

PETER WALTERS | p.walters@uq.edu
M. ADIL KHAN | adil.khan@uq.edu.au
KAMRUL ASHAN | kamrul_70@yahoo.com
School of Social Science, The University of
Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
Department of Public Administration, The
University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh

ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE AS PRELUDE TO A RIGHT TO THE CITY FOR THE URBAN POOR IN RAJSHAHI, BANGLADESH

RESUMEN

One of the fundamental prerequisites for a 'right to the city' is a level of knowledge about the processes, services and opportunities that can improve the life chances of the poor. A vital source of knowledge in any urban environment is local government, which provides access to essential services including knowledge about education, health, sanitation and emergency services and security of tenure. This paper reports on a research project conducted in the city of Rajshahi in Bangladesh in 2013 designed to better understand how people living in poverty and absolute poverty accessed these necessary services. Three types of community were used

in the case study: a poor slum with access to the donor sponsored Urban Program for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) scheme in operation, a poor slum with no such support and a more 'middle class' neighbourhood used for comparison. The study found that local political representatives on the city government tightly controlled access to knowledge and services in all cases. This was to the detriment of the poorest slum, which was exploited by its local elected representative. The UPPR slum had a greater access to information and thus voice due to organised local leadership, with a strong role from women. The middle class neighbourhood enjoyed

a close and productive relationship with their local member due to high levels of cultural and symbolic capital. The paper concludes by observing that there are particular levels of community cohesion required before poverty alleviation can work. The best intentions of local authorities to improve services and transparency can be futile if political control is not relinquished at the grassroots level and/or the poor are not adequately mobilised and educated about their entitlements and rights.

KEYWORDS: SLUMS, RIGHT TO THE CITY –
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INTRODUCTION

One of the pressing problems in achieving a 'right to the city' for the urban poor in the developing world is access to knowledge. This knowledge can take the form of knowledge gained through quality universal education; knowledge of markets to allow for fair and gainful participation in economic life; knowledge about the nature and availability of government services, and knowledge about imminent threats to safety and tenure. All of these basic rights are necessary before mobilisation for a 'right to the city' becomes plausible. Access to reliable information and subsequent knowledge, leads to what Stiglitz (2002) terms 'voice, openness and transparency' leading in turn to successful and sustained transformation and development. Access to knowledge however, is more than a variable in an economist's model of development. Social and cultural factors and an understanding of the time and place in which the urban poor experience the myriad obstacles to development are necessary. A vital source of services in any urban environment is local government, which provides access to knowledge about education, health, sanitation and emergency services. This paper reports on a research project conducted in the city of Rajshahi in Bangladesh in 2013. The project takes a case study approach to evaluate access to knowledge and services from the perspective of the urban poor in Rajshahi as a prelude to greater access to knowledge and a 'right to the city' at the grassroots level. The paper is based on 60 ethnographic interviews with residents of three urban communities in Rajshahi. The findings from these interviews are focussed on the ways in which slum residents see themselves as citizens, through their negotiations of everyday obstacles and opportunities and their battle for reliable knowledge about their city. This research

evaluates access to knowledge and services firstly against the background of compulsory rights-based 'citizens' charters' – a national effort to make local officials more closely accountable to the urban poor across Bangladesh. Second, the paper investigates the circumstances in which donor-sponsored community support can assist the poorest of the poor. The paper discusses shortfalls in access to basic knowledge and services in terms of the predictability and trust in elected officials, and each other, that is required for the most marginalised in a city to achieve both the ontological and physical security required to claim a 'right to the city'.

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

The 'right to the city' is an idea originating with Lefebvre's original *Le Droit à la Ville*, first published in 1968 (Lefebvre, 1996). In this book, Lefebvre calls for nothing less than a revolution, resulting in a utopia where rights to the way in which space is used and resources are allocated in the city are transformed from those based on property ownership to those based on a right to urban life, where all decisions about the use value of space are made by the inhabitants of a city rather than just those who own property (Purcell, 2002). While this is an alluring ideal, it remains utopian, particularly as neo-liberal practises and the effects of globalisation mean that capital is attaining an unassailable grip on the right to determine the use value of urban space. However despite the idealistic original vision, the idea of the right to the city has endured, in somewhat modified versions of Lefebvre's original vision. Harvey, in his interpretation of the right to the city retains the ideal of 'voice' in the conduct and shaping of urban space and describes the right to the city as inevitably linked to conceptualisations of justice and the right of all residents of a city to

a role in not just accessing the resources available in the city as consumers or passive users, but to a greater voice in how those resources are allocated and how they shape the city itself (Harvey, 2008; Harvey & Potter, 2009). Importantly, Harvey, one of the principal contemporary thinkers on the right to the city, calls for a grounded, process-oriented view of justice, rather than a philosophical one that pits one meta-framework against another (i.e. capitalism vs socialism) (Harvey & Potter, 2009). The processes that Harvey refers to are principally those of capital and those of the state and how those processes might be better harnessed to the benefit of all in the city, particularly those most marginalised.

In a further incarnation of the right to the city, activists, NGOs and multilateral organisations and donors have taken these statements of ideals and utopian principals and incorporated them into the existing economic, social and political landscape, calling not for revolution or conflict, but for the normative prescriptions of greater transparency, inclusiveness and respect as guiding formulations for a right to the city (Brown & Kristiansen, 2009[UN Habitat]). Using international standards such as the UN Millenium Development Goals (MDG), Brown and Kristiansen (2009: 7) on behalf of UN Habitat define right to the city as:

...a series of legitimate claims to the conditions necessary for satisfying dignified and secure existence in cities by both individual citizens and social groups

The conditions necessary for this dignified and secure existence are generally greater democratic participation, but more specifically: greater gender equity; efficiency and transparency in public administration; greater tolerance of ethnic and cultural diversity; and reductions in poverty

and violence - all of which will be addressed in the findings and discussion below.

In this article we will use this view of justice to investigate the processes at work that constrain and enable the residents of our case study communities in realising a right to the city. More specifically according to Marcuse, this right needs to be directed to those most marginalised, which includes the majority of those who participated in our research project:

...those directly in want, directly oppressed, those for whom even their most immediate needs are not fulfilled: the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned, the persecuted on gender, religious, racial grounds. It is an involuntary demand, those whose work injures their health, those whose income is below subsistence (Marcuse, 2009: 190).

A CITIZENS' CHARTER AND THE RIGHT TO SERVICES

One of the ways in which the immediate past national government of Bangladesh attempted to introduce greater accountability, transparency and ultimately participation into systems of governance was the adoption of a 'Citizens Charter'. The citizens' charter is an idea first adopted in the United Kingdom during the conservative government of John Major in the early 1990s. The intention of the charter was to bring about cultural change in the UK civil service by taking a more 'customer focussed' approach to the way in which government agencies provided services to citizens, or 'customers'. The charter in the UK has met with mixed success. Although many agencies have become more customer-focussed, transparent and responsive, there are still criticisms based around a general cynicism from the public about the charter and the fact that it, in many cases, the delivery of

services are not compatible with a market-based management style and that the charter merely serves to introduce efficiencies as a mask for cutting funding to essential services (Bellamy & Greenaway, 1995).

Local governance in Bangladesh has traditionally been regarded as unresponsive, self-serving, inefficient and prone to patronage and corruption. In 1997, Khan observed that:

The poor's exclusion from local urban bodies is complete. They simply have no means through which to directly or indirectly participate in the deliberations of such bodies and influence decisions (Khan, 1997: np in Banks (2008:383).

In Bangladesh, a citizens' charter program was first implemented in 2000, however it failed to take hold due to unwillingness by the central Government of Bangladesh to involve regions in planning and implementation (Rahman, 2012). In 2007 the military backed care-taker government of Bangladesh introduced compulsory rights-based citizens' charters for local governments in an attempt to make local officials more closely accountable to citizens in accordance with basic rights set out in the constitution of Bangladesh. The charter set out a list of basic services and customer care to which citizens should feel entitled such as levels of service, courteous treatment, value for money and avenues for redress. This 'second generation' of citizens' charter was introduced in trial regions in 2007 (Nayem, 2010). An extensive academic case study conducted in 2010 found that the citizen's charter had again failed to meet its objectives due to a lack of local political will, entrenched bureaucratic culture, significant power differentials between officials and citizens, limited devolution of power from the centre and

indeed, a complete ignorance of the citizens charter, and hence their rights, on the part of citizens (Nayem, 2010). Despite these potentially empowering charters, and despite transition to a democratically elected central government and despite goodwill at the regional and city level, service remains poorly coordinated and local government officials and elected representatives remain largely unaccountable. There have been few further studies or evaluations of the effectiveness of citizens' charters, but what does exist in the media and academic literature indicates that one of the greatest barriers to the success of these charters is a general level of ignorance from citizens about their existence (Nayem, 2010).

In this paper we take stock of some of the everyday constraints that prevent slum residents in Rajshahi in Bangladesh from accessing the sort of services and knowledge that a well functioning citizens charter might be expected to enable. To better understand this we engage with the urban poor in their quest to lead more secure lives economically, politically and socially. We use interviews conducted with residents of two slum communities and, for comparison, a 'middle class' community to highlight the ways that access to services and amenity are denied them, despite the apparent existence of channels through which they can make their case for better inclusion.

CONTEXT AND METHOD

The study was conducted in the city of Rajshahi, the third largest city in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is located in the Bay of Bengal to the east of the Indian sub-continent. It won its independence in a war of liberation with Pakistan in 1971 with whom it had been amalgamated since Indian partition in 1947. The population of Bangladesh is 155 million, in an area of 130,000

km² (slightly larger in area than New York State or Nicaragua) making it the most densely populated large country on earth. (United Nations Statistics Division, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2012). Bangladesh is one of the flattest countries on earth, comprising a massive riverine delta where three rivers, the Padma (Ganges), Brahmaputra and Meghna converge. The country is regularly subject to widespread inundation when rivers flood. The population is 98 percent ethnic Bengali, 90 percent Muslim, and 30 percent urban. The estimated population of the capital city, Dhaka, is approximately 17 million and is one of the fastest growing mega-cities in the world. Urban growth in Bangladesh is largely through rural-urban migration with significant numbers moving to cities to escape the various effects of climate change on this environmentally vulnerable river delta (Afsar, 2000).

Bangladesh ranks 142 out of 187 countries on the UN human development index (UNDP, 2013), but has made significant progress in poverty alleviation in recent years with the economy growing at 6.5 percent per annum. Main export industries are textiles, farmed seafood and jute. According to Roy (2005) one of the main obstacles to greater growth and a more equitable spread of income are weak institutions and poor governance. Domestic and international NGOs and donors are engaged in implementing targeted poverty alleviation activities in Bangladesh but outcomes are mixed (Ullah and Routray, 2007). Our research site is in the city of Rajshahi located in the north west of Bangladesh, on the river Padma (called Ganges in India), which marks the border between Bangladesh and India (see figure 1). The population of Rajshahi district is 2.2 million with approximately 800,000 living in the city of Rajshahi (UPPR, 2012) making it the third largest city in the country. The city has



Figure 1: Map of Bangladesh [ref]

virtually no industry and no export markets; its economy depends largely on services provided to one of the largest universities in the country, the University of Rajshahi, as well as a number of smaller universities and institutions. Rajshahi is one of four cities in Bangladesh governed by a City Corporation, a level of government subordinate only to the national government. The Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) is responsible for the provision of day-to-day government services including city infrastructure, sanitation, public utilities and public health. Although its responsibilities are significant, it has little power to raise taxes locally and is reliant on the national government for funding.

30 elected local Ward Councillors represent citizens in Rajshahi in the City Corporation and there are 10 reserved Women’s Ward Councillors. The RCC is led by an elected Mayor, historically aligned to one of the two major political parties in Bangladesh (Huq, 2013).

Like all cities in Bangladesh, a significant proportion of Rajshahi’s population, around 35 percent (Islam et al, 2006), lives in conditions that meet the UN definition of an urban slum, lacking one or more of the following conditions: 1. Durable housing of a permanent nature that protects against extreme climate conditions; 2. Sufficient living space, which means not more than three people sharing the same room; 3. Easy access to safe water in sufficient amounts at an affordable price; 4. Access to adequate sanitation in the form of a private or public toilet shared by a reasonable number of people. 5. Security of tenure that prevents forced evictions (UN Habitat, 2006).

This study was a collaboration between authors Walters and Khan from the School of Social Science at The University of Queensland in Australia; and author Ashan, along with postgraduate students from the Department of Public Administration at the University of Rajshahi. From the three case study sites (see below), a total of 60 residents were interviewed in mid 2013. Masters of Public Policy students from the University of Rajshahi conducted the interviews after receiving training in ethnographic field methods and qualitative interviewing by the authors. The students were paid for their time and expenses; interview participants were not paid. Due to cultural sensitivities and a need to overcome initial mistrust from research participants, particularly in the poorest of the case study communities, interviews were not recorded and interviewers, working in pairs, relied on notes and their memories to report

each of their encounters immediately following the interviews. Also for cultural reasons, female interviewers were responsible for interviewing female participants and male interviewers interviewed male participants. Interviews lasted between forty minutes and one hour and were conducted on site, usually inside or in the vicinity of participants' homes. Because interviews were not recorded verbatim, resident quotes will be attributed with a code according to gender and the category of case study community, and paraphrased. To protect the identity of the research sites and the research participants we have used place names or participant names. Codes are provided for each participant excerpt according to the following key:

- F2: Female (interview no.2)
- M11: Male (interview no.11)
- UPPR: the slum community in which the Urban Partnership for Poverty Reduction program was active
- non-UPPR: the slum community in which this program was not active
- MC: the 'middle class' community

CASE STUDY SITES

For the study, three different types of residential community were chosen for comparison. The first type of community consisted of two sites and was representative of the poorest of the slums of Rajshahi, located on State railway land and state land on the banks of the Padma river; these slums had a population of approximately 1200 and had been in existence for around thirty years. The conditions in these slums generally fit the description of 'absolute poverty' in that residents subjectively felt that the absolute basic necessities of life were not always available to them. Tenure was uncertain, houses were makeshift, services were poor and a lack of adequate sanitation was a constant threat to health. For those residents with work, it was casual, sporadic and menial. Most

children finished their educations at around 10-12 years of age and entered the workforce in order to contributing economically to their struggling families. Girls were routinely married by the time they were 12-14 years old. There were significantly more adult women than men in the slum, the result of divorce, abandonment or the death of male partners.

Slum dwellers collect Zakat [according the Islamic obligation to give the poor] from the rich people during Eid. He says that slum dwellers lead their life with much suffering. They struggle to manage meals twice in a day. Many slum dwellers ask their little children to beg. He also says that many want to send their children to school. But they think that if children are sent to school their income will decline (M8 non-UPPR).

The second case study site, while still poor and meeting most of the UN Habitat requirements to be categorised as a slum, had the benefit of an Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) program established in the community. The UPPR was initiated in Bangladesh in 2008 as a partnership between the Government of Bangladesh and donor organisations: the UK Government (UKaid), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN-HABITAT (UPPR, 2013). UPPR has the goal of lifting three million urban poor and extreme poor people out of poverty by 2015 in 23 cities and towns across the country. UPPR uses a "community-based approach led by mostly poor and extremely poor women, who are empowered to manage their development to meet their own needs and those of their family and community, and as a result overcome poverty and the barriers to be part of the city" (UPPR, 2013). The UPPR project has three main components: "(i) providing grants for the construction of basic services and physical improvements; (ii) providing support for livelihood development programmes in the

communities through community contract system; and (iii) capacity building of local government to address the needs of the urban poor" (Huq, 2013: 94).

UPPR projects are enacted through local municipal governments who build small scale infrastructure projects such as latrines, wells, footpaths and drains, as well as apprenticeships and grants for small business development, education grants to keep children, particularly girls, in school, and grants for urban food production activities for the urban poor. There is a strong emphasis on decision making and prioritising for these projects by communities themselves, in particular, committees comprising women and girls, called Community Development Committees (CDCs).

The second case study site consisted of a number of Community Development Committees (CDCs), comprising largely of local women, representing approximately 200-300 families with a constitution, accredited by the Rajshahi City Corporation. The role of the CDC is to prioritise development needs for the community and present project proposals to the UPPR delegates on the City Corporation for funding (Huq, 2013). Importantly, at the local ward level, the local elected councillor sits on the Project Implementation Committee, which acts as a conduit to the city corporation for UPPR funding proposals. The implications of this will be discussed below.

The third case study site was selected to provide a comparison between the different social conditions that existed in a community where members had security of tenure, substantial housing, good access to local infrastructure, relatively well paid and secure employment and the education required to negotiate the social and cultural barriers faced by those who lived in the slum communities of the first two case study sites. The participants interviewed in the third case

study site – the ‘middle class’ community – were not extraordinarily affluent but held high status jobs such as teachers, academics, lawyers and doctors and could be considered in the context of Rajshahi to occupy the cultural, if not economic, elite. The accounts provided in interviews demonstrated that this community enjoyed a far greater ‘right to the city’ than the first two case study sites.

ACCESS TO KNOWLEDGE AND SERVICES: ROLE OF THE WARD COUNCILLOR

None of the research participants in any of the case study sites had heard of the term ‘citizen’s charter’. However in the UPPR and non-UPPR slum sites, there was good evidence that people knew they were probably entitled to better service and infrastructure than they currently received from the City Corporation and other institutions, but they rarely had full knowledge of what those services might be:

They do not know at all about the kinds of services they could get from the City Corporation. This is because they never go to the City Corporation. Besides, they do not have desire to get services from the City Corporation since they have no money and you need money to get what you need (F1 non-UPPR)

the major problems are lack of electricity supply, eviction of slum residents, no supply of tube wells [for water], lack of garbage management, and non-existence of toilets. The City Corporation should have an arrangement for informing about the services about which they are unaware (F2 non-UPPR).

The City Corporation remained an abstract institution - most participants in the UPPR and the non-UPPR slums had very little direct contact

with officials from the city government. A local political representative, the Ward Councillor, largely mediated their relationship with this institution.

The Ward Councillor is the elected representative on the Rajshahi City Corporation and represents up to 25,000 residents at the local level. The councillor’s role was crucial and in all three communities the Ward Councillor played a defining role in how, and whether, communities gained access to government services. Since 1994, the poor have been able to take part in the election of ward councillors, and although this change was intended to provide a universal political voice, in practice it has further politicised the role and strengthened the gatekeeper powers of this crucial player in the provision of services to the urban poor (Banks, 2006). Although, in principle, citizens should be able to deal directly with the RCC, and this is reflected in the Citizens Charter (Rahman, 2012), in practice the Ward Councillor appeared to mediate almost all interactions with RCC this included access to basic services, improvements to local infrastructure, complaints and local dispute resolution. In all three case study sites, the relationship with the Ward Councillor was almost entirely political. For the residents of the poorest community, this meant that support from the Ward Councillor was almost non-existent.

For most interview participants in the poor non-UPPR site, the Ward Councillor was an immovable obstacle. The councillor acted as the sole gatekeeper to government services and dispensed or withheld patronage based on his perception of political allegiance. The Ward Councillor perceived residents of the non-UPPR slum, as having voted for the wrong political party and almost all requests and petitions to him by residents fell on deaf ears:

When members of non-UPPR community went to him with problems, they would be told that since they had not voted for him, there was nothing he could do for them. For example they had been waiting for three years to have a drain dug in the community that would prevent all of their homes flooding during frequent heavy rain storms (F10 non-UPPR).

The Ward Councillor works in exchange for money, people who are able to pay get things done easily. Since they have no money, they have no success with the Ward Councillor (F2 non-UPPR)

He is corrupt and gets elected by stealing votes. He has good connections with the City Corporation. This is because he soft soaps whichever political party is in power and works for those which are in power. No meetings with the men or women are held in the community (F13 non-UPPR).

The unreliability and contingent nature of the Ward Councillor’s support was exacerbated in the poor non-UPPR slum because, as one man remarked, there is no local (organic) leadership in the slum, they rely all the more on the Ward Councillor as a conduit for services and other leadership roles (M12 non-UPPR). The information to which they have access, particularly about the type of services that are available to them from the City Corporation is necessarily dependent upon what the Ward Councillor and the Ward Councillor’s office was prepared to do for them or tell them.

In the UPPR slum by contrast, the relationship with the ward councillor was better, but could also be problematic:

There are some people in their community who have established a water tap in their house by lobbying with the ward councillor or giving him a

bribe (F3 UPPR).

The present ward councillor promised before election that he would make arrangements for drains, tube wells and toilets. Moreover, he assured that he would repair the roads as well. But he has not done anything after winning the election. Although he has been informed regarding these several times he has not paid any attention to these. He says that since there is no authority in his hands he cannot do anything in this regard. In their community, they get more facilities from the CDC and other NGOs than the government or the City Corporation (F12 UPPR).

Despite the control the Ward Councillor exercised over the residents of the UPPR slum, the presence of a CDC (which also enjoyed the backing of a UNDP project manager) in their slum provided them with enhanced opportunities to access the Ward Councillor, and a greater weight of presence. This CDC arrangement demonstrated how an externally assisted programme has the capacity to empower the negotiating capacity of the poor and facilitate capacity building by promoting community leadership. The CDC could be used as an effective platform for community representation and in this sense was far more effective than individual representation. The presence of the UPPR in the slum provided a level of implicit and explicit oversight of governance:

Moreover, the CDC requires community people to be present at meetings with the Ward Councillor. The issues on which discussion is held in the meeting are tube well, drains, the education of children, quarrels between husbands and wives, dowry and health. The ward councillor listens to everybody's expectations and complaints and tries to resolve them (F3 UPPR).

Importantly, the City Corporation also uses the CDC as a convenient village infrastructure separate from the Ward Councillor's office, as a way to distribute information and knowledge about public health, sanitation and domestic management (sewing and cooking) via women members of the CDC (F4 UPPR).

In the third case study site, the 'middle class' neighbourhood, participants also had little reason or opportunity to deal directly with officials from the City Corporation, however, their dealings with their Ward Councillor, apart from some minor irritations, were almost uniformly positive:

We are treated well by him. This ward councillor has important roles in solving problems and development in the area. He comes by himself and solves family problems by judgment. If the people from the area go to him with any demands or problem he listens to them carefully and takes necessary steps. He is easily accessible (F13 MC). The middle class neighbourhood spoke of the Ward Councillor as an ally rather than an obstacle and most did not hesitate to use him to their individual and collective advantage.

FIRST, THERE MUST BE A COMMUNITY

According to the charter of the UPPR, "the three main responsibilities of the CDC are: (i) maintaining bank accounts (ii) formulating community action plans, and (iii) developing proposals for and managing community-contracts" (UPPR, 2013: website). The selection and eligibility process for CDCs is 'demand driven' and eligible communities must be approved and accredited at the ward and City Corporation level, using the same bureaucratic infrastructure that manages services to city residents (Huq, 2013):

Social mobilisation will be initiated by Community Development Workers with the assistance of the

Ward Commissioners [Councillors] (Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 2001:28).

The implications of this mechanism are that even the poorest communities selected for participation in the UPPR scheme need to fulfil some basic requirements for organisation, mutual trust and social capital, in other words, to be classified as a 'community'.

This minimum level of social organisation in the non-UPPR slum, it could be argued, was lacking. The ability to reach consensus and put a credible case to the local government for inclusion in a scheme such as UPPR would require certain minimum social conditions to exist. The non-UPPR slum was not cohesive for a number of important reasons. The level of poverty that exists in this type of community means that its members have few material or social resources to devote to anything but survival. The slum was characterised by an absence of any clear leadership. The impression from interview participants was that this slum settlement, although in existence for more than 40 years, was still considered by its residents to be temporary. The land where it was located belonged to Bangladesh Railways and the City Corporation and there had been regular attempts to evict people in recent years. The slums were also known for drug use, with men and boys from the slum itself and from further afield involved in drug abuse and drug dealing.

Among these drugs, marijuana, 'tari' [alcohol] and Phensidyl [prescription cough medicine] are the common ones. Many people of this area are involved with this drug business. Many people from outside the area are also involved with this business. Not only are there adults from the area but also the young people of the area drug addicted. Young men from outside their area come there to take drugs. There are no guards or

police to provide security. Thievery and smuggling happen at night (F15 non-UPPR).

The rest of the slum including the women, who were mostly not involved in drug-related activity, were stigmatized as a result and this also contributed to an over-representation of women heads of household in this settlement. One of the other significant differences between the UPPR village and the non-UPPR village was the relative difference in the empowerment of women. In the non-UPPR village, women had very little demonstrable power. For those who had husbands, their access to knowledge was incomplete and often questionable; husbands did not routinely pass on important knowledge to women. Women interviewed in the non-UPPR slum had little access to reliable knowledge about issues such as healthcare, government service, education; all of which would have given them greater access to the resources of the city. Many women interviewed said that they relied on men for this type of information and had no other access. Not all had access to television or radio as electricity supply was sporadic. Television in Bangladesh is used extensively by the government for public service broadcasts about maternity care, disease eradication, nutrition and other public service programs.

While talking about the Urban Clinic the respondent's husband comes out from the room and tells us that he knows about the Urban Clinic but has not informed his wife about it (F10 non-UPPR).

He says that although he is capable of buying television he cannot do so due to lack of electricity. As a result, it is not possible for him or his family to know what is happening in the country (M3 non-UPPR).

In contrast, the UPPR program in the UPPR slum had allowed women to take a far more prominent

leadership role in their community and while this is unlikely to have completely transformed cultural gender norms, it did mean that women, who might be more attuned to community needs and better communicators of knowledge, were able to make the most of these attributes.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The people living in the poorest slum communities in Rajshahi were constrained by a number of factors in gaining access to reliable and useful knowledge about the city and its services. The first was the fact that they expended all of their available physical, economic and cognitive resources on filling the most basic needs at the level of basic survival. The toll that merely surviving takes on the poor cannot be overestimated and participants' descriptions of the nature of their poverty demonstrate this.

The second was that residents of the poorest slums only had recourse to knowledge and experience of the services the local city corporation could provide through local political representation. So rather than local politicians providing a 'fall back' when services did not meet expectations, the local politician, the Ward Councillor, acted as a gatekeeper to the government and exchanged these services, constructed as favours for personal political and, in some cases, material benefit. Access to knowledge by slum dwellers about government health initiatives, disease eradication, sanitation and lighting would have provided these people a measure of inclusion and engagement with government beyond the significant amenity that these services provided.

The residents of those slums with a functioning Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) program were certainly materially better off but it would be wrong to assume that this was an outcome rather than a cause of their relationship

with the UPPR. The fact that the residents of the UPPR slum exhibited a level of community cohesion and long term stability, low levels of crime and a structure of local leadership, particularly among women, meant that they were in a better position to organise themselves as a community to access information and services – a basic barrier to entry for the non-UPPR slums.

This study should not be read as representative of all slums in all wards in Rajshahi and the negligence of particular Ward Councillors should not be seen as condemnation of them all. However, what it does demonstrate is that in a governance arrangement that is highly slanted in favour of the rich and elite, the poor are disadvantaged at many levels. A programme like UPPR, that attempts empower the poor through social mobilization and leadership capacity building has the capacity to establish rights, access services and alleviate urban poverty especially through the provisioning of essential basic services and infrastructure development of direct relevance to the poor. However, perhaps more importantly, it brings local leaders and particularly women into the realm of decision making and access to decisions makers and knowledge, which can be easily stifled by the critical intervention, negligence or petty corruption of an elected official.

Finally, this study reveals that in a socio-political arrangement where power is unequally distributed and the poor are structurally disadvantaged both in terms of accessing knowledge and claiming services to which they are entitled, community empowerment initiatives such as those of UPPR that empower poor and foster leadership help to bridge inequities. But for the poorest of the poor, such as those in the non-UPPR slums in this study, the inability to organise and agree as a community may prevent them from meeting the minimum requirements to access programs

like the UPPR. The presence of a functioning community with common aims and the resources to devote time and effort to collective goals is a substantial achievement. It is the poorest of the poor who must devote their entire energies to fulfilling fundamental survival needs and who are therefore least equipped to achieve community.

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