

# NPRS-PRF

Helping Accelerate Poverty Reduction in Asia and the Pacific

## INVOLVING THE URBAN POOR IN MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH

A technical assistance (TA) was approved in 2005 to provide assistance to the implementation of the Urban Governance and Infrastructure Improvement Project by applying the social accountability mechanism and process developed under a previous project ensuring the participation of the poor men and women in municipal governance.

The world's urban population rose from 13% (220 million) in 1900, to 29% (732 million) in 1950, to 49% (3.2 billion) in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Today more than 50% of the global population lives in towns and cities; and 78% of urban population of least-developed countries lives in slums.

It is predicted that by 2030, an estimated 5 billion of the world's 8.1 billion people will live in cities. About 2 billion of them will live in slums, primarily in Africa and Asia.<sup>2</sup>

Bangladesh has been experiencing rapid urbanization.<sup>3</sup> About 35 million people—or a quarter of the population—currently live in urban areas, compared to only 8% since independence.<sup>4</sup>

Despite a recent decline in overall population growth, rural-to-urban migration has sustained high urban population growth. The urban growth rate currently stands at 5–6% per annum, almost twice that of rural areas. If trends continue, more than half of the population of Bangladesh will be urban by the year 2030.

Most migrants come from rural areas in search of opportunities that can provide new livelihood options for millions, translating to improvements in living standards. This migration, however, add tremendous strain on already-crowded cities with limited infrastructure and a low level of public services.

About 37% of the urban population lived below the poverty line in 2000. Even though the percentage of urban poor has decreased over the last decade, the same period has seen a 40% rise in the absolute number of urban poor. According to a survey conducted by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Planning Commission, Government of Bangladesh (1995–1996), 61% of the urban population in Bangladesh fell below the absolute poverty line while 40% fell below the hard-core poverty line.

Unemployment, underemployment, environmental degradation, lack of services, inadequate housing, deteriorating infrastructure, and violence continue to mark the country's increasing levels of urban poverty.

Urban growth has been concentrated only in a few centers in Bangladesh, which has led to frantic competition for land and access to development and other basic facilities. The problems of poverty in Dhaka and other big cities are enormous and, thus, any poverty reduction strategy for these cities will require major policy shifts on many fronts, including strong management, effective and transparent local government, improvements in infrastructure, and better access to basic services.

### Supporting Urban Governance and Infrastructure

The rapid urbanization process in Bangladesh is generating huge challenges. As a result, both the Government and civil society have to develop and implement strategies to cope with these challenges.

Widening disparities in access to health, water, sanitation, housing, and security exist between the poor and better-off urban residents. These disparities severely restrict the rights of the urban poor and limit their access to the benefits available.

Recent experience in Bangladesh suggests that urbanization needs to be seen in a positive light. The poverty-reducing potential of well-planned and decentralized urbanization is immense, especially in the longer term.

Tapping the potential advantages of urban growth has become the imperative for ADB's Urban Governance and Infrastructure

Improvement Project<sup>5</sup> (UGIIP) approved in November 2002. UGIIP adopted a demand-based approach, linking urban infrastructure improvements to enhanced urban governance. The project includes provision of urban infrastructure and governance improvements, alongside capacity-building and implementation assistance.

## TA 4707 Participation of the Urban Poor in Municipal Governance

One of the proven strategies in poverty reduction and responsive governance is the involvement of key stakeholders in shaping the policies and programs that affect their lives.

People's participation in good urban governance has been the guiding principle of UGIIP. To assist UGIIP by applying the social accountability mechanism and process developed under a previous project whereby ensuring the participation of the poor men and women in municipal governance, Technical Assistance (TA) 4707: Participation of the Urban Poor in Municipal Governance<sup>6</sup> was approved by ADB and started in 2005. The TA was conducted in selected municipalities<sup>7</sup> covered by UGIIP with the aim of expanding the coverage further if proven successful.

The TA intended to i) mobilize and develop the capacity of urban poor in selected slums to participate in urban development decision-making processes; ii) develop the capacity of town-level coordination committees (TLCCs), ward commissioners, and other key municipal officials for pro-poor planning processes; iii) establish municipal forums as vital mechanisms for urban poor's participation in governance; and iv) showcase good practice on the poor's participation in urban governance. The goal was that by the end of the TA period, urban poor would be able to effectively demand for better urban infrastructure and services.

## Developing the Poor's Capacity in Participatory Urban Governance

To strengthen civil society participation in the TA, 15 local nongovernment organizations (NGOs) were engaged to implement TA activities at the municipal level. These NGOs were supported by a nationwide core NGO (the Center for Development Services) to enhance their skills for capacity development training for poor communities. The local NGOs were also involved in mapping the urban poor in the 15 municipalities.

About 1,200 slum dwellers<sup>8</sup> were provided with training on the roles and responsibilities of the municipalities and citizens, the municipal budget and its allocation, and information on government and nongovernment development programs. The expected result was their enhanced skills in articulating their needs and concerns to TLCCs and ward committees.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, 9,000 slum dwellers (600 slum dwellers in each of the 15 municipalities) were mobilized in community groups, which proved to be very successful. Originally, only 300 slum dwellers were expected to participate in these groups. The groups have held regular meetings with participation of the municipal

chairpersons and/or commissioners. And finally, the community groups have prepared proposals, based on a participatory approach, for infrastructure improvements in slums.

Study tours to India, Philippines, and Thailand were organized for government officials and urban poor representatives. The study tours aimed to provide participants with insights into programs and projects that encourage urban poor participation in municipal governance in the countries visited. They were also oriented on the countries' respective urban poverty alleviation programs.

Municipal officials, TLCC, and ward committee members were provided with training on participatory, pro-poor planning, and monitoring of municipal services provision, making the decision makers more sensitive to the needs of the urban poor. Another innovation of the TA was the introduction of citizen report cards—cards that indicate access to, cost, and quality of services available to the citizens.

The TA is well accepted by the various stakeholders in local government and civil society. Initiatives to enable slum dwellers to participate actively in the TLCCs and ward committees established under UGIIP are appreciated. Other notable gains are the involvement of local NGOs in the TA to ensure post-project sustainability/continuity and the mobilization of 9,000 slum dwellers, of which about 60% were women. Finally, in some cases, the community groups have received financing from the municipality for improving urban infrastructure.

Key activities of the TA 4707 were completed by the end of 2007. At the time of writing (late 2007), much of the following TA deliverables have been achieved: establishment of municipal forums, which will provide an institutional setting for poor groups' interaction with municipal authorities; capacity development and introduction of participatory, pro-poor planning, budgeting, and monitoring framework in selected municipalities; and a national-level workshop for future policy directions.

## The Challenges of Participation

The urban poor themselves in countries, such as India, Philippines, and South Africa, have set up groups, associations, and federations to identify the social and economic issues they deal with and find practical solutions to these problems. These social formations have learned to engage national and local governments to ensure access to the goods and services to which they are entitled.

Today, there are more than 11 million urban poor in Bangladesh. Vulnerability and insecurity characterize their lives. Most slum dwellers have no tenure rights, no guaranteed shelter, little access to basic services, restricted access to jobs and, when they have a job, their wages are generally low. The challenge is to harness their collective strength and potentials in local governance engagement.

In light of this, TA 4707's capacity development efforts were welcomed as they would contribute to increased participation of the urban poor in urban planning and management. It is

important, however, that the capacity development efforts would be taken to the next level, institutionalizing urban poor's representation in urban decision-making bodies. Similarly, TA 4707's gender response should go beyond mobilizing women in community meetings. Urbanization and urban poverty affect men and women differently given the difference in socially-ascribed roles and responsibilities. Participation of women in municipal governance requires that the existing regulations ensuring seats for women as commissioners are followed up by extensive and continuous capacity development of women commissioners in order for them to become more empowered to enter the political scene.

Finally, by mobilizing the urban poor, the TA so far has learned that careful handling is needed to manage citizen's high expectations given the dearth of local government financial resources. At the same time, it was learned that it is equally important to demonstrate the value of the poor's participation in a range of meetings and the benefits that could be derived from it.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> [World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision](#), Population Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations.
- <sup>2</sup> [http://www.forbes.com/2007/06/11/third-world-slums-biz-cx\\_21cities\\_ee\\_0611slums.html](http://www.forbes.com/2007/06/11/third-world-slums-biz-cx_21cities_ee_0611slums.html)
- <sup>3</sup> The process of transition from a rural to a more urban society. Statistically, urbanization reflects an increasing proportion of the population living in settlements defined as urban, primarily through net rural-to-urban migration. The level of urbanization is the percentage of the total population living in towns and cities while the rate of urbanization is the rate at which it grows.
- <sup>4</sup> Bangladesh Development Series, Bangladesh: Strategy for Sustained Growth, World Bank, July 2007.
- <sup>5</sup> Formulated as a sector loan to provide assistance to the Government of Bangladesh for the rehabilitation and expansion of urban development and services in Pourashavas (municipalities) throughout the country, and to further assist in the decentralization and strengthening of urban governance. The total loan amount is \$60 million.
- <sup>6</sup> TA 4707: Participation of the Urban Poor in Municipal Governance – Bangladesh. Total TA amount was \$600,000, of which \$480,000 was financed by the Poverty Reduction Cooperation Fund (contributed by the United Kingdom Department for International Development and administered by ADB) and \$120,000 was the counterpart government financing. Executing Agencies: Local Government Division, Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperation. TA Approval Date: December 2005. TA Completion Date: January 2008.
- <sup>7</sup> The UGIP covers 22 municipalities, 15 of which are covered by TA 4707: Bhairab, Gazipur, Hobigonj, Netrokona, Khagrachori, Ishwardi, Lakshampur, Meherpur, Maulvibazar, Narayangonj, Norshingdi, Savar, Shahzadpur, Shariatpur, and Tongi.
- <sup>8</sup> Not all slum dwellers are poor, however. TA documents used for this case equate the urban poor with slum dwellers and are used interchangeably.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ward Committee*. According to rules framed by the Government, a Ward Committee was constituted in every electoral unit with a member from that unit as chairperson and 5–10 representatives of that unit. Ward Committees in urban areas were required to organize activities for keeping its areas well-drained and clean, arranging adult literacy classes, performing civic duties, and providing family planning services, etc. They were also entrusted with the task of providing parks and playgrounds, planting trees, and collecting Bait-ul-Mal fund. [http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/L\\_0122.htm](http://banglapedia.search.com.bd/HT/L_0122.htm)

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