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Press Release:
Call for Making an Inclusive City and to Ensure Housing Rights for Urban Poor

It is the state's constitutional duty to ensure the right to life and livelihood of all, including the urban poor. At a national conference today, speakers called for **urgent steps to ensure housing or tenure security for all city dwellers, by implementing the recently adopted National Housing Policy, through public private partnerships and inclusion of those affected in particular the urban poor.**

Dr Kamal Hossain, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh said *"We need to change our outlook so that those responsible can make a concerted effort to solve the housing problems of the urban poor. We should learn the lessons of our previous experiences, positive and negative, including projects to build low-cost housing, and adopt laws and policies for rehabilitation of slum dwellers and the construction of an inclusive city in furtherance of the constitutional mandate to ensure the right to life and shelter for all."*

Architect Mubassher Hossain called for allocation of khas land to slum dwellers at market prices or less to address the issue of housing. He also called on the government to push forward decentralization, to ensure education and health facilities and create employment in divisional towns, and at the same to review its existing policy for allotting plots and flats.

Appreciating the recent adoption of the National Housing Policy 2016, participants made a number of **recommendations**: including calling for a fundamental change of attitudes towards the urban poor, recognising their rights as city dwellers along with others, adopting through a participatory process a national plan for housing for the urban poor in furtherance of the SDGs, and reviewing the master plan and existing policies for allocation of plots and flats in this light; ensuring compliance with court orders mandating resettlement prior to any eviction including through adopting laws securing housing rights for the urban poor, making budget allocations to ensure housing projects for low-income groups; and ensuring facilities for transport, government services, decentralization required, for the making of an inclusive city. They also highlighted the need to consolidate and disclose information related to the city, including housing arrangements and availability of khas lands; and to undertake research to learn lessons from previously implemented projects, especially the Bhashantek project. Finally, they encouraged the adoption of policies encouraging Public Private Partnership (PPP), ensuring regulations and guidelines are in place to ensure the rights of the urban poor, and reforming the available financing to enable low-income groups to secure housing and shelter.

The first session reviewed **the law and policy framework**. Adv. Abu Obaidur Rahman reviewed experiences of seeking legal protection against forced eviction and past initiatives for rehabilitation or resettlement and stated *"Urgent implementation is needed*

of the Supreme Court directives to stop forced eviction of slum dwellers without prior settlement. We also need to review our laws to secure rights to housing and shelter of the urban poor, and to ensure due process in cases of eviction in the light of international human rights law.” **Dr. Ferdous Jahan, Dhaka University**, called on responsible authorities and developers in Bangladesh to examine the approaches taken in other countries in Asia, in particular in Mumbai, India, to resettle slum dwellers, and echoed this call for inclusion “*Appropriate and effective rehabilitation is not possible without the involvement of the slum dwellers in the rehabilitation process.*” **Touqif Islam, Research Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue, and Citizens’ Platform for SDGs**, also noted ‘*There is no scope to exclude the urban poor when implementing the Sustainable Development Goals.*’ Emphasising the important role of slum dwellers, in particular, the community of workers, he stated “*It is not possible to implement the SDGs in Bangladesh if we are unable to ensure not only housing but also public amenities such as the supply of electricity, gas and water and a standard education or transport system for all, especially for the urban poor, and for marginalised communities.*”

Opening the second session, **Architect Salma A. Shafi** spoke of the **impact of laws and policies on the right to housing of the urban poor**, highlighting that about 60% of urban land remains unutilized. She proposed action to ensure that 40% of govt housing projects are allocated for low-income groups, and implementation of the National Housing Policy, and called for leadership and political will here.” On this issue, **architect and city planner Iqbal Habib** said “There are many land development projects being taken up in Dhaka city, but none of them provide for housing for the urban poor. Even though the City Corporation has a specific budget allocation for slum development we have not yet seen this being activated. We won’t be able to secure the city’s development if we leave behind low-income groups, who are 60% of the city.” **M. Kamaluddin, Executive Director of ARBAN**, who pioneered a low-cost housing development in Dhaka city, also called on authorities to ensure the right to housing and livelihood of urban slum dwellers, who are driving the city’s economy.

In the third session, **participants identified strategies for action**, including seeking coordination of government ministries and agencies, and participation of stakeholders.

General Secretary of Nogor Doridro Bostibashi Unnayon Sangstha Fatema Akhter said, “If any new policy or plan prepared then that needed to be done in consultation with the urban poor. After 46 years of liberation war of Bangladesh, if they put 1% of their focus on them then there would be 40% less urban poor of the country. We showed the government 1200acre land for rehabilitation purpose but later it was grabbed by others. In term of planning urban poor condition must be taken into the consideration and to ensure their participation.

Ashekur Rahman of UNDP Bangladesh highlighted opportunities to undertake low-cost housing developments, and existing policies and plans, and also pointed to the opportunities for developing public – private partnerships to deliver on SDG commitments. **Dr Shapan Adnan** called for stocktaking of existing research on urban

land use and the impact of existing policies on the housing rights of the urban poor. He emphasized the need to analyse patron-client relations and power structures. **Khurshid Alam Khan, Advocate Supreme Court**, called for closer monitoring of Court orders, and for action to hold in contempt of court those responsible for flouting Court directives to ensure rehabilitation and resettlement of slum dwellers.

In the concluding session, Information Commissioner, Nepa Chandra Sarker, commented on the lack of housing projects for the urban poor, in contrast to those available for rural poor. He urged the relevant ministries to disseminate and disclose information related to housing projects, to ensure rights of the poor. **M. Sirajul Islam, Chief Town Planner of RAJUK**, noted that 110 acres of land in Purbachol project had been allocated for the low-income group. He said “ *Housing problems of industrial workers will be solved if industries create accommodation facilities for their workers. Industrial decentralization and developing a transportation system will reduce the migration flow in Dhaka city.*” **Christine Forester**, of the Community Legal Services Programme emphasized the need for further research on these critical issues, and to take steps to ensure participation of the urban poor in decisions and policies regarding their housing and livelihood.

Sessions at the conference were chaired by Dr Kamal Hossain, Senior Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh, and Architect Mubasshar Hossain of the Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA) and former President of the Institute of Architects.

The conference was addressed by the Chief Information Commissioner, Nepal Chandra Sarker, and RAJUK’s Chief Town Planner, Md Sirajul Islam. Other speakers included researchers (Dr Shapan Adnan, Dr Ferdous Jahan of Dhaka University, and Toufiqul Islam Khan of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, Fatema Jahan Sharna of the Law Commission of Bangladesh), architects and urban planners (Salma A. Shafi and Iqbal Habib), Supreme Court lawyers (Adv. Khurshid Alam Khan and Adv. Abu Obaidur Rahman), civil society organisations (M. Kamal Uddin, Executive Director of ARBAN, Fatema Akhter of the Nogor Doridro Bostibashi Unnayan Sangstha (City Slum Dwellers Development Organisation), Rebeka Sanyat of the Coalition for the Urban Poor, Shirin Akhter of the Women with Disabilities Foundation, Sarder Shafiqul Alam of the International Centre for Climate Change and Development, Kazi Baby ED of the Participatory Development Action Programme). Christine Forrester of the British Council, also spoke. Zakir Hossain, ED of Nagorik Uddyog, and Sara Hossain, Advocate, Supreme Court/ BLAST moderated sessions.

Background:

The conference was held to bring together key stakeholders to identify the barriers to implementation of and the opportunities for securing the constitutional mandate to ensure the right to shelter and livelihood. Secure housing ensures the right to shelter status and livelihood for each person. Almost one third of Dhaka city dwellers now live in urban slums. Even though those who live there are the drivers of the city’s economy – whether working in the garments industry or the informal sector – as rickshaw pullers, cleaners, domestic workers, or running small shops – they remain under threat of

sudden homelessness. For example, on 16 March a fire broke out at Korail resulting in many facing injuries, suffering loss and damage, and thousands being left without shelter and under the open skies. Several other fire incidents have broken out during the course of this year. The causes of the fire are still under investigation.

Given the commitments made in 7th Five Year Plan and the newly adopted Housing Policy 2016, as well as international commitments made to achieve the SDGs, and Supreme Court orders clearly mandating alternative resettlement prior to any eviction, necessary plans and programmes need to be put in place urgently to ensure the rights of the urban poor to housing, shelter and livelihood.

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