

**The Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction Project:  
A community-based approach to urban development in Bangladesh**

“Our debates about migration are too often concerned with questions of what should happen, what ought to be allowed; we devote far too little to planning for what will occur.” – Doug Saunders, Arrival City

*Azahar Ali, National Project Coordinator of Bangladesh’s Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction Project (UPPRP), was frustrated. Bangladesh needed a national urban strategy that offered security of tenure to the 12 million urban poor living on government and private lands. Despite attempts to facilitate the adoption of a national urban sector policy, it had been sitting in draft form since 2007. Consequently, evictions remained a major occurrence that disrupted livelihoods and exacerbated the vulnerability of the urban poor, who already lacked access to many basic services and entitlements.*

*Building on the success of the earlier Local Partnerships for Urban Poverty Alleviation Project (LPUPAP) in 11 towns, in the past five years, UPPRP expanded highly active community development committees in over two and a half thousand slums in 23 towns, with great engagement with local governments. These groups identified local priorities, mobilized resources, and effectively ensured that infrastructure and services were provided to their slums.*

*In 2013, sustainability was a key priority for UPPRP. To achieve sustainability, it established more than 500 linkages and partnerships with the government, non-governmental and private organizations to leverage their services. In general, however, despite great interest in addressing urban poverty, Bangladesh lacked a unified vision or policy, and efforts were fragmented.*

### **A rural nation undergoing an urban transformation**

Often “urban Bangladesh” is used as a reference to Dhaka, the megacity and capital home to over 15 million people. Nationwide, there are over 300 municipalities and eleven city corporations, seven of which have a population of over three million (see **exhibit A**). By 2030, about 99 million people will be living in Bangladesh’s towns and cities, roughly twice as many as currently do.

Roughly 40% of urban dwellers, 12 million people, are considered poor, and most live in slums. These low-income settlements have population densities as high as 30,000 per km<sup>2</sup>. Provision of public services, such as water, education, and security, are noticeably absent. Non-governmental organizations and informal, private solutions have cropped up in the void. On average, the rural poor have better health and education indicators than the urban poor. However, the availability of jobs and opportunity in urban areas has created a steady pull of migrants, at about 3.4% annually.

*Ishtiaque Hussain and Maria A May developed this case as part of BRAC Social Innovation Lab’s “Doing While Learning” initiative. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements or illustrations of effective or ineffective organizational practices. Support for this project was provided by the Rockefeller Foundation. The full case series can be found at [www.brac.net](http://www.brac.net).*

Many opinion leaders, policy makers and politicians subscribe to the view that taking any steps to address these issues will only make the problem worse as it will attract more people to urban areas. They believe that urban development is opposed to rural development, that rural to urban migration is bad and should be reversed. They view slums as a source of problems, not solutions and the urban poor as charity cases encroaching on the government's already stretched resources. This view is reflected by the media and held by urban elites.

### **The challenges facing local urban interventions**

About four hours drive south of Dhaka city, on the banks of the Modhumoti River, lies Gopalganj, the district capital of Gopalganj District. This town, with a population of more than 120,000 people, is home to some 9,000 slum households. Most people migrated here because of flooding and riverbank erosion 35 years ago, others have also moved here more recently in hopes of securing higher incomes. The residents of the slums are generally employed as house servants, day laborers, rickshaw pullers, cobblers, cooks, barbers and garment workers and their average monthly income is approximately Tk. 3,000 (USD 40). Like the rest of urban areas in Bangladesh, the settlements where they live are either privately owned or, on vacant, government land. Most do not have legitimate water, electricity and gas connections; neither do they have any drainage or, sanitation facilities. Most such settlements are not recognized by the government and thus the residents do not have a legal right to stay there. Powerful middlemen have sprung up, extorting premiums from the poor in return for protection. Individuals or groups which have influence with the government are able to obtain illegal utility connections and re-sell them to the residents at exorbitant prices. The government has established some free primary schools but there are too few of them. Secondary schooling is entirely fee based and expensive. Unfortunately, such evictions do take place from time to time despite the existence of court rulings against them being carried out without prior notice and proper resettlement and rehabilitation plans.

In 2000, the Local Partnerships for Urban Poverty Alleviation Project (LPUPAP) – a UN initiative – started working with the objective to alleviate poverty in selected urban areas of Bangladesh through 'the empowerment of poor urban communities and capacity building of local governments.' It adopted a community-based, demand-driven approach to identify and construct urgently needed infrastructure. The urban poor communities were the main project partners. They formed Primary Groups (of about 20 families), 90% were comprised entirely of women. The primary groups created mechanisms for community management of regular savings, leading over time to a community-managed micro-credit fund. Primary groups then grouped themselves into Community Development Committees (CDCs), representing 200-300 families. Women were strongly represented in the leadership of the CDCs.

By 2007, in Gopalganj alone, LPUPAP had mobilized more than 48,000 poor and extreme poor people into 35 Community Development Committees (CDCs) and invested almost 50 million taka (USD 625,000) in constructing latrines, footpaths, storm water drains and water reservoirs and in experimenting with apprenticeship models, enterprise development activities, education grants and social development.

For the UN project leadership, the LPUPAP experience produced important lessons that would inform the strategic approach of the project's scale-up phase.

**A revised approach: the Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction Project**

*“LPUPAP worked with only 600,000 to 700,000 people. When it started in 2000, there were 18 million poor and extreme urban poor in Bangladesh. It’s not enough to demonstrate the effectiveness of a model or approach and change the mind set of policy makers. So, the strategic thinking was if UPPRP can incorporate the lessons learnt from LPUPAP and alleviate the poverty of 3 million people then the other 15 million can be supported by other development partners and the government.”- Azahar Ali, UPPRP*

LPUPAP was implemented by UN Habitat in partnership with the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. Besides Gopalganj, the project also worked in five other municipalities - Kushtia, Bogra, Sirajganj, Mymensingh, Narayanganj - and in four city corporations - Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Barisal. It was a six year project and had a budget of USD 20 million.

The Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction Project (UPPRP), the second, scale up phase of LPUPAP, started working in 2008 with ‘the goal of reducing urban poverty in Bangladesh and the purpose of improving the livelihoods and living conditions of 3 million urban poor and extremely poor people especially women and girls.’ It focused on:

1. Mobilizing urban poor communities to form representative and inclusive subgroups and prepare community action plans
2. Enabling urban poor and extremely poor people to acquire the resources, knowledge and skills to increase their incomes and assets
3. Enabling poor urban communities to create healthy and secure living environments
4. Fostering partnerships at the local and national-level to influence pro-poor policies and practices

UPPRP adopted the LPUPAP approach but took account of the lessons learnt and added a number of new initiatives to it (see **exhibit B**). The urban poor communities and elected local government representatives were the main project partners and UPPRP confined itself to playing a purely facilitating role. It had an overall budget of USD 120 million to be utilized over six years and set out with a strong emphasis on involving and building a direct relationship between the government and the urban poor in project areas. The scale was extended to 30 towns and municipalities – including the 11 project areas from the first phase– across Bangladesh (see **exhibit C**). UNDP took over as the lead UN implementing organization, reflecting the greater focus on engagement with the government as well as the economic development of project participants. UN Habitat provided technical support to implement construction contracts. The project was officially ‘executed’ by the Local Government Engineering Department. UPPRP sought to deepen ties with the department and respective Municipalities and City Corporations, to the extent that that UPPRP staff were based inside the LGED head office. The government also appointed and remunerated UPPRP’s ‘National Project Director’. The LGED took on an active role in the work by allocating staff to work alongside UNDP staff in the field in all of the project areas.

UPPRP expanded the community development committees. It lay out a strategic approach to make them more autonomous and empowered. The objective was to enable them to identify, prioritize, and plan to solve their own problems by establishing relationships with local government officials and participating in the implementation and steering of measures to improve their socio-economic status and living environment. By 2012, the project had reached all the households in the areas it worked in – with the exception of Dhaka and Chittagong – and had created CDCs that were able to prioritize and advance the needs of their communities. An additional value of the committees was that they become a central repository of knowledge about the local community. CDCs created lists of key statistics to

identify the needs of the community. The idea was that, for example, a water and sanitation program could consult the Molavi Para CDC and learn about how many poor people lived in the area, how many water points, if any, there were, how many latrines there were, if there were any organizations which were already working to address these needs, etc. The program could then decide whether to intervene in the area and how. This method of CDC involvement gave UPPRP information it could use to more accurately identify and classify the poor, the extreme poor and their needs. Moreover, it left it up to the community members to decide where new programs should be implemented and to ensure that they secured the buy-in of local government representatives.

Decentralization of management and flexibility of the model were also identified as key to the successful scale up of UPPRP. The project prioritized building the capacity of the CDCs to function on their own by improving training modules for both CDC group leaders and elected government representatives and organizing exchange visits. Budgetary allocations were made on the basis of local needs. CDCs developed proposals for UN Habitat to review. This process enabled budgetary allocations to reflect local needs, which could differ dramatically from Habiganj, a small district town where 26,000 people were mobilized, and Chittagong, Bangladesh's second largest city, where UPPR worked with 500,000 people. CDCs in Rangpur built much-needed lamp posts while also allowing CDCs in Savar, where lamp posts were already in place, to use the money to improve their drainage systems.

Communities with CDCs seemed to enjoy higher levels of tenurial security than many other areas. After 5 years, of the two and a half thousand communities working with UPPRP, only 10 were evicted.

### **The need for civil society to work together**

*“Urban is a very diversified area of work and one single solution cannot address all the issues. A common vision and close cooperation are missing.” Azahar Ali, UPPRP*

As a vital part of its sustainability and impact strategy, UPPRP established more than 500 linkages and partnerships with the government, non-government and private services providing agencies. UPPR developed community leaders' capacity to partner with the local organizations for sustainability. “It was an attempt to simultaneously encourage them [NGO, government and private agencies] to work with the CDCs and link CDC members to services that the partners offered,” said Kishore Singh, International Poverty Reduction Specialist, UPPRP. Collaboration could potentially save time, improve coordination and efficiency, and better enable sustainable development in the communities. Continuous engagement with CDCs would also ensure that they remained functional and effective, potentially giving them the strength to garner interest from local government officials. And, if being a CDC member meant that they could access useful services from various providers, then that would also work as an incentive to them to maintain continued participation. However, some of the big development organizations working in urban areas of Bangladesh declined working with the CDCs, many choosing to build their own community groups in the same neighborhoods instead.

It was mid-2013, and UPPRP had one year remaining until this phase ended. What should its strategy be to create large-scale policy change for sustainable poverty reduction and sustaining community development committees?

## References

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### *Exhibits:*

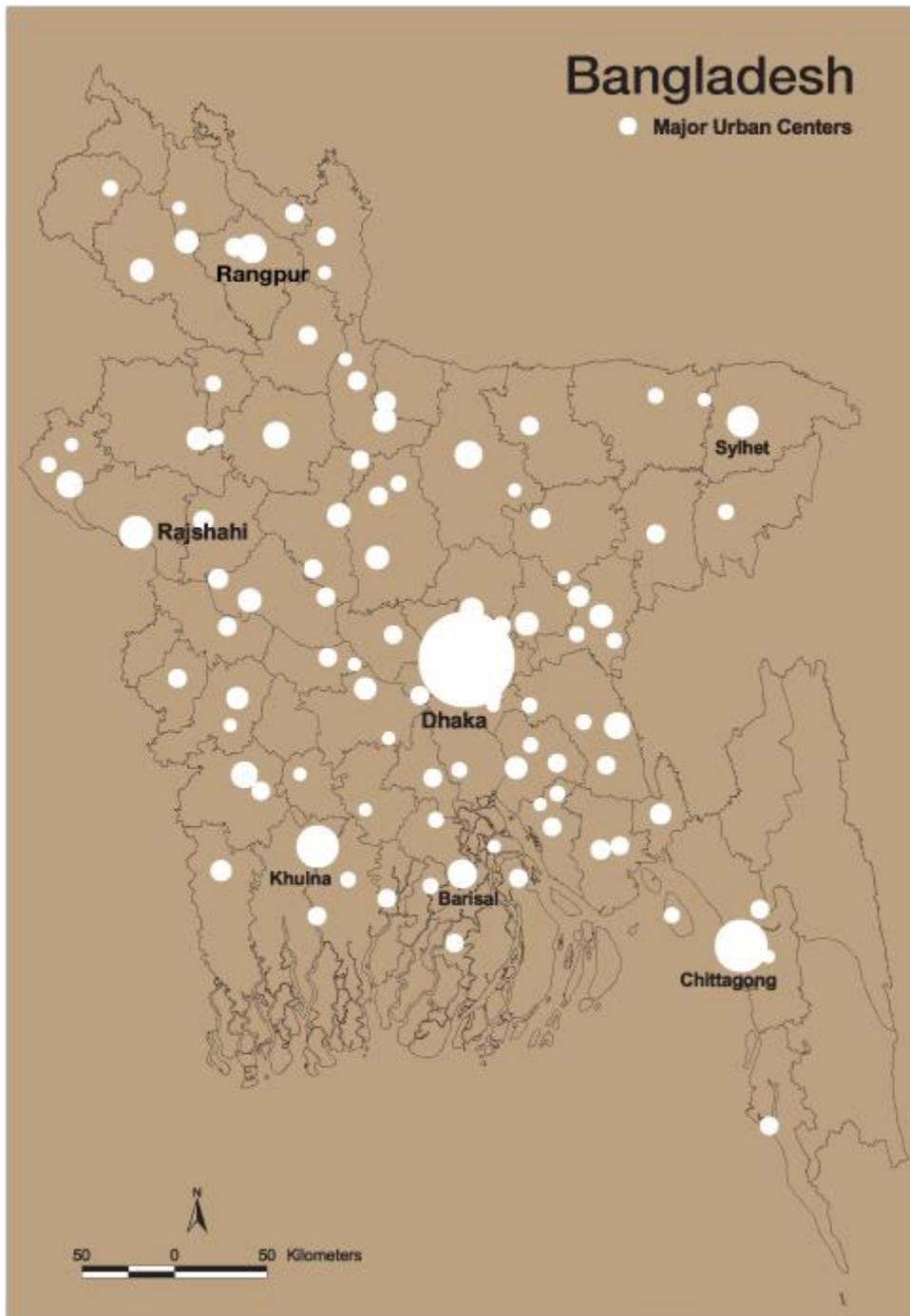
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Exhibit A Major urban centers of Bangladesh

Note: The size of the white dots reflects the population living in each center



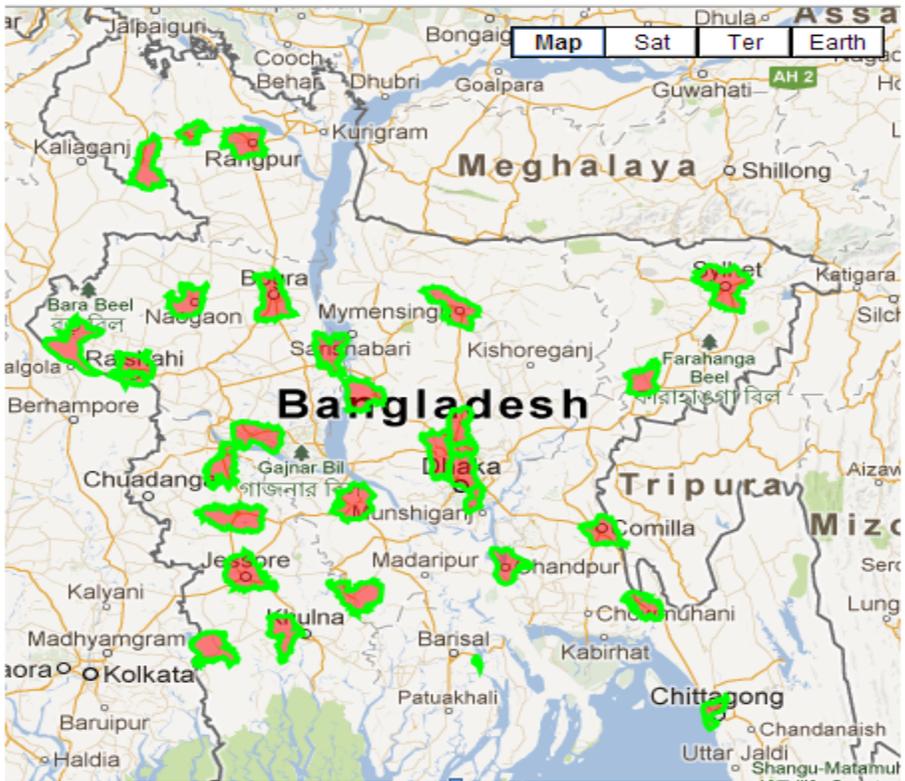
Source: Slums of Urban Bangladesh, Mapping and Census, Centre for Urban Studies, 2005

**Exhibit B** Lessons from Local Partnerships for Urban Poverty Alleviation Project (LPUPAP) that Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction Project (UPPRP) adopted

- ✓ adopt the LPUPAP community based approach
- ✓ expand its geographical coverage to 30 towns and cities, including parts of Dhaka City
- ✓ enhance the leadership and participatory role of women to ensure that the project benefits are shared equally
- ✓ improve the living conditions and health of poor people by providing basic services prioritized and managed by communities, such as drinking water, sanitation and drainage
- ✓ increase access to livelihood improvement opportunities, including jobs and financial services
- ✓ take measures to reduce the vulnerability of the urban poor by improving their tenure conditions
- ✓ reach out to the highly vulnerable and extremely poor, both in-slum and non-slum
- ✓ seek to influence urban development policies within the national development frameworks and through strategic partnerships with local and national governments
- ✓ support towns and cities to develop stakeholder partnerships to address the needs of existing urban poor communities and groups
- ✓ help towns build capacity and establish institutional structures that can develop and implement urban poverty reduction strategies to meet the future needs of the urban poor
- ✓ seek to enable towns and cities to graduate out of donor dependent programmes and address future needs from nationally mobilised resources through a process of institutional change and capacity building.

Source: LPUPAP Final Report 2007

**Exhibit C** Areas of Bangladesh covered by UPPRP



Source: UPPRP website (<https://sites.google.com/site/upprbd/>)