

Poverty, Household Strategies and Coping with Urban Life: Examining 'Livelihood Framework' in Dhaka City, Bangladesh

- Shahadat Hossain*

Abstract: The livelihood framework suggests that poverty is not only a product of material deprivation but of a set of interlocking factors, including physical weakness, social isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness. The paper aims to explain how the poor cope with urban life through their household strategies in reference to livelihood framework. Data have been collected from five hundred urban poor living in three different neighbourhoods in Dhaka City, Bangladesh, by using a structured questionnaire. The study reveals that the poor face extreme poverty and vulnerability in terms of their economic and social conditions and cope with these adverse situations having adopted different strategies in their households. The paper argues that the urban poor adopt such strategies through their household to survive in the city as they have limited access to the existing economic and social systems.

Key words: Urban Poverty, Household Strategies, Livelihood, Dhaka City, Bangladesh

Introduction

The most accepted explanation of poverty is provided by social scientists who attempt to combine both material and non-material dimensions of poverty (Chambers 1989; 1992; Sen 1981; 1997). This suggests that poverty is a product not just of material conditions, but also of a set of interlocking factors, including physical weakness, social isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness. The poverty of a household is related to its resource endowments, its organisational capacity to manage and deploy its resources, its labour force position, the available coping mechanisms and external or family contingencies which affect it (Rakodi 1995). Household strategies are those implicit principles that guide household members when seeking household goods for coping with urban life. This suggests that people can choose, and choices make a difference, despite the economic or social constraints they face. By pooling resources, by working in both formal and informal economies, by the self-construction of shelter, by self-provisioning, and by the skilful use of social networks, families avoid entrapment in a self-perpetuating culture of poverty (Roberts 1994). The issue of urban poverty in developing countries attracts research attention in recent times as the major urban centres in these countries face tremendous pressure of population with insufficient infrastructure and social services. In recent decades the issue of urban poverty in Bangladesh has attracted attention from scholars especially social scientists as the major cities of the country face serious challenges of population and poverty (BBS 1998; Islam 1990; Khundker et al 1994; ADB 1997; Hossain and Humphrey 2002; Prayer 2003). Most of the studies use macro level data to explain the trend and pattern of urban poverty. Some of them use micro-level data to explain the spatial and economic characteristics of the urban poor. But a few studies focus on the coping mechanisms of the urban poor used in an adverse urban setting. However, attempts have been made in this paper to explain livelihood framework, which has been used recently in analysing urban poverty and to explain the faces of recent urban poverty and the strategies adopted by the poor in their households to cope with urban life.

Data and Method

Data were collected from three lower income neighbourhoods in Dhaka City, Bangladesh between October 2002 to July 2003. These neighbourhoods include Adabor (under City Ward-43), Gandaria (under City Ward-81) and Kalsi (under City Ward-2). The neighbourhoods were selected as research sites because they represent different forms of adaptations of poor households in the city. Five hundred urban poor were interviewed from three neighbourhoods based on their employment, income, household structure as well as migration pattern. A structured questionnaire, constructed on various forms of household adaptations such as,

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economic activities, expenditure and purchasing pattern, shelter and environmental services, using social services, rural-urban ties, social network and community participation, was used for data collection. Mainly descriptive statistics (percentages) were used for data analysis. The data from the household survey have been supplemented by some qualitative data to demonstrate the coping strategies of the urban poor in Dhaka City, Bangladesh. The study reveals that the urban poor experience miserable economic and social conditions and cope with the adverse urban situations through strategies adopted mainly in their households.

Explaining 'Livelihood Framework'

The increased attention being paid to urban livelihoods follows from a wide recognition that significant portions of urban poor households in developing countries are vulnerable in terms of their sustainable livelihood systems (Rakodi 1995). A livelihood is generally defined as comprising the capabilities, assets, including both material and social resources, and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. A livelihoods framework to development draws on a conceptual framework which may be used as a basis for analysing, understanding and managing the complexity of livelihoods:

The livelihood framework is a tool that helps to define the scope of and provide the analytical basis for livelihoods analysis, by identifying the main factors affecting livelihoods and the relationships between them; to help those concerned with supporting the livelihoods of poor people to understand and manage their complexity; to become a shared point of reference for all concerned with supporting livelihoods, enabling the complementarity of contributions and the trade-offs between outcomes to be assessed; to provide a basis for identifying appropriate objectives and interventions to support livelihoods. At the centre of the framework are the assets on which households or individuals draw to build their livelihoods (Carney cited in Rakodi 2002:9)

The indicators of Poverty Line analysis based on household consumption do not capture all dimensions of poverty, especially from the viewpoint of poor people themselves. Poverty is not defined solely in terms of low incomes, but uses broader concepts of deprivation and insecurity. And any attempt to place monetary values on these aspects of personal, household and social deprivation involves so many arbitrary assumptions that it is likely to be meaningless. Deprivation occurs when people are unable to reach a certain level of functioning or capability. Chambers (1983; 1989) includes physical weakness, isolation, vulnerability and powerlessness in addition to lack of income and assets. A pyramid starting from income poverty as the most measurable, to access to common pool resources, state-provided commodities, assets, dignity and autonomy is identified.

In livelihood framework poverty is thus characterised not only by a lack of assets and inability to accumulate a portfolio of them, but also by the lack of choice with respect to alternative coping strategies. The poorest and most vulnerable households are forced to adopt strategies, which enable them to survive but not to improve their welfare. In urban areas households seek to mobilise resources and opportunities and to combine these into a livelihood strategy which is a mix of labour market involvement; savings; borrowing and investment; productive and reproductive activities; income, labour and asset pooling; and social net-working (Grown and Sebstad cited in Rakodi 2002). Households and individuals adjust the mix according to their own circumstances and the changing context in which they live. Economic activities form the basis of a household strategy, but to them, and overlapping with them, may be added migration movements, maintenance of ties with rural areas, urban food production, decisions about access to services such as education and housing, and participation in social networks. The 'livelihoods' concept is a realistic recognition of the multiple activities, in which households engage to ensure their survival and improve their well being, as will be explored further below (Ellis 1998).

Livelihoods approaches propose that thinking in terms of strengths or assets is vital as an antidote to the view of poor people as 'passive' or 'deprived'. Central to the approach is the need to recognise that those who are poor may not have cash or other savings, but that they do have

other material or non-material assets - their health, their labour, their knowledge and skills, their friends and family, and the natural resources around them. Livelihoods approaches require a realistic understanding of these assets in order to identify what opportunities they may offer, or where constraints may lie. Proponents argue that it is more conceptually appropriate, empirically sound and of more practical use to start with an analysis of strengths as opposed to an analysis of needs. However, it has also been suggested that there is a danger that this emphasis may restrict policy and actions to households that have some assets on which they can build and neglect the poorest and the destitute, who may be effectively assetless (Rakodi 2002).

Social capital is defined as rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity and trust embedded in social relations, social structures, and society's institutional arrangements, which enable its members to achieve their individual and community objectives. Levels of social capital and the ability to call on the social networks involved vary in space and time. They may break down because of repeated shocks like drought, economic crisis or physical insecurity like violence and crime (Moser 1996). Social networks are not all supportive of the poor or effective as social capital and are generally thought to be less robust in urban areas because of the mobility and heterogeneity of their populations. Closely linked to social capital is political capital, based on access to the political process and decision-making, and best seen as a gatekeeper asset, permitting or preventing the accumulation of other assets. In urban setting, informal cultural networks can serve to transpose ethnocentric or patriarchal rural arrangements that otherwise may have been under threat. The dual potential of social capital is described as follows:

Social capital (or informal networks) built by households over generations in the village may take on a different form in dynamic, multi-cultural urban context where people come and go. This can induce new forms of social organisation at the community and city levels which provide the basis for more effective pooling of resources for lobbying of political leaders, engaging in partnership with civil society, the private sector and local government and for undertaking community development and management initiatives. It can also, however, promote an increasing sense of isolation as slum new comers are denied the 'citizenship rights' of older occupants, and tenants are excluded from participating in community activities (DFID 2001: 10).

The livelihood framework now turns to the structures and processes in the macro environment that impact on urban poverty and vulnerability. Livelihood systems and community networks develop in the context of shifting relationships between the state, market and society. These shifts are significant for urban vulnerability as they entail a redistribution of power and responsibility in relation to poverty reduction and development. As Beall and Kanji note (1999:21-22):

The emphasis by mainstream development agencies on partnership, decentralisation and 'community participation' has increased during the 1990s. Decentralisation has involved a shift in the role of central governments from direct providers of services to enablers, creating a regulatory and financial environment in which private enterprises, households and community groups can play an increasing role in meeting their own needs. Responsibilities have shifted to local (public and private) levels. While decentralisation has the potential to provide new opportunities for previously excluded groups to participate in local planning process, much depends on local power structures and the mobilisation of resources often remains a critical problem.

However, livelihood framework begins 'from the bottom up', drawing largely from literature on sustainable livelihoods. It then considers the structures and process 'from the top down' that enable and constrain urban development. The final component of the framework includes a focus on urban governance as the meeting ground between these two constructs.

Poverty, Household Strategies and Coping with Urban Life: Evidence from Dhaka City Economic Activities

The urban poor are mostly employed in self-managed low paid jobs in the informal urban sectors like rickshaw pulling (29.4%), street vending and selling (22.8%), construction work (6.4%), driving and transport work (4.6%), factory work (5.2%) and personal servicing (7.6%). A small portion (4.8%) work in government and semi-government organizations. About 35% of the urban poor frequently face underemployment due to lack of employment opportunities, physical illness, staying in their ancestral villages. Significant portions of the urban poor (32%) are harassed physically, mentally and sexually at their work places. About 12% of the urban poor mentioned about unsafe working condition, which sometimes causes injuries and damages to their physical and mental health. The rates of income, wage and productivity are very low among the urban poor. The average monthly income of households is only Taka 4452 (US\$75). But the intra-household income difference (Sd.2453) is quite significant. The condition of female-headed households is comparatively more miserable than male-headed households.

Entering more household members into the workforce is the main survival strategy of the urban poor. This is why female participation in the urban work force is considerably higher among the poor than among their rural counterpart. Sometimes the female members use domestic spaces for both production and reproduction through operating income-generating activities with the assistance from other family members. This type of home based work is a manifestation of the urban poor women's involvement in the household production-reproduction sphere in the local space- the setting where poor women live with the members of their households.

Expenditure and Purchasing Pattern

The urban poor mostly spend their earnings to fulfil their basic needs especially for food and shelter. The average monthly household expenditure is only Tk.4156 (US\$70). There is also a high level of intra household differentials (Sd.1957.18) in expenditure. The expenditure of single headed households in the city is comparatively lower than other forms of poor households. More than 60% of the earnings of single headed households are spent in the rural areas where their family members are also living. The expenditure of male-headed households is higher than that of the female-headed households. About 57% of the poor who are living in the low cost housing developed in low-lying land in urban peripheries spend a certain amount of their earning on housing. As most of their earning is used for food and shelters, the poor spend very small portion of their earning on clothing, medicine, education and other incidentals.

The urban poor mainly buy food items like rice, pulses, potatoes and vegetables at a low cost from retail shops located in their neighbourhoods. They rarely go to wholesale markets to buy such a small amount of goods though the price of goods in those markets is comparatively lower. They usually buy bad quality fish from local fish-markets at low costs. Moreover, they can not afford expensive items like meat, milk and fruit. About 50% of the urban poor buy meat or poultry once or twice a month. It was found that 59% and 71.8% did not buy milk or fruit in the week they were interviewed either. The urban poor rarely buy new clothes from the market places. Most of them get used clothes from relatives, landlords and employers. They sometimes buy cheap clothes for their family members from second-hand markets. Besides these cheap clothes, they buy used cookeries, furniture and other household goods from second hand markets at low price.

Shelter and Environmental Services

The urban poor have little access to urban land and they mostly build their houses on vacant private and government land and thereby become squatters in the city. Most of them are living in *jupri* which are constructed from low cost housing materials like tin, bamboo, straw and polythene. These houses become more vulnerable during rainy season. Only 18% of the households are living in *semi pucca / pucca* housing with permanent walls. And most (73.8%) of these poor urban dwellers are used to living in single roomed housing. In many cases more than five members of the households live in one congested room. Of the single headed households, most live in appalling conditions with twenty to thirty people living in a single room. Only 15.6% households, with extended families, live in housing with more than one room. The majority of households (54%) have no cooking facilities and they cook inside their only room or open spaces.

Another 46% have access to a common *chula* (oven) - where ten to fifteen households share one kitchen with four to six *chulas*.

About sixty percent of households use firewood and straw for cooking, which are mostly collected by them. They sometime get electricity connections from informal sources and their access to electricity is inadequate and irregular. Most of the poor have no individual access to the city's water supply and they collect water for drinking from a common municipal tap or from hand tube-wells. They usually wait for a long period of time to get water from public municipal taps. More than 65% of households have no access to city sewerage systems and share pit latrines, which are temporary and made by them. This type of latrines pollutes neighbourhood environment as well as the whole city environment. Most of the poor (64.4%) living in the city have no access to drainage facilities. Only 17.8% have access to municipal waste disposal facilities and the rest of them dispose in generally marshy land adjacent to their settlements, which also pose serious challenge to the environment of the neighbourhood.

Using Social Services

The urban poor have very limited access to the existing health care facilities. Only 33.4% use services from city health centres, most of which are operated by Non-Government Organizations (NGO). Less attention from physicians (22.6%), lack of medicine in the hospitals (17.6%), high fees and charges (11 %) and far to travel (14%) are the major reasons for not using government hospitals by the urban poor. The majority (58.2%) get their medicine from pharmacies without the consultation of trained physicians. About 29% of the poor take medical advice regarding maternal health from the health centres operated by NGOs. At the period of child delivery only about 5% of the poor takes help from the doctors and nurses and the rest of them take help mostly from untrained persons, family members and relatives.

The poor have low level of education and employment training. More than 60% of the poor have had no formal schooling in their lifetime. There is at least one school-age child in 50% of the households who is not currently attending school. Despite the high percentage of illiteracy among the urban poor a very small portion of them attended non-formal education programs (NFEP) managed by NGOs. The poor have low level of employment training, and have limited access to such training. Only about 17% of the poor ever attended in skill development training program.

Due to poverty the poor can hardly think about recreation and socialising. They rarely participate in the city's cultural activities despite living in the city over a long period of time. They typically pass their leisure time by gossiping with family members as well as community members. They have little access to outdoor game facilities in the city and they pass their time by playing few indoor games like carom, ludo and card games. Some of them pass their leisure time only by watching television at their homes or in some communal places. Only 21.6% of the poor in the city go to parks, zoos and museums for recreation.

Rural-Urban Ties

The urban poor migrated from different rural districts due to 'push' and 'pull' factors. River erosion (14.6%), small income in the rural areas (20%), available job services in the city (32.8%) and accompanying the family (17%) are major reasons for their migration to the city. But after migration to the city the poor migrants fail to achieve their expectations and sometimes they consider their previous life better than present one. But they don't move from the city due to their present economic reality. Despite living in the city for a long period of time they do not generally lose their bonds with their villages. Gugler (1997) refers it as 'life in a dual system'.

Box-1: Major Household Strategies of the Urban Poor

Economic Activities

Involvement in urban informal sectors

Participation of female/children in labour force

Changing domestic spaces for production and consumption

Urban agriculture

Expenditure and Purchasing Pattern

Spending money mostly for food items

<p>Spending little amount for non food items Avoiding luxurious items Buying second-hand clothes at low price</p> <p>Shelter and Environmental Services Self-help housing with low cost materials Renting low cost housing/ Leasing land and renting houses to others Using utility services from informal sources Collecting firewood</p> <p>Using Social Services Using local pharmacies for medicine Using folk medicine Using health services provided by Non-government Organizations Sending children to schools of Non-government Organizations Recreation by indoor games</p> <p>Rural-Urban Ties Meeting relatives in villages Visited by village guests Sending money to villages</p> <p>Cultivation in villages</p> <p>Social Network Using kinship for social network Using fictive kinship (village fellow) Making neighbourhood based social network Maintaining patron-client relationships</p> <p>Community Participation Using informal power structure Involvement with community based organizations Using urban development agencies</p> <hr/> <p>Participating in urban politics</p>
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The urban poor felt better identifying themselves as villagers rather than city dwellers. About 80% of the urban poor maintain a connection with villages, which they visit at least once a year. But the connection with rural districts is correlated with the period of stay in the city and the pattern of migration. The number of those visiting rural areas is significantly higher among recent and temporary migrants than long-term and permanent migrants. Although meeting relatives (43.6%) and providing financial help (23%) are the most common reasons for visiting rural areas, 10.2% of the urban poor visit rural areas mainly for observing *Edul-Fetar*, a religious festival. Another 15.2% visited rural areas to look after their former homesteads and agricultural land, bringing back rice, wheat, vegetables and fruit cultivated by them or by their relatives. Few urban poor who have small amount of savings buy agricultural land in their ancestral villages.

Social Network

Social networking plays an important role in coping with urban life since it works as 'social capital'. The urban poor maintain both 'blood' networks (12.8%) and marriage networks (7.4%) in the city. Beside these kinship networks they have fictive network - based mainly on their district of origin. This type of network becomes social capital in the context of migration to the city - by providing migration related information and adaptation to city life, and by providing initial accommodation and employment information. After migration to the city neighbourhood where they live, it becomes important in terms of their social network. About 37% of the urban poor have close relationships with their neighbours. Employment and land lordship also plays important role for social networks for a considerable portion of urban poor.

The poor mostly maintain their relationships with relatives, friends and village fellows who are living in the same community. Only about 16% have connections with the people living outside their immediate neighbourhoods. The poor households who are living in the city for a long period of time have wider social network. These long-term households maintain more relationships outside their communities than the households recently migrated to the city. Social network working as a social capital helps to perpetuate reciprocity in their microeconomic life. More than 50% of the urban poor visit and invite each other to social occasions. The relatives, friends and neighbours help the poor to mitigate their economic and social crisis. More than 53% of the poor provide/receive financial help from their kin, fictive kin and neighbours and another 27% of them provide/receive non-financial support from these relatives and friends.

Community Participation

Grouping, factionalism and feuds are characteristics of the urban poor. The poor form committees to resolve existing conflicts in the neighbourhood. They rarely rely on help from law enforcement agencies (especially the police) to mediate in or mitigate their problems. More than 28% of the urban poor are members of different community based political organizations, cooperatives and voluntary organizations. The rural districts from where the urban poor migrated plays an important role in community-based organization. Hossain (2000: 105) points out, "regional factors has become the main cause of groupings and organization. District of origin divides them into different fractions and leaders are sometimes selected considering their rural origin."

Their participation is not limited to their own communities. Most (64.6%) are registered city voters and about 55% cast their votes in the last city corporation election. But their level of integration with city politics is determined by their household structure. The single headed households who have mostly migrated to the city recently are not interested in city politics. They are mostly interested to earn more money so that they can support their family members. But the majority (68.4%) shared strong nationalist or liberal political ideology and cast their votes mostly based on their party ideology. A considerable portion of the poor (27.4%) participates in action politics like picketing during strikes, joining public meetings and joining party meetings. Despite participating in different political activities and maintaining contact with the elected bodies they can not achieve their expected goals. The leaders use them for their interests and generally ignore their claims. Due to their poverty and vulnerability they cannot exert any strong pressure upon urban government. They consider them vulnerable and powerless in the city; as such they are not interested to attend the protests against urban government.

Conclusion

Rural-urban migration does not create improved opportunities for a significant portion of city dwellers living in slums as squatters. They invariably live below the poverty line and have little access to employment in formal sectors. They have failed to secure a sustainable livelihood in the city despite living for a long period of time. The poor communities are vulnerable in terms of their physical and social capital. They have little access to the city's social and political structure, which also shows their vulnerable situation. Urban government has little initiative to create opportunities for the poor sections of city's population. The poor communities cope with urban life through 'household strategies' such as: putting more family members into the work force, through petty trading, avoiding many basic goods, which represent luxuries to them, increasing their household size by inducting more relatives, withdrawing their children from education, constructing their own shelter, using kinship as social capital, and establishing patron-client relationships with local leaders. There is an intra-household variation of coping with poverty and deprivation based on households having more than one income earning member, having access to urban or rural land, living in self constructed housing and a renting room to others, having access to city politics for better prospects of wellbeing. However, the livelihood framework explains their situations very well, as it combines both local level issues of the community and macro structures.

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