



URBAN POVERTY IN BANGLADESH: LAND, MIGRATION, BASIC SERVICES

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Table of Contents

List of boxes, diagrams, figures, tables

Abbreviations and acronyms

Acknowledgements

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY	1
1.1. Context	1
1.1.1. Global urbanisation phenomenon	1
1.1.2. The essence of urban poverty through a lens of political economy.....	2
1.1.3. Urbanisation in Bangladesh	4
1.1.4. Context of the study.....	5
1.2. Purpose and Objectives	6
1.3. Methodology	7
1.4. Limitations	8
CHAPTER II: URBAN POOR IN BANGLADESH	9
2.1. Urban and Urbanisation: Meaning and Realities	9
2.2. Urban Poor Population of Bangladesh	12
CHAPTER III: THE URBAN POOR MIGRATION JOURNEY	18
3.1. Migration Facts	18
3.2. Migration Factors	20
3.2.1. Post-Migration Habitation	21
3.2.2. Post-Migration Livelihood.....	26
3.3. Urban Poor Aspiration	33
CHAPTER IV: ACCESS TO HUMAN DEVELOPMENT-RELATED SERVICES	36
4.1 Education	36
4.2 Health	42
4.3 Civic Services	45
CHAPTER V: LAND RIGHTS STATUS	50
5.1. Tenure	50
5.2. Land Ownership	51
5.3. Dispossession and Eviction	52
5.4. Laws and Policies	54
5.4.1. Existing legal and policy frameworks	54
5.4.2. Adequacy status of legal and policy frameworks	55
CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	57
6.1. Conclusion	57
6.2. Recommendations for Urban Poor Inclusion	58
Annex: Data Collection Instruments	61

LIST OF BOXES, DIAGRAMS, FIGURES, TABLES

Box 2.1: Urban Household Demographic Characteristics	12
Box 4.1. Neglected adolescent girls, women and elderly people	44
Diagram 4.1. Various dimensions of human development	36
Diagram 4.2. The trap of poverty and non-quality education	41
Figure 2.1: Timeline of poverty assessment methods by the BBS.....	13
Figure 2.2: Urban poor, slum population, and urban population in Bangladesh (in millions)	14
Figure 2.3: Share of urban poor among total poor in Bangladesh (%)	15
Figure 2.4: People using safely managed sanitation services in the urban area (%).....	15
Figure 3.1. Urban poor household heads categorisation according to key reasons for migration (in %)	18
Figure 3.2. Urban poor household heads categorisation according to tenure term (in %).....	18
Figure 3.3. Comparison of Urban poor and national level safe drinking water access (in %)	23
Figure 3.4. Households by the availability of drinking water throughout the year (in %).....	23
Figure 3.5. Comparison of Urban poor and national level improved sanitation access (in %).....	24
Figure 3.6. Urban poor households by use of shared latrine (in %)	24
Figure 3.7. Urban poor households by disposing of excreta in an appropriate place (in %).....	25
Figure 3.8. Status of urban poor households do have savings (in %)	27
Figure 3.9. Urban poor households having outstanding credits (in %)	28
Figure 3.10. Urban poor households by sending domestic remittance to village/origin in the last year (in %)	30
Figure 3.11. Urban poor households' food security status (in %).....	31
Figure 4.1. Adult literacy rate (%)	37
Figure 4.2. The average number of schooling years among the adult urban poor population.....	37
Figure 4.3. School enrolment of children between 5 and 16 years of age among the urban poor (%).....	37
Figure 4.4. Portion of out-of-school children.....	38
Figure 4.5. Education level of household heads (in %)	38
Figure 4.6. Household members who never attended school (aged 6 years and above; in %)	38
Figure 4.7. Key reason for never attending school (%).....	39
Figure 4.8. School dropout scenario (%)	40
Figure 4.9. Households having a member suffered from any disease prior to the last three months of the survey (%)	42
Figure 4.10. Household members by incidences of diseases in the last three months before the survey (%).....	42
Figure 4. 11. Status of looking for medical help by (among only those who became diseased, in %) .	43
Figure 4.12. Household members by place of receiving treatment in case of the disease occurred in the last three months before the survey (among only those who became diseased, in %)	43
Figure 4.13. Children's immunisation status (%)	45
Figure 4. 14. Household members having a national recognition document (%)	45
Figure 4.15. Social injustice faced in the households in last year (in %).. Error! Bookmark not defined.	
Figure 4.16. Violence faced in the households in the last year (%)	48
Figure 5.1. Tenure pattern of the urban poor households (in %).....	50
Figure 5.2. Urban poor households by land ownership range in decimal (in %).....	51
Figure 5.3. Household landlessness scenario (in %)	51

Urban Poverty in Bangladesh

Table 2.1: Urban Poverty scenario in Bangladesh	14
Table 2.2: Urban poverty scenario in low-income settlements.....	16
Table 3.1. Distribution of household heads' age at the time of migration (in %)......	19
Table 3.2. Household heads by origin area from where migrated to urban (in %)	19
Table 3.3. Household head's last primary occupation before migrating to urban (in %)......	20
Table 3.4. Push factors of urban poor household head migration to urban (multiple responses, in %)	20
Table 3.5. Pull factors of urban poor household heads migration to urban (multiple responses, in %)	21
Table 3.6. Household access to drinking water by type of source (in %)	22
Table 3.7. Urban poor household use of cooking fuel by source (in %)	26
Table 3.8. Urban poor (household heads and members) primary occupation status (in %)......	26
Table 3.9. Urban poor households by savings range (among those who had savings) (in %)	28
Table 3.10. Urban poor households by savings place (among those who had savings; multiple places) (in %)	28
Table 3.11. Urban poor households by credit range (among those who had credits) (in %)	29
Table 3.12. Urban poor households by credit source (among those who had credits; multiple sources) (in %).....	29
Table 3.13. Urban poor households by net annual income (in %)......	29
Table 3.14. Urban poor households by the portion of yearly net income sent as remittance (in %) ..	30
Table 3.15. Urban poor households by yearly expense head (in %)......	31
Table 3.16. Urban poor households by poverty lines using the CBN methods (in %)	32
Table 4.1. Having accounts in the households (%).....	47

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

ASK	Ain o Salish Kendra
ALRD	Association for Land Reform and Development
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BEA	Bangladesh Economic Association
BIGD	BRAC Institute of Governance and Development
BLAST	Bangladesh Legal Aid Support Trust
BRP	Bhasantek Rehabilitation Project
CBOs	Community-based Organisations
CDAs	City Development Authorities
CBN	Cost of Basic Needs
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DCI	Direct Calorie Intake
FCDO	Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office
FEI	Food Energy Intake
FGDs	Focus Group Discussions
FY	Fiscal Year
GD	Group Discussion
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
HBFC	House Building Finance Corporation
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
HCR	Head Count Ratio
HDDS	Household Dietary Diversity Score
HDRC	Human Development Research Centre
IDIs	In-depth Interviews
ICSECR	International Covenant of Social, Economic and Cultural Rights
KIIs	Key Informant Interviews
LGI	Local Government Institute/Institution
LPG	Liquid Petroleum Gas
LPI	Lower Poverty Line

Urban Poverty in Bangladesh

MoL	Ministry of Lands
MoLGRDC	Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives
MoLJPA	Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs
NHA	National Housing Authority
NUPRP	National Urban Poverty Reduction Programme
PSU	Primary Sampling Unit
RAJUK	Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SRS	Simple Random Sampling
SSN	Social Safety Net
SSNP	Social Safety Net Programme
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UGBs	Urban Governance Bodies
UPL	Upper Poverty Line
WASA	Water and Sewerage Authority
WHO	World Health Organization

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Poverty is subject to individual and institutional denial because it distorts national development narratives. In urban areas, poverty is often non-existent, where high expenditure remains uncounted against comparatively better income than in rural areas. Only income cannot deter an individual or household from poverty. As evident, urban poverty receives little attention in Bangladesh's overall poverty reduction strategy. However, perspectives are shifting as rapid urbanisation poses multifaceted challenges to citizens' lives, rights, and livelihoods, particularly for people experiencing poverty. Given this context, the Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD) needed an in-depth study to understand Bangladesh's urban poverty scenario better. Accordingly, the ALRD commissioned the Human Development Research Centre (HDRC) to conduct the research.

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Our efforts will be fruitful only if the lives and livelihoods of Bangladesh's urban poor are prioritised in the country's policy agenda and implemented rightfully and respectfully.

At the same time, we fully understand that any research or knowledge pursued is an evolving process; there remain particular scopes for future research. We are confident that the ALRD will continue to support HDRC in generating future evidence-based knowledge products on urban poverty and other pertinent topics that could be utilised as hard evidence and a vital tool in the fight to establish the rights of the country's citizens.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

The unprecedented growth of the urban population in recent decades has brought new changes and challenges to people worldwide, particularly in developing countries. The conceptual framework of urban poverty illustrates that the collapse of the rural economy results in a large group of the rural population being forced to migrate into urban areas in search of employment to change their and their children's fortune. Most end up in the informal sector and live in poverty. As a result, the urbanisation process in Bangladesh, without much concomitant industrial development, remains "slumisation" within a resource-poor, predominantly agrarian economy, which is an ugly reality.

Against this backdrop, the Human Development Research Centre (HDRC), with support from the Association for Land Reform and Development (ALRD), conducted the accompanying in-depth research to understand the urban poverty scenario. The study aims to contribute to developing alliances to support urban poor rights and advocate for their rights with the Government and Local Government Institutions (LGIs) and find implementable collaborative solutions.

Methodology

The study adhered to a *Quanti-Quali Approach* comprising quantitative and qualitative methods. In addition to using several qualitative tools, a household survey covered eight City Corporations and eight Paurashava, where, in total, 480 households from low-income settlements and *bostis* (slums) were surveyed finally for this study. The primary data and information collection phase occurred between May and July 2022. One limitation of this study is that it could not cover the floating people (with or without households) due to study design and resource constraints.

Findings

Urban poor population: The preliminary report of the Population and Housing Census 2022 indicates that 31.5 per cent population of Bangladesh live in Urban areas. According to the most recent household income and expenditure survey, urban poverty is down to 18.9 per cent, a 28 percentage points decrease since 1991. The rate of poverty reduction has been slowing down since 2010, and the share of urban poor among all poor is increasing. In absolute terms, more people lived in poverty in 2016 than in 2010. With nearly 44 per cent of the country's population projected to live in urban areas by 2050, the absolute number of people living in poverty will increase.

The official figure of urban poverty suffers from undercounting. According to official statistics, the urban poverty rate is 18.9 per cent (population below the upper poverty line), which according to our estimates, would be not less than 40 per cent.

Push factors: Multiple factors play a catalytic role in the rural-to-urban migration, increasing the urban poor population size. Our survey reveals that 24.5 per cent of the household heads migrated to urban areas due to the lack of job opportunities in the rural areas, and 20.4 per cent said they migrated to urban areas in search of fortune. The agricultural production crisis is another crucial push factor for rural-to-urban migration, followed by river erosion.

Land rights: More than half of urban poor households (50.5%) reside in rented homes on either privately or publicly held land. Most of those who live in rented homes reside on privately owned land, whereas a smaller percentage reside in rented homes constructed on government-owned land (76% versus 24%). Intriguingly, 30.5 per cent of households live on land held by others (primarily the government), although they have constructed their own homes.

Most urban poor have to stay in the slum or slum-like areas for a long time, but they have no land rights and no legal status of their tenet, and thus live in constant fear of eviction and uncertainty about their future.

Only fourteen per cent of households have their residence on land they own. The land ownership (either in the urban or rural areas) scenario is bleak among the urban poor households. Twenty-eight per cent of urban poor households do not own any land. Ninety-four per cent of urban poor households are functionally landless (i.e., own land between 0 and 49 decimal), whereas the national average is 58.6 per cent. The increasing corruption and bribe-induced black money are why land price hikes, making it impossible for a typical household to buy land in the country's urban areas. Notably, only 6 per cent of the urban poor households reported having some agricultural land in their villages—which clearly shows a dim connection between the urban poor people and agricultural activities.

Economic situation: Urban poor households' average net annual income is only BDT 153,260, significantly less than the national average income (BDT 267,590). Urban poor households maintain interactive relations with their left-behind families, relatives, and friends in rural villages. Sixty-eight per cent of the urban poor households sent domestic remittances to the village. Food insecurity is highly prevalent in poor urban communities across the country. Only 12 per cent of the urban poor households are food secure, which refers to the rest of the 82 per cent in some food insecurity.

Using the Cost of Basic Needs (CBN) method—based on the national data of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), 2016 and inflation-adjusted up to 2022—, the study finds that 77.5 per cent of the surveyed households live below the upper poverty line, with the corresponding national figure of 24.3 per cent.

Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic worsens the condition of poor urban households. They lost their job, and many had to starve for a long. Their wage and salary had decreased, and income from the informal sector decreased. Due to the COVID-19-induced long break in school and the household's deteriorated economic condition, many students drop out. Many joined in child labour. Many adolescent girls stopped attending school and married due to security and poverty concerns.

Living conditions: Against rapid and continuing urbanisation, meeting the basic demands of citizens in terms of infrastructure and service delivery remains a significant challenge. Urban poor usually take temporary shelter in their peer urban poor households already residing in low-income settlements or bostis (slums) of urban towns. From the make-shift shelter of peers in low-income settlements/bostis, urban poor gradually move to a rented house of one or two rooms in the same or different low-income settlements/bostis, which is supposed to be near their workplace. The condition of the urban poor people was more miserable than one could imagine: living an inhuman life for survival. Their rooms are highly crowded, and their low-income settlements/bostis are highly dense. Most low-income settlements/bostis pavements are out of function: broken and/or water-logged by drain overflow and rainwater. Politically backed land mafias control these low-income settlements' housing and citizen services. The political economy of informal housing of the urban poor indicates the infringement of their right to adequate housing for a decent living.

Access to water and sanitation: Access to safe drinking water remained a challenge for urban-poor dwellers even after several interventions from NGO-operated projects and Municipality/City Corporation Offices. The sanitation situation is deplorable, with only 16 per cent of the urban poor households having access to improved sanitation, whereas the national status is 65 per cent. In addition to the meagre status of using an improved sanitation system, it completely fails to protect the privacy of adolescent girls and women. Persons with disabilities face nightmares while utilising the facility. In most instances, the urban poor do not receive utility services from responsible governmental agencies; instead, they access relevant services via intermediaries at a very high cost.

Education: The access to and level of education are significantly low among the urban poor households compared to the national scenario. The school enrolment rate is 6 percentage points lower among the urban poor households than the national average in the urban areas (76% vs 82%). The adult literacy rate is notably deficient in urban-poor households compared to the national average (50.2% vs 75.6%). More than two-fifths (41%) of the members in urban poor households never attended any school; the corresponding national figure is 20 per cent. At the secondary level, the dropout rate for urban poor is 19.2 per cent (Boys: 24%, Girls: 14.8%), and the corresponding national figure is 7.2 per cent.

Health: More than four-fifths of the poor urban household (82.1%) had at least one member who suffered from a disease in the last three months before the survey—a very high. The common illnesses reported are cold, cough (38%), and fever of unknown origin (32%). Also, they reported Skin disease (20%), Gastric/ulcer (21%), Diarrhoea/Dysentery (15%), Arthritis/pain/ swelling (15%), Asthma (11%), Dental carriage (6%), and other diseases (4%). In most cases, the household members who suffered from an illness could not avail of competent medical help. Those who looked for some medical support (78% of the diseased persons), in two-thirds of the cases (64%), only visited the local pharmacy and bought some medicine as suggested by the seller. Less than three-fourths of children (73%) in urban poor households are fully immunised, while the national average is 86 per cent, meaning a 13 percentage-point gap.

Civic services: Less than four-fifths (77%) of the household members who are 18 years or above reported having a National Identity (NID) Card—meaning around one-fourth (23%) of the adult members in the poor urban households have no recognition to their identity. At the same time, less than half of the members in poor urban households (48%) have birth registration certificates. The urban poor people are deprived of social justice in many ways. Many of them faced resistance to doing income-generating work (38%), many were not allowed to express their views (37.5%), and one-fourth of them (25.4%) even were denied to get required medical services in need. Meanwhile, in most situations, people aim to avoid government offices to avail of some rightful services for two primary reasons: they believe they will not be served and fear getting into more difficulties/troubles.

Financial inclusion: Half of the urban poor households (51%) have some account for financial transactions. However, almost all the accounts are with mobile banking (95%), while only 5 per cent reported having an account at scheduled banks. It is indeed a reflection of the poor financial inclusion of this group. Only 23.5 per cent of the urban poor households have some savings. Due to the security risk of loan retention, formal financial institutions are unwilling to pay loans to the urban poor.

Violence: Violence against urban-poor household members is not unusual; instead, it occurs frequently: 23 per cent of households were victims of at least one act of violence in the past year. Urban poor do not feel comfortable accessing the local legal service providers. They also reported that fearing humiliation and harassment, they do not dare to approach law-enforcement agencies for human rights-related services.

Social safety net programmes: Only 12 per cent of the urban poor households reported receiving any benefits from the social safety net programmes of the government in the last year. In the surveyed households, only 28 per cent of the older people received an old age allowance. However, their financial condition and living standard were miserable, and their eligibility for old age allowances is unquestionable.

Recommendations

A set of recommendations is stated below based on the motto "*migration (rural to urban or vice versa) and habitation should be a natural choice for all Bangladeshi nationals in the course of national development and progress.*"

Policy Recommendations:

- **Inclusive urban planning:** Develop policies prioritising urban poor needs, ensuring access to basic services, affordable housing, and livelihood opportunities. Collaborate across relevant government agencies and engage development partners and bellwether organisations for sustainable development strategies.
- **Land tenure security:** Implement land reforms to protect urban poor land rights, preventing land grabbing and securing housing access. Align policies with constitutional principles through collective efforts.

Rights Recommendations:

- **Land rights protection:** Enforce laws safeguarding the urban poor against land displacement and establish redress mechanisms for violations.
- **Participatory governance:** Foster urban poor participation in local governance, countering tokenism. Empower community-based organisations for collective advocacy.
- **Legal aid and awareness:** Provide legal aid services to educate the urban poor about their rights and assist in legal matters.

Basic Services Recommendations:

- **Primary basic services provision:** Ensure equitable access to clean water, sanitation, healthcare, and education, tailored to urban poor needs.
- **Infrastructure development:** Invest in improved infrastructure in low-income settlements, enhancing living conditions and preventing health hazards.
- **Livelihood opportunities:** Leverage vocational training, job placement, and endorsing micro-enterprises for enhanced economic prospects.
- **Social safety Nets:** Enhance comprehensive social safety net programs for financial assistance, food security, and healthcare for distressed during crises.
- **Digital Inclusion:** Bridge the digital divide with digital literacy training and technology access, opening avenues for education and communication.

Conclusion

The social and political systems that deny low-income citizens access to decent jobs, better wages, assets, services, and employment opportunities are at the root of urban poverty and extreme inequality—the urban poor lives in a complex scenario of political economy. Keeping significant portions out of formal decision-making processes and local politics contributes to their social and political isolation. In this situation, eradicating urban poverty calls for more than just providing services and technical support; it also calls for confronting and altering alliances to ensure that those who live in urban poverty are fully engaged in formal government structures and procedures. Without this official integration, the informal integration of slums into local and municipal governance systems has increased inequality.

Urban poverty should not be considered a simple challenge; rather, it should be seen from a more comprehensive political-economic viewpoint. All initiatives to reduce urban poverty will be neutralised unless establishing a rights-based society that assures positive discrimination for some marginalised groups, including the urban poor and subgroups among them. Urban poverty should be viewed from this perspective because it primarily depends on political will and resource mobilisation to bring meaningful outcomes.