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Project Title: Hold Back the Water: Planning, Politics and Design in Dhaka's Flood Adaptation

Abstract:

To cope with the paired challenges of rapid urbanization and mounting flood vulnerability in Dhaka, the government of Bangladesh, with the support of international aid agencies, has constructed extensive flood control embankments. With the growth of urbanized areas outside of the current protections, international funders and government officials are renewing calls to significantly expand these protections as proposed in the Flood Action Plans (FAP) produced following devastating floods in the late 1980's. Areas inside and outside of the current protective infrastructure exhibit distinctly different forms of flood vulnerability and settlement patterns. Attempts to address flood vulnerability in Dhaka through both "hard" infrastructure methods and "soft" methods that rely on land use and building regulation are complicated by institutional capacity constraints at the national and municipal level and by the increasing role of private real estate development. With the assistance of the AIBS Junior Fellowship, I propose to study how Dhaka's existing and proposed flood infrastructure impacts risk perception, household and community-level adaptation, and urbanization patterns. In examining the politics of adaptation at large and small-scales, I will draw on literatures including natural hazards planning, climate adaptation planning, political ecology, and critical urban and development studies. This research is informed by two preliminary research trips to Dhaka and similar research conducted in the vulnerable peri-urban region surrounding New Orleans. Research methods will include resident interviews and spatial and building analysis as well as interviews with experts, advocates, and decision makers. As national and municipal government officials seek to guide Dhaka's urban growth, it is essential to develop a better understanding of the social and spatial implications of the range of options confronting the growing urban region, from investment in large-scale infrastructure development to laissez-faire approaches that rely on private initiative to reduce flood risk. For a growing number of vulnerable cities, understanding how flood infrastructure and planning decisions shape household-level decisions is a critical component of informing equitable and sustainable urban climate adaptation strategy