

The pavements and slums of Dhaka

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Almost half a million people every year seek refuge in Dhaka, compelled by a nexus of climate change, poverty and environmental degradation. Many end up on living on the pavements.

The slums of Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka, have traditionally provided shelter for the country's environmentally displaced poor. Recent increases in storms and flooding have diminished the liveability of the country's coastal and rural regions; unable to fish, farm or safely dwell on their land, millions of people have migrated from their homes and are now internally displaced in Bangladesh's cities. When slum housing for them is inaccessible, the next shelter option for internally displaced environmental migrants is the unsheltered pavement.

The 'pavement dwellers' of Dhaka have transformed public spaces for private use, creating their own tenuous shelter under blue tarpaulins on the sides of streets, in front of shops on footpaths, and under bridges in

upper-income neighbourhoods. Men who were once farmers and fishermen are now Dhaka's rickshaw drivers and vegetable sellers, sleeping at night on the lawns of Bangladesh's government buildings. Women work in factories, or as sex workers, or as domestic day servants for middle-class households, and come home to sleep in Dhaka's parks and bus stations. Families unite into communities, and build portable outdoor kitchens and washing areas between buildings and in alleyways, paying officials for the right to sleep on the streets. Home for these climate migrants is a squat beneath abandoned shopping malls and within construction sites of luxury apartments scattered across the city. Living on the streets, they are at increased risk of assault, rape,

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theft and disease, and their children are vulnerable to trafficking and labour abuses. Some NGOs have established walk-in centres for the pavement dwellers' health-care and hygiene needs, and have constructed one short-term shelter for pregnant women. While a patchwork provision for the migrants' basic needs is certainly beneficial to health and well-being for those able to access services, true shelter remains out of reach.

Globally, in the face of environmental disasters, the international aid community erects temporary tents and constructs permanent structures to protect the displaced from harm, reducing the vulnerability of survivors while preserving their dignity. This is the importance of safe shelter, however basic that shelter might be. Bangladesh has received generous international funding for climate change adaptation plans and projects, with more than US\$10 billion invested in building irrigation pumps, distributing solar panels and constructing cyclone shelters in rural coastal regions to mitigate the impact of climate change. These are important programmes but, as migration is also part of adaptation, providing decent shelter for climate-related

displaced people should also be an integral part of any climate adaptation strategy.

While the climate-related displaced of Dhaka are increasingly often evicted from slums and prevented from sleeping in public spaces, shelter solutions are urgently needed. A current and reliable census of slum and pavement dwellers would be an excellent starting point for assessing the need for shelter construction and for health and education provision. An account of available and liveable units affordable to climate-displaced migrants would assist communities in ensuring that dwellings lost to urban development will be replaced. Building safe shelter for those dwelling on the pavement would assist Bangladesh in its compliance with international human rights law and with its own constitution, according to which all its citizens should have access to shelter.

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