# **“Working Together Towards Health Equity”**

**A Stakeholders’ Workshop at BRAC JPG School of Public Health, BRAC University**

The BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health of BRAC University is implementing two projects aimed at health and equity in urban areas in Bangladesh. Apart from their work for the Pathways to Equitable Healthy Cities project (Pathways), the School is also implementing a project called ARISE (Accountability and Responsiveness in Informal Settlements for Equity), which aims at identifying the needs and priorities of marginalized people living in urban informal settlements and to develop better accountability mechanisms and responsive services by making their condition visible to key actors to improve their health and wellbeing. The Centre of Excellence for Urban Equity and Health (CUEH) at BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University, Dhaka, hosted a stakeholder workshop titled “**Working Together Towards Health Equity in Urban Informal Settlements**” on 5th September 2019 jointly with the Pathways and ARISE projects.

The objective of the workshop was to inform relevant stakeholders working in the urban scene of Bangladesh about the two projects and discuss different development and policy issues in equitable health for the urban population living in the informal settlements and in Dhaka City respectively. A total of 37 participants consisting of academicians, researchers, practitioners, development partners, and government officials from national and international organizations in Dhaka joined the workshop. Representatives from organizations such as International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (icddr,b), BRAC, International Centre for Climate Change And Development (ICCAD), United Nations Development Fund (UNDP), SIDA (from Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs), Marie Stopes, Plan International, Concern Worldwide, Practical Action were in attendance.

The workshop was inaugurated with a welcome speech from Professor Sabina Faiz Rashid, Principal Investigator of ARISE and PEHC, followed by speeches from the Chair and Special guest Hussain Zillur Rahman. Professor Dr. Zahidul Quayyum, Director Research and Co-Director of CUEH, BRAC JPGSPH provided an overview on the Center for Urban Equity and Health (CUEH). Bachera Aktar, Assistant Director, CGSRHR (Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual & Reproductive Health and Rights), BRAC JPGSPH presented the ARISE project, followed another presentation on the Pathways project made by Dr. Tanvir Hassan, Assistant Professor and Co-Director, CUEH, BRAC JPGSPH. After the presentation, there was an open discussion session. The discussion was organized under four thematic areas: 1. Health, 2. Governance and Accountability, 3. WASH and Basic Utilities and 4. Housing/Livelihood. The four groups identified the service providers, available services, intervention, existing challenges and recommendations on their pre-decided themes.

Under theme one, *Health and Wellbeing of Urban Informal Settlement Dwellers*, participants from academia, health organizations, health service providing NGOs suggested that pregnant women and new mothers, women at reproductive age among others should be the target population. Among the major challenges identified, it was mentioned that maintaining the sustainability of providing health services is a major dilemma for NGOs since they are solely dependent on donor funding. Lack of coordination among the major actors and service providers in the slums, quality assurance of services are the major challenges faced. The group generated recommendations that the overall health service delivery system in urban areas should be structured similar to the rural area. An urban health system should be established with a clear structure, human resources and finance. In this regard, the introduction of financial protection plans such as the Insurance Scheme for urban extreme poor is needed along with proper formulation, revision and implementation of the policy.

Under theme two, *Governance and Accountability*, participants including development practitioners and government officials identified the target groups as policy makers/development partners, Health managers Community participants/ informal settlement dwellers, the local government representatives as well as the private sector. The participants mentioned that there is a huge knowledge gap among the stakeholders as well as a lack of accurate and time data availability. There also exists a lack of coordination among stakeholders and an existence of informal governance, harming both the urban informal settlements and the government. The participants recommended that correct and timely stakeholder mapping is essential along with media and community engagement. It is also necessary to implement awareness raising activities among all the stakeholders.

For theme three, *WASH/ basic utilities in urban informal settlements,* participants consisted of experts from WASH or basic utilities related project identified the target group as the slum settlements. The major impediments were identified as tenancy and ownership of household, and identification number of the households, land scarcity for infrastructure development and a general lack of resources and financing. In this sector as well coordination challenges among the stakeholders persist and service providers are also not provided with accurate slum information, leading to inaccurate distribution of services. The group recommended that initiatives need to be undertaken to provide house holding numbers in the slums so that basic services can be made more easily available. In addition, coordination among stakeholders needs to be improved and community participation needs to be ensured. Policy formulation and their proper implementation were also addressed during this session.

For the fourth theme, *Housing/livelihood issues in urban informal settlements*, service providers from City Corporations, NGOS and multilateral development agencies were the participants. The major challenge identified was the scarcity of spare land for providing housing and the lack of political will to provide an urban poor community with housing. A lack of unity among the urban community also creates challenges for the service providers to work with the target groups. The participants recommended that a holistic approach should be taken rather than simply concentrating on the single housing challenge. There is also a need for large scale government-initiated housing projects for the target population with a co-funding by the private sector. The introduction of social safety net programmes for urban slum dwellers may also be a useful initiative.

The workshop also included a presentation by Dr Camilla Audia, currently working on partner engagement and co-production for the Pathways project. She presented about the role of coproduction in the Pathways project. She introduced the concept of coproduction that would be used to identify key issues and priorities on urban health for the different cities and guide Pathways project’s research towards addressing them and supporting policy makers with relevant and accurate information on urban health priorities. She demonstrated a conceptual framework to represent how co-production is happening in Pathways. This framework comprised of three loops including different steps identifying all partners/ stakeholders for engagement, establishing communication and trust building to jointly frame issues and priorities, while mapping actors and networks. She highlighted how co-production is an iterative process and that the different steps may need to happen several times for the process to be taking into account priorities from different stakeholders.

This framework is a useful analytical tool as it allows researchers to track comparability of processes across the different cities of the project; however, it can be complex, time and resource consuming. For this reason and acknowledging that interactions across actors of Pathways can be varied in length, scale, quality and nature, we introduced the concept of a modular construction of co-production made of building blocks, acting as co-production steps. Any actor, at any point of the project, can start engaging in co-production by picking up a block. Over the course of the project, we aim to support actors into picking up more and finding a balance of steps across the three analytical loops. Blocks can be built by researchers by engaging with policies or policy makers, by reading newspapers or blogs and by organising and attending meetings but also by stakeholders simply by communicating with researchers, asking for data or through informal conversations. Dr Audia mentioned that applying the concept of co-production will be key in aligning the project’s research outputs with the different cities’ key priorities and issues. The presentation generated a useful follow-up discussion on its adaptation in different contexts. Participants asked about the flexibility of the proposed tools to achieve co-production so that it can be useful in the context of Bangladesh; an interesting discussion also concerned finding a balance between asking for decision-makers’ time and giving them relevant data and findings from the project’s research. This will be part of the conversation among Pathway researchers to identify next steps for engagement in Bangladesh over the next two years.