

Policy Evolution and Its Impact on Slum Dwellers: A Review of Bangladesh's Five-Year Plans

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ABSTRACT:

This journal article reviews the evolution of urban policy in Bangladesh, specifically focusing on how these policies have affected slum dwellers across various Five-Year Plans post-independence. It traces the historical context, policy frameworks, implementation strategies, and their socio-economic impacts on the urban poor communities.

Keywords: Policy Evolution, Impact on Slum Dwellers, Bangladesh's

1. INTRODUCTION:

Urbanization in Bangladesh has historically been skewed towards protecting the interests of the land-owning classes, often at the expense of the landless and urban poor. This dynamic became particularly pronounced in the capital city, Dhaka, following the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971. The aftermath of the war led to rapid urbanization as rural populations migrated to urban centers in search of employment and better living conditions, thereby leading to the proliferation of slums and squatter settlements (Islam, 2005).

Before Bangladesh's independence, the Government of Pakistan had initiated its First Five-Year Plan (1955-1960), which included policies aimed at rehabilitating refugees, setting a precedent for dealing with urban poverty and housing issues. However, these early policies primarily focused on managing the immediate aftermath of partition rather than addressing the systemic problems of urban poverty.

Post-liberation, the government of Bangladesh recognized the burgeoning problem of slums. In 1974, a program was launched to resettle squatters in major cities like Dhaka, Chittagong, and Khulna, though implementation was limited to Dhaka in January 1975 (Centre for Urban Studies, 1976). The Second and Third Five-Year Plans continued this trajectory, with some policy suggestions aimed at squatter resettlement, but these were largely theoretical without substantial on-ground impact.

A critical shift in policy focus occurred in 1989 with the establishment of the *Dhaka Mahanagari Bastee Niroson Committee* (Dhaka City Corporation Slum Rehabilitation

Committee), which marked the beginning of more concerted efforts to address the plight of slum dwellers. This initiative was followed by the Fifth Five-Year Plan, which explicitly aimed to mitigate the hardships faced by those living in slums and squatter settlements in Dhaka (Islam, 2005).

This study aims to critically analyze the evolution of these policies through Bangladesh's Five-Year Plans, examining how they have either addressed or failed to address the needs of slum dwellers in Dhaka. By tracing the policy developments from post-independence resettlement efforts to more structured urban planning and community development initiatives, this paper seeks to understand the governmental approach towards urban poverty, its implementation, and its real-world impact on one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Through this analysis, we intend to highlight both the successes and shortcomings of these policies, providing insights into urban governance challenges in a rapidly developing nation like Bangladesh.

2. Historical Context and Policy Evolution:

Pre-1971 Policies:

The landscape of urban policy in what is now Bangladesh was significantly influenced by the urban planning strategies implemented during the period of Pakistan's governance, particularly through the First Five-Year Plan (1955-60). This plan was pivotal as it introduced systematic approaches to urban community development amidst the socio-political upheaval following the partition of India in 1947.

Urban Poor and Refugee Resettlement:

The partition of India in 1947 led to significant demographic shifts, with millions of people crossing borders in both directions, creating immediate challenges for the newly established state of Pakistan, including what would later become Bangladesh. This mass migration had profound implications for urban areas, where many refugees settled, necessitating urgent policy interventions for their resettlement and integration. As Ali (1962) notes, the government was tasked with the monumental job of not just providing homes for these refugees but also integrating them into the socio-economic life of the nation, amidst an already disorganized economic landscape.

The rehabilitation of these refugees posed complex challenges. The government's response was encapsulated in the First Five-Year Plan of Pakistan, which was pivotal in shaping urban policy. This plan was the first structured effort to tackle the issues arising from such a large-scale human movement:

Development of Social Work: Understanding that the successful reintegration of refugees required more than just infrastructure, the plan highlighted the critical role of social work. It emphasized the training and professionalization of social workers to manage the social upheaval effectively. By the onset of the plan, with support from international entities like the United Nations, programs were already in place to train a group of individuals who would play a key role in urban community development (Government of Pakistan, 1955).

Urban Community Development (UCD): The plan placed a strong emphasis on UCD as a strategy to combat urban poverty. It was recognized that urban areas needed not just physical but also social reconstruction, and trained social workers were essential to this process. The initiative aimed at empowering communities through self-help, education, and health services, thereby fostering resilience and self-sufficiency among the urban poor (Government of Pakistan, 1955).

These early policy frameworks under Pakistani governance were instrumental in setting precedents for urban planning in Bangladesh after its independence. The focus was not solely on physical resettlement but also on social integration, community empowerment, and building institutional capacity. This approach influenced subsequent Bangladeshi policies, which continued to evolve with a focus on involving the community in its own development and ensuring that social services were delivered by well-trained professionals, thereby laying a foundation for addressing urban poverty and slum development in a more holistic manner.

Post-Liberation Initiatives:

Following the liberation war, the government of Bangladesh embarked on a comprehensive path of reconstruction and rehabilitation. The First Five-Year Plan (1973-78), initiated in November 1973, was designed to address the urgent socio-economic needs in the wake of the conflict. This plan placed a heavy emphasis on rebuilding efforts, striving to restore the essential infrastructure and services necessary for urban recovery (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1973).

One of the key components of this plan was the introduction of Urban Social Services (USS), which specifically targeted the urban poor. The focus was on groups like the homeless and destitute women, aiming to uplift their living conditions. The strategy adopted was multifaceted:

Rural-Urban Balance: Recognizing that previous welfare initiatives were predominantly urban-focused, there was a concerted effort to extend these services into rural areas. This approach sought to promote self-help concepts, with the hope of curbing the exodus of rural populations to urban centers (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1973).

Revitalization of Urban Social Welfare: Despite ongoing urban social welfare programs, the challenges faced by urban communities persisted. The plan called for a revitalization, strengthening, and acceleration of these services. It proposed setting up 16 new Urban Community Development (UCD) centers to enhance community development within urban areas (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1973).

The Two-Year Plan (1978-80) served as a bridge to continue and complete the initiatives started under the First Five-Year Plan. This plan was focused on ensuring the continuity of projects, with financial allocations made to support this continuity. Allocations amounted to Tk. 43.50 million in 1978-79 and increased to Tk. 49.00 million in the following year, demonstrating a commitment to seeing these projects through to completion (Planning Commission, Bangladesh, 1980).

The Second Five-Year Plan (1980-85) marked a significant evolution in policy, adopting a 'basic needs' approach. This was in response to the stark socio-economic conditions of the late 1970s, where the majority of the population struggled with basic necessities. The plan's objectives expanded beyond mere provision of services to include structural societal changes (Planning Commission, Bangladesh, 1980):

Community Development: It aimed to involve communities actively in their development, promoting activities that would elevate the living standards of the urban poor. Strategies included providing interest-free loans, skill acquisition programs, and fostering self-help initiatives. The expansion of UCD centers to 68 symbolized a move towards a more integrated and

holistic approach to urban development (Planning Commission, Bangladesh, 1980).

Empowerment through Organization: The plan strategically focused on organizing and mobilizing the underprivileged, particularly targeting the youth, women, and the landless, to enhance their social and economic capabilities (Planning Commission, Bangladesh, 1980).

The Third Five-Year Plan (1985-90) further built upon these initiatives, reinforcing the focus on urban social services:

Continuation and Expansion: The plan continued to emphasize the expansion of urban social services, with the number of USS projects now at 68, showcasing a sustained commitment to urban development (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1985).

Comprehensive Development: Adopting a family-centric approach, this plan aimed for comprehensive development, focusing on empowerment over mere relief.

Specific Goals: It set out to reduce population growth by enhancing living standards through income-generating activities and to foster social and cultural values that encourage communal responsibility (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1985).

The financial commitment reflected this intensified focus, with Tk. 750 million allocated for social welfare during this period, underscoring a robust governmental push towards addressing urban poverty through a progressively nuanced policy framework (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1985).

These plans collectively represent a shift from post-war recovery and basic welfare service delivery to a more strategic, community-driven model aimed at sustainable development and social integration for slum dwellers.

Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990-95)

The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990-95) of Bangladesh reflected on the achievements of the Third Plan, acknowledging steps taken to ameliorate the conditions of both urban and rural impoverished communities. During the Third Plan period, efforts were made in 34 cities/towns focusing on skill training, income generation, and family development activities, benefiting an estimated 1.25 million individuals (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1985).

In addressing the slum and squatter issues, the Fourth Plan adopted a policy of upgrading existing slum conditions over relocation, based on recommendations from the Dhaka Metropolitan Slum Improvement Committee. The plan was structured in three phases:

Short-Term Program: Initiated in October 1989 for six months, targeting the rehabilitation of nearly 10,000 families across various Dhaka neighborhoods onto government land.

Medium-Term Program: Over the first three years (1990-1993), this phase aimed to provide shelter and basic services to 41,000 displaced families, with an annual target of rehabilitating approximately 14,000 families.

Long-Term Program: Envisioned as a comprehensive ten-year plan from 1990 to 2000, it focused on improving the environmental conditions and infrastructure, including essential services like water supply, sanitation, health, and education. The execution was to be primarily handled by DMC and RAJUK, with support from various government bodies.

The plan's policy recommendations included:

Urging the formulation of a National Housing Policy and a Human Settlement Policy.

Suggesting that the principles for Dhaka's slum improvement could be extended to other urban areas.

Proposing the creation of a Low Income Housing Authority and encouraging private sector involvement in low-cost housing through incentives like low-interest loans.

Recommending the establishment of a 'Housing Bank' similar to Grameen Bank for urban poor to foster self-employment.

Declaring 1990-2000 as the 'Low-Income Housing Decade' to emphasize the urgency of housing issues.

Advocating for robust publicity to increase public awareness and political commitment to slum issues.

Suggesting the formation of a Presidential Council and a national executive committee for coordinated policy action.

The objectives set for the urban poor during this plan included creating employment opportunities and promoting the rehabilitation of the disabled and elderly through community programs.

Strategies involved:

Providing basic services through self-reliance-focused institutional mechanisms.

Focusing on human resource development rather than mere relief.

The urban community development program under this plan expanded to all remaining districts, with initiatives aimed at skill development, income generation, and health care for slum dwellers.

Interim Period between Fourth and Fifth Plans (1995-97)

In the absence of a formal plan between 1995-97, the government continued with projects from the Fourth Plan. According to the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002), 30 projects were active during this interim period, with 13 being continuations from the previous plan. Financial allocations for these projects totaled Tk. 1005.70 million, with Tk. 371.30 million spent up to June 1996, and an expected expenditure of Tk. 608.70 million for 1996-97 (Bangladesh Planning Commission,

1997). Out of these, five projects were completed, with 25 expected to carry over into the Fifth Plan, requiring an additional Tk. 3200.00 million.

This interim period was characterized by a continuation of efforts rather than the initiation of new policy directions, focusing on the completion or advancement of ongoing urban development projects.

3. Fifth Plan and Beyond:

In the aftermath of Bangladesh's liberation, the government initiated efforts in 1974 to address the squatter problem, with a primary focus on Dhaka. These initial resettlement programs were more about relocation than rehabilitation but marked the beginning of systematic governmental intervention in slum issues. Over time, policies evolved towards not just moving slum dwellers but improving their living conditions sustainably. This shift reflected an understanding that relocation alone was insufficient; the focus began to include providing better infrastructure and services in situ or in new resettlement areas.

The concept of Urban Community Development (UCD) was inherited from pre-liberation Pakistan, where similar initiatives aimed at integrating refugees into urban life were established. Post-liberation, these UCD projects in Bangladesh were designed to foster community participation and self-help among slum dwellers, aiming for their socio-economic integration into broader urban development. The objective was to empower communities to take charge of their environment and socio-economic development, thereby reducing dependency on government relief. This approach was seen as a way to address both the physical and social aspects of urban poverty.

Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002):

The Fifth Five-Year Plan recognized the profound challenge of poverty alleviation in a country with a rapidly expanding population and low per capita income. It highlighted the critical role of human resource development in overcoming poverty, noting that despite the low-calorie intake typical among the poor, education, health, and welfare services could significantly aid in poverty reduction (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1997).

Physical Planning: The plan included the development of infrastructure like roads, water supply, sanitation, and slum improvement, aiming to provide basic services and community centers in urban areas. This was a significant move towards enhancing the living conditions of slum dwellers directly in their environments.

Housing Initiatives: In alignment with the National Housing Policy of 1993, the plan proposed the establishment of a National Housing Authority to tackle

housing issues for low and middle-income groups, including slum dwellers. Key objectives included:

Construction of condominium apartments for 20,000 slum dwellers in Dhaka.

Development of residential plots for low and middle-income groups.

Construction of low-cost flats and core houses for urban poor and squatters on a hire-purchase basis.

Water Supply and Sanitation in Dhaka City: The plan aimed to increase the coverage of safe drinking water to 80% of Dhaka's population and improve sanitation by constructing sewerage systems and community latrines in slums, promoting a cleaner urban environment.

The Fifth Plan also introduced the concept of micro-credit as a tool for poverty alleviation. Following the international recognition of micro-credit, particularly after the Microcredit Summit in Washington in 1997, Bangladesh's government emphasized fostering an enabling environment for micro-credit institutions (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1997). The plan advocated for:

Micro-Credit Programs: These were to be implemented through existing institutional frameworks like the Rural Social Services Project and Urban Social Services Program, targeting both rural and urban poor. The focus was on providing small, collateral-free loans to encourage income-generating activities, which was a novel approach in empowering slum dwellers socioeconomically.

Social Welfare and Poverty Alleviation: The plan included urban and rural community development programs, integrated approaches for poverty alleviation through micro-credit, and social security programs for those in dire circumstances, reflecting a holistic approach to urban poverty reduction.

This detailed analysis underscores a progressive shift in policy from mere resettlement to a comprehensive strategy involving community development, sustainable infrastructure, and economic empowerment through micro-credit, all aimed at improving the lives of slum dwellers in Dhaka and beyond.

4. Analysis:

The evolution of policy in Bangladesh, particularly through its Five-Year Plans, reflects a growing recognition of the complexity of urban poverty, with a specific focus on slum dwellers. This analysis has highlighted key shifts in government strategies from mere relocation to comprehensive urban development and empowerment through economic programs like micro-credit.

Micro-Credit as a Tool for Poverty Alleviation:

The introduction of micro-credit in the Fifth Five-Year Plan marked a significant policy evolution. The Prime Minister's call at the 1997 Microcredit Summit in

Washington for more effective poverty alleviation tools underscored the government's commitment to this approach. Micro-credit, providing small loans without collateral, aimed directly at the socio-economic improvement of the impoverished, particularly those in urban slums.

This initiative was not only a continuation of earlier efforts by Bangladesh's social welfare department since 1955 but also an expansion, recognizing the potential of micro-financial services to foster entrepreneurship among the urban poor, thereby integrating them into the economic fabric of the city (Bangladesh Planning Commission, 1997).

Implementation Challenges:

Despite the progressive policies, the execution of these plans has faced significant hurdles. The financial data from the plans indicate a discrepancy between allocated and utilized funds, with an average utilization rate of only 86% from 1973 to 1997, suggesting inefficiencies or misalignments in resource allocation or bureaucratic execution. This underutilization has undoubtedly impacted the effectiveness of poverty alleviation efforts. Political instability, as noted during the Second Five-Year Plan, further complicated implementation, leading to sub-optimal outcomes in slum development projects.

The Broader Context of Slum Issues:

Slums in Bangladesh are symptomatic of deeper socio-economic issues including mass poverty, landlessness, unemployment, and exploitation. These problems are exacerbated by rural push factors where individuals migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities, only to find themselves in slums with minimal improvement in living conditions. Therefore, while the government has initiated policies aimed at slum improvement, these need to be part of a more comprehensive approach that addresses underlying causes like rural poverty, land erosion, and unemployment.

5. CONCLUSION:

The journey from the initial resettlement efforts of 1974 to the sophisticated poverty alleviation strategies of the Fifth Plan indicates a maturation in policy-making. However, the effectiveness of these policies in truly uplifting the living standards of slum dwellers remains under scrutiny. The inadequacy of measures taken, when compared to the scale of the problem, suggests that while steps have been taken, they fall short of what is needed.

To effectively tackle the slum issue, a multi-faceted, long-term strategy is required. This involves not only the government but also necessitates the involvement of national and international agencies alongside voluntary organizations. The role of various government

departments like the Municipality, Capital Development Authority, and Ministries of Education and Health must be more proactive.

Ultimately, the problem of slums in Bangladesh requires an approach that goes beyond urban planning and financial aid, integrating socio-economic reforms, education, health services, and sustainable employment opportunities. Only through such integrated and sustained efforts can the cycle of urban poverty be broken, leading to genuine improvement for slum dwellers.

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