



SIGHTINGS

A HEAVY BURDEN

TWELVE BILLION. That's the number of bricks that Bangladesh produces each year. Unfortunately, the bricks are important not only for what they build but for what they destroy: lives, families, and the environment. The industry employs about 1.2 million people, many of them women and children who endure extreme conditions working at the nation's eight thousand kilns.

But you don't have to toil at a kiln to suffer from its effects. In the city of Dhaka, for example, where the photo above was taken, kilns burn car tires, low-grade coal, and firewood, spewing into the air dangerous pollutants—ten times the maximum amount set by the World Health Organization. The tiny size of the particles makes them particularly hazardous to health. In fact, in Dhaka alone, an estimated fifteen thousand people annually die prematurely partially due to the poisonous effects of the area's 1,200 brick kilns, which makes Dhaka among the world's most polluted cities.

Meanwhile, half of the Bangladesh's kilns operate illegally and do not comply with (largely unenforced) environmental standards. The 350 tons of wood that each kiln burns a year are chopped from the country's forests, which shrink by 2.5 million hectares annually. At this rate, the forests will be gone in twenty-five years.

Most of the kilns still use 150-year-old technology developed during a time when saving money trumped saving the environment. It takes about twenty-three tons of coal to produce 100,000 bricks in Bangladesh, against only eight tons in China—China! But things are changing: The country is slowly adopting cleaner kilns that emit less smoke and demand less energy. As a result, the industry is gaining efficiency and reducing its negative environmental and social impact. Brick by brick, Bangladesh is building a more sustainable future. —VADIM LIBERMAN