Rising inequalities, deepening divides: Urban citizenship in the time of COVID-19

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Abstract
As governments around the globe navigate the effects of COVID-19 crisis, the urban poor endure the unevenly distributed socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. This burden is more pronounced in Global South megacities, where millions of people engage in precarious informal employment. We examine how the urban poor in Delhi (India), Dhaka (Bangladesh), and Manila (Philippines) have been disproportionately affected by the crisis. A cross-case analysis was undertaken to determine how the realities and relations of one context can enrich our understanding of the other. We argue that the current COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the unequal urban citizenship in these three metropolises. Drawing on research reports, news articles, and interviews with urban poor leaders, we explain how limited government assistance has forced some to retreat to their rural hometowns or rely on self-help and mutual aid practices to survive. We consider the patterns both in governments’ treatment of impoverished citizens and in the unjust effects of lockdown enforcement on marginalised populations. We also discuss the roles that women and non-government organisations (NGOs) have played in facilitating solidarity-based practices to help urban poor communities cope with COVID-19 vulnerabilities.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, Global South megacities, government, informality, invisibility, urban citizenship

1 | INTRODUCTION

In mid-May 2020, an informal vendor named Eva sent out a message to her friends on Facebook asking for financial aid to pay for the house rent after weeks of being unable to sell goods in the streets of Metro Manila. Excluded from the list of beneficiaries of the Philippine government’s social amelioration fund, she had to worry about the family’s daily food and about whether they would be driven out of their home in coming weeks. The COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have caught everyone by surprise, claiming thousands of lives and wreaking havoc on the global economy. Yet, the factors that produce the virus’s ravaging impacts, particularly on urban poor such as Eva, had been deep-rooted long before the COVID-19 became a global pandemic. In Asian metropolises, many urban poor live in informal settlements, earning their incomes from daily waged activities such as street vending, domestic help, and informal transport services. The COVID-19 shutdown has deprived them of their livelihoods while containing them in living conditions where spatial distancing is nearly impossible. Beyond the fundamental health crisis, the pandemic has magnified acute challenges linked with inadequate social services, food insecurity, precarious employment, and stubborn inequalities. As people around the world get engrossed in the visible and unexpected effects of COVID-19, the task is to “make the
unapparent appear” (Nixon, 2011, p. 15) by unpacking the entrenched issues that have intensified the crisis.

In this article, we critically gaze upon the living conditions of the urban poor in Delhi (India), Dhaka (Bangladesh), and Manila (Philippines)—megacities that have recorded high numbers of COVID-19 cases in their countries. Our findings shed light on pervasive yet elusive dimensions of the pandemic. We show how inadequate state aid has resulted in urban exodus, forcing thousands of urban poor in Delhi to walk for days to return to their rural hometowns. In Manila, the ‘Balik Probinsya’ (Return to the Province) Program was revived and especially targeted the urban poor. In Dhaka, conflicting strategies by the government left workers stranded without any transportation and they then had to resort to walking and other informal modes of transport. Since strict lockdown has been a primary government response to curb the spread of the Coronavirus, we also explain how unjust enforcement inflicts a ‘policing’ approach to the health crisis. Amid limited government aid and economic shutdown, civic organisations and volunteer groups have stepped in to provide much-needed support to impoverished populations. These solidarity-based initiatives create spaces for urban belonging and yet, when juxtaposed with questions of governance, they reveal deeply entrenched issues related to unequal citizenship and the politics of unseeing in cities.

The article proceeds as follows. We first examine some global impacts of COVID-19 and draw on key scholarly insights to frame our analytical lens. We then explain the data gathering methods and present five empirical threads: inadequate state support, urban exodus, unjust enforcement of lockdown measures, politics of unseeing and invisibility, and solidarity-based initiatives. Our conclusion considers the implications of these themes for postpandemic recovery and future research.

## 2 | SPECTACULAR COVID-19 AND SLOW-MOVING DISASTERS

The COVID-19 pandemic has reached an unprecedented scale. At the time of writing, on 18 June 2021, there have been over 177 million confirmed cases worldwide with more than 3.8 million deaths (JHU or John Hopkins University, 2021). In terms of economic consequences, the World Bank’s forecast shows a 5% contraction in global gross domestic product (GDP) in 2020, with deep recessions expected to result in lower levels of investment and an erosion of human capital through lost work and schooling (World Bank, 2020). In Asia, the number of poor people will rise by between 90 million and 400 million (Park et al., 2020). These impacts have wide ranging implications for local and international economies and geopolitical dynamics. Yet, several factors that have worsened the COVID-19 effects on mostly impoverished populations are “neither spectacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental and accretive” (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). While COVID-19 has been front and centre of global media agenda since early 2020, its spectacle-deficient but equally debilitating dimensions remain largely unproblematised. Nixon (2011, p. 3) makes a critical distinction between “spectacular” and “slow-moving” disasters:

In an age where the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?

As people become preoccupied with news reports of the COVID-19-related deaths and economic meltdown, it is crucial to pay attention to hidden factors that arguably have worsened the pandemic’s impacts. While the effects of COVID-19 can easily be viewed as spectacular, the underlying causes and structures of crisis interventions that followed should be seen through the prism of a slow-moving disaster. This work entails asking questions such as what does the COVID-19 crisis tell us about our prepandemic national and urban governance structures; who have been the most affected; and why and how are the urban poor’s basic rights exercised or violated during
lockdown enforcements? Raising these questions might help avoid the romance and overreach of sweeping analytic claims that frame our imaginations in this time of uncertainty. Doing so also means taking a hard look at how and to what extent institutional arrangements and acute inequalities in Global South countries have exacerbated the COVID-19 as a disaster and humanitarian crisis for the urban poor.

3 | DISASTER JUSTICE IN THE AGE OF A GLOBAL PANDEMIC

Conventional formulations on disaster management claim that disaster happens when the capacity of social institutions is overwhelmed to mitigate demands created by the physical events (Dynes et al., 1967). Societies and communities that are usually resilient during ‘typical’ disasters may be overwhelmed by the demands and impacts of catastrophic disaster events (Tierney, 2012). Recent research on disasters has also highlighted the importance of processual contexts (Button & Schuller, 2016) and shown how public institutions could mitigate or aggravate the effects of disaster crises on the affected populations (Bankoff & Borrinaga, 2016). The idea of disaster governance thus underscores the importance of structural arrangements and processes through which several policies are crafted and implemented (Tierney, 2012). In this era of global interdependence, major disasters such as COVID-19 disrupt worldwide supply chains, prompting cross-border collaboration and global governance arrangements to overcome disaster impacts. Inevitably, disaster governance also means bringing together multiple organisations to reduce and manage disaster risks (Ansell & Gash, 2007; O’Leary et al., 2006).

Furthermore, disaster governance entails unpacking the institutional arrangements that have been put in place to reduce vulnerabilities and exposure during nondisaster times and manage disaster situations once they occur. Here, it is important to consider various stakeholders representing the implementers of disaster responses and those affected by crisis situations. Curato (2019) has pointed out how multiple publics exist and has also highlighted the diversity and fragmentation of views and practices against the backdrop of a major catastrophe. Fragmentation and tensions emerge from the different perspectives of heterogeneous actors and often arise because of uneven vulnerabilities and varying capacities of social groups to cope with disaster risks. These conditions reveal how moments of crisis bring issues of spatial and socio-ecological justice to the political fore. For Douglass and Miller (2018, p. 271), this is a question of disaster justice as a moral claim on governance, and they recognise that “disasters always occur in political spaces, which necessitate more equitable and inclusive modes of disaster preparedness, response, and redress for the underlying inequalities that contribute to conditions of compounded risk and precarity.”

We draw on these ideas about slow-moving disasters, disaster governance, and disaster justice to examine how certain societal and structural factors—those that are accretive, incremental, and spectacle-deficient—have contributed to the unprecedented COVID-19 impacts and the deepening urban divide in Delhi, Dhaka, and Manila. To do this work, we have investigated how the urban poor in those three megacities bear the brunt of the unevenly distributed effects of the pandemic. We have analysed how the broader social contexts and governance structures have played a critical role in crisis interventions. Here, we have also built on and expand Douglass and Miller’s (2018) two dimensions of disaster justice: the underlying socio-spatial processes leading to uneven patterns of vulnerability and just distribution of resources to support recovery and resilience. We have focused on five issues: the inadequate state support, urban exodus, unjust enforcement of lockdown measures, politics of unseeing and invisibility, and solidarity-based initiatives. It is our contention that these overlapping factors shape the urban poor’s uneven experiences of citizenship in the time of COVID-19.

4 | METHODOLOGY

We collected data from Delhi, Dhaka, and Manila. Delhi, India’s capital, has a population of 29.4 million (UN, 2019) and 50% of it resides in informal settlements (Banerjee et al., 2012). Dhaka, Bangladesh’s capital city, had a population of 18 million in 2017 (UN, 2017). One third of these people live in informal settlements and 89% work in the informal sector (ADB, 2012). Manila has been the Philippines’ primary urban centre since the Spanish colonial occupation in the late 16th century. It is home to 12.8 million residents (PSA, 2015), about a third of whom are in informal settlements.

Given existing COVID-19 lockdown situations, we could not conduct face-to-face interviews or undertake field observations. Instead, we collected data using telephone interviews and zoom meetings with key informants and undertook content analysis of online news articles and videos from reputable local and international media organisations. We also collected data used Netnography, a method that includes observation of online activities on various social media (Kozinets, 1998). Interviews were undertaken with 44 participants (25 females and 19 males) who are urban poor leaders, community organisers in
informal settlements, and officials in non-government organisations (NGOs). Of them, 12 participants (6 female and 6 male) are from Delhi, 14 participants (7 female and 7 male) are from Dhaka, and 18 participants (9 female and 9 male) are from Manila. The online and telephone interviews were conducted between April and August 2020. We have adhered to the guidelines stipulated in two approved research ethics documents—Ethics Application ID 1749888.1 and Ethics Application ID 1955844.1.

The guide questions used to interview participants centred on the following topics: participants’ decisions to leave or stay in the city; support provided by government actors, NGOs, and other community organisations; difficulties in accessing food, medicine, and other essential items; impact of lockdown on livelihoods; and employment. We curated government perspectives by referring to online news articles and policy documents uploaded to government websites. Themes emerging from empirical insights were then examined and linked to our conceptual lens. We employed a cross-case analysis where the realities and relations of one city have enriched our understanding of the other.

5 COVID-19 AND THE URBAN POOR

Over 90% of reported COVID-19 cases worldwide have come from urban areas (Mizutori & Sharif, 2020), turning the spotlight on cities as the pandemic’s epicentres. In our three metropolises, COVID-19 cases as of 18 June 2021 were as follows: Delhi—1,431,868 (Government of India, 2021); Dhaka 335,922 (IEDCR, 2021); and Manila—518,946 (DOH or Department of Health, 2021). These numbers were among the highest in Asian cities (Figure 1).

Along with the rise in virus infections, COVID-19 has exposed the dismal state of healthcare systems and the ongoing existence of profound inequalities, which have constrained the ability of governments to respond to the pandemic and rendered some groups more vulnerable. The urban poor are among those who endure the disproportionate impacts of the crisis. The pandemic has significantly damaged many poor people’s already unstable asset base, making it hard for them to bounce back. To a large extent, impacts on the poor have stemmed from the enforcement of lockdown measures in the three countries, as well as from prepandemic socio-economic structures and political relations.

In India, the national government declared a 21-day countrywide lockdown on 24 March 2020, with just four hours to prepare. The shutdown affected poor migrant workers most adversely because of their negligible social protection, which has been aggravated by their lack of identity proofs in the state[s] where they work (Bhagat et al., 2020). The government definition of migrant worker is narrowly confined to interstate labourers (workers who travel from one province to another).
recruited by contractors. We adopt a broader definition provided by the Housing and Land Rights Network [Habitat International Coalition] (HLRN 2020), which includes street vendors and other informal workers who travel between different administrative regions for work.

While the Indian government used the National Disaster Management Act (NDMA) 2005 to restrict migrants from travelling, it had no national plan to deal with the pandemic (Sibal, 2020). The government passed most of the responsibility to private players and state governments, which were under-resourced and lacked infrastructure and financial capacity to deal with the pandemic. Similarly, landlords were advised to provide rent relief and employers were asked to continue payments even during the lockdown period. However, there was no mention of a minimum standard of relief to which they should adhere.

In Bangladesh, the government declared a lockdown from 25 March to 5 May 2020, shutting down public transports and non-essential businesses. During the first week of national lockdown, 13 million people suddenly found themselves unemployed. In May 2020, the government announced stimulus packages targeting different sectors. However, most such packages do not help the poor and instead are directed to owners of the garment and other industrial and service sectors (Lata, 2020). There was some coordination between national and local governments for relief distribution among the most vulnerable groups (Alam, 2020). In March 2020, the Ministry of Health and Welfare prepared the National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, which was implemented by committees working from national to the subdistrict levels. The implementation included mechanisms to develop surge capacity to manage patients, sustain essential services, and reduce social impacts.

In the Philippines, to spearhead the COVID-19 response measures, the national government convened an Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases. In April 2020, the first few weeks of lockdown covered Metro Manila but that was then extended to the whole of Luzon Island in succeeding weeks to contain the spread of the virus. Most crisis interventions initially came from the IATF. Given the magnitude of the crisis, the national government has focused on building the health system’s capacities, mobilising national resources, and issuing policies. Local governments had to implement the IATF-formulated policies on quarantine procedures, community lockdown, health protocols and other measures.

With this context in place, in what follows we explain how COVID-19 has widened and deepened existing inequality among various social groups, focusing on the vulnerability of the urban poor.

6 | INADEQUATE STATE SUPPORT

In most South and Southeast Asian cities, governments have provided inadequate support to the urban poor during COVID-19. Migrants in Delhi have protested the shortage of money and food arising from the sudden lockdown (Kumar, 2020). While the central government has directed rent relief and provisions for shelters for the migrants, its recommendations have often not been followed or properly implemented. In some cases, migrants have been forced to stay in containment zones, which has led to overcrowding, unsatisfactory living conditions, and shortage of food in shelters. The uncertainty of the situation has also led to agitation and despair among migrants who have demanded transport to go back to their villages. Because of international criticism, the government eventually announced relief measures for the poor and transport facilities for migrants. However, experts have cautioned that the aid package for the poor is insufficient as many undocumented urban poor cannot access the funds (Bajaj et al., 2020). Travel arrangements have been fraught with discrepancies. Free travel for migrants seems to have been ignored, and opportunists agents have swindled migrants for tickets back home (Lalwani, 2020). Journeys by train have often been ill-managed. Food provisions and transportation from arrival stations to villages have been missing in most cases too (The Wire, 2020).

In Bangladesh, the urban poor who rely on daily wages have experienced dramatic income declines. One study claims that poor people have no alternative but to depend on government assistance (BIGD, 2020). However, the urban poor have received very little assistance, despite a government promise of over US$11 billion
stimulus package. Although the government has provided food assistance to 10.25 million people (Sakib, 2020), not all urban poor received that provision. On 14 May 2020, the government provided to five million poor families affected by the COVID-19 crisis a cash assistance of US$30 each using mobile financial services (Lata, 2020). The beneficiaries were floating populations: rickshaw and van-pullers, day-labourers, dock workers, sales staff at shops, small traders, barbers, street vendors, and manual workers. The government selected those beneficiaries with the help of local administrators and elected representatives. However, the selection process was opaque and some middle-class followers of the ruling political party even received payment. After an investigation, the Finance Division dropped 493,200 persons from the allocation list because they are from well-off families. This measure suggests that the beneficiary list was influenced by people’s political affiliations rather than their economic status. Similar discrepancies have been found in food assistance in different parts of Bangladesh.

In Manila, 21 residents of San Roque, an urban poor settlement with about 30,000 inhabitants, were detained in early April 2020 for voicing discontent and seeking aid to tackle hunger. While the national government had distributed PhP 16,000 (US$314/household) to the poorest families, urban poor groups claimed that this amount was not enough to meet family needs for more than three months of enhanced community quarantine (Figure 2). Nearly five million households were excluded from the list of beneficiaries (Tupas, 2020). The cash aid distribution had also been marred by irregularities in many areas (Bajo, 2020) because some village-level officials have falsified the list of recipients or asked for a ‘cut’ from the beneficiaries. While beneficiaries of the government’s conditional cash transfer programme for poorest families have been automatically enlisted as recipients of the state’s social amelioration program (SAP), many informal workers such as street vendors have been excluded from SAP. Street vendors told us about their exclusion because they were not officially registered in barangay (village-level) government’s enumeration system. This reportage has been affirmed in an NGO research report, highlighting the discretionary and arbitrary nature of SAP selection at the barangay level. The report, which collected data in 11 communities across Metro Manila, cites the following reasons for rejecting SAP applications: failure to show any document of barangay registration; being employed during the enumeration period; ownership of micro-enterprises; and having cemented/concrete houses (SENTRO, 2021).

Such incidents highlight the dire conditions experienced by daily wage earners who have been forced to stop working because of tough movement restrictions. Limited state assistance had compelled the urban poor to rely on community-based organisations (CBOs), NGOs, and other self-help initiatives to arrest hunger, discussed in detail below. While these groups were able to provide financial aid to most of the vulnerable groups, some slipped through.

In some cases, local governments have been working hard to address the needs of the vulnerable. In Pasig, a Metro Manila component city, an amelioration fund has been provided by the local government to families who were not covered by the national government’s cash assistance (Mercado, 2020). In Dhaka, some local ward councillors developed a list of the ultra-poor and distributed relief with help from its community members. In April 2020, the Delhi government announced that access to free rations would be made available to non-ration cardholders (All India News, 2020), a step to ensure the undocumented poor could receive relief packages. Some local leaders also devised a mechanism to oversee food distribution in their area (Livemint, 2020). Those practices reveal that responsive crisis interventions often rely on the quality of leaders in local governments.

7 | URBAN EXODUS

In addition to receiving inadequate state assistance, many urban poor had been compelled to return to their rural hometowns during the COVID-19 pandemic. HLRN has reported that 66% of migrants in India have lost their job, 63.7% have run out of money, 43% have had no access to food, and 12% have been rendered homeless. Some waited for three days while others lasted a week before they were exposed to hunger and had to start their long journey home, defying lockdown rules. Migrant Jai’s words capture this situation aptly: “for the poor, the choice is between dying of hunger or exposure to Coronavirus.” He travelled 1,200 km from Delhi to Bihar on foot because all modes of transport had been stopped. Thousands of migrants walked very long distances (Figure 3), rode on bicycles for days, and climbed into cement mixers to return to their rural hometowns. Many even squeezed into cramped trucks to find a way home; however, not all survived the journey (Thejesh, 2020). When news of the migrant exodus started surfacing in the media, the government urged those leaving cities to stay put, promising them food and shelter, fearing they would spread the virus. Yet, the assurances arrived very late; many migrants who had stayed behind were pushed to begging to survive. The pandemic already had a detrimental effect on their mental wellbeing, and families back in their villages who depended on their earnings were facing difficult times too.
In the Philippines, amid the fear of COVID-19 spreading in dense urban poor settlements, President Rodrigo Duterte issued an Executive Order (EO 114) reviving the ‘Balik Probinsya’ (Return to the Province) Program (Office of the President, 2020). This policy is intended to decongest Metro Manila and drive balanced and inclusive urban and rural development. Critics have warned that this rehashed scheme to dump the urban poor in the provinces is unlikely to be sustainable without significant development and job opportunities in rural areas. While many migrants from rural areas have moved to Manila in search for better socio-economic opportunities, only very limited data exist on the short-term and seasonal migration of urban poor in Metro Manila. In one study, however, a seasonal migration phenomenon has been observed in Baclaran district, where, from September to December, some Muslim Filipinos from impoverished provinces take part in vibrant street vending practices in the area (Recio, 2021).

In Bangladesh, about 300,000–400,000 poor migrants arrive in Dhaka every year (Hackenbroch et al., 2008), and there the government’s announcement of a 10-day holiday in March 2020 prompted many urban poor to flee to their rural homes. To stop the urban exodus, the government banned travel by water, rail, and air routes and suspended road transportation. When the government reopened the factories, no transport was made available and workers found themselves stranded in their hometowns. This situation forced many garment workers to walk hundreds of kilometres to return to Dhaka to save their jobs (Ahmed, 2020). It should be noted here that the number of seasonal migrants only increases the population of Dhaka by approximately 1% (Mobarak & Akram, 2016).

8 | UNJUST ENFORCEMENT OF LOCKDOWN RULES

Coupled with limited state assistance, the forced urban exodus has been exacerbated by the inequitable and violent policing of the urban poor. Throughout the Philippines, close to 300,000 people have been apprehended for breaching curfew and quarantine restrictions since the lockdown was enforced in late March 2020. The government’s approach has thus been termed highly militarised and human rights abuses have been reported to the United Nations (Aljazeera, 2020). Reports of local officials imprisoning quarantine violators in dog cages and coffins have surfaced from many villages (ABC, 2020). This heavy-handed approach has been in stark contrast to how the government has handled quarantine violations by some state officials. One example relates to a Manila police general who held a birthday party with other officers on 8 May 2020 despite a strict ban on mass assemblies. The officers who attended the gathering have not been arrested nor removed from service. The police general was later appointed head of the entire Philippine National Police.

While the government of Bangladesh did not use an overtly violent strategy, the urban poor have been exposed to discrimination such as when, on 27 April 2020, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police permitted hotel and restaurant owners and managers in the capital to sell iftar, a meal taken by Muslims at sundown to break the daily Ramadan fast (Alif, 2020). Grocery shops were allowed to remain open until 4 pm. The police did not, however, authorise small eateries and street vendors to set up stalls in public spaces, exacerbating inequalities at very least.
A similar narrative illustrating varied forms of unequal treatment has been observed in India. At the start of the pandemic, the government’s strategy to stop migrants from travelling included fuelling the fear that they would carry the virus and infect others (Bindra & Sharma, 2020). Migrants who travelled back to villages were subjected to inhume quarantine practices both during their journeys and once they reached their destinations. Photographs of migrants being sprayed with disinfectants have emerged from different parts of India. In certain villages, some have been forced to quarantine on trees and in fields, far from the residential clusters. Community surveillance has also led to violence and abusive practices.

In all three cities, the bias against the poor has been fully evident. Throughout India, members of the middle and wealthy classes who had returned home by air were not exposed to any prejudice even though the virus had entered the country through that portal. On the other hand, the poor were treated as if they were the virus themselves. In comparison, Dhaka’s poor were victims of unfair policies that further aggravated their already disadvantaged economic situation. In Manila, many urban poor endured heavy-handed policing measures as opposed to the compassionate treatment extended to the government officials.

Lockdown enforcements have also had a strongly gendered dimension. In a recent report, UN-Habitat (2021) has highlighted how widespread poverty and entrenched inequality in cities have exacerbated the uneven impacts of the pandemic on women, leaving them more isolated and burdened with pressures to earn income, manage home schooling, and engage in unpaid care for families during the COVID-19 crisis.

In Delhi, a study of women waste pickers indicates that 68% of those who took part in a survey were unable to perform their usual work because of shop closures, police patrols, and a lack of protective equipment (Majithia, 2020). Another survey conducted by staff from the Institute of Social Studies Trust found that 54% of domestic workers in Delhi were unable to collect their wages in March 2020 because of mobility restrictions and 14% were unable to collect their wages in the same month because of their fears of getting infected with virus (Ghos & Bilkh, 2020). Such outcomes have been aggravated by those workers’ exclusion from emergency cash grants because the Delhi government has not crafted rules that would have protected domestic workers under the 2008 Unorganised Workers’ Social Security Act (Babu & Bhandari, 2020). In Dhaka, many domestic workers who used to work in several houses have had to restrict themselves to work in one house only but have received no compensation from employers for having to leave their other jobs (WIEGO & IDWF, 2020). In Manila, women vendors have been struggling to deal with financial distresses and emotional burdens because they have been unable to sell goods on the streets because of lockdown restrictions. A statement from one female vendor captures their plight: “We have been dealing with a very tough situation. Each time we go out into the streets, we feel we need to kneel down and beg the police to allow us to sell. When we try to sell, our main goal is to put food on the table, but they [police] only destroy our goods.” Some of these women have also reduced their caloric intake to just two meals a day to cope with the crisis.

9 | INVISIBILITY AND UNSEEING

The urban poor and informal workers are often unseen and unaccounted for when policymakers formulate national policies and programs. At least three international instruments recognise informal workers—ILO Convention 189 concerning Domestic Workers, ILO Recommendation 202 concerning Social Protection Floors, and ILO Recommendation 204 on the Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy. Yet, urban informal workers still do not enjoy worker rights and protections in many countries (WIEGO, 2020). This shortfall has become obvious during the crisis.

Urban informal traders often operate precariously in markets and on streets but contribute to food security of low-income communities. However, a survey of legal approaches to COVID-19 in 51 countries indicates that just over a third (18) of national governments recognised informal food traders as essential service providers (WIEGO, 2020). In the Philippines, registered stalls or informal workers could collaborate with some local governments who have launched ‘markets on wheels’ projects.

The urban exodus and the mishandling of the transportation and quarantine facilities have also exposed poor migrants’ invisibility in Delhi. This outcome is alarming in a city whose migration rate is among the highest in India, officially acknowledged at 45% (NCRPB, 2008). These migrants occupy public spaces, use public transport, and work in private as well as public sectors—albeit in informal jobs. Yet, they are primarily undocumented in the census and national surveys. Besides statistical invisibility, the government appears to have been generally clueless about migrants’ living and working conditions. During the lockdown, most undocumented migrants who temporarily lived in their workplaces were left homeless because those workplaces had shut down.
Invisibility is also an act of unseeing. In Delhi’s case, unseeing is partly connected with electoral politics (Naik, 2020). Since most migrants can only vote in their home locations based on the country’s voting system, local politicians have not seen any benefit from their enumeration. Even when civil society groups have pushed for migrants’ documentation, it has not been realised. Many short-term migrants are marginal or landless farmers, placing them in a comparably precarious situation when schemes have been made to landholders in their home states (Sengupta & Jha, 2020). Outdated data are a problem; the distribution of relief packages continues to be designed using 2011 census data, which overlook many urban poor (Sengupta & Jha, 2020).

Meanwhile, when the Bangladesh government lifted movement restrictions and formulated COVID-19 containment guidelines, instructions were given for farmers’ markets, shopping malls, restaurants, and other organisations but not for informal and domestic workers. In the 2021 budget, the government also allocated interest payment subsidies for working capital loans by banks to businesses including US$2 billion loans to cottage, micro, small, and medium enterprises. Yet, it would be hard for the urban poor and informal workers to access this loan scheme because of a lack of collateral and the illegality or legal marginality of their businesses.

In the Philippines, a substantial number of informal workers have been unable to get any financial aid from the government, prompting one senator to file draft legislation to create a database that includes all informal workers in the country. While this reform is expected to ease the distribution of government aid in times of emergencies, it clearly shows that the pre-pandemic policy environment had been unresponsive to the needs of informal workers who constitute about 62% of the Philippine labour force (Bersales & Llarena, 2019).

The glaring lack of attention to the urban poor’s precarious informal employment thus has reflected the prevailing labour and social protection laws that exclude informal workers (WIEGO, 2020). It has also revealed policymakers’ poor understanding of how sizeable sections of their populations work and live. As such, frameworks for aid distribution and the design of lockdown policies fail to recognise how urban poor survive in cities, resulting in deeper fault lines of inequality and sustaining practices of unseeing in a time of great suffering.

**10 | MUTUAL AID AND SOLIDARITY-BASED PRACTICES**

Discourses about disaster coping strategies and crisis responses underscore how grassroots players undertake self-help initiatives and how NGOs are often among the first to help the victims with limited resources. The role of civil society is particularly important where state systems of governance are weak and often unable to distribute resources equitably among all groups.

In India, disaster management has traditionally been a state affair. In 2011, civil society groups started engaging with social problems in expanded ways within the constraints of the state’s policies, making their work predominantly a top-down approach (Özerdem & Jacoby, 2006). In Bangladesh, community members have historically been excluded from government-led disaster responses (Hasan et al., 2013). To cope with disasters, poor people have often relied on assistance from government, NGOs, and voluntary organisations. In the Philippines, the civic ethos is rooted in centuries-long experiences where people have relied on their own capacities to deal with hazards and related problems (Bankoff, 2007).

In dealing with COVID-19 impacts, community groups and NGOs have been on the frontlines, facilitating solidarity-based practices with urban poor communities. In Delhi, while the government has been feeding and sheltering 92% of the poor, it was plagued by bureaucratic problems. Ill-prepared food distribution centres have been unable to reach large sections of the urban poor. NGOs have stepped in to support the poor by distributing food and engaging in advocacy (Sen, 2020). Individuals have also joined the fight against hunger by distributing food cooked in their own kitchens. In some areas, local governments have forged relationships with civil society groups to deal with the pandemic. This collaboration, however, needs to be understood in the broader context of the uneasy relationship between the present government and those civil society groups; to fight the humanitarian crisis the government now depends on the same group it had earlier condemned but that amity may not last.

In Dhaka, because of a lack of social safety net and inadequate government response, the urban poor have relied on their neighbours, friends, and families who have shared food, distributed food aid packages, and lent money (Taylor, 2020). Local CBOs have also actively provided information and other assistance to community members. In some informal settlements, organised community responses have ensured the health and safety of the urban poor. The Urban Poor Federation of Dhaka North City, which is linked to 350 Community Development Committees, has organised community savings groups and extended accessible finance to urban poor groups. CBOs in other informal settlements have also mediated between the government and NGO officials (Figure 4) and assisted them to distribute aid and food among their local communities (Taylor, 2020). In addition, some landlords in urban poor communities have provided food to their tenants.
Some community groups have also identified ultra-poor families who should receive relief packages in their communities.

In Manila, local peoples’ organisations have set up community kitchens with help from volunteer professionals and civic groups. In San Roque community, collective histories and struggles for decent housing and livelihoods have contributed to the citizen-led COVID-19 response in the area. Local groups that normally have clashing positions on housing relocation and eviction issues have banded together to undertake relief operations, manage community kitchens, and implement context-specific health protocols (Faminiano et al., 2020). They have been able to manage 27 community kitchens, feeding over 5,000 individuals every day between April and June 2020. In neighbouring urban poor settlements, local groups have been partnering with social movements, student groups, and civic associations to distribute relief goods and conduct seasonal feeding drives for children and the elderly. In Sitio Mendez (Quezon City), community leaders have acted as health ‘frontliners’, showing courage drawn from their shared agency and struggles (Tadem et al., 2020). In other areas, street vendors who continue to earn money because of local governments’ mobile markets programs share relief packages with fellow street workers who have been out of work since mid-March 2020 (Recio et al., 2020). One vendor leader has described this effort as part of their group’s routine mutual aid schemes, which they also observe when there are clearing operations against...
informal hawkers. Some informal vendor coalitions have also gotten in touch with volunteer organisations to extend financial aid to street hawkers.

Again, women have played an important role in carrying out these mutual-aid practices. In Delhi, women’s associations have made efforts to cushion the economic impacts of the crisis on informal workers. The Self-Employed Women’s Association has helped women informal workers gain access to government relief programmes (UK AID, 2020). In Dhaka, women leaders in slum settlements have assisted in relief distribution and mounted a local campaign to enforce spatial distancing measures and hand washing routine. In Manila, women leaders and volunteers have been running community kitchens, cultivating vegetable gardens (Figure 5), and serving as health frontliners in urban poor communities.

These solidarity-based initiatives—food distribution, NGO assistance, community kitchens—create spaces of urban belonging and enable the poor to cope with the onslaught of COVID-19. Bhan, Caldeira, Gillespie, and AbdouMaliq (2020) consider these practices part of collective life in the urban Global South, which pertains to “a broad fabric of relations, initiatives, efforts, ways of paying attention, of joining forces, investing time and resources that take place both as matters of intentional organisation, but more importantly as a series of practices that people engage in so as to manage their everyday existence within cities.” While these grassroots initiatives are direct responses to crises such as COVID-19, they also draw attention to the enduring struggle of impoverished urban residents to realise the substantive meanings and practices of being a ‘citizen’—not least in cities. The pandemic reminds us about how the precarity of informal employment and deep-rooted inequality in these megacities unevenly distribute the vulnerabilities and opportunities to cope with the current and postpandemic issues.

11 | CONCLUSION

We have sought to shift the gaze from the monumental features of COVID-19 to its ordinary and historically-rooted dimensions. We have paid attention to how the pandemic has disproportionately affected the urban poor in Delhi, Dhaka, and Manila. This work has allowed us to move beyond the limited analytical frames that often inform government narratives and media reports. The foregoing issues we have presented reveal a fundamental issue in many Global South cities—the uneven experiences of urban citizenship (Hammett, 2017). The inadequate state support leading to ‘voluntary’ exodus and the ‘return to the province’ approach confirm that the governments in the three countries under consideration often consider the urban poor to be a burden and fail to recognise their contributions to the urban economy. The ‘stay-put’ strategy, implemented without offering provisions, reveals how governments treat migrants as dispensable. Evident too are double standards in enforcing lockdown policies. In the Philippines, the poor have been criminalised and punished while those in power are treated with compassion for breaking the same rule. The sudden lockdown imposition in India and Bangladesh without warning and adequate assistance shows how the poor are invisible to the gaze of the state.

Conditions for the urban poor in the three cities have also amplified the role of NGOs and civic groups in the politics of unseeing. Through their sustained development efforts and disaster-oriented interventions, NGOs and other citizen organisations act as intermediaries between the poor and well-off citizens who are willing to help. They help us ‘see’ and make ‘visible’ the unseen and unimagined communities (Nixon, 2011), filling the social service gaps and drawing public attention to government failures. The various acts of exclusion—from aid distribution in Dhaka and Manila to sudden lockdown in Delhi—have worsened the impacts of the crisis on the urban poor. Here, governments have clearly deployed seeing and unseeing as tactics to exercise power; this is critical in understanding how COVID-19 is framed as a ‘crisis’ and who gets to tell the ‘story.’ How we shape and communicate the narratives of this crisis matters in measuring the impacts, identifying the ‘victims’ and determining who are responsible.

The exclusion of the poor from state records and administrative procedures also shows how ‘invisibility’ is fundamentally a relational issue (Polzer & Hammond, 2008) that influences policy-making; this is apparent in urban planning and governance processes. For instance, urban policies in Dhaka and Manila have been largely framed around ‘formal’ economic transactions and relations (Recio, 2020). Self-help practices and informal livelihoods are thus easily seen as illegal, treating the informal workers as stubborn law violators even in times of crisis. Revealed is how the politics of unseeing are intimately linked with the broader issues of uneven citizenship and disaster justice. COVID-19, like other crises, did not just come out of nowhere. It has causes and consequences that occur in specific political contexts. Our empirical insights demonstrate the failure of state institutions to implement equitable and inclusive crisis interventions to tackle the existing inequities that heighten the urban poor’s health vulnerability and economic precarity.

Furthermore, discussion has shown how women, who have been disproportionately affected by the crisis,
have performed a critical role in initiating and sustaining solidarity practices. The mutual-aid initiatives have also underscored how urban poor communities worked with NGOs to undertake solidarity-based initiatives and create spaces of urban belonging. In this regard, COVID-19 has revealed the critical role NGOs play in scaling up self-organised techniques and mobilisation practices of the urban poor. This is not to uncritically valorise the much-vaunted and misrepresented practices of ‘resilience.’ After all, grassroots coping mechanisms take place within structures of economic inequality and entrenched power asymmetries. Yet, in this time of uncertainty, it is important to recognise and build on the poor people’s ethic of care and deep conviction in human flourishing as foundational values of social relations.

Solidarity-based practices could thus inform postpandemic recovery and enliven a ‘planning of care’ (Jon, 2020) framework as we recognise human interdependence and acknowledge the uneven vulnerabilities within and between urban communities. In other words, enhancing solidarity-based practices not only invites us to embrace (and celebrate) grassroots agency but also urges us to look closely into the urban poor’s everyday disasters and the broader structural issues that affect their lives in the city. In practical terms, policy measures to support a solidarity-inspired urban development model, both during and after the COVID-19 crisis, should be put in place. State institutional support for informal workers’ associations is needed to enhance self-help initiatives and sustain mutual-aid groups. Pro-poor social protection systems should also be strengthened, ensuring that they address the vulnerabilities of urban poor communities. Finally, crafting a strategic NGO-public partnership as an alternative to private-public partnership—which often excludes civic groups and people’s organisations—is a crucial step for advancing solidarity-based practices in the development process.

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ENDNOTE
1All names are pseudonyms used to protect the participants’ identities.

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