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Building Resilience of Urban Slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper is derived from a pilot project implemented by Habitat for Humanity during 2012-2013, where the author was a technical advisor. Rapid urbanisation and the growth of slums in developing countries such as Bangladesh has led to slum upgrading as an approach to address the problems of the urban poor. The project here was in essence such a slum upgrading project, targeted at an urban slum settlement called Talab Camp in Dhaka, Bangladesh, where the residents comprised an ethnic *Bihari* community. Dhaka is a rapidly urbanising megacity in one of the world's most densely populated and poorest countries, where almost 30% of its more than 14 million population lives in slums and faces the impacts of a range of hazards, hence the need for building resilience. The project began with a study of this urban context to identify the challenges and opportunities for building resilience in slums there, followed by a sequence of inter-related activities. This consisted of provision of training to local professionals on concepts and applications of Urban Resilience and toolkits for Risk Assessment and Action Planning; a Community Based Participatory Risk Assessment (CBPRA) to identify the inter-related hazards and vulnerabilities affecting Talab Camp, supplemented by a survey of city level institutional actors; and a set of pilot activities guided by the above and Community Action Planning (CAP) workshops, together with community capacity building and developing community organisations. Three main risks were prioritised for addressing in the pilot activities – inadequate drainage, inadequate waste disposal and poor sanitation, and thereby focused on WaSH (drainage, community toilets, water supply, and water purification), solid waste management (household and community level waste collection and disposal), housing improvement (plinth-raising above flood level) and awareness raising (cleaning event and billboards). The pilot activities also included extensive training and capacity building activities. A long-term Community Development Plan (CDP) was also developed in parallel to the pilot activities. The project faced a number of challenges in terms of local expectations, capacity building, and working in a megacity like Dhaka. A number of key lessons were learnt including the time required for adequate community consultation and participation, and unpredictability of political circumstances, in addition to a set of other lessons that can inform future such projects.

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1. Introduction

This paper is derived from a 1-year (2012-2013) pilot project on “Building Resilience in Urban Slum Settlements” implemented in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in partnership between Habitat for Humanity Australia (HFHA) and Habitat for Humanity Bangladesh (HFHB), together with a local partner NGO, Participatory Development Action Program (PDAP). Technical support was provided by Architects Without Frontiers (AWF) and Arup, and the author was a technical advisor on behalf of AWF. This paper provides an overview of the project and presents the key lessons learnt that have implications for future work. The widespread and rapid urbanisation process in developing countries over the last few decades has been accompanied by the growth of slums characterised by impoverished and difficult

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living circumstances for a significant segment of the population. Recent estimates indicate that urban growth and extensive urbanisation has led to 54% of the world's population living in urban areas, with the urbanisation process occurring most rapidly in Asia and Africa, regions that consist of a significant number of developing countries (United Nations 2014). More than 30% of the world's population live in slums and after Sub-Saharan Africa, the largest proportion of urban population living in slums is in South Asia, where Bangladesh is located (UN-Habitat 2012). A common approach by most governments is to demolish slums and evict their residents, but since the 1970s, authors such as Turner (1972) have advised against such an approach. An outcome of this is the concept of slum upgrading, that is, improvement of slums instead of their eradication, now promoted and applied widely by prominent international agencies such as the World Bank (2011) and United Nations (UN-Habitat 2014). Typically slum upgrading projects include activities such as "provision of basic services such as housing, streets, footpaths, drainage, clean water, sanitation, and sewerage" (Cities Alliance 2014). They also often include social and economic development elements such as access to healthcare and education, and support for livelihoods and enterprises.

In essence, the project discussed in this paper is a slum upgrading project. However, the context of the project, Dhaka, is highly vulnerable to natural and human-induced hazards, as discussed below; hence the upgrading initiative necessarily had to be linked to addressing these hazards and building the resilience of the project's beneficiary community.

2. Background and Context

To guide the project, at the outset a review of the context was undertaken to provide an understanding of the constraints and opportunities for the project and thereby advise the project partners (Ahmed 2012; also see Ahmed 2014). The key aspects of the context that became evident in the review, particularly relating to vulnerability and resilience of urban poor communities in Dhaka, are summarised below.

Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital is a rapidly urbanising megacity in one of the world's most densely populated and poorest countries (UNFPA 2011; World Bank 2012). Almost 30% of the city's population of more than 14 million lived in slum settlements (Islam *et al* 2005). Slum settlements were characterised by tenure insecurity and evictions, and controlled by *mastaans* – ganglords who charged exorbitant rents and charges for basic services (Banks 2008). Such a situation deterred investments for improving living conditions by slum residents and agencies. Poor quality and densely built housing was typical in Dhaka's slum settlements and basic public infrastructure for water, energy, sanitation and hygiene were non-existent or very limited.

A combination of human and natural factors resulted in various urban hazards with serious impacts on the urban poor. Some of the key urban hazards in Dhaka included, widespread flooding and water-logging due to poor drainage; windstorms caused havoc in slum settlements because of the weak construction of houses; unplanned urbanisation and sub-standard building practices posed great risk in the event of a major earthquake; urban fires were common and were often believed to be ignited intentionally; Bangladesh was one of the countries most threatened by climate change and impacts such as erratic weather, increased flooding and temperature rise were already evident (see for example, Daily Star 2011; IRIN 2009; Khan 2010; USGS 2012).

A large number of development agencies are active in Bangladesh, but most of them did not engage extensively in urban areas. Some of the key initiatives include, the Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR), a very large program in urban slum settlements targeted for 3 million people in 30 cities including Dhaka (UNDP 2013); WaterAid Bangladesh addressed water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) in urban slum settlements with a range of partners (WaterAid 2011); the Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP) was a network of more than 40 NGOs and advocated for the rights of slum-dwellers, and supported community-based organisations in slum settlements (Banks 2008; NDBUS 2010). The challenges of building resilience in urban slums are many, but there are also opportunities. Particularly recent government policies on urban development and climate change, as well as emerging interest among agencies to address urban issues, offer potential for advocacy for building resilience in urban slum settlements.

The Habitat for Humanity (HFH) pilot project was targeted at an urban slum community of 650 households known as Talab Camp in Mirpur in the north-western part of Dhaka. During the 1947

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