



Slum residents are not ignorant

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Not backward in terms of knowledge MAHMUD HOSSAIN OPU

How can we better manage disasters in slum areas?

People living in slum areas are lagging behind in many respects.

They are deprived from many amenities of life such as proper education, health care services, power supply, water, and other basic needs. In those places, people live in a crowded space with immense noise pollution and noxious fumes of the waste dumped in surrounding areas.

BBS estimated that about 2.23 million people live in slums across the country, of them 1.14 million are males, 1.09 million females, and 1,852 transgender people. Out of them, 1.6 million people live in the Dhaka division alone.

A social survey conducted in the slum areas revealed that a little more than one-fifth had never been in school, one-third were literate, and approximately only 3.1% of the slum-dwellers completed their secondary education. Slum-dwellers are the worst affected people of fires, and also the most vulnerable to earthquakes because of the congested set-up of infrastructure and makeshift homes. Is there any way out for them?

Adda and television

The first means was “adda” which takes place in leisure time, and is availed as a means of dissemination and development of ideas and knowledge.

A small social gathering is considered social capital, which is commonly practiced by most women of the slum areas. They gossip and hold discussions with their neighbours in leisure time.

They watch television and share knowledge about what they see on screen.

In such social gatherings, many issues of their everyday lives surface, which they discuss and learn about, including fire and earthquakes.

NGOs could learn about their concerns over urban disasters and take initiatives to address them. They have organized awareness sessions and workshops to disseminate knowledge over disaster management.

Television programs can reach all people at all levels. Nowadays, FM radio also plays a crucial role in increasing the awareness of slum people.

Both can be good mediums to disseminate knowledge among the people.

Many aid agencies nowadays have taken initiatives to educate slum dwellers about disaster management with limited coverage.



Mobile phone apps and games can be developed and distributed among the people. Women and children are the most effective agents

How BTV helps

Nonetheless, having experienced all kinds of deprivations, slum-dwellers are well-informed about disaster preparedness and disaster risk resilience. They have learned about what to do in case of severe earthquakes and fires.

They also know about how first aid should be provided to the injured persons in a severe fire incident, and how to inform the fire service department.

A slum-dweller remarked that although they didn't get any formal education from any educational institution, they are still well-prepared to fight any disaster, learning from the programs of BTV. BTV is regularly broadcasting different programs to increase awareness about disaster preparedness, which are quite popular.

While discussing, it was found that they know about all the very basic strategies of disaster resilience. If someone were to catch fire, covering the person with a water soaked sack could be beneficial before sending them to the hospital.

Most importantly, they also know that if a fire is caused from a gas leak, water can't be used to put out the fire. Rather, sand or loose, earthen soil is to be used. In addition, the main electrical switch is to be turned off immediately to stop the spread of fire.

Looking forward

Concerned agencies can prepare some action plans to disseminate the knowledge, as it can be done with minimum resources. A digital approach like an audiovisual documentary of disaster preparedness can be made and shown in the slum areas.

Mobile phone apps and games can be developed and distributed among the people. Women and children are the most effective agents, as they share their knowledge with their family members and neighbours through group discussions.

Department of Disaster Management (DDM), City Corporation, Ward, Upazila can take initiatives to make people at all levels aware. At the end of the day, collective efforts can make slum residents resilient to all disasters.

Benjamin Franklin once said: "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest."

The knowledge and perception of the people about the disaster preparedness is remarkable in the slum area. The children of slum areas are also aware of the precautionary measures of urban disasters.

Indeed, slum-dwellers lag behind in many respects, but not always in terms of knowledge about some critical issues like disasters. Living in backward conditions does not always mean that they are backward in terms of knowledge.

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