

Lived experiences of “invisibilized” slum and informal settlement populations:

Climate change impacts, adaptation, and the way forward for slum transformation

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Executive Summary

Climate change disproportionately affects the urban poor, particularly those living in informal settlements that are excluded from protective infrastructure and planning systems. This study investigates how vulnerabilities manifest in two urban contexts in Bangladesh: Chattogram, where residents face recurrent flooding and infrastructural breakdowns, and Cox’s Bazar, where climate migrants from Kutubdia Island endure catastrophic cyclones, tidal surges, and salinity intrusion.

Using a mixed-methods design that combined 50 in-depth interviews, six-yard meetings, 500 household surveys, and five key informant interviews, the study explored three objectives: (1) understanding lived experiences of climate vulnerability, (2) analyzing community-based adaptation and maladaptation strategies, and (3) evaluating the role of past disaster experiences in shaping preparedness and response. Findings reveal that vulnerabilities are deeply shaped by governance neglect, insecure tenure, and livelihood precarity.

Communities employ resourceful coping practices, but many prove maladaptive, including reliance on high-interest loans and unsafe water storage. Disaster memory fosters both preparedness and fatalism, influencing whether residents trust or resist official warning systems. Comparative analysis highlights that while Chattogram residents manage everyday hazards, Cox’s Bazar households face episodic devastation. Nevertheless, both are trapped in cycles of risk reinforced by exclusion from state protection.

The study concludes that effective interventions require hazard-specific investments, gender-sensitive approaches, secure tenure, and inclusive planning. Without structural reforms, community resilience will remain precarious, perpetuating injustice in the face of escalating climate risks. Integrating slum transformation into urban adaptation strategies is therefore essential for reducing vulnerability and achieving sustainable resilience.