“COVID-19 lockdown means starvation,” laments Lila, a street vendor of boiled eggs. Lila has previously weathered police harassment and countless evictions. But the COVID-19 crisis, she says, is a different catastrophe. In Dhaka in Bangladesh, domestic worker Shamima echoes Lila’s concern: “We have to drink poison if we cannot go out for work. Who will save us from hunger?” These accounts reflect the sentiments of many informal workers in Asian megacities which have recorded high numbers of cases in their countries. As governments scramble for an effective approach to combat the pandemic, millions of urban poor like Lila and Shamima endure its impact with limited state assistance and unjust policy enforcement.

**Redento B. Recio**
PhD in Urban Planning, postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Melbourne’s Informal Urbanism Hub

**Ishita Chatterjee**
PhD candidate, University of Melbourne

**Lutfun Nahar Lata**
PhD in Urban Sociology, The University of Queensland

Widening Urban Divide:
COVID-19 and the Unequal Citizenship

Dhaka’s urban poor have not received enough state assistance either, despite the government’s release of a stimulus package of over $1.1bn to provide soft bank loans and to assist people. However, experts have warned that the aid package for the poor is insufficient, as many undocumented urban poor cannot access the funds. Similarly, travel arrangements have been fraught with inconsistencies. Opportunists have sprung up swindling the migrants for a ticket back home. These incidents exposed the dire condition of daily-wage earners, who have been forced to stop working due to tough movement restrictions. The limited state assistance has compelled some urban poor to set up community kitchens, spend their own savings and rely on aid from civic groups to arrest hunger.

**Urban exodus**

With fears that COVID-19 would spread rapidly in poor, dense urban settlements, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte issued an Executive Order reviving the ‘Balik Probinsya’ (Return to the Provinces) programme. This policy was intended to de-congest Metro Manila and drive balanced and inclusive urban and rural development. However, critics claim this rehashed approach in states is counterproductive to how the government has handled violations committed by some state officials. In Bangladesh, the urban poor faced discrimination when the Dhaka Metropolitan Police allowed hotels and restaurants in the capital to sell iftar (a meal taken by Muslims at sundown to break the daily Ramadan fast) items on 27 April. The police did not allow small eateries to set up stalls on the footpaths. This means the informal food traders are not allowed to operate any business in public spaces.

Returning migrants in India were exposed to inhumane quarantine practices, both on their way home and once they reached their villages. Images of workers being sprayed with disinfectant have emerged from different parts of India. In some villages, they were forced to quarantine on trees and in fields, far from the residential clusters. The bias against the poor was evident since the middle class and rich returning by air were not subjected to this kind of discrimination, even though the virus had reached India by air passengers. Unequal experiences of (urban) citizenship.

These accounts reveal a fundamental issue in many Global South cities – the uneven experiences of urban citizenship. Inadequate state support, leading to a ‘voluntary’ exodus, and the ‘return to the provinces’ approach reveals how governments consider the urban poor as a burden, with little recognition of their contribution to the urban economy. The ‘stay-put’ strategy without offering provisions or giving any assurances shows how migrants are treated as dispensable. Double standards prevail in the administration of justice in unequal cities. The poor and vulnerable are criminalised and punished, while those in power are treated with compassion. In India and Bangladesh, the sudden imposition of lockdown without warning or adequate assistance exposes how the poor are invisible to the state gaze.

It is important to end by emphasising how solidarity-based initiatives – e.g. community kitchens and NGO assistance - create spaces for enduring struggles of impoverished urban residents to realise the substantive meanings and practices of being a ‘citizen’ in the city. COVID-19 reminds us how informal employment and deep-rooted inequality in these megacities mean the vulnerabilities and opportunities to recover from the pandemic are unevenly distributed.

All names of the interviewees in this article are pseudonyms we used to protect their identity.

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Redento B. Recio has a PhD in Urban Planning and is currently a postdoctoral researcher fellow at the University of Melbourne’s Informal Urbanism Hub (InfUr-) Research Hub. His research focuses on social inclusion, urban informal livelihoods, grassroots collective action, development planning and urban governance issues in global South cities.

Ishita Chatterjee is pursuing her doctoral studies at the University of Melbourne. Her research interest is to understand informalisation processes of informal settlements in India, where she also traces the different urbanisation patterns that impact these settlements and studies the growth trajectories they take on account of this.

Lutfun Nahar Lata has a PhD in Urban Sociology and researches urban space, gendered space, urban poverty, inequality and housing rights. Her methodological expertise lies in using qualitative and quantitative methods to examine emerging urban issues including urban-governance processes from multiple perspectives.
Author/s:
Recio, R; Chatterjee, I; Lata, LN

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