

# **Demystifying the Rhetorics of Slums in Dhaka: A Critical Review on the Spatial Manifestation of Urban Poverty**

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## **Introduction**

The world is now experiencing an unprecedented rate of urbanization, which is even faster than originally predicted by the Club of Rome in its Malthusian 1972 report *Limits to Growth* (Davis, 2006a:1). In 1950 there were 86 cities in the world with a population of more than one million, today there are 400 and it is now being predicted that by 2015, the number will rise up to 500 (UNDESA, 2002:3). Cities have absorbed almost two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950, and last some years growing by one million babies and migrants each week (Population Information Program, 2002:1). However, the scale and velocity of low income developing countries urbanization completely dwarfs that of Victorian Europe. London in 1910 was seven times larger than it had been in 1800. On the contrary, cities like Dhaka, Kinshasa or Lagos are today approximately forty times larger than they were 1950s (Davis, 2006b:2). It is now apparently evident that in many parts of the developing world, urban populations are growing even faster than the capacities of the cities to support their citizens.

At the recent decade, Dhaka has emerged as one of the fastest growing megacities. It had a manageable population of 2.2 million in 1975 and that became 12.3 million in 2000. The growth rate of this urbanising population during 1974-2000 was 6.9% (UN, 1998:7). There are very few other cities in the world, which has ever the experiences of having such a high growth rate in population during this period. Apparently the growth rate of urbanising people in Dhaka City will also continue to remain high even in the coming years. At 2000-2015 the expected growth rate is 3.6% and will reach a total population of 21.1 million in 2015 (UN, 1999:8). Recent population report of the United Nations also highlights the same issue by mentioning Dhaka as one of the top ten cities of the world in terms of population (World Urban Population, 2010: 14-17). Right now Dhaka is the home of 13 million people and everyday approximately 2600 people come Dhaka to reside permanently (Ittefaq, 2010:2). As Dhaka always represented being one of the megacities in low income countries with least planning interventions, the formation of slums or informal settlements was inevitable. Without administrative and financial decentralisations and country-wide employment creations, slums were a definite outcome and viewed as the spatial manifestation of urban poverty and at the same time, state failure in response to country-wide pro-poor development.

## **Rhetorics of Slums**

Rapid growth of cities along with economic crises, currency devaluations and shortening national expenditures impacted largely for the marginalisation of populations and the mass production of informal labours' settlements, which is frequently termed as "Slums". The first published definition reportedly occurs in the convict writer James Hardy Vaux's 1812 "Vocabulary of the Flash Language", where slum was synonymous with racket or criminal trade (Prunty and Larkin, 1997:2). By the cholera years of the 1830s and 1840s, the poor were started to live in slums rather than practicing them (Davis, 2006c:21). However, the authors of "The Challenges of Slums" discarded these Victorian notions and pursued for a classical definition of slums, which are characterised by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation and above all the insecurity of tenure (Davis,

2006d:23). Garau (2005:49) highlights the same scenario of slums by extending the urban employment aspects through the access to services that are essential to surviving in urban economies. Right now, the residents of slums, while only 6% of the city population of the developed countries, constitute a staggering 78.2% of urban populations in the least developed countries.

Currently more than three billion people are living in urban areas worldwide and among them almost one billion are living in slums and informal 'spontaneous' settlements (Zetter and Deikun, 2010a:5). Everywhere in the low income developing countries, housing choice for the poor person is a hard calculus of confusing trade-offs. John Turner famously pointed out as "Housing is a verb". The urban poor have to solve a complex equation as they try to optimise the housing cost, tenure security, quality of shelter, journey to work and sometimes and personal safety etc. This is a frequent phenomenon that a location near a job is more important than a roof on heads (Davis, 2006e:27).

As part of human impacts, rapidly growing, unregulated and under-serviced urban areas are high-risk locations making the majority of urban populations vulnerable to a range of disasters and crises. The increasing stresses on slum environments derive both from existing deficits in the supply of land, housing and urban infrastructure. These processes and the sub-standard conditions of slum livelihoods usually contribute to chronic or slow-onset emergencies or become the tipping points for different types of humanitarian crises. Overcrowding, poor living conditions, lack of access to clean water and adequate sanitation in slum areas contribute to health emergencies including outbreaks of communicable diseases. Frequently the slum dwellers are at high risk of food insecurity (high prices, food shortages, lack of safety nets) due to poor public health conditions, loss of livelihoods, income insecurity and marginalization. Beneficiary targeting in health and nutrition crises is especially challenging for low income developing countries. Health and nutrition crises may be the by-product of other emergencies such as flooding, earthquakes or urban violence, creating so-called 'stress bundles' (Zetter and Deikun, 2010b:5). Climate change and the increasing propensity for low income urban regions to experience disasters caused by more frequent extreme weather events will be compounded by rising sea-levels, desertification and drought, thereby driving population displacement or evictions and producing new patterns of intra- and interurban migration as well as inequality.

This is now assumed that earth is now burdened with more than 200,000 slums, ranging in population from a few hundreds to more than a million. The five great South Asian historic metropolitan cities, Karachi, Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata and Dhaka, contain more than 15,000 slum agglomerations (Davis, 2006f:26). For the countries like Bangladesh, the risks of forming slums agglomerations are strongly correlated with short sighted urban policy and thereby poorly managed, uncontrolled urbanization along with inadequate governance. The rate of slum formation increased rapidly after the independence in 1971. In the early 70s, landlessness and unemployment in the rural areas increased along with natural calamities and oppression by the newly emerged socio-political elites (Rahman, 2001a:51). Therefore rural-urban migration was an inevitable reality and the spread of slums all over Dhaka was visible and became the dominant spatial manifestation of urban poverty. In addition to this, the 1974-75 famine and floods acted as another reasons what pushed a large number of rural poor for being slum dwellers in Dhaka city in search of their livelihoods (Rahman, 2001b:51).

### **Patterns of Agglomerations**

At the "regimen of congestion", characterised the new mercantile cities of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, too many people began competing for too few dwellings and rooms. The rapid influx to the

cities or poor rural-urban migrants looking for jobs created a huge need for accommodation. Much of the new housing for rural-urban migrants was development and re-developed by speculators seeking profits, and in the absence of controls.

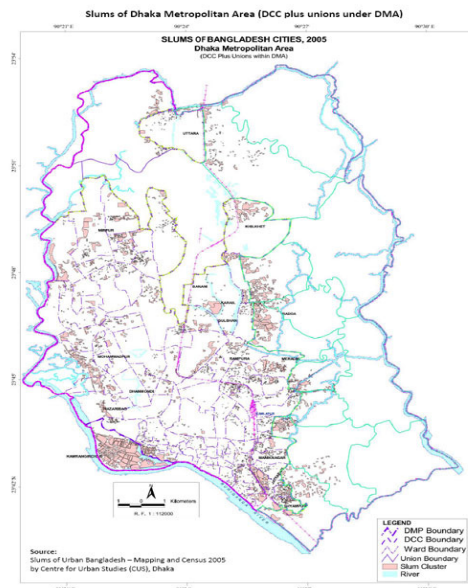
Dhaka is now experiencing the same scenario. However, 65% residents of Dhaka subsist in the informal sector (Davis, 2006g: 177) and at the same time 70 percent of the population is estimated to be concentrated into only 20 percent of the surface area (Mahmud and Duyar-Kienast, 2001: 272). The greater Dhaka urban agglomeration is projected to grow at an annual average rate of 2.72 during the period 2007–2025, making it the fastest growing "mega-city" in the world (Angeles *et al*, 2009a:2). In the last few years, the slum growths in terms of spatial expansion as well as increase in numeric values of slum clusters and population are also alarming. Table 1 shows a complete picture of the situation.

Table 1: Slum Growth in between 1996 and 2005

Year	Number of clusters	Number of households	Slum population	Total population	% living in slums
1996	3,007	220,920	1,104,600	NA	NA
2005	4,966	673,874	3,420,521	9,136,182	37.4%

Source: World Bank (2007:19)

Usually the slums are clustered around the central business districts, because from there the slum dwellers can avail easier access to jobs, opportunities and services at affordable costs. In addition to this, severe traffic congestion and lack of public transports encouraged the poor people to live at a short distance between 2 to 4 kilometres so that they could travel to their workplaces on foot (Rahaman and Ohmori, 2006: 1745). Urban Slum map of Dhaka city in Figure 1 shows that the slums are clustered sporadically.



Source: Map of Bangladesh (2009)

Fig. 1: Slums of Dhaka Metropolitan Area

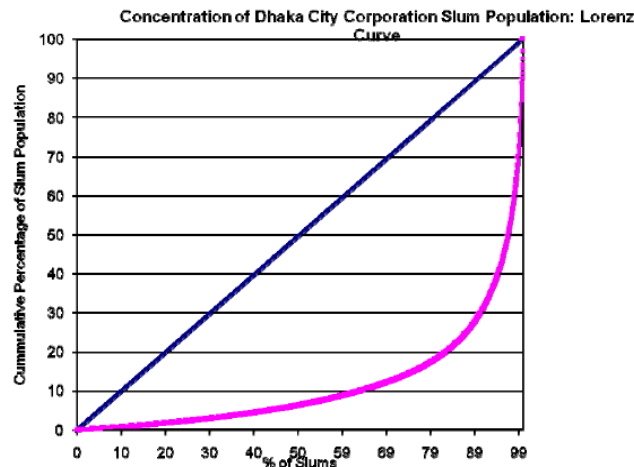
Angeles *et al.* (2009b:8) identified 9,048 slum communities across the six major cities in Bangladesh. Unsurprisingly, by far the most (4,966) were in Dhaka. Dhaka also had the largest slum population in Bangladesh. While the rank of the cities by total slum population mirrored that by their overall populations, the proportion of the city population living in slums ranged from 19.5% in Khulna to nearly 40% in Dhaka.

Table 2: Slum Agglomeration in Dhaka.

Number of Slum Communities	4966
Overall 2005 population (estimate)	9136182
Slum population	3420521
Non-slum population	5715661
Ratio of non-slum to slum population	1.67
Slum population as a percent of city population	37.4
Overall population density (persons per sq. km.)	29857
Slum population density (persons per sq. km.)	220246
Non-slum population density (persons per sq. km.)	19677
Ratio of non-slum to slum population density	0.089
Gini Coefficient	0.771

Source: Angeles *et al.* (2009c:8)

Table 2 shows a fact through the measurement of Gini-coefficient. The Gini coefficient measures the level of inequality in the distribution of the slum population by slum size: higher values indicate a high concentration of the slum population in few slums, accompanied by large number of small slums. This was the case of Dhaka where one can see from the Lorenz curve in Figure 2 a high concentration of the slum population in few large slums together with a large number of small slums, which are dispersed throughout the city (Angeles *et al.*, 2009d:10).



Source: Angeles *et al.* (2009e: 10)

Fig. 2: Concentration of Dhaka City Corporation Slum Population: Lorenz Curve.

In Dhaka, 5.7% of the slum population (almost 200,000 people) lived in 2,483 slums (50% of all slums in the city). On the other hand, 50% of the slum population was concentrated in only 3.7% of slums (185 slums) (Angeles *et al.*, 2009f:9).

### **Contemporary Slum Politics**

In many developing countries, evictions of slums are often associated with urban development. When the demand of land is high and the supply is scarce, developers usually target sites that are underutilized in economic terms. Most often, these sites happen to be living and working areas occupied by the weaker strata of the urban society. Supported by favorable urban development policies and powered by financial or administrative strength, developers are often able to pressurize on people occupying economically attractive land. Usually in this case, the pressures of forced removal, eviction, resettlement or relocation are very much visible (UNHABITAT, 2003:164–188).

Following in the footsteps of governments in many developing countries confronted with massive growth of squatter or slum settlements, the democratically elected governments of Bangladesh also pursued for slum demolitions in different times and in different places. These were justified by stereotyping the slums as hubs of antisocial elements and dens of most illegal and criminal activities such as murder, robbery, illegal arms smuggling, drug peddling, and female trafficking and prostitution. The government claimed that criminals use slums as the safe asylums, and regularly extorted payments from slums dwellers in the guise of safeguarding their interests.

However the constitution of Bangladesh provides some relevant laws in favour of slums dwellers. Kamal (2007a: 2) precisely mentions as: (a) Article 12 of the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh states that the state will provide basic necessities of life including shelter for all; (b) Article 32 emphasizes protection of right to life and personal liberty; (c) National Housing Policy 1993 clause 5.7.1 strongly states that no eviction from any slum would be under taken without providing for full and adequate rehabilitation of the slum dwellers; (d) As per the Government and Local Authority Lands and Building (Recovery and Possession) Ordinance 1970 section 5 provides that a prior notice has to be served before 7 days of the slum eviction. Simultaneously Kamal (2007b:2) also mentions that even though there are a number of constitutional provisions in supports of the rights of slum dwellers, but there is almost no evidence or little evidence to implement or respect the existing laws.

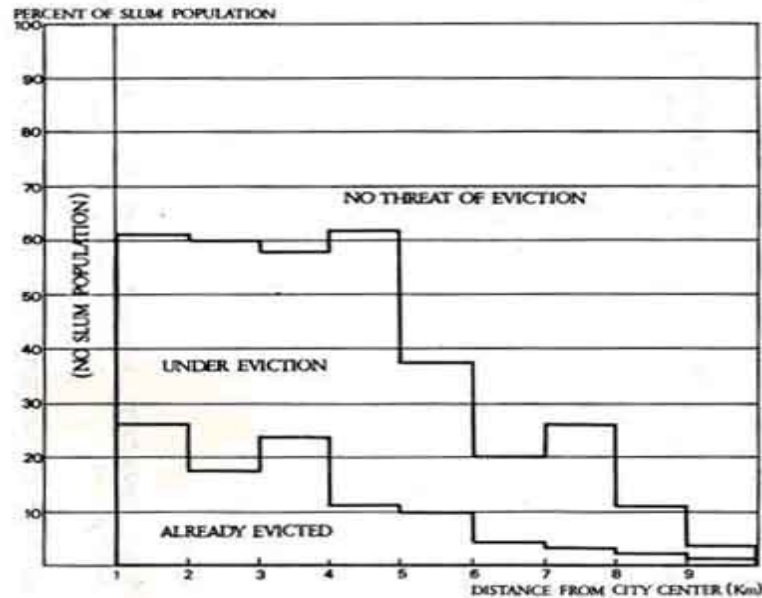
In 1999, almost 3000 informal settlers did not get any notice prior to leave their slums in Poribagh (Dhaka) slum of the city. As a procession, the settlers took shelter in an open field in front of the Supreme Court Building of Bangladesh. Government has consoled them as usual and has given them manifesto to provide shelter later on. Still there is no evidence of such resettlement plans executed by any public or private stakeholders for those affected poor people (ADB, 1999: 118).

Slum eviction in Dhaka began in the mid-1970s when there were about 125 slums and squatter settlements. At that time, slightly more than 10% of the city's 1.6 million people lived in these settlements. Over the years, both the number of slums and the proportion of people living in these settlements have steadily increased, and the city has witnessed eviction of slum dwellers in almost every year since 1975 (Paul, 2006a: 569).

In Dhaka, most of the dwellers of informal settlements are poor rural-urban migrants, especially from the north eastern Bangladesh. Seasonal food insecurity, hunger, poverty, malnutrition and lack of local employment opportunities are usual phenomena in this region. In addition to this, river erosion and low sea level from the coastal south also contributing for generating a huge number of environmental/climate refugees.

### The Spatial Determinants of Evictions

Slums in some certain locations are more prone to be evicted than others. There are four interrelated spatial factors affecting the evictions: centrality, accessibility, land use and land tenure. Boonyabancha (1983a:267) highlights also the evidence for declining percentage of families already evicted or facing eviction with increased distance from the city centre. He particularly explained the phenomenon in the context of Bangkok Metropolitan Region, Thailand.



Source: Boonyabancha (1983b:266)  
Fig. 3: The locational pattern of eviction.

However, in certain countries or local/regional context, slums at greater distances from the city centre can also be evicted as the gradual improvements of roads greatly increase accessibility and invite invasion by higher income people (Figure 3). Evictions have also occurred in locations where land values have significantly increased due to the land use change, particularly in the areas surrounding the expanding secondary commercial centres on the city fringes. This is however evident that the higher the land value, the greater the potential for eviction to take sooner or later (Boonyabancha, 1983c: 267).

### The Human Impacts of Eviction

Each year, millions of persons are forcibly evicted in different parts of the world. While through evictions sometimes perceived economically profitable projects can bring enormous socioeconomic benefits to the society, they can also impose costs, which are often borne by its poorest and most marginalized members. Robinson (2003:iii) points out that for millions of people around the world, traditional development interventions favours eviction, which actually cost homes, livelihoods, health, and even very lives of the poor resident people. Impoverishment and disempowerment usually become their lot, with particularly harsh impacts on women and children. The Center on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) documented in 2002 the forced eviction of 4.3 million people in 63 countries during the

period 1998-2000. According to them, these forced evictions occurred largely as the result of development projects, discrimination, urban development schemes, gentrification, urban beautification, land alienation in both rural and urban areas, and in situations of armed conflict and ethnic cleansing, or their aftermath (COHRE, 2002:9).

However, the World Bank based development sociologist Michael Cernea, who has researched eviction, displacement and resettlement for almost two decades, highlights that eviction carries the risk of becoming poorer than before displacement. Even though, in ideal scenario, those evicted people are supposed to receive compensation of their lost assets, and effective assistance to re-establish them productively, but this does not happen for a large portion of displaced-evicted people (Cernea, 1996a:304). Cernea developed an “impoverishment risk and reconstruction model”, which proposes that the beginning of impoverishment through eviction can be represented by a model of eight interlinked potential risks intrinsic to eviction or displacement. These are: (a) *Landlessness*: Expropriation of land removes the main foundation upon which people’s productive systems, commercial activities, and livelihoods are constructed. This is the principal form of de-capitalization and pauperization of evicted or displaced people, as they lose both natural and human-made capital. (b) *Improper Employability*: The risk to employability is very high. Creating new jobs is difficult and requires substantial re-investment. This is a quite frequent that the unemployment or underemployment among resettlers endures long after physical relocation has been completed. (c) *Homelessness*: Loss of shelter tends to be only temporary for many resettlers; but, for some, homelessness or a worsening in their housing standards remains a lingering condition. In a broader cultural sense in context of South Asia, loss of a family’s individual home and the loss of a group’s cultural space tend to result in alienation and status deprivation. (d) *Marginalization*: Marginalization occurs when families lose economic power and trapped on a “downward mobility” path. Many individuals cannot use their earlier acquired location-specific skills at the new locations. Economic marginalization is often accompanied by social and psychological marginalization, e.g. deepening vulnerability or a feeling of injustice (e) *Food Insecurity*: Forced eviction increases the risk that people will fall into temporary or chronic undernourishment, defined as calorie-protein intake levels below the minimum necessary for normal growth and work. (f) *Increased Morbidity and Mortality*: Massive population displacement threatens to cause serious decline in health levels. This is also very much interlinked with food insecurity. Social stress and psychological trauma are sometimes accompanied by the outbreak of relocation related illnesses, particularly parasitic and vector-borne diseases. Along with this, unsafe water supply and improvised sewage systems increase vulnerability to epidemics and chronic diarrhea, dysentery etc. The weakest segments of the demographic spectrum, e.g. infants, children, and the elderly are particularly vulnerable. (g) *Loss of Access to Common Property*: For poor people, loss of access to the common property assets that belonged to relocated communities result in significant deterioration in income and livelihood levels. (h) *Social Disintegration*: The forced eviction causes a profound unraveling of existing patterns of social organization. This unraveling occurs at many levels. When people are forcibly moved, production systems are dismantled. Long-established residential communities and settlements are disorganized, while kinship groups and family systems are often scattered. Life-sustaining informal social networks that provide mutual help are rendered non-functional. Trade linkages between producers and their customer base are often interrupted, and local labor markets are also disrupted. (i) *Loss of Access to Community Services*: This could include anything from health clinics to educational facilities, which have direct impacts on sustainable human development. (j) *Violation of Human Rights*: Eviction from one’s residence and the loss of properties without proper compensation usually constitute a violation of basic human rights. In addition to violating

economic and social rights, forced eviction can also lead to violations of civil and political rights.

It is important to stress that evictions have an additional impact on the urban poor not because of the events themselves but because their vulnerability is exacerbated by three factors; firstly, governments rarely have the capacity to provide the evicted people satisfactory water supply and drainage systems, effective protection from floods, safe land for housing or sound public health systems; secondly, in most of the cases evicted slum dwellers have no alternatives without living in hazard-prone locations such as low-lying areas and landfill sites or in substandard, crowded and insanitary housing and finally, these conditions expose communities to a cocktail of multiple hazards as the stressbundles (Zetter and Deikun, 2010b:6).

### **Comprehensive Development Strategy**

Paul (2006b:573) has revealed that most residents of slums in Dhaka live in constant anxiety and fear, not knowing if and/or when they might be evicted. He has also highlighted that not all slum dwellers want to return to their ancestral villages because they have lived in Dhaka for long time and have lost contacts with their former rural homes. On the contrary, recent migrants to Dhaka are often willing to migrate back to the rural areas from which they came, provided they receive adequate compensation and incentives. This suggests that the government should pursue double track solutions: one for those who are unwilling to leave Dhaka and one for those who want to return to their villages. These solutions profoundly based on the initiatives and policy responses both from macro level policy perspectives and micro level projects' interventions.

Those who are unwilling to leave, from them eviction is much easier when no one is looking, and much more difficult when a large pool of poor families are seen to be thrown out of their homes with nowhere to go (Boonyabanha, 1983d: 280). Government cannot deny the importance of labour forces in informal sectors. Without preparing a resettlement plan for the poor people, evicting them would encompass another dimension of urban problem too.

Turner argued that the solutions to slums is not to demolish or evictions, but to improve the environment. However, slums dwellers often demonstrate their organizational skills in their land management and can also be trusted to maintain the infrastructures which are provided to them (Werlin, 1999a:1523). Participatory mechanism could be a good planning tool in managing the scenario. Choguill (1994:944) mentions therefore that the appropriate role of government would seem to be to minimize direct interventions, allowing the urban poor to find solutions that they can afford in their most traditional ways. The slum upgrading is frequently justified for avoiding the potentially violent or politically troublesome reaction of slum dwellers; the economic costs of removing slums dwellers from sources of employment; and the disruption of social or ethnic support systems (Werlin, 1999b:1524).

However, meeting the needs to improve the living conditions for exiting slum populations is not an easy task for most of the government in Global South. It will be inadequate unless equal efforts are made to reduce the need for future slums (Payne, 2005a:136). Payne (2005b:142) also highlights, as not all slums or informal settlements are likely to be acceptable for long term upgrading, it is important that all affected communities of possible eviction should be informed the fact as soon as possible. This will help them to appeal against such decisions to the relevant authorities. In cases where appeals against relocation are rejected, it is important to provide both the affected communities and authorities with sufficient time to make alternative arrangements through public private consultations.



The numbers of the rural-urban migrants are increasing in Bangladesh day by day. They have no definite future and job opportunities even in Dhaka City. When they are evicted, the frustrations usually reach to the pick. Then it is, in reality, no more an urban development initiatives, it turns to a Government initiated poverty generation process. To tackle the problem, which is a physical and spatial manifestation of urban poverty and threats to human security, apart from slum upgrading or rehabilitation, there is another avenue to support those slum dwellers who really want to go back to their rural life. Some of the options could be highlighted as follows:

Firstly the Government should identify why there are so many rural-urban migrants and why these migrants have no alternatives without living in abject situations in Dhaka with very precarious employment and living opportunities. At the recent time, the Government of Bangladesh did not play appropriate role to promote deep decentralised administration, so that local administrations are administratively and financially capable to promote, organize and implement integrated nationwide rural-regional development planning with the particular focus on employment creation. At the same time, accessibility to NGO services, particularly access to micro financial services has been criticized, as it sometimes ignores the actual needs of extreme poor or disadvantaged people. Rural Growth Centre development should to place on national priority development agenda. To promote rural farm or non farm economy, Government should to prioritize the energy supply to the rural regions; otherwise small and medium enterprises along with agro based industry could be severely hampered. For access to jobs, markets, health services, education facilities and legal supports, rural road infrastructure plays another big role. Otherwise it will never be possible to offer secured livelihoods in rural areas, and thereby rural-urban migration will be inevitable. At the same time, different rural and urban areas are suffering precious types of natural phenomena, which are termed as climate change. This change has already started to pose challenges to the lives of millions of poor people both in rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh with the supports from all stakeholder groups should to promote and make available different types of skill development opportunities, so that the poor people can have adequate capacities to adapt with this changing situation. Climate change, which could be one of the major drivers of rural-urban migration influx in Bangladesh, demands an urgent policy, advocacy and media responses in shaping human behavioural patterns in employability, human security and sustainability above all.

### **Conclusion**

This paper is a thoughtful outcome after reviewing literature based on contemporary arguments from different publications around the world. It does not include an empirical modelling or analytical technique so that the problems can be proved quantitatively. At the end, the paper proves that a strong nexus exists among the stakeholders in connection with slum formation, development, eviction and enforcement. In most of the cases, human rights are being violated when enforcement authorities are evicting the slum dwellers. Resettlement plans are mandatory before evicting the slum dwellers so that the human rights should not be violated. Along with this, preventive measures should be carried out well in advance so that slums cannot be formed overnight with the help of people who are taking illegal advantages from this very unexpected human right event. At the same time, this research work is paving another step for the scientific community to think more about this acute problem which is following almost every year with lots of hopes offering to the illegal settlers. Policy makers should also think this event seriously and more quantitative research works should be carried out to quantify the losses people are facing in terms of social value, monetary losses and environmental cohesion.

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