

Concerns, changes and challenges faced by the extreme urban poor in Dhaka and Chittagong during the COVID-19 lockdown

Background

The Government Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in Bangladesh on March 7, 2020. According to the WHO, as of the 11th May, Bangladesh has 15,691 confirmed positive cases with 239 confirmed deaths due to COVID-19. This number is likely an underestimate due to testing constraints. Since the 18th of March, the Government has been recommending and implementing increasingly stringent social distancing measures to contain and prevent the spread of the virus. The country-wide holiday lockdown period, initiated from March 26th will continue to have significant, immediate and long-term implications for citizens livelihoods, economic and social wellbeing.

Lockdown measures are disproportionately affecting the extreme urban poor who are highly vulnerable to economic, social and health shocks (Rashid et al. 2020). In Dhaka, over 7 million people reside in squatter settlement and slums, with at least an additional 40,000 residing on the streets (BBS 2015). Informal settlements and squatter settlements are characterized by over-crowded dwellings, limited access to soap, water and sanitation facilities (Arias-Granade et al. 2018). Those sleeping on the pavement have no way of physically distancing themselves from others due to a lack of shelter and often have very limited access to safe water and sanitation facilities (Uddin et al. 2009). For the extreme urban poor, many of the recommended strategies - washing hands, self-isolation and physical distancing are not possible to the same degree as other city dwellers (IDS 2020).

In addition, the lockdown measures have had a significant adverse impact on the livelihoods of the urban extreme poor who depend on daily earnings. Daily laborers, daily wage earners, house maids, rickshaw pullers, small business holders and garment factory workers, have been the hardest hit by the outbreak, who have limited savings and largely rely on foot traffic to earn their daily income. The economic impact of the lockdown on the urban poor has created wide spread insecurity. The impact on the livelihoods and food security of the urban poor has been somewhat captured by a BIGH survey. The survey highlights a 32% drop in food expenditure and 23% drop in number of families having 3 meals a day in urban slums (Rahman & Matin 2020).

A key challenge facing stakeholders is 'how to do things fast and at scale while also ensuring control measures are contextually appropriate' (IDS 2020, 2). This requires understanding of the experiences and realities faced by those who are disproportionately affected by the pandemic and associated lockdown measures. However many of the emerging papers and studies surrounding urban poverty and COVID-19, do not capture the realities faced by the extreme urban poor – especially those living on the streets, in squatter and 'under-developed' informal settlements.

The Amrao Manush (we are people too) project aims to improve the lives and livelihoods of pavement, squatter and 'under-developed' slum dwellers. Since 2008, the project has reached over 21,000 persons across seven pavement dweller centers (PDC's) in Dhaka and Chittagong.

SAJIDA Foundation's urban poverty team conducted a rapid response survey in order to understand the impact of COVID-19 in order to inform their programming and practice. The survey explored changes in living location, food security, income and employment, violence experienced as well as health status, key concerns and plans post lockdown. As such, the survey provides a rare insight into the live realities of city dwellers who experience extreme economic and social marginality and who are typically excluded from conversations surrounding urban poverty.

The survey was conducted by 18 Amrao Manush staff via mobile from 19th – 26th April, 2020. The findings presented also include the perceptions and observations from these staff members who debriefed with the lead researcher in three focus group discussions.

Methods

There were a total of 572 participants in the survey, 17.5% male and 82.5% female. Survey participants were service users of the Amrao Manush program with a recorded phone number. The project has lists of approximately 2400 phone numbers of active service users. The survey aimed to capture a wide range of participants who access services, including a range of ages, genders and living locations (pavement, squatter and slum). Amrao Manush service users are typically women and children, who access the service for shelter, daycare, advocacy, livelihoods and health support services.

Findings

The urban poor are highly diverse

The urban population is diverse. The urban poor do not only live in slums, but also temporary shelters on the pavements, in railway and bus stations, on the pavements, in parks and under bridges. This group is both highly visible and yet largely ignored by the public, NGO's and government. Within this survey, participants 'usually' lived in a range of locations – including pavements, pavement dweller centers and squatter shelters (33%) and 'under-developed' slums (67%).

The survey found that 70% of participants lived in a 'household' of 5-7 persons, well above the national average. The large household size had key implications for food distributions. Food distribution packages were typically portioned for a four person household – which meant that a 'monthly' food package only lasted two-three weeks for households.

Very few participants in this survey reported they had migrated to rural areas (1.6%). Most participants had stayed in their typical sleeping location (80.6%) whilst a small

number (17.8%) had shifted within the city. Discussions with staff revealed that participants' movements in city were often due to slum and pavement evictions. In addition 19 participants had moved from the Shadarghat pavement dweller center, which had closed shelter services due to the risk of COVID transmission. Furthermore, the majority of participants had plans to stay in the city (97.7%) post lockdown. Reasons provided included 'having no where else to go' and 'better earning opportunities in city' as well as 'inability to stay in village' (due to social, economic and land-related causes).

High rates of unemployment and dramatic decrease in daily earnings

Before lockdown 87% of participants earned more than 100 taka per day, whilst after lockdown 95% of participants were earning less than 100 taka per day. Men were likely to report that they were still working (18%) than women (11%). Several people discussed changing their livelihood strategy (eg. to rickshaw pulling, starting a small business or begging) in an attempt to continue earning an income. It appeared that some house maids and small business/hawkers were the most likely to have retained employment.

Rising food insecurity and poor access to food distributions

Food security of participants had been dramatically impacted due to lockdown. Before lockdown 73% of participants ate three or more meals a day, whilst after lockdown 94% of participants ate less than three meals a day. When asked how confident people were in eating at least one meal tomorrow, only half (56%) 'somewhat' confident, whilst 14% believed they would not eat tomorrow.

Interestingly, squatter and pavement dwellers (35%) were more likely to be confident of obtaining food than slum dwellers (27%). Conversations with staff who conducted the survey confirmed this finding. The survey suggests that slum dwellers are finding it more difficult to access food distributions due to distance from distribution centers and being 'kept inside' slums by the police. In comparison, pavement and squatter dwellers are more mobile, are able to arrive at distributions early in the morning, and may occasionally receive distributions at night by locals.

The survey revealed the generosity of local city dwellers towards the extreme poor. 27% of participants had received a cooked meal from a fellow city dweller, whilst 66% said they received a dry food package from a NGO or local person. However, most people had only received one food package (73.3% reported they had received between 1-10kg rice), whilst 13.8% reported they had not received a food package.

Discussions with staff revealed that many people had reported they had been put 'on the lists' of ward distributions however only some had received a package. There were several reasons discussed by participants, including difficulties leaving their slum, being registered to vote outside of the ward (often in a village area) and thus being refused a package or being told that the food distribution was 'finished' when they arrived.

Increasing police and family violence

55% of participants reported an increase in violence since lockdown. The 10% of people who reported a 'decrease' in violence during lockdown typically were not leaving their shelter. When participants were asked who was perpetrating this increased violence, participants cited the police (70%). Staff discussed that whilst there were some positive examples of police attempting to explain the rationale behind lockdown to participants, there were also many instances of increased beating people and their belongings during lockdown in an attempt to 'move them' in direct response to them engaging in livelihoods on the street.

Survey findings also suggest that family violence is increasing, with participants discussing economic, health and spatial stressors as contributing to the violence. 51% of participants said that the perpetrator of increased violence was their spouse, and another 29% discussed other family members. In addition, 26% of participants reported experiencing health and 'COVID' related verbal and physical harassment in the last two weeks- often perpetrated by the general public.

Access to Mobile Banking

The majority (63%) of participants did not have immediate access to mobile banking. Access to mobile banking was lower amongst those who lived in pavement/squatter and PDC as compared to those living in slum settlements. However it appears that participants are willing and able to obtain mobile phone banking services. Discussions with the staff revealed that asking participants about mobile banking services resulted in several participants anticipating cash transfers. One staff member discussed, "Many people did not have a [mobile banking] account, but they assured me that they could open one if they needed it. I had several families call me later in the evening telling me that they had already opened an account."

Fear and stigma surrounding COVID

91% of participants were worried about contracting COVID. This was the third most pressing concern of participants, closely following food and unemployment/no income discussed by 95% and 91%. Staff discussed participants discussing watching the news at cha stalls. Staff report that, 'people are really worried about getting COVID. They see USA and Italy and wonder how Bangladesh can cope... they are saying that we will die first because we live in such densely populated slums. Will we be sacrificed for Bangladesh?'

Discussion

This survey provides an insight into the changes, challenges and concerns of the extreme urban poor in Bangladesh during the lockdown. Whilst many participants are attempting to engage in strategies to cope and adapt to this lockdown, the survey reveals a high degree of food insecurity, unemployment, violence and fear amongst the extreme urban poor population in Dhaka and Chittagong that are taking their economic, physical and emotional toll.

The majority of participants in this survey had not migrated to rural areas. Whilst mass urban-rural migration has occurred prior to lockdown, this research illustrates that there is an group of people who have chosen to remain in cities. These may be due to the perceived improved employment opportunities, as well as 'having no-where else to go' due to a lack of family, land or shelter in rural areas.

Dramatic rises in unemployment and food insecurity are key challenges faced by the urban poor. A loss of employment opportunities, difficulties in leaving slums and accessing local government food distributions are key issues faced by this population. Rising unemployment and limited income also means that many families may be unable to pay their water and rent bill at the end of the month, and which places them at risk of becoming homeless.

The majority of participants had experienced an increase in violence. This included from the police, family violence and the public. Family violence may be triggered from economic and health stressors, as well as living in cramped living spaces. Police and public violence is an everyday occurrence for pavement and squatter dwellers before lockdown, and has only increased post lockdown as people attempt to live, access food and water in a highly difficult context. In addition, the reported increase in 'health and corona virus related harassment' may be arising from the perception of this population as being vectors of disease as a result of their living situation.

This research re-iterates the urgent need to address the issue of inadequate and unsafe shelter and inaccessibility of health services for the urban poor. Co-ordinated food distributions by local government, NGO's and other informal food distributions in conjunction with cash transfers are urgently required to prevent starvation and ensure the urban poor can remain housed and access water and sanitation facilities. Given the low percentage of the extreme urban poor with immediate access to mobile banking services – care must be taken to ensure an inclusive approach to cash transfers to ensure the maximum coverage. Innovative and rapid solutions must be developed to ensure those who do not have mobile phones are included in distributions and future solutions where possible. Developing coordinated and clear public health messaging regarding the strategies to prevent COVID-19, key facts about the virus and where people can access health services are urgently required.

Key limitations

The current survey has been implemented in a very short period of time. The survey only includes responses from Amrao Manush service users who currently have mobile access. As such the responses for this service may represent a slightly less vulnerable demographic. Participants are connected with the Amrao Manush project and have a level of social and economic capital that enables them to access a charged phone during lockdown. As such, survey findings can-not be generalized to represent the entirety of the need and vulnerability experienced by the urban extreme poor within Dhaka and Chittagong.

References

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