

Part II: Field Notes

Outline

The purpose of this part of the booklet is to present the field notes and lessons learned from the research. It attempts to discuss some of the issues that need to be understood when working closely with the poor.

The first section provides some background information about the research and describes some of the methodology used in the fieldwork. The second section focuses on the people for whom this research was carried out, highlighting issues relating to choice of research participant and listening to those in most need.

Section 3 describes and discusses some of the problems associated with communication between the researcher and the researched. The importance of recognising misunderstandings and ambiguity in fieldwork, and the existence of different perspectives is illustrated with examples. A number of the methods used to enable and encourage clarity of expression, on the parts of the researcher as well as participants, are also described.

Section 4 outlines a number of general issues relating to the fieldwork and suggests ways in which their negative effects can be minimised. The final section provides a summary of the Field Notes section.

1.

Fieldwork methodology

1.1 The researcher and local collaborators

The fieldwork was undertaken by one Englishman (the principle author) with the assistance of Mr Hasnat Iftekhar Hossain, a Bangladeshi who worked as a translator and field assistant. Assistance was also provided by a second Bangladeshi, Mr Shafiul Azam, who was present for some of the fieldwork and planning. Mr Azam worked for the Water and Sanitation Programme, Bangladesh (WSP) in Dhaka. These two people provided invaluable insights into the area and research topic which would have been extremely difficult to obtain through non-local contacts.

Local collaboration is considered by many to be a pre-requisite of overseas research ventures. However, it seems important to ask where priorities lie in seeking collaboration. Are they in 'local' or in *genuine* 'collaboration'? Local researchers can offer an unmatched depth of knowledge and insight in various areas through fluency in local languages/dialects and intimate understanding of local culture and practices. However, if a local collaborator does not understand and share the outlooks and methodological approach of a researcher, the value of local knowledge may be limited. The same could be said of understanding and being sympathetic towards the objectives and ethics that underpin the research. In situations where a local collaborator with similar outlook cannot be found, it may be that a similarly minded foreign collaborator would, overall, be more valuable.

Much of the research in Dhaka was participatory in nature, and required a translator who understood the philosophy of open ended, open-*minded* research techniques. Hasnat Iftekhar was conversant with concepts of open-ended discussion and questioning and participatory group-work. This was essential for effective research and enabled a good partnership in fieldwork. Despite this, on occasion loaded questions were being asked and participants were being guided towards providing information that Iftekhar had come to know was 'required'. This was due to subtle misunderstandings in the reason behind asking certain questions, as well as perhaps a deeper misunderstanding of the desire to be *given* information rather than to 'take' or infer it.

Iftekhar was not primarily a translator but a field-researcher who was able to translate. He has undertaken research with children in the past and already had a good knowledge of waste pickers and their work. This latter experience was very useful and means that it is possible that he will use, or continue, this research in the future. This is an obvious longer-term benefit of employing individuals with genuine interest and involvement in the work after a given piece of research finishes. This was also the case with Mr Azam of the Water and Sanitation Programme, Bangladesh who is involved in solid waste research.

1.2 Time and duration of fieldwork

The fieldwork for this booklet was undertaken over a period of two months from March 2000. There was no specific reason for having chosen this time. This was the dry season in Dhaka when temperatures were highest, at up to 40°C. It was not the most uncomfortable period of the year, which falls at the beginning of the monsoon when the high temperatures combine with up to 100 percent humidity.

In the course of this field work the effects of the seasons were studied in some detail. At the time of research, it was clear that heat was a limiting factor for the pickers. This was mentioned by some of the pickers, but it was also clear to the fieldworkers who were experiencing the intense heat and exaggerated stench of decomposing waste first-hand. Given the value of first-hand observation and experience by fieldworkers during research, it may be that conducting the research at different points in the year would give greater insight into the effect of climate on the pickers.

1.3 Initial observations

Before formal research began it was important for the researchers to orientate themselves in Dhaka. This enabled them to understand where the pickers lived and worked and to select a variety of contrasting areas in which to conduct research.

Research was undertaken using a variety of participatory techniques with both individuals and groups. Methodologies are outlined, in turn, below.

1.4 Research with individuals

Nine individual informants were interviewed for this research. They were located in five contrasting areas of Dhaka as indicated in Table 4.

These areas were chosen to enable comparison of a range of waste pickers' livelihoods in Dhaka. It was also anticipated that study of different types of areas could reveal trends in the spatial variation of waste in Dhaka and its impact on livelihoods. The pickers tended to work in areas away from their homes, mostly because they came from very poor areas and the waste in wealthier areas is likely to be more valuable.

WASTE PICKERS IN DHAKA

Table 4. Research areas for individual participants	
Area/place name	Characterised by
Banani	High income inhabitants
Mirpur	Low income inhabitants
Begum Bari	Industry & low income inhabitants
Matuail	Solid waste municipal landfill site
Farm Gate	Numerous ' street children '

NB. 'High income' and 'Low income' are not quantitative terms but are based on common knowledge of the areas and observation of type and quality of housing.

Table 5. Details of individual participants			
Name	Location	Sex	Age*
Nasir	Korail bustee	M	~ 15
Saddam	Korail bustee	M	~ 7
Shahib Ali	Mirpur hostel	M	~ 25
Shafi	Mirpur hostel	M	14
Maleka	Matuail dump	F	34
Jussna	Matuail dump	F	~ 9
Raju	Begum Bari	M	~ 14
Jushim	Begum Bari	M	~ 9
Muman	Farm Gate	M	~ 12

** Most participants were unsure of their exact age. Uncertainty is indicated by '~'.*

The names and details of the individual participants in this research are provided above in Table 5.

When points of particular interest and relevance to individual participants are cited, they are referenced using their name as given above.



Photograph 6. Fieldwork in Banani

Waste pickers are easily located in Dhaka. In general, the researchers would arrive at a slum or an area known to be inhabited by pickers early in the morning (usually at around 7am) and locate potentially suitable candidates. After brief introductions and explanations, providing the pickers felt comfortable, two researchers would join them for a few hours observing and discussing their work. Interviews were carried out ‘on the move’ for three reasons. The first was to avoid the inevitable accumulation of a crowd (by keeping moving this was less of a problem). Secondly, it provided an insight into the activities of the pickers in their work as researchers were with them during a relatively normal day. The third reason was that any time a picker spends not working can directly result in lost income. Income is proportional to the amount of waste collected.

None of the ‘interviews’ comprised solely of a set of questions. The facilitators had a set of issues in their minds, and would steer the conversation around these. Depending on how talkative or articulate the pickers were, issues that they themselves mentioned would also be explored and discussed. To gain information on all aspects of a picker’s livelihood would require much time and effort and it was important to appreciate that these pickers were giving up time, and hence potential earnings, in talking to us. Hence, the objective was not to cover all livelihood issues with each individual, but to cover most issues with a range of individuals. Where information and understanding was lacking on certain aspect of livelihoods, conversation would be encouraged on that issue in the next meeting. Where possible a

photograph was given to the participants at a later date as a token of thanks for their time and help. No payment was ever rendered.

1.5 Research using focus groups

A focus group is a meeting of a group of individuals used as a forum for discussing issues common to each participant. It is likely that a group of individuals will reveal different livelihood information from interviews with each member individually. A number of factors account for this such as the difference between being in a secure, familiar environment in the company of friends, and being in the sole company of an adult translator and a foreigner in a street. Participants in a group are also accountable to one another, and in group activities one individual is likely to be challenged if he or she makes a statement with which others disagree. Recording such disagreements can be valuable in themselves, whether resolved or not (Folch-Lyon, *et al.* 1981).

The focus group activities in this research were designed with children in mind and lessons from the first were embraced in the second. The use of pictures (latterly in the total absence of any written word) made the sessions accessible to all and entertaining for participants and facilitators alike. Entertainment held the participants' attention, and humour served to relax them. The use of pictures and tangible indicators (beans and picture-counters) also meant that there was a way of communicating ideas without the need for language.

Participants for the focus groups were chosen from two areas where research with individuals had already been undertaken. This meant that a relationship already existed with some of the group members, and that the facilitators were not completely new to the context. This made the meetings more relaxed due to the familiarity that existed from the outset, as well as easier to organise from a logistical viewpoint. The results were groups of pickers not of the same age or sex but of similar *circumstances*. Circumstances were found to be more likely to determine picking habits than age.

The areas chosen were quite different from one another, as described in Table 6.

Two activities were carried out in each focus group. The first was the completion of a seasonal chart, and the second a ranking exercise. The proceedings of the meetings are discussed in Section 3.2, Articulation and group work.

Table 6. Focus group areas

<i>Place/region name</i>	<i>Characterised by</i>
Mirpur Boys' Hostel	A hostel for underprivileged boys formerly living on the streets or abandoned in the slums, run by the joint Swiss – Bangladesh NGO Aparajeyo. It provides security, shelter, accommodation, health care and education for 50 boys. All the boys work, many as waste pickers, and pay Tk4 (US\$0.08) per day to the hostel. Most of the boys are semi-literate. A boy called Shafi was previously known from hostel visits and had participated in the individual work. The Focus Group took place in the hostel building around a low table.
Korail Bustee	A slum south of Banani situated on government land. Like most slums in Dhaka its future is uncertain and it is 'run' by corrupt landlords and considered an insecure place. The boys and girls who participated in the focus group here were clearly very poor. They had received little or no formal education and were illiterate. The link with this slum was through Nasir who had participated in individual fieldwork. The Focus Group took place in a school classroom during the lunch break. The school is in the Korail Bustee and is run by 'Proshika', a Bangladeshi NGO. It was a simple tin building with matting floors and no furniture.



Photograph 7. Participants from the Korail focus group.

2.

Whose research and whose agenda?

2.1 Listening to ‘quiet voices’

In the course of field work it became clear that there was a broad spectrum of pickers on the streets. Some boys were very personable, articulate, and loquacious and had lots of initiative and ambitious plans for the future. By contrast, other participants said very little, would not hold eye contact with researchers, had few opinions and/or were unable to express them well and had few hopes or ambitions for the future. The following are two examples of such contrasting pickers encountered during fieldwork.

Box 5. Contrasting personalities: Saddam and Shahib Ali

Saddam was a very gregarious seven year old boy from the Korail Bustee who was clearly very intelligent and had a lot of initiative. He was also very popular and in moving through the slum area people shouted his nickname ‘Dollar’ (Saddam proudly explained that he had acquired this nickname on account of his successful begging exploits at Dhaka international airport). Saddam had many ambitious ideas about the future, and intended to become an auto-rickshaw driver. He had attended school for some time and was keen to continue it at some point in the future. He did not intend to continue picking for very long.

Shahib Ali, who at 27 years of age was the oldest male participant in the research, seemed very uncomfortable with our presence. He appeared to be ill at ease in conversation. It transpired that he had suffered from mental illness (not defined) as a boy. He has now recovered following medical treatment for which he had to borrow money. As a result of his health he had not been to school. He said ‘I will continue picking for ever. I won’t get other work because I can’t even count’.

The following example is based on the actual experience of gathering information from these two pickers. It illustrates how the personality of a picker will impact the nature, quality and quantity of information acquired. Saddam and Shahib Ali are chosen because they represent two furthest extremes amongst the participants.

Box 6. Who are we listening to?

Saddam. Saddam was very talkative and as a result, many pages of information were gathered about him and his livelihood. With little prompting he happily stopped to talk in depth about certain issues. Saddam enjoyed the attention. His picking success does not determine his survival; his earnings simply help the family out and provide him with a few *Taka* per day to buy some sweets. He was chosen from amongst the other boys because he had one of the loudest voices. The research morning was a pleasure and Saddam kept the researchers amused with his jokes, games and personality.

Shahib Ali. Shahib was not talkative and often did not (possibly could not) answer questions at all. He rarely said anything beyond the direct scope of questions. Shahib relies on his picking income to pay ground rent on his hut in a *bustee* and to buy food for himself and his widowed mother. As a result he was not willing to stop work to answer questions for any length of time, and during the brief stops his mind was clearly on his work, not the research. Shahib was not very friendly. Speaking to him and trying to find out about him exhausted the researchers.

Findings. The researchers found interviewing and gathering information about Saddam very much easier (and more enjoyable) than Shahib. They managed to compile a detailed and comprehensive 'Livelihood Profile' on Saddam. Information about Shahib, however, was scant and the researcher was left unconvinced that questions and issues being discussed were even understood because he was so unresponsive in his replies.

There are two important questions to ask at this point. 'Who is the research for?' and 'Who is the research about?' The answers to these questions *should* be the same. Unfortunately in the above example they are likely to be different. While information about Saddam is valuable, details about the life and livelihood of Shahib are in many ways more important. Saddam's survival does not depend on picking while Shahib and his Mother's survival do. Saddam is likely to stop picking soon, but Shahib is 'stuck' and set to continue picking into the foreseeable future. It is Shahib who is most in need of help from future intervention, but it is Saddam whose voice is most likely to be heard. This example illustrates the danger that reporting (and hence intervention) is based on research findings that are more about pickers like Saddam than Shahib, and hence not necessarily based on information from longer-term stakeholders and beneficiaries.

It is clearly vital to avoid the situation where the pickers who are being listened to most are those who are least likely to spend much of their working lives picking. As the above example shows, it is easy for this to happen. It is vital to build into future research ways of ensuring less articulate pickers, who may be less willing and able to participate, are heard and listened to.

2.2 A note on gender

There are certain gender issues for pickers, but because little of this research was carried out with females little is understood in any detail.

The fact that little research was undertaken with girls is an important gender issue in itself. This was partly due to there being more male pickers than females, but also because both researchers were male. Given the pervading cultural norms in Bangladesh, there are difficulties associated with males interviewing female pickers, and they were much less keen to offer their participation than boys. More work would need to be done on this area, and it is possible (although not known for certain) that female researchers would be required to facilitate work with girls and women.

3.

Communication

3.1 Language difficulties

One of the most notable limitations to effective research was language problems. All conversations and communication between participants and researcher in this study had to be conducted through a translator. This is likely to have resulted in valuable information not being recorded, and in inaccuracies in that which was recorded. This is not to say that the research was not useful or of value. However, as with any research, the ideal is where the recorder, interpreter and reporter of the information speak the same language as those with whom (and *for* whom) the research is being conducted.

3.2 Articulation and group work

Even without the language difficulties posed by a translated meeting, an individual may not have ever spoken about issues in the way in which he or she is being asked to by a researcher. This raises questions about the nature of the research topics (their complexity) as well as the appropriateness of the research techniques. Like uncovering ‘invisible trends’, this requires careful thought and incisive methodology. Methods of enabling people to express themselves need to be carefully prepared.

3.2.1 Focus groups

The focus group activities are examples of ways in which participants could express themselves without even using words (hence eliminating language problems). They are also examples of how it is possible to ask questions such as ‘What trends exist in the annual cycle?’ and ‘What are the most and least important things in your life?’ in an ‘accessible’ way whilst trying to minimise suggestion and ‘loading’ of questions.

Two main activities were carried out in the groups: the completion of a seasonal chart and a ranking exercise designed to reveal the priorities of pickers.



Photograph 8. The completion of the Mirpur group seasonal chart

3.2.2 Seasonal charts

The children were asked to indicate how a number of aspects of climate, life and livelihood varied throughout the year on a large seasonal chart. For the (semi-literate) Mirpur Group these aspects were labelled with pictures and Bangla words. Trends in these were marked under the twelve months of the year (in English) using dried peas, except for the 'Health' and 'Food and Nutrition' trends which were indicated by pictures on small squares of cards. Photograph 8 shows the chart as it was being completed by the boys at Mirpur.

The chart was made considerably simpler for the Korail *bustee* group as they were all illiterate. The year was split into three seasons (Hot and Dry, Hot and Wet, and Cold and Dry) instead of the twelve months, and these were indicated by pictures (see Figure 4). The Korail *bustee* boys plotted the same trends on the chart with the exception of 'Food Expenditure' ('General Expenditure' remained), and with the addition of a 'Helping Parents' category. These were also represented entirely by pictures for the Korail group (see Figure 4).

The trends indicated on the seasonal charts represent the combined opinions of two groups of waste pickers. They can be used to 'cross check' the findings of individual discussions as well as discussion with dealers. In addition, trends within the chart can be used to justify or validate other trends within the chart itself. Asking the participants about the links between different trends will often reveal whether they have filled in the chart consistently, for example, with regard a relationship between climate and ill health. In addition, the chart can

Figure 4. Pictures used in the Korail seasonal chart



Sketches: Jonathan Rouse

be used to clarify questions which otherwise appear to be very similar, such as ‘Waste available’ and ‘Waste income’.

3.2.3 Ranking exercise

The children carried out a simple ranking exercise in which they were given a set of picture cards indicating different aspects of their lives, such as family, security, food, money, friends, clothes etc. Before the exercise began, each card was held up in turn and the participants were asked to describe what they thought the pictures represented. Of the 14 cards, only the card depicting freedom was misunderstood; this was a concept not easily represented in a drawing. After ensuring that they understood the meaning of these cards they were asked to rank them in order of their perceived importance.

For the first group in Mirpur, it was felt that the card depicting ‘money’ was too vague, and that it should be possible to draw a distinction between having *enough money* (i.e. meeting basic needs), and having *lots of money* (i.e. being rich). For the ranking exercise with the second group in the Korail *bustee*, two such cards were used. The cards were ranked second and third most important respectively by the Korail group but after some questioning it was felt that the participants had not understood the difference. Simplicity is clearly important.

Figure 5 shows the cards depicting ‘Good friends’, ‘Family’ and ‘Good clothes’ used in the ranking exercise.

3.3 Recognising different backgrounds and perspectives

This section explores some issues resulting from the fact that participants are from very different backgrounds from those of the field workers undertaking this research. While the researchers are educated and literate, the pickers have had little or no formal education, and are mostly illiterate. In addition, in this research, the primary field worker and participants are from different countries, continents and cultures and speak different languages. These differences each pose their own problems which need to be overcome with considerable thought and care.

In the course of discussions with pickers, it appeared that sometimes they were being asked about concepts they had never before considered or analysed. Others appeared to have difficulty understanding the questions being asked or thinking about certain concepts. Many such examples related to questions about trends and seasonality.

Some of the issues and concepts tackled within the SLA are complex. Concepts familiar to the facilitator may seem obscure to the participant and prove impossible to grasp. The consideration of some aspects involves skills such as hypothesising, which may be alien (and seem quite superfluous) to a picker. The reasons for this communication difficulty could be that the pickers simply do not have the mental capacity or skills to consider such ‘complex’

Figure 5: Cards used in the ranking exercise



Sketches: Jonathan Rouse. The results of the ranking exercise are presented in Section 6.1 of Part I.

issues. This is genuinely unlikely however, and the findings in Dhaka strongly suggested that this was not the case. A more likely explanation for communication problems is that the pickers can, and do, think about the issues, but in a *different way* from the facilitator. The distinction between ‘*not thinking*’ and ‘*thinking in a different way*’ is an important issue to understand. The key to unlocking people’s knowledge may be in understanding *how* they think, and *why*. Practically, this means asking a question in a way relevant to the picker. The following example illustrates how not doing this can lead to confusion and misleading responses.

Box 7. Understanding the question: making links

A waste picker is aware that the number of other pickers has increased in a particular area over the last few years. He has reacted by arriving at that place progressively earlier in the morning and finding new areas in which to pick later in the day.

A researcher asks him about trends, which are explained to him as ‘things which have changed over time’. Having never considered the changes in his picking area in this light or as ‘dynamic processes’, he answers no. In fact – he has noticed a trend, has thought about and reacted to it, but he just saw it as a ‘change’. He does not make the link between it and what the researcher is asking about.

Making this link is the job of a careful and skilled researcher and is the subject of the next section.

3.3.1 Being understood by participants

The following example illustrates one such way of forging the link using the (slightly contentious) method of ‘gentle’ suggestion. This was used in the course of the research in Dhaka on various occasions.

Box 8. Gentle suggestion technique

A picker was asked whether he had noticed any trends relating to his work during the last few years. Without appearing to consider the question much, he answered no. Suspecting that there were perhaps some trends, but that the boy had not understood the question, the researcher said ‘We have spoken to some of your friends and they said that the city corporation have begun emptying the skips more frequently in the last six months. Have you noticed that?’ The boy remembers that this has indeed happened, and goes on to say that it has meant that he has had to start picking earlier in the morning before the first collection. In addition, he now understands exactly what type of information is being sought, and goes on to mention further trends including an overall increase in the number of pickers.

This method should only be used when open-ended enquiry has elicited no response. Care is required, and its use should be recorded in field notes. In the research for this study it was found to be a useful way of deciding if there were actually no trends or if the participant simply could not think of any or had not understood the question. This technique is one step away from the ideal of no suggestion at all, but is a long way from the worst-case scenario of asking a loaded question at the outset.

It is essential to find ways of making concepts accessible to pickers and of ‘unlocking’ their views and knowledge. A further important aspect of this process is enabling people to express themselves in a way in which they feel comfortable. This is likely to be different from the technical form of expression usually employed by the researcher, and is further discussed in the next section.

3.4 Invisible trends

The presence of trends was investigated with waste pickers to help develop an understanding of how aspects of their livelihoods have changed over time, and how they are likely to change in the future. These were generally investigated in discussions with individual pickers, and involved them identifying changes they had noticed in any aspect of their livelihood since beginning picking. Pickers mentioned a small number of trends mostly relating to the composition and quantity of waste. These had directly impacted their work and their effects had been clearly visible to them.

It is possible that other trends existed but were not mentioned. One reason for this may be that trends, pertinent to the lives and livelihoods of pickers, were combining in such a way that their effects were negated. Such trends would thus not be noticed by pickers and would remain unmentioned. This illustrates the possibility that important trends exist but remain overlooked in research. The following fictitious examples further illustrate how this might happen.

Box 9. Invisible trends

1. The quantity of valuable waste on the streets may have declined significantly over a period of time, but with it the number of pickers also declined, so the net effects on the livelihoods of remaining pickers was zero.
2. The quantity of waste on the streets may have increased over time, but a picker already picked as much as he or she could carry before this, so the increase made no difference to income.

A similar problem was highlighted in the seasonality discussions, illustrated overleaf

Box 9. Invisible trends *continued*

3. Raju reports that his income remains steady throughout the year. It was therefore assumed that quantities and prices of waste also remained steady throughout the year. However, in the course of further discussion, it transpires that during the wet season the value of waste decreases but he is able to collect more in the ponds near his home. Hence, the overall effect on income is zero.

In these examples, trends or seasonal variations exist but their effects are not apparent in the livelihoods of the pickers. In other circumstances, a single trend may be reported which appears straightforward but which is in fact the complex product of two or more different trends combined. The following demonstrates how this may happen.

Box 9. Invisible trends *continued*

4. The value of waste may have declined over a period, but in that time a given picker grew older and stronger and was able to pick, carry and sell significantly more waste. Therefore, despite the decline in value of waste the picker enjoyed a rise in income.

These hypothetical examples demonstrate the need for great care and thoroughness in research and data collection. They also highlight the need for cross-checking techniques such as triangulation, described in Section 4.5. A consideration of ‘invisible’ trends may be vital to the planning of effective interventions.

3.5 Ambiguity

In addition to the problems of overlooking or misinterpreting trends, there is also the danger that questions be misinterpreted through ambiguity. On occasions, different pickers can also describe a situation in different ways according to their perspective or the way in which they have understood the question. One such example occurred in the course of the Dhaka research, and related to questions about the ‘amount of waste available’ during different seasons. The ambiguity of this question was not realised until some way into the research. The pickers’ answers could reflect either the quantity of valuable waste *available for picking* or the quantity actually *collected and sold*. These may be very different. The fictitious example below, based on real experience in the course of the research, demonstrates how this ambiguity can be problematic.

Box 10. An illustration of the pitfalls of ambiguity

In a given area the quantity of waste available for picking remains constant throughout all seasons. During the wet season many pickers choose to collect and sell less waste because the work is unpleasant, and as a result, their incomes from waste picking decrease. Because there are fewer pickers on the streets, those who continue picking during the wet season have access to a greater proportion of the valuable waste (less competition), so their incomes *increase*.

In answer to the question 'How does the amount of waste change during the year?' three equally correct answers could be given depending on the perspective of the picker and the way in which they understood the question. 'It decreases' according to the pickers who work less during the wet season and are referring to how much they collect and sell. 'It remains constant' for those pickers referring to the amount of waste on the street irrespective of their picking habits. 'It increases' from the perspective of the pickers who continue picking and are referring to the amount of waste available to them.

It is difficult to be sure of the degree to which this ambiguity was an issue for this research, in part because all answers were translated. However, it is another important demonstration of the need for care and clarity in questioning techniques.



Photograph 9. Waste pickers in the Korail *bustee*

4. Other issues

4.1 Fear of authority and attitudes to field staff

One aspect of understanding participants is trying to understand how they perceive the field workers themselves. On first visits to areas or upon first meetings, participants would often look scared, submissive and be very closed and quiet. Some feared the fieldworkers might be from the municipal authorities or the police, and in the slum areas there was reportedly concern that they were government representatives, perhaps assessing land for its development potential. A fear of 'authorities' amongst pickers is in many ways justified for a number of reasons, some of which are described in Part I. In one *bustee* the author was mistaken for a tourist and the translator was accused of taking money for 'showing off' the poor of Dhaka. This was another reason not for fear of, but general negative attitudes towards, fieldworkers.

These examples highlight the importance of forging trusting relationships with participants. In the time scale of this research this was possible with only a few of the boys. These were in the Korail *bustee* which was visited on at least five occasions, and the Mirpur Hostel which was visited by one or other of the researchers three times. Knowing, and being known, by some of the inhabitants by name, and having gained general familiarity undoubtedly did much for improving the ease with which views, opinions and experiences could be exchanged.

4.2 Crowds and attention

The effects of crowds, onlookers and attention were undoubtedly the single most disruptive factor experienced in the field work. In most research areas in Dhaka when the fieldworkers paused, a crowd would gather interested in knowing what was happening. This was a particular problem in the poorer areas of town where researchers, let alone white researchers, are not a common sight. It would be likely to be less of a problem if the researchers were all Bangladeshi.

For some participants the attention was welcome, but for most (particularly older boys) it was not. It seemed remaining inconspicuous was important. In one instance, crowds caused a

picker (Jushim in Begum Bari) to terminate the interview because he said he was too 'embarrassed'.

In the case of the focus groups it was difficult to prevent other children and adults gathered around from adding their own opinions or 'helping' the children think through the concepts presented to them. In these circumstances, due to our indebtedness to the hostel owner or the school teacher who had enabled the groups to take place, it was difficult to politely ask them not to participate.

The problem with crowds on the streets was overcome to a great extent by discussing issues 'on the move'. Keeping moving shed the curious children, and also meant that the participant would spend more time working. It was often useful to stop to discuss some of the more complex issues, such as seasonality, with pickers. For this a place was generally chosen away from where they lived, often in a roadside tea shop.

4.3 Time

Time exercised a constraint on the thoroughness of research with individual participants, and it was important to accept that it would not be possible (or reasonable) to try to elicit information for a comprehensive livelihood profile from a single interviewee. The time required to do this would result in loss of income for the picker, and may lead to loss of concentration for interviewer and interviewee alike. Concentration was a problem during some of the interviews as pickers wished to return to their work, and some clearly (and perhaps understandably) had little interest in the issues being discussed.

It is important to be sensitive towards the feelings and wishes of participants, particularly when they are giving their time freely for something from which they may never benefit. The Dhaka research highlighted the importance of being well prepared and organised in order to optimise the time spent with pickers. It was also important to know when to stop; younger pickers lost patience, others felt embarrassed or scared and others just wanted to return to their work.

4.4 Motivation behind answers

This report is based on the assumption that pickers tell the truth in the answers they give. However, it is important to accept that pickers may be providing spurious information for a variety of reasons. Three such reasons may be that:

- participants are trying to give you the answers they assume you wish to hear. This may be exaggerated in cases where participants feel threatened or intimidated by the researcher;
- participants base their answers on the assumption that they will determine the nature or extent of future help. As such, they answer in the way they think they would be most likely to benefit; or,

- participants have been asked the same questions by many different researchers but have never benefited from any of the promised interventions. Given this, they provide spurious information because they feel angry, or simply for their own amusement (Tripathi, 2000).

These problems can each be combated by clarifying the purpose of the research, being honest about the benefits it will or *will not* bring them and by forging trusting relationships with participants. Other than that, it is important to be aware that this may be happening and to include in fieldwork ways of checking findings. One such way, ‘triangulation’, is described in the following section.

4.5 Cross-checking and triangulation

There were various occasions on which it was possible to cross-check information supplied by one picker with information from another, or from someone closely linked with pickers’ work. It was useful to speak to a number of pickers in a given area in order to try to verify the accuracy of information given. It is of course quite possible that different answers can all be correct given that the circumstances of no two pickers are identical, but when findings from two similar pickers in a given area were different it was worthwhile investigating. Checking would either reveal genuine differences between pickers, or highlight misunderstandings on the part of the interviewee, researcher or even translator.

In addition to speaking to other pickers, another useful way to cross-check data was to speak to the dealers to whom the pickers sell their waste. Dealers are only concerned with how much waste is collected and sold to them, and not with the overall quantity of waste on the streets, or difficulties associated with its collection etc. A number of dealers were consulted in Dhaka and their statements often concurred with what pickers had said. Here are two examples.

Box 11. Triangulation: dealers’ statements

At the Matuail dump, a dealer called Riyadge described how around 10% of the pickers stopped work altogether during the wet season, but that his business could actually improve during the rains because those that remain actually collected more waste. Riyadge concurs with Jussna’s statement that when she continues picking during the wet season she finds valuable waste more easily.

Abdul Jumna, a dealer in the Begum Bari area who buys waste from participants Raju and Jushim said that overall business is better during the wet season. He stated that although the value of waste falls during the wet season the quantity increases sufficiently to mean that he is better off. This is consistent with Raju’s description of the seasonal trends in waste.

Clearly, referring to people who interact with pickers and who have a stake and interest in their livelihoods is a valuable exercise and one that can serve to raise questions about, or confirm, the information gathered from pickers.

Even after triangulation, it is possible that the findings from each participant will disagree. An example of discrepancies between data collected from three different sources each referring to the Korail *bustee* area is described below.

Box 12. Discrepancies

In an individual discussion with Nasir of the Korail *bustee* he stated that he found more waste in the wet season. However, the question of seasonal waste trends in the Korail Focus Group (in which he was participating) was met with an emphatic answer of 'definitely less waste in the wet season'. Despite this, the dealer in Banani (to whom some of the group members sell waste) said there was very little difference in quantities of waste during the year.

This shows that, for some reason, either each of the parties experiences the effects of the seasons *in a given area* differently, or that two of the parties are misunderstanding the question and / or providing incorrect information. It raises the need for more investigation.



Photograph 10. Jussna and friends, pickers at the Matuail landfill site

4.6 Generalisation

In the course of research it became clear that it was not possible to treat or consider waste pickers as an homogeneous group. There were numerous variations in terms of their personalities, personal circumstances and the nature of their work. While most pickers had received no education, some had received a little. Some pickers were the main breadwinners in the family while others were just working to supplement household incomes, both factors that impacted their decision-making processes. Although most pickers were young boys, there were pickers of all ages and both sexes in Dhaka. In addition, pickers in different areas of Dhaka had access to different forms of waste and were even affected differently by the seasons.

It would be unwise to attempt to treat pickers as a single consistent group behaving in the same way and involved in a uniform occupation. A large sample would be required both to understand the composition of the waste-picking group in Dhaka, as well as to develop accurate and meaningful understanding of their livelihoods.

5. Summary of findings

Part II of this booklet has described a number of the pitfalls encountered and lessons learned during the research in Dhaka. The main findings are outlined below.

- Choice of participant in research requires thought and care, and it is important to avoid listening only to the confident and loud and ignoring those with ‘quiet voices’. It is important to be sure that data is collected from a variety of stakeholders.
- There are problems associated with the sex and nationality of researchers. These related to crowd attraction in the *bustees* resulting from the nationality (and appearance) of the main fieldworker, the problems presented by the need for a translator and the difficulties of male researchers working with female pickers.
- Unexpected results can arise and certain trends and effects can be ‘hidden’ and easily elude a researcher. This was the case with regards ‘invisible trends’ where apparently straightforward trends could actually be the result of two or more trends interacting.
- A general awareness of how questions are being interpreted, and recognising ambiguity is essential in fieldwork. Ambiguity arose through language and translation problems as well as through more fundamental misunderstandings due to differences in perspective. The careful use of ‘gentle suggestion’ and ways of aiding pickers’ understanding of issues, concepts and questions can also be valuable.
- Incorporation of cross checking and ‘triangulation’ techniques into the research is important. It is vital to appreciate that discrepancies in data may be because of inaccuracies, misunderstandings or genuine differences between participants.
- Research with groups and individuals are both valuable and likely to provide different types of information. The ability of young, uneducated and illiterate pickers to express themselves vocally, as well as through group exercises such as seasonal charting and rank-

ing, should not be underestimated. It is important however to recognise, understand, and respond to differences in the abilities of pickers to communicate.

- Pickers' attitudes towards field staff need to be understood. Taking time to develop relationships and understand participants can encourage and enable more open and honest discussion.
- The motivation behind answers may not always be obvious or simple and it is important to interpret responses accordingly.

The box below summarises the kinds of questions a researcher should be asking to keep in mind the pitfalls and lessons learned from this research.

Box 13. Field worker questions

- What other explanations are there for findings? Ambiguity, interplay of different factors, combinations of trends etc.?
- On what grounds am I choosing my participants in this research? How relevant is this participant to the purpose of this research? Am I giving everyone a fair hearing?
- Am I giving this picker the opportunity to express himself in a way in which he feels comfortable?
- Am I being understood? Are the questions ambiguous? Am I asking them about things in a way relevant to them, or me? How are communication problems manifesting themselves and who are these problems between (myself / translator / picker)?
- Do communication difficulties run deeper than the language alone (i.e. fundamentally different perspectives)?
- How can I cross-check and verify the information I am getting?
- Am I being reasonable to this picker? Am I disrupting his work or embarrassing him? Am I overstaying my welcome?

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End notes

- ¹ It has been suggested that this fire was not entirely accidental, and that this is a method employed by the local authorities to make demolition of slums appear accidental.
- ² The possibility that the discrepancies are due to the way in which pickers have understood the questions is explored in 'Field Notes' Section 3.3.
- ³ Source: DFID 'ESTEEM' primary education programme, Dhaka.
- ⁴ This issue was discussed with Henrietta Search, a DFID consultant engaged in research in the garments industry in Dhaka. According to her, training periods generally last 2–3 weeks and trainees are required to have some existing sewing skills and, officially, be 14 years of age or older. The larger firms pay 50% salary during the training period, while many of the smaller firms pay nothing.
- ⁵ The relationship between pickers and the police is described in more detail in Section 5 'Transforming Structures and Processes'.
- ⁶ When walking through Banani with Saddam he pointed out the various trees in gardens from which he stole fruit. A number of other boys picked fruit from market floors and sold it on the streets.
- ⁷ The Korail *Bustee* group said that during the wet season, one of the reasons they ate poorly was because of the shortage, and high price, of fuel for cooking.
- ⁸ Another hostel run by the Swiss / Bangladesh NGO *Aparajeyo*.

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