

# **PhD Findings & Recommendations** **Report (July 2018)**



*Collective Action, Service Provision and Urban Governance: Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in Dhaka's low-income (slum) settlements, Bangladesh*

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## **PhD Findings and Recommendations Report**

**PhD Title:** Collective Action, Service Provision and Urban Governance: Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in Dhaka's low-income (slum) settlements, Bangladesh

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### **1. Overview**

Over five million people live in Dhaka's low-income, informal settlements with limited access to basic services, housing, land tenure security and political voice. Whilst access to legal water supply has improved, many challenges remain to achieve SDG 6.1 – 'by 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all' and 6.2 – 'by 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls, and those in vulnerable situations' (UNDP 2018).

Drawing on international examples, and nine months of in-depth qualitative fieldwork in Dhaka's low-income settlements, this PhD thesis examines the role of Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in obtaining water and sanitation services. It focuses on how CBOs access, manage and maintain water and sanitation facilities at the settlement level, and how urban poor groups raise their voice to obtain land, housing and services at the citywide level.

### **2. Field Sites & Methods**

In-depth fieldwork was conducted in three settlements in Dhaka from November 2014 to August 2015. This was coupled with scoping visits to 25 other settlements across Dhaka North and South City Corporations. The three settlements were selected according to land tenure type (e.g. public/private/disputed), occupancy type (e.g. ratio of tenants to owners), and level of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) NGO and CBO activity (e.g. low-high). Two settlements had active WASH NGO and CBO activity, whilst one had no NGO activity.

A mixed qualitative toolkit, including; participant observation, mini surveys, semi-structured questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was used in each field site to gather detailed information about the role of CBOs in water and sanitation access, construction and maintenance, and the activities of CBO leaders and members. Citywide key informant interviews were also conducted with 59 NGO, urban poor, academic and government (e.g. DWASA and DNCC) representatives, to understand the policy and programme context in Dhaka and across Bangladesh.

### 3. Key Findings

The following outlines key findings from the study at the CBO, settlement and citywide level.

#### CBO LEVEL

+<sup>1</sup> **CBO Role:** WASH CBOs play an important role in obtaining legal water supply, and in construction, operation and maintenance of water and sanitation facilities.

+ **Benefits of Participation:** Leaders and members of WASH CBOs reported many benefits, including: increased confidence and respect in the community, unity through organising collectively, leadership and skill development, opportunities to travel across Dhaka, Bangladesh and in a few cases overseas, access to and negotiation with service providers and politicians, and ability to address other issues beyond water and sanitation in the locality (e.g. child marriage, eviction).

+ **Impact for Women & Girls:** The emphasis on leadership and skill-development by WASH NGOs had particularly positive impacts for women and adolescent girls. For example, increased confidence, communication and negotiation skills. I met many women (and men) who were very passionate, proud and committed to their role as CBO leader, member or community representative.

+ / - **'Software' Sustainability:** CBOs can sustain in a loose form post-project, and leaders and members continue to actively seek other services and improve their living conditions, using the skills they have developed in the CBO. User CBOs (managing specific facilities) were more likely to sustain longer-term than central CBOs, but only if the facilities were fully operational. Reasons for central CBOs dissolving included; high rates of migration to/from the area, lack of incentives, limited financial capacity, autonomy, or manipulation by local leaders.

- **Multiple CBO Affiliations:** CBO leaders and members are often involved in many CBOs at one time (e.g. WASH, education, health, skill-development, MFI). This can lead to stress and anxiety, especially for women who may have the 'triple burden' of childcare, paid and unpaid work. For women, intra-household support (e.g. from husbands, children, relatives) was an important driver for long-term participation. In other cases, however, women's participation in NGOs and CBOs was linked to domestic violence.

- **Mistrust:** Local residents who are not involved in CBOs can sometimes be jealous or distrustful of CBO leaders and members. For example, if they (leaders and members) are selected to attend a training and receive 'free' food or tips, this can fuel negative comments. This can be hurtful and stressful for those involved in the CBOs. Some even dropped out or

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<sup>1</sup> The symbols + and - refer to the researchers subjective 'positive' (+) and 'negative' (-) findings.

stopped participating as a result. However, compensating residents for attending meetings (with food or tips) is also justified, as they are taking time out of their work day.

- **Unpaid Work:** Unpaid voluntary work in WASH CBOs (e.g. attending meetings; monitoring WASH facilities, collecting bills and resolving disputes) can be a great burden for low-income households. When these costs are taken into account, the urban poor may pay significantly more for their services (from in-kind labour), which raises important equity concerns.

- **Division of Labour:** Division of labour inside the CBOs was often unequal. For example, cashiers and secretaries often felt they had more work to do compared to the president or vice president, who were in more 'symbolic' roles, though this varied case by case. Female leaders and members also had to clean water and sanitation facilities, while the male leaders and members did not.

- **More Likely to Participate:** Those *more likely* to lead and be a CBO member included; local (male) political leaders (and/or their wives), those in a better financial situation and with good connections to NGO fieldworkers/experience with NGO programmes, house owners, physically and mentally well persons, those educated to Standard 5 or above, and elders.

- **Least Likely to Participate:** Those *least likely* to participate included; tenants, extreme poor households, single mothers, mentally, physically unwell and disabled persons, elderly widowers, those with long working days (e.g. garment workers), those living in 'hidden' or inaccessible parts of the settlement, those with a dispute with local political leaders and/or opposition party supporters.

- **Female Leaders 'Dropped':** Despite leadership and membership criteria promoting female participation, and democratic voting, male local leaders often forcefully or coercively replaced female leaders during or post-project. Some NGOs seemingly allowed this to happen, to implement the project quickly.

- **Co-Sharing Accounts:** Many WASH CBOs had a cost-sharing or joint account, created with signatures from NGO project staff. However, when the NGO phased out and project staff left, leaders and members were often unable to withdraw or deposit money. This created obstacles for the CBO, and meant many lost interest in participating.

### SETTLEMENT LEVEL

+ **NGO WASH Benefits:** The benefits from WASH projects reported by residents included; improved access to cheaper services (located nearby), a more hygienic, safe and enjoyable living environment, cleaning materials, greater awareness of hygienic practices (e.g. going to toilet with sandals, hand washing before and after defecation and preparing/eating food), and connections to government agencies responsible for service provision.

+ **Staff Retention:** Long-term relationship building between NGO project staff and community members had a positive effect on project sustainability, responsiveness and effectiveness. NGO field workers who had been active for a long time with the same NGO were very well respected, and had built up trust over many years with local residents.

+ / - **Role of Cooperatives:** In the settlement where no NGOs were operating, there was a formal cooperative that applied for legal water connections independently. This shows initiative of local leaders. However, it was difficult to obtain these connections without the

support of an NGO, due to financial, land tenure and political obstacles. As the settlement was not a recognised Low-Income Community (LIC), DWASA also charged the full rate for connection (i.e. 25,000-30,000 Tk.).

- **Fraud:** Registered cooperatives were found to play an important role in livelihood and local area development. However, there were also many cases of fraud in cooperative savings and loan groups. Female participation and leadership in the cooperatives was also very low.

- **Tenants Excluded:** Tenants were often excluded – directly or indirectly – from NGO WASH programmes and CBOs. House owners were mainly targeted because they are perhaps more likely to invest in water and sanitation, and stay longer-term. However, many tenants felt excluded, even though they were in great need of assistance. Some were also abused physically and verbally by the house owner. Many also lived in the area for a long-time, challenging the idea most tenants are short-term. The reduction of settlements on public land, and rise on private and ‘disputed’ land, means there will be more tenants in future in need of safe, hygienic and affordable WASH.

- **Mismanagement & Coercion:** Community members hired (either paid or unpaid) to be mobilisers, coordinate ‘gift’ distribution and project activities play an important role. Many take much care and pride in what they do. However, in some cases, these individuals were found to exploit other members of the community to their own benefit. For example, only distributing gifts to friends, family and political allies, or forcing project beneficiaries to attend political rallies, in order to receive access to the programme. If people did not comply, their names would be dropped.

- **‘Hardware’ Sustainability:** Sustainability of WASH CBOs and the associated water and sanitation facilities continues to be a challenge. WASH CBOs have a weak financial base, and face challenges to scale-up activities. CBOs do not have the financial capacity to make large-scale repairs, and NGOs may not take depreciation into account, leading to the rapid deterioration of facilities. Some landowners also demolish the NGO facilities, to build more shops and houses. I came across many examples of NGOs replacing other NGOs failed infrastructure, or re-forming another NGOs CBO. The financial and economic costs associated with this replacement and reformation, are high both for the community and NGO.

- **Priority Mismatch:** There is a potential mismatch between the agenda of WASH NGOs, donor agencies and priorities of residents at the settlement level. Whilst access to potable water was often identified as a priority by respondents, this was not necessarily the case for sanitation. Across the three settlements studied, the following ‘top 10’ problems were identified from 213 questionnaires: 1) financial insecurity; 2) potable water crisis; 3) flooding and water logging; 4) social insecurity; 5) land tenure and housing insecurity; 6) electricity problems; 7) poor living environment; 8) sanitation problems; 9) gas problems and 10) illness. These underlying insecurities greatly affected the willingness and ability to pay or contribute in-kind labour to WASH projects. Two problems from the list are highlighted in more detail below:

- *Financial insecurity:* in addition to low and irregular income, high rent and bills, many households reported problems in transparency with MFIs, savings and loans groups, with reports of fieldworkers and community leaders ‘flying away’ with the money. However, financial insecurity also meant that more people were inclined to join MFIs, NGO or donor programmes that provided grants, savings or loans, over WASH CBOs.

- *Social insecurity*: this was a particular concern for women and adolescent girls, who reported many cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment and abuse. In many cases, these women and girls had no one to talk to or seek help from, for fear of repercussions in the local area. Many faced ridicule in the area if they did speak out, or left their abusive husbands to live in an all-female household. Male and female respondents also expressed anxiety over speaking out against local political leaders.

### CITYWIDE LEVEL

+ / - **New Intermediaries:** WASH NGOs, CBOs and cooperatives are replacing *mastaans* and illegal vendors as ‘intermediaries’ between Dhaka’s low-income settlement dwellers and government service providers (e.g. DWASA, City Corporations, DESCO etc). This relates to effective capacity building of leaders and CBOs at the settlement level, with residents more able to access and negotiate for services, and change in DWASA’s Citizen Charter. However, in all settlements, residents were also concerned that local (male) political leaders involved in WASH CBOs were visiting local politicians and government agencies to promote their own agenda, which was not necessarily in the best interest of the wider community.

- **Lack of Coordination:** Despite progressive efforts from NGOs, DWASA and City Corporations to enhance coordination, and clarify roles and responsibilities over WASH, there was confusion in the settlements about who was ultimately responsible for water and sanitation provision. For example, DWASA and Navana Ltd (the contractor), or NGOs and DWASA.

- **‘Easy’ Slums:** With some exceptions, WASH NGOs in Dhaka were found to operate mainly in settlements on public land and/or land deemed ‘safe’ to enter (e.g. low eviction threat, existing NGOs operating). This means that multiple WASH NGOs and CBOs may operate in certain settlements, while others receive no or limited support. This can result in poor coordination of activities; mismanagement and frustration among residents (i.e. ‘NGO fatigue’) that their priorities are not being addressed. NGOs also leave a legacy and collective memory (good or bad), which may affect future expectations and success of NGO projects in the area. Residents also decide which NGO to engage with, in a strategic way.

- **Practical vs. Strategic Agenda:** WASH NGOs and CBOs play an important role in providing much needed services to Dhaka’s urban poor. However, their actions may, at times, undermine broader political struggles for secure land and housing, and citizenship rights for Dhaka’s low-income residents. A general shift is observed from NGOs working ‘strategically’ on land and housing, to ‘practical’ service delivery or microfinance, which is seen as less politically sensitive. Few NGOs are willing to engage in debate and advocacy around housing and land tenure insecurity due to its contested political nature. However, this lies at the heart of the challenge for improving water, sanitation and other services for the urban poor in Dhaka city.

- **Donor Reliance:** CBOs, NGOs, urban poor groups and government agencies (e.g. DWASA) all rely heavily on donor funding, as there is very limited national budget allocation. Many (especially small) NGOs are facing a funding crisis. Those that do access donor funds must often adhere to strict criteria that favours cost-recovery, lacks flexibility, pursues rapid ‘results’ and does not necessarily address the priorities of residents (mentioned above).

+ / - **Citywide Urban Poor Federations:** Dhaka’s three urban poor groups have many achievements, and great potential, but face financial, logistical and political barriers to be a strong voice for the urban poor at the city and national level. NGOs and donors are increasingly

forming their own CBOs, rather than using existing groups. This can exacerbate overlap, lack of coordination, duplication and promote dis-unity.

- **Political Representation & Accountability:** The urban poor continue to be exploited by powerful political leaders both outside and inside low-income settlements. Politics is central to everyday life, but few politicians (MPs, councillors) seem to try and improve the lives of Dhaka's urban poor in a transformative way. This is an impingement on their rights to decent shelter, basic services, safety and fair political representation.

#### **4. Recommendations**

Table 1 outlines recommendations based on the PhD findings, and ongoing discussions with NGO, urban poor group leaders and researchers. The recommendations are divided into different stakeholder groups, specifically, Government of Bangladesh, NGOs and Donors. They are not meant in a prescriptive manner, but to encourage debate and progressive action in academia, policy and practice.

**Table 1:** Recommendations from PhD

STAKEHOLDER	RECOMMENDATIONS
<i>Government of Bangladesh</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Finalise and implement urbanisation, urban poverty and housing policies for the low-income settlement dwellers;</li> <li>• Stop slum evictions and implement affordable rehabilitation programmes and/or upgrading for low-income settlement dwellers. Participatory discussions with residents can be used to determine needs and preferences;</li> <li>• Regulate ‘slum speculation’, ensuring housing standards, service provision and tenant protection (e.g. rent cap);</li> <li>• Do not apply rural indicators to urban poverty reduction. Create stronger datasets and measuring criteria;</li> <li>• Invest central funds and human resources in local government agencies (e.g. DWASA, Slum Development Department, DESCO, Dhaka North and South City Corporations). Mainstream the urban poor into customer services and train staff to be responsive to their needs and financial capacity;</li> <li>• The urban poor should not be expected to maintain and complete large-scale repairs of their water and sanitation facilities. This is often not financially or logistically feasible. This should be the responsibility of DWASA or City Corporation. Invest in urban water and sanitation infrastructure, and appropriate Faecal Sludge Management (FSM) systems for low-income settlement dwellers (e.g. additional FSM trucks, staff and appropriate treatment);</li> <li>• Improve and safeguard health, social security (e.g. policing and justice system) and financial security (e.g. labour laws, wage protection, pensions, disability and welfare support) for urban poor, especially women and girls;</li> <li>• Improve access to quality and affordable legal services (e.g. electricity and gas) for low-income settlement dwellers, as this can increase revenue;</li> <li>• Run training programmes for politicians, bureaucrats and officials (led by urban poor group leaders) to sensitive them to challenges facing low-income settlement dwellers, and tackle rural-bias and misconceptions;</li> <li>• Encourage female participation in cooperatives via change in registration criteria;</li> <li>• Encourage progressive dialogue between politicians, councillors, urban poor groups and low-income settlement dwellers, and hold accountable politicians and councillors found to exploit low-income settlement dwellers (for personal or political gain).</li> </ul>
<i>NGOs and Donors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively engage in land tenure and housing challenges, and other citizenship rights. Continue to work with legal-aid NGOs on housing and land tenure, and to educate low-income settlement dwellers on their rights;</li> <li>• Train men, women, girls and boys on women’s rights and gender equality, as well as laws on domestic violence;</li> <li>• Take steps to include excluded groups (e.g. tenants, extreme poor, widowers) in CBOs and programmes if they wish to participate, and have monitoring systems in place to ensure they are not later pushed out and/or abused;</li> <li>• Enhance WASH infrastructure sustainability by promoting; low-cost community-led solutions, cleaning rotas or paying cleaners/managers, needs-based assessments, greater emphasis on privacy (especially for women), adapting</li> </ul>

to changing preferences (e.g. from shared to individual sanitation chambers, or tube wells to in-house taps), linking to centralised sanitation and water systems, co-financing with government agencies and addressing underlying tenure, social and financial insecurities;

- Enhance CBO sustainability by; encouraging financial autonomy (e.g. group savings and access to accounts post-project), incentives for continued participation (e.g. livelihood opportunities) and personal development, inspiring WASH ‘champions’ (in community, civil society and government), peer learning and exchanges, self-management and leadership training, continuity and flexibility (in budget) from NGOs and donors (to meet community demands, retain staff), longer-term projects and registration (as cooperatives, not NGOs), to reduce NGO overlap;
- Conduct background research in each project site prior to implementation, to understand priorities and existing power structure (to ensure equal and representative participation);
- Work in settlements that are potentially ‘difficult’ to work in (e.g. isolated/marginalised location, political control, private land, no other NGOs operating etc), as many people are still in need of support;
- Run training programmes on urban poverty reduction for staff (led by urban poor group representatives) to sensitive them to challenges facing low-income settlement dwellers, and tackle rural-bias and misconceptions;
- Run exchanges between settlements and CBOs to share experiences, share ‘successful’ initiatives and ‘best practice’ examples from across Bangladesh, South Asia and globally;
- Provide support to CBO leaders and members who may be facing harassment, stress and anxiety as a result of their role in the community;
- Ensure upward and downward accountability and monitoring in NGO projects, to ensure field staff and community leaders are responsive to needs, and benefits are reaching the target groups;
- When feasible, build capacity of *existing* CBOs and citywide urban poor groups, rather than create new CBOs/groups;
- Enhance the capacity of, and coordination between Dhaka’s three citywide urban poor groups by funding joint projects, promoting group savings and learning exchanges (e.g. inviting policy makers from other countries). Link Dhaka’s citywide urban poor groups to others around the country (e.g. in Chittagong, Khulna, Sylhet and Rajshahi) and strengthen links internationally (e.g. ACHR; SDI; WIEGO), to promote the rights of the urban poor;
- Promote an integrated approach to water, sanitation, housing and land tenure security, rather than ‘single-issue’ programmes. Encourage greater coordination between NGOs, CBOs and government agencies and, ultimately, encourage the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) to take responsibility for service provision and invest in WASH, housing and land tenure security for the urban poor, to reach the SDGs and work towards inclusive development.

## 5. Further Readings

Cawood S 2018. Water and Sanitation in Dhaka's Low-Income Settlements, Bangladesh. *Microsave Low-Income Lives Series*. Available from: <http://www.microsave.net/resource/water-and-sanitation-in-dhaka-s-low-income-settlements-bangladesh> [Accessed: 26.06.18]

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## 6. Acknowledgements

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