

Neglecting the urban poor in Bangladesh: research, policy and action in the context of climate change

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ABSTRACT In Bangladesh, urban poverty is neglected in research, policy and action on poverty reduction. This paper explores the underlying reasons for this relative neglect, which include national identity and image, the political economy of urban poverty and the structuring of knowledge creation. It argues for more comprehensive policy and programmes for the urban poor given Bangladesh's increasingly urban future and the growing magnitude of urban poverty. The impact of climate change will accelerate Bangladesh's ongoing urbanization as well as deepen the scale and severity of urban poverty. The fact that reducing urban poverty will be increasingly important in meeting national goals for poverty reduction means that policy and action must pay more attention to the urban poor. This is contingent upon two factors: first, a better understanding of the scale and nature of urban poverty and vulnerability; and second, the confrontation of powerful interests necessary to secure a national commitment to urban poverty reduction.

KEYWORDS Bangladesh / climate change / urban poverty

I. INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, research, policy and action on poverty in urban areas is neglected relative to rural areas. A number of overlapping factors underpin this, including national identity and image, the political economy of urban poverty and the structuring of knowledge creation. Furthermore, the impact of climate change on low-income urban residents will compound this neglect. Following an overview of urban poverty in Bangladesh, this paper discusses the causes and implications of this relative neglect for urban poverty, in the context of increasing vulnerability as a result of climate change.

II. URBANIZATION AND URBAN POVERTY IN BANGLADESH

Rapid urbanization is a key feature of Bangladesh's recent development. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, the annual urban population growth rate of Bangladesh was more than six per cent, much higher than the national population growth rate of 2.5 per cent per annum for the same period.⁽¹⁾ Its urban population continues to grow at more than 3.5 per cent annually.⁽²⁾

By 2005, Bangladesh had an urban population of around 35 million, just over 25 per cent of its total population.⁽³⁾ While rural population growth is expected to stagnate by 2010, population growth will continue in urban areas.⁽⁴⁾ Changes in population dynamics have been – and will continue to be – accompanied by large increases in urban poverty. As Figure 1 shows, projections indicate a declining share in the number of rural households living under the poverty line, alongside large increases in the number of urban households living under the poverty line. The “tipping point”, that is when Bangladesh’s poor population becomes predominantly urban, is therefore likely to occur within this generation.

Bangladesh distinguishes between large and smaller urban areas. The country’s six largest cities have been given the status of city corporations and are governed by their own municipal authorities. An additional 271 municipalities, or *pourashavas*, are also classified as urban areas. Many of the smaller municipalities are little more than “rural towns”; in the late 1990s, for example, nearly 70 per cent of municipalities did not meet the criteria necessary to be considered as such.⁽⁵⁾

Bangladesh’s six largest cities contain more than half of the national urban population, and Dhaka alone absorbs nearly one-third.⁽⁶⁾ Discrepancies in district levels of urbanization have widened in recent years, moving from a system of four-city primacy to one of two-city primacy. In 1991, the four largest metropolitan cities (Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi) held 46 per cent of Bangladesh’s urban population, and this polarization has increased dramatically. In 2001, Dhaka had just over 58 per cent of the total urban population of the six city corporations, while the two largest cities – Dhaka and Chittagong – together had more than 85 per cent.⁽⁷⁾

While urban and rural areas are distinct geographical categorizations in Bangladesh, there is less distinction between the rural and urban

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1. Islam, N, S A Shafi and N I Nazem (2007), “Urban poverty alleviation through access to land and housing”, Paper presented at the conference on Alleviation of Urban Poverty through Good Governance, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology and UNDP, Dhaka, 5 June.
2. Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), NIPORT and Measure Evaluation (2006), *Slums in Urban Bangladesh: Mapping and Census 2005*, Dhaka and Chapel Hill.
3. See reference 2.
4. Garrett, J and S Chowdhury (2004), “Urban–rural links and transformation in Bangladesh: a review of the issues”, Care Discussion Paper, Dhaka, 57 pages.
5. See reference 2. Municipalities must have a total population of more than 15,000 inhabitants, a population density of more than 2,000 per square mile and have more than three-quarters of the population engaged in industry other than agriculture.
6. See reference 1.
7. See reference 2.

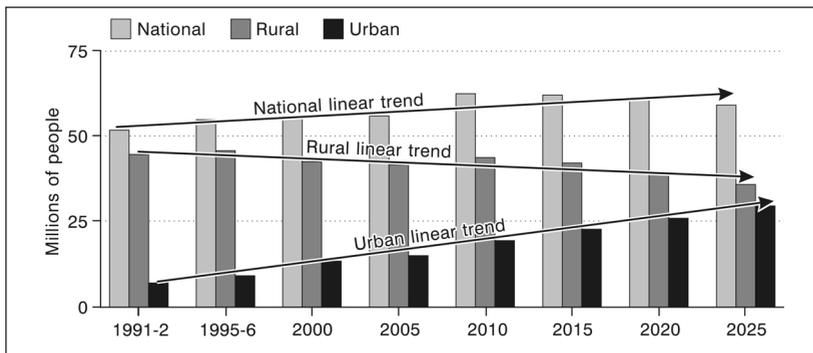


FIGURE 1
Bangladesh: rural and urban populations below the poverty line 1991–2025 (by DCI method, absolute number in millions)

SOURCE: Data for 1991 to 2005 are actual, reported in the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics–Household Income and Expenditure Survey (BBS–HIES); figures for 2010 to 2025 are projected, with data obtained from UNDP. See Eusuf, M (2010), “Dynamics of urban poverty in Bangladesh”, unpublished research proposal, University of Manchester.

TABLE 1
Urban poverty in Bangladesh (1983–2005)

	1983–1984	1988–1989	1991–1992	2000	2005
HIES urban poverty head count	40.9%	35.9%	33.6%	26.4%	28.4%*
NOTE: Estimate for 1995–1996 is excluded because of gross overestimation of average urban per capita expenditure. See Sen, B, K Mujeri and Q Shahabuddin (2007), <i>Operationalizing Pro-poor Growth: Bangladesh as a Case Study</i> , World Bank, Washington DC, 83 pages. *See also Narayan, A, N Yoshida and H Zaman (2007), <i>Trends and Patterns in Poverty in Bangladesh in Recent Years</i> , World Bank, South Asia Region, Washington DC, 22 pages.					

8. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (2005), *Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction*, the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 285 pages.

9. See reference 1.

10. World Bank (2009a), "Dhaka: improving living conditions for the urban poor", *Bangladesh Development Series No 17*, World Bank, Dhaka, 138 pages.

11. Islam, N (1995), *Dhaka Now: Contemporary Urban Development*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 95 pages.

12. World Bank (2007), "To the MDGs and beyond: accountability and institutional innovation in Bangladesh", *Bangladesh Development Series No 14*, World Bank, Dhaka, 68 pages.

13. See reference 2.

14. Satterthwaite, D (1997), "Urban poverty: reconsidering its scale and nature", *IDS Bulletin 2*, pages 9–23.

15. Dubois, J L (1997), "Monitoring urban poverty at the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics: design and implementation issues for an Adaptive 1-2-3 Survey", accessed 25 June 2011 at http://www.dial.prd.fr/dial_publications/PDF/Doc_travail/1997-13.PDF, 55 pages.

poor. Larger metropolitan centres have been the major destination for rural to urban migration, and many migrants retain close linkages with their rural villages. New "urban" migrants must not be viewed as disconnected from rural economies; the relationship between urban and rural areas should be seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy.⁽⁸⁾ It is also, however, important to recognize that high natural increases in the urban population mean that new generations of low-income urban residents may have looser links with rural areas. Migration has been the most dominant component of urban population growth, especially in large cities.⁽⁹⁾ As capital city and Bangladesh's economic, political and administrative heart, Dhaka attracts between 300,000 and 400,000 new migrants each year.⁽¹⁰⁾ Both "push" and "pull" factors have contributed to migration in Bangladesh, however it is widely acknowledged that "push" factors – such as a lack of job opportunities or land erosion – have been the main contributors, suggesting that the majority of migrants are below the poverty line.⁽¹¹⁾

Urban poverty is a distinctive feature of cities in Bangladesh. The World Bank reports that the human development situation in urban areas is either stagnating or actively deteriorating.⁽¹²⁾ In 2005, nearly 35 per cent of Bangladesh's urban population lived in low-income settlements, or *bustees*, across its six city corporations.⁽¹³⁾ While official urban poverty rates have experienced a steady decline – as illustrated in Table 1 – the absolute number of urban poor has risen dramatically.

Official poverty lines, however, are widely recognized as being unrealistic. The monetization of the urban economy is one key reason for this: national poverty lines are unlikely to meet the costs of living in urban areas.⁽¹⁴⁾ The tendency for urban poverty to be underestimated in low- and middle-income countries is common to Bangladesh. The Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) applies the same questionnaire and sampling strategy to both rural and urban households regardless of their cost and consumption patterns. Food poverty lines are computed using a fixed food bundle, using the average price of each item for each of Bangladesh's 15 geographical areas. There is, however, no breakdown of urban and rural prices,⁽¹⁵⁾ and given the large variations in food prices across rural and urban areas, this undermines claims that the national poverty line is representative of both. That poverty lines are based upon the food costs of a fixed food bundle also means that there is little attempt to

establish the costs of non-food needs. The lower poverty line, for example, incorporates only a minimal allowance for non-food goods, which is unlikely to meet the costs of non-food expenditure in urban areas.⁽¹⁶⁾

Not recognizing that large segments of the urban poor must meet monthly rental payments for housing greatly underestimates the costs of urban living.⁽¹⁷⁾ For example, in a survey across four low-income settlements in Dhaka, monthly rents constituted between 17 and 22 per cent of residents' mean monthly incomes.⁽¹⁸⁾ Low-income households must also meet food and transport costs and pay for services, including health, education and the high costs of illegal water and electricity. Given these differences in costs of living, one cross-country study revealed that urban poverty lines are on average 30 per cent higher than rural ones.⁽¹⁹⁾

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has conducted several other surveys in urban areas to address these limitations, but they are not fully representative of the urban poor. They include the Poverty Monitoring Survey (PMS), the Labour Force Survey (LFS), the Local Development Monitoring Survey (LDMS) and the Health and Demographic Survey (HDS). While the PMS – which provides bi-annual information on poverty incidence – is most relevant to urban poverty, the samples are small.⁽²⁰⁾

Given the underestimation of urban poverty, as well as its growing magnitude, the need for a more accurate measurement is striking. The hidden extent of urban poverty contributes to the continued emphasis in policy, action and research on rural manifestations of poverty. These problems will be compounded by the impact of climate change in Bangladesh.⁽²¹⁾ Climate change will accelerate the process of urbanization by displacing a greater number of poor rural households at a faster rate. The majority of those displaced will be the rural poor heading for *bustees* in cities and towns.⁽²²⁾ In an era of climate change, the vulnerability of low-income urban households will increase for three main reasons. First, because of environmental hazards caused by the increased scale and concentration of poor households; second, through increased health, physical and environmental risks and disruption as a result of more frequent, more severe or more prolonged severe weather events; and third, through increased pressure on urban resources caused by higher levels of rural–urban migration.

Although climate change is adding pace and complexity to Bangladesh's urban future, urban poverty continues to be sidelined in national policy efforts concerning action for climate change, notably in the National Adaptation Plan of Action and the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan. Governments tend to envisage climate change as a problem of rural poverty and food security, and fail to consider the life- or health-threatening risks to which low-income urban populations are exposed.⁽²³⁾ The following sections review the extent and nature of the neglect of urban poverty in policy statements, action and research on poverty reduction in Bangladesh.

III. BANGLADESH: IMAGE AND IDENTITY

Bangladesh originated as a predominantly rural economy and remained so until the late twentieth century. Since 1970, Bangladesh has experienced a shift towards being highly urbanized without any concurrent shift in recognition of what this means for research, policy and action on

16. Adjustments in the poverty line for non-food needs are based upon the average amount spent on non-food items by households. For the lower poverty line, the average amount spent on non-food items by households whose consumption does not meet the food poverty line is used, while the upper poverty line uses the average spent on non-food items by households whose total consumption is equal to the food poverty line. See World Bank (2002), *Bangladesh: Poverty in Bangladesh: Building on Progress*, Report No 24299-BD, World Bank, Washington DC, 115 pages.

17. Banks, N (2010), "Employment and mobility among low-income households in Dhaka, Bangladesh", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Manchester, UK, 299 pages; also Chandrasekhar, S and M R Montgomery (2010), *Broadening Poverty Definitions in India: Basic Needs in Urban Housing*, Human Settlements Working Paper Series, Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas 27, IIED, London, 33 pages.

18. See reference 17, Banks (2010).

19. Ravallion, M, S Chen and P Sangraula (2007), *New Evidence on the Urbanization of Global Poverty*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper Series No 4199, World Bank, Washington DC, 46 pages.

20. See reference 15.

21. Bangladesh was the country most affected by extreme weather events from 1990 to 2009 according to the Global Climate Risk Index. See Harmeling, S (2011), *Global Climate Risk Index 2011: Who Suffers Most from Extreme Weather Events? Weather-related Loss Events in 2009 and 1990 to 2009*, German Watch Briefing Paper, 23 pages.

22. Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (2009), *Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan*, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Dhaka, 78 pages.

23. Bicknell, J, D Dodman and D Satterthwaite (editors) (2009), *Adapting Cities to Climate Change: Understanding and Addressing the Development Challenge*, Earthscan, London, 424 pages.

24. See reference 1.

25. See reference 12.

26. Van Schendel, W (2009), *A History of Bangladesh*, Cambridge University Press, 374 pages.

27. Hossain, N (2005a), *Elite Perceptions of Poverty in Bangladesh*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, page 44.

28. See reference 8, page 53.

29. Hossain, N (2005b), "Productivity and virtue: elite categories of the poor in Bangladesh", *World Development* Vol 33, No 6, pages 965–977.

30. Sen, B, K Mujeri and Q Shahabuddin (2007), *Operationalizing Pro-poor Growth: Bangladesh as a Case Study*, World Bank, Washington DC, 83 pages.

31. World Bank (2009b), *Bangladesh at a Glance*, World Bank, Dhaka, 1 page.

32. See reference 12.

poverty reduction. It has been claimed that all ruling governments since Independence have been anti-urban poor.⁽²⁴⁾

As with other countries with agrarian histories, Bangladesh remains loyal to a rural-oriented model of development.⁽²⁵⁾ The generation that governs Bangladesh at present continues to envision the country as "rural",⁽²⁶⁾ and these perceptions play an important role in maintaining a rural bias in poverty reduction. While rural areas tend to be associated with "social harmony",⁽²⁷⁾ the urban poor have commonly been associated with issues of crime and squalor, and emphasis has been placed on removal rather than assistance. In Bangladesh's first Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), for example, the government of Bangladesh reveals that neglect of the urban poor has been due to "...a tendency...to equate the problem with that of a big city slum life...",⁽²⁸⁾ generating visions of illegality, unsanitary environments and criminality. These traditional perceptions of the urban poor vis-à-vis the rural poor have led to the latter being viewed as more deserving of support and investment.⁽²⁹⁾

Another factor that exacerbates the view of rural areas as the location of poverty is the ongoing perception that rural areas are the "legitimate" place for the poor. Bangladesh's cities are increasingly recognized as centres for growth, as reflected in city planning, priorities and spending. There is no scope within a vision of Bangladesh's "urban future" that allows rightful space for low-income households. Furthermore, early beliefs that investment in the urban poor would encourage further migration remain, and this contributes to a lack of investment in urban poverty reduction. While investments in infrastructure, services and human capital have ensured that the rural poor have some access to the benefits of economic growth, few comparable investments have reached the urban poor. This rural bias in poverty reduction efforts has meant that the 1990s was largely the decade of escape from poverty by the moderately poor in rural areas; initial disadvantages in the capabilities of the poor and extreme poor in urban areas, however, persist.⁽³⁰⁾

While images of a rural Bangladesh are based upon objective information – 74 per cent of Bangladesh's total population in 2008 lived in rural areas⁽³¹⁾ – this ideology overlooks the need for urban-specific policies and programmes with which to meet the complex vulnerabilities facing the growing number of urban poor. This has implications both for the urban poor and on development and poverty reduction at the national level. Urban areas will drive the improvement, stagnation or deterioration of national outcomes in poverty reduction.⁽³²⁾

IV. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF URBAN POVERTY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Policies and actions to tackle poverty have been part of policy debate within Bangladesh since its liberation in 1971. Within key policy documents, however, urban poverty has been overlooked. This is most visible in Bangladesh's national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The initial draft of the first PRSP in 2005 omitted urban poverty, and subsequently no policy prescriptions were outlined for its reduction. Urban poverty was only incorporated into the final document after last-minute advocacy work by concerned stakeholders, but it remained a

relatively small focal point. While its half-page inclusion recognized the phenomenon of urban poverty, there was insufficient room to outline the distinct vulnerabilities it entails or the strategies necessary to address it. This has had a direct impact on resources for urban poverty reduction, for which no government agency, department or ministry has been allocated responsibility or funds.⁽³³⁾

Alongside ideologies of a “rural” Bangladesh, a number of political economic factors make the pursuit of narratives about urban poverty less attractive for those with economic and political power than rural poverty. This has had implications for the policies and programmes of donors and NGOs and, to a lesser extent, for research.

Three main obstacles to more effective urban policy making have been identified: a rural bias in Bangladesh’s PRSP; a lack of coordination among relevant departments and ministries; and resignation to the fact that urban poverty reduction is “the impossible” – although financial and administrative constraints contributed to this attitude, a lack of knowledge on the scale, causes and consequences of urban poverty also contributed.⁽³⁴⁾

Municipal governance leaves little scope for participation by the urban poor. Historically, there was little need for municipal governments to represent the urban poor, who were only granted voting rights in 1994; prior to this, voting rights were dependent on property, income and qualifications.⁽³⁵⁾ However, even with voting rights now established, political participation remains limited.⁽³⁶⁾ In recent years, some progress has been made regarding the urban poor in terms of participation and representation at the municipal level. The Bustee Bashir Odikhar Surikha Committee⁽³⁷⁾ is a network of local committees throughout low-income settlements across Bangladesh’s major cities. Its successes are limited, however, by its low coverage and a lack of national commitment.⁽³⁸⁾ Subsequently, there are no mechanisms through which the urban poor can influence national policy.

That voting rights have not translated into wider political participation for the urban poor is driven in part by a lack of representation. Relationships between democratically elected government officials and their constituencies differ across rural and urban areas. While winning the rural vote depends – among other things – on relationships of accountability and legitimacy, this is not the case in urban areas, where election to local government is strongly dependent on the power, wealth and influence of candidates.⁽³⁹⁾

Differences in the size of electorate also causes problems with representation of the urban poor. Municipal electorates are much larger than rural local government ones. Ward sizes in Dhaka, for example, comprise up to 100,000 voters,⁽⁴⁰⁾ making urban electorates large and anonymous voting blocks. In rural areas, by contrast, *union parishads* – the core unit of rural local government – have an average population of 27,000 people.⁽⁴¹⁾ In rural areas, local leaders are more accountable to their poor constituencies. Opportunities for re-election are, in part, dependent on being seen to deliver rights and entitlements, and there is the possibility to confront local elites about poverty reduction. Their position becomes vulnerable if they do not “perform” in this respect.⁽⁴²⁾

Two factors limit interaction between municipal officials and low-income urban residents. First, practically no national social assistance

33. Banks, N (2008a), “Improving the urban poverty agenda: the need for realigned priorities and a better understanding of urban poverty”, Paper presented at the conference on Understanding Urban Poverty, GTZ, Dhaka, 30 November.

34. See reference 33.

35. Kamal, A (2000), “Accountable governance and poverty alleviation”, Paper for the Regional Workshops Democracy Forum 2000: Democracy and Poverty: A Missing Link? Kathmandu, 10–11 April 2000.

36. Khan, M M (1997), “Urban local governance in Bangladesh”, in N Islam and M M Khan (editors), *Urban Governance in Bangladesh and Pakistan*, Centre for Urban Studies, Dhaka, pages 7–26.

37. In 2000, the Coalition for the Urban Poor (CUP) – a network coalition for the 53 NGOs working with urban poverty in Bangladesh – created BOSC (Slum Dwellers Rights Protection Committee) to provide a mechanism through which the urban poor could mobilize and press their demands upon local government. See Banks, N (2008b), “A tale of two wards: political participation and the urban poor in Dhaka city”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 20, No 2, October, pages 361–376.

38. See reference 37.

39. Centre for Governance Studies, BRAC University and BRAC Research and Evaluation Division (2006), *The State of Governance in Bangladesh: Knowledge, Perceptions, Reality*, Centre for Governance Studies, Dhaka, 149 pages.

40. Siddiqui, K, A Ghosh, S K Bhowmik, S Siddiqui, M Mitra, S Kapuria, N Ranjin and J Ahmed (2004), *Megacity Governance in South Asia: A Comparative Study*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 546 pages.

41. See reference 39.

42. See reference 29.

43. Successive governments have reaffirmed their commitment to provide vulnerable groups with public safety nets, and targeted safety nets comprise one of the four strategic blocks of Bangladesh's 2005 PRSP. There are 27 safety nets in the government's portfolio of such programmes (see reference 39), yet only one of these, pensions (the old age allowance), has been introduced in urban areas; and this only since 2007.

44. See reference 37.

45. Sen, B and D Hulme (2006), *The State of the Poorest 2005/2006: Chronic Poverty in Bangladesh, Tales of Ascent, Descent, Marginality and Persistence*, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies and Chronic Poverty Research Centre, Dhaka and Manchester, 199 pages.

46. See reference 29.

47. Siddiqui, K, J Ahmed, K Siddique, S Huq, A Hossain, S Nazimud-Doula and N Rezawana (2010), *Social Formation in Dhaka 1985–2005: A Longitudinal Study of Society in a Third World Megacity*, Ashgate Publishing, UK and Burlington, USA, 380 pages.

48. See reference 1.

49. This is visible in a comparison of NGOs operating across rural and urban areas: there are 52 members of Coalition for the Urban Poor, a network organization representing NGOs that have some programmes in urban areas, compared to 6,500 NGOs registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau. See Gauri, V and J Galef (2005), "NGOs in Bangladesh: activities, resources and governance", *World Development* Vol 33, No 12, pages 2045–2065.

50. See reference 47. There are, however, exceptions to the rule: DSK is an NGO that facilitates access to legal water supplies and infrastructure provision in informal settlements. Several NGOs also provide primary education.

programmes are extended to the urban poor;⁽⁴³⁾ and second, where goods or entitlements are distributed in urban areas – such as food rations or blankets during crises – officials do not engage directly with communities. Instead, they work via intermediaries known as *mastaans*. These are unofficial local leaders in each *bustee* who draw upon their political affiliation to legitimate their power. The literal translation of *mastaan* is "muscleman", and these figures play a role somewhere between a strongman and a local leader. They act as intermediaries, making connections between underserved informal settlements and political leaders.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Elected municipal officials exchange improved services or other benefits for a vote bank mobilized by the *mastaan*.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Therefore, while rural officials are subject to some level of accountability – communities are aware of the identity of recipients of social assistance programmes and will be vocal if they think that resources go astray⁽⁴⁶⁾ – this is not the case in urban areas. Even where low-income urban residents are aware that resources are not distributed equally, the threat of violence or retribution from *mastaans* is enough to prevent communities from vocalizing their disapproval.

Given this political economy in urban areas, it is hard to challenge the structure of interests necessary to "deliver" poverty reduction to the urban poor. There is limited space for confrontation and no incentive for democratically elected officials to deliver services or entitlements to the poor in order to safeguard their legitimacy and authority. The interests that must be influenced in order to advance urban poverty reduction in Bangladesh are powerful elites, with wealth and power over issues such as access to land and control of local *mastaans*. Only those with high levels of commitment – and power themselves – could consider such a risky venture.⁽⁴⁷⁾

These obstacles mean that the urban poor have benefited comparatively little from government policy or programmes for poverty reduction. Only one of Bangladesh's 27 social safety nets – the old age allowance (pension) – is accessible to the urban poor, and this was introduced only recently, in 2007. Alongside being neglected by social assistance programmes, the only major government assistance programme for the urban poor was the UNICEF-supported Slum Improvement Project (SIP), launched in 1995 but discontinued shortly after, in 1996. In addition, while there exists a Housing Fund for Homeless People, which covers both rural and urban areas, loans made available under this do not make specific reference to the urban poor, unlike the rural poor.⁽⁴⁸⁾ Local governments and government agencies are limited in their ability to run programmes for the urban poor because no agency, department or ministry has been allocated responsibility or funding for urban poverty. More recently, UNDP–Bangladesh has been implementing the Urban Partnerships for Poverty Reduction project in 30 towns and cities across Bangladesh in partnership with DFID, the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) and UN–Habitat.

Neglect of the urban poor in national policy and programmes has impacted on the willingness and ability of NGOs to operate in urban areas.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Consequently, NGOs in Bangladesh have less presence in urban areas, and the urban poor are less well served by their programmes than their rural counterparts. It has been said that NGOs have yet to make a mark either as advocates or as service providers for the urban poor.⁽⁵⁰⁾ NGOs are also deterred from operating in urban areas because of land

issues, including the threat of eviction. That “ownership” of land and facilities in *bustees* lies with the *mastaans* is also an obstacle for NGOs.⁽⁵¹⁾

a. Climate change: compounding existing vulnerabilities for the urban poor

As poverty has been a key part of policy debate in Bangladesh since Independence, the country has responded quickly to a new challenge that threatens to increase the vulnerability of millions of its citizens, namely climate change. Bangladesh has taken a lead among low- and middle-income countries in the development of two national strategies on climate change adaptation: the 2005 National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) and the 2009 Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP). But in the same way that it is neglected in national policy on poverty reduction, so too is urban poverty neglected in policy and action for climate change.

While having taken an LDC lead on issues of climate change adaptation, Bangladesh has so far neglected any follow-up action on policies and plans; priority actions of NAPA, for example, have not yet been implemented. In contrast to the implementation failures of NAPA, the post-NAPA preparation period was one of rapid development and build up for the Copenhagen Summit: Bangladesh responded by developing the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP). This quick revision of national policy suggests that earlier documents may have been prepared hastily to tap into the growing possibility of international funds. The lure of international finance for adaptation may have led to identifying costly projects rather than building and expanding current initiatives and existing community adaptations.

Both BCCSAP and NAPA have prioritized agriculture and adaptation in drought-prone or coastal areas. Of the 15 actions prioritized under NAPA, only one – the need for increased urban infrastructure to increase resilience – relates to adapting urban areas to the vulnerabilities of climate change. It does not, however, make any explicit reference to the urban poor. The 2009 BCCSAP, which built upon and extended NAPA, furthered this neglect of the urban poor. While a number of its programmes **may** have some relevance to urban areas, programmes make no explicit reference to the different environmental, socioeconomic and political contexts of rural and urban areas.

Like its predecessor NAPA, the only urban-focused programmes in BCCSAP are infrastructural, including the improvement of urban drainage and urban waste. As with other investments in infrastructure development, these programmes make no provision for the urban poor, consequently there is little likelihood that any investments will benefit this vulnerable group. Moreover, infrastructural and drainage improvements may displace low-income urban communities situated in flood-prone areas or alongside water bodies. Eviction and displacement of low-income urban communities are common in large-scale infrastructure development programmes.⁽⁵²⁾ Recently, for example, in May 2011, two slums were evicted in order to implement the master plan of a project by the Water Development Board.⁽⁵³⁾ Rehabilitation was not provided to the households removed from the five square kilometres of land that were cleared. Despite a national policy on the need to rehabilitate evicted residents, this is not commonly implemented during or after evictions.⁽⁵⁴⁾

51. Rashid, S and Y Hossain (2005), “Constraints in delivering services to the urban poor living in slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh”, Report commissioned by the World Bank, Dhaka, 138 pages.

52. See reference 1.

53. Shiree (2011), *Outcomes from Workshop on Creating Livelihoods for the Urban Extreme Poor*, e-mail communication to online urban poverty group.

54. See reference 1.

The urban poor, therefore, face a “double-whammy” of neglect. Not only are they neglected in national policy on poverty, they are also neglected in climate change policy. Bangladesh’s cities will be heavily impacted by climate change, which will magnify their existing problems. This is particularly the case for the urban poor, who have limited access to services, live in densely populated and environmentally vulnerable areas, and who have limited coping mechanisms and little adaptive capacity with which to cope with shocks resulting from climate change. These problems will be magnified as the impacts of climate change expand city populations and strain existing infrastructure.

Dhaka will be particularly affected by climate change, given its size and nature as an unplanned city in an environmentally vulnerable country prone to heavy flooding and cyclones.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Indeed, of 11 Asian cities, Dhaka was highlighted as the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Flooding, drainage congestion and increased heat stress are the major climate-induced vulnerabilities that will affect this city.⁽⁵⁷⁾ These problems will impact most heavily upon the urban poor, who live in flood-prone and waterlogged areas with little or no access to drainage. Consequently, low-income urban populations will face large health implications, possibly even loss of life.

It is important to recognize that the impact of climate change on the urban poor must be contextualized within the broader perspective of their poverty. A recent study in Khulna, Bangladesh’s third largest city, reveals that the impacts of climate change on low-income urban households are both generalized and highly context specific. While, for example, the vast majority of low-income urban households in a given city would face some of the impacts associated with climate change – such as heat stress and food price rises – other effects would be localized, with physical, tenure-related, socio-political and institutional factors making certain challenges more significant in some settlements than in others. For instance, some livelihoods may be affected more than others and, depending on geographical location, some settlements will be more prone to flooding. These factors shape the way households prioritize and adapt to the challenges they face. For example, in Rupsha Ghat, Khulna – a low-income settlement on public land – the threat of eviction is by far the main concern of residents, as highlighted in Figure 2. Therefore efforts to address climate change-related challenges and risks facing the urban poor must situate these within the other difficulties and priorities that they face.

A lack of explicit recognition within BCCSAP of the vulnerability of low-income urban communities means that these populations will not be incorporated into programmes and policies arising from the strategic action plan for climate change adaptation. This means that it is unlikely that measures will be taken to help the urban poor manage increased vulnerability, and that good opportunities for adaptation will be missed. It is widely acknowledged that optimizing the adaptive capacity of cities must recognize household and community level adaptive practices. Rather than assessing future vulnerability and long-term policy on climate change at the state level, low- and middle-income countries must “...take into account existing coping strategies at the grassroots level, and build upon that to identify priority activities.”⁽⁵⁸⁾ This places grassroots communities at the centre of a country’s adaptive capacity. The exclusion of urban poverty in these policy documents on climate change, however, suggests that there has been little or no consultation of the urban poor in their

55. UN-Habitat (2008), *Case Study: Dhaka’s Extreme Vulnerability to Climate Change*, United Nations Human Settlements Programme, Nairobi, 2 pages.

56. WWF (2009), *Mega-Stress for Mega-Cities: A Climate Vulnerability Ranking of Major Coastal Cities in Asia*, Worldwide Fund for Nature, Geneva, 39 pages.

57. See reference 55; also, Alam, M and MD G Rabbani (2007), “Vulnerabilities and responses to climate change for Dhaka”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 19, No 1, April, pages 81–97.

58. UNFCCC (2010), *Chronological Evolution of LDC Work Programme and Concept of NAPAs*, UNFCCC website.

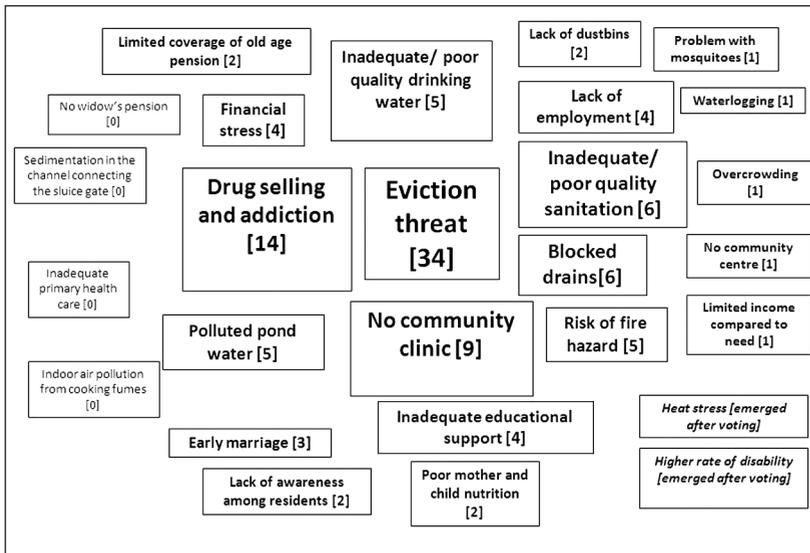


FIGURE 2
Identification and prioritization of challenges facing low-income urban people in Khulna

This diagram is based on a participatory problem identification and ranking exercise in Rupsha Ghat settlement (Khulna, Bangladesh). Nine participants were each assigned 10 votes to prioritize the challenges they faced. The number in parenthesis indicates the total number of votes cast for the corresponding problem. See Roy, M, F Jahan and D Hulme (2011, in press), *Adaptation to Climate Change by the Urban Poor in Khulna, Bangladesh*, The Brooks World Poverty Institute, University of Manchester, UK.

development. Despite this, the urban poor are making adaptations to the environmental problems they face, such as designing huts to reduce heat stress and shading roofs with “green infrastructure”. Such adaptations will become more important as climate change impacts intensify.

These recent changes in national policy do not bring promise for the urban poor in Bangladesh. Obstacles to getting urban poverty onto Bangladesh’s policy agenda have fed into its exclusion from national policy on climate change. Consequently, existing climate change policy does not recognize the challenges facing low-income urban communities, nor does it recognize the adaptive measures they currently undertake. BCCSAP acknowledges some of the problems it faces, including a lack of research-based knowledge that undermines the creation of clear and appropriate policies or programmes targeted at specific groups. The following section turns to research on urban poverty in Bangladesh, which also experiences a rural bias.

V. KNOWLEDGE GENERATION ON URBAN POVERTY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

A lack of understanding and information on urban poverty in Bangladesh – in terms of scale, measurement and understanding its vulnerabilities – causes

59. Islam, N, N Huda, F B Narayan and P B Rana (1997), *Addressing the Urban Poverty Agenda in Bangladesh: Critical Issues and the 1995 Survey Findings*, Asian Development Bank and University Press Limited, Dhaka, 323 pages.

60. Wood, G and S Salway (2000), "Introduction: securing livelihoods in Dhaka slums", *Journal of International Development* Vol 12, pages 669–688.

61. See reference 60.

62. Datasets that do exist in urban areas are also not directly comparable because no research has collected panel data on urban poverty in Bangladesh.

serious problems in developing adequate policy responses.⁽⁵⁹⁾ The dominance of rural issues in Bangladesh's development has also impacted upon knowledge generation on poverty; rural poverty remains the major focus of research in Bangladesh. For example, a bibliographic search of the Swetswise database for post-2000 papers identified 358 papers on Bangladesh, of which only 35 addressed issues of urban poverty.

Research on poverty in Bangladesh had a strong start through the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), a multi-disciplinary institute mandated to undertake policy-oriented research on development issues. BIDS is one of the largest and most active research organizations in the country, however its research has a strong rural bias. While 182 reports have been published since the 1980s, only 14 of these have focused on urban issues (six of which related to urban poverty). A review of the other most active national research organizations in Bangladesh shows that they too have neglected the urban poverty agenda. Only one research institute, the Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), has a specific mandate regarding urban issues, including poverty. The institute also plays an advocacy role in promoting issues of urban poverty.

Existing urban research has so far focused on providing poverty profiles. Among the contributions of CUS, for example, are a series of surveys on urban poverty. While they form an important step forwards in reporting the incidence of urban poverty in Bangladesh, these surveys are limited to providing demographic, socioeconomic and environmental profiles of *bustee* populations. Most existing research has not analyzed the socio-political and cultural factors that lead to the specific vulnerabilities facing the urban poor, thus overestimating the "room for manoeuvre" low-income urban households have in a hostile political economy.⁽⁶⁰⁾

Another limitation of existing urban research in Bangladesh is that it displays a "big city bias". Unlike rural datasets, it is not nationally representative of the country's urban areas. The few surveys conducted among the urban poor are primarily in Dhaka or across the six city corporations. In Dhaka, many of the research publications on urban poverty have emerged from one large research study, the DFID-funded Urban Livelihoods Study (ULS) undertaken in Dhaka in a single ward of Mohammadpur.⁽⁶¹⁾ Such studies, therefore, have not captured the characteristics of urban poverty across greater geographical areas.

A predominance of rural-focused research is not unique to Bangladesh. Local research communities in low- and middle-income countries have been slow to produce research outputs on urban poverty. As the previous section explored, this is partly because their scholarship has been historically driven by the persistence of poverty in rural areas. A relatively distant "urban future" has been slow to attract established academics, many of whom have gained expertise in areas of rural development and macroeconomics.

While agricultural economics and rural poverty dynamics are internationally established in microeconomic analysis, urban economics has not really evolved. Economists face the dilemma of whether to follow these theoretically and methodologically well-established areas or to take a professional risk by specializing in urban poverty. Furthermore, for economists and quantitative analysts, the problem of sample attrition on panel datasets makes the analysis of urban poverty more difficult.⁽⁶²⁾ The mobility, and sometimes anonymity, of urban residents means that complex analyses of urban datasets are likely to be flawed because of

attrition, a potential blighting factor for economists trying to advance their careers.

Research funding has meant that it has been hard for local research bodies to meet the needs for commitment and continuity in research. That most research on urban poverty in Bangladesh is based upon externally funded projects, and have lead authors that represent external institutions, may mean that it fails to produce policy-relevant knowledge. Internationally funded and led research projects are sometimes seen as an alternative source of knowledge creation in low-income countries. However, international research funding is subject to the policies and priorities of funding bodies, which often run contrary to national interests and priorities.

The lack of research on urban poverty is compounded by a neglect of research and policy on the impacts of climate change on the livelihoods, homes and assets of the urban poor.⁽⁶³⁾ Yet links between climate change and urban poverty have been firmly established,⁽⁶⁴⁾ and research – both in Bangladesh and internationally – recognizes that the effects of climate change will have a disproportionate impact on the urban poor.⁽⁶⁵⁾ However, while the potential repercussions of climate change and their impact on the urban poor have been forecast for Bangladesh's cities, there has been less research on their impact at the community level and on the adaptive capacities of grassroots communities. The question is, therefore, whether governments, decision makers and the research community have the expertise, imagination and willingness necessary to meet the new challenges that climate change brings to a context of urban poverty.

Unfortunately, the process of creating and utilizing climate change knowledge in low- and middle-income countries does not look promising in this respect. Knowledge and expertise for development and climate change rests primarily in the hands of a limited number of global expert institutes, such as the World Bank and the United Nations. In Bangladesh, examples of the UN support mechanism include the formation of an expert group to advise on areas of adaptation and capacity building in the development of NAPA.⁽⁶⁶⁾

Conditions of funding mean that even where it is available for climate change adaptation or mitigation, little has been used for research or for practical responses in low-income urban areas. The promise of larger sums for international climate change adaptation is acting as a catalyst for governments of low- and middle-income countries to buy in foreign expertise.⁽⁶⁷⁾ In addition, in order to exploit access to external funding, bureaucrats and researchers end up prioritizing actions that maximize it. This means that policies supporting low-cost, low-technology and people-centred practices for the urban poor are likely to receive less priority given the perverse incentives created by the financing of climate change adaptation. Conditionalities for accessing these funds require that these countries rapidly formulate actions at national and sub-national levels. The speed with which they must act leaves little time for participation or consultation of all stakeholders. This results in a gap between national plans and grassroots level activities, and means that the latter remain unsupported by global funds.

More can be said about how each of these foci – a foreign, expert-led knowledge and policy-making process that undervalues grassroots level practices, and a lack of research providing useful local knowledge on urban poverty – will affect low-income urban residents in an era of climate change. Increasingly, however, it is recognized that these problems

63. A few ongoing research projects on urban poverty and climate change in Bangladesh have been launched recently – including the Climate Change and Urban Poverty in Bangladesh (ClimUrb) Research Programme (Brooks World Poverty Institute, University of Manchester); and outside of Bangladesh, there are programmes on urban poverty and climate change through the British Council Higher Education Link Programme and UCL. This is a relatively small volume of research compared to the growing scale of urban poverty in the face of climate change, however.

64. See reference 23; also IIED (2009), *Climate Change and the Urban Poor: Risk and Resilience in 15 of the World's Most Vulnerable Cities*, IIED, London, 20 pages.

65. See reference 23; also see reference 64, IIED (2009); and Pelling, M (2003), *The Vulnerability of Cities: Natural Disasters and Social Resilience*, Earthscan, London, 224 pages.

66. Huq, S, A Rahman, M Konate, Y Sokona and H Reid (2003), *Mainstreaming Adaptation to Climate Change in Least Developing Countries*, Russell Press, Nottingham, 60 pages.

67. Porter, G, N Bird, N Kaur and L Peskett (2008), *New Finance for Climate Change and the Environment*, Heinrich Boll Foundation and WWF, Washington DC, 57 pages; also Ayers, J (2009), "International funding to support urban adaptation to climate change", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 21, No 1, April, pages 225–240.

68. Jabeen, H, C Johnson and A Allen (2010), "Built-in resilience: learning from grassroots coping strategies for climate variability", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 22, No 2, October, pages 415–431; also, Hutton, D and C E Haque (2004), "Human vulnerability, dislocation and resettlement: adaptation process of riverbank erosion-induced displacees in Bangladesh", *Disasters* Vol 28, No 1, pages 41–62.

are adding to the urgency on the ground for civil society organizations and low-income urban communities to take the initiative. In the case of Bangladesh, initiatives on climate change by low-income households at the local level have, in some cases, been identified.⁽⁶⁸⁾

Micro-level actions and projects, however, have limited impact without wider knowledge creation at a level that leads to application through policy. Given the weak understanding of urban poverty (especially in the context of climate change) and a short-term focus because of elections, policy makers have yet to prioritize actions to address urban poverty; instead, it has been consigned to future rounds of policy. In the meantime, national policy maintains existing narratives that view urban poverty as an issue for political neglect.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has emphasized the urgent need for increased recognition of urban poverty in policy, research and action in Bangladesh, the lack of which is visible both in an underestimation of urban poverty and in its growing magnitude. The "tipping point", that is when Bangladesh's poor population will live predominantly in urban areas, is forecast to be within this generation. Intensified pressure from climate change will accelerate this transition and exacerbate the existing vulnerabilities faced by the urban poor.

National policy and action, however, continue to overlook urban manifestations of poverty, and this has had repercussions on government and NGO programmes and research activities. A number of interacting factors lie behind this. Elite perceptions remain focused on rural areas as the rightful home of the poor, and this view is exacerbated by negative images of crime and squalor and a persistent belief that any investment in urban poverty will cause further migration to the city. These views are compounded by a lack of understanding of urban poverty; while the Centre for Urban Studies has increased knowledge and awareness of it, other national institutes and external research conducted in Bangladesh remain predominantly focused on rural or national issues.

An analysis of the political economy of urban poverty reveals structural factors that ensure it is not accorded a higher priority at the national level. While there has been some progress in political participation at the local municipal level, impact is limited given a highly centralized government and a lack of appropriate mechanisms through which electoral successes at the local level can reach the national level. There are also problems with representation: interacting primarily with their poor constituents through *mastaans*, local elected officials in urban areas have little incentive to be responsive and accountable to or inclusive of their poor electorate.

This rural bias in policy for poverty reduction reaches the activities of both the state and NGOs. Initiatives by government and NGOs in urban poverty reduction, while welcomed, have barely scratched the surface. While the rural poor have benefited directly and indirectly from investments in infrastructure, services, human capital and social protection, this has not been the case for the urban poor. Although government spending priorities invest heavily in urban areas, low-income urban households are only indirect beneficiaries of government spending

through infrastructure development: where evictions are a prerequisite for this development, they can indeed be victims of this. While Bangladesh is recognized for its proliferation of NGOs, vulnerabilities in urban areas are not addressed by these given the limited urban coverage of NGO programmes. Ultimately, this means that the urban poor have not been equipped with an institutional framework that supports their efforts to increase resilience and access opportunities for upward mobility.

The evidence presented in this paper means that it must now be recognized that urban poverty reduction will be increasingly important to meeting future national poverty reduction goals, and that urban poverty must be addressed in policy, action and research. This urgency is magnified in the context of climate change. Although policy makers continue to treat climate change primarily as a problem of rural poverty and food security, it will have a heavy impact on urban areas, increasing the scale and severity of current urban poverty and increasing the frequency of environmental hazards. With low resilience and living in environmentally hazardous areas, the urban poor will face the most severe repercussions of climate change.

There are two challenges to efforts to meet improved policy and action for the urban poor. The first is gaining a better understanding of the scale and nature of urban poverty and the urban-specific vulnerabilities that the urban poor face. Both the national and international research community can play a role in this. More challenging, however, is confronting powerful interests in order to secure commitment at the national level. Until there is a normative shift that recognizes the urban poor as a legitimate group for government support, urban poverty will continue to face a “double whammy” of exclusion, both from national development plans and climate change adaptation strategies.

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