A tale of two wards: political participation and the urban poor in Dhaka city

NICOLA BANKS

Nicola Banks is a Doctoral Associate, Brooks World Poverty Institute at the University of Manchester, where she is pursuing a PhD in urban poverty in Bangladesh at the Institute for Development Planning and Management.

Address: nicolabanks@gmail.com

ABSTRACT This paper investigates the extent of political participation of the urban poor in Dhaka, identifying the actors with whom the urban poor interact for problem solving and gaining access to services. Through a comparison of the different experiences of "active" and "non-active" poor residents across two wards, the research identifies barriers to effective political participation; it then considers how opportunities for participation can be advanced. The experience of the Coalition for the Urban Poor's (CUP) Basti Basheer Odhikar Surakha Committee (BOSC) illustrates how collective mobilization of the poor has been successful in incorporating the urban poor into municipal governance. However, alongside its successes, the research investigates constraints to such initiatives in terms of securing national commitment to urban poverty reduction.

KEYWORDS Bangladesh / political participation / urban governance / urban poverty

I. INTRODUCTION

The poor constitute 35.4 per cent of Dhaka's population, or 3.4 million people.[1] Recently, there has been progress in democratic participation for the urban poor in Bangladesh, and the research reported here analyzes the depth of this participation. How involved are the urban poor in local governance and what are their expectations and perceptions of elected officials and the voting process? Who are the actors with whom the urban poor in Dhaka interact for problem solving and gaining access to services?

By comparing different experiences within two wards, the research also identifies barriers to effective political participation and looks at how opportunities for participation can be advanced. The experience of the Coalition for the Urban Poor's (CUP) Basti Basheer Odhikar Surakha Committee (BOSC)[2] illustrates the accomplishments of grassroots mobilization of the poor.

While the analysis aims to portray the depth and successes of grassroots participation, it also studies its limits. How can urban governance in Bangladesh complement a "bottom-up" process with a "top-down" approach to ensure national commitment to urban poverty reduction and to a system of urban governance in which the poor can actively participate?

II. URBAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A lack of effective governance has been identified as a major constraint on past poverty alleviation initiatives in Bangladesh.[3] Good governance requires not only effective and accountable institutions but also a means through which to ensure an open and accountable relationship between the state and civil society.[4] To what extent does Dhaka's governance structure allow the poor to participate in issues that affect them? A brief discussion of Dhaka City Corporation will be followed by an analysis of the ability of the poor to influence local governance processes. [5]

Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is the most visible authority in Dhaka and is headed by a democratically elected mayor. DCC is split into 10 zones and 90 wards, each headed by a democratically elected ward commissioner, and the wards constitute the most localized level of municipal governance. As the closest representatives to residents, ward commissioners play a crucial role in city governance. However, lacking a fully defined framework of duties and responsibilities, ward commissioners are left to perform their responsibilities according to their individual initiative and commitment. This leads to significant variations in efficiency, particularly with regard to the needs of the poor. Many lack empathy for the poor and fail to prioritize their needs.[6] Wards are large – estimates of their population vary from 65,000–75,000[7] to 100,000[8] – but there is little official bureaucracy or funding at the ward level.

Although responsible for managing development works and the day to day running of their wards, ward commissioners are provided with little in the way of resources or power and have only three staff members – a security guard, a secretary and an errand boy. The ward commissioners select their ward's priorities for development – mainly service and infrastructural developments such as roads, sewage and drainage maintenance, and improvements in electricity – and then submit proposals to the relevant authority, such as DCC or Dhaka Water and Sewage Authority. Budgets are controlled through DCC, which struggles to get the necessary funds from its tax base and central government transfers and thus, in turn, cannot give sufficient funding at the ward level. Financial resources fall far short of the amount required to run wards effectively: "*Everything is impossible to maintain*" suggested one ward commissioner, "*…DCC only provides enough for 65 cleaners in each ward. Considering my ward size, I would need about 200 cleaners to keep it clean.*" Both the ward commissioners interviewed for the research emphasized that corruption further diminishes available finances: "*At every stage of the development process money has to be handed out along the way, leaving little to solve the problems*" claimed one ward commissioner. The other suggested that 10–20 per cent of development funds are lost due to corruption.

The two ward commissioners identified a lack of decentralization as central to their problems. Although they are closest to residents, decision-making powers are left in the hands of an inefficient bureaucracy, which is neither transparent nor accountable: "*If you want something from me…*", one ward commissioner stated, "*…give me the power... If I have done a bad job I will not be re-elected. This will be my judgment day.*" A high degree of centralized power also undermines independent political representation. While democratic elections reflect the interests of the poor at the local level, this is not echoed in policy or priorities at a higher level, due to both

8. See reference 6, Siddiqui (2004).

9. However, democratic elections have also been blamed for an increase in corruption, for reinforcing political networks and policies that favour the elite, and for DCC's lack of autonomy. Ruling parties are unwilling to transfer significant power to city mayors for fear the position will be gained by the opposition. The loss of mayoral position to the opposition party in 1994, for example, has been named as one of the contributing factors to the decline of the BNP, which lost power in the next election. See reference 5, Banks (2006) for further details of this debate.

10. See reference 3.

11. Khan, M M (1997), "Urban local governance in Bangladesh", in Islam and Khan (editors), see reference 4.

12. *Hartals*, a form of nationwide strike action, remain a common way of mobilizing the population around sensitive political topics. They are usually called by the party in opposition in response to an unpopular decision, policy or action. Although having a history stemming from the Language Movement of 1952 in Bangladesh, *hartals* have increased in frequency in the decades since then and have, in some periods, been used relentlessly by the opposition regardless of the social, political and economic costs. Violent activities often accompany *hartal* demonstrations, including setting off small bombs, burning tyres and buses, and ransacking cars and rickshaws – any means through which Dhaka's (and national) lifelines can be immobilized are used. The urban poor are often hired – perhaps even forced – to stage demonstrations, with local leaders used as agents

the weakness of ward commissioners in relation to DCC and of DCC in relation to central government.

One of the most significant achievements in participation of the urban poor was the extension of municipal elections to the poor in 1994.[9] Prior to this, the electorate constituted only 9 per cent of the city's population, with voting rights dependent on property, income and qualifications.[10] At the municipal level, the mayor of DCC and the 90 ward commissioners are elected by residents. Although democratic elections have increased representation and participation of the urban poor, questions arise regarding the depth of this participation. Such external pressures as "vote buying" – the practice of payments in exchange for votes – or payments to facilitate presence at protests and demonstrations mean that monetary obligations can become the major facilitators behind political participation, thus undermining independent political representation, as will be discussed further in Section V.

III. AN INTRODUCTION TO BOSC

In 1997, Khan stated 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."[11] The mobilization and conscientization of NGOs and community-based organizations was one of Khan's suggestions for improvement. In 2000, the Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP) – a network coalition for the 53 NGOs working with urban poverty in Bangladesh – created BOSC, a network of local committees throughout low-income settlements in Dhaka through which the urban poor could mobilize and press their demands upon local government. It was created in response to the more violent rallies, protests and demonstrations that had previously been the main forum for staging the voices of the poor.[12]

CUP, recognizing poor residents' rights to representation and seeing room for manoeuvre in municipal governance, provided a forum through which the urban poor could press their demands on local government. Since ward commissioners were the most local representative of government, it was considered they should be used to access the wider municipal system of governance. The BOSC network aimed to create accountability mechanisms for the urban poor and incorporate the poor into municipal governance.

The BOSC network consists of a hierarchy of committees run for and by the urban poor themselves. At the local level, primary committees – composed of 15 directly elected local residents from every 500 to 1,000 households[13] – provide a source of assistance for local problems such as rainwater removal, quarrels or problems with electricity. Larger problems that are out of their control are passed onto ward committees, which are composed of 15 members from that ward's primary committees. The next level in the hierarchy, the *thana* committees,[14] comprise representatives from ward committees. The central committee, at the top of the hierarchy, is formed by members of *thana* committees, through direct voting. Across Dhaka, the BOSC network comprises 404 primary committees, 90 ward committees, 29 *thana* committees and is headed by one central committee. This suggests that just over 6,000 poor residents are members of BOSC committees across Dhaka, fewer than two per cent of Dhaka's poor population.

The central committee solves citywide problems faced by the urban poor, such as resisting eviction and fighting for rights to land tenure and legal service provision. Members of the central committee are the major participants in urban governance, representing the urban poor across Dhaka. It is at this level that the urban poor communicate and press demands on local government, service providers and other agents.

This approach is based on using accountability mechanisms. The ward commissioner–citizen relationship can be viewed as similar to a service provider relationship. The method of payment is a vote, and the services provided are – ideally – those facets of good governance that render local government responsive and accountable to the needs of the urban poor.[15] Decentralization is a key element in bringing "good governance" within the reach of the poor, so that they can participate and monitor and hold accountable elected officials. Figure 1 is a modified framework from the 2004 World Development Report, which advocates a shorter route to the accountability of service providers to the poor, and shows the potential BOSC provides for the urban poor to participate in urban governance.

BOSC committees are founded on the assumption that ward commissioners should provide a platform of access between the poor and DCC.

to procure participants for the *hartal*. *Hartals* are associated with intimidation, coercion and an infringement on freedom of movement, restricting the ability of citizens to earn a living and go about their daily lives. Consequently, recent reports have emphasized the need to move away from a culture of *hartals* to more constructive dialogue and alternative forms of protest. See UNDP (2005), *Beyond Hartals: Towards Democratic Dialogue*, UNDP Dhaka, Bangladesh; also Hossain, Akhtar (2000), "Anatomy of *hartal* politics", in *Bangladesh Asian Survey* Vol 40, No 3, pages 508–529.

13. Each tier's committee consists of 15 members. It is headed by one president, two vice-presidents, one secretary,

(a) Long and short routes to accountability

(b) BOSC's approach to accountability

The "long route to accountability" follows the lighter shaded arrows above. Service users influence policy makers, who then ensure service providers provide better services.

Given the difficulties in strengthening the long road to accountability, the WDR emphasizes that the "short route to accountability" is crucial, allowing service users to press demands directly on service providers.

The poor are reliant on "the short route to accountability" for getting their voices heard by policy makers (DCC).

With direct access to policy makers blocked, relationships with ward commissioners are crucial for incorporating the poor into the governance process. In this sense, the ward commissioner acts as a gatekeeper and intermediary. If this relationship breaks down, the poor's voices do not reach policy makers.
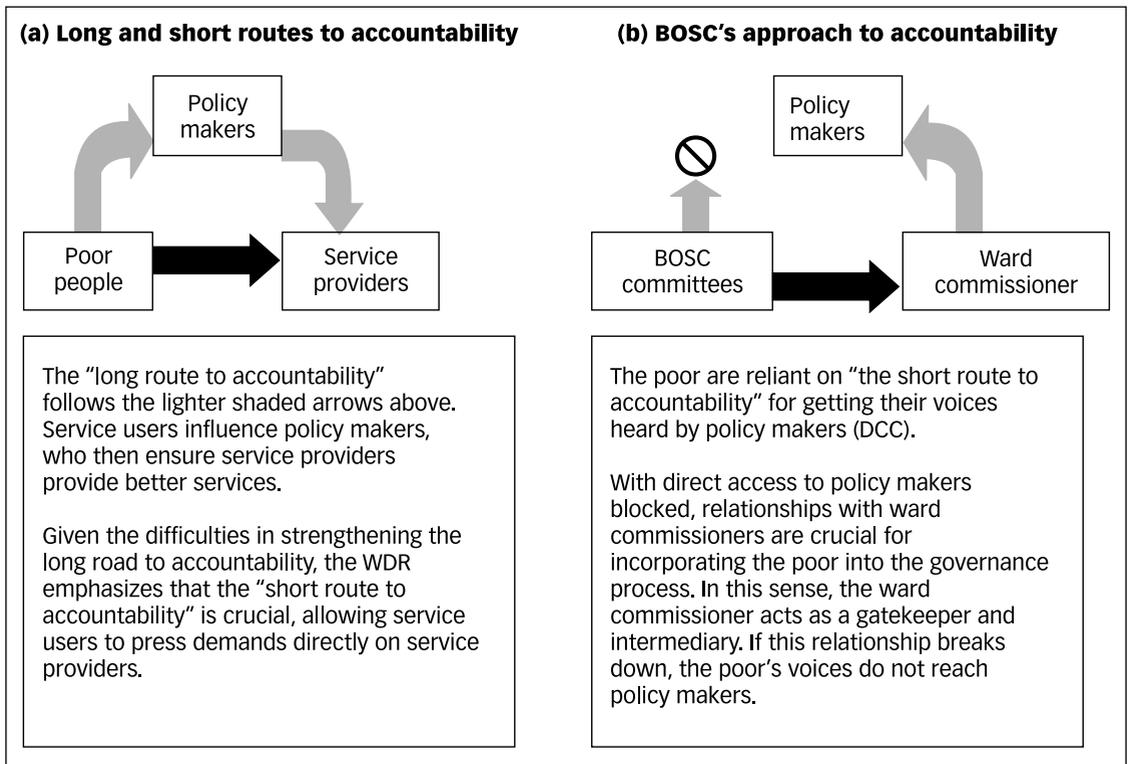
FIGURE 1
Routes to accountability

SOURCE: Modified from: World Bank (2004), *World Bank Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* World Bank, Washington DC.

one vice-secretary and 10 members. Gender balance is maintained by a ratio of 7:8 or 8:7 men to women. Primary committees are voted for by a direct hand vote of residents during a local meeting. Primary committee members then elect from among themselves those who will represent them at the ward level. Ward committees then elect their representative at the *thana* level from among their members.

14. A *thana* is an administrative unit between ward and zone.

15. This chain will, however, fall apart in instances where there is no accountability or legitimacy for the poor. This is seen in ward A, where the poor acknowledge that once they have cast their vote, there is nothing they can do if the ward commissioner does not look after their interests.

16. Given a paucity of data, it is not possible to disaggregate available poverty statistics and access to services at the ward level.

The ward commissioner acts as the gatekeeper to the poor's participation in the wider system of municipal governance. If this relationship breaks down, then "service delivery fails" – the voices of the poor do not reach DCC.

The gatekeeper role is not limited to ward commissioners. With a multitude of agencies involved in DCC's governance, the ward commissioner is not always the right actor on whom to press demands. Here, CUP plays a vital role, helping committees to access and communicate with the relevant agencies or service providers. It aims to create a sustainable network where the poor themselves play the major role and, consequently, its role is progressively becoming limited to one of support. The following section outlines the background to the study.

IV. METHODOLOGY AND WARD PROFILES

Research was limited to two residential wards in Dhaka city. The study aimed to draw upon experiences from both a "rich" and a "poor" residential ward, and the conclusions drawn are limited to the two wards in question. Each ward has unique characteristics and composition,[16] and further research is required before citywide conclusions can be drawn. The research aimed to capture the extent of political participation of the poor and, crucially, identify the differences between the "active" and "non-active" poor. For respondents in ward A, participation was limited to the voting process itself, while in ward B, collective mobilization allowed the poor to press their demands on elected representatives and city government.

Ward A has a high proportion of low-income communities that have struggled to retain their settlements as the ward has developed. The building of an embankment adjoining the ward has improved the area, which is no longer vulnerable to frequent flooding. This has furthered the development of the ward, where property is now in great demand, but has also intensified the struggles and insecurities of the ward's poor residents, who have faced eviction to improve the ward's drainage capacity. As one of the founding members of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the ward commissioner has been consistently re-elected during his 16-year reign.

Ward B was selected on the basis of its "elite" status. While inhabitants represent all income groups, the majority can be classed as high income. Land prices have soared and the ward houses a diverse population, attracting Bangladeshis from throughout the country as well as a number of foreign expatriates. However, alongside this wealth, the ward also houses the city's largest informal settlement. The ward's skyline illustrates the city's severe income inequalities, with tall office blocks and elite residential apartments towering over the vast lakeside settlement. The ward commissioner is serving his first term and hopes that his performance will see him re-elected.

The study focused on the political participation of the poor, particularly with regard to the relationship between ward commissioners and poor residents. The impact of the wealth status of each ward on the participation of poor residents was not investigated. Within each ward several semi-structured interviews were carried out with ward commissioners, who provided an overall impression of each ward's difficulties, their views on city governance and their priorities with regard to the urban poor.

Although both claimed a pro-poor stance, we aimed to verify this through focus groups in each ward.

The focus groups aimed to capture the expectations and perceptions of "typical" low-income residents, as well as residents who were BOSC committee members, in order to compare their experiences and perceptions. Hereafter, these two groups are referred to as the "non-active" and "active" poor.

In each ward, male and female focus groups composed of "non-active" poor residents were selected by the research team after discussion of the project with local residents. These focus groups consisted of four to six participants, generally rickshaw pullers (male) and housewives or domestic help (female). Focus group discussions covered the following questions: What were the expectations of the poor regarding their ward commissioner and to what extent were they met? Did they identify any means through which they could influence him and press their demands? Were there any other individuals or groups that helped or prevented their voices from being heard?

Within ward B, where several members of BOSC's central committee reside, focus groups composed of male and female BOSC committee members (the "active" poor) were facilitated by CUP. Although the BOSC network is also active in ward A, the research participants selected in this ward were not members of the programme nor had they heard of the programme. This suggests that its influence only extends to those involved in, or in close proximity to, a BOSC committee. These issues are further explored in Section VI.

V. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF THE URBAN POOR

A contemporary definition of political participation is: "All voluntary activities by private individuals which seek, either directly or indirectly, to influence political decisions on different levels of the political system."[17] This research extends the scope of participation beyond a "political" definition to incorporate any form of participation through which the poor gain access to services and other means of problem solving.

Bangladesh's patron–client hierarchy has meant that clientelistic relationships have personalized the nature of both politics and broader forms of participation. The study finds that along with ward commissioners, the poor identify several other actors with whom they interact to solve problems, namely *mastaans,* government service providers and NGOs. They also identify negative interactions with the police. While earlier studies of informal settlements have identified that the urban poor face considerable social exclusion,[18] recent experience indicates that the urban poor now have more avenues of both traditional and non-traditional political participation.

a. Ward commissioners and the poor: perceptions and expectations

Official duties of ward commissioners are limited to managing development works and the day to day running of their ward. What do the urban poor expect their ward commissioner to do on their behalf? Both "active"

17. Kersting, N and J Sperberg (2003), "Political participation", in D Berg-Schlosser and N Kersting (editors), *Poverty and Democracy: Self-Help and Political Participation in Third World Cities*, Zed Books, London and New York, 304 pages.

18. Berg-Schlosser, D and N Kersting (2003), "Poverty and democracy. A contradiction?", in Berg-Schlosser and Kersting (editors), see reference 17.

and "non-active" focus groups identified that the most valued characteristic of a ward commissioner was to maintain a presence, be approachable and show an interest in the lives of the poor. Such perceptions ranged from: "*We do not expect a lot, simply to keep in touch*", to "*…he must communicate with the people.*"

This characteristic was a factor in explaining the disillusionment with the ward commissioner experienced in ward A and the satisfaction experienced in ward B, where the commissioner was praised for his regular visits to informal settlements, his concern for the poor and his approachability. In ward A, "non-active" participants viewed the ward commissioner as unreachable; they noted that he had not visited since elections and that it was impossible to meet him directly. While in ward B both "active" and "non-active" groups applauded the ward commissioner for immersing himself in the problems of the poor, in ward A there was no contact between the ward commissioner and the "non-active" poor: "*He does not give heed to our affairs*" stated male respondents.

All groups in both wards identified informal dispute resolution as a ward commissioner's duty. Neutrality was seen as integral to a "good" ward commissioner: "*He should measure all people equally, and be honest and neutral*" suggested female BOSC members in ward B. In practice, however, respondents suggested that it was more common in informal dispute resolution for a positive verdict to be given to the party affiliated with his own.

Discussions in ward B suggested that the ward commissioner's duty was to look after their collective requirements, such as improvements in roads, street lamps or water pumps within their community. In ward B, both the "active" and "non-active" poor described improvements in roads and street lighting within their settlement. Although noting road improvements within the ward, "non-active" residents in ward A had received no improvements within their settlement.

Poor residents within the two wards placed different emphasis on their definition of a "good" ward commissioner. In ward A, "non-active" respondents emphasized personal qualities and duties, such as approachability. Although these were also mentioned in ward B, "active" and "non-active" residents here placed greater priority on collective goods, such as carrying out development works. Higher expectations have emerged from differences in performance by respective ward commissioners. With the ward commissioner performing more positively in ward B, his residents placed emphasis on the things that they would like him to do more of. In ward A, feeling neglected and unable to communicate with the ward commissioner, the "non-active" poor focused on the relationship with the ward commissioner as a foundation that could lead to future improvements.

Both ward commissioners claimed in their interviews to take a pro-poor stance, and both specified that their most important duty to the poor was to "*…help them live a peaceful life*". They identified crime reduction and informal dispute resolution as central to this role. However, the ward commissioner in ward B showed more enthusiasm towards his low-income residents, which matched the more positive responses his residents displayed: "*They come in the same doors, sit in the same chairs and take tea from the same cups*" he explained; "*I see everyone equal because I am their ward commissioner. My duty extends to every resident, whether they are*

rich or poor." As well as helping with general problem resolution in the community, he is also actively involved in NGO programmes and BOSC activities.

In ward A, the ward commissioner has held a secure position for the past 16 years, despite neglecting the interests of his poorer residents. Thus, he faces little incentive to represent their interests. Meanwhile, in his first posting, ward B's commissioner spoke keenly of his desire to be re-elected. It may be that maintaining good relations with the poor is in line with his ambition for re-election. Further research would be necessary to draw more substantial conclusions about ward commissioners and prioritization of the poor.

b. Other forms of political participation

Political participation is not limited to interactions with ward commissioners. Focus groups identified three other avenues for problem resolution or service delivery, namely NGOs, government services and *mastaans*. Previous studies have highlighted that using personal contacts with politicians or officials for grievance resolution is more successful than using formal channels, particularly in service delivery.[19] Respondents also highlighted negative experiences with the police, with police being used for political ends.

NGOs. Focus groups identified several areas where NGOs are working, including schooling, microfinance, health clinics and immunization, water and sanitation, and awareness campaigns. Doubt and suspicion surrounding NGO operations were identified throughout all focus groups. While the more extreme views came from the "active" poor, "non-active" respondents also mentioned high costs and problems experienced with accessing services.

"*It seems more like they develop themselves*" stated one group of "active" BOSC members. "*NGOs have been exploiting the poor in the name of poverty reduction*" claimed another. These accusations are grounded in two issues. While they feel that the poor have learnt a lot from NGOs regarding social and legal awareness and hygiene and sanitation, they also feel the NGOs have developed themselves more, highlighting their misery in order to gain more funds: "*We get awareness while NGO staff get rich*" asserted BOSC members.

In addition, NGO programmes in urban areas are seen as not meeting the primary requirements of the urban poor, which are closely related to security of tenure. Vulnerable to the threat of eviction at any time, insecurity is at the forefront of their daily struggles. Although "active" respondents appreciated the NGO interventions that did reach them, they recognized that these were wasted in the face of eviction.

"Non-active" respondents in both wards also voiced suspicions regarding NGOs. However, their sentiments were not as strong and highlighted specific and local, rather than general and city level, experiences with NGOs. A history of raised expectations and dashed hopes has made the "non-active" urban poor wary of NGOs. Several experiences of false NGO representatives and stolen savings were detailed. Other individuals had come asking questions and offering the potential of loans, never to be seen again. Some focus groups criticized the high rates of interest charged and one group complained of the poor ethics of NGOs; one man in ward B

returned to his house to find NGO staff raiding his belongings after he was unable to pay his weekly instalment.

In the view of all focus groups, insufficient places and unaffordable prices characterize NGO schooling and provide a significant barrier to education. The quality of education is also a concern. "Active" female participants in ward B asserted that different NGO schools within the slum differ markedly in quality and performance. At the same time, stated respondents, inequality dictates schooling opportunities: "*Only powerful people within the slum can get their children admitted*" at preferred schools. Residents with contacts take precedence for limited school spaces. The more accessible NGO schools were referred to as being of poor quality: "*They are not serious about our children and have no headache if the children come to school or not.*"

These responses suggest that NGOs working in urban areas may need to review their operations and make concerted efforts to meet the needs of the urban poor.

Government services. Few government services reached respondents. Although some NGO health services were accessible, there were no government health services within either settlement: "*Here [in our settlement] none of the government's services are working. We have to go far away if someone becomes ill as there is no hospital in our area*" explained "active" male respondents. Both "active" and "non-active" participants indicated that the provision of government health services was a priority.

In both wards, neither "active" nor "non-active" participants mentioned the availability of government schools. "Non-active" respondents in both wards suggested that schooling should be a priority for ward commissioners, although schooling is not within their jurisdiction. This reflects their desire for access to schooling opportunities.

Without secure tenure, service provision to low-income settlements is illegal. Consequently, poor urban communities face difficulties in obtaining legal services. In this environment, political patronage has become a substitute for government services. Respondents detailed the patronage networks through which party members rewarded supporters and penalized opponents via the provision of services and other benefits. The poor recognize that the party in power tends to reward its supporters while neglecting those who support the opposition party. "Active" female participants confirmed that: "*We were refused a water line, because when they came to power, they thought that all slum dwellers [here] were supporters of the Awami League.*"

Informal leaders/*mastaans*. Although the literal translation of *mastaan* is "muscleman", respondents suggest that the *mastaan* plays a role somewhere between a local strongman and a local leader. They act as intermediaries, making connections between underserved informal settlements and political leaders. This interaction exchanges a vote bank that is mobilized by the *mastaan* in return for improved services or other benefits from elected officials. *Mastaans* have been described as a "creation of the elite and politicians", who rely on links with local *mastaans* for support and re-election.[20]

Discussions surrounding local leaders were more prevalent among "non-active" participants and female participants.[21] "Non-active" participants had mixed views on local leaders. On the one hand, respondents recognized their necessity in mediating with officials and connecting informal settlements to service providers and political contacts:[22] As

20. Rashid, S F (2004), "Worried lives: poverty, gender and reproductive health of married adolescent women living in an urban slum in Bangladesh", unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University; also Rashid, S F and Y Hossain (2005), "Constraints in delivering services to the urban poor living in slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh", World Bank, Washington DC.

21. Local leaders were not discussed among male BOSC members, perhaps in recognition that their activities at the city level were close substitutes for (and more legitimate versions of) the traditional role of local leaders. "Active" female participants recognized the role that *mastaans* played in coordinating eviction efforts, and of the fear they invoked in doing so.

22. Although this provides connections to services that the poor are otherwise excluded from, it comes at a cost. Rashid and Hossain estimate that poor households pay up to three times as much for electricity than those who access it legally. See reference 20, Rashid and Hossain (2005).

"non-active" participants in ward A suggested, "*It is not possible for a government to reach each and every household, so it is better to select a person who can take care of the slum dwellers.*" On the other hand, these leaders are a source of fear among the urban poor, often using extortion or threats of violence to control a neighbourhood. Discussions among the "non-active" poor suggested that much of their power is reliant upon fear.

"Non-active" female respondents in ward A claimed that many local leaders are drug addicts or drink alcohol, do not work and threaten weaker residents. Some are involved deeply in local crime but remain free from reprimand because of their affiliation with the ward commissioner and political leaders. On one occasion, the police asked poor residents to assist them in catching criminals in their community. After turning over one criminal – a renowned local leader – to the police, residents did not receive the safety that they had been promised. Instead, the criminal was allowed to bribe himself out of jail. On his return, he tortured families who had helped seize him, and the police would not step in to protect them: "*Political parties protect all the criminals and no one can do anything against them*" stated "active" females in ward B.

Both "active" and "non-active" respondents suggested that local leaders looked after their own interests rather than their community's interests, capturing government aid allocation resources for personal gain: "*The leader grasped all the facilities and relief goods provided by highlighting our difficulties, and nothing is provided for us*" stated "non-active" respondents in ward A.

Police. Both "active" and "non-active" groups identified police harassment as a frequent occurrence, as the police have been used increasingly for political ends. Prior to any large opposition party parade or demonstration, the police arrest large numbers of the poor: "*At such a time, the police are given some target to arrest a fixed number of people. It is easy to access a slum, so they arrest people from here, whether they are involved in politics or not*" explained "active" female participants in ward B.

Negative interactions with the police incur economic costs. In a study of four informal settlements in Dhaka,[23] nearly 40 per cent of respondents were found to have faced some form of police harassment at the household level, involving financial transactions ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand taka.[24]

Both the "active" and "non-active" urban poor distinguished between two rules of law. While the rich can escape punishment due to their wealth and power, the poor suffer a much greater burden from police corruption due to their lack of power and money: "*There are no rules of law in our country*" claimed "non-active" males in ward A, "*…the poor have to suffer all kinds of hazard either in political or police action. Sometimes, innocent people in the settlement are arrested so that the police can demand bribes.*" Respondents emphasized the retention of innocent poor people who are unable to pay the high bribes demanded for their release. Respondents in both wards suggested that there are no rules and laws for the rich, who have the money to support themselves.

The preceding discussion has identified briefly the main actors with whom the "active" and "non-active" urban poor interact for problem solving or service provision. Responses from focus groups indicate that those who can promote the interests of the poor can also harm them. Although integral to local social and political structures, local leaders generate considerable fear, particularly to females and the "non-active"

23. Banks, N (forthcoming), "Struggling with the state: security and social protection in Dhaka slums", Research Monograph, BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, Dhaka.

24. US$ 1 is equivalent to around 70 taka.

urban poor. The police offer no help or protection to the poor, while protecting the rich and powerful. The "active" urban poor identify the ways in which both NGOs and government exploit their misery to gain funds, of which only a small proportion reaches them.

Many of these problems result from the absence of a formal and accountable system of governance. Laws prohibiting service provision to informal settlements, for example, have allowed the creation of the *mastaan*, who provides services while exploiting the poor. Overcoming problems with land ownership and service delivery requires formalized and legitimate relationships; but do experiences of the urban poor suggest that formalization can help overcome these problems? The following section discusses the extent to which the urban poor feel that local elections allow them to influence municipal governance.

c. What's in a vote?

25. See reference 3.

High levels of enthusiasm in the political process have been evinced by continuously high election turnouts.[25] Respondents universally viewed the vote as an important citizen right. Elections are seen as a reversal of power and the only time when the poor hold social and political power. As affirmed by women in Ward A: "*Without this vote, we have no importance to them. Only during election times do they come to us seeking votes, and in this time we feel ourselves stronger than them.*"

However, the poor are aware that a lack of accountability means that this power begins and ends with their vote: "*It is our right to vote*" stated "non-active" participants in ward A, "…*but after this, it is not our affair if the leader does not undertake development.*"

Crucially, in ward A the "non-active" poor can see no platform through which to press their demands on their ward commissioner. This helps to explain their feelings of neglect and disillusionment. During campaigning, candidates ask for their vote in exchange for promises, which are left unfulfilled. Instead, residents see that the ward commissioner's first priority is to maintain social relationships with the rich: "*We are valued less because we are poor and our votes are valueless*" stated one respondent.

Why are the "non-active" poor in ward A quietly accepting of a government that neglects their needs? This may be explained in part because some action has been taken that has improved their livelihoods.[26] Respondents in all focus groups praised the last government (2001–2006) for its efforts in reducing crime: "*These changes seem a big factor to us because during the last government we got nothing*" stated one focus group.

26. Ali, T O and N Hossain (2006), "Popular expectations of government: findings from three areas in Bangladesh", PRCPB Working Paper No 13, BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, Programme for Research on Chronic Poverty in Bangladesh (PRCPB), Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), and Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester (IDPM), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

However, pockets of improvement do not entail overall satisfaction. Although there have been some improvements in livelihoods, for instance, there are also policies that constrain livelihood possibilities, such as a rickshaw ban on main roads. One rickshaw puller stated that: "…*they have hurt the poor like me, so I will not vote for this government again.*" The price index of basic goods – which has increased substantially – is also a crucial indicator for both "active" and "non-active" poor households regarding government performance.

This suggests that the urban poor vote on performance rather than by party affiliation, in particular on how government policies and programmes affect their lives. Previous research suggests that: "…*poor Bangladeshis see the vote as a referendum on the incumbent government, and*

their votes are based on their evaluation of the incumbent's performance rather than the challenger's leadership styles or policies."[27] An "active" female respondent in ward B stated that: "*A vote does not help us anyway, but in this way we express our liking and disliking.*"

27. See reference 26.

Both "active" and "non-active" participants identified their disillusionment with broken government promises: "*Candidates bestow their heads and hands to us during the election, but the same candidates kick us after the election.*" They associate their social and political exclusion directly with their lack of money. In a system that equates power and access with wealth, the poor feel that they will always lose out. Section VI discusses the influence of the urban poor in municipal governance. While "non-active" respondents in ward A see no channel through which they can mobilize collective action, the presence of a BOSC committee in ward B offers a more positive outlook.

VI. MOBILIZATION OF THE URBAN POOR: LESSONS FROM BOSC

a. Achievements and accomplishments

One of BOSC's biggest achievements has been to secure formal water and electricity connections within some informal settlements. Although land-holding laws render it illegal for utilities to provide legal connections to informal settlements, this is to the detriment of service providers and citizens across the entire city, as well as to the poor. While the poor must rely on *mastaans* for services, service providers and customers suffer from revenue loss and irregular supplies due to the illegal tapping of already constrained water and electricity supplies. CUP facilitated a meeting between BOSC's central committee and the Minister of Power in the Secretariat, through which they could represent the needs of the urban poor. Through discussion and debate, BOSC members acted as a catalyst for the provision of electricity to low-income settlements. Similarly, BOSC committees are actively involved in the provision of legal water connections.

The involvement of BOSC in electricity supply has helped to overcome two constraints commonly used to justify the exclusion of informal settlements from service provision, namely technical problems and problems of cost-recovery. BOSC committees provide a network through which local communities can be mobilized and local needs and desires incorporated into project design. Technical difficulties associated with service provision meant that individual household connections were not feasible due to the unsound nature of housing; the participatory design of collective meters per 20 households resolved this issue. Primary committees were responsible for mobilizing local committees to look after each meter and ensure regular payments. Mobilizing community participation and ownership from the project outset in this way has proven to have successful outcomes in sustainability and cost-recovery.[28]

28. See reference 20, Rashid and Hossain (2005).

Membership of BOSC committees has had additional benefits for female members: "*We can talk now…*" explained "active" women in ward B, "*…we can go outside of the house and we are familiar to each other. We might not have financial help but we have mental strength now.*" Without further study, it is not possible to assess the depth of empowerment that accompanies female membership, but brief conclusions can be drawn.

Women mentioned that membership has improved their mobility and increased their interactions outside the household, allowing them influence on matters affecting their communities. Some are even president of their primary committees.

BOSC members are more articulate and more politically aware than the "non-active" poor. They had opinions on broader citywide issues, in contrast to the "non-active" poor who detailed only personal experiences. BOSC members have regular interactions with people within and outside their communities, including government officials, and participated in both local issues and urban governance. "Non-active" members had no direct participation in either.

However, it is clear that those elected to committees by local residents are the more confident, respected and relatively "better off" people, often with prior leadership status and contacts. BOSC respondents also have more respected jobs, being either government service holders or small business owners. Their ability to partake in unpaid BOSC activities also suggests that they are less constrained by concern for immediate survival. Their initial position is bolstered by BOSC membership, which allows access to the ward commissioner and to the higher classes and networks for jobs and contacts.

"Non-active" households in ward B benefit indirectly from BOSC activities. Not only do they benefit from the services and recognition won by BOSC committees in their communities, but respondents are also more politically aware than their counterparts in ward A. However, political knowledge was spread through word of mouth rather than direct experiences. This was particularly evident with women, who stated that politics was an affair for men: "*We are female, so politics is not our subject. We are busy with our work and the rest of the time we are busy with family affairs*." This contrasts with the more empowered view of female BOSC respondents.

The "non-active" urban poor in ward A revealed the most obstacles to political participation. Although the BOSC network was active in ward A, participants had not heard of it. The research suggests that the lower profile of BOSC here was a function of the perceptions of respondents in the ward. Living further away from areas of BOSC activity, they were unaware of its aims, objectives and activities. They also had no interaction with the ward commissioner and were most disillusioned with the voting process. Lacking an avenue through which they could press their demands, the poor could not influence whether or not the ward commissioner carried out his responsibilities towards them. Faced with the hardships of day to day survival, matters of political participation were not prioritized.

Although the "non-active" poor in ward B also prioritized their immediate livelihoods and did not interact with ward commissioners and/or political affairs, respondents did not display the same extent of resignation as those in ward A. Here, a complete lack of participation outside the voting process has led to their marginalized state of mind, in which the hardships of daily life coupled with a lack of participation can lead to fatalism, resignation and an inability to focus on long-term perspectives.[29]

Although it is difficult to quantify the difference in the experiences of the "non-active" poor in wards A and B, the research suggests that an active ward commissioner can contribute to the wider impact of BOSC

29. See reference 18.

committees. "Non-active" respondents in ward B were more politically aware and optimistic than those in ward A and benefited from services secured by BOSC committees.

b. Limits to political participation of the urban poor

Through BOSC, CUP has found space for participation and representation of the urban poor in issues of local governance.[30] However, BOSC activities are limited to the municipal level, and progress in urban poverty reduction also requires the recognition of urban poverty and livelihoods in Bangladesh's policy agenda. At present, urban manifestations of poverty are neglected in both policy and programmes.

Where there is a high degree of centralization in decision making and weakened powers at the local level – as is the case in Bangladesh – local mobilization has a limited impact on higher levels of government and policy makers (Figure 1). A lack of decentralization undermines successes in political representation by limiting the voices of the poor to the local level. Given the weakness of DCC in relation to central government, although BOSC may have had significant achievements in local participation there are no avenues through which the urban poor can influence national policy.

Another actor with a stronger influence on policy makers is necessary in a national chain of accountability. CUP argues that political commitment to the urban poor is necessary at the highest level. Progress at the national level needs to generate simultaneously both "bottom-up" and "top-down" efforts in fighting for the rights of the urban poor. Community mobilization at the local level must be complemented with advocacy work within central government to encourage national policy change.

CUP has accompanied their efforts at mobilizing the urban poor with advocacy work at the national level. The representation of CUP on the Dhaka Good Governance Committee, directly within the Prime Minister's Office, brings voice to the urban poor where it was previously neglected and ensures that they are a consideration within discussions of a large number of citywide issues and problems.[31]

To strengthen advocacy efforts at a national level, CUP formed the Bangladesh Urban Round Table (BURT). This includes CUP's 53 member organizations alongside advocates from donors and highly visible organizations such as the World Bank, the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research Bangladesh (ICDDRB), the United Nations and the Asian Development Bank. The importance and impact of advocacy work at the national level can be illustrated by BURT's successes. When the draft PRSP was distributed, for example, it made no accommodation for urban poverty. Subsequent advocacy work by BURT facilitated the incorporation of urban poverty into the final PRSP, although it remained a relatively small focal point.

Thus recognizing the limitations of grassroots mobilization of the poor, CUP complements the activities of the poor with advocacy work from within central government. The ultimate aim is to generate firm policy commitments on behalf of the urban poor with which the poor themselves can then hold government to account, thus extending successes in local political participation to the national level.

30. One aspect of Basti Basheer Odhikar Surakha (BOSC) activities that is a topic for future research is the possibility or extent of any political opposition to the Coalition of the Urban Poor (CUP) or to BOSC. The boundaries of this study have not allowed for any conclusions to be drawn in this respect.

31. For further details, see reference 5.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The research reported here investigated the extent of the participation of the urban poor in municipal governance. At the most basic level, this participation takes place through voting in city elections. The voting process is an important citizen right for two reasons. It provides a mechanism through which the poor can evaluate government performance with regard to its impact on their lives; and it empowers them. During elections, they hold power over government, while at all other times, they associate their poverty with their social and political exclusion. Depth of participation beyond the voting process varies, however.

Experiences of the poor within the two wards illustrate that although participation in urban governance is possible, it is by no means the norm. The extension of the BOSC network across Dhaka has opened up opportunities for the poor to participate in municipal governance – which appear to be best realized where there is an active ward commissioner. The poor outside the BOSC network have had different experiences.

In ward A, democratic municipal elections have done little to improve the rights, participation or livelihoods of the poor. Over and above the voting process, the poor see no avenue through which they can press their demands on elected officials. While expectations are low – merely that the ward commissioner "keeps in touch" – even these remain unfulfilled. Although they recognize that collective mobilization is imperative for getting their voices heard, their poverty holds them back. Respondents showed quiet resignation, arguing that it was not their duty to ensure the ward commissioner met his responsibilities. Lacking conventional avenues of participation, they rely on other actors to fulfill their needs, including local leaders and NGOs. These relationships, while bringing benefits to the poor, can also harm them. Negative interactions with the police increase their vulnerability.

In contrast, in ward B, BOSC committees enhanced the political capabilities of members by creating a channel through which committees could press demands and hold elected officials to account. The BOSC network ensures that accountability mechanisms are used to make local elected officials responsive to the needs of their poor electorate. Democracy here has led to greater participation and expectations. The BOSC network has mobilized the urban poor to press demands upon ward commissioners, service providers and other authorities. The successes of BOSC are partly attributed to an active ward commissioner, who in the eyes of his poor residents is a good man who is concerned with the lives of the poor. Such interactions help to incorporate the poor into the wider structure of urban governance. Even "non-active" respondents in ward B displayed more positive sentiments with regard to expectations and experiences of the ward commissioner. The experience of ward B illustrates a model through which ward commissioners can engage their poor communities, and in the process incorporate them into municipal governance.

Although BOSC illustrates the possibilities for incorporating the urban poor into municipal governance, the urban poor remain neglected in policy at the national level. CUP complements mobilization of the poor with top-down advocacy work to encourage government to develop a comprehensive urban policy for poverty reduction.

REFERENCES

Ali, T O and N Hossain (2006), "Popular expectations of government: findings from three areas in Bangladesh", PRCPB Working Paper No 13, BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, Programme for Research on Chronic Poverty in Bangladesh (PRCPB), Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), and Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester (IDPM), Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Banks, N (2006), "Urban governance in Bangladesh", CGS Working Paper Number 2, Centre for Governance Studies, BRAC University and BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Banks, N (forthcoming), "Struggling with the state: security and social protection in Dhaka slums", Research Monograph, BRAC University, Dhaka.

Berg-Schlosser, D and N Kersting (2003), "Poverty and democracy. A contradiction?", in D Berg-Schlosser and N Kersting (editors), *Poverty and Democracy: Self-Help and Political Participation in Third World Cities*, Zed Books, London and New York, 304 pages.

Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT) and Measure Evaluation (2006), *Slums of Urban Bangladesh: Mapping and Census, 2005*, Dhaka, Bangladesh and Chapel Hill, USA.

Hossain, Akhtar (2000), "Anatomy of *hartal* politics", in *Bangladesh Asian Survey* Vol 40, No 3, pages 508–529.

Islam, N and M M Khan (editors) (1997), *Urban Governance in Bangladesh and Pakistan*, Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Kamal, A (2000), "Accountable governance and poverty alleviation", commissioned paper for the Regional Workshops Democracy Forum 2000 "Democracy and Poverty: A Missing Link?", Kathmandu, Nepal.

Kersting, N and J Sperberg (2003), "Political participation", in D Berg-Schlosser and N Kersting (editors), *Poverty and Democracy: Self-Help and Political Participation in Third World Cities*, Zed Books, London and New York, 304 pages.

Khan, M M (1997), "Urban local governance in Bangladesh", in N Islam and M M Khan (editors) (1997), *Urban Governance in Bangladesh and Pakistan*, Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Rahman, M (1998), "Institutional issues", in *Asian Cities in the 21st Century: Contemporary Approaches to Municipal Management*, Volume 3: Reforming Dhaka City Management, Asian Development Bank Conference Papers and Proceedings, Manila, Philippines.

Rashid, S F (2004), "Worried lives: poverty, gender and reproductive health of married adolescent women living in an urban slum in Bangladesh", unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University.

Rashid, S F and Y Hossain (2005), "Constraints in delivering services to the urban poor living in slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh", World Bank, Washington DC.

Siddiqui, K (2004), *Megacity Governance in South Asia: A Comparative Study*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

UNDP (2005), *Beyond Hartals: Towards Democratic Dialogue*, UNDP Dhaka, Bangladesh.

World Bank (2002), "Bangladesh urban service delivery: a scorecard", Proshika, Survey and Research System, World Bank, Washington DC.

World Bank (2004), *World Bank Development Report 2004: Making Services Work for Poor People* World Bank, Washington DC.