



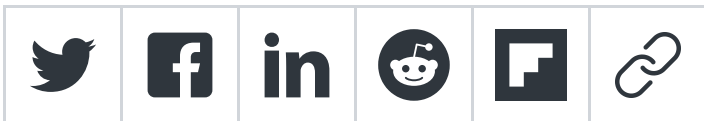
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# Bangladesh influencers push tree planting to fight record heat

As a heatwave grips Bangladesh, social media influencers call for tree planting but experts say solving heat problem is complex.



Thomson Reuters Foundation

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With heat-related deaths mounting, the tarmac on roads melting and desperate people gathering in mosques to pray for an end to the deadly heatwave ravaging Bangladesh, the call went out from cyberspace: plant more trees.

The worst heatwave in seven decades is particularly unbearable in the capital Dhaka with temperatures reaching as high as 43 degrees Celsius (109 Fahrenheit) in a crowded city that has been [steadily stripped](#) of the trees, lakes and ponds that once offered its residents relief and shelter.



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Now social media influencers are urging their followers to plant trees in a bid to make the city, and country, more liveable during heatwaves, which scientists say are becoming more frequent, more severe and longer because of climate change.

In late April, Peaya Jannatul, a model, actress and lawyer, [asked](#) her 1.6 million followers on Facebook to go out and plant 10 trees each.

A student group linked to the ruling Awami League party launched a [campaign](#) on April 21 to plant 500,000 trees in just 10 days, while a popular cleric [urged](#) his 4.3 million Facebook followers to donate money to plant 300,000 trees.

[Green Savers](#), which allows people to sponsor tree planting across 22 districts, is helping translate the calls for tree planting into action.

“We are seeing a surge of interest in our [tree sponsorship programme](#),” said Ahsan Rony, the CEO of Green Savers, which also trains gardeners.

**Planting trees to cool cities is common sense, but you need to combine that with many other factors - and we need deeper studies to plan out optimal actions.**

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**Md Imran Hosen, postdoctoral researcher, University of New South Wales**

A sponsor donates less than US\$2 to plant a tree at a poor family's home and can then digitally track the tree and see how the host family is benefitting. Since 2012, 66,000 trees have been planted across the country under the programme, Rony said.

Photographer Mahmud Rahman has harnessed social media to encourage others to help him turn a rubbish-filled space near his home beside Dhaka's Gulshan Lake into a verdant oasis bright with colourful flowers.

Through his [Facebook page](#), Rahman encourages other residents and visitors to volunteer to help plant 50-60 varieties of plants and herbs along the kilometre-long Gulshan-2 lakeside.

Treena Bishop, a US citizen living in the neighbourhood, was one of the volunteers.

"This is a great example of how the community is contributing to tree plantation in Dhaka... and I hope everybody should know how it works so that they can follow it," she said.

### **The right tree at the right time**

The heatwave scorching Bangladesh is taking a heavy toll [across the region](#) - tens of people have died in several countries, [schools have been closed](#) and authorities are warning of forest fires, heat stroke and dehydration.

The U.N. World Meteorological Organization said this month that Asia is warming faster than the global average and was the most disaster-

hit region by climate-related hazards last year.

Trees can help **mitigate** heatwaves by cooling cities but Dhaka is ill-prepared. Rapid, unplanned growth as migrants flocked to the city, sometimes to escape the effects of climate change along the coast and rivers, saw trees being cut down to make space for concrete buildings and other development.

And environmental activists warn that planting new trees, especially in the searing heat of summer, is not always the best answer in this mega-city of 23 million people.

“It does not make sense to plant new saplings every year if we cannot protect mature trees with large canopy that give shade and shelter to not only heat-stricken people but also to the city’s birds, beasts, and insects,” said Amirul Rajiv, a photographer and activist who organised a movement last year to protect hundreds of trees in the city’s Dhanmondi neighbourhood.

It is also important to choose the right trees, said Mohammad Zashim Uddin, professor of botany at the University of Dhaka, noting that non-native trees like eucalyptus or acacia can harm local biodiversity.

City authorities have put forward plans governing land use through to 2035, including proposals for 55 new parks around water bodies and 14 eco-parks to protect biodiversity.

Environmental experts say the authorities should tap the knowledge of specialists to draw up a coordinated approach.

“We need to have clear annual goals (saying) by what percentage we can increase green space in Dhaka, and with what trees,” said botany professor Zashim Uddin.

Md Imran Hosen, a postdoctoral researcher at University of New South Wales, Australia, said the government should use water management to cool the city, while people could also play their part by creating rooftop gardens or installing vertical greening on tall buildings.

“Planting trees to cool cities is common sense, but you need to combine that with many other factors - and we need deeper studies to plan out optimal actions,” he said.

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