabilities of the poor and extreme poor in urban areas, however, persist (Sen et al 2007). The shift towards higher levels of urban poverty relative to rural poverty requires these beliefs and theories be re-evaluated (Jones and Corbridge 2010).

4. The Political Economy of Urban Governance with Respect to Urban Poverty Reduction

Urban governance in Bangladesh’s city corporations

One critique accuses that all governments since Independence have been “anti-urban poor” (Islam and Shafi 2007), and current systems of urban governance have received heavy criticism for paying inadequate attention to the needs of the urban poor. Understanding this criticism, however, requires an analysis of the existing system of urban governance and how this addresses the needs of the urban poor. Given that national governance structures dictate policies and opportunities for governance at

³ Fears that urban investment fuels unmanageable migration and that urban growth is driven by a pro-urban bias is not unique to Bangladesh. See, for example, Satterthwaite (2002), Clarke-Annez and Buckley 2009.

the local level, it is important to frame possibilities for urban poverty reduction within governance structures and processes at the national *and* municipal level.

Urban areas in Bangladesh are divided into small and large urban areas. The country's six largest cities have been designated as city corporations and are governed by their own municipal authorities. Together, these six cities account for more than half of Bangladesh's urban population, with Dhaka alone absorbing nearly one-third (CUS et al 2005). A failure to implement decentralisation measures has contributed to Dhaka's overall primacy as a city (Bertuzzo 2009). Given their unique system of urban governance, the paper refers to city corporations as its focal point for urban areas. An additional 271 municipalities, or *pourashavas*, are also classified as urban areas, but in many cases, are little more than 'rural towns'. Nearly 70 percent of *pourashavas* in the 1990s, for example, did not meet the requirements of their classification, including a population of more than 15,000 and a density of over 2,000 per square mile, and with over three-quarters of the population engaged in industry other than agriculture (CGS 2006).

No Ministry has sole jurisdiction over urban affairs, leaving the urban sector to be administered by mixture of the Ministry of Housing and Public Works and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Cooperatives. Lacking a national policy on the urban sector, urban governance has therefore not received the recognition or priority that it requires and subsequently, unplanned urban growth has characterised Bangladesh's rapid urbanisation (Banks 2006). This situation is exacerbated by the multiplicity of authorities and organisations involved in urban governance and development and the lack of an effective coordination mechanism amongst them. Islam (2005) estimates that upwards of 41 agencies and departments participate in Bangladesh's urban development. As well as poor communication among these, there also exists no government agency, department, or Ministry that is allocated responsibility for urban poverty reduction (Banks 2008b).

City corporations are headed by democratically-elected mayors and split into zones and wards (Dhaka City Corporation, for example, is split into 10 zones and 90 wards). Wards, the most localised level of municipal governance, are each headed by a democratically-elected ward commissioner, who, as the closest representative to residents, plays a crucial role in urban governance. Ward sizes remain large, however, with estimates in Dhaka ranging from 65,000 to 100,000 (Rahman 1998; Siddiqui 2004). As well as having limited resources, ward commissioners lack a fully defined framework of duties and responsibilities, leaving them to perform their responsibilities – managing development works and the day-to-day running of their wards – according to their individual initiative and commitment (Banks 2008).

A two-tier system of urban governance

While municipal governments are best-placed to address issues facing the urban poor (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2007), a lack of political commitment provides a major barrier to more effective urban governance, with central government reluctant to handing over power and resources to a democratically-elected municipal government (Banks 2008). The realities of the existing system is that it has created a two-tier system of urban governance which prevents the decentralisation of resources and power to the local level, and in doing so, prevents the representation of the interests of the local electorate – including the urban poor – to the national level. Ruling parties remain unwilling to transfer significant power to city mayors for fear the position will be gained by the opposition. The loss of the mayoral position to the opposition party in 1994, for example, has been named as one of the contributing factors to the decline of the BNP, which lost power in the next election (Siddiqui et al 2004). This “conflicting dual metropolitan power structure” (World Bank 2009) means that central government holds enormous powers financial and legislative powers over city corporations, reducing their ability, initiative, and ultimately, their effectiveness.

Interviews by the author in 2006 with a number of senior officials at the key institutions for urban governance shed further light on how these constraints overshadow the needs and rights of the urban poor. Responses from government officials highlighted three main obstacles to urban poverty reduction efforts, including a rural bias in Bangladesh’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (and subsequent national policies on poverty reduction); a lack of coordination among relevant departments and ministries; and resignation to the fact that urban poverty is “the impossible – although financial and administrative constraints contributed to this attitude, a lack of knowledge on the scale, causes and consequences of urban poverty also contributed to this (Banks 2008). Officials at Dhaka City Corporation, for example, highlighted that they struggle to meet even their designated responsibilities within their current funding allocations. With their budget taken up by compulsory functions – from which urban poverty is excluded – is it impossible for DCC to prioritise urban poverty.

Although democracy has brought popular representation to local government, a high degree of central control has ensured that city corporations do not have effective powers to enact the popular will. Thus, the powers, functions, jurisdiction and financial capacities at the municipal level are severely constrained. These governance arrangements begin to reveal further why, until now, urban issues, including urban poverty, have so far been neglected in policy and planning. This has limited, as the next section discusses, scope for political participation of the urban poor.

5. Political Participation of the Urban Poor

Looking at governance structures and processes tells only one side of the story: the relations between the state and low-income urban residents themselves are also critical in an assessment of urban

governance for urban poverty reduction. Good governance requires not only effective and accountable institutions, but also a means through which to ensure an open and accountable relationship between the state and civil society (Islam and Khan 1997). Lessons learned from across the developing world reveal that improved outcomes in urban poverty reduction requires the improvement of municipal government institutions and processes and a changing relationship between these institutions and their poor urban constituents (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2007; DFID 2010; Banks 2011b). While this requires using the existing system of urban governance, it also requires changing it: enhancing collective assets and capabilities must be a bottom-up procedure generated by low-income communities themselves (Appadurai 2004; Rao and Walton 2004). This has resulted in an increasing focus on the concept of community mobilisation as a means of facilitating external linkages for low-income urban communities through which they can secure access to resources (Benjamin 2006).

The extension of voting rights for municipal elections to the urban poor in 1994 was one of the most significant achievements in participation of the urban poor in municipal governance: prior to this, voting rights were dependent on property, income, and qualifications, and subsequently, the electorate constituted only nine percent of the city's population (Kamal 2000). Even with voting rights now established, however, political participation remains limited for the urban poor. A lack of representation and accountability in municipal government means that the urban poor are forced to address their needs for service delivery and security to alternative actors.

Large ward sizes create major difficulties for representation of the urban poor, resulting in limited interactions with their elected representatives, who instead communicate with urban poor residents of *bastees* through politically-affiliated middlemen. With ward sizes in Dhaka reaching up to 100,000 residents, for example, urban electorates become large and anonymous voting blocks, especially for the urban poor. In contrast, the average population of *union parishads* (the core unit of rural local government) is 27,000 people (CGS 2006), ensuring that local leaders are more accountable to their poor constituencies. With opportunities for re-election being in part dependent on delivering rights and entitlements to their electorate, rural local representatives become vulnerable if they do not 'perform' in this respect (Hossain 2005b).

Two factors limit interactions between municipal officials and low-income urban residents. The first is that the urban poor are excluded from social assistance programmes that their rural counterparts can access.⁴ Secondly, where goods or entitlements are distributed in urban areas – such as food rations or blankets – officials do not engage directly with communities, instead working through politically-

⁴ Safety nets have been a core component of successive government commitments. There are 27 safety nets in the government's portfolio of programmes (CGS 2006), but only one of these – the old age allowance – has been introduced to urban areas, and this only since 2007.

affiliated local leaders, who draw upon party support to legitimate their power (Banks 2008; Banks et al 2011).

Lacking formal recognition and legal service provision has led to a complex political economy in which other actors play a key role in problem resolution and service delivery for the urban poor (Banks 2008). This has led to the system of urban governance operating in, “a ‘third space’ of constant negotiation and contestation” that is dependent heavily on political affiliation (Hossain 2012: 68).⁵ These leaders, often referred to as *mastaans*, have been described as a ‘creation of the elite and politicians’, who rely on links with these local leaders for support and re-elections (Rashid 2004; Rashid and Hossain 2005; Sen and Hulme 2006; Banks 2008). In addition to being able to mobilise ‘vote banks’ for politicians, these local leaders play an additionally important role, creating a dependency relationship between the state and the urban poor. Given government fears that large urban areas controlled by opposition political parties will deteriorate their chances of re-election, this creates a ‘controlled social order’ that minimises the chances of social movements against the Government (Hossain 2012). Research with the urban poor in 2006 revealed that while *basteebashees* see the necessity of these relationships in mediating with officials and accessing services and political contacts,⁶ they are also a considerable source of fear to many, often using extortion or threats of violence to control the *bastee* (Banks 2008). These local informal governance structures are also both exclusionary and self-interested, with local leaders acting out of personal interest rather than the needs of the *bastee’s* residents (Hossain 2012). While these patronage networks bring illegally-accessed services to slumdweller, it comes at financial cost, with the urban poor supplied by illegal electricity connections intermediated by politically-affiliated local leaders paying up to three times the legal rate (Rashid and Hossain 2005).

Although democratic elections elect ward commissioners as local political representatives to urban residents, limited decentralisation of power and resources undermines this political representation. While elections reflect the interests of the poor at the local level, ward commissioners have little resources or power with which to meet the needs of the poor, and their interests are not echoed into

⁵ Hossain (2012) gives a detailed account of the processes through which low-income urban residents in Dhaka negotiate access to services and recognition with urban governance institutions. In one case, through close political affiliation with the then government in power, BNP, influential local residents were able to secure support and approval from the local ward commissioner to run a market committee and cooperative which took responsibility for running water supply, electricity provision, market allocations, and employment of cleaners for the *bastee*. When the AL Government came to power in 2007, given their political affiliation with the previous government, members of the committee became virtually inactive, lacking the support of the political party and subsequent access to services and protection. In their place, supporters of AL took control over the committee and its responsibilities.

⁶ Without secure tenure, service provision to *bastees* is illegal. Consequently, informal settlements face great difficulties accessing legal services, and in this space, political patronage has become a substitute for government services (Banks 2008; Hossain 2012).

policy or priorities at a higher level, due to the weakness of ward commissioners in relation to their city corporation and of city corporations in relation to central government (Banks 2008).

Strengthening urban governments in developing countries is politically complex, because it implies less power for government agencies and the state at the national level (Satterthwaite 2001; Stren 2008). Central government, therefore, has little incentive to decentralise resources to municipal governments that can be used to improve living conditions for the urban poor for fear that the opposition will garner further support if the conditions of low-income residents are seen to improve (Resnick 2011; Banks 2011). This is particularly the case in large cities where large populations of the urban poor constitute big voting blocks and where the municipal government is governed by the opposition party, a political threat. Given this political economy of urban areas, it is hard to challenge the structure of interests necessary to “deliver” poverty reduction to the urban poor (Banks et al 2011).

From informal to formal: changing relationships between city corporations and the urban poor

Although the high concentration of low-income urban households provides a major strength in terms of the potential for urban poverty reduction – offering greater scope for joint action, community mobilisation and negotiation with government bodies for access to infrastructure and services – this is dependent on closing the large gulf between government institutions and the urban poor (Satterthwaite 2002). As one account of urban poverty reduction highlights, “It is difficult to envision any great possibilities for poverty reduction in urban areas without changes in the relationships between local governments and the poor” (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2007).

As one account of political participation of the urban poor in 1997 found, “The poor’s exclusion from local urban bodies is complete. They simply have no means through which to directly or indirectly participate in the deliberations of such bodies and influence decisions” (Khan 1997). This has led to the creation of informal governance structures mediated through politically-affiliated local leaders. There has, however, been considerable improvement since then with the creation of *Bastee Basheer Odhikar Surakha* (BOSC), a network of local committees throughout *bastees* across the six city corporations through which the urban poor can mobilise and press their demands upon local government.⁷ BOSC was created by Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP) as an alternative to the violent rallies, protests and demonstrations that had been the main forum for staging the voices of the poor (Banks 2008). The BOSC network creates accountability mechanisms for the urban poor to incorporate them more greatly into municipal governance through ward commissioners, who act as the ‘gatekeeper’ to the poor’s participation in municipal governance. Success in this model, however, is greatly dependent on a ward commissioner’s individual interests in and empathy for his poor

⁷ Banks (2008) gives a detailed account of BOSC, its achievements, and its challenges.

residents: if this relationship breaks down the voices of the urban poor do not reach higher levels of government.

One of BOSC's biggest achievements has been, through negotiations with the Minister of Power in the Secretariat, to secure formal water and electricity connections within some informal settlements. This was a process of negotiation through which the BOSC committee were able to help overcome two constraints commonly used to justify the exclusion of informal settlements from service provision, namely technical problems and cost-recovery. Given the unsound nature of housing in *bastees*, individual household electricity connections are not feasible, but in their negotiations, BOSC were able to participate in the design of collective metres to resolve this issue. They also mobilised local committees to look after the metres and ensure regular payment to DESA (Dhaka Electricity Supply Authority). Mobilising community participation and ownership of these services has proven to have successful outcomes in sustainability, cost recovery and savings, and also in terms of renegotiating traditional forms of patron-client relationships between the urban poor and local government and service providers through which the majority of resource allocations benefit a small number of politically-affiliated local leaders.

While BOSC committees have found space for participation and representation of the urban poor in issues of local governance, that BOSC's activities are limited at the municipal level means that their achievements cannot reach greater recognition of urban poverty and livelihoods in Bangladesh's policy agenda. Given the high degree of centralisation in decision-making and limited power and resources at the municipal level, local mobilisation has limited impact on higher levels of government and policy makers. Given the weakness of city corporations to the central government, achievements of BOSC are limited to the local level, since there are no avenues through which the urban poor can influence national policy. Better recognition of the urban poor in policy and programmes requires both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' efforts in fighting for the rights of the urban poor (Banks 2008). Community mobilisation at the local level must be complemented with advocacy work within central government to encourage national policy change.

6. Towards National Commitment to Urban Poverty Reduction

The multiple challenges and complexities of urban governance and urban poverty reduction are strongly inter-twined. There have, in recent years, been several signs of greater recognition of urban issues, including poverty, at the national level.

In 2008 the 'Urban Sector' Local Consultative Group was revitalised, and being chaired by GIZ, shifted away from its heavy focus on infrastructure towards a stronger focus on social development and urban poverty. The group have since played a key role in raising the profile of urban poverty in

Bangladesh, culminating in the publication of a strategic approach to urban poverty reduction, *Bridging the Urban Divide in Bangladesh* (LCG 2010).

The second National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction (NSAPR 2009-2011), for example, includes 'urban development' in its second Strategic Block on Pro-Poor Economic Growth. However, there is no guarantee that the benefits of urban growth and development accrue to the urban poor, necessitating for the government to further this by laying out a strategic vision for urban poverty reduction that would lay the foundations for a subsequent action plan to supplement and support these commitments (LCG 2010).

One of the largest ongoing obstacles to planned urbanisation in recent years has been the lack of policy on Bangladesh's urban development (CPD 2001). While an earlier attempt to ratify an urban sector policy met with little success in 2006, recently, the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives have renewed their efforts to bring the policy into the national policy arena (GoB 2006). This coincides with the launch of the first Bangladesh Urban Forum in December 2012, through a three-day conference, under which urban poverty is a sub-theme of "Making Cities and Towns Work For All".⁸ While not recognising urban poverty within the objectives of the urban sector policy, the urban sector policy highlights urban poverty as one of 21 major dimensions of the policy for prioritisation.

Other progress has included the start up of new programmes for improved urban governance and poverty reduction. UNDP-Bangladesh has been implementing the Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) project in 30 towns and cities across Bangladesh in partnership with DFID, the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) and UN-Habitat. This is the largest urban poverty reduction initiative and in Bangladesh and one of the largest in the world, aiming to improve the livelihoods of three million slum dwellers across Bangladesh's six city corporations and an additional 24 *pourashavas*. In addition, GIZ is supporting municipal governments in the ADB-designed UGIIP-2 project (See Banks 2011b for further detail).

While the urban poverty agenda is in part 'frozen' by a lack of political commitment at the national level, these forms of ongoing lobbying, advocacy work, and exposure to urban poverty issues and programmes is critical in keeping the urban poverty conversation alive (Banks 2011b). It also means that those working in lower levels of government that support urban poverty reduction have got more concrete in their approaches, laying the foundations for more effective action if and when national commitment is secured (Banks 2011b).

⁸ See <http://www.bufbd.org/> for further details. The National Steering Committee of the Bangladesh Urban Forum is led by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives and co-chaired by the Ministry of Housing and Public Works.

7. Conclusions and Ways forward

Although playing a critical role in national economic development and poverty reduction, Bangladesh's rapid urbanisation has been accompanied by large increases in the urban poor. Indeed, the tipping point in which Bangladesh's poor population will live predominantly in urban areas will be within this generation. National policy and action in Bangladesh, however, has continued to overlook urban manifestations of poverty due to a number of interacting factors. Elite perceptions remain focused on rural areas as the legitimate home of the poor, and this view is exacerbated by the association between urban poverty and crime and squalor and persistent beliefs that investment in urban poverty will cause further urban migration.

Political resistance provides one of the major barriers to greater integration of urban poverty into national plans and policies, given that by nature, urban poverty reduction programmes require challenging the state to change political relationships and foster greater relationships between the urban poor and municipal governments. While there has been some progress in political participation at the municipal level through BOSC – which has opened opportunities for dialogue and participation of the urban poor in municipal governance, thereby reshaping traditional patron-client relationships – its impact is limited given Bangladesh's highly centralised government and a lack of appropriate mechanisms through which electoral successes at the local level can reach the national level.

There are also significant problems with representation that have yet to be overcome: interacting primarily with their poor constituents through politically-affiliated local leaders, elected ward commissioners have little incentive to be responsive and accountable to or inclusive of their poor electorate. Improvements in urban governance for urban poverty must, therefore, be two-fold, including the strengthening of municipal governments with resources and the ability to be more accountable and responsive to their low-income residents and the confrontation of powerful interests necessary to secure commitment at the national level. This must be accompanied by grassroots mobilisation of low-income urban communities to transform the relationship between them and the state and to ensure that they can participate in and benefit from urban development. Unless there is a normative shift that recognises the urban poor as a legitimate group for government support, urban poverty will continue to be overlooked in national policies and programmes.

While there has been recent progress in the incorporation of urban poverty into policy discussions and programmes, national commitment still constitutes an obstacle to improved urban governance for poverty reduction. Without mandating an agency or department with jurisdiction and funding for urban poverty reduction, it is unlikely that significant progress will be made. Existing problems of coordination, through which urban poverty falls through the gaps, and neglect will continue. Urban poverty reduction needs to be recognised as a deserving phenomenon for policy and action as well as one part of a multi-dimensional urban policy.

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