Urban Safety for the Poor: The Case of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Summary

- This profile on urban safety for the poor of Dhaka, Bangladesh has been prepared to contribute to the initiative of UNESCAP and UN-Habitat to gain a comparative perspective from an inventory of profiles from a number of cities in the Asia-Pacific region. It is based on literature review and interviews of the urban poor and experts in Dhaka.

- Bangladesh is one of the world’s poorest nations with a large and growing urban poor population. The great bulk of the urban population lives in Dhaka, the capital, which is among the world’s fastest growing megacities, with rapid population growth fuelled by rural-urban migration and significant natural increase. Despite economic growth inequality is rising and glaringly evident in Dhaka.

- While violent and lethal crime is relatively less compared to cities elsewhere, other forms of insidious and persistent crime is widespread in Dhaka, among which street mugging or “hijacking” as locally called is most prevalent. A result of rising inequality, the perception of insecurity is high among the affluent, who invest in substantial private security measures. This results in social exclusion and marginalisation of the urban poor.

- A significant proportion - an estimated 30% of the city’s population - live in informal settlements (slums, squatter settlements) or are homeless. The urban poor live in deprived environments that face frequent flooding and eviction drives, and have very little police support or access to justice and thus experience various forms of crime. Three main types of safety issues afflict the urban poor: organised crime led by local ganglords (mastaans), drug trade and violence against women. Triggered from outside the informal settlements, the poor are often victims of brutal illegal evictions and political demonstrations.

- The police force does little to assist the urban poor to resist or prevent crime and is often corrupt and partisan to a criminality nexus of ganglords and politicians. It must however be conceded that the police operate on low budget and salaries, and are constrained by the circumstances typical of a poor nation. Initiatives for better law enforcement such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) have improved the safety situation somewhat, but have also resulted in extra-judicial murders. All levels of public institutions, including the legal system, are distinctly anti-poor and thus the urban poor are deprived of the most basic forms of services. Local politicians tend to manipulate the poor for political ends and enmesh them within a web of patronage relationships.

- Given the irresponsiveness of public institutions, the poor fall back on traditional justice systems, such as the shalish, but this has also become politicised. Informal crime prevention and punishment can result in extremely violent episodes that take the law in hand and subvert it.

- Although Bangladesh has a large civil society comprising many NGOs, there is limited engagement of this sector with urban poor safety issues. Much of the work of this sector pertains to reduction of domestic violence. Nonetheless there are some examples of good practice, often initiated by international agencies, and offer lessons in a number of key aspects that are being addressed.

- Given that the level of violence is not yet very high despite an extensive crime network and that there are some examples of good practice, there is potential for upscaling, replication and mainstreaming such practice. Bangladesh could benefit from the experiences in this field from other countries of the region.
Background

UN-HABITAT and UNESCAP are jointly implementing a project entitled “Urban Safety for the Poor”, with a focus on the most vulnerable groups in Asia and the Pacific. The project aims to raise information on issues of urban safety for the poor in the Asia-Pacific region, through analysis and collection of information, and the identification and exchange of promising or good practices. Considering that urban safety is a comparatively new field for development cooperation, particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, more in-depth analytical work is needed to increase understanding of the key trends of urban violence, regionally and locally, the drivers of crime, and the relationship with urban poverty. City profiles have been collected from a number of cities in the region and this study was commissioned to add to that inventory to facilitate comparative understanding.

The overall purpose of this study is to initiate a dialogue in the city of Dhaka, Bangladesh on issues of safety for the urban poor and to provide UNESCAP with a verified baseline of the safety situation for the poor there. The profile focuses on violence and crime as well as related policies and practices. It also highlights promising or good initiatives to promote safety and security for the urban poor implemented by public, private, civil society and community organisations. To address key objectives, this study endeavours to:

- Provide an overview of issues of safety that concern the urban poor and their underlying causes, including inter-personal violence, illegal/criminal acts, as well as intangible forms of violence like social and institutional violence;
- Analyse the links between the issues of safety, poverty and the environment in the poor communities;
- Analyse how the safety issues experienced by the poor compare with the safety situation in the city as a whole;
- Provide an overview of what institutional mechanisms and policies are in place to support interventions to improve safety in the city, particularly addressing the poor;
- Describe any good or promising practices to prevent crime and insecurity, especially for the poor, its conditions of success and weakness of interventions.

This study has been conducted on the basis of review of a wide range of literature including reports, academic papers and media articles. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions of community leaders and residents mostly in Korail slum and also in Mohammedpur embankment squatter settlement, some of the largest informal settlements in Dhaka, were carried out during December 2009 and January 2010. Several key persons including academics/researchers, civil society/NGO activists and police staff working on urban safety issues were also interviewed (see Appendix).

Literature and data collection was carried out in Dhaka by Ms Huraera Jabeen, Senior Lecturer, Department of Architecture, BRAC University, with guidance from the author. In the recent past the author has carried out a number of studies on the urban poor in Bangladesh (Ahmed 2007; Ahmed 2009; DIG 2008) and these served as useful background resource material.
Context

This study is concerned with urban safety of the poor in Dhaka city, the capital of Bangladesh - the 7th most populous country in the world with a population of nearly 160 million inhabiting an area of 145,570 square kilometres (UNDP 2008; WSUP 2007), that is, an average population density of more than 1,000 persons per square kilometre. It is one of the world’s poorest nations with one-third of its population living in extreme poverty (Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2008; UNDP 2008; WSUP 2007). While still predominantly rural with only about 26% of its population living in urban areas, Bangladesh is urbanising rapidly and is expected to have more than 40% urban population by 2030 (UNFPA 2005) (see Fig 1).

The great bulk of the urban population is concentrated in Dhaka, the primate capital city. According to the last census in 2001, the Dhaka conurbation includes nearly 40% of the total national urban population, while the remaining 60% is distributed among 19 other urban regions; Chittagong, the next largest urban area has less than one-third the population of Dhaka (BBS 2004; Jahan and Maniruzzaman 2007). The capital Dhaka is the fastest growing megacity in the world with a population of over 14 million (UN-Habitat 2008); it is estimated that density exceeds 18,000 persons per square kilometre within Dhaka’s municipal boundary (SDNP 2005). While urban areas throughout the country are growing, Dhaka is growing at a much faster rate, on average at 4.24% during 1995-2000 (BBS 2001), and is projected to be the 6th largest megacity of the world by 2010 (UN-Habitat 2001) and the 4th largest by 2025 (UN-Habitat 2008); the population might increase to more than 20 million by 2020 (UN 2008). 300,000-400,000 mostly poor rural migrants arrive in cities annually (WSUP 2007) due to various ‘push’ factors including frequent natural disasters, increasing pressure on land, rural unemployment and underemployment and rural-urban income disparity, as well as ‘pull’ factors such as employment opportunities and better living standards in the city (UN-Habitat 2008; World Bank 2007). The bulk of urban growth,
However, it is from natural increase of the already large existing population and reclassification of rural areas on the fringes (Shafi and Payne 2007; UN-Habitat 2009).

According to one study, since the early 1990s to mid 2000s there has been significant economic growth with overall national poverty reduction impacts and strong per capita increase of income particularly in urban areas (4.4% urban compared to 0.5% rural) (Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2008). However at the same time income inequality in urban areas has increased by 10%; the same study observes that “the full potential of the poverty reducing effects of the accelerated growth of the period was not translated into reality.” Other than income, inequality is reflected in other aspects – for example, one-third of Dhaka’s population occupy less than 1% of the total land area and the rest is distributed among wealthy groups (Afsar 2000); although low-income groups comprise 70% of Dhaka’s population they are able to live on only 20% of the land (Islam 1996). Quantitative measurement aside, income inequality in Dhaka is glaringly evident to the eye – while new up-market shopping malls, restaurants and apartments continue to spring up in the city, the increasing number of people who are homeless and live on the streets or in informal settlements is also highly visible (see Figs 2 and 3). This condition of rising inequality within a context of economic growth is a key factor in the perpetuation of both actual and perceived insecurity in the city.

**Overall safety situation in Dhaka**

On a global level, Dhaka is not among cities with the highest homicide or lethal violence levels as in some African and Latin American cities (World Bank 2007). A study in Dinajpur city indicated 16% of urban poor households had been victims of crime in a year, relatively low compared to elsewhere such as Nigeria (40%), Malawi (29%), Chile (34%), Nicaragua (30%) and across eighteen European Union countries (18%) (Hossain 2008). Another study indicated that 93% of Dhaka slum dwellers experienced crime (World Bank 2007), but as this was a small sample of 1,000 respondents from four slums, the figure needs to be treated with caution. Various reports, although highlighting unsafe urban conditions, indicate that the nature of crime is different in Dhaka - insidious, persistent and on the increase (Ali 2006; Daily Star 2006; Hakim and Tanaka 2007; Khan 2009), but not entirely of a very violent nature. A
Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) record of crime during a 5-month period during 2009 (Fig 4) indicates that lethal and extremely violent crimes such as murder, robbery and armed break-ins (categorised as 'dacoit') were few in number compared to less violent crimes such as theft and drug-related offences. A study mentions that police often raid slums to intimidate the dwellers and innocent men are picked up randomly and charged for drug dealing (Rashid 2006), perhaps a reason why drug offences figure high on the DMP’s crime list.

One of the most widespread types of crime in Dhaka has been characterised as “hijacking” (Daily Star 2006; Hakim and Tanaka 2007). By this is meant various forms of forcible misappropriation of personal belongings, valuable or considered valuable by the perpetrators, ranging from snatching (bags, jewellery, etc) to outright armed mugging. The ‘theft’ category of the chart in Fig 3 alludes partly to it, ranking high in the list of crimes recorded by the police in Dhaka. This form of crime is carried out in the public domain – predominantly streets – usually during periods of relative isolation, but also sometimes in crowded situations where the victim is intimidated into silence, or when criminals operate from fast vehicles such as motorcycles. In general, desolate open public spaces or streets, particularly during late or isolated hours are considered unsafe (Hakim and Tanaka 2007). People moving about alone are the prime victims of hijacking, particularly women and the elderly, though there are exceptions to that where people in small groups and young men have also been preyed upon.

Pick-pocketing in crowded places (markets, buses, etc) is common and committed even in unlikely places such as large social gatherings – weddings, religious ceremonies, etc. A typical example of a less violent, but nevertheless debilitating, form of urban crime is to drug a victim by sharing food containing sedatives in a gesture of friendliness, often carried out in public transport such as long distance buses. Once the victim falls deeply asleep, personal belongings are stolen.

Innovative forms of hijacking have developed. Criminal groups hang about ATM machines after dark; after a customer withdraws money, it is snatched forcibly and the customer is forced to disclose the ATM pin code, whereupon the criminals immediately withdraw as much money as possible. A very common form of crime throughout the recent past was that of two criminals getting up from the two open sides of a three-wheeler vehicle (or “CNGs” as locally known as they use compressed natural gas; see Fig 5) at a stop signal or traffic jam, hemming in the passenger from both sides and extracting valuables by threat of injury by harmful weapon. Once done, chilli powder or some other noxious substance was sprayed into the victims eyes, blinding momentarily, while the criminals made their escape as the victim writhes in pain. The three-wheeler driver was usually an accomplice, or at least equally intimidated not to protest during the crime sequence. A number of hotspots within Dhaka where such hijacking is common had been identified and reported in the media, but corresponding police action appeared generally lacking. In December 2009, because of the widespread prevalence of CNG hijacking, through government order the DMP instituted that
all CNGs be fitted with security grills around the passenger seating (Khan 2009). However because the grills can be latched only from the outside by the driver, this arrangement has made passengers more vulnerable, not only to crime, but also being trapped inside in an accident.

Social exclusion of the urban poor (Rashid 2009; Hakim and Tanaka 2007) is a key factor in the perpetuation and perception of crime in Dhaka. A somewhat simplistic fragmentation by one author (Karim 2006) into two groups – “mainstream” and “underclass” – nonetheless reflects the growing inequality in the city. High capital and material investment for private policing and surveillance in gated communities, apartment complexes, shopping malls, high-end corporate, multinational and NGO offices, etc (see Fig 6) allows achieving a relatively high degree of security that is generally absent in the public domain. This demonstrates that achieving security in the Dhaka circumstances is possible if there is a will, but at a high cost, affordable only to an affluent minority group. Karim (2006) thus describes Dhaka as “a fortress city brutally divided between fortified cells of affluent society and places of terror where the police battle the criminalised poor.” In such a context it is only natural as one source points out that “Crime and violent incidents occur more in slums than in “higher-income” areas in Dhaka” (Hakim and Tanaka 2007). This spatial distribution of crime has implications for the perception of security among city dwellers. With the rise of protected formal sector private domains, the public domain and urban poor settlements are increasingly perceived by occupants of the sanitised private domains not only as cluttered and unhygienic, but also unsafe, insecure and ridden with crime, over and above actual prevalence and propensity for crime. While fear catalyses further enactment of security barriers, social divisions, exclusion and marginalisation of the urban poor become further entrenched. Thus even though the crime level despite being widespread is at a relatively low level of violence, fear is high and exaggerated perception mars the innocence remaining.
Safety situation of the urban poor

The great majority of the urban poor in Dhaka live in informal settlements (slums or squatters) that do not have legal landownership status (CUS et al. 2006). This constitutes about 30% of the city’s population that reside in nearly 5,000 informal settlements comprising nearly 700,000 households (BURT 2005b; Rashid 2009), that is, an estimated population of more than 4 million. Various other forms of informal tenure arrangements by the poor also exist (Shafi and Payne 2007), such as occupation of old or derelict buildings and construction sites where work has been delayed for lack of funds. Additionally, an estimated population of 15-20 thousand ‘floating’ or homeless people dwell on pavements, railway and bus stations, under bridges, parks, etc in Dhaka (Koehlmoos et al. 2009).

Given the country’s impoverishment, weak governance and political instability, and being persistently beleaguered by frequent natural disasters, particularly floods (Rashid et al. 2007; Rashid 2009; UN-Habitat 2008) (see Fig 7), the urban poor have to fend for themselves against the regular fear of eviction and live in an environment of crime, violence and anarchy controlled by local ganglords. Slum dwellers have almost no voice in influencing policy decisions that affect their daily lives. The police seldom help the poor to resist crime, and access to justice and restitution for the poor is next to impossible; police action and justice are reserved for those who are wealthy and well-connected (Banks 2008; Hossain 2008; Rashid 2008). Thus the poor have to fend for themselves because as one author suggests, “The poor have particularly strong reasons for guarding against crime with all their might, because any losses they suffer are likely to be significant and unrecoverable blows” (Hossain 2008).

In a survey of Dhaka slums, it was found that more than 90% of the respondents were affected by various crimes consisting of 36 enumerated types (World Bank 2007). Various sources also provide similar accounts of violence and insecurity in informal settlements (Ali 2006; Hakim and Tanaka 2007; Koehlmoos et al. 2009; Rashid 2006). Three main types of crime relating to the urban poor are consistently highlighted in the literature and community interviews:

Firstly, the all-permeating control over informal settlements by organised criminal ganglords, or mastaans as locally known, who run the collection and extortion of illegal ‘toll’ (fee for allowing to operate) from a wide range of businesses, transport stations, construction sites and even small informal traders and workers. The mastaans also control housing rents and supply of basic services (water, electricity, etc) and charge extortionate rates from poor slum dwellers (see for example, Ahmed 2007; Banks 2008). Various criminal activities - snatching, mugging, forgery, drugs, small arms and weapons, prostitution, etc operate under the patronage of mastaans, who usually have political links and police support to be able to...
operate themselves (Banks 2008; Rashid 2006). This phenomenon has been characterised succinctly as “a nexus between politicians, mastaaans and law enforcement agencies”, being “embedded into the political, economic and social structures” (Rashid 2006). The lack of tenure conveniently prevents formal sector institutions from intervening or providing services to informal settlements, considered illegal. This is the entry point for mastaaans who fill the institutional lacunae by acting as “alternative providers of service” (Ahmed 2007; Dwyer 2010), albeit unregulated and often arbitrary cost, and in exchange exert power and control over dwellers of urban poor settlements and thereby territorialise the settlements. For the mastaaans, informal settlements are both a playground and battlefield – while using the settlement as a base for a range of criminal activities, it is also the place for frequent gang wars to establish territory for criminality – both affecting the residents who are largely not associated.

The large beggar population in Dhaka is also a racket controlled by mastaaans who take a cut from the beggars’ earnings in exchange for being able to operate in designated spots with income-earning prospective - traffic intersections, mosques, affluent areas, etc. Recruiting disabled people or even amputating and disfiguring body parts to increase potential for earning is common practice. Recently the government has announced a new law¹ that penalises such acts for forcing people into professional begging (mX News 2009a), but as with many such laws, it is foreseeable that enforcement and avoiding corruption would face tough challenges.

Secondly, linked to the first but assuming a proportion to be significant on its own, is crime linked to trade and consumption of drugs (predominantly heroin, but also cannabis, sedative cough syrup and illicit alcohol). Because of the lax law and order situation and lack of policing in informal settlements, mastaaans use it as a base for smuggling, storing and distributing drugs – basically to run a drug trade (Rashid 2006) (see Fig 8). Slums dwellers are often caught in between territorial battles among dealers over turf for drug dealing and are also victims of theft and mugging by addicts. Police raids, often a law-and-order show-and-tell more than actual action, and to elicit bribes from mastaaans, result in random victimisation and further marginalisation of the poor, as mentioned in the preceding section. The actual criminals get information of any raid beforehand from corrupt police staff and escape, whereas innocent people become victims.

Many poor men (drug users are almost all male in Bangladesh) develop drug habits because of its visibility and availability within their surroundings (Daily Star 2006); a study of the homeless in Dhaka indicated a high prevalence of drug use (Koehlmoos et al 2009). In general, particularly in the evenings a tense and uneasy atmosphere prevails in slums where drug use and dealing are common and many slum dwellers reported of the insidious effect

¹ Vagabond and Street Beggars Rehabilitation Act, 2010.
this has on their lives and especially on families with young men or boys. However the consumer group is not confined only to informal settlements; such settlements serve as a supply source to the entire city including upper income groups. Given the prevalence of drug use at all levels of society, poverty alone cannot explain it or indicate policy directions to reduce abuse and drug-related crime. Comments made by a prominent legal aid agency in Bangladesh suggest that the drugs issue, and indeed crime, is not intrinsic to urban poor settlements, but linked to the wider urban society through political patronage networks: "The poor living in slums can’t afford to buy food, how can they afford to buy pistols or heroine? It’s the white-collar criminals who are the wealthiest in society who use the poor to bear their crime. In slums maybe 10 people are involved in crime out of 20,000 but there is always a tendency to generalise them as associated with criminal activities. I went to slums even in the middle of the night, I felt safer inside a slum than out in the city." Such an observation finds validation in a study conducted in four urban slums in Dhaka (World Bank 2007). Here it was found that not all slums, even if very poor, had crime and violence problems and even in those that did, it tended to be clustered in certain hotspot areas within the slum. As with hijacking hotspots within the city, such known zonal clusters should render easier the task of crime and violence prevention and reduction; however it appears that such knowledge only does not serve as a driver for law enforcement.

Thirdly, but not the least, also sometimes linked to the other types above, the third type of crime – that particularly against women - is perhaps less visible, but more deeply entrenched and possibly more all-pervading, and often as insidious as the other two types of crime in the context of the urban poor. Women are subject to a range of criminal and other offences - sexual abuse and exploitation, trafficking, battering, assault, retribution, illegal fatwa (Islamic condemnation), harassment and teasing - to name a few in a long list of such crimes. In Bangladesh, as in other countries of the region, many forms of domestic violence against women are linked to cultural practices such as dowry demand, early marriage and illegal divorce. Muslim clerics tend to disfavour women, particularly those who are poor – rape and harassment victims are blamed and punished instead of male perpetrators who enjoy impunity (mX News 2009b; Rashid 2006). During a 3-month period in 2009, six cases of fatwa against women were recorded and corresponding lack of institutional preventative action against this act which is illegal and punishable by law was also noted (ASK 2009). Acid-throwing, a particularly cruel form of assault on women to disfigure them because of rejection, revenge, dowry demand, etc was widespread in Bangladesh. The government had issued a death penalty in 2002 against acid attacks and many NGOs then became active in exposing perpetrators to justice, thereby this crime has reportedly scaled down.

Women in informal settlements generally bear the brunt of poverty more than men, especially single women-led households, and are more vulnerable to familial violence. In the context of frequent disasters in slums, such as flooding, psychological stress and economic pressure leads to domestic violence against women (Alam et al 2008). Such violence and abuse have been found to have serious detrimental impacts on women's reproductive health (Salam et al 2006). Fear of harassment by mastaans and local louts and loss of reputation prompts many parents in urban slums to prevent their daughters from attending school and to marry them off very early, sometimes even before the age of menarche; again, female children in single women-led households are much more vulnerable without the presence of a protective male guardian (Hossain 2008; Rashid 2006). Homeless women experience assault and sexual harassment from a wide range of men – thugs, staff members of public premises where they live, strangers and even the police (Koehlmoos et al 2009). Homeless women who are also informal sex workers tend to face a higher degree of violence and intimidation (IIAS 2010). The lack of very violent crime in the wider urban domain appears to be compensated for by the high rate of violence against women, indicating that the net level of violence in Bangladeshi society is high, but is targeted to a large extent at women.

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Acid Crime Control Act and Acid Control Act (Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre 2008).
because of their position of weakness in society. Bangladesh has continued to have among the highest rates of violence against women in the world (Ali 2006; Hossain 2008; Salam et al 2006; UNDP 2002; UNFPA 2000; WHO 2005; World Bank 2007), often assuming the steepest proportions in urban slums. Slum upgrading or service delivery programmes often tend to focus on reduction of violence against women (Ahmed 2009), perhaps an easier intervention than addressing wider and structural aspects of urban crime and violence perpetuated through the bond between mastoons, the national political apparatus and law enforcement agencies.

The urban poor are implicated in various forms of crime and violence, where the actual perpetrators usually belong to other socio-economic groups. Political demonstrations and rallies often result in a specific form of urban violence in Bangladesh through clashes between rival political groups and with police. For example, in 2004 at an attempt to assassinate the opposition political leader at a large political gathering, 24 people were killed by bomb explosions and more than 200 were injured (Daily Star 2004; Kumar 2007). Children and youth from urban poor settlements are often enlisted at low fees to participate in such political rallies and boost numbers (Daily Star 2006; World Bank 2007) and thereby become victims of violence. The actual perpetrators are rarely accountable to the poor in such events.

Evictions in urban informal settlements have continued throughout the past into the present often accompanied by violence and brutality by the police against the residents (Ahmed 2007). Arson attacks on slums are often a covert form of eviction (see Fig 9). This is a form of institutional violence committed against the poor, in itself a crime as it contravenes national policy, which stipulates eviction only with adequate legal notice and resettlement of displaced people (BURT, 2005a; Rahman 2001; Rashid 2009; Shafi, 2006), often ignored.

Thus the insecurity experienced by the urban poor is brought about by a combination of internal conditions within informal settlements and external forces pertaining to the city as a whole. Despite social exclusion of the urban poor from the larger urban domain and being physically ghettoised into shantytown settlements, strong linkages with the city at large exist through which the poor are drawn into participating in a network of links of underhand crime and violence that lie in the darker recesses and pervades through all strata of Dhaka society.

**Role of institutions**

The police force, represented by Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) in Dhaka, is the principal governmental law enforcement agency mandated to address, prevent or reduce urban crime and violence. Various reports indicate that the urban poor have low confidence and very little expectations of the police; most slum dwellers are of the view that the police seldom help the poor and cater mainly to the affluent sections of society (Banks 2008; World Bank 2007). Other than being the main actors in eviction drives, the police have been known to routinely
harass the urban poor, make arbitrary arrests for drugs or political charges and in general act on a clearly-defined anti-poor footing.

The homeless, both women and men as well as street children, are particularly vulnerable to police harassment and assault, often on the pretext of maintaining law and order, but also because of not complying with sexual advances or demands (Koehlmoos et al 2009). In other words, as expressed by an interview respondent from the Police Reform Programme, the police force in Bangladesh seems to have inherited the colonial institutional view of “ruling the people rather than serving.” In the absence of police support, the urban poor rely on a system of patronage through subscription to certain political parties, often under the mastaan-politician-police nexus. Slum dwellers represent a large vote bank hence politicians exploit their vulnerability through patronage (World Bank 2007), which is however not always reliable. Those who are not politically aligned, particularly women-led households that are traditionally excluded from the public domain, are unable to benefit from any patronage and are particularly vulnerable. Thus slum dwellers, particularly women, are not only distrustful but also fearful of the police, encapsulated in the account of an interview respondent from Korail: “I am always afraid that the police are going to come. I have a son who can become a victim without any reason in a block arrest. The police come to the house if they don’t get them from the streets. If we ask them why they are arresting, they say they have orders from the top. I never feel safe. What can I do? We are poor and have no other place to go.

Police corruption and collusion with criminal mastaans and politicians is widely reported in the literature and was highlighted at interviews (Ali 2006; Banks 2008; Daily Star 2006; Hakim and Tanaka 2007; World Bank 2007). In this sense, in contrast to fulfilling the mandated role of crime prevention and reduction, police force members themselves become perpetrators of crime, or allow manifestation of crime through intentional inaction. An investigation found 132 police offences in an 8-month period in 2005 and 123 in the same period in 2006, which included “robbery, extortion, mugging, drug peddling, rape and violence against women”, mostly committed by low-ranking police staff (Daily Star 2006). Media reports often highlight such wrongdoings, for example: “police are the most corrupt of all government organs and protect the criminals rather than the victims”; or, “average income of the police force is 1000 times their legal income” (Ali 2006). As summarised in another report, “police have been blamed for causing crime and violence in the city either by “not enforcing their power” or being “partakers in incidents” Daily Star 2006). Negligence in discharging duties, corruption, lack of good governance, criminalisation of politics, vested interest, etc was some of the common blames against the government and police force.” Here, thus, the role of government also comes to light, the supra-body of which the police are but an ‘organ’. The poor performance of the police is the reflection of weak governance, a key aspect of the Bangladeshi national context (GSDRC 2009; Hakim and Tanaka 2007; Dwyer 2010).

Several changes of government over the past decade have witnessed hardly any change in police performance except for changes only in political allegiances. The only exception was the interim Caretaker Government regime during 2007-08. Being independent and mostly neutral from the two main political parties that have alternated in power since the creation of Bangladesh in 1971, the Caretaker Government for a change disallowed political patronage to some extent and initiated a series of reforms during its tenure, including an anti-corruption drive. As a result criminal activities were suppressed and the security situation improved somewhat. However human rights activists have criticised many of the Caretaker Government’s actions as being extra-judicial and resulting in arrests and criminal charges without fair trial or assessment (Alam 2007). For the urban poor, the outset of the Caretaker Government regime was accompanied by extensive eviction drives in the name of eradicating ‘illegal’ constructions. Only after pressure from urban poor advocacy groups, the government agreed to provisionally discontinue evictions in informal settlements on public
land and to rehabilitate evicted people; nonetheless eviction does continue to be implemented under various guises (Ahmed 2007).

It must however be conceded that the DMP operates on very limited resources and manpower, roughly at an average ratio of 1 police staff per 400-500 urban residents (Daily Star 2006; World Bank 2007). It grapples with inadequate equipment and training to address crime and violence in a rapidly growing megacity of nearly 14 million people with poor transport and infrastructure. Salaries of low-ranking police staff are typically low and thus the temptation to commit crime is great. Such staff is usually at the lower end of the rising urban inequality scenario, separated only by a fine line from the urban poor of informal settlements.

The creation of a special force in 2004, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), equipped with superior weapons, transport and training, and believed to be independent of political persuasion and corruption, marked a change from the typically lackadaisical police force, and enjoyed a degree of popularity (Hossain 2008; World Bank 2007). This reportedly contributed to improvement in law and order, demonstrating that even in Dhaka’s difficulty-laden context there is potential for reduction of crime. However, the extra-judicial power endowed in RAB leading to mysterious deaths attributed to ‘cross-fire’ has raised serious human rights questions (Human Rights Watch 2009). After election of the current government, from January to May 2009, at least 25 people have been executed extra-judicially by law enforcement forces and RAB, which continues to enjoy impunity from the law (ASK 2009). Abuse of power, denial of fair trial to suspects, victimisation of the innocent and disavowal of opportunity for criminal reform are some of the key human rights aspects that might eventually undermine the popularity enjoyed by the RAB and make it an untenable option for crime reduction.

In line with the lack of responsiveness of law enforcement agencies to the urban poor, the public legal and justice system is also largely “anti-poor” and the poor have little or no faith in it (Banks 2008; World Bank 2007). Legal recourse is unaffordable, an extensively protracted process and existing practices tend to disfavour the poor. Arrests without warrant is common and jail inmates are predominantly from poor backgrounds, most of whom have been denied legal or fair trial (World Bank 2007). The government does not have any provision for legal aid for those who cannot afford legal fees (UNDP 2002). A lawyer from a civil society legal aid organisation who was interviewed for this study represented the urban poor in an eviction case; he mentioned that during the trial the deputy attorney commented negatively that slums are “the breeding grounds of all evils of the society.” This view is dominant at the institutional level. The urban poor are often seen as the instigators of all crime and violence; it is as if criminality is a trait specific to the poor. On the other hand, slum community members, and NGOs and researchers working with them who were interviewed, strongly objected to this view. They pointed out that there is an increasing tendency to associate criminals with particular slums, even though they were not residents of the slums. It is a form of regular and persistent “blame game”.

In a nutshell, the urban administration structure consists of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) headed by a mayor. Under the DCC there are 10 administrative zones and 90 wards; each ward is headed by an elected ward commissioner – the government representative closest to the urban poor in informal settlements (Banks 2008). Although such settlements are considered illegal, as their residents are entitled to vote, they represent a large vote bank for ward commissioners. Through patronage of local community leaders by ward commissioners, in most informal settlements, considerable manipulation of residents is carried out particularly prior to local elections. Performances vary according to individual ward commissioners and some are more responsive to the needs of the poor than others, as revealed in the study by Banks (2008), though the bottom line remains that of the poor playing an instrumental role towards aspired re-election. Ward commissioners are often key
actors in the mastaan-politician-police nexus, patronising aligned individuals and households, while neglecting or victimising those who are non-aligned or support opposition groups.

Thus the position of the urban poor vis-à-vis public sector institutions remains that of outright marginalisation and victimisation, and often the only avenue for support remains in patronage links in exchange for political allegiances. Private sector and civil society organisations sometimes attempt to intervene and provide alternatives within such a scenario, but so far these are limited largely to infrastructural and social services (health, education, etc) delivery and except for some specialised organisations very few of them attempt to address crime and violence.

Community practices

Because of the lack of access to the formal legal and justice system, at the urban poor community level dispute resolution and redress against crime is often conducted informally through the traditional shalish (informal court) system. At the first instance, it can be very informal if mediation is carried out and resolution achieved through the help of family members, relatives, friends or neighbours. If that fails, a somewhat more formalised and structured process is adopted where help is sought from respected persons or those who represent a degree of authority - community leaders, religious clerics, schoolteachers, local ward commissioners, etc (Jahan 2009) and the shalish is conducted openly in a public place. However, the permeation of national politics into all spheres of public life including urban poor communities via the system of patronage discussed in the preceding sections has meant that the traditional shalish system is also tainted by it (World Bank 2007). Increasingly ward commissioners play a prominent role in shalishes and tend to favour supporters of their own political party (Banks 2008). Perhaps when both parties have the same political affiliation, ward commissioners are confronted with the challenge of neutrality and rendering fair justice. Despite its current shortcomings, the shalish system offers potential for improvement; it is often the only form of justice available to the urban poor and may serve as a cost-effective community-based process that agencies attempting to assist the urban poor could facilitate and support for delivery of fair justice. An effective institutionally-backed shalish system could contribute to crime and violence reduction.

Urban poor communities are not always passive victims of crime and violence. There are many examples of mob behaviour when offenders are attacked by a crowd and overwhelmed, and the punishment doled out is “gory, humiliating, and barely shy of the lynch mob”, as one observer notes (Hossain 2008). In that sense, such spontaneous and community-based crime resolution goes a step beyond the actual problem and gives rise to a new law and order problem, where the perpetrator becomes victim. Thieves and pickpockets if caught are often severely beaten by the crowd in public, sometimes to death. This is the other side of the coin of law enforcement laxity: on one hand, while the poor might become victims and get entangled in the mesh of organised crime perpetrated under institutional sanction, institutional inaction allows them to take the law in their hands and bequeath the harshest informal justice.

Civil society and examples of good practice

Bangladesh has a robust civil society and an extensive network of NGOs. In the past and to a large extent even now, most NGOs are active in rural areas as Bangladesh has been and still is a predominantly rural country. Nonetheless rapid urbanisation is transforming the balance and NGOs now also operate in cities. However, compared to the large number and wide range of NGOs that operate in the country, very few of them work in cities, particularly in urban informal settlements. The lack of legal landownership and tenure status is a major deterrent for NGOs to extend their services to informal settlements. Random eviction drives
undo infrastructural investments made by NGOs (see Fig 10) (Ahmed 2007) and disrupt communities that had been organised. Where NGOs are active, the work is largely confined to awareness campaigns, infrastructure upgrading and delivery of health, education and microfinance services; very few of them address human security issues (Hossain 2008). Where they do, efforts tend to be focused mainly on addressing domestic violence.

Urban poor communities often tend to view NGOs with suspicion: despite benefiting from service delivery they feel exploited and believe NGOs use them to get foreign donations. Criminals disguised as NGO representatives are reported to have stolen savings – a common story in many communities – also a reason for distrust of NGOs (Banks 2008).

Nonetheless, whatever few examples of good or promising practice for protecting human security and crime and violence prevention or reduction for the urban poor can be found in such a context of inadequate public sector institutions and limited civil society engagement, have been initiated largely by the NGO sector or by international funding agencies. Some of these examples are discussed below, though this is not meant to be an exhaustive or definitive list; the idea is to identify some of the key areas that have been addressed and lessons that can be gained from that.

- The Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP) is a network of 53 NGOs addressing urban poverty in Bangladesh (CUP undated). CUP maintains links with donor organizations, governmental bodies and research/educational institutions through an informal group known as the Bangladesh Urban Round table (BURT) (see BURT 2005a; BURT 2005b). The key achievement of CUP has been the formation of Slumdwellers Rights Protection Committees, or BOSC (acronym of the Bangla name). As a non-violent alternative to rallies and demonstration, BOSC’s seek to press demands for services and infrastructure in informal settlements by dialogue and negotiation with local authorities, primarily via ward commissioners. The BOSC network comprises a hierarchical system of tiers beginning with primary communities at the neighbourhood level (15 committee members for 500-1000 residents) to a citywide central committee consisting of elected members from the next committee tier. Although localised disputes are resolved through lower tier committees, larger issues such as dealing with land rights, eviction resistance and legal aid are handled by the central committee (Banks 2008).

However, BOSC’s have not been able to significantly address key human security issues, because of the highly politicised nature of crime in Dhaka. They are nevertheless able to deal with domestic violence, which in some communities have been lessened. At the micro-level, for instance in some neighbourhoods in Korail, residents each contribute a small sum of money through the primary BOSC’s to pay for the salary of night guards.

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3 BOSC now acts also under a different name NDBUS and is itself registered as an NGO, indicating a gradual step towards self-reliance of this entirely community-based body.
The police have begun supporting them and maintain close relations for reporting or redressing any untoward incidences. This demonstrates that such initiatives have potential for upscaling as an approach to addressing wider urban crime and violence. The BOSC network is a well-established system embedded within urban poor settlements and presents opportunity for grafting into institutional crime and violence prevention and reduction initiatives.

- There is increasing pressure from donor agencies to improve the crime and violence situation as a prerequisite for development assistance, which Bangladesh is reliant on; some such agencies consider it as “an obstacle to development” (World Bank 2007). Notwithstanding the weak governance structure, there are initiatives being developed through external pressures, which have led to changes in government policy through an act in 2008 aimed to develop and make police more accessible to communities; however the urban poor has not received specific consideration in the act, despite their high vulnerability. Nonetheless there is some movement towards a pro-poor direction. For example, the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs has been prompted and is being supported by the German aid agency GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit) to develop “gender-friendly, community-based policing” and is expected to be extended to urban poor settlements (Koehlmoos et al. 2009). This however primarily addresses security issues pertaining to women; this is an area that definitely requires addressing given the high rate of violence against women in Bangladesh, but as the author has argued in an evaluation of UN-Habitat’s Safer Cities Programme, such efforts need to be upscaled and extrapolated to address wider aspects of urban crime and violence, particularly in Dhaka where the situation is more challenging than in smaller cities where many such initiatives tend to remain confined (Ahmed 2009).

Similarly through the endeavour and support of UNDP (United Nations Development Programme), to address the weaknesses embedded into the national police force, a Police Reform Programme has been initiated. It is now recognised that only expansion of the police force is not the solution (Ali 2006), but a fundamental change is necessary in its operation by shifting from the prevalent upper-hand paradigm to one that is more embedded and responsive to the ground reality of communities. The programme has a key component on crime prevention and community policing in order to create a more accessible police service, particularly for the urban poor who face significant impediments in this regard. The principal idea is to reduce and mitigate causal aspects of crime rather than acting only in response after crime has been committed, and in the process engage communities as stakeholders in the gamut of police activities. Small community-based initiatives are being piloted: In a slum in Kamrangir Char, a local CBO is being supported to run a community-based youth centre that conducts advocacy, awareness-raising and role model creation campaigns targeted at young men at risk of being drawn into crime and social deviance. For the future there are plans to work with urban poor communities of the UN-Habitat-supported Urban Partnership for Poverty Reduction (UPPR) project in two secondary cities. If the results are positive, such initiatives would be implemented in Dhaka.

There are examples of community-based policing that have been developed without any NGO or government intervention, for example the BOSC example mentioned above, and also elsewhere where ward commissioners, community leaders, community members and the police have worked together to make informal settlements secure from drug dealers and miscreants, thwarting politically-supported *mastaans* (Hossain 2008). These are as yet isolated examples, but have potential for citywide replication as a model. It must however be borne in mind that community policing by itself is not the answer, given the inclination for mob violence and extreme punishment of offenders inherent in community practices. There is a role for both public and civil society institutions to work in partnership with communities to combine the benefits of community-based efforts with
approaches promoting moderation, access to fair justice and human rights, which the above examples have potential to adopt.

- Two NGOs - Ain O Shalish Kendro (ASK) and Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) – are prominent in the field of legal aid for vulnerable groups including the urban poor. ASK and BLAST has been active in assisting domestic violence victims, particularly acid attack victims. They often strive to protect fundamental human rights through a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) process. Successful cases that obtained positive ruling from the Supreme Court include preventing forced eviction and securing adequate state rehabilitation, ensuring workplace safety, legal redress for arbitrary arrests and unreasonable police remand and reducing inordinate delay in court trials. The PIL process has enabled litigation in the interest of the poor, for whom access to justice is remote, and has created a forum for civil society to advocate for pro-poor policy and legislation (for further information, see www.askbd.org; www.blast.org.bd).

- There are various other small scale programmes that focus on specific aspects of human security:

  One Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs) is another initiative of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, where two such centres have been established in the emergency sections of teaching hospitals (Koehlmoos et al 2009). These cater to victims of crime and domestic violence; together with attending to physical injuries, the OCCs also provide psycho-social counselling and rehabilitation support.

  Prevention of drug dealing and smuggling is only part of addressing a social problem that has implications for human security; rehabilitation and behaviour modification of drug users is also a key aspect. In partnership, ICDDR,B (International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh) and UNODC (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime) are promoting the use of methadone as an alternative to injecting drugs, where needle sharing is prevalent and poses risk of spread of HIV/AIDS and other diseases (Koehlmoos et al 2009). Another partnership between a local NGO, Aparajeyo Bangladesh, and ChildHope UK targets street children with preventative measures against substance abuse and high risk sexual behaviour, integrated with employment support and community services (Koehlmoos et al 2009).

  Other NGO programmes, such as BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), Nari Uddog Kendra (NUK) and Proshika, focus on building low-cost dormitory housing for single poor women which provide a safe living environment compared to mastaaan-controlled housing in slums that are rented at extortionate rates and where women are vulnerable to harassment and rape. This is particularly relevant not only because of the high rate of violence against women in Bangladesh, but also because of the need for safe housing for the large numbers of poor women who work in the extensive garment industry in cities such as Dhaka - often rural migrants who have moved to the city for employment (UN-Habitat 2008) and have very few housing options other than slums.

**Conclusion**

It may not be that Dhaka is a very violent city compared to cities elsewhere, but it nonetheless has a widespread crime network to which its large urban population is exposed. Because of increasing inequality, the urban poor are excluded through elaborate private security barriers and are blamed for all the crime in the city, and thus an exaggerated sense of insecurity prevails amongst the wealthy. In reality, it is the coalition of politicians, mastaaans and a corrupt police force that perpetuates organised crime, of which often poor women and children are the prime victims. In the face of an institutional setup that is indifferent to the security and justice needs of the urban poor, spontaneous informal crime prevention and punishment measures have developed, which are often extreme and bypass
the boundary of legal redress, but do little to shift the weight of the hegemony of organised crime.

The ‘illegal’ tenure status of informal settlements places limitations on civil society organisations in assisting the urban poor towards safety and justice. Nonetheless, there are some examples where organisations are overcoming such barriers and are even influencing government agencies to become a partner in addressing urban crime and violence. Although as yet such examples are few and far in between, they illustrate that a wide range of partnerships are required between international funding agencies, government, civil society and communities to prevent and reduce crime and violence and improve human security in a megacity such as Dhaka where the problem is multi-sectoral and multi-faceted, and is perpetuated via a deeply-entrenched and nefarious network linking various actors at different levels of society. At this stage, issues relating to obstacles in upscaling and replication of such initiatives need to be dealt with, as well as mainstreaming into wider national and social development. There is also possibility of learning from lessons in other countries of the region, to which this study aspires to contribute.

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## Appendix: List of key persons interviewed

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<tr>
<th>SL</th>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>POSITION</th>
<th>ORGANISATION/LOCATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ms Fatima Begum</td>
<td>Executive member</td>
<td>NDBUS (Nogor Doridro Bostibashi Unnoyon Shongstha – NGO for slum improvement), Korail resident</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mr Md Shaheduzzaman</td>
<td>Secretary Gulshan Thana</td>
<td>NDBUS, Korail resident</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ms Nazma Begum</td>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>Korail</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ms Shufola</td>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>Korail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mr Md. Kashem</td>
<td>Resident</td>
<td>Mohammedpur Beribadh (embankment squatter settlement)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mr Abu Obaidur Rahman</td>
<td>Senior Coordinator, Legal Advocacy &amp; Policy reform Unit</td>
<td>Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK)</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Mr Taufiqul Islam</td>
<td>Staff Lawyer</td>
<td>Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Dr Sabina Faiz Rashid</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
<td>James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Dr Ferdous Jahan</td>
<td>Coordinator</td>
<td>BRAC Development Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Mr Kumar Koirala</td>
<td>Crime Prevention &amp; Community Safety Specialist</td>
<td>Police Reform Programme, UNDP</td>
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