

## Trained, Resilient Urban Community Volunteers as First Responders in a Disaster Prone Capital



Volunteers working in partnership with the Fire Service and Civil Defense (FSCD) respond to a fire incident at Churihatta, Chawk Bazar, Dhaka  
Photo Source: FSCD, Bangladesh

**Dhaka, Bangladesh—** In 2019, Dhaka City experienced several fire incidents that killed more than 100 people. The alarming rise of such incidents in a densely populated city requires urgent attention.

One such incident occurred on the night of February 20, 2019, when a massive fire ravaged through several multi-storied buildings on Kumar Lane in Chawk Bazar's Churihatta area of Old Dhaka. Immediately, 71 were killed and scores more were injured. The fire was reported to have originated from an explosion of a compressed natural gas cylinder in a vehicle involved in a road accident. The fire quickly spread to nearby buildings which were being used to store hazardous, flammable chemicals. The fire rapidly spread to adjoining structures in the densely populated historic district of old Dhaka.

Habibul Islam Sumon and Sinthia Hossain are two urban community volunteers that were early to arrive to the scene of the incident. Sumon is a Protocol Officer of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and lives in old Dhaka. Sinthia is a housewife and lives in the same area. Each have been working as volunteers for over 15 years.

On the evening of the disaster, Sumon received an alert through the government wireless radio and immediately saw the dark cloud of smoke and flames pouring out from Chawk Bazar. He quickly shared the news with his fellow urban community volunteers through social media groups. Volunteers living nearby made their way to the site of the fire and sprang into action by evacuating the residents of adjacent buildings, since the massive fire was generating destructive flames and heat that were engulfing surrounding structures. Sumon and



Urban Community Volunteers received instruction from FSCD during the Chawk Bazar fire incident.

Photo Source: Fire Service and Civil Defense, Bangladesh

Other volunteers helped fire personnel identify dead bodies to be handed over to relatives. He also aided in the transportation of injured victims to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Meanwhile, firefighters and rescuers from the FSCD arrived on the scene and worked to control the fire and save as many lives as possible.

Sinthia also responded during the rescue operation. When the Chawk Bazar fire broke out, she got a call from another volunteer at 10:45 pm who asked her to proceed immediately to the site with other available volunteers. She explained that the volunteers worked seamlessly with the FSCD team, as they were trained according to the same procedures. **“Crowd management is essential during this kind of hazard,”** she added.

Sumon and Sinthia both received Basic Training under Comprehensive Disaster Management Program (CDMP) and completed the Advanced Refresher Course on Collapsed Structure Search & Rescue (CSSR), Fire Fighting and First Aid under USAID’s Strengthening Earthquake Resilience in Bangladesh (SERB) Program. The program also provides equipment to aid in search and rescue missions.

As a volunteer continuously striving to improve his knowledge and skills, Sumon had the opportunity to visit ADPC’s Head Office in Bangkok, as well as the Philippines as part of the SERB Program’s learning exchange visits. As a veteran and experienced volunteer of more than 18 years in Bangladesh, the FSCD appointed him as the coordinator of a local urban community volunteer group. In this leadership role, Sumon describes the benefits of effective training: **“If I did not receive basic and refresher training, I wouldn’t have known the right way to deal with the situation. I recommend that ADPC continue to organize additional refresher training and simulation exercises to keep volunteers active and maintain their readiness to respond to different types of emergencies.”**

Sinthia agrees that the training is invaluable: **“I couldn’t have done what I did at the Chawk Bazar fire without the refresher training. While we normally do not have sufficient equipment and proper clothes to enter a burning building, we can still contribute by safely performing other duties such as helping control the crowds, providing safety information to the community, safely operating rescue equipment and clearing the road to facilitate uninterrupted movement of emergency vehicles and personnel responding to the emergency scene. During a rescue operation, volunteers also safeguard the properties and valuable belongings of the affected people from theft by local people or outsiders.”**

Looking toward the future, and thinking through how to improve operations, Sinthia suggested the establishment of an official communication procedure to alert and quickly mobilize urban community volunteers to respond to emergencies. Currently, these procedures are not formalized, and activation of volunteers depends on how the area volunteer coordinator broadcasts the information and provides instructions to mobilize. As a next step, establishing a formalized structure could improve the effectiveness of communication and inevitably, the response.

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The Strengthening Earthquake Resilience in Bangladesh (SERB) is a program funded by USAID Bangladesh Mission implemented by ADPC since 2013. Around 1,640 (428 Female, 1212 Male) Urban Community Volunteers have been trained in 11 Districts to date, namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Mymensingh, Tangail, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Manikganj, Rangamati, Bandarban and Cox’s Bazar. The SERB Program continues to support the FSCD and contributes to the development of 62,000 community urban volunteers nationwide as mandated by the Government of Bangladesh.



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