

Policy Thrusts Needed to Address the Vulnerability and Marginalization of the Internally Dislocated Women and Children in Distressed Urban Settings

By

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Honorable Chief Guest Dr. Kamaluddin Ahmed, eminent special guests, my fellow presenters in the panel and distinguished participants on behalf of the Institute of Hazrat Mohammad (SAW) it is my privilege to be presenting the keynote paper on the theme of the seminar.

The topic of my presentation is ‘Policy Thrusts Needed to Address the Vulnerability and Marginalization of the Internally Dislocated Women and Children in Distressed Urban Setting’.

The presentation is based on an informal and rapid; mostly qualitative survey of randomly selected squatters in the residential areas of Banani, Dhanmondi and Lalmatia. The format was predominantly focused group discussions and some one-to-one for substantiation.

The government of Bangladesh since its independence in 1971 has emphasized on human development issues specifically concentrating on poverty and vulnerability of women and children. In this context the country witnessed tremendous changes having socio-cultural and economic impact that has improved the lives of individuals providing them with opportunities for self realization.

Factors like poverty alleviation, gender equity, education and health for all and livelihood options have emerged as the predominant concerns in the innumerable channels of various development interventions. National programs in collaboration and cooperation of development partners, international donor agencies and NGO’s, are being implemented to improve the status quo.

And that the country has made considerable progress in this context is evidenced by the UN Award Bangladesh received for its remarkable achievements in attaining the Millennium Development Goal particularly for reducing infant mortality rates.

Honorable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said briefly while receiving the award– “This gesture is particularly encouraging to us as we have been sparing no efforts in achieving all the MDGs by 2015 despite the adverse impacts of the recent global economic crisis, global warming and climate change”.

She also reiterated that her government plans that by 2021;

- maternal mortality rate would reduce even further to 15%
- infant mortality to 15 deaths per 1000 live births
- increase life expectancy to 70 years

- provide safe drinking water for all by 2011, and hygienic sanitation by 2013
- achieve a Digital Bangladesh for global connectivity by implementing our national ICT Policy

In the light of the above pledges and the significant achievement notwithstanding the evolving and expanding difficulties towards progress in other MDG targets for reducing hunger, maternal mortality, income inequality, primary education rates and vulnerabilities of women, as well as ensuring “health for all”, well-planned urbanization and improving the stock of creativity and human capital, and social justice urgently requires;

“the multi-sector attention on population dislocation from rural to urban squatters is an emerging challenge”.

An estimated one million people are displaced annually in Bangladesh

The urbanization process gained momentum in Bangladesh after its independence in 1971. Between 1990 and 2000, the urban population in Bangladesh experienced an annual average growth rate of 5.6 per cent, which is the highest rate amongst the South Asian countries (BBS, 2003).

Urban growth in Bangladesh is predominantly an outcome of rural-urban migration that has now evolved into dislocation and displacement.

Internal displacement of population in Bangladesh is almost systemic, linked to the nature of the land e.g. displacement caused by river erosion or periodic floods or cyclones. Historically population movement was seasonal in conjunction to harvest and work opportunities – the changes are being brought about in traditional peasant society by the forces of globalization and urbanization.

Generally these forces contribute towards reconfiguring class formations that lead to structural violence expanding internal displacement into chronic mobility. Examples of this are to be found in the south-west of Bangladesh where the encroaching monoculture of shrimp cultivation is displacing agricultural laborers.

While the causes of internal displacement can be diverse the result is the same it increases poverty and related vulnerability and marginalization.

To sustain the progress and fulfill the commitment made by Bangladesh towards achieving the other MDGs it is imperative that we take cognizance of the issue of women and children within the urban poverty context that are missing all the essential services and access to basic rights.

Bangladesh’s rapid progress in industrialization has created job opportunities offering the rural poor alternative source of employment and livelihood and generating wide scale acceptance of women’s economic empowerment as we see through the readymade apparel and other sectors of manufacturing and service industries.

Generally opportunities of employment and cash earnings weigh heavily in favor of migration. The flow of remittances contributes significantly to the welfare of the relatives left behind by the temporary migrants in rural areas.

However, the recent trend shows that migrants now residing in the slums of the Dhaka city and other urban squatters have become a huge mass of dislocated and chronically mobile population.

As the chart shows that the percentage of those living in squatters for more than 5 years is at 60%.

The urban slum population is growing at an estimated rate of 4.2% per year, one of the highest rates amongst Asian cities mostly driven from their habitat due to low or loss of income because of climate change and environment degradation impact of river erosion, floods and cyclone.

The migrating population consists of mostly agriculture, small scale business, craftsmen and rural laborers they are moving to the cities with their families in search of livelihood and better income.

As a result the influx of rural to urban migration in search of subsistence continues unabated and contributes to 60% of the urban growth as this chart from the study delineates.

It is expected that more than 50% of the population in Bangladesh will live in urban areas by the year 2025 (WorldBank, 1999).

This phenomena provides both opportunities and new challenges. While the opportunities abound in the human capital index however, because of diluted attention and vertical sector systems these are not optimally exploited by;

- ✓ provision of formal employment in industrial sector,
- ✓ formalizing the non-formal sector and
- ✓ resettlement through expanding options of employment in rural areas

Hence, the movement of population from rural to urban environment has generated increased poverty and related consequences as they become permanently settled in squatters under extremely distressed conditions –

Therefore,

Even after long 35 years of focused, comprehensive and deliberate impetus on human development issue the poverty rate still hovers over 45%.

The picture of urban poverty is quite desolate because of the lack of concerted effort for capturing this segment in the social security net. The unabated influx of people from rural to urban areas if not integrated as an issue within the mainstream development agenda, the strategies for reducing poverty would become futile exercises of isolated efforts.

It would also affect the progress made in terms of women's empowerment, addressing child labor and preventing communicable diseases.

The cities offer a diverse range of work for the unskilled and skilled, literate and non-literate, from construction to domestic help. But the absence of regular employment diminishes options for livelihood. The men in such circumstance more often than not abandon the women and children to etch out a living by themselves.

The process creates further differential and marginalization. Women are forced into earning in any manner. In one of the areas of our study we found that the men in the family stayed home and women were engaged in selling themselves and drugs. These women were subjected to acute violence at home from the male members if they failed to bring in money that the men often used for gambling.

The study finding revealed that –

- The population consists mostly of rural poor without work and livelihood.
- On an average 5/6 people share one plastic covered space.
- There is no proper sanitation and the roadside water gutters or manholes without cover serve the purpose.
- Source of water is the WASA public faucet if available or nearby lake or mosques.
- Children have virtually no access to education and mostly spend their days wandering, begging and sometimes also getting involved in petty crimes.
- Harassments are regular especially in slums by the shanty owners and on the streets by the law enforcers.
- Women face sever marginalization as they have to ensure income through any means and also take care of the elderly, the disabled and children in this aggressive environment.
- Because of very insecure subsistence there is virtually no protection for children from trafficking, prostitution, drugs and other crimes.

The chart shows the level of harassment.

The first chart shows the married status at 67% however, please notice that the next chart is indicative at that only 27% still have their male guardians that is husbands/fathers living with them.

At the core of this issue lies the negligence to re-settlement strategies as a cross-cutting agenda to address urban poverty.

Paradoxically, the all encompassing 'push' and 'pull' dynamics that has generated breaking the top down approach to human development is the essential element of urban squatter condition.

The promise of income and glitz of better life is the urban pull factor and unemployment and loss of livelihood is the rural push factor that has created a parallel population segment of abject poverty and incomprehensibly vulnerable women and children.

According to our finding primary health care is relatively better accessible mostly through govt. and NGO service provision but EPI remains sketchy. Exposure to communicable diseases is very high amongst them due to sexual exploitation and drug peddling that provides higher income. Family planning is virtually absent amongst this population segment and the women are found to give birth in the squatters and the infants are raised under unhygienic conditions.

On an average each family has 3 to 4 children.

From the above review it is evident that internally displaced and dislocated population of the country does not enjoy equal rights as citizens of Bangladesh and are mostly discriminated because of poverty.

One of the ways that the government has tried to address the issue of urban squatters and slums is through phases of eviction without any specific plans of resettling the people.

As a result where one slum or squatter is demolished a few others erupt in another locality.

Despite the existence of a National Housing Policy (1993) there is still a dire need to provide adequate accommodation and necessary sanitation facilities for the urban poor living in slums.

Simultaneously, the government needs to integrate resettlement policy within the human development paradigm. A good example is the education sector where enrollment has reached 95% but with a consistent dropout rate of 50% can we hope and expect for positive change??

Consider this that the study found most of the children above the age of 10 and who have moved from rural areas within the last 6 years were going to school in their village but are now in the streets scavenging and begging or involved in hazardous work to bring money to the family.

Although the infant mortality is declining in both urban and rural areas, the decline is much slower in urban areas than in rural areas. Over the last 15 years, the infant mortality declined by 30% in urban area compared to 38% per cent in rural areas.

But of significance is the critical factor of absence of any kind of monitoring of birth and death amongst the squatters.

In the absence of government intervention and adequate NGO support to improve basic social services and human resources development in urban areas, the urban poor, especially poor women, are more susceptible to health and environmental hazards than their non-poor counterparts. Poor displaced households face potential threat of income-erosion arising out of eviction, extortion by musclemen, frequent sickness and sexual harassment of women.

The worsening situation requires concerted, integrated, complimentary and supplementary efforts that addresses the main issues simultaneously, and not as one off project. Factors influencing population dislocation is interconnected

The displaced population in one area of the study moved into the squatter post 'Sidr', coming from the same rural area and locality. In the last two years some of them made efforts of

resettling back into their habitat but due to lack of work, less income and loss of land as aftermath of the cyclone have converted the strip of street as their permanent home.

In conclusion it is again reiterated that as the MDG goals primarily deal with poverty related human degradation factors and are inter-linked so is the situation of population dislocation.

It is therefore, imperative for the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper – II to seriously articulate the problems of chronic mobility and internally displaced population.

The government needs to urgently address the issue through policy paradigm that is multi-directional and involves all the stakeholders;

The private and corporate sector plays a vital role in socio-economic emancipation.

The study found considerable numbers of squatters are engaged in formal industrial employment. But due to lack of any housing, children's education and health services provision by the employer they still remain in abject poverty without access to the basic requirements.

Simultaneously, the development partners need to concentrate on comprehensive and cohesive approaches that consider sustainability of any project to improve the situation as the essential element.

And the implementing organizations expand their program area through engaging the people and pertinent stakeholders in designing the project.

This study proposes that the dimension of addressing the vulnerability of the dislocated urban population specifically women and children is not merely a gender and marginalization issue but of the citizen's rights and access to all the basic needs.

Therefore, a multi-sector approach is needed to come out of the vertical, narrow and topical regimen for formulating a policy of rights that can be monitored for compliance, sustainability and improving the status quo for expanding

'from micro to macro solutions'

Thank you.