

RURAL LIVES ON THE MOVE

Why Bangladesh must rethink rural–urban migration



ALA UDDIN

Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chittagong. He can be contacted at ala.uddin@cgu.ac.bd

Since independence, rural–urban migration has shaped the socioeconomic landscape of Bangladesh. Yet the ways in which it unfolds create tensions around development, opportunities, and survival. People move from villages not only for income, status, and education, but also in the hope of finding relief from uncertainty that shapes their decisions regarding migration. As the country prepares for a long awaited elected government in early 2026, the longstanding demands arising from repeated waves of migration require comprehensive attention. Given global scenarios and prevailing migration trends, it should be considered a crucial phenomenon that affects economic growth, social solidarity, and the



Aerial view of a Dhaka slum.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

creating an overall state of disorder. The second-largest city, Chattogram, also shares a similar fate for its residents.

Social researchers, including anthropologists, offer insights into how migration has shaped and introduced new patterns in family structure and mental life. When a man or a woman leaves a village for a city, the decision does not merely involve economic issues such as employment and income; it also encompasses kinship obligations, social networks, and responsibilities. Remittances sent from cities become lifelines for families left behind. Food for parents, school fees, and medical expenses often depend on these remittances. Over time, migrants' presence becomes social rather than merely physical, spreading through mobile phones and digital platforms. These bonds help rural families remain afloat, yet they also intensify emotional distance that receives little policy recognition.

Rural people often narrate migration as a form of loss. Elders speak of empty courtyards, abandoned homesteads, and fading heritage. At the same time, they acknowledge that migration sustains the family economy while they face land scarcity and worsening conditions caused by climate disruption. These dual perceptions—loss and survival—reveal why migration cannot be viewed solely through economic lenses. It touches upon identity, memory, and social continuity. If policy aims to engage with lived experiences rather than abstract data alone, the upcoming government must recognise this nuanced dimension.

On the urban side, migration from rural areas reshapes neighbourhoods and city culture. Informal settlements

become hubs of new languages, foods, norms, customs, and forms of rural solidarity. Migrants recreate village-based networks within cities, often organised around their districts of origin. These networks provide social security, employment information, and psychological support. Urban planners rarely acknowledge these social landscapes, yet they are essential to migrants' survival. If the next elected government seeks to manage cities effectively, it must recognise these networks not as obstacles, but as strengths.

Housing has remained one of the most crucial problems connected with migration. Millions live in crowded settlements without basic amenities and secure tenure. Fires, evictions, poor sanitation, and flooding are regular threats in most settlements. Residents are aware of this uncertainty; they consider themselves as 'city guests'. However, they remain patient, even though their situation never becomes stable or permanent. If the upcoming political leadership intends to reduce urban vulnerabilities, then strengthening affordable housing, enhancing legal safeguards, and promoting community-led leadership upgradation should become priorities. Policies should shift from eviction-based solutions to long-term stability; migrants should not be considered a burden but should instead have their contributions recognised.

Transport is another sector where migration pressure is evident in major cities. Every morning, thousands of workers travel from densely populated and remote settlements to industrial areas.

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KEY POINTS

1. Invest in rural livelihoods, climate resilience, and services to reduce distress migration.
2. Plan cities for informality, density, and migrants' housing, transport, and healthcare needs.
3. Protect migrant workers through labour rights enforcement and humane working conditions.
4. Strengthen inclusive education, healthcare, and food systems in informal urban settlements.
5. Enable migrants' political participation through voter registration and decentralised governance.

everyday struggles of millions in both rural and urban areas.

Over the last few decades, lifeways in most rural areas have shifted in

such a manner that, sooner or later, they motivate rural–urban movement. Currently, agriculture provides less stable income, land has become increasingly fragmented, and weather patterns have grown more unpredictable in most rural regions. Although rural people choose migration, multiple pressures shape this preference. Researchers have observed how people talk about migration using the rhetoric of necessity rather than adventure. It is often described as something one must do to protect one's family. This moral framing shows how migration aligns more with family expectations than with individual aspirations.

Dhaka, Chattogram, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Cumilla attract new migrants every month, which implies a lack of opportunities in migrants' rural areas. These cities are no longer

capable of supporting their already overpopulated residents, let alone new arrivals. Migrants usually work in garment industries, construction sites, and the transport sector, while some find employment in formal sectors. They contribute significantly to strengthening the national economy, yet their living environments often lack fundamental living standards.

One of the major reasons for this situation is rapid and unplanned urbanisation without adequate consideration of migrants' living standards or the carrying capacity of cities. With about 36.6 million people, Dhaka has become the second-largest city in the world in terms of population, and the capital is incapable of adequately supporting its residents and the growing migrant population in areas such as employment, housing, security, and disaster management,

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