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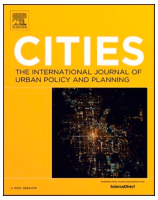
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Liveability and vitality: an exploration of small cities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a mixed method, participatory exploration of liveability as a stocktaking assessment with projections for urban vitality in cities, particularly in LMIC, small cities. The paper takes as its case study research conducted in 2019 and 2020 in Mongla and Noapara, south west Bangladesh. This paper illustrates firstly, the possibilities for the concept of liveability to produce nuanced, granular understandings of how small cities such as Mongla and Noapara function and are experienced by residents: how residents negotiate social processes, power relations, and access to resources that shape their everyday living. Secondly, the paper considers how liveability enables assessments of a city's vitality in the present and its potential vitality in the future: how cities might cope and develop in the face of rapid urbanization, chronic difficulties, and acute crises. This research combines work in under-researched LMIC small cities, practical research towards more nuanced and socially just deployment of the notion of 'urban liveability' and urban vitalist discourse to argue for a people centred urbanism for the future.

1. Introduction

In its most general, everyday use, the term 'liveability' offers an emphasis not on how cities might be 'functional' (humans as moving parts within the city machine) or 'survivable' (capacity for cities to keep humans alive), but rather how cities might be all these things: supporting life, humans and systems working together for the ongoing functioning of the human settlement and experienced by inhabitants as pleasurable, enlivening, lively. In short, the 'liveability' of a city gives a good indication of its 'vitality' in the sense with which this special issue is concerned: how cities are able to evolve, through the networked relationality of those who dwell in them, in the face of sudden, major crises and the ongoing, daily difficulties of urban life.

As the urban population continues to rise globally, creating 'liveable' cities that will therefore have a better chance of being sustainably 'vital' has become a priority for many stakeholder groups. Most rapid urbanization in coming decades will likely take place in the low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) (UN-DESA, 2018). An urgently significant part of urban futures globally is in places such as Mongla (population 106,000) and Noapara (population 170,000) Bangladesh. These are places that are changing at a rapid pace sometimes organically, sometimes with national government propelling change, and bearing considerable and various exposures to risk/difficulties for human life. Mongla and Noapara are two among many small cities globally characterised by diverse livelihood opportunities, climate change vulnerabilities, natural hazard portfolios *and* as cities attracting individuals seeking better life opportunities. There are visions of the much bigger cities they are likely to become with government-corporate planning, as seen in Mongla, and capital enterprise growth, as seen in Noapara. There is an imperative for investigation because of the big(ger) cities small

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cities such as Mongla and Noapara are likely to become. Yet evidence in urban discourse pertaining to what constitutes a liveable city is primarily limited to large cities in high-income countries captured using quantitative frameworks (Alderton et al., 2019; McArthur & Robin, 2019; Mould, 2019). This research offers an opportunity to learn what might make a city liveable and therefore potentially vital in this less-engaged with LMIC, small city context.

In this paper, we firstly illustrate how the concept of liveability could be mobilised to give nuanced perspectives of everyday lived experiences in small cities in LMICs using quantitative and qualitative data. Our case study engages with how liveability might be interpreted in different ways based on residents' location in a particular city and the individual's intersectionality of class, education, income levels and other factors. The insights into the everyday lived experiences and views of Mongla and Noapara residents are valuable to thinking about the similarities, differences and complexities of where the world's urban majority live – regional, small, intermediate cities in LMICs that are urbanizing and changing at a rapid pace. We argue that engaging residents around the notion of liveability enables understandings of how residents of small cities in a LMIC negotiate social processes, power relations, and access to resources that shape their everyday living and how they participate in making the fabric of their cities' through cultural, institutional and material structures. In short, we consider how attention to residents' sense of liveability might further understandings of a city's relative vitality.

Secondly, we consider how multi-dimensional qualitative interpretations of liveability from the view of residents in small cities in LMICs supports a consideration of urban vitality through foregrounding the lived experiences and aspirations of residents rather than primarily focusing on developmental strategies created by government or international development agencies. Understanding how residents find and make their cities 'liveable', is then a useful means for thinking through the vitality of small cities in LMICs: what 'the *lived city*' in these regions that are overlooked in geographic and urban discourse might be in the process of becoming through a process that is plural, fluid and relational (Special Issue Editors, 2022). Our approach to liveability gives a sense of specific actions and experiences, for example in Mongla in terms of water use we learn about the secondary school that has a rainwater harvesting system, the young family of a former professional football player that use their own pond for fish and water supply, the group of women from the informal settlement who describe and showed us the communal washing of laundry in public ponds. From this we learn how these residents find their city liveable in terms of water supply and make it liveable for themselves through their relational actions with other people, infrastructure, the natural environment. This information then serves an understanding of the city's broader vitality: the relational networks and strategies that serve a potable and portable water provision for Mongla's residents, but also something of the qualities of the cities vitality: how it feels to wash clothes off the edge of a pond wall, while looking to other residential areas across the water. In addition to the arguments we draw out around liveability and vitality in small cities in LMIC, we use the case study of our research in Mongla and Noapara, Bangladesh to propose drawing on the humanities and social sciences for mixed research methods in productively exploring liveability with city residents.

This paper is organized in the following manner. It begins with a literature review framing urban liveability and vitality, describes academically overlooked small cities, in general, and in urbanizing Bangladesh, in particular. Section three provides contextual background on Mongla and Noapara and details the research project's mixed methods used to capture nuances of everyday realities in these cities. The results section discusses the findings of the field work in terms of liveability and section five considers how the insights on liveability from Mongla and Noapara residents might contribute to anticipating the cities' relative vitality as they evolve into the future.

2. Literature review

2.1. Framing urban liveability and vitalism

There is a certain sense of synonymity between 'liveability' and 'vitalism', with both of them referring to life, living, aliveness. Yet compatible as they may be as words, in urban studies the two terms have had different conceptual trajectories to one another. In what follows we offer a brief literature review of liveability and vitality to position the use of these terms historically as different. We also define how we understand this special issue to be working with "urban vitalism" and how that is distinct to how our research works with "urban liveability". We then unpack our sense of liveability as a useful concept for exploring the day to day ways in which residents find and make their cities liveable and how this information on "urban liveability" might offer a valuable barometer for understanding a city's overall "urban vitality", which we might broadly summarise as its robustness and resilience and the collective experience of the city.

In the 1950s and 1960s, environmental behaviour design researchers used the concept of liveability to explore how people perceive and use cities and subsequently developed design guidelines and recommendations to incorporate people's views (Ahmed et al., 2019; Kaal, 2011). Since then the term has had ongoing appeal for social scientists, human geographers, development researchers as well as urban planners.

In the 1990s, liveability became a popular concept among urban planners in cities in high income countries (HICs) (Pacione, 1990) and by the 2000s, liveability become part of neoliberal rankings of cities based on narrowly defined quantitative data highlighting the importance of city branding and external perceptions of a city's success. Cities in HICs were comparing themselves to each other in rankings such as Mercer (2019) in relation to the preferences of the elite: placing a high priority on the quality of architecture, urban design, restaurants, public safety, schools and access to airports for international travel (McArthur & Robin, 2019: 1714). With more of a development focus, an index like The Economist's Economic Intelligence Unit (2021) ranks 140 cities from Western Europe, Eastern Europe, the USA and Canada, Asia and Australasia, Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa and lastly Sub-Saharan Africa on five dimensions of a "liveable city" including stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education and infrastructure. It ranks Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, 137th only followed by Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, Lagos in Nigeria and war-torn Damascus, Syria. For a South Asian ranking see Kim (2015). However, many of the cities at the top of these league tables experience pronounced inequality and yet the rankings continue to be used as a means of urban analysis (Mould, 2019; McArthur & Robin, 2019: 1712).

In recent years there has been considerable scholarly work calling for a more complex and socially just recuperation of the concept of urban liveability. McArthur and Robin (2019) offer a detailed discourse analysis of liveability concluding with a southern urbanisms compatible argument for thinking liveability in cities of the global north through the international development goal lens more readily used in the global south (1724). Mould (2019) argues for a more people-centred and city specific assessment of liveability. Tolfo and Doucet (2022) champion a similar line of thinking to Mould, detailing through a case study of gentrification in Vancouver's suburbs how a more inclusive, agonistic and area-specific consideration of liveability might serve more equitable cities. Ahmed et al. (2019) unpack different liveability indices to construct a composite picture of how liveability is and might be employed. Of particular value to our discussion in this paper, Ahmed et al. mark a difference between what might be considered objective factors in determining liveability, such as health and environmental sustainability, and subjective factors, like a sense of happiness. Critically they propose that these objective and subjective factors 'integrate rather than wrestle' in making for liveable urban environments and, like Mould, Tolfo and Doucet, they argue for the contextual specificity of liveability in any one urban setting (Ahmed et al., 2019, 179). In a

discussion on urban ranking metrics generally (liveability, among others), Acuto et al. (2019) consider that it is not only depth and range of quantifiable data that is needed to make more useful assessments and interventions in cities, but also a sophistication in interpretation of data so city rankings are not just read for which cities come out top and which come out bottom.

Across this critical liveability literature we see the following identified concerns as gaps in urban liveability discourse which the Mongla and Noapara study works into. First, liveability metrics create a polarisation between cities and within cities. The metrics create a picture of 'liveable', elite HIC cities and LMIC cities failing liveability measurements, but they also obscure differences in liveability within cities. The result is nuanced understandings of the issues with liveability failings in HIC and LMIC cities do not get detailed critical attention. Second, liveability is context specific. Applying universal criteria does not do justice to the particular qualities of liveability within each city nor to identifying what might enhance liveability. Third, there are objective and subjective factors contributing to liveability, therefore detailed data is required that reflects objective and subjective liveability factors. Fourth, implicit in all the preceding points is that the people who make up the city are the ones whose experiences and opinions should matter in assessing liveability. Finally detailed quantifiable data and its careful, sophisticated interpretation is key to achieving more complex and just understandings of liveability. In this regard, and a less overtly explored factor in the current critical liveability discourse, we argue through the Mongla and Noapara case study that qualitative data used alongside quantitative can assist, both in generating more nuanced data and in its more nuanced interpretation.

In contrast to 'liveability', 'urban vitalism' as concept has a history less instrumentalised for metrics-driven assessments serving the urban elite, city branding drives or development paradigm, reductionist assessments of cities. Instead, urban vitalism has given greater focus to networked, human experiences of the city: to understanding what a city in all its peopled, material, policy, institutional, elemental complexity is and what it might be becoming through the relationship between all of these things. As Fraser et al. (2005) helpfully suggest, a concern with vital processes might "enable us to think about change – both novelty and endurance – in a world which 'might be different but is not' (Haraway, 1997: 97)".

Pieterse, 2012 champions a vitalist understanding of cities, especially in a southern urbanisms context, as key to "a more plural and dynamic conception of city-making and cityness" (44). He cites Amin and Thrift's (2002) contemporary urban classic *Cities*, Lorimer (2009) and actor network theorists Latour, Haraway, Law and Serres and vital ontologist, Jane Bennett in giving a history of understanding the world and its unfolding emergence through the lively relationality of all things, human and non-human. This vitalist line of thinking of course traces further back beyond contemporary scholars to Spinoza in the 1600s and to Lucretius in Ancient Rome.

The editors of this special edition similarly define vitalism as offering a sense of the city as organically emergent through relational interactions between people, built environment and systemic structures. Their particular investment is in how this view of vitalism might be used for assessing and promoting cities' capacity to cope and possibly even positively transform as they live through chronic difficulties and acute ones. The editors wish to use vitalism to critically further urban discourse around 'smart', 'resilient', 'sustainable and just' and 'inclusive' cities in ways that focus on the complexities of real-life experiences and actions for all city-dwellers.

'Urban vitalism' then has been a theoretical lens for interpreting cities to drive urban planning and policy focused on the nuances of people's experiences and interactions in cities rather than viewing people as masses to be managed and provided for through built form and policy. Yet while urban vitalism's theory orientation might stand in contrast to the metric-driven liveability, data to support urban vitalist policy and planning must inevitably include quantifiable measurements as well as qualitative engagements. In a 2022 paper Gómez-Varo, Delclòs-Alió and Miralles-Guasch offer an example of this as they use Jane Jacobs's (1961) very particular theorisation of urban vitalism for more socially just, people-focused cities as a springboard for designing a detailed set of metrics to measure urban vitality in Barcelona's Nou Barris district and with an attentiveness to marginal urban experience, somewhat overlooked in Jacobs's propositions (22, 103565).

There are a number of points to mark in conclusion to this literature review of liveability and urban vitalism. Firstly, how are we seeing liveability and vitality relate for the purposes of this paper? We are understanding liveability as a starting point for engaging residents of Mongla and Noapara as to how their cities might be: 'supporting life, humans and systems working together for the ongoing functioning of the human settlement and experienced by inhabitants as pleasurable, enlivening, lively', according to our broad-based definition in our introduction. We are understanding urban vitalism as how the cities might or might not be vital in the ways this special edition of *Cities* is invested in: able to absorb shocks, stabilise and possibly positively transform through the complex networked relationality of people, systems and material. Liveability starts the conversation and gathers the data on what is liveable or not for residents and this data serves as an indicator to discuss and analyse Mongla's and Noapara's relative and potential urban vitality.

Secondly, this research responds to practices and theorisation in terms of urban studies and geographic workings with 'liveability' and 'urban vitality'. Our work with Mongla and Noapara serves as a case study for a mixed methods approach to nuanced, resident-driven conceptions of liveability in small, LMIC cities. Our study advocates not for qualitative over quantitative or vice versa, or for subjective or objective metrics on liveability, but rather for a carefully considered, detailed use and combination of these kinds of data to inform each other. Our study also suggests that initiating discussions and making tentative conclusions about small, LMIC cities' relative urban vitality, may be well served by initiating a participatory engagement with residents around the concept of 'liveability', as opposed to pre-determining what might constitute 'vitality'.

2.2. *Academically overlooked cities*

'Southern' and post-colonial urbanisms have been enormously influential in refocusing attention towards cities in LMICs, and yet many cities continue to be systematically overlooked (Ruszczyk, Nugraha, et al., 2021). The necessity of research focus on megacities and the subsequent marginalisation of small cities is not difficult to understand. While mega cities and capital cities function as 'city states in a networked global economy, increasingly independent of regional and national mediation', other cities are left to 'seek new ways of claiming space and voice' (Appadurai, 2001). The lack of attention given to smaller cities all around the world (Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1986; Lowder, 1991; Ali & Rieker, 2008; Bell & Jayne, 2006; Chen & Kanna, 2012; Marais et al., 2016; Cook, 2018; Mackay, 2019) is a self-imposed academic and policy limitation and it implies that these cities are less worthy of critical analysis, or that they are not as problematic in that they experience the same urban development issues but on a different scale (Sheppard et al., 2013, 894). Taking each of these interjections seriously, studying non-capital and non-mega cities, whether labelled regional, smaller or secondary cities, can inform us more thoroughly about global urban conditions, the limits of existing urban geographical theory and carries a political and moral imperative. Most recently, UN-Habitat (2022) renewed the call to focus on smaller cities and the tremendous role they play for our collective urbanizing sustainable future, the role of rural - urban linkages as well as their potential to stem outward migration flows.

The World Organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) groups small and medium (or secondary and tertiary) cities together as 'intermediary' cities, defined as cities with populations

between 50,000 and two million people with a primary role in connecting rural and urban areas to basic facilities and services (UCLG, 2020). High density is not a defining feature of these cities' urbanism, instead there is an emerging sprawl in the city's porous boundaries. Areas that are very rural yet within the city's boundaries, compete for resources with the city's core where oftentimes, informal residents live in precarious circumstances (such as day waged labourers who reside in one room structures with insecure tenure). Paterson et al. (2017) suggest these cities have local governments with little capacity, limited data, minimal funding under their control and often lack political power to fulfil their responsibilities (For corroboration of this opinion specifically in terms of South Asian urbanization, see Ellis & Roberts, 2016: 80–81). Recent research based on thirteen cities in nine countries (Ruszczyk et al., 2021) suggests smaller cities do not function in the same manner as large cities and can even be viewed as sites of possibility for a limited time, where mistakes from large cities are not repeated. This includes urban planning, infrastructure investment, access to green space and leisure, relationships between government and residents and thinking for the long term under the nexus of climate change, disaster risk reduction and development opportunities. The future of small cities does not need to replicate the trajectory of large cities. Small cities can and do serve a different role within their local environs.

Furthermore, there has been insufficient academic attention focusing on people who Simone (2014, 322) refers to as the possible urban 'majority'. Urban residents "straddling and making ambiguous the distinctions among 'upper poor', 'working class', and 'lower middle class'". It is these residents who are taken for granted, who 'barely register in discussions of the probable and potential future of cities', yet play pivotal roles in city-making through the life worlds they actively construct with or without governmental support. This research engaged residents in Mongla and Noapara struggling with poverty, but it also gave considerable focus to engaging Simone's 'majority' as to their interpretations and experiences of liveability.

2.3. Small cities in urbanizing Bangladesh

While Bangladesh is often framed as ground zero for climate change devastation and according to 2018 statistics is one of the most heavily and densely populated countries in the world (World Bank, n.d.) with a population of nearly 162 million and 1240 people/km^2, this historically rural-agrarian country has made remarkable progress in decreasing the population growth rate, reducing poverty and raising incomes. Bangladesh is also regarded as a climate change adaptation leader among developing countries, mainstreaming climate change into its development strategies (Khan et al., 2021). Bangladesh's development policy prioritises food security for households, educational opportunities for men and women, and a reduction in natural hazard induced disasters (Hossain, 2021). According to the Agglomeration Index, an alternative measure of urban concentration, the share of Bangladesh's population living in areas with urban characteristics in 2010 was already 45.7 % (Ellis & Roberts, 2016). This compares to an urban share of the population based on official definitions of urban areas of almost 28 % (BBS, 2011), suggesting the existence of overlooked urbanization in Bangladesh. By 2035 the majority of the population is predicted to be living in urban areas (UNDP, 2019).

Existing academic scholarship on Bangladesh's cities is often on the mega city and capital, Dhaka (Morshed & Asami, 2015) or the second largest city of Chittagong. There is paucity of literature on many of the regional, smaller cities of Bangladesh where tens of millions of residents live. The two cities in our case study (Mongla and Noapara) are considered 'small' cities by Bangladeshi and global standards, with populations under 200,000 (see Fig. 1 for the major cities and the research sites). There is little academic research into how residents in these smaller Bangladeshi cities earn their livelihoods, how the patterns

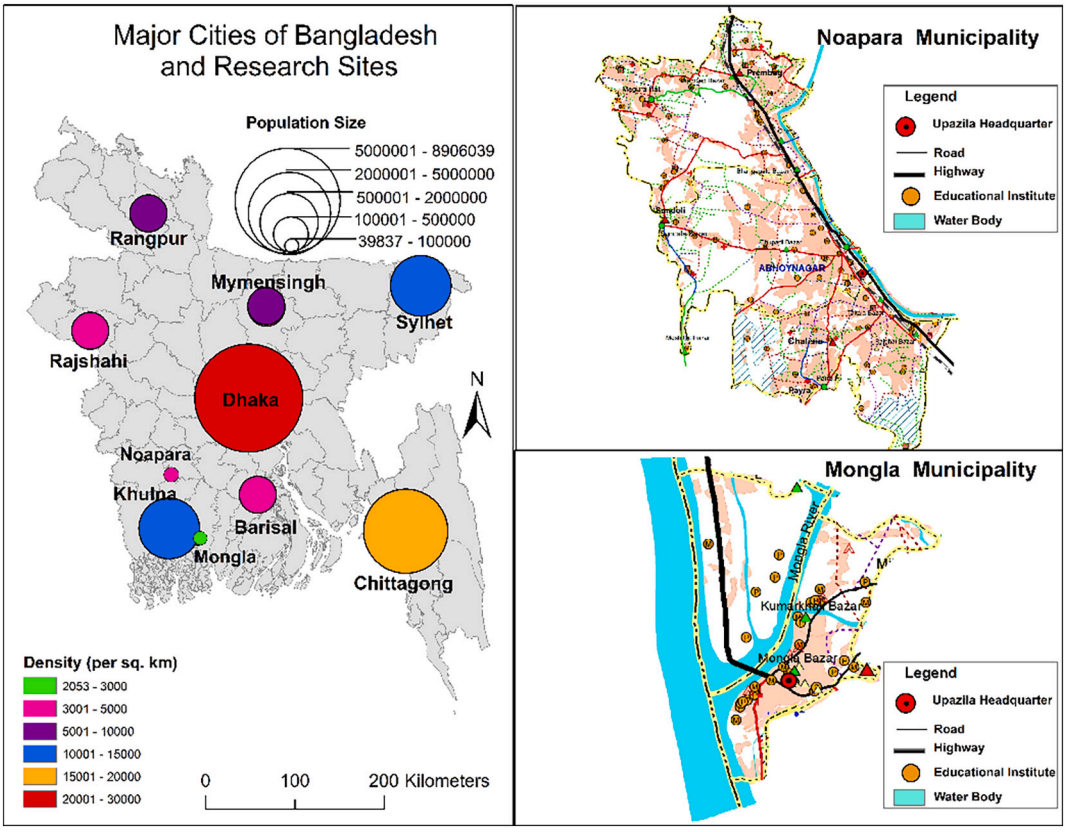


Fig. 1. Maps of major cities of Bangladesh and the research sites.
Source: Juel Mahamud, ICCCAD (2020).

of migration are evolving and what residents think of their cities. Yet these small cities and towns are now being positioned in Bangladeshi urban studies discourse as potentially key in dealing with population displacement (Khan et al., 2021). This is a new narrative that warrants investigation.

It has been predicted that up to 216 million people could be internally displaced globally (Clement et al., 2021) and up to 10 million in Bangladesh by climate change (Rigaud et al., 2018). The majority of those displaced gravitate/are forced to large cities like Dhaka and Chittagong for the relative infrastructural security they afford. Khan et al. propose a strategy:

> to address displacements under increasing urbanization across the world could be the establishment of peri-urban growth centres and transformation of cities and towns to be migrant-friendly.
>
> Khan et al. (2021: 1291)

The authors argue that such a strategy with 'safe and orderly movement for migrants ensuring employment, social protection, access to education, housing, health services, utilities etc.' is rather pragmatic for densely populated countries such as Bangladesh which have little space (geographic and political) for retreat from vulnerable hotspots. Accordingly, Khan et al. (2021) proposed a concept called 'Migrant Friendly Climate Resilient Cities' and listed both Mongla and Noapara as potential sites for piloting the concept. Participatory and consultative processes involving local authorities and other stakeholders are underway to formulate plans and implement interventions to make these smaller regional cities hospitable for potential migrants and facilitate their transition to becoming long-term residents/citizens.

A 2022 *Guardian* article (Ahmed & Choat, 2022) gives a perhaps somewhat simplified and overly optimistic view of the early days of this strategy in Mongla itself. Detailed data with as little bias as possible on how these cities are liveable now and might be in the future, is critical to determining how vital Mongla and Noapara might be and continue to be as small cities earmarked as prospective 'Migrant Friendly Climate Resilient Cities'. Rahman et al. (2022) citing on-going urban sprawl and physical-infrastructural transformation in Mongla argued "a techno-optimistic perspective is presented in which infrastructural improvements, factories and blue-collar job opportunities, alongside public services such as affordable housing (although rising land prices may soon render housing unaffordable), schools and hospitals define transformational adaptation." Vitality of these small cities is in question not only for existing city-dwellers, but as a source of potentially supportive urban vitality for a portion of the 10 million predicted to be displaced by climate change (Rigaud et al., 2018).

3. The two cities and methodology

3.1. Research sites

Mongla and Noapara are in a coastal region and vulnerable to various hydro-meteorological hazards including cyclones, flooding and salinity intrusion. Yet both cities are also transport hubs accessible through multiple modes of transport making them favourable for industry and attractive to migrants seeking potential employment opportunities. The growth of the two cities is only expected to burgeon for numerous reasons but significantly on a national infrastructure level, as a result of the anticipated completion of the 'Padma Bridge' which will establish a direct road link between the southern region of Bangladesh with the capital Dhaka and other areas.

3.1.1. Mongla

Mongla might be described as on the verge of radical change from a sleepy city to one of significant national importance. It is located on the far southwest coast of Bangladesh, adjacent to the world's largest mangrove forest, the Sundarban, which shares a border with India. Mongla is particularly vulnerable to natural hazards such as regularly occurring cyclones and the annual monsoons. It struggles with significant and worsening water salinity issues which threaten the overall social and economic development of the city. Yet being Bangladesh's second largest seaport, the city has the central government's attention as a national priority economic zone.

The city is divided into two distinct parts by the river Mongla (Fig. 1). On the southern side the city is older with markets, residential buildings no higher than three stories and many pedestrian alleyways. Residents use commuter flat boats to access main road routes to the rest of Bangladesh and the second, northern part of the city, where the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) is located, the harbour and government buildings. Recently, the city has seen rapid population growth due to the 6000 jobs created at the EPZ and the revival of port activities. The EPZ and an anticipated international airport could bring tens of thousands of low skilled jobs to greater Mongla. The possibility for economic development is significant but the possibility for further environmental degradation is equally so. The EPZ and the projected international airport will possibly create a parallel town to the existing, 'old' town. What this will do to the social, economic and infrastructural fabric of the city remains to be seen and understood.

3.1.2. Noapara

While Noapara does not hold the gaze of the central government and is not receiving significant financial support, it is nevertheless a bustling, vibrant city with road, rail and water thoroughfares. Noapara is also located in the southwestern part of Bangladesh (Fig. 1), but inland from the coast and north of regional capital Khulna (Mongla is to the south of Khulna). It is an internationally important transportation junction with a national transportation road bisecting the city. The railway links to the rest of Bangladesh as well as to India. The Bhairav River at Noapara connects Noapara as a river port to the seaport of Mongla and on through the Bay of Bengal to the primary Bangladeshi port of Chittagong in Southeast Bangladesh. Noapara is the entry point to Bangladesh for key imports to be transported by truck domestically within Bangladesh: coal from Indonesia, sand from India, fertilizer supplies. In addition to its role as a key node in goods transport routes, Noapara has an industrial precinct similar to Mongla's EPZ, but sustained by private rather than state investment. Again, similarly to Noapara's EPZ, the factories in this precinct provide a significant number of low skilled jobs. It is worth noting in terms of the rural urban relationship between employment, over 100,000 labourers commute daily into Noapara from small villages in the surrounding region.

3.2. Methodology

Intending to compare residents' experiences of liveability in these two small cities in south-west Bangladesh, we designed a mixed methods participatory approach. Views of residents were to be given primary consideration in the research, with the opinions of government officials, community leaders and NGO officials considered to give a sense of different stakeholder perspectives and the professional opinions of development and urban practitioners intimately involved in these cities. Methods more conventionally associated with social science were surveys, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Arts-based methods used were storytelling workshops, street theatre performances, photography and video documentation of the other research tools in process as well as of public and private spaces in each city. These tools enabled us to make quantifiable claims of experiences of liveability within each of the cities (for intra-urban comparison) and between both cities (for inter-urban comparison) as well as to gather qualitative perspectives on the feeling and experience of each city by its residents. The variety of tools allowed multiple opportunities and different expressive media for research participants to accurately, and with nuance, express their own experiences of liveability.

Using the existing literature on liveability and long discussions

within the six-person research team, we defined eight possible factors of liveability (livelihoods and food security, utilities and transport, health and natural environment, education, housing and neighbourhood, central and local government, safety and security and lastly, social and leisure) for the 108 question survey of 201 individuals and asked sets of questions grouped under each factor. We hoped the factors would be numerous enough and flexible enough to allow participants in the survey to describe what they value and experience as liveable. A team of eight field researchers including researchers from the International Center for Climate Change and Development were engaged in administering the household survey. The interviews were conducted in Bangla and on average each interview took about 1 h. Respondents were selected randomly and not all of them could complete/answer all the answers. Each respondent was given 100 tk ($ 1 USD) as compensation for their time. Responses were recorded digitally using Kobo® software and uploaded on a server daily. One of the co-authors was the survey coordinator and checked the responses randomly on a daily basis to ensure quality. To avoid any bias, the survey team was given training on basic interview protocols as well as on the questionnaire beforehand.

The surveys were conducted from mid-September to mid-October 2019 with 98 people in Mongla, 49 from the middle-income residential area and 49 from the informal settlement and 103 people in Noapara, 51 from the middle-income residential area and 52 from the informal settlement. This demographic distribution, and its relation to different residential areas of the city, was key to our intention of engaging both the urban working class and 'poor' as well as Simone's (2014) "urban majority" (322) on the subject of liveability. In Mongla and Noapara the residents in the middle-income residential areas closely follow Simone's typifying of the blurry lines between working class, lower middle and middle class. Residents in these areas were lower income earners as well as middle income earners in the context of Bangladesh. The key marker of local identification of being middle class was the level of education within the family members, rather than wealth. Residents in the middle-income area worked for the public sector, NGOs or were small scale business owners. Many had formal access to the government and some could influence the government based on political affiliation. The informal settlement dwellers in contrast had less access to and influence on government officials and flagged the interrelated concerns of education and money (lack of money limiting education access, lack of education limiting access to earning) as holding them back from their aspirations.

Beyond the surveys, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual residents in each city. A videographer and photographer spent half a day each with two residents in each city in order to learn about how they interact with the city and conduct their everyday lives. Additionally, using the eight factors of liveability as inspiration, the research team organized a two-day storytelling workshop with ten to fifteen residents in each city, to mime, tell stories with actions and act out scenes from their daily lives that involved water, food, domestic and public spaces, education and health. These themes were entry points for residents to give physical and vocal expression to the actions, relationships, pleasures and frustrations of their lived experience in their cities that would corroborate and detail survey information and offer new insights beyond the scope of the survey or FGDs. An exercise like miming eating your favourite food served to inform survey and interview findings on residents' staple diets, but it also gave a sense of the qualities in daily food preparation and eating. Another exercise invited participants to act out sitting in the favourite part of their home gave information on doorways and windows, the relative spaciousness of individuals' living conditions, but also showed the sensory pleasure of being in your home in relation to the city.

These residents then performed short street theatre pieces in their cities[4] which were used as an immediate, outward facing event, broadcasting what we as participants and researchers had found in the workshops. This allowed us to test how people in public spaces responded to what was represented. People were agreeing, disagreeing, adding information. The street theatre performances also gave the participants an immediate experience of representing their own opinions in a public forum.

The use of visual methods served multiple purposes in complementing our other research methods including: documenting the other research methods, providing a visual ethnography of the cities as well as residents' experiences and lastly, the process of conducting the research. They captured the research situation in a way that represents the 2019 emotive and 'affectual landscape' (Thrift, 2008) of Mongla and Noapara, which gives a sense of the two cities 'vitality' in a broader more experiential sense - what it feels like to be in the life of the city. Results of the research (videos, photography exhibit, six-page profiles of the cities and 100-page document with the results from the surveys) were subsequently shared in three separate events in Mongla, Noapara and in Dhaka with local government officials, community leaders and national government officials in March 2020. Research participants were invited to attend and speak at the local events which they did, putting residents in direct communication with officials, sometimes for the first time.

4. Lived experiences in small cities

This section by no means offers an exhaustive account of the results from the Mongla and Noapara research, but rather offers a sense of how the study's different research methods, subjective and objective, quantifiable and qualitative data worked together to give insights into residents' experiences and opinion of liveability in the two cities.

The household survey provided quantifiable data on facts such as income, percentage of income spent on food monthly and the saving status of survey respondents and their households (see Fig. 2). There are visual representations for the responses to each of the survey questions for both cities that can be explored in English and in Bangla (see Ruszczyk, Shudha et al., 2020). These statistics provide some form of 'objective' assessment on the provisions for city living in each city. For example: it was evident from these questions that surveyed residents in both cities, regardless of their income groups, spent a large portion of their income on food while over 60 % of the respondents in both cities indicated they have no savings. Relevance of such information for urban liveability and vitality is discussed in the next section of this paper.

The survey also asked opinion-based questions such as: what do you think are the biggest contributors to liveability out of the eight factors? How do you feel about security in your city? Do you see your future in this city? These types of questions allowed for a subjective definition of liveability in Mongla's and Noapara's residents' terms to emerge as opposed to the survey defining liveability for participants (Fig. 3). This subjective survey data gave the most important factors for liveability in Mongla and Noapara as housing and neighbourhood, access to utilities (specifically water in the case of Mongla), livelihood and food security, personal safety and security as well as educational facilities. Health and natural environment, central and local government, and lastly, social and leisure, did not register as directly important. The data also showed a hierarchy of components. Securing housing and livelihoods is most critical for the informal settlement dwellers while education for children and personal safety were more important for the middle-income residents in both cities.

Yet, as Acuto et al. (2019) point to, the metrics we arrived at could easily result in planners and city officials looking only to those factors which the highest percentage of residents flagged as priorities. Housing and neighbourhood upgrades in Mongla might then neglect that local

[4] A film based on the storytelling workshops and the street theatre performances is available online please see here (Ahmed et al., 2020).

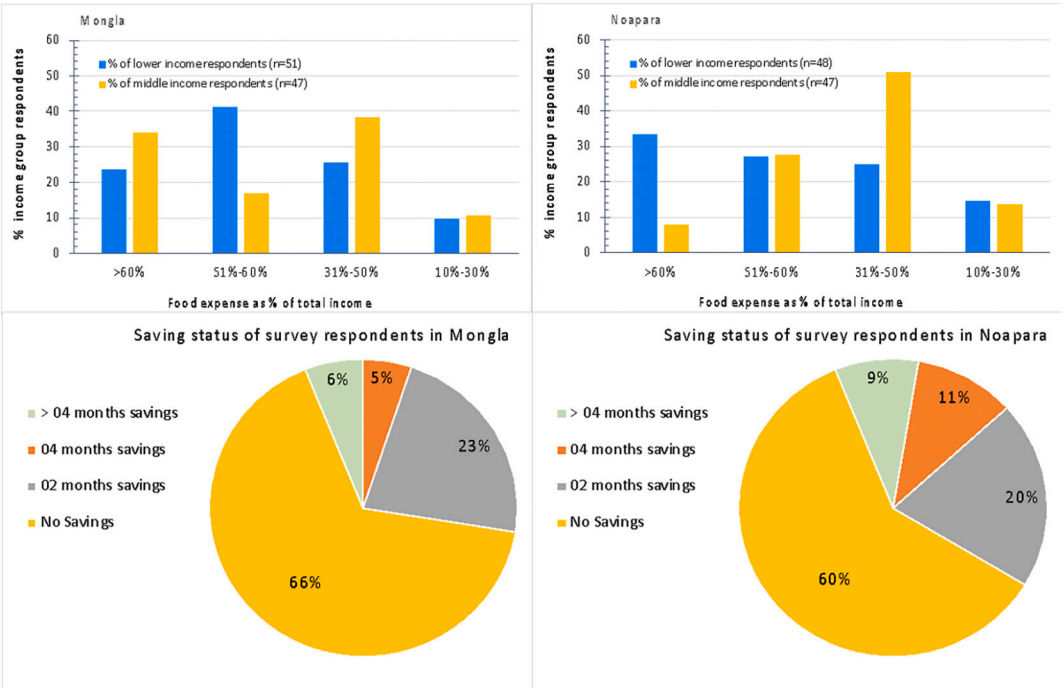


Fig. 2. Food related expenses and saving status of residents in Mongla and Noapara in 2019.

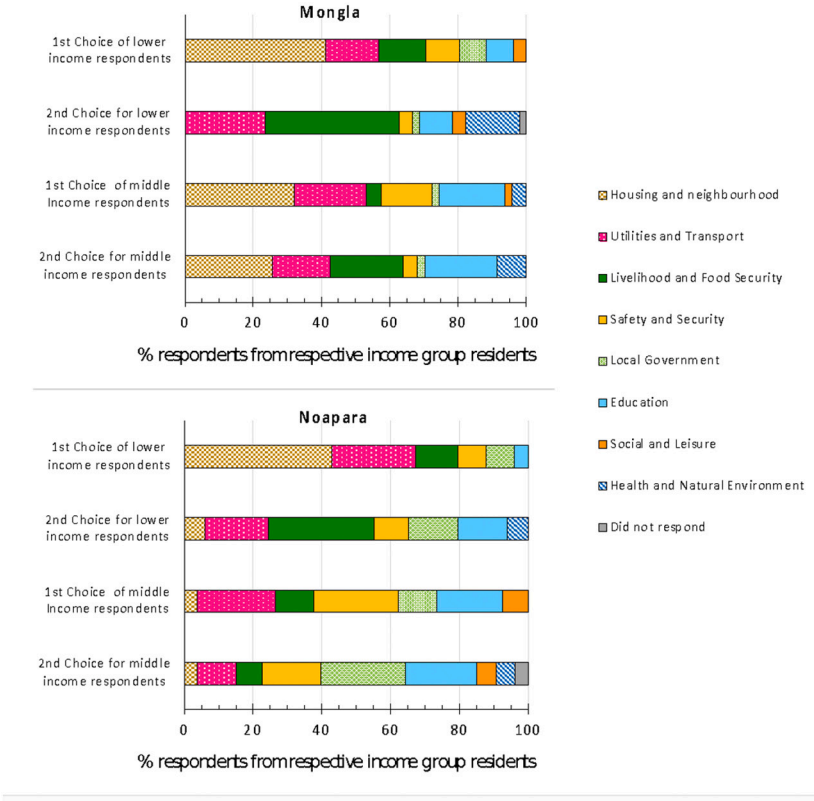


Fig. 3. Responses to the question, "What do you think are the top two important factors to make the city liveable for you?", to yield data for opinion.

governance improvement or the 'social and leisure' of public parks could be key factors in positively transforming housing and neighbourhoods and that there were residents who flagged these specific things - local governance and public parks - as most important to them in making their city liveable. Similarly, Noapara officials reading for highest percentage metrics might not consider that a small group of residents living close to the harbour are experiencing the environmental impact of air pollution on their neighbourhood.

Our additional research tools such as the interviews, FGDs and storytelling workshops came into play to reach towards a fuller capturing of

the quality of life (in terms of natural, social and cultural capital aspirations) or the lack thereof in Mongla and Noapara and to make visible different perspectives difficult to distinguish through the survey process and data analysis. For example, 'Water is life' was the common refrain among all residents in salinity-prone Mongla, but understanding the range of strategies for managing this life force became more and more refined through each interview: from the opinions of the international water NGO on communal ponds and rising salinity levels to the teacher on the school's own rainwater-harvesting system to the management of water for each individual resident between private ponds for drinking, public for bathing and laundry, rainwater harvesting and using water purification tablets to manage bacteria levels. In other instances, the qualitative tools enabled participant-led comparison of experience as well as validation of collected data. For example, where the survey data gave an overall sense of positivity about security in Mongla, a discussion with a group of women from the informal settlement revealed distinct, individually inflected senses of public security. One woman rarely leaves her house, others move freely but are more wary at night and make use of male chaperones and an active community leader feels no issues moving freely at any time of day, unchaperoned. In summary, these interviews and discussions enabled us to account and give reasons for the survey data with a nuanced range of perspectives from local knowledge.

From this finding we suggest that an interdisciplinary, layered reading of liveability in small cities might enable us to capture mundane and fluid forms of urban living, especially of marginal groups. As Fransen posits residents using the built environment and available resources form strategies which allow them to negotiate hierarchical and network governance arrangements, and cope with, adapt to and/or transform urban crises (Fransen, 2021). Focusing on liveability in the way we propose through the Mongla and Noapara research gives granular information on a city's vitality: the mundane and fluid forms of urban living that work strategically with urban governance. Here we share an illustrative vignette from a semi-structured interview with residents in Mongla which supports Fransen's sense. The detail we present is also layered with knowledge that emerged from the other methods (photography, storytelling workshops, survey data) and speaks to the strategic ways in which residents make their life worlds within cities both over long periods of time and in the day-to-day:

This vignette illustrates how residents in the informal settlement used the affordances of lake and sand to autoconstruct surfaces to build on, creating dwellings within the city, neither stopped nor supported by state officials. It also illustrates the ongoing strategic management of tenure between tenants and Port Authority with residents freed of rent, but ever uncertain of their right to remain. The community political leader's membership of the ruling party gives her some recourse for addressing issues through regional government, but makes her wary of city channels through the opposing party's mayoral office. All three women dream of a more affluent future for their children, but have no certainty of support from city, state or development agencies in achieving these dreams of education, land tenure, financial security and socio-religious status.

Research conducted by Ruszczyk, Rahman et al. (2021) beyond the liveability study and from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic further confirmed the sense of residents in both cities using multiple strategies to cope with difficulties, chronic and acute. The May – June 2020 lockdown induced loss of income and subsequent food insecurity during the initial months of the pandemic in both cities. Since the majority of the low-and middle-income residents did not have savings - an objective marker of liveability precarity - loss of income suggests those households would be likely to suffer from food insecurity. The local authorities played an important role in providing food support during the first lockdown in May and June 2020 and ensuring that residents could survive the crisis. Although the food relief was useful, it was clear that it did not reach everyone in need; nor did it give adequate consideration to households maintaining a balanced diet (Ruszczyk, Rahman et al., 2021).

This pandemic lockdown research also revealed that (lower) middle-income households without guaranteed income (including those with small businesses) suffered as much as, if not more than, low-income households in the informal settlements because they did not qualify for food relief or social safety net programmes. They were also embarrassed to ask for help. One strategy employed by households was taking loans from friends and neighbours, reflecting the importance of social capital to cope with disasters (Ruszczyk, Rahman et al., 2021). Sources of loans to cover everyday needs in the two cities were identified during the 2019 household survey: friends and family (which had been used by 35 % of respondents), community (22 %), NGOs (18 %), and other sources, e.g. pawnbrokers, loan sharks (25 %). However, several interviewees in 2020 stated that their traditional support systems could not be accessed because everyone was going through the same hardship and had no money to spare. The COVID study bore out the suggestion in the data gathered from the initial liveability study that living in Mongla and Noapara is precarious not just for the lower income residents residing in informal settlements but for the middle income residents as well.

5. Discussion

In both cities, all residents spoke about friendships, kinship, communities and a network of affordances for liveability that worked across private resources, informal communal support, city, state and NGO structures. The middle-income area residents valued the aesthetics of their neighbourhood and wanted improved and/or more social public spaces in the future. Informal settlement residents described futures for themselves that looked like the existing middle-income area residents' life worlds and were able to unpack what they find liveable and what embattles liveability in their current, informal settlement experiences of

Vignette

Three young married women participants live in *Balur Math*, an informal settlement in Mongla whose Bengali name means "fields of sand". Over a period of decades, residents created their settlement by filling in the lake with sand and creating land upon which they now live (Fig. 4 below). The area is owned by the port authority who does not want to extract rent from the residents of *Balur Math*[51] for fear of establishing a relationship that can be used to bind the Port Authority to these informal dwellers. Eviction is the overwhelming worry for all residents of *Balur Math*. Their relationship to the local authority is also problematic. One of the interviewees (whose three-room house we conducted the interview in) is a community political leader from the ruling party. When problems occur in *Balur Math*, her and other community leaders interact with the sub district chairman rather than the Mayor who is not from the ruling party. The three women describe their neighbourhood as functioning "like a family", with neighbours supporting each other financially, with food and in domestic labour. Thinking about the future, the political leader hopes her children (one boy and one girl) will own land, have legal jobs (rather than informal jobs) and trees around their home in the future. Another of the interviewees who rarely leaves *Balur Math*, dreams that her two sons will become religious leaders. While the youngest interviewee (aged 21) dreams that her school aged daughter will become a teacher someday, she explained that she does not have the financial security to make this a reality.



Fig. 4. *Balur Math*, informal settlement in Mongla.
Source: Hanna A Ruszczyk

their cities: land tenure, fresh drinking water supplies (Mongla), paying for school supplies to enable their children's education, secure employment. Residents, stakeholders and government officials in both cities spoke fondly of their cities and said repeatedly that they "liked" or "loved" their city. Subjectively, resident participants in the study found their respective cities to be liveable, on their terms, with desire for certain changes.

While Noapara and Mongla currently face a range of issues (basic infrastructure, livelihood security and environmental risks), the overall impression from the empirical work is that these cities are livable and loveable in the *now* for their residents because they are small enough for citizens to make do with the resources provided by some urbanization combined with a proximity to the natural resources of the rural. For example, in Mongla, backyard and communal water ponds answer both food security and water supply concerns (even if imperfectly). In Noapara, an NGO called *Nabo Digantha Sanstha*, provides cows to households, with a similar intention of enabling greater food security. Residents in both cities engage in urban agriculture primarily to grow vegetables or fruits for household consumption (see survey results in Ruszczyk et al., 2020). Yet with the percentage of total income going to food already more than 50 % for the majority of residents (middle income and informal settlement residents) engaged in the survey in both cities and two thirds reflecting that they have no savings, liveability on food security and livelihood levels is evidently objectively precarious.

The findings in the COVID lockdown research of 2020 indicated the complexities and difficulties arising in a crisis affecting income and livelihood (Ruszczyk, Rahman et al., 2021). The support from the local government and other sources was essential to ensuring residents in both cities were able to cope through the initial lockdown. So while there was a strong sense in both cities of community and residents working strategically across formal and informal resources, urban and agrarian affordances to create urban vitality in Monga and Noapara, this vitality is tenuous. What do we mean by this in terms of liveability and how it worked as a measure for urban vitality in the two cities? Our 2019 study gave a sense of how Mongla and Noapara residents were active in making their cities liveable (in their terms) by working through networked relationality to respond to their everyday difficulties. This gave an indication of the cities' relative vitality: the cities' operational, relational networks responding successfully to everyday difficulties, keeping the cities lively and functioning (again, in the residents' terms). Yet the 2020 lockdown research revealed the precarity of this vitality, when in the face of a sudden, major crisis the residents could not sustain their actions and access to affordances for making their city liveable (in their terms). The relational network that indicated and supported an urban vitality in Mongla and Noapara was under pressure and the cities had less capacity for vitality.

With a few differences, both cities face significant potential changes, some planned and others unpredictable and potentially definable as crises. Natural hazards are an ongoing concern with two cyclone seasons annually and both the damage and potential flooding they can cause. Cyclone Amphan caused damage during the pandemic lockdown on 20 May 2020 in both Mongla and Noapara. Whether planned as part of the 'Migrant Friendly Cities' campaign or occurring through capitalist urbanization, both cities will continue to see an influx of migration from other parts of the country. Whether the urban infrastructural support in both cities can adequately support this influx seems unlikely without significant state or institutional intervention. Similarly, the scaled up industry that seems inevitable in both cities, is also likely to extend beyond the bounds of the residents' networked relationality that currently gives the cities their particular vitality and the residents' their current experiences of liveability.

The national government's economic strategy for the country includes large-scale EPZs throughout the country with plans for Mongla's EPZ to expand much further into agricultural land adjacent to the city, creating thousands of low paid jobs, the majority of which will be for women. This state planned industrialization and urbanization of Mongla may make the city as whole more economically powerful, but with individual jobs at low pay, it is not going to significantly increase economic power for residents of the city as individuals. Poor and working class residents may find greater job security, but their earning is unlikely to be significant enough to resource them to make the changes in their life worlds that they desire. Furthermore, what will industrialization and urbanization mean for the tenuous vitality the residents of the city now are providing as they live in and make their current liveable city? It seems unlikely that the puzzled together rainwater harvesting systems, ponds for fishing and pleasures of the natural environment will survive, let alone support, a large scale and fast industrialization process and escalating labouring population. Even without rapid, planned urbanization, climate change accelerations in salinity are going to make potable water an increasing concern in Mongla and, again, one in which the ingenuity of residents is only going to go so far without significant resource and infrastructural provision from the state or development agencies.

Owing to employment opportunities at the EPZ and the port, Mongla was already attracting migrants from different parts of the country which we anticipated would only increase if the planned industrial developments were to materialise. Furthermore, the then under construction (and recently completed) Padma bridge establishing road links between the southern part of the country to the capital Dhaka and other parts of the country meant more business potential for the Mongla port as well as prominence for Mongla. Accessing freshwater as we observed was the foremost challenge facing the residents of Mongla. Already severely stressed especially during the dry season, it was not clear how the additional and new demands for freshwater from industrial development and increased migration will be sourced. This becomes an issue for both the liveability and vitality of the city. Furthermore, land prices within Mongla were already skyrocketing in anticipation of growth suggesting an increase in living costs within the city. We anticipate that these consequences of the anticipated expansion and growth will have adversely affected already marginal communities within the city, in particular those living in informal settlements. Also Mongla being a highly climate-vulnerable city demonstrates how threats from climate change collide with planned economic growth and development. In

[5] While the residents call their neighbourhood *Balur Math*, '*Bosti*' (the word for slum) is used by all other respondents and stakeholders interviewed. Interviewees estimated between 3000 and 7000 people live in the settlement although there is no official data collected according to the government official working on social welfare for the sub district.

many ways it serves as a bellwether of the tensions between adaptation and economic development that coastal cities around the world will face. The ongoing and future transformation in Mongla therefore will be a preview of how the conflict will be negotiated in practice and how it affects the liveability and vitality of small size cities as they morph into the future.

Although there is no clear state plan for urbanization in Noapara, its privately owned industry is only likely to expand, especially given the city's placement as a water, rail, road, intra-national and international transport node. In addition, though it is not getting the same press attention as Mongla as a 'Migrant Friendly City', it is positioned as such in Bangladeshi urban discourse advocating for this solution to displacement (see Khan et al., 2021). The 100,000 day labourers coming into the city for work each day speaks to the ready potential for residential population growth. A few factors recommend Noapara's current vitality as potentially more robust than Mongla's and with capacity for growth and transformation, rather than annihilation, in the face of rapid urbanization and possibly even crises. Having a good supply of fresh water, unthreatened by salinity and working water pipe infrastructure offers a certain sense of stability in this resource and its sustainable urban management. The city is also a geographically unified whole, with a network of roads navigable by motorcars and trucks, unlike Mongla where the old residential town with its roads only wide enough for motorised bicycle 'vans' is separated by the river from the EPZ with its tarred roads and access to the national road inland. As a result of these differences the industrialization of Noapara is more integrated into the urban fabric than in Mongla. Similarly, the formalisation of urban infrastructure is more sophisticated than in Mongla. These existing functions supporting Noapara's vitality are likely to serve an ongoing vitality in the city as it expands. These functions may make a change in residents' experiences of and contributions to liveability more gradual and possibly also more positive. This sense we came to through the research process was felt by resident participants on the ground too and possibly accounts for one participant's bold assessment that "Noapara will be way better in ten years".

Interestingly data from one of the survey's opinion-based questions supports this deduction we make about Mongla's and Noapara's relative urban vital future. Over half the respondents in Noapara agree or strongly agree there is a good future for their children in Noapara, whereas in Mongla, the percentage is lower, coming in at 39 %. Yet Noapara's piped water, roads and sustainably integrated industry is only going to remain functional with ongoing investment at state/local government/private entity/development agency levels. The liveability of Noapara and what it suggests for the cities' vitality now and in the future is not that much more predictably secure than in Mongla.

This review of liveability from residents' perspectives in Noapara and Mongla raises various questions and issues of concern in terms of liveability, vitality and how the two concepts might work together productively. First, liveability approached in the way we did in Mongla and Noapara does give a good composite picture of each city's vitality in the sense of how residents negotiate social processes, power relations, and access to resources that shape their everyday living and how they participate in making the fabric of their cities' through cultural, institutional and material structures. Furthermore assessments can be made for how the existing vitality in each city might support and be supported by rapid urbanization and be robust in the face of crises such as natural hazard induced disasters and pandemics. From here, the question arises: what are the steps to be taken if residents' opinions and experiences of liveability, and the nature of urban vitality it produces, are to be given precedence? In the push for significant economic development in coastal Bangladeshi cities, residents' views of how their cities are liveable now and how they would like them to be liveable in the future, the nature of urban vitality these experiences and opinions articulate, may well go unaccounted for. In this situation, hazards, migration and degradation of natural resources may not be managed to sustain these cities' current standards of liveability as experienced by their residents and the cities' may lose their current, particular quality of vitality. Stock-taking liveability now in the way this research did offers the potential for a more resident-inclusive planning for city futures, which is to say it is a resource for working with and expanding the cities' existing, resident-centred vitality. An *ongoing* stock-taking of liveability according to residents' experiences has the potential to facilitate a long-term collaboration between residents and the key players in national, regional and city planning for resident-centred urban vitality.

However, without support through policy making and governance systems for actioning policy, stocktaking liveability to assess vitality may become only a recurring checking in with city dwellers capacity to make do within greater systems (economic, political) that do not prioritise them as a source of urban vitality. This special issue's editors note that the foundations for vitalism are always there: with the presence of human beings from different walks of life, capable of building relationships between each other, despite or because or irrespective of their differences, yet inclusion is the key ingredient for the vitalism of a city (Special Issue Editors, 2022). By this we understand, and advocate for here, that vitalism becomes a robust and positively transformative power in urbanity only when residents as sources of the vitalism are included in policy and actions that radically shape cities.

Two other factors argue compellingly for the usefulness of the Mongla and Noapara liveability study in assessing each city's vitality. First, the evolving national strategy to support migration to regional cities of Bangladesh requires greater development of understanding Bangladesh's smaller cities and their 'absorption capacity', particularly if liveable urban experiences are to be enabled for current and future residents, and existing vitalism is to be leveraged for ongoing, vital urban growth. Second, the majority of residents who participated in the research do not desire to leave their cities, cities that according to measures such as access to utilities and basic services can be considered barely 'liveable'. Yet the residents find their cities liveable as their aspirations and future hopes for their lives and their children's lives in these cities stand testament to.

On the one hand it is important to acknowledge that there are likely many underlying factors contributing to residents' contentment with Mongla and Noapara which we might broadly term lack of exposure to other possibilities for urban living. Yet our research team's sense was that residents' investments in their cities also came from knowing and valuing the affordances of their current cities in contrast to Bangladeshi big city life. The gaps in the utilities and basic services do not limit residents' liveable experiences of their city, in the way they might in bigger cities. As an illustrative example, one middle-income family in Mongla spoke of aspirations to move to a gated housing estate in Dhaka. With sufficient affluence, Dhaka can afford an attractive degree of liveability. However for any lower-income Mongla and Noapara residents, they are aware of the realities of big city living in informal settlements, more cramped than their current accommodation and the loss of all possibilities of water harvesting, fishing, small-scale agriculture and short commute distances that fill the gaps in their cities' current utilities and basic services. Furthermore, they would lose existing forms of social solidarity and networks of care that they have spent time over the years cultivating.

Our exploration of liveability of overlooked regional cities points to an informed desire to reside in these cities and residents' investment in their cities' vitality. This is important knowledge for policy makers, human geographers and urbanists in the context of Bangladesh as well as LMIC cities more broadly: that in these case studies residents do not long to relocate to bigger cities or the capital of the country. Thinking through smallness, liveability and vitality shows us the value of understanding cities in terms of their relationality rather than their population or geographic area size. Through attention to relationality we understand how urbanity is made and experienced by residents and decision makers (the city's liveability). In turn we might gain insights into how do a city's peopled relational networks respond to difficulties and crises and give the city a quality of aliveness as opposed to embattledness (the

city's vitality).

6. Conclusion

This paper is not introducing a new line of inquiry strictly for the sake of urban theoretical discussion, rather we are trying to think through how to use the concept of liveability in a productive, sustained way and link it to the concept of vitality through showcasing relational, multiple, layered experiences of urbanizing small cities and thereby contributing to understanding complex realities of cities in LMICs. The predominant sense from research participants in Mongla and Noapara that they want to live in their cities and find them liveable on their terms, argues for an urban vitality in these two LMIC, small cities that should matter to public policy in Bangladesh and urban discourse more broadly. Academically overlooked cities, small regional cities that are rapidly urbanizing and changing at pace offer the opportunity to learn from residents and local government officials before they possibly morph into large/(r) unmanage(d/able) cities. The gaze of scholars and urban planners should be here, on the multitude of small cities around the world where people are living their lives with varying degrees of liveability, aspirations for their liveability in the future and contributing to the networked realisation of particular urban vitalities. We argue that this mixed methods reading of liveability (rather than a strictly quantifiable, or 'objective' interpretation) offers a small but valuable contribution to challenging hegemonic urban liveability discourse and to understanding the complex foundations of vitalism.

In terms of contributing to productive dialogue on historically overlooked smaller cities, resident-centred research on liveability in the way we propose, is a continuous project. Mapping how residents' experiences of liveability shifts over time would start to build a body of knowledge to theorise the trajectories of regional, small cities and how they might be more constructively supported for a holistic promotion of liveability and the vitality it indicates in small cities. However, we would also propose that this study's way of working with liveability and using it as an indicator of vitality has applications beyond the context of Bangladesh or LMIC small cities discourse. Resident-centred views and experiences of liveability and what these say about a city's vitality, may be of use in many urban contexts to assess cities' 'absorption capacity' for influx of residents or their potential to sustain economic-driven growth with an attentiveness to liveability for all residents and the vitality they generate or to support residents' desires to remain in their current city with hope of greater liveability and an ongoing, networked contribution to their city's vitality. Cities or areas within cities that have the potential for closer relations between residents and sources of formal power, close relations within neighbourhoods with a strong sense of mutual aid and support, a middle class that is defined not by income but by education, may all find the considerations of liveability and vitality from this research in Mongla and Noapara valuable.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

The authors were all involved in the paper creation
The authors all contributed to the production of the paper.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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