



# SOCIAL COHESION DURING DISASTERS

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PHOTOS: COURTESY



“No matter how little they helped, whatever we get in such disasters appears to be a big support for us,” said Fatema. She was talking about the emergency food support that she had received from the members of the community after the devastating fire hazard at Tetultala Slum, Tongi.

Fatema is a climate refugee who lost her village land due to riverbank erosion. Three years ago, she came to this slum with her family from a village in Bogra. But in this city, she once again fell victim to a new form of disaster. Urban slums are full of migrants like Fatema. Also, slum dwellers often migrate from one slum to another. As a result they have little sense of belonging to the community. Social cohesion is almost a missing element in the urban setting.

However, Tetultala Slum appears to be an exception. A good sign of social cohesion was observed when a fire broke out at the slum, at Namabazar, Milgate area in Tongi. The fire originated around 11.45 am on Saturday, January 21, 2017 from a cotton go-down and spread across the nearby slum. Around 100-110 slum houses, 33 cotton go-downs were burnt into ashes following the devastating fire. An additional 50 households were demolished to prevent the fire from spreading.

Here, majority of slum dwellers are garments worker. During the fire outbreak, most of them were at work. Hearing the news, many of them rushed to the spot and found everything burning. They didn't get the opportunity to bring out any goods or assets from their rooms. They had to take shelter at their relatives' or neighbours' houses.

From the beginning of the fire breakout to the recovery stage, this

community has established a unique example, which makes it a model of a resilient urban community. It has a central committee called Community Development Committee (CDC) consisting of leaders and influential people of that particular community. During this time of crisis, this committee took the lead to unite the people to help the affected households and later mobilise support from the local government. While in most cases, the slum dwellers usually keep waiting for aide to come from the government or other organisations, people of this slum who were not affected by the fire started to collect money within their community to raise funds. Then they distributed an emergency food package consisting rice, potatoes, onions, Iodized Salt, pulse, and green chili to all the victims. Each package is worth 245 Taka. The Community Development Committee prepared a list of the affected households and submitted it along with an application at District Commissioner's Office and City Corporation seeking support. Local MP, District Relief and Rehabilitation Officer (DRRO) and a female councillor visited the slum. The MPs distributed a sari, a lungi and two blankets to each of the victims.

Moreover, this community owns a number of Urban Community Volunteers who are trained by Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defense and they act as a first responder regarding any disaster in their community. During the fire, these volunteers joined the firefighters to help them extinguish it. Not only the trained volunteers, but also local people and people from the nearby community came forward to help. Such cohesion among the

community members sped up the recovery process. Just within two days, people began to repair and rebuild their houses.

It is worth mentioning that the community is surrounded by street solar lights which emerged as a helpful emergency lighting system at night. It is also a prerequisite for any rescue operation in building collapse or fire hazard incidents to cutoff the electric connection for ensuring safety. Solar-powered street lights played a good role to illuminate routes for victims during power outage at night. These solar lights were installed under two development project. UNDP installed some solar lights under its “The Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction (UPPR)” project. Some other street solar lights were installed by CARE and VERC under “Building Resilience of the Urban poor (BRUP)” project.

This slum has faced fire hazard several times in the past. Even just a year ago, in February 2015 the same community was engulfed with a devastating fire. But never before, have the people seen this kind of rapid recovery.

Raihan, a victim of the fire, said, “During the incident, I was working in a garment's factory. When I had reached the spot, I saw that my room was totally destroyed. I also experienced the fire hazard that took place in our community last time but this time it is a matter of hope that we are recovering very fast.”

These all have been possible because the community is no more cohesive. People of this community believe that their communication and access to the local government have increased more than ever before.