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# Social capital and accessing services and support during COVID-19 in informal settlements of Dhaka, Bangladesh: a cross-sectional study



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## Abstract

**Background** Social capital, which describes the social ties enjoyed by groups and networks with common interests, is one of the most useful resources in society. These networks could be both formal and informal, with positive effects seen at both individual and community levels—especially during crisis management. In building urban resilience and to ensure access to support and services, social capital has been fundamental throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. We aimed to explore different forms of social capital networks in the informal urban settlements (known as slums) of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and how these networks were helpful during the pandemic.

**Methods** This qualitative study was conducted in three urban slums (Kallyanpur pora bosti, Dholpur, and Shyampur) in Dhaka city). In-depth phone interviews with residents (aged  $\geq 18$  years) of the slums were carried out by the research team, using a semi-structured questionnaire of 13 open-ended questions. Additional probing was done as necessary, depending on the clarity and specificity of the information provided by respondents. We used a snowballing sampling technique and verbal, informed consent was obtained before interviews. Thematic analysis was done. Ethical clearance was acquired from the institutional review board of BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (2019-034-IR).

**Findings** Between Oct 21, 2020, and Jan 12, 2021, 30 phone interviews were conducted with 22 women and 8 men. Thematic analysis showed that the most marginalised individuals in urban slums are highly dependent upon their social structures, in whom bonding social capital through informal networks is most evident. These networks are based on the trust and reliance built among people whilst living together in close proximity for a long time. Immediate family members and relatives were described as the primary point of contact for any support during emergencies. Respondents who had bridged social capital networks, and were now affiliated with different local community groups, had greater access to relief (such as food, face masks, and soap) and financial support than those who did not form social networks beyond the slums. Informal networks with landlords, local shopkeepers, pharmacies, and neighbours played a crucial role during the COVID-19 pandemic, by providing food or cash support or lending goods in credit.

**Interpretation** Strengthening different forms of social capital is vital in building urban resilience and our findings highlight the importance of prevailing social capital networks and their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Contributors

FM, WA, and IH collected and analysed the data. FM wrote the abstract, with guidance from NF, BA, and SFR.

## Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

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