

Research Trip to Dhaka, Bangladesh

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I recently finished a short research trip to Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh) for a follow-up project of my PhD, which aims to understand the effectiveness of industrial relocation in improving the environmental performance of polluting firms in developing countries. The overarching aim was to find out to what extent the decision to relocate the leather tanning industry has been successful in Bangladesh. I gathered the empirical data from Hemayetpur, Savar (25 kilometres to the northwest of Dhaka) where the tannery sector recently relocated to from Hazaribagh. I collected data through observation and semi-structured interviews with the tannery owners. In particular, I addressed the following two questions: (1) How were the tannery owners responding to that relocation decision? and (2) What were the challenges they were facing in the new industrial area?

The initial analysis of my data suggests that the tannery owners were facing a number of challenges in the new industrial area, such as gas and electricity crisis, mismanagement of the central effluent treatment plant, and poor management of the overall site. Although the tanneries were finally relocating to the new location and were expecting to start production soon, the owners were still not convinced of the effectiveness of the central chemical treatment facility and of the stability of the gas and electricity supplies. As one of the owners interviewed put it: “the pollution will not stop in the new location; maybe, it will be even worse ... the government has just displaced the pollution from one place to another”.

Further analysis suggests that the relocation decision was materialised without enough consultation with the tannery owners which led to some conflicts in the latter stages. The government initially assured the tannery owners that the relocation process would be handled as efficiently as possible and that the new location would be ready by 2012 with all modern chemical treatment facilities. It also promised the public and the environmental pressure groups that the Hazaribagh area would be reclaimed to build houses and that the Buriganga River would be made pollution-free. Unfortunately, none of those promises had been fulfilled as of July 2018, the time when the fieldwork for the current study was completed. The new industrial area in Savar was not fully ready for the tanneries to move there and start production. There was evidence of corruption in allocating plots in the new location, as only a handful of the owners had secured plots in their preferred locations, whereas more than one-thirds of the tanneries had not even been assigned a plot.

My initial plan was to select tanneries from a government database published in 2013, but due to serious security concerns, gaining access to local businesses without any reference was impossible. Therefore, I had to access almost all the tanneries through informal networking (i.e. with the help of friends, former colleagues and local consultants). Overall, the trip was very useful, both for my own research and my personal development. I gained fascinating insights on the day-to-day operations of indigenous factories in Bangladesh.

Travelling around the Savar area was challenging, especially due to severe traffic congestion in Dhaka city during the weekdays. Moreover, because of poor public transport facility, I had to use private transport to commute from my house to the research location, which was extremely expensive. I am truly grateful to the University for generously funding my research trip and I would also like to encourage others to make every effort to apply for the Royal Holloway Travel Award.