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Weeding out the grassroots in a concrete jungle: reflections from Dhaka, Bangladesh



From Brazil's Landless Workers Movement and Argentina's Piqueteros, to South Africa's Homeless People's Federation and Bangladesh's Coalition of Urban Poor, collective struggles over land, housing and labour increasingly inform our understandings of social justice in cities of the Global South. However, can this global lens overlook local level complexities? What role do grassroots organisations play? In this post, [Sally Cawood](#) takes us to Dhaka, Bangladesh, where she is conducting fieldwork on Community Based Organisations (CBOs) in Dhaka's informal settlements (bustees). For Sally, unearthing networks of friends, families and neighbours within these organisations, is crucial to understanding social development in context.



Credit: Sally Cawood.

Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital of over 15 million is like many other megacities, with informality ingrained in the very process of urbanisation ([Roy, 2011](#)), and inadequate provision of services fuelling low levels of satisfaction among the urban poor and middle classes alike ([Islam & Khan, 2013](#)). This concrete jungle is home to over five million slum dwellers (*bustee bashees*), living in over 5,000 informal settlements ([Angeles et al, 2005](#)). This city is undergoing rapid change, yet millions still live without access to secure housing, clean water and sanitation.

Dhaka is my home for the next eight months whilst I conduct fieldwork on CBOs in these settlements. CBOs can be understood as 'arrangements and associations formed and located within the local space, or immediate residential surroundings of the actors [or residents]' (Akin,

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Book

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1990 in [Shatkin, 2007: 4](#)). Little is known about these organisations in Dhaka. I therefore want to unravel who forms CBOs and why, what their functions and obstacles are, and how they coordinate with other development ‘actors’ e.g. NGOs, urban poor federations, local officials and donors.

Upon arrival, I’ve started to ‘map out’ the different types of CBOs, creating four groups; internally led by community members, externally led by NGOs and Donors, informal or ‘unregistered’ and formal or ‘officially registered’ by government legislation. After only two weeks, I’ve found these rigid categories problematic, as demonstrated by the examples below.

- **UNDPs Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR).** This donor programme set about forming CBOs known as ‘Community Development Committees’ (CDCs). To date, over 816,000 slum dwellers have been mobilised into over 2588 CDCs ([UPPR, 2013](#)). Whilst this is externally-driven, many groups formed from established informal hierarchies.
- **Nagar Daridra Basteebashir Unnayan Sangstha (NDBUS).** This collection of CBOs and NGOs has members all over Dhaka. Although this started from informal networks, NDBUS is now registered as a formal NGO.
- **Asian Coalition for Community Action (ACCA).** ACCA – a network of CBOs and NGOs across Asia – attempted to build a network of CBOs in Dhaka. However, they found that ‘the city’s poor have developed very few community organisations of their own, and the ones that do exist are small, scattered and isolated’ ([ACHR, 2012](#)).

The complexities around grassroots organisations are becoming clear. Firstly, CBOs (or at least their leaders) interact with numerous actors and institutions inside and outside the *bustees*. These interactions with private landlords, police, political elite, criminal gangs, utility companies, NGOs and local residents are not always positive. In fact, they can exacerbate exclusion and dependency ([De Wit & Berner, 2009](#); [Banks, 2012](#); [Mitlin, 2014](#)).

Secondly, the majority of CBOs appear to be externally-driven, especially regarding Water and Sanitation (WASH). Whilst this is by no means disempowering, this does have implications for the sustainability of CBOs formed or supported by NGOs and donors.



Credit: [Health education in Dhaka](#) by [Waterdotorg](#) (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

There is also confusion over what classes as a CBO, NGO or social enterprise in Dhaka, with some NGOs seemingly re-forming as CBOs to access funding. For example, NDBUS re-formed as a

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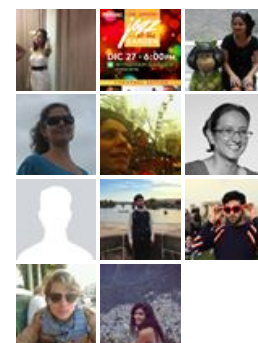
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'formal' organisation to act as a delivery mechanism for their programme (Banks, 2012). Interestingly, Banks (2012:58) argues 'it is the wives of these leaders who comprise the Community Development Committees (CDCs) organised by UPPR, ensuring they have control over these organisations too'. This justifies a closer look at *why* these organisations form, *by/for whom* and for *what* purpose.

I've also started to learn about informal groups, such as mosque committees, social control and mothers groups, food and cleaning rotas. Just days ago, I read about residents in Bhashantek *bustee* forming a patrol group to tackle gang violence (New Age, 2014). Thirdly then, we can look beyond 'externally led' initiatives to understand the fundamental values of self-help and kinship that underpin Bangladeshi society. *Bustee* residents discuss their concerns openly with each other, building strength in numbers. For women in particular, group formation has led to increasing mobility. Recently, I sat with a group in a **Bihari Camp** in Mirpur. One lady explained how, before the group began five years ago, the women stayed in their homes. Now, they meet regularly to discuss issues around housing, drug addiction and child marriage. It is these networks of friends and neighbours that underpin grassroots organisations.

Whilst CBOs may provide a 'lens' into how, why and when people work together to address collective grievances, dense social networks bound by need, trust, kinship, fear and identity define urban life for *bustee bashees*. As said by Devine (2006), there is a difference in Bangladesh between '*amar kichu ney*' (I have nothing) and '*amar keu ney*' (I have no-one). This is at the heart of social development in Dhaka and beyond.

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About the Author

Sally Cawood is a PhD researcher at the Brooks World Poverty Institute (BWPI), University of Manchester, UK. Her research interests include urban geography, social policy and grassroots initiatives in low-income settlements in the Global South. Sally is also involved in the EcoPoor Project that focuses on 'good institutions' (collective action and co-production) and ecosystem services (i.e. water and green spaces) in low-income settlements.

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david hulme December 11, 2014 at 10:08 am - [Reply](#)

Hi sally

Just been reading a thesis on SDI and I wonder how much microfinance in urban Bangladesh being dominated by NGOs/MFIs weakens the possibility of using savings and loans activities as a device to get people to start simple cooperative CBOs (the SDI model)? have fun,
david



Sally Cawood December 11, 2014 at 11:03 am - [Reply](#)

Hi David,

Thanks for your comment! Yes that's a good point. MFI schemes seem to be NGO driven in the slum settlements, this must have implications for CBO cooperatives. It's also interesting how certain NGOs target extreme poor or ultra poor groups, who are then 'empowered' to access MFI. I will learn more about this as I go along...

Take care,
Sally

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