

EXAMINING VULNERABILITY IN A DYNAMIC URBAN SETTING: THE CASE OF BANGALORE'S INTERSTATE MIGRANT WASTE PICKERS

Urban migrants often move from rural areas in hopes of finding new livelihood options. However, they frequently face worse marginalisation in urban areas. Migrant waste pickers are extremely vulnerable to climate change, yet they perform vital ecological services for cities which present unique opportunities for urban areas to meet sustainability goals.

KEY IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

While analysing vulnerability or adaptive capacity, it is critical to understand causality, and the larger social, political-economic, and structural variables that shape capacity and “enable or disable people’s abilities to maintain their security”. However, causality is seldom discussed in the literature. By examining vulnerability from a structural perspective, our work contributes significantly to understanding the barriers and enablers of adaptation, and the need for vulnerability, and adaptation research and practice, to link back to justice.

In the background of the “New Urban Agenda”, there is an increased appetite for dovetailing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the process of urban development itself. As articulated in Goal 13, the SDGs stipulate that reducing inequality and overcoming poverty are critically important for climate change adaptation. Our findings emphasise the compelling need for vulnerability and adaptation research to focus more on understanding inequality, and argue that the focus on justice is insufficiently prioritised in climate change adaptation work.

KEY FINDINGS

We found that, while the root causes of the vulnerability of interstate migrant waste pickers can be traced back to the socio-economic and ecological conditions of their homelands, exclusionary urbanisation patterns in Bangalore prevent them from accessing livelihoods and severely impact their health and identities. In addition, migrant waste pickers reside in extremely hazardous zones amidst heaps of garbage which are likely to have detrimental implications on their health and incomes.

However, by handling and processing a large amount of waste generated by the city, waste pickers provide an essential ecosystem service.

Using interstate migrants as an example, our study illustrates the importance of applying a climate justice lens to the city by recognising the existing forms of marginalisation, and how climate change can exacerbate them.

WHAT WAS DONE, AND WHAT WAS NOVEL?

Understanding the causality of vulnerability is difficult to do and consequently has received insufficient attention. Root causes of vulnerability need to be understood in order to support adaptation that addresses climate risk and inequality.

This paper contributes to bridging this gap by examining vulnerability from a structural perspective for the case of interstate migrants from West Bengal working as waste pickers in Bangalore’s informal squatter settlements.

Using qualitative methods we examine complex intersections between a multitude of factors like climate change, agrarian distress, exclusionary patterns of urbanisation, and the resultant lack of recognition that shape and reshape the vulnerability of a certain group of people.

