Migration, Informal Labour and Translocal Productions of Urban Space –

The Case of Dhaka’s Street Food Vendors

Abstract

Dhaka is the most important destination for migrants in Bangladesh and has itself been fundamentally transformed through rural to urban migration that is directly linked to global labour relations – most obviously in the garments industry. Through their labour, migrants literally make the city work; they live and consume in the city; they give the city its meaning as a site of interaction and communication; and they are (re)producing the urban space in all its physical, economic, social and cultural dimensions. Yet, there is 'no place’ for many migrants in Dhaka. Poor migrants thus live in slums and many encroach on public space to sustain their lives – the new urbanites are taking their ‘right to the city’. In order to do so, they not only draw on local resources. Their subaltern production of space often relates directly to their migration trajectory, their translocal networks, and their simultaneous situatedness at multiple places. Migrants connect ‘the rural’ and ‘the urban’ and constitute translocal spaces, which reach far beyond the city, and which contribute to re-making Dhaka from below.

Shifting the focus from transnational migration and global work, this paper integrates current debates on translocality, informal labour, and subaltern urbanism to address two key questions: How do migration trajectories and translocality structure the urban poor’s lives? How do migrants make use of local networks and translocal social relations to find work and appropriate ‘their place’ in the city? Qualitative and quantitative research on street food vendors in Dhaka, almost all of whom are internal migrants, builds the empirical basis for my argument. I show that ‘translocal social capital’ and home-bound identities can be important resources to gain access to urban labour markets and to appropriate one’s place in the city. The paper argues that the poor use translocality for their livelihoods and thereby continuously re-shape the face of the megacity of Dhaka. The urban (work) space and migrants’ translocal spaces are mutually constructed.

Key Words: Translocality, migration, subaltern urbanism, production of space, informal labour markets, street vendors, Bangladesh
1. Introduction

Tasneem¹ is living a translocal life in the megacity of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. As street vendor she sells small rice cakes in front of a plastic recycling factory. She is ‘bound’ to the city, its economic and political dynamics, and needs a secure access to urban public space to sustain her livelihood. In her life, she has often moved back-and-force between the countryside and the city. When I met her, she hardly managed to make ends meet in the city as she had to transfer much of her business profits back to her husband, who is chronically ill and lives in his family’s rural home. For her, translocal relations were not a valuable resource, but rather a burden that hindered her personal freedom and development. In contrast, there is the case of a family clan who sell snacks, tea, biscuits and cigarettes at the entrance of a large park in the city. Twenty years ago, Hisham was the first who came to Dhaka. He appropriated a vending spot and successively, his brothers, sons and other people from his home village followed his path and established street shops at the same site. Now, most food shops at the park’s entrance are run by family members – they used translocal connections to appropriate their local ‘work-place’. Hisham thereby acquired financial capital and expanded his field of influence as the site is de facto under control of his family. And because he is economically successful in Dhaka, he is also well respected in his bari, his rural home village.

Building on and partly departing from the transnationalism paradigm (cf. Glick-Schiller et al. 1992; Pries 2008; Vertovec 2009), there is a growing academic debate on translocality and how migrants connect places of origin, places of transit and places of destination through everyday practices, how they are simultaneously situated or emplaced at multiple sites, and how they thereby constitute ‘translocal social spaces’ that reach beyond a single place. In many studies, the moves, connections and multiple emplacements between rural and urban places are particularly looked at (cf. Smith 2001; Lohnert & Steinbrink 2005; Thieme 2007; Brickel & Datta 2011; Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2011; Smith 2011; Verne 2012; Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013). The two brief cases studies illustrate that translocal relations are a normal part of the lives of many internal migrants, who now live and work in the megacity of Dhaka, but who are nonetheless closely tied to their home villages and cities. For most of the year, migrants are in the city. They have turned Dhaka into an “arrival city” (Saunders 2011) – each year around 400,000 rural-urban migrants arrive in Dhaka, while an unidentified number leaves it (World Bank 2007). Through their labour they literally make the city work; they live and consume in the city; they give the city its meaning as a site of interaction and communication; and they leave their marks in the city as they are (re)producing the urban

¹ All the names of the involved persons have been anonymized in order to protect the interviewees.
space in all its physical, economic, social and cultural dimensions. In doing so, they create flexible spaces such as slums or street vending sites, which neither have a place in the urban development plans, nor are they recognized by the state and the city authorities. As follows, migrants’ subaltern appropriations of the urban space and their everyday geographies of labour are often highly contested.

In this paper, Dhaka is used as an example for the concept of ‘transient urban space’, which centres on the role of migrants in the city and the dialectic relation between lived translocality and permanent urban transformations (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014). The paper makes use of current debates about translocality (cf. Brickel & Datta 2011; Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013 for recent overviews of the literature), informal labour (cf. Portes et al. 1989; Chen 2005; Etzold et al. 2009) and subaltern urbanism (cf. Roy & AlSayyad 2004; Roy 2011), in particular Bayat’s (1997, 2004) ideas on the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”, to address two key questions: How do migration trajectories and translocality structure the urban poor’s lives? How do migrants make use of local networks and translocal social relations to find work and appropriate ‘their place’ in the city? The short examples given above already show that migrants’ different experiences with translocality and different chances to carve out their niche in urban space can produce quite different livelihood outcomes. In this paper, I argue that ‘translocal social capital’ and home-bound identities can be important resources to gain access to urban labour markets and to appropriate one’s place in the city. Migration and translocality are then important factors that contribute to continuous transformations in the megacity of Dhaka.

2. Making Transient Urban Spaces from Below: Reproducing Cities through Translocality and Everyday Encroachments

The concept of transient urban spaces as introduced in Bork-Hüffer et al. (2014) is adopted as theoretical frame for this paper. Transient urban spaces are the social, political and economic spaces in cities that are produced and reproduced by people’s everyday practices, interactions and imaginaries. There are two core dimensions of transient urban spaces: first, they can be characterised through their translocality, and second, they are undergoing permanent transformations (ibid.). Both dimensions are further illustrated in the following.

Translocal Social Fields, Translocal Social Capital and Translocal Communities

Transient urban spaces are translocal in the sense that they transcend the physical and administrative boundaries of one specific city, but rather connect different, sometimes distant,
physical places and social fields through interactions and flows. Migration is the key driver for the emergence of translocal spaces. Migrants – no matter whether they are rural-urban, urban-urban or international migrants – not only move through different physical spaces and across administrative boundaries, but also traverse and expand different “social fields”, which are hierarchically structured spaces of positions (Bourdieu 1985: 724). In recent debates about transnationalism and translocality, several authors have indicated that migrants then do not necessarily depart from a place of origin and permanently settle and integrate at a place of destination, which indicates that they ‘leave their home behind’. They rather remain situated in one ‘translocal social field’ that stretches over multiple places between which resources, ideas or information (or capital, in a broader Bourdieuan sense) are exchanged. Such translocal fields might also include quite different social settings, where the same capital is valued to a different extent. Migrants’ everyday life is then not ‘placeless’, but rather characterised through their experience of, their simultaneous embeddedness in, and their social networks across specific local places (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004; Thieme 2007; Pries 2008; Brickel & Datta 2011; Smith 2011; Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013). The places, where flows of people, material goods, capital, information and ideas intersect and where they are exchanged, re-arranged and re-loaded with meaning, are often located in cities (cf. Appadurai 1996; Smith 2001; Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2011). Brickel and Data (2011a: 16) thus noted that cities are the “sites of translocality par excellence”.

Translocality is not a given fact that is automatically created through migration, but rather comes into being through regular communication, through the exchange of resources and through investments in one’s local and translocal network. If a person belongs to a network of lasting social relations and reciprocal recognition, s/he has ‘social capital’ and can thus ask the members of this network or close community for advice, a favour or help (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Thieme 2007). The relations between migrants, former migrants and non-migrants constitute ‘translocal migrant networks’, which can in turn facilitate further movements and translocal exchanges (Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013). Having ‘translocal social capital’, i.e. good network relations to several people at multiple places, increases the likelihood of migration movements, because networks “lower the costs and risks of movement and increase the expected net returns to migration” (Massey et al. 1998: 42). If not only close social networks exist across multiple places, but also shared place-based identities, ‘translocal communities’ come into being. Translocal communities are translocally organised groups with a common origin that functions as an important medium in everyday life (Lohnert & Steinbrink 2005). For most migrants, the ‘home’ is not merely the place of birth or the place
where one’s family presently lives, but also a “space of belonging and identity” (Brickel & Datta 2011a: 13). If migrants from the same village in Bangladesh live in the same slum in Dhaka, for instance, they might see themselves as a translocal community. They share a sense of belonging and frequently refer to their home to reaffirm their collective identity.

**Subaltern Transitions: Re-working Cities from below**

Cities are socially constructed. They are places of interaction, exchange and communication that are permanently in a process of transition. They are re-produced by people’s everyday practices and their imaginations of what a city constitutes. Different actors occupy different positions of power in the social space of a city, and they have different interests, needs and desires with regard to the design, the functions and qualities of urban space (Holston 1999; Smith 2001). The state and resourceful actors have the power and capacities to structure the urban space through planning, to govern it through legislation, and to assign specific meanings to a city and its places through symbolic campaigns. In comparison, the poor have fewer options to shape the urban space – they are navigating through the existing urban fabric. Nonetheless, they carve out ‘spatial niches’ and resist the hegemonic appropriations of the urban space by the powerful as Bayat (1997, 2004) demonstrated in a study of squatters and street vendors in Teheran. Central in his approach is the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”, which is the “silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of ordinary people in relation to the propertied and powerful in order to survive and improve their lives” (ibid. 2004: 90). Because they are present in the city in large numbers and because they are appropriating the urban space for their livelihoods, the urban subalterns such as slum dwellers and street traders create new urban forms. Slums can be seen as marginal sites at the most unfavorable locations of a city, or as terrains of sociability, self-organization and creativity (Roy 2011). Either way, they are providing a place to live, access to livelihoods and a social structure for millions. By the same token, highly flexible hawkers turn streets, footpaths, public parks and ‘edge spaces’ into vivid market places, sites of consumption and leisure, and into livelihood arenas (Brown 2006; Cross & Morales 2007; Bhowmik 2010b). Many studies have demonstrated that even if ‘ordinary people’ are not able to shape the urban space in its physical structure, they are to a large extent shaping the quality of places (Smith 2001; Glick Schiller & Çağlar 2011). Moreover, through their everyday local and translocal practices, the urban subalterns are actively re-directing, re-working, contesting or even resisting the flows into, within and out of their cities. The state or city authorities, however, often disapprove of, actively discourage and even criminalize the spatial appropriations of the subalterns and their translocal practices.
To sum up, scholars in the field of subaltern urbanism radically challenge dominant narratives of an elite-led production of space as they acknowledge the crucial role of city residents’ seemingly mundane everyday practices and how they are permanently producing and reproducing the city from below (cf. Simone 2010; Roy 2011). They thereby assign more and possibly subversive power to all city dwellers and emphasize the agency of migrants, informal labourers and the poor, in particular. It is then not only the urban space as such that is under permanent transition, but also the power geometries in a city (Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014).

3. Patterns of Migration and Translocality in Bangladesh and the Quiet Encroachments of the Poor in Dhaka

Recent Migration Patterns in Bangladesh

Both internal and international migration are a normal part of everyday life in Bangladesh and closely connected to its historic political ruptures, economic development and social transformations (cf. Haan et al. 2000; Afsar 2005; Dannecker 2005; Siddiqui 2005; van Schendel 2009). Since the 1980s, migration patterns in and from Bangladesh were affected by two major trends. On the one hand, rising oil prices and thus an increasing need for cheap labour power in the Middle East and in Southeast Asia led to the growth of international labour migration from Bangladesh. The number of labourers who left for work in the Gulf states increased tenfold from 25,000 in 1980 to more than 250,000 in 2010 (Siddiqui 2005; Rahman 2012). On the other hand, Bangladesh started to produce and export textiles in the early 1980s, which gradually changed its role in the global economy fundamentally. In 1985 roughly 120,000 people worked in 380 garment factories, while it was around 1.6 million workers in 3,200 factories in 2000, and even four million workers in 5,600 factories in 2013. The garment factories are predominantly situated in and around the capital city, which fuelled the growth of Dhaka’s economy and enhanced internal migration flows. This industrial boom also led to social transformations as young rural women, who did not migrate to urban centres in large numbers before, became access to livelihood opportunities in the urban factories (Dannecker 2002; Salway et al. 2003; Islam 2005; World Bank 2007; Siddiqui et al. 2010).

In 2010, Bangladesh had an estimated population of 149 million people. With 72 per cent, the vast majority of the population still lives in rural areas, while 28 per cent reside in urban areas (UN 2012). The life of many families has, however, become more and more mobile. The 2011 population census revealed that 12 per cent of all households have migrants in their

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2 According to the data provided by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), http://www.bgmea.com.bd/home/pages/TradeInformation#.Uo2-l-Iy-no (last access: 21.11.2013).
immediate family (BBS 2011). Most movements take place within the country and over shorter distances so that people can re-join their family after a while. A longitudinal study (1994–2010) undertaken in 14 districts across Bangladesh found that 81 per cent of permanent long-distance moves, were to urban centres, 13 per cent to international destinations, and six per cent to other rural districts (Gray & Mueller 2012). Bangladeshis migrate to major cities, because of prevailing poverty and chronic food insecurity in many rural areas, because of regular disruptions of livelihoods by natural hazards, because diverse economic opportunities exist in cities, and because of centralistic educational structures. Existing translocal networks, improved transportation and modern communication technology have also made mobility easier and cheaper. As recent debates on migration theories have reaffirmed (Bakewell 2010; Smith & King 2012), there is never solely a single cause motivating or forcing people to migrate. Yet, for most people coming to Dhaka from all over the country, the available opportunities in the megacity’s labour market seem to be the most important reason for moving (cf. Begum 1999; Islam 1999; Kumar Das 2003). In between 1980 and 2010, Dhaka’s population increased from 3.3 to 14.7 million people, largely due to in-migration (UN 2012).

Translocality in Bangladesh

A too static picture of migration in terms of permanent movement of a household from place A to place B should be avoided in the case of Bangladesh. Many families organise their livelihoods across different places – they are “living translocality” (Verne 2012). At least four aspects are important to understand labour migration and translocality in Bangladesh. First, besides international labour mobility, several migration systems co-exist in Bangladesh: permanent rural-urban migration, but also circular movements within the country such as temporary labour or educational migration to cities or seasonal labour migration to agricultural regions. A study undertaken in Kurigram district in the North of Bangladesh showed that migration takes place within established migration systems and within existing social networks and that migration is always a process of social differentiation (Ahmed et al. 2012; Etzold et al. 2013; Peth & Birtel 2014). People’s access to migration opportunities and their ‘choice’ of migration destinations reflects the inherent social inequality in a rural community. If members from more affluent households migrate, they rather move to urban destinations for secure employment in the formal economy or for higher education. Men from the rural ‘middle class’ generally have good migration opportunities, too. They either go to the cities like Dhaka or Rangpur, where they can find work in the garments industries, the construction sector or in the urban informal economy, or they temporarily move to other rural
destinations such as Munshiganj or Feni instead. Due to local labour shortages throughout the labour-intensive harvesting seasons of rice or potatoes, they can sell their agricultural skills there. While moves to urban areas are normally self-organised or assisted by family members, seasonal agricultural migration is in general facilitated by middlemen, so called Sadars, who negotiate wages with employers and organise transport, accommodation and food for a group of labour migrants. Over time, long standing networks between employers, labourers and ‘migration entrepreneurs’ have emerged and a new agrarian labour migration system has evolved between Kurigram district and prospering agricultural regions. But not everybody can benefit from such migration systems. The poorest and most food insecure people in rural communities often cannot afford the initial investments that are needed for migration, or they do not have access to the necessary networks, or their family composition or own physical condition does not enable them to migrate at all. These households remain ‘trapped’ in the local space of vulnerability (Ahmed et al. 2012; Etzold et al. 2013; Peth & Birtel 2014).

Second, interactions and transfers within translocal networks are highly important for migrant workers’ families and for the economies of migrant-sending- and money-receiving nations. Officially recorded migrants’ remittances to Bangladesh have steadily increased over the past 30 years. In 2012, international labour migrants from Bangladesh sent home more than 14 billion US$, which accounts for more than 12 per cent of its GDP. There is no official data available on the transactions of internal migrants, but a survey in the aforementioned study in Kurigram revealed that the migrants’ contribution to households’ overall income is viewed as ‘substantial’ by more than half of the respondents. Remittance-sending has become easier, quicker, cheaper and safer with the introduction of e-remitting and e-banking via mobile phones – a service that is widely used by seasonal migrants working in agriculture regions and by permanent migrants living in the cities. Remittances are mainly spent on migrants’ families regular food consumption, but they are also needed to repay debts, to meet the costs of health care and education, and to invest in one’s business or agricultural production (Ahmed et al. 2012; Peth & Birtel 2014). Migrants do not only bring home money and other material goods like gifts and consumer products, but also ‘social remittances’ such as knowledge, ideas and changed values and identities (Levitt & Lamba-Nieves 2011; Rahman & Fee 2012). Material and social remittances both play important roles in the everyday lives of translocal families and contribute crucially to economic, social and political transformations in Bangladesh as the

1 For 2012, the Gross Domestic Product of Bangladesh was 115.61 Billion US$, while international remittances summed up to 14.06 Billion US$ according to the Bangladesh Bank and the World Bank, respectively. (http://www.tradingeconomics.com/bangladesh/gdp-growth, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/334934-1110315015165/Bilateral_Remittance_Matrix_2012.xlsx; last accessed 24.10.2013)
existing gender relations are, for instance, challenged through female labour migration (Dannecker 2005). Both types of transfers also leave their ‘marks’ in space as remitted money is invested ‘at home’ to buy agricultural land or to build a new house, or as rural lifestyles change due to newly introduced products such as mobile phones.

Third, in Bangladesh, strong kin connections and home-bound identities exist. The bari, which is the rural home village of the father of a family, is important for people’s sense of belonging. Even if people came to Dhaka decades ago, frequent reference to one’s home is being made. In a study of the culture of slum dwellers in Dhaka, Kumar Das noted that although slum dwellers with rural origin “have become a permanent part of city life, they did not forget their connections with the native place” (Kumar Das 2003: 111). Besides the already mentioned transfers, the translocal relations are carefully maintained through regular, often daily, communication, which is much easier and cheaper now with mobile phones than it was a decade ago, and through regular visits of the whole family or at least of the head of household to their home village, in particular for traditional festivities such as Eid-ul-Fitr. Strong emotional bonds are normal among relatives, but also among the people who come from the same village and live in the same slum in the city (ibid.). There, they spend time together and support one another to meet the daily challenges of megacity life, such as finding a place to live and a job to earn an income or getting access to public services. Maintaining close relations to family members, people with similar origin inside the slum community and other people in the home community is a crucial aspect of translocal city life.

Fourth, family networks, kinship ties and also close relations to political leaders, or social capital in a broader sense, often structure people’s individual migration trajectories. For the case of Dhaka, Kumar Das (2003) underscored the importance of chain migration and social networks, and thereby questioned a too simplistic understanding of migration in terms of the most prevalent pull- and push factors (cf. Begum 1999). He argues that rural-urban migrants are not merely motivated by the magnitude of rural poverty that is still prevailing, or that they are simply attracted by the comparatively better living conditions and labour market opportunities in the city. People are rather stimulated to migrate by networks that have developed between the places of origin and the city (Kumar Das 2003; Peth & Birtel 2014). Moreover, ‘translocal social capital’ can become an important asset in times of ecological, political, economic or personal crises as research on the coping strategies of Dhaka’s slum dwellers during the 2007/08 food crisis has shown (Zingel et al. 2011; Keck & Etzold 2013). The empirical examples in chapter four demonstrate that one’s bari can be of great symbolic value in the city, in particular for the appropriation of urban space.
The Imprints of Rural-Urban Migration in Dhaka

Migration and translocal relations have the potential to transform the urban space significantly. Such transformations take place at two levels. On an individual level, niches in the urban space can be appropriated, or not, by a single migrant or a family. Dhaka’s poor and street vendors, in particular, depend on access to the urban public space for their livelihood (Etzold et al. 2009; Hackenbroch et al. 2009; Etzold 2011). They thereby change the physical setup, social realm and meaning of particular places in the city as demonstrated in the case studies below and as discussed in the conclusion.

On a structural level, rural-urban migration has contributed significantly to transforming Dhaka from a large provincial capital to a globally embedded megacity. Not only had its population grown, but also the number of the urban poor. As follows, migration contributed to the spread and growth of slum settlements in the city (Islam 2005; Siddiqui et al. 2010). Eighty per cent of the 5,000 slums that exist today were built in between 1971 and 2000 – the era of Dhaka’s most rapid population growth (CUS 2006). In turn, 87 per cent of Dhaka’s slum dwellers are internal migrants (Khan et al. 2010). Migration also contributed to the city’s spatial expansion. Until the 1970s, the area of Dhaka City Corporation (145 sq.km), which includes the city’s historic city and its expansions during colonial rule and the Pakistan era, was big enough to house the urban population. But new city boundaries had to be drawn. Dhaka Metropolitan Area (306 sq.km) was created after independence, Dhaka Statistical Metropolitan Area was delineated in 1981 (797 sq.km) and further extended in 1991 (1350 sq.km)(Islam 2005). At present, Dhaka’s built-up area is growing due to illegal land acquisitions and settlement constructions in the peri-urban fringe.

Besides living in the megacity and using its basic services, the urban subalterns in general, and rural-urban migrants in particular, are making the city work through their economic activities and social practices. In this sense, not only spaces for living are required, but also livelihood spaces. It has often been mentioned that the ‘urban informal sector’ (cf. Portes et al. 1989) and the ‘social field of street vending’ (cf. Tinker 1997; Brown 2006) are closely connected to patterns of internal and international migration. In Dhaka, poor city dwellers and most migrants do not have access to secure jobs in private enterprises or public services, but rely on the city’s informal economy. They are temporarily employed in industries, for instance in one of the 5,000 ready-made garments factories that are located in Dhaka, or work as day labourers in the construction sector, as house maids or guards in private households, or as rickshaw pullers or hawkers on the streets (Kumar Das 2003; Salway et al. 2003; World Bank 2007; Siddiqui et al. 2010). Around 97,000 street vendors sell snacks, fruits and
beverages and thereby provide a living for more than 400,000 people (own estimates, Etzold 2013). The great majority of street food vendors in Dhaka, the focal group of the following case studies, are internal migrants, and many hawkers spoke about plans for and failed attempts of international migration. Dhaka’s population growth naturally propelled the demand for food in the city (Keck et al. 2013), and in particular the demand for readily available, cheap street food that is consumed daily by every second city dweller (own estimate, Etzold 2013). Highly mobile and hard-working labourers such as rickshaw pullers or construction workers particularly need full meals and energy-rich snacks from the street in order to keep going throughout long working days (Sujatha et al. 1997; Tinker 1997). Street food is a necessary supplement to their diet and thus crucial for urban food security (Etzold 2013).

4. Translocal Livelihoods and Street Food Vendors Spatial Appropriations

This chapter subsumes an analysis and discussion of migration, translocal livelihoods and spatial appropriations of Dhaka’s street vendors. A short introduction of the background of the study and an outline of major migration decisions is followed by four case studies on street food hawkers, which reflect their personal migration trajectories, their working history, and their opportunities to appropriate ‘their’ niche in Dhaka’s public space. They show how the vendors’ productions of space are closely tied to their experience of translocality and their personal relations. The overarching question is: How do translocal relations structure street vendors’ livelihoods and their spatial appropriations?

Methodology

In my empirical study of the livelihoods and vulnerabilities of street food vendors and of the contested governance of public space in Dhaka, I combined different types of interviews with different stakeholders: semi-structured interviews were conducted with 70 street food vendors, with 15 “regulators” of vending sites, such as policemen or security guards, with 50 street food consumers, and with nine local experts on urbanisation, poverty and livelihoods. Venn-diagrams and repetitive in-depth interviews were employed to map street vendors’ social networks and to assess the local power relations. 120 street food vendors were also interviewed in November 2009 at six characteristic sites with the help of a structured survey. All study sites were publicly accessible places within the area of DCC. Moreover, over 210 local newspaper articles were analysed in order to dissect popular discourses on street food vending (see Etzold, 2013 for more details).
Street Food Vendors’ Migration to Dhaka

The vast majority (96%; n=120) of interviewed street food vendors in Dhaka were not born in the megacity. Among those, one third arrived before 1990, one third came in the 1990s, and one third since the year 2000 (see figure 1). Although the absolute number of street vendors living and working in Dhaka can only be estimated and the existing estimates differ quite remarkably, the growth of this sector is evident (Islam 2005; Bhowmik 2010a; Siddiqui et al. 2010) and clearly linked to the increase of Dhaka’s population (see figure 1).

Map 1 shows the districts of origin of those 115 vendors not born in Dhaka district. There is no clear link between population density, poverty or food insecurity levels in their respective districts of origin and the vendors’ mobility. The distance to Dhaka is rather important. Half of the hawkers come from districts that are less than 100 kilometres away. Only one vendor was born more than 200 kilometres away from Dhaka. Given the difficulties in Bangladesh’s infrastructure and public transportation system, shorter distances imply shorter travelling times when visiting the extended family and thus an easier and cheaper translocal life.
Map 1: Home District of Street Food Vendors working in Dhaka

Data sources: Population density according to the Population Census 2001, online-datasheet 'Area, Population and Literacy Rate by Upazila/Thana-2001'. Areas of netto in-migration according to food security atlas of Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh & World Food Programme 2004). Home districts of vendors according to own Street Food Vendors' Survey (Oct./Nov. 2009, n=120).
Table 1: Street Food Vendors’ Major Reasons for Migration to Dhaka

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<th>Share of vendors who are migrants (not born in Dhaka District)</th>
<th>What were the major reasons for your move to Dhaka?</th>
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<td>Livelihood opportunities</td>
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<td>better life in Dhaka</td>
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<td>115 of 120 (96%)</td>
<td>48%</td>
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Source: Street Food Vendors’ Survey 2009 (n=120); Note: multiple answers were possible

For 91 per cent of the interviewed migrant vendors, the major reason to migrate was the prospect of a (better) job and thus the hope to acquire a higher income (see table 1). Half of the vendors stressed that they generally sought a better life in Dhaka. Nine per cent of the migrant vendors had lost agricultural land through river erosion at home and therefore looked for an alternative livelihood in the city. Family problems such as a divorce also played a role for the migration decision of some. Only two per cent of the migrant vendors stated that they moved to enable their children a better education, but qualitative interviews showed that once they are in Dhaka they are able and willing to invest substantial amounts in their children’s education, and thus in their own future.

The decision to migrate and the access to accommodation and working opportunities often depends on the kinship relations between migrants, former migrants and non-migrants and thus on people’s translocal social capital. Interestingly, the results on this aspect differ substantially between my quantitative and qualitative research. According to my survey, 60 per cent of the migrant vendors did not get any help for their initial move to Dhaka, while one quarter had received support from the family living in the home village. Only few were assisted by family members or friends who were already living in Dhaka at the time of their arrival. Through the more personal in-depth interviews, however, I gained the impression that translocal social capital was one of the most important factors to explain why and when people migrate to the city, where they settle within the city, where and what kind of work they can obtain, and to which vending site the street vendors can get access to. The following four case studies thus illustrate the relevance of translocality for place-making in Dhaka.

Claiming and Transforming a Place in the City Through Translocal Relations

The case of Hisham Salah’s family clan shows that translocal network relations can be a very valuable resource to find work and claim urban public space. I first met Hisham, when I was
strolling through a large public park in the heart of Dhaka and stopped to drink a cup of tea. He has been selling Cha, light snacks and cigarettes at one of the parks’ entrances for 20 years. Having arrived from a small agriculture-based village not far from Chandpur, he turned to street food vending as he could not find a job in the urban industries. Back then, it was easy for him to take his ‘own’ vending spot at the park’s entrance, because not too many people sold food snacks at that site. He started his shop with a table, a kerosene stove and some stools to sit on, but did nonetheless make enough profit to regularly send money to his family. Back home, people quickly became aware of his success-story. As follows, his brothers and two friends from the same village came to Dhaka as well and established own shops at the site with his help. Later, sons, cousins and other not related boys from the village followed to work in the established shops. Like in an apprenticeship system, the boys and younger men first learn their trade, before they can set up their own shops. Today, eleven of the 15 food shops at the site are run by people, who come from the same village (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Appropriating Public Space Through Chain Migration and Translocal Relations

Source: own interviews (Dec. 2007)
Hisham and his elder brother have now settled in Dhaka. Their wives and children followed when the income obtained through street vending could provide for their higher costs of living in the city. Others from this clan continue to live a translocal life: the men work in the megacity, while their wives, children and elderly parents continue to live near Chandpur. And the wife of Hisham’s younger brother usually lives in their home village, but comes to Dhaka every year for three to four months during winter, when there is a higher demand for rice cakes (*pithas*), which need special preparation skills that she has. The particular food demand of the urbanites then shapes a distinctly seasonal rhythm in this family’s translocal life.

Overall, the vendors at the park’s entrance now offer a broad range of hot and cold snacks like *fuchka* and *chatpotti* as well as beverages like tea to the visitors who can enjoy these refreshments during some leisure time. But not everybody sees these advantages of street food vending. The city authorities and the police as well as the security guards from the nearby university campus often try to impede the vending activities in public space (Etzold, 2013). For the hawkers it is thus important to have spokespersons, which can negotiate with the authorities and convince them to show tolerance towards the street vendors. Due to their close relations, the hawkers from Chandpur can speak with one voice. Jalal, a 36 years old tea vendor who is running a shop at the site for 17 years, maintains good contacts to the police and other locally powerful people and bribes them. For this purpose, he collects money from all the vendors at the park’s entrance. The hawkers are buying their ‘tenure security’, and Jalal is the key contact person for them. The vendors from Chandpur have not only used their translocal social capital to establish street shops and sustain their livelihoods. They have also used their networks to expand their field of influence step by step and to permanently claim their ‘own’ niche in the urban space. In effect, they ‘rule’ this arena of street vending (four interviews, Dec. 2007).

**Translocality as Urban Opportunity and Rural Backup**

Salim’s case shows that translocal relations can be crucial for entering the urban labour market and for maintaining one’s vending spot. But it also demonstrates that the rural home can serve as a backup or retreat in times of urban crises. Salim was 28 years old, when I first met him in 2007. Together with his wife, he is selling tea, biscuits, bananas and cigarettes from a push-cart in front of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH). At the age of 16, he came to Dhaka with his father to earn a better living. The harvest that they could obtain from their small plot of agricultural land in a village near Comilla could not satisfy their family’s
needs. Having arrived in Dhaka, they could at first live with Salim’s uncle, who was employed in Dhaka’s university hospital. As no jobs were available for them in the hospital too, they started to sell goods in front of DMCH. Many vendors selling along that street have relatives working inside the hospital and come from the same region. According to Salim, both factors are important for the allocation of vending spots at this site, and for one’s reputation: “Medical staff’s relatives have the first priority. Do you know where my hometown is? Our hometown is Comilla. Inside the medical, people from Comilla have huge power.” “I know everyone respects me. I am from Comilla, everyone knows it” (interviews, 07.09.08 and 05.03.2010). Due to the symbolic capital of ‘being from Comilla’, because of his local network connections – he knows almost everybody working in the hospital and on its street – and because he also bribes policemen and the local political leaders who regulate the street trade, Salim could appropriate a comparatively good place, which would be impossible to get for a ‘newcomer’ without the necessary local and translocal social capital.

For ten years, he has now been selling tea at the very same vending spot under a large tree. Despite the omnipresent threat of being evicted by the police and regular hassle with the hospital’s security guards, he can pursue his livelihood with at least some ‘tenure security’. This has not always been the case. In 1996, for instance, the Dhaka City Corporation destroyed all street shops near the university hospital and evicted mobile street vendors, too. These drives were launched shortly after the Awami League came into power. The newly elected government (1996-2001) wanted to set an example for a more clean and orderly city. As a consequence, the street vendors could not reconvene their business at that site in the following three years (Etzold, 2013). This eviction campaign was a severe shock to the livelihood of Salim and his father. With no job alternatives available in the city at that time, both went back to their home village and worked as agricultural day labourers for five years. They only returned to the megacity and resumed street vending after that government had lost some rigour. Although he established a permanent claim on ‘his’ vending spot after his return, he became very cautious and now fears both regular harassments by security guards as well as erratic evictions carried out by the police (8 interviews; Oct. 2008 till March 2010).

**Taking Risks and Living Translocal for the Family Back Home**

The case of Nazim Hussain shows that many rural-urban migrants are working and living, but not ‘settling’ in a city, as they transfer most of their earnings back to home and as they often commute between the city and their rural village. Translocality is then an everyday practice. Nazim is a 40 years old street vendor, who sells tea, snacks and cigarettes from a little semi-
permanent shop on a footpath close to the Shaheed Minar, an important monument on the University Campus to commemorate the nation’s independence. He was born in a village near Munshiganj, about 30 kilometres southeast of Dhaka. As a young man, he worked in a jute mill, but migrated to Dhaka in the late 1980s, when many jute mills in Bangladesh were shut down due to a national economic recession and low prices for jute on international markets. For the last 20 years, he had maintained his street-side shop at the same place. Occasionally, he tried to get a permanent retail shop somewhere else in Dhaka, but always failed because he could not afford the initial investments and necessary bribes.

Since his marriage 15 years ago, Nazim has been moving back and forth between Dhaka, where he shares a room with others in a mass accommodation in a slum, and his home village, where his wife and their four sons are living. Like in this case, according to my survey, the families of 22 per cent of all male street vendors live in rural areas; they thus maintain translocal households. Throughout the week, he keeps close contact to his family by mobile phone. Once a week, he makes the two-hour-journey home, brings home the money he earned in Dhaka, and stays one day. His family uses most of the remittances for daily expenses, for their house and for the education of their sons. Now and then, he also made business investments in his village, like a little chicken farm, but was not very successful.

Two years ago, he took up a loan from a money lender in his village to pay for international labour migration. Somebody from his village had offered him a job in the United Arabian Emirates and demanded 150,000 Taka (~1.440 Euro) for facilitating his move. This opportunity did, however, not work out. Although he got most of the money back after two years, the interest rate for the money borrowed from a money lender in his village was so high that he had to sell some of his land to pay back the interests. Being aware of the risks involved, he justified his ambition to migrate internationally with economic rationality: He believed that he could make a lot of money in a very short time by working in the Gulf States and then reinvest it ‘at home’. He did not want to “eat up the money” he had saved through his work as a street vendor in Dhaka (four interviews, Oct. 2007 till Febr. 2010).

Like in this case of Nazim Hussain, the bari is one of the most important points of reference in the everyday life of many rural-urban migrants; they are living, but not settling in the megacity. Most of the money they make in Dhaka flows back to their home village and leaves its marks there. Securing assets ‘at home’, improving one’s house, and opening up opportunities for own children are considered to be more important than one’s own working and living conditions in Dhaka. Occupying a small niche in public space and the meagre profits from street vending enables this active translocal lifestyle. Although some vendors
manage to encroach on an ‘own’ vending spot quite permanently – Nazim has been selling at the same site for 20 years – being a street vendor in Dhaka represents not necessarily an ‘ideal’ and permanent livelihood. Alternatives to street vending, such as opening a retail shop or migrating internationally, are aimed at and tested by many hawkers, but can often not be realized due to a lack of capital. Nonetheless, many street vendors are able and willing to take great risks in order to invest in a better future. High social costs, false expectations and even betrayal are, however, experienced by many migrants in Bangladesh.

**Local Embeddedness as Livelihood Chance and Translocality as a Burden**

The last case study demonstrates that having translocal relations as such is not always an advantage. On the one hand, street vendors need to be embedded locally in order to get access to a vending site. On the other hand, translocal networks of dependency can be a severe burden that actually limits some people’s freedom and potentials. Tasneem was born in 1979 as the third of four children in a poor family in a village in northern Bangladesh. At the age of ten, her father left her mother and married again. She could not stay with them and therefore accompanied a female neighbour to Dhaka to work in her house. She worked as domestic maid in several households for six years, and then as labourer in Islambagh’s plastic recycling industry (Kulke & Staffeld 2009). During that time, she got to know her later husband, a rickshaw puller from the same district. She soon gave birth to a son and stayed for three years with her husbands’ family in his native village, while he was working in Dhaka again. Not wanting to be separated any longer, she returned to Dhaka around 2000 and continued work in the plastic industry. As they did not have adequate day care for their son, she started a small street food business. Her husband had the initial idea and told her: “you cannot take care of the kid [when you work in the factory] and on the other hand there is no way without working […]. Do one thing, start a pitha business. Then maybe we can survive” (interview, 13.02.09). Since 2003, she offers little rice cakes (*pithas*) in front of the factory, in which she worked before. Her small shop consists only of a small wooden table and three clay stoves only, and does not even take up one square meter. The local labourers value her *pithas* because of their good taste, their nutrients and their low price. The owner of the plastic factory allows her to sell in front of his factory in order to support her. In return, she sometimes cooks for his family members and helps them by working at their home, too. Besides him, a neighbour also gives her good advice, sometimes lends her money and protects her against the claims of other people who had tried to evict her from the site. Both men are her ‘local guardians’,
without whom she could not secure the access to her vending spot. Her good relation to them, or more broadly speaking her local social capital, is a crucial livelihood asset for her.

Shortly after she started street food vending, her husband fell severely ill from the arduous work as a rickshaw puller and could not support the family any longer. Because they lacked money for treatment, his condition worsened quickly and it became impossible for him to continue rickshaw pulling. He thus moved back to his village and now lives with his parents, but gets no proper treatment. Tasneem decided to stay in the city to earn money and to enable her son a better education. Her income from street vending is, however, insufficient for all of them. If she is working all day, she earns only 100 Taka (less than 1 Euro). Considering the recent rapid price increase in Dhaka (Zingel et al. 2011), it is hardly possible to buy sufficient food for her son and herself and to pay for their living expenses. Moreover, she has to save money for her husbands’ medicine and treatments. She maintains a translocal household, but they can rarely see another, because travelling to the village is expensive. Most often, she is just sending him the money. Although her business is not very profitable, and although supporting her husband over the distance is getting more and more difficult on this meagre basis, she stated that she would like to continue with her street food shop in Dhaka. Having her ‘own place’ and the relative liberty to make her own business seemed to make her proud and to some extent even optimistic about her future (two interviews, Feb./March 2009).

5. Conclusion: How Migrant Vendors are Re-Working Dhaka from Below

Examples from many cities in the Global South show that negotiations and conflicts about the ‘appropriate’ use of the urban space are an inevitable part of societal transitions – not only in Dhaka (Brown 2006; Cross & Morales 2007). The observations about translocal relations, informal labour and urban transition that were presented in this case study of street vendors in Dhaka largely go in line with the concept of transient urban space as proposed by Bork et al. (2014). On a structural level, the urban space is transformed by the sheer number of migrants that simply are in the city: They settle in one of the thousand slums. They are building the city with mere hands. They produce, exchange and consume goods. And like the street vendors, hundred thousands of migrants provide services for others. The accumulative effects of migrants’ practices of work and everyday life leaves visible imprints in the city.

On the individual level, Dhaka’s poor and street vendors, in particular, are using distinct places in the city to live and to pursue their business. The effects of their practices on the existing urban space vary substantially according to the extent, temporality or perseverance of their spatial appropriations (see Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014 for the modes of (re)production of
Mobile hawkers who walk around with a basket of fruits, a tray of snacks, or flasks with tea do not modify the physical setup of a place, but change its character through their mere presence (often in large numbers). A footpath might then not be perceived by passengers as ‘a place to walk’, but rather as ‘a place to stop and to consume food’ – the functions and socially ascribed meanings of public space are altered. The imprints of street vendors in the urban fabric are even greater, if they occupy a whole street with push-carts and rickshaws, if they set up large tables on a footpath, or if they build permanent shacks in ‘edge spaces’ next to the street, for instance. In doing so, hawkers are collectively moulding the urban space. Through offering their services, the food vendors are also making new spatial niches that are flexible and fluid, and which serve crucial social and economic functions in the city.

The elites, planners and city authorities often meet the subalterns’ (re)productions and reinterpretations of urban space as ‘livelihood spaces’ with scepticism, disapproval and criminalization: They are seen as a threat to the existing order, as eyesore in their imagination of modern, beautified and functional cities, and as an urban governance challenge (Bayat 2004; Roy 2011). In Dhaka, street vendors’ encroachments on public space are deemed illegal, informal, and illegitimate by state representatives and are therefore often suppressed (see Bork-Hüffer et al. 2014 for the modes of social (re)productions of agency). The hawkers are regularly evicted from their vending sites by the police (Etzold, 2013). The poor, among them rural-urban migrants, perceive their “quiet encroachments” as legitimate and necessary to make a living: They are in the city, but the state is not providing adequate settlements, services and jobs for them and is largely ignoring their political interests and needs. They therefore they take their ‘right to the city’ and appropriate its ‘free spaces’ (Bayat 1997).

One’s own family and friends, kinship relations and other personal networks are a vital resource for the poor and provide daily support, access to work and to specific places in the city, and help in times of crises. This is where translocality comes into play. Most of Dhaka’s residents have an own migration history, which is rooted in strong kin connections. They moved from a village to the city and found work in Dhaka – often with help of family members. Some move back and forth in a circular pattern – their mobility is often directly related to their life cycle. Most maintain translocal ties with their extended family through the regular exchange of money, goods, and information. Hardly any migrant I met had lost her/his sense of belonging to their rural home. Translocal relations and home-bound identities shape the life of many migrants in the city. In the case of many street food vendors both translocal social capital and the symbolic capital associated with one’s origin were particularly valuable resources that opened up specific livelihood opportunities in Dhaka, and which enabled them
to appropriate ‘their place’ of work and living in the city. This can be seen as an indication that the urban (work) space and migrants’ translocal spaces are mutually constructed.

6. References


