

## Urban poverty in Bangladesh: the perspective of the Nutritional Surveillance Project

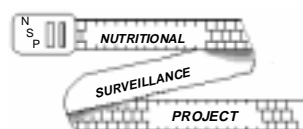
**Many tens of thousands of people live in desperately poor circumstances in the slums of towns and cities in Bangladesh, and all the evidence suggests that their numbers are rising. How can they be raised from poverty and employed, housed, fed, educated and cared for? This bulletin presents data from the Nutrition Surveillance Project that show how living conditions and food security vary widely from one poor area to the next suggesting that the solutions to urban problems may not be the same everywhere. Accurate and up-to-date information is needed to understand the manifestations and causes of poverty and how they vary between and within cities. This information can then be used to design policies and programs adapted to local circumstances. A surveillance system can provide the data needed to inform, guide and evaluate this process.**

It is estimated that by the year 2015 the population of Dhaka will almost double to around 21 million people and only three cities in the world will be bigger – Bombay, Tokyo and Lagos.<sup>1</sup> The national census conducted in 2001 showed that Dhaka is not the only growing city in Bangladesh: over the last 10 years the population of all urban areas in the country grew by 38% compared with only 10% growth in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> Much of this increase is likely to be fuelled by the movement of poor rural people to towns and cities where they often find shelter in appalling conditions, sometimes in small clusters of shacks on open land or on the margins of developed areas. Some people also still live in the large refugee camps that were established after the war of independence in 1971. Most of these sites are characterized by crowded living conditions, low quality housing and poor access to health services, clean water, sanitary facilities and garbage disposal. Over the last 11 years the Nutritional Surveillance Project (NSP) has captured information about the characteristics of poor urban households living in circumstances such as these.

### The Nutrition Surveillance Project monitors long-term trends

The NSP was established in 1990 by Helen Keller International in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh to collect information every two months on the health, nutrition and livelihoods of households in both rural and urban Bangladesh. With a decade of experience in the collection, analysis and interpretation of data from both rural and urban areas, the NSP continues to make a unique contribution to understanding the dynamics and trend in poverty and food insecurity in Bangladesh.<sup>3</sup>

Ever since the establishment of the NSP in 1990, data have been collected in the slums of two city wards in Dhaka, one in Khulna and one in Chittagong. In 2000 for example, the NSP visited 4,259, 2,162 and 2,128 households in these cities respectively, as well as 53,848 households in 24 rural sub-districts throughout the country. The fact that many of the slums where the NSP and its partner NGOs collect data are well-established means that they may be different from newly established or transitory settlements. Nevertheless, the long

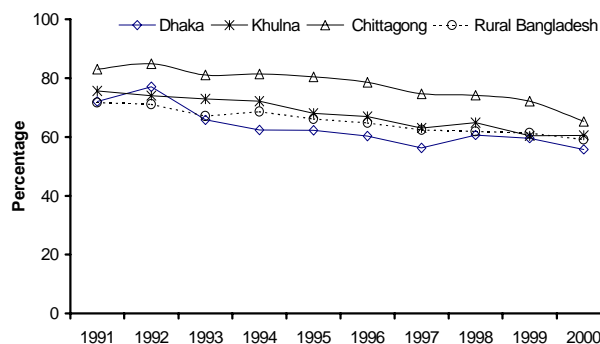


series of data – over 70 surveys to date – and the large sample sizes provide the ability to detect differences between cities and slums, monitor trends, and describe seasonal variations in the characteristics of poor urban communities.

**Trends**

An example of how the NSP can detect changes over time is shown in Figure 1 for an important nutritional indicator, the percentage of children classified as underweight. Figure 1 shows that there has been an overall improvement in the nutritional status of young children in both urban and rural areas, but that until recently children in Chittagong have been significantly more underweight than children in Dhaka or Khulna. The percentage of underweight children in 2000 in the urban slums and rural Bangladesh ranged from 53% to 61%, indicating that despite significant nationwide improvements, undernutrition is a major problem in Bangladesh.

**Figure 1.** The percentage of underweight children aged 6-59 months (defined as weight-for-age < -2 standard deviations below the NCHS median) in rural Bangladesh and in urban slums in Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong, from 1991 to 2000.



**The causes of urban poverty**

In cities and towns all over the world there are certain phenomena that have been shown to affect the food security, nutrition and health of poor city dwellers.<sup>4</sup> For example:

- people have no land to grow food, so they need income to buy it;
- mothers may work long hours outside the home to earn money, so their children suffer from the lack of child care;
- people who have recently moved to cities from rural villages often have no relations or friends

who can provide support in emergencies, such as sickness or unemployment;

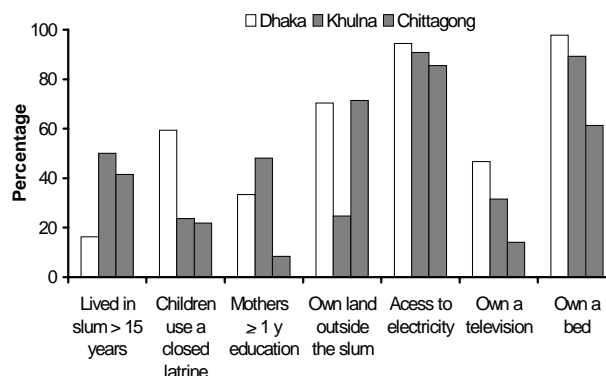
- poor sanitation, contaminated water and polluted air contribute to ill-health;
- squatters or poor tenants have few rights and are vulnerable to intimidation or eviction.

These urban phenomena make life hard for poor people in towns and cities, and suggest that urban and rural poverty have different causes and manifestations. When the urban data collected by the NSP are examined closely it is clear that there are also differences between poor urban communities in different cities, and even between slums in the same city. First, an example of some differences between cities.

**Variations between cities**

Figure 2 shows data from slums in Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong for a number of important indicators of socio-economic status. In 2000 about 50% of all households in Khulna had lived in the same slum for more than 15 years compared with less than 20% of households in Dhaka. Although the households in Khulna were more likely to be long-term residents than households in Dhaka, only 20% had access to a closed latrine compared with 60% in Dhaka. Even though many households in all cities live in unsanitary and crowded conditions most had access to electricity and over 40% in Khulna owned a television, a relatively expensive item for poor people. Many households were not landless either: about 70% of households in both Dhaka and Chittagong reported owning land outside the slum, though these proportions were very different from households in Khulna in which less than 25% owned

**Figure 2.** Some characteristics of households in the urban slums of Dhaka, Khulna and Chittagong in 2000.

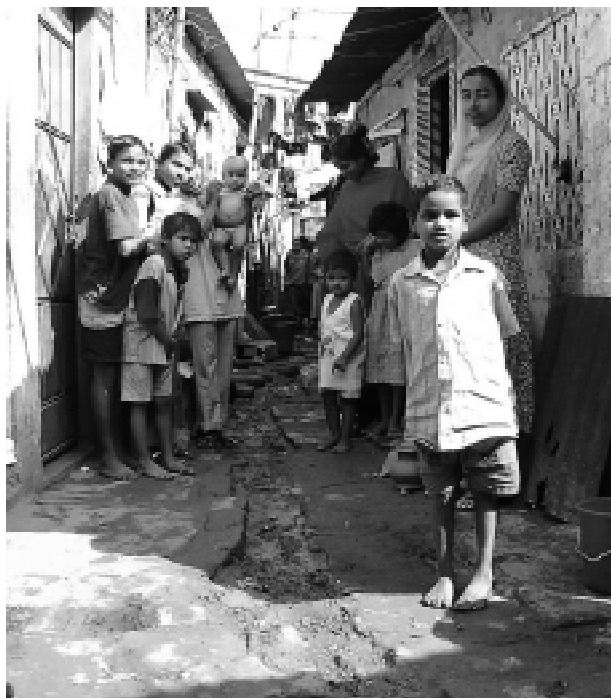


land elsewhere. Although these data may not be representative of households living in all slums in these three cities, Figure 2 serves to illustrate that the characteristics slums in one city cannot easily be generalized to others.

**Variations between slums**

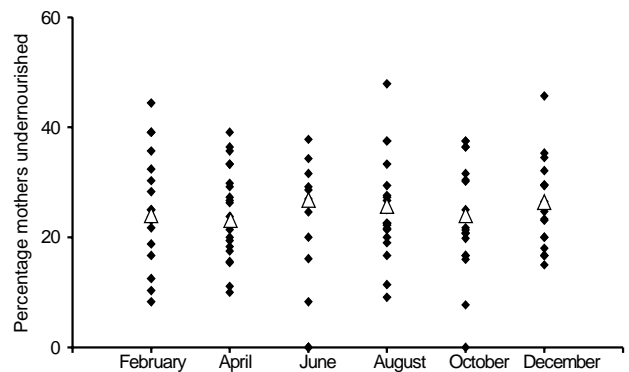
Within the same city there can also be considerable differences between slums. Figure 3 gives an example of the percentage of mothers who were classified as underweight in each of 15 randomly selected slums in two city wards in Dhaka during the six surveys done in 2000. In each slum about 25 mothers with a child aged less than five years old were selected, and each mother was weighed and measured. Figure 3 shows a wide range in the percentage of underweight mothers (BMI < 18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) ranging from 10% in one slum to 45% in another in August 2000. These data suggest that some poor urban settlements suffer much more from acute food insecurity than others, despite being relatively close to each other.

The differences between cities and within cities have implications for our understanding of poverty and food insecurity in urban areas and the best approaches to combat their harmful effects. The heterogeneity in the likely causes and expressions of poverty and



An alley in Agargaon slum, Dhaka

**Figure 3.** The percentage of mothers classified as undernourished (defined as a body mass index < 18.5 kg/m<sup>2</sup>) in each of around 15 slums visited during 6 surveys in two wards of Dhaka city in year 2000. The triangle represents the mean percentage for women each month.



food insecurity mean that findings from one area cannot be generalized to the next. Furthermore, it means that particular approaches to development may be more appropriate, and hence more successful, in some areas than others.

**What next?**

It is clear that better food security, health services and sanitation are needed by poor urban people in Bangladesh, both for humanitarian and economic reasons, a view shared by the Government of Bangladesh, local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), agencies and donors. In order to ensure this, accurate, relevant and timely information is needed to decide how and where to deliver services and programs, and how to evaluate their impact. As with most programs, sound data provide a good starting point for unraveling the complex issues associated with urban poverty, food insecurity and undernutrition, and can help establish priorities for programs. This information can be provided by a surveillance system such as the NSP, because it is flexible and can respond rapidly to the changing needs for information while collecting core data that are fundamental to understanding poverty and food insecurity; because it collects data regularly over a period that can capture changes; and because the structure of the NSP is suited for collecting data in many sites. This is because the NSP works to collect data with local NGOs which have an existing infrastructure and programs in each study site. The presence of NGOs provides the entry point to households and they also use the information they collect for their own purposes.

## Conclusions

- The socio-economic status and nutrition of poor urban households may vary considerably between and within cities.
- Up-to-date information is needed to understand the causes of poverty in urban areas to enable policies and programs to be designed that are appropriate and adapted to local needs.

## Recommendations

- Programs and policies aimed at alleviating urban poverty should be based on relevant, accurate and timely information provided by a comprehensive surveillance system;
- Because of the rapid growth in urban populations in Bangladesh surveillance of poor urban communities needs to be extended within the three major cities of Bangladesh and broadened to include the secondary cities and towns where the other half of the total urban population live.

The cities of Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna contain about half the total number of people living in the urban areas of Bangladesh – about 15 million people in 2001 – so the need for continued but broader surveillance of the urban poor in these metropolitan areas is increasing. But the fact that the remaining 50% of the urban population live in other secondary cities and towns, such as Barisal, Sylhet, Rajshahi and Mymensingh, highlights the need for an expanded urban surveillance system to capture the characteristics and circumstances of their poor inhabitants as well.

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