

# Urban Agriculture for and by the Poor

Photo by Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

Mohammad Badol (38) is a resident of the Korail Bosti slum. He prepares the ground on his lot on the bank of Banani Lake to grow vegetables. Having lost his garment factory job he sells them to other residents to earn money, while also sharing with his family to eat. April 28.

This first special edition of the Situation Analysis series has been put together by the Dhaka Food System project, with support from the Kingdom of the Netherlands. This edition focuses on the practice of urban agriculture by the poor in communities across Dhaka. It results from ongoing research into different parts of Dhaka's food system that contribute to delivering safe, affordable, and nutritious for all.

All across Dhaka the urban poor are looking for food to satisfy a most basic of needs: to eat. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis the poor have borne the brunt of worsening economic conditions. They have lost jobs and savings, and they continue to face desperate conditions as the crisis continues indefinitely. In addition, disruptions to food supply chains from rural areas to the city have resulted in rising prices for the food staples that they depend on – such as rice, lentils, and vegetables. With little money or capacity to buy food, many are eating less food of poorer nutritional value. The even less fortunate are going hungry.

**“Let there not be an inch of land left without farming.”**

*Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, April 2020*

Urban agriculture, also known as urban gardening, is the practice of growing and harvesting food in cities. Commonly small gardens grow leafy vegetables, root vegetables, chili, and fruit. Raising goats and hens for meat and eggs is also practiced. It can help the poor generate income, provide much needed nutrition and ingredients for their meals, and even build community resilience. During the last months, small household or community gardens have become a lifeline for many poor communities. They are a creative solution to scarcity that can provide households with inexpensive access to food that they might otherwise struggle to purchase. Urban agriculture can also serve as a more durable and long lasting answer to future food security threats.

## Where can urban agriculture occur?

While the search for alternatives to traditional food sources has intensified in recent months many urban poor communities have practiced urban agriculture for some time. There are many kinds of

foods that can be grown and raised in cities, and this depends a lot on local conditions and the amount of available space in a given community. In dense urban slums it is difficult to find empty lots, while in the urban periphery there are fields and larger expanses that can be taken advantage of for planting. In Dhaka there are other kinds of spaces which include riverbanks and space alongside lakes, on rooftops, in backyards, and even utilizing windowsills.

## Korail Bosti

Situated in one of the most sought after areas of Dhaka, Korail Bosti is one of the largest poor settlements in the city, with an estimated 100,000 inhabitants. On one side Korail sits alongside Banani Lake. Along a short stretch of the bank of the lake, twenty enterprising residents have created small plots of land for growing vegetables. They mainly grow leafy vegetables such as puishak, palongshak, datashak, laalshak and also tomatoes, begun, dherosh and other seasonal vegetables.

Prior to the COVID-19 crisis these urban farmers sold vegetables to supplement their incomes, but now that jobs and incomes are scarce, they have relied on these crops for their subsistence. They also sell to other residents who are finding it increasingly difficult to afford food due to rising prices and minimal income. The farmers have been able to maintain the plots by creating small fences, drawing water from the lake, and creating seed banks to nurture small plants.

Beyond supplying fresh and nutritious vegetables to residents the plots also provide a solution to a tricky problem. By occupying the banks of the lake, after the city's land authority decided to construct a road, they prevent informal structures being erected on the riverbank.



Photo by Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

Mohammad Samad (45) has been growing vegetable in his garden in Korail TNT Colony for the last twenty years. The vegetables are mostly for his own family's food, but he also sells extra vegetables to his neighbours. April 28.

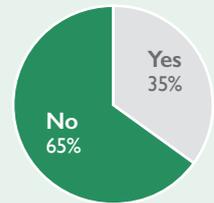
## Quick Survey

During the week of April 26 the DFS Team conducted a quick poll of 123 urban poor respondents to provide an up to date estimate of the interest in practicing urban agriculture.

## Key Findings:

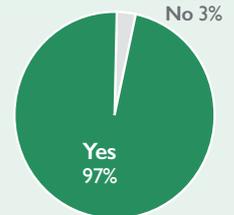
### Do you grow any kind of food items to supplement your diet?

From 123 respondents, 43 (35%) are currently growing their own food.



### Are you willing to grow your own food?

Among those who do not grow their own food 97% said they are willing to start.



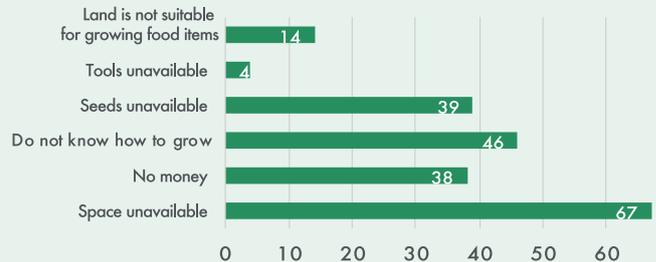
## Colony Bosti, Mirpur

Colony Bosti is a large settlement of government workers located adjacent to a cemetery in one of Dhaka's largest housing areas, Mirpur. An area of the settlement is a cemetery, but within that a group of four women saw an area of underused and abandoned space that they wanted to use for social gathering and for gardening. They created 10 ft x 10 ft lots on which they are growing seasonal and leafy vegetables, such as dherosh, begun, tomato, chili, and onion. The local authorities have accepted the gardening practice as it has had a positive effect on the community, while not otherwise being used. During the COVID-19 crisis these plots have been especially important to the families of the women who feed their families with the vegetables that they been growing.

## Why are you not growing any food items?

The respondents interested in growing their own food but who do not practice urban agriculture (78) gave the following reasons that prevent them doing so are:

- 85% unavailability of space (67)
- 58% lack of knowledge on growing food items (39)
- 50% unavailability of seeds (39)
- 48% lack of money (38%).



## Recommendations

- ✓ Most land alongside lakes is not used. It accumulates trash and is unsightly. Permission should be given to temporarily use vacant land for growing
- ✓ Seed banks can be arranged to supply seeds to low income communities at affordable prices with the collaboration of organizations such as BRAC, FAO, and urban poor organizations.
- ✓ Government permission can be given to poor communities to also use vacant and abandoned land alongside train tracks, roads, and rivers, to grow plants, and aquaculture can be promoted in lakes and ponds. Government can incentivize this practice on vacant private lots through tax breaks.
- ✓ Trainings can be given on small-scale gardening techniques, even growing plans in plastic bottles, and other practical alternatives.
- ✓ Development organizations and NGOs can provide loans and small grants to set up gardening plots, given the shortage of money available to the poor at the moment.



Photo by Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

*Mukuli Begum (40) lives in Kallayanpur Pora Bosti and has twenty-five goats. She has been raising goats for the last ten years, selling them during religious festivals to earn a livelihood. The lockdown has been bad for business, as most people don't have enough money to spend, and she has struggled to buy food for her goats. April 28.*



Photo by Fahad Abdullah Kaizer

*Mohammad Nurunnabi (39) grows vegetable for his family in his homestead garden Banani TNT Colony. He is on leave from his garment factory job due to the lockdown. April 28.*