The Daily Star

2:00 AM, November 27, 2018

Is housing for the urban poor a mere dream?

One of the most iconic public housing projects of the 20th-century was built in St Louis, Missouri, in the early 1950s, during a time of post-war optimism and construction boom in America. The Pruitt-Igoe housing project consisted of 33-housing blocks, each 11-storey high, and was arranged across a 57-acre site in the poverty-stricken DeSoto-Carr neighbourhood. Upon completion, the project was seen as an answer to the urgent problem of housing the urban poor.

Twenty or so years later, on July 15, 1972, the project was demolished, as it earned the notoriety of a crime-ridden, dangerous, and desolate housing project! While what exactly caused its demise remains contested, most observers believe that Pruitt-Igoe became a symbol of failed public policy and the simplistic belief that the building itself could solve such a complex social problem as urban poverty.

Alas, as onetours Dhaka, Pruitt-Igoe replicas and variations are seen to be mushrooming abundantly in many corners of the city. These “vertical slums” appear to be just another glorified variation of the so-called concept of “slum improvement.” Not only is slum improvement a failed public policy, but it also dehumanises the poor as a sub-human category; one that could be perpetually ghettoised and supplied with periodic “improvements” from the high perch of the city planner or urban administrator.

To reduce urban poverty and address the related problem of housing for the poor, we need to begin by asking a fundamental question. How do we, as a society, view poverty? It is important to revisit this age-old question in order to disrupt the vicious cycle of urban poverty in a sustainable way.

Most empirical studies on poverty bypass the messy idea that poverty is not just a result of material deficiency, but also of a host of interconnected societal factors, such as systemic lack of access to opportunities and decision-making power structures, physical isolation, discrimination, and an entrenched cycle of vulnerabilities. Poverty exists because policymakers often address this social pathology with a quick-fix mindset, driven by cold-hearted empirical research.

It is not that empirical knowledge of the poor is unnecessary. But without compassion as public policy, big data continues to calcify the poor as a lowly category. Without any real agency of its own, this category is on perpetual life support. In his work on gender justice, Amartya Sen argued that real societal progress is made when women's empowerment takes a strong hold on the public's ethical imagination. A similar argument could be made in the case of poverty studies. An ethically-based view of the poor as fellow citizens, rather than as an objectified research category, is needed for any sustained alleviation of poverty. It is time policymakers, municipal administrators, and urban planners rethought urban poverty as a problem of social justice, not just as a problem of economic development. The poor must be seen with a human face, not as an abstraction.

The concept of poverty has not been static in history. Both the concept and strategies for its relief have changed since the Industrial Revolution, and industrial cities grew manifold in the modern era. Consider London, for instance. In the wake of the city's intense urbanisation in the 19th century, a highly divisive political and philosophical debate raged about reforming laws related to poor people.

Should the poor be the charge of the state? It was hardly a straightforward argument between state responsibility and private charity. As studies show, in 19th-century London private charity flourished when public relief for the poor was most generous. At the centre of this vexing debate was this question: would top-down “help” (from the state and wealthy private citizens) diminish the poor's ability to take personal responsibility? So intense was this philosophical discussion that even Tocqueville and Hegel followed the English turmoil with much fascination.

Let us return to the issue of housing for the urban poor. We should consider Bangladesh's current economic scenario and its impact on urbanisation. The gravity centre of the country's economy is steadily moving away from agriculture to industry and service. Agriculture now accounts for only 15.5 percent of the country's GDP but 44 percent of total labour force. That means the surplus labour will move to cities in search of jobs and financial security. According to the World Bank, Bangladesh's urban population grew from 5 percent in 1960 to 36 percent in 2017.

Where will this growing urban population be housed and how? Housing the urban poor will be the greatest challenge for urban administrators. Since the 1950s, governments in developing countries have been trying to sort this out by employing a variety of approaches. Among them was the heavy-handed attempt to resettle slum-dwellers in low-cost shelters, away from the centres of employment and transportation, and severed from their existing social networks. Most slum-dwellers abandoned their shelters and returned to city centres, where there were job opportunities.

Furthermore, they were able to pay neither the minimum price for the purchase of new housing units, nor the monthly service fee for the maintenance of their project. From the 1950s to 1970s this type of failed public housing projects in Manila, Madras, Kuala Lumpur, and Seoul, among other cities, revealed how the challenge of urban housing for the poor was intertwined with broader social predicaments of employment, mobility, and social adaptability.

In the 1970s, the World Bank-assisted sites-and-services programmes began to offer low-income urban families opportunities to pursue their own housing priorities, build houses that fit their lifestyles, and use local building materials that they could afford. Served by basic infrastructure and utilities, sites-and-services programmes, combined with self-help principles, provided the poor with relatively easy access to housing options. But this system worked only when city lands were available for a large poor population, fair and efficient allocation of plots was possible, and the costs of participation in the programme was affordable. These were major hurdles that eliminated the poorest households in urgent need of housing.

Given the rapidly growing size of the urban poor in Bangladesh, what approach should be taken to solve the country's looming housing crisis? There is no easy solution. The problem requires multidisciplinary answers. In a land-scarce metropolis like Dhaka, sprawling sites-and-services housing programmes don't seem feasible. Clearing slums and resettling people in fringe areas, away from job opportunities and transportation hubs, won't work either. We need novelty on multiple fronts: community-oriented architectural design, community participation and arrangement, social planning, urban connectivity, and housing financing.

We need a policy of land-saving and high-density vertical development, but one that is humanised by adequate community areas at the ground level. People would get used to living in tall structures only when we can recreate the social dynamism of typical street life at their interconnected base. A vertical complex would work when it is mediated by a horizontal ground-level social and market corridor, where inhabitants would socialise and become small-business

owners, entrepreneurs, vegetable-sellers, and so on. As congested, chaotic, and unsanitary as it is, the Dhaka Karail slum has a street life that fosters social interaction. For a large housing complex to succeed, its inhabitants must feel ownership and be socially comfortable. Economic planners must come up with affordable and easy-to-understand financing options for the urban poor to become homeowners with a step-by-step ethos.

We should not ghettoise the urban poor in the gutter of inhumane pigeonholes, unfair financial burden, and social discrimination. Most important, we should not betray our fellow urban citizens with the false hope of slum improvement.