

The Daily Star

Urban Health Innovation Challenge 2021: Promoting youth-led, community-centric solutions for building resilient and inclusive cities

Afsana Yeamin and Bachera Aktar

Fri Jun 18, 2021

Promoting healthy and safer cities, the Urban Programmes of World Vision Bangladesh (WVB) and BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH) of BRAC University, jointly organised "Urban Health Innovation Challenge 2021: Healthy, Safe and Inclusive Cities" from February to March 2021, where youths from universities, urban slums and gender-diverse communities competed side by side.

This innovation challenge invited Bangladeshi university and college students, recent graduates and young people from urban informal settlements to share their ideas on pragmatic, low-cost, innovative, and community-centric solutions to mitigate two problems faced by the adolescents and youths living in urban slums: the limited access to sexual and reproductive health (SRHR) services for adolescents and youths, and the increasing sexual harassments among these target population.

Urban Health Innovation Challenge 2021 (UHIC 2021) was launched virtually on February 9, 2021. 42 teams submitted their ideas. Among them, 6 teams participated from urban slums and 1 team represented a gender diverse population.

A three-member screening committee primarily shortlisted 20 teams. Out of those, based on the implementation plan and innovativeness of ideas, top 6 teams were selected for the final round held virtually on March 31, 2021. The top 6 teams pitched their ideas in front of a jury panel, after which the winners were announced.

Teams 'Biroti', 'Poribortan' and 'Protimoncha' secured the champion, first runner-up and second runner-up positions respectively. 'Friday School' were ranked 4th and 'Juboshakti' and 'Uttaran' jointly achieved the 5th position.

Champion team 'Biroti', proposed an idea of a digital app for building awareness on long-acting reversible contraceptive (LARC) methods among young, married women living in urban slums. The app will provide information on nearby health

facilities, where LARC are available, store users' can record and give users automated reminders for upcoming dose schedules.

First runner-up, team 'Poribortan', proposed a comprehensive age-specific sexuality education curriculum for adolescents through interactive classroom sessions and a user-friendly, low-cost digital SRHR education platform.

Second Runner-up team 'Protimoncha', a team from Kallyanpur slum, came up with the idea of building a youth club and community watch group to raise awareness against sexual harassment in their slum. The community watch group patrols in harassment prone areas in slums and a complaint box will be set up in the community resource centre to encourage reporting harassment cases anonymously.

'Team Friday School' designed a creative community-space for adolescents and youths for promoting behavioural modifications through healthy recreational activities. 'Team Jubosukti' proposed the idea of innovative peer-education approach for SRHR education and team Uttaran proposed the establishing of a one-stop SRHR helpline service for gender diverse people run by a group of trained gender diverse people.

A prize-giving ceremony was arranged on June 9, 2021, at the BRAC Centre Inn Auditorium to give prizes to the top 6 winning teams. Dr Sabina Faiz Rashid, Dean and Professor, BRAC JPGSPH, BRAC University, initiated the event with a welcome speech. Monju Maria Palma, Deputy Director, Urban Programme, WVB and Bacher Aktar, Assistant Director, The Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (CGSRHR), JPGSPH, BRAC University, briefly presented the objectives and the overview of the contest.

Barrister Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, Mayor, Dhaka South City Corporation, graced the event virtually as the chief guest. He said that no nation can achieve success without innovation and identified the increasing population as a huge threat to Dhaka. He highlighted the government's initiatives for improving urban facilities, emphasising on prioritising and solving urban problems based on the actual needs, instead of the donors' interests.

Besides, Brigadier General Dr Md Sharif Ahmed, Chief Health Officer, Dhaka South City Corporation, attended the event as special guest and highlighted several measures Dhaka South City Corporation has planned to implement to ensure SRH rights of adolescent girls living in Dhaka city.

Special guest Dr Jaynal Haque, Program Manager Adolescent and Reproductive Health, MCH Services Unit, DGFP, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, emphasised on empowering adolescents by education and SRHR knowledge and ending child marriage among female adolescents.

Suresh Bartlett, National Director, WVB, joined the event as special guest as well. He said that WVB will continue to promote such innovations and gave importance on implementing and scaling up the ideas generated by the youths for the betterment of urban communities.

"Pregnancy rate is two times high among women living in urban slums - lack of awareness and knowledge on long term contraceptives is one of the notable reasons. The interface of 'Biroti' app is very user friendly and can be operated in Bangla. We believe that the outcome of using this app will be enormous and it will help the government reach the desired target for family planning," Noshin Sayiara Suchi, leader of the Champion team, said.

While all these ideas are yet to be implemented, WVB and JPGSPH are planning to carry out research in future to test the implementation feasibility based on the solutions proposed by the winning teams with an aim to develop scalable urban health programmes.

The authors are respectively: Research Associate; Assistant Director, Brac James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University.