

MARC Research Profile

Community and Institutional Responses to the Challenges Facing Poor Urban People in an Era of Global Warming in Bangladesh



Climate change, and especially climate variability, is impacting on the living conditions and livelihoods of poor people. These effects will deepen over coming decades. Increased exposure to minor shocks and major disasters can dramatically increase poor urban people's vulnerability and damage their economic and social prospects - dwellings are damaged/destroyed, casual labour is laid off, fuel prices rise, water supplies become contaminated, children get sick ... a downward spiral may result. Yet most governments in developing countries see climate change purely as a rural problem with impacts on agriculture and food security.

Nowhere in the world are these problems more evident than in Bangladesh. Its urban population already exceeds 40 million and is growing at 3.4% per annum. With 20 million people potentially displaced by rising sea levels in coming years, the urbanisation rate seems likely to increase. Urban poverty is already high (estimates vary from 47% to 70%) and in the bustees (i.e. "slums") living conditions are deteriorating. But, like most other governments, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) maintains a rural focus, as none of the 20 "priority actions" in its Climate Change Strategies and Action Plan 2008 targets the problems faced by the urban poor.

This research, which has been designed after a pilot programme funded by BWPI's "seed corn" research fund, seeks to fill this important research gap in policy-relevant knowledge by exploring how to effectively address the problems of poor urban people, in a context of rapid climate change. It adopts a cross-disciplinary perspective, and brings together a team of leading Bangladeshi and UK researchers and policy activist.

The analytical framework draws on three main bodies of theory. Firstly, we apply political economy of urban change to examine the entitlements of different groups, and especially the poor and vulnerable, to call on resources and negotiate changes in resources access and use. Secondly, our framework explores changes in the assets (material, financial, human, natural and social) of poor urban people. Thirdly, we examine the adaptive practices of poor people and of the institutions with which they interact to understand the individual and societal learning processes that can help, or perhaps hinder, the poor's efforts to reduce vulnerability and improve their prospects. The research will produce rigorous academic findings that are of international standing and high impact policy recommendations for agencies in Bangladesh and beyond (e.g. DFID and World Bank).

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