

Redefining urban resilience



Introduction

Despite being predominantly rural, Bangladesh is rapidly urbanizing compared to its neighbors. In 2022, 40% of its population lives in cities and towns; the annual urbanization rate averages 6% since the country gained independence in 1971. This has resulted in the proliferation of slums across major cities, particularly in the capital city of Dhaka. As of 2020, 52% of the urban population, or at least 35 million people, in Bangladesh were residing in slums (World Bank). These urban dwellers live in overcrowded, inadequate housing with limited access to basic services such as water and sanitation. They are particularly vulnerable to climate-induced disasters.

Every year, 250,000 people migrate from rural areas to cities in Bangladesh, in search of jobs and other opportunities. Urban slum development approaches help to prevent and reduce the impact of shocks and stresses on people, economy, infrastructure, and natural environment, increasing well-being and resilience.

Bangladesh's seventh Urban Dialogue, which focused on policy recommendations and stakeholders' commitment, was held in June 2023 in Dhaka. The theme was "Redefining Resilience of Cities and Its Services." Habitat for Humanity Bangladesh is part of the Urban INGO Forum that organized the conference.

The Urban Dialogue in Bangladesh was organized under the umbrella of the Asia-Pacific Urban Dialogues. The discussion will help shape the establishment of the urban housing practitioners hub in Asia-Pacific.

At the Bangladesh Urban Dialogue on June 14, 2023, multisector participants focused on issues such as housing, basic services, safety of women and children, environmental degradation, livelihood opportunities and economic growth. Habitat for Humanity Bangladesh led a session on basic services in the urban context as part of the Home Equals global advocacy campaign. At the close, key government officials taking part in the conference committed to an inter-ministerial discussion on the issues raised. Recommendations included cultivating partnerships to improve access to basic services; ensuring inclusive process for people-centered development initiatives and good governance.

This policy brief is produced by Habitat for Humanity Bangladesh. For more information, please email Juliet Rosette at juliet@habitatbangladesh.org.

Recommended solutions



Expansion of social safety net programs

Social safety net programs must be extended to temporary residents of urban areas including those living on the streets and in slums. These individuals should be assured of access to social services such as maternity allowance for poor mothers, primary school stipend program and allowances for older people and widows using authorized proof of nationality identity.



Affordable and sustainable housing for all

Involve the public in formulating policies and allocate adequate budget. Ensure the rights to safe, sustainable housing for all, including the homeless and floating urban populations. As cities grow, structural developments should incorporate environmentally friendly technologies.



Ensure access to safe water

Comprehensive action plans that are implemented in a coordinated fashion are necessary. This helps to protect and/or increase the existing stock of bodies of water and freshwater reservoirs in the city, especially in urban informal settlements.

Barriers to inclusive urban resilience

1. According to a study by Bangladesh think-tank Centre for Policy Dialogue, it is difficult to deliver targeted social support because the welfare metrics for defining the poor — occupation, dwelling, education, etc. — are not static. The poor are fragmented and have weak bargaining power. In the absence of solidarity from non-poor households, they are a target of exploitation by vested groups.
2. The lack of affordable housing is a serious issue as private developers focus on the higher income classes. The lower income groups and people who live in informal settlements sitting on private or public land without security of tenure are worse off.
3. More than 1.8 million people in Bangladesh lack access to an improved water source and 36 million people lack improved sanitation. Tube wells, which served as a source of drinking water in the past, are no longer reliable due to heavy contamination. Moreover, the water levels have dropped drastically.

Recommended solutions



Equal access to healthcare services

To address inequitable access, low-income families need institutionalized services through community clinics and day care centers as well as health care vouchers. Community participation is necessary in urban planning.



Integrated coordination among public-private collaborators

Relevant agencies need to work better together to implement public-private partnerships in delivering housing. Such integrated coordination applies to the handover of government-owned land to lower- and lower-middle-income people. The contributions of both the private and public sectors should be monitored systematically to track the progress on sustainable and resilient urban development.



Build climate resilience

A longer term strategy is required for standing orders on disasters as part of urban disaster risk management. Through all levels of government, appropriate budgets should be allocated. Green building policies that protect natural resources and wildlife must be formulated. Government, construction companies, development agencies and urban populations need to work together in implementing such policies. Collaboration with the media also helps to raise awareness and promote preparedness within communities.

Barriers to inclusive urban resilience

4. In Bangladesh, inequitable access to health care services mars the remarkable progress made. The rich-poor, urban-rural, and gender gaps are disturbing. Other factors that affect people's health include social and cultural practices, public health care delivery system and health expenditure.
5. The government provides for public-private partnerships in its eighth five-year plan for 2020-2025 to address the housing deficit and to hand over government-owned land to lower- and lower-middle-income people. But there is a visible lack of proper planning and policy to encourage private sector contribution in improving low-income urban settlements and to provide affordable, sustainable housing and other basic services.
6. Bangladesh experienced 185 extreme weather events between 2000 and 2019 due to climate change (Global Climate Risk Index 2021). The World Bank called on Bangladesh to prioritize investments in infrastructure and services for climate resilience while supporting long-term growth. Greater community and private sector involvement is required to build climate-resilient capacity.

“Resilience can be achieved through a bottom-up process with city residents taking the lead in planning and governance issues, forming strong social networks that manifest and reinforce local identity.”

(Ercoskun & Ozuduru, 2014; Gunduz, Oner, & Knox, 2016)

