

# The moral calculus of footpath evictions in Dhaka

THE GRUDGING URBANIST

Adnan Zillur Morshed  
is a professor, architect, historian, and public  
thinker. He can be reached at morshed@cua.edu.



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

The footpaths of Dhaka have again become a political flashpoint of late. Amid an eviction drive that started earlier this month and subsequent re-occupation attempts by aggrieved hawkers, we have seen calls for a proletarian revolution: *shara Banglar hawker ek hao, lorai koro ... bhat de, kaj de, noile hawker boshte de* ("Hawkers of the country, unite—fight on... give us food, give us work, or at least let us sit on the footpath and sell"). Marx would have agreed with them.

How should we respond to this crisis? The reality is that there is simply no just solution to the so-called "illegal occupation" of footpaths by vendors. Of course, footpaths are for pedestrians. However, this assumption is reasonable so long as we are content to take a sanitised view of the street—namely, that it should be neatly divided into paths for vehicles and paths for pedestrians. This is the standardised position of the planner and the urban administrator, one that ignores the complex urban ecology of what we experience as a "street" in the developing world. Streets, in our socioeconomic context, are battlegrounds of daily life, featuring myriad urban activities: moving, walking, selling, shopping, eating from street vendors, socialising, protesting authorities, demanding rights, begging, and, most importantly, claiming space for livelihoods.

In our prevailing pattern of urbanisation,

of the city and to citizenship. Any attempt to cleanse the streets must therefore begin with an understanding of how they function in our urban context.

This is not to say that vendors have a natural right to occupy footpaths, nor can streets be simply reduced to a vehicle-pedestrian binary. Consider the issue from another angle for a moment. When law enforcement officials justify their eviction drive on legal grounds, what exactly is the law regarding footpaths? What law are the authorities enforcing? There is none. There is no codified footpath policy. What the authorities are enforcing is a bureaucratically agreed-upon arrangement of urban street use. But that is not law. I would argue that the footpath eviction drive constitutes a misuse of power, one rooted in a bourgeois view of urban life that seeks to render invisible a pervasive grassroots economy because it is perceived as an aberration in the smooth functioning of the city in favour of the elite.

The crucial question before us is: how do we do justice to pedestrians while remaining empathetic to footpath hawkers? Is it possible to dispense justice to competing stakeholders simultaneously?

To solve the problem of footpaths, we must think beyond immediate eviction and address broader structural issues: how to educate the urban population about

our eyes. In this city of excessive noise pollution, traffic congestion, and crowds, there is a severe lack of open, peaceful spaces. That is why people gather there in the afternoons to stroll and enjoy the open footpaths in front of the parliament. A park-like environment spontaneously emerges there in the evenings. For small-scale vendors such as fuchka sellers, this becomes an ideal market—a simple matter of supply and demand.

Not only fuchka sellers but also sketch artists, toy sellers, balloon sellers, tea vendors, clothing sellers, and jewellery sellers arrive with their small businesses. This is grassroots survival. It is difficult to eliminate such practices. If removed forcibly, such action may be perceived—within our social context—as an aggressive cleansing of poverty by the elite, ruling classes. The roots of this informal economy run deep

in our moral soil, generating a quiet public sympathy for these "street warriors."

However, there is also a counterargument. Should grassroots markets—or any market—be allowed uncontrolled access to every corner of the urban body? The parliament building is the constitutional centre of the state. Ideally, as laws are made there, should the surrounding area not maintain a certain market-free sanctity? Even if people hold

moral responsibility within the Greek polis. The Latin term *justitia* implies treating everyone equally. In democratic systems, the rule of law forms the institutional core of justice. However, in recent times, discussions of justice have expanded beyond legal frameworks and judicial boundaries. As Amartya Sen argues, justice is an ongoing process with no revolutionary endpoint; it must extend beyond legal definitions into everyday moral imagination. Its primary goal, he suggests, should be to empower the broader population in decision-making. Until the concepts of justice and injustice are deeply embedded in people's daily lives and moral imagination, social instability and self-serving behaviour will persist, and the greater good will remain secondary.

Let me offer an example. Suppose students block a highway demanding that their college be upgraded to a university. The public is stranded in traffic all day. Patients cannot reach hospitals. Students cannot reach their school. Small traders lose their capital. But do the protesting students ever consider the damage they have caused? In pursuing their own demands, are they not being unjust to others?

Consider another example: in developing countries, the informal economy plays a major role. Research shows that in Bangladesh, the informal economy contributes 40-43 percent of GDP and accounts for 85 percent of employment. Yet mainstream economists in the country rarely address it; their policy reports focus almost exclusively on the formal economy. According to the United Nations' 2025 World Population Report, Dhaka is currently the world's second-largest city by population, with approximately 37 million residents, behind Jakarta at 42 million. More than 80 percent of Dhaka's population is engaged in the grassroots economy. Is it not unjust to exclude them from macroeconomic policymaking?

American political philosopher Judith Shklar offers a useful framework for understanding such situations. She argues that while we often theorise justice as an ideal condition—for example, upgrading a college to a university or including informal economy into macroeconomic policies—we rarely consider how injustice operates in everyday life, such as through the harm caused by road blockades or the exclusion of large populations from policy frameworks. Ideal justice is rare, but injustice is abundant all around us. Until we develop the habit of viewing society through the eyes of those who suffer injustice, the dream of a good society will remain unattainable.

In the end, evicting footpath vendors is a gross simplification of a complex social problem—one that demands a long view of how injustice is enacted under official mandate and, paradoxically, in the name of law.



Temporary shops recently removed from the footpaths in Gulistan by Dhaka South City Corporation returned to their previous locations after a few days. PHOTO: MEHEDI HASAN

**To solve the problem of footpaths, we must think beyond immediate eviction and address broader structural issues: how to educate the urban population about land-use regulations so that hawkers are incentivised to relocate to designated marketplaces; how to redesign footpaths as multifunctional urban ecosystems; how to ratify a national footpath policy; and how to decentralise cities so that the grassroots economy does not need to occupy every square inch of street space.**

wherever the lower-income population finds even a square inch of street space, they will create opportunities for livelihood there. This fluid arrangement cannot be undone by force. A week or a month after eviction, footpath vendors invariably return. For better or worse, this is how the informal, grassroots economy functions in the cities of the developing world. Eviction here is not just bad optics; this elitist project is antithetical to the humanity

land-use regulations so that hawkers are incentivised to relocate to designated marketplaces; how to redesign footpaths as multifunctional urban ecosystems; how to ratify a national footpath policy; and how to decentralise cities so that the grassroots economy does not need to occupy every square inch of street space.

Let us now zoom in on the footpath problem from the perspective of moral

negative attitudes toward politics, is there any reason not to regard the parliament area as nationally significant? Why should it be subjected to market "pollution"?

So, the question becomes: should grassroots markets be allowed to remain on Manik Mia Avenue, or should the area be kept market-free so that citizens can enjoy it peacefully? Is this binary framing of rights even fair? Can justice be ensured for competing parties at the same time? Clearly, there are no simple answers. We are thus confronted with a philosophical dilemma: the concept of justice is relative and largely dependent on our moral, political, and social viewpoints. Justice is never an unquestionable ideal. One group's justice may be another's injustice.

Since ancient times, justice has been a subject of debate. Plato and Aristotle associated justice with human virtue and

## Before scaling up renewables, we must first make the grid flexible



Shahriar Ahmed Chowdhury  
is founding director at Centre for Energy Research at  
United International University. He can be reached at  
shahriar.ac@gmail.com.

SHAHRIAR AHMED CHOWDHURY

Bangladesh is on the brink of a major transformation in its power sector. The country has ambitious plans to increase its renewable energy capacity, particularly solar photovoltaic (PV) and wind energy, in line with global climate commitments and its own national development goals. Yet, the promise of renewable energy comes with the challenge of variability. Because, unlike traditional thermal power, solar and wind energy cannot be dispatched on demand. Their output depends on the sun shining and the wind blowing, which varies by the hour, day, and season. Without a flexible and resilient grid, large-scale adoption of these variable renewable energy (VRE) technologies can create instability, inefficiency, and even risk of grid failure.

A flexible grid, capable of accommodating fluctuations in supply while maintaining a stable power flow, is the backbone of any renewable-driven energy system. A modern grid does more than simply transmit electricity from a power plant to a consumer—it balances supply and demand, adjusts to sudden changes in generation, and ensures that voltage and frequency remain within safe operating limits. In Bangladesh, several factors can limit this flexibility.

For example, many of the country's substations are operating near maximum capacity. Adding more renewable energy without upgrading these nodes could overload the grid. Thermal power plants, particularly those fuelled by natural gas and imported fuels, often face shortages or technical failures, limiting their ability to provide backup power when renewable output drops. Thermal plants also have minimum operating levels and technical

constraints that prevent them from adjusting output rapidly enough to match renewable variability. Additionally, solar and wind plants clustered in certain regions can exacerbate local grid stress if not balanced by transmission or storage solutions.

Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of Bangladesh's electricity system must include supply and demand patterns, transmission and distribution constraints, storage potential, and market mechanisms. Only then can policymakers determine how much VRE can be integrated safely and what upgrades are required to support a renewable-dominant grid. Preliminary simulations of Bangladesh's power system are encouraging. Studies indicate that, under idealised conditions, the grid can accommodate higher shares of solar and wind without immediate investments in storage or major transmission upgrades. The least-cost scenarios typically involve maximising renewable penetration, suggesting that technically, Bangladesh has room to scale up VRE.

However, these simulations come with important caveats. They assume that thermal plants can reliably operate on standby, ready to ramp up when renewable generation falls. In reality, fuel shortages, made worse by the Ukraine and Gulf wars, have disrupted predictable operation of gas and liquid fuel plants. High global LNG prices and limited domestic gas reserves mean that even if the installed thermal capacity is sufficient, its operational reliability may not match the assumptions of the models. Further, many coal plants and older gas plants have technical constraints that limit ramping

speed or minimum operating load. This is particularly critical in areas like Chattogram, Feni, Sirajganj, Jamalpur, and Rangpur where rapid growth in VRE is expected. Without flexible backup, periods of low solar or wind generation could lead to instability, forcing curtailment of renewables or risking load shedding. To navigate these challenges, Bangladesh can begin with several practical, short-term measures.

stability and reducing the risk of blackouts.

However, as renewable penetration grows, further interventions will be necessary. First, coal and gas plants may need modifications to reduce minimum operating levels and increase ramping speed, allowing them to complement variable renewables more effectively. Second, battery or other grid storage systems can provide ramping flexibility in regions with limited gas plant



FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

First, time-of-use electricity pricing can incentivise consumers to shift energy-intensive activities to periods of high renewable output, smoothing demand and reducing grid stress. Second, implementing solar and wind generation forecasting can help thermal plants anticipate dips in renewable output and adjust their operations accordingly. Third, introducing Free Governor Mode Operation (FGMO) in power plants could allow automatic adjustment of generator output in response to grid frequency changes, improving frequency

availability. Third, smart appliances and building energy management systems can prioritise electricity consumption when supply is limited, contributing to grid stability.

Looking ahead, Bangladesh must adopt structural and policy solutions to create a truly flexible and renewable-friendly grid. For instance, developing local natural gas reserves can reduce dependency on imports and stabilise thermal generation availability. Second, investments in grid-scale storage are essential to absorb excess renewable

generation so that it can be released during low-output periods. Electric Vehicles (EV) can act as distributed storage, charging during periods of surplus solar generation and feeding electricity back to the grid when needed. Connecting Bangladesh's grid with neighbouring countries can provide additional flexibility, allowing power imports or exports to balance supply-demand fluctuations. Modernising the grid with digital controls, automated distribution, and spot-market electricity pricing ensures efficient operation, reduces losses, and improves reliability. Additionally, promoting devices that align with renewable generation patterns can reduce overall demand pressure on the system.

For these solutions to succeed, grid flexibility must become a central consideration in national energy planning. Thermal power plants must be designed and contracted with flexibility in mind, ensuring they can operate at lower loads without financial penalties. Renewable capacity expansion plans should consider geographical diversity to mitigate local variability. Substation upgrades, transmission expansion, and storage deployment must be integrated into long-term planning. Finally, policymakers must create market incentives and regulatory frameworks that encourage innovation, demand response, and private investment in grid-enhancing technologies.

Bangladesh has the opportunity to transition towards a cleaner, more sustainable energy system driven by solar and wind. But without a flexible grid, these ambitions risk inefficiency, curtailment, or worse, grid failure. By combining short-term operational improvements, medium-term retrofits and storage deployment, and long-term structural and policy interventions, Bangladesh can build a resilient, efficient, and renewable-friendly grid. This will not only enable the integration of variable renewables but also reduce dependence on fossil fuel imports, enhance energy security, and position Bangladesh as a leader in sustainable energy transition in South Asia.