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CREATING KNOWLEDGE TO END POVERTY

CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION FROM THE BOTTOM UP

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There is a strong rural bias in poverty reduction efforts in Bangladesh. The government views poverty as largely rural and agricultural. Historically this was correct, but times are changing. The slums, where large numbers of poor Bangladeshis live, are classed as illegal settlements and are neglected by government.

In 2008 the Bangladesh government published its current Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan. This document neglects the deepening problems encountered by people in poor urban settlements in earning a living, accessing water and sanitation services, keeping healthy and raising children.

And, in facing challenges from climate change, millions of slum dwellers are left to adapt with minimal support from NGOs or civil society. The policy neglect of poor urban people reflects dominant perspectives on poverty in Bangladesh that must be challenged.

Bangladesh is experiencing rapid urbanisation, and faces large-scale 'urbanisation of rural poverty'. Climate change may displace an extra 12-15 million population by the turn of the century. Most of these will be poor people from rural areas heading for urban slums. This must force a re-thinking of poverty reduction policies.

Policymakers' neglect of the urban poor will become increasingly damaging in an era of global warming. The route to developing effective policy starts by learning from poor people in the slums of Bangladesh, understanding their lives, livelihoods and practices now. Research needs to focus on what they are doing to adapt to climate change.

In our study of two slums, in Dhaka and Bhairab, we found that poor people are affected by multiple sources of vulnerability. This makes their poverty persist for long periods of time. They recover slowly from sudden shocks, such as eviction, which destroy their homes and belongings. During the recovery period they remain particularly vulnerable to lesser shocks, including those related to climate change and variability, such as heavy rainfall, flooding and heat and cold waves.

Domain	Aspect	Examples of adaptive strategies
Environmental	Flooding	Raise entire or part of the floor Construct high above-ground storage space Construction techniques for fast, easy shack dismantling
	Heat & cold waves	Grow vegetables on roof and over courtyard Place thatched bamboo partitions beneath roof
Basic services	Tenure security	Maintain and build trust with power structure Rent/settle first, own later
	Water supply & sanitation	Form a collective identity, e.g. cooperative Harvest rainwater in pots
	Health	Seek support from community health clinics Use herbal medicines
Economic	Jobs and income	Remain networked; diversify jobs and skills Rear livestock, own rickshaws/sewing machines
Political	Eviction	Form cooperatives and negotiate block voting

Table 1: Poor urban people's strategies to reduce vulnerability

Poor households employ a range of strategies to reduce their vulnerability. The main ones are summarised in Table 1. Above all, they remain flexible, mobile and networked. They often form a collective identity – cooperatives, slum development committees – to build support from existing institutions.

Existing local institutional support is often inadequate, mostly ad-hoc and informal, and lacks awareness of the climate change context. However, it is encouraging, and significant, that poor urban people develop and deploy strategies which are technologically, socio-

culturally and politically innovative. Local and municipal authorities are emerging as an important source of support for poor urban people. This is in sharp contrast to the neglect of the urban poor in central government policies.

Our research concludes that policy neglect deprives poor urban people of their rights to human and social development. It may also limit the scope for constructing innovative adaptation strategies. In spite of this, adaptive practices are emerging. Future policies and actions need to build on the strategies developed by the urban poor in Bangladesh.

Key policy points

- Highlight strategies to address urban poverty, in particular ensuring poor urban people's rights to human and social development.
- Identify, document and analyse emerging adaptive practices in poor urban settlements and formulate policies and actions to enhance and diffuse them.
- Seek permanent solutions to political shocks, such as eviction, and strengthen institutional structures to enable people to tackle and absorb lesser shocks.

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