Sustainable Social Housing Initiative in Bangladesh: Stakeholders’ Mapping and Assessment Report

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Executive Summary

Bangladesh is undergoing a rapid urban transformation in recent years and its capital city, Dhaka, has now emerged as one of the fastest growing megacities in the world. It may be mentioned that Bangladesh already belongs to the most densely populated countries in the world having 1,015 people/km. In this context, one of the major policy concerns emerges from rapid urbanization which is mostly concentrated in the country’s two largest cities- Dhaka and Chittagong. The unplanned nature of urbanization, along with the growth of low-income settlements and slums in the urban areas, is raising significant socio-economic and environmental challenges for the country. In this context, social housing programmes (popularly known as low cost housing) are emerging as viable options of meeting the housing demand of the low income households in the country. It is observed that these housing programmes, which are undertaken mostly at government initiative, are often inadequately planned and rapidly constructed with little consideration for durability, sustainability or environmental health.

Low cost (social) housing projects in Bangladesh are mostly undertaken by the government through several public sector organizations such as the National Housing Authority (NHA), Public Works Department (PWD), and the RajdhaniUnnayanKathipakkhya (RAJUK). No doubt, the expanding social housing programmes present significant opportunities for improved resource use both during their construction and while using the housing units by the inhabitants.

Sustainable Social Housing

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) initiated the Sustainable Social Housing Initiative (SUSHI) in 2009 to promote the use of resource and energy efficient building solutions in social housing programmes in developing countries.

The present study in Bangladesh aims to conduct preliminary research and undertake awareness raising activities, coordinated by the Built Environment Unit of UNEP - Division of Technology, Industry and Economics based in Paris, with inputs from relevant subject expert organizations. This report presents the findings of the stakeholder mapping and assessment exercise carried out under the SUSHI-Bangladesh
project. The assessment broadly examines the familiarity, knowledge and capacities of different stakeholders in designing and implementing sustainable social housing in Bangladesh.

The present report on stakeholder mapping and assessment is based on both primary and secondary data and information. The primary data have been collected through surveys based on questionnaires as well as interviews to assess the level of awareness of different stakeholders about sustainable building practices and solutions. For the purpose, four different groups of stakeholders: Housing developers, material suppliers, building designers, inhabitants have been identified and separate questionnaires administered for these groups. A total of 66 stakeholders were selected for the questionnaire-based survey for the study. Of the total, 15 were from the housing developer group, 6 from the building designer group, 19 from the material supplier group and 26 from the inhabitant group.

Familiarity and knowledge about social housing
About one-third of the developers have either no or low familiarity and knowledge about social housing while the share is as high as 95 percent for the material suppliers and 50 percent for the building designers. These results suggest that the concept of social housing is yet receive adequate attention of the stakeholders whose roles are critical in making social housing a reality in Bangladesh. The vast majority of the respondents do not have a clear understanding of the concept of social housing and its relevance to Bangladesh.

Interest in social housing
Most of the respondents of the four stakeholder groups, including 80 percent of the developers and 100 percent of the designers, have expressed their interest in promoting social housing which shows its potential in addressing the country’s housing problem in a sustainable and cost-effective manner.

Targeting social housing to different income groups
One important factor is the perception of the housing developers on different income groups who would be more interested in social housing so that the right groups could be targeted for the purpose. It is seen that household groups having monthly income within the range of Tk. 30,000 and Tk. 100,000 are the most preferred groups by the developers for targeting social housing.

Perceptions on attitudes of inhabitants and other stakeholders
It is seen that 100 percent of the developers, material suppliers and building designers believe that households with a monthly income below Tk. 5,000 would be willing to spend 0-10 percent of their income on social housing while 90 percent maintain the same share for households within an income range of Tk. 5,000 and Tk. 10,000.

The perception of the developers regarding the feasibility of providing social housing to different household income groups reveals that no developer thinks that it is feasible to provide social housing to households with monthly income of less than Tk. 5,000. As household income rises, the feasibility in the opinion of the developers also rises and reaches nearly 93 percent for the monthly income groups exceeding Tk. 50,000.

The perception regarding the intensity of acceptability of social housing across different income groups shows that the acceptability of the very low income households (having monthly household income of less than Tk. 5,000) is perceived to be zero by both material suppliers and designers. The richer income household groups, on the other hand, have high intensity of acceptability in terms of social housing. The perception of the developers in terms of the ability of the suppliers to ensure smooth supply of the materials needed for social housing shows that nearly 39 percent of the developers believe that the existing supply chain would be able to meet such requirements while 61 percent believe that the ability of the suppliers is limited for fulfilling such requirements.

Opinion on constraints and required government initiatives
The survey results show that nearly 87 percent of the housing developers consider the lack of government initiatives as one of the major constraints followed by lack of affordability of inhabitants and land available for social housing (73 percent). For the material suppliers, high cost of materials is identified by all respondents followed by lack of government initiatives and support (85 percent). On the other hand, more than 83 percent of the building designers regard high cost of building materials and services as the major constraint followed by lack of knowledge and information including data on cost-effectiveness, pay back and economic returns (67 percent).

Views of inhabitants
The respondents were asked to identify the five most important aspects that they value the most while buying a house. It can be seen that nearly 85 percent of the inhabitants rank reasonable prices followed by the quality of environment and surroundings of the housing units by 81 percent as important.
considerations. Other important considerations are good location and area of the buildings (69 percent),
closeness to amenities like parks, playgrounds and gardens (69 percent), and good transportation system
(54 percent).

As the survey results indicate, the concept of social housing is yet to gain popularity among the
stakeholders in the country’s housing sector. The relevant government policies which promote low cost
housing in the urban areas have several disadvantages from the perspective of sustainable social housing.

The relevant strategies for promoting social housing need to start with the narrowing down knowledge
gap that exists regarding the concept of social housing including its sustainability dimensions. Similarly,
efforts are needed to highlight the mutual benefits that all stakeholders could gain through adopting the
social housing approach. The majority of the stakeholders hold the view that the absence of long-term
financing and other support from the government are the two major constraints which hinder the
development of social housing on a sustained basis. Further, initiatives are needed to enhance the
capabilities of the government and the private agencies to plan and implement sustainable social housing
in Bangladesh.

It seems that the middle income groups are the viable potential groups who could take the pioneering role
in promoting social housing in Bangladesh. For success in these efforts, two considerations emerge out as
extremely important.

First, streamlining the channels of the existing housing finance and creation of new channels, if necessary,
targeting these groups so that they can access hassle-free housing loans; and second, competitive and
reasonable pricing of social housing units (e.g. through earning low profits) which will encourage the
potential buyers to invest in social housing.

The government also needs to contribute to raising awareness regarding the concepts of social housing
and green buildings and ways of promoting such sustainable housing facilities in Bangladesh through
conducting in-depth research and analysis. One of the key findings of the present study is that all
important stakeholders in the housing sector are willing and interested in promoting social housing in
Bangladesh. For making sustainable social housing a reality, an important priority of the government is to
create a congenial environment through adopting appropriate policies and measures such that social
housing can be expanded based on a solid foundation in the country’s housing sector.