

Case study: Bangladesh – an over-populated country?

'Spiraling population strains Bangladesh's sustainability.'

OneWorld South Asia, April, 2009

If small, largely urbanised countries such as Singapore and small island states such as the Maldives are not considered, then Bangladesh (Figure 22) has the highest population density in the world. At 1062 people per km² its population density is about twenty times the global average. It compares with 383 per km² in India and 141 per km² in China – two countries that many people associate with over-population. Over-population cannot be judged by population density alone, but it is a useful starting point when considering the relationship between population and resources in a country.

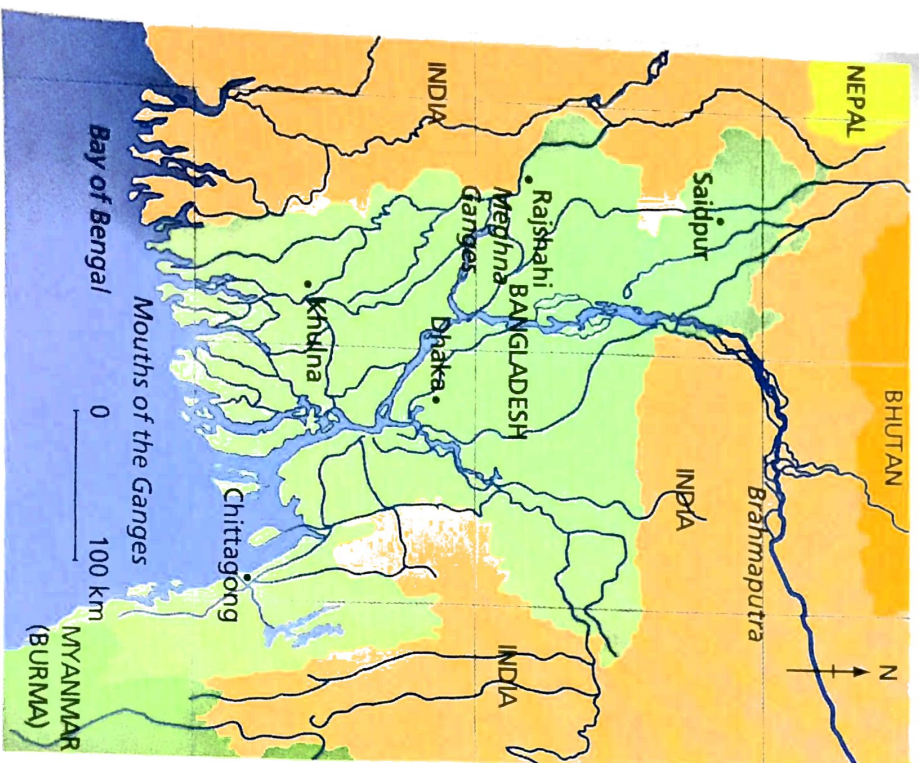


Figure 22 Map of Bangladesh

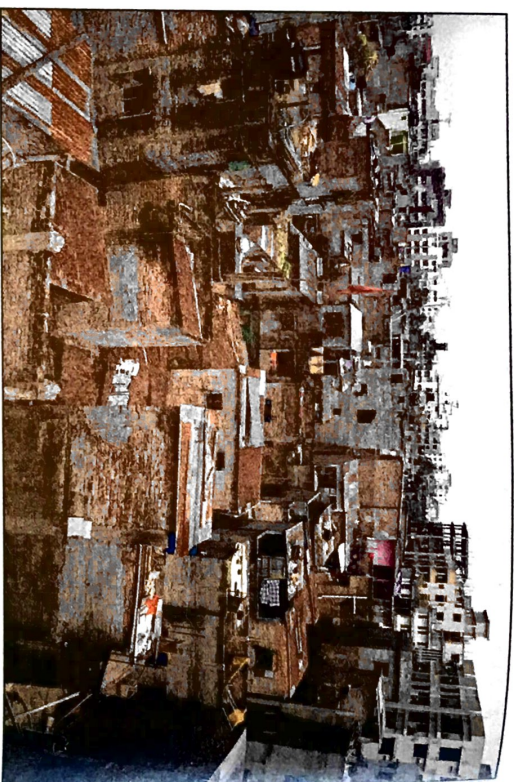


Figure 23 Urban overcrowding in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a relatively small and resource-poor country with a land area of 147 000 km². This compares with 244 000 km² in the UK. Yet the population of Bangladesh is 153 million compared with 63 million in the UK.

The lack of natural resources is a major factor in over-population in Bangladesh, as is rapid population growth. The current rate of natural increase in Bangladesh is 1.6 per cent. When Bangladesh became an independent country in 1971 its population was about 75 million, just under half of the total today! The Population Reference Bureau estimates that the population of Bangladesh will rise to 183 million by 2025 and 226 million by 2050. There is already intense competition for the available resources in Bangladesh. How will the country cope in the future when it is already experiencing large-scale poverty and so many other problems?

Extremely high population pressure and the deprivation associated with it is characteristic of both rural and urban areas. Four-fifths of the population live in rural areas. The very small amount of cultivable land per person has resulted in a very high level of rural poverty. Most families have to survive on extremely small plots of land. This means that there is not enough work available for many people. About 40 per cent of the population is underemployed, working a limited number of hours a

week at low wages. **Underemployment** is not just confined to the countryside, but affects urban areas too.

The regular threat of cyclones and flooding makes this problem much worse. Eighty per cent of the country is situated on the floodplains of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, Meghna and those of several other minor rivers. Much of the country is close to sea level and about 40 per cent is regularly flooded during the monsoon season. Major floods can cause considerable loss of life and destroy vital infrastructure, often setting back development many years. Where possible, people move to higher land, increasing the already overcrowded nature of such areas. Major floods increase the level of rural-to-urban migration, with the majority of migrants heading for the capital city Dhaka. Other urban areas such as Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi are also growing in population at very rapid rates. Around 8000 hectares of cultivable land is lost every year due to urbanisation, industrialisation and the expansion of infrastructure. This is potential food production that Bangladesh can ill afford to lose.

Living conditions in Dhaka and the other main urban areas are in a continuous state of deterioration. Many people lack basic amenities such as electricity and clean drinking water. Dhaka has become one of the most crowded cities in the world with a population density of 43000 per km². This rapidly growing megacity was

recently ranked as the least habitable city among 140 cities surveyed by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The 2012 Human Development Index, which ranks all the countries of the world according to their quality of life, placed Bangladesh 146th in the world.

Land is being lost to rising sea levels, a process associated with global warming. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has predicted that as sea levels rise, by 2050 about 35 million people from Bangladesh will cross the border into India in search of more secure living conditions.

Poor governance and corruption have undoubtedly hindered development in Bangladesh. However, national and international efforts to improve the lives of the population have registered progress. For example, the World Bank noted in 2013 that the number of people in poverty in Bangladesh had fallen from 63 million in 2000 to 47 million in 2010. The question is: can Bangladesh continue to reduce poverty in the future?

Case study analysis

- 1 Describe the geographical location of Bangladesh.
- 2 How does the physical geography of the country make life difficult for its people?
- 3 What evidence would you produce to support the statement that 'Bangladesh is an over-populated country'?