

## VI. DHAKA CITY: SOME GENERAL CONCERNS

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**A** ccording to a recent UN data sheet, the Dhaka metropolis, currently the 22nd largest urban agglomeration in the world, will be the 5th largest, with a population of 19.5 million, by 2015.

Few cities in recent history have experienced such rapid population growth as Dhaka. Those who have lived in this city since 1951 have witnessed its phenomenal transformation into a megacity. From a large town of only 335,928 in 1951, it is now a megacity of over 9 million. The average annual growth rate of Dhaka City's population during the last three decades has been over 7 percent, doubling its population each decade. The rate of growth continues to be high even now, at nearly 6 percent annually. The nature of Dhaka's urbanism is quite unique, a peculiar mix of rural and urban traits and attitudes.

The city's area has also expanded. From only 73 square km in 1951, Dhaka now encompasses 1,530 square km. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics has officially called this extended metropolitan area a megacity in the 1991 census. Previously it was referred to as a Statistical Metropolitan Area. Megacity Dhaka is an agglomeration of Dhaka City Corporation, four other municipalities (Narayanganj, Tongi, Gazipur, and Savar), several cantonments, and a large number of rural settlements, stretches of agricultural lands, wetlands, rivers, and even part of the Modhupur forest.

*From a large town of less than 350,000 in 1951, Dhaka is now a megacity of over 9 million.*

The gross density of population in the megacity area is only 6,000 persons/square km, but this figure hides the reality to a large extent. Less than 40 percent of the megacity area has been urbanized. The population density in urbanized areas is about 14,000/square km. This is quite high, especially when most development is horizontal. By 2015, Dhaka's projected population of 19.5 million will fill most of the designated metropolitan area as a result of urban migration, extensions in the peripheries, and fresh urbanization. DCC comprises only 24 percent of the megacity, a total of 360 square km, but within this small area it has to accommodate a population of nearly 6 million, plus another million or so daily commuters.

Although the focus of this paper is the area within the DCC limits, we cannot forget about the close interrelationship of DCC with the other municipalities, or with the surrounding region within the megacity. Indeed, Dhaka's functional hinterland is the whole of Bangladesh.

The three basic premises with which planners and builders of cities normally deal are economy, efficiency, and beauty. A city should be a human settlement that is highly efficient, economically productive, and visually attractive. Today, an ideal city should demonstrate equity in access to resources and services, provide scope for democratic participation, and be environmentally and culturally sustainable. Unfortunately, DCC does not present a good track record in any of these parameters.

### **OPPORTUNITIES IN DHAKA**

For the millions of rural poor in Bangladesh, Dhaka remains an attractive destination. Compared to any other place in the country, it offers the best chance for economic opportunity. Anyone can make some kind of a living in Dhaka. It rarely takes more than two or three days to start earning. The kinship

network among the migrant poor is the major key to this phenomenon.

Many foreign investors select Dhaka over other cities in the region. They do this with their eyes wide open, for good reasons. Some of the main considerations of the investors are the macro-economic stabilization in Bangladesh over the years, the abundant and inexpensive supply of land, and the improvements in the transportation and shipping systems. Other factors are the following.

### *A Great Pool of Cheap Labor*

Though mostly unskilled, Dhaka's seemingly unlimited supply of cheap labor, especially women, has in recent years been a boon for export-oriented industrial growth and other activities. The working class in Dhaka is remarkable for its ingenuity, innovation, and technology adaptation. The poor and other classes have demonstrated enormous capacity for small trade and commercial entrepreneurship.

The informal sectors provide employment to more than 60 percent of the labor force. They keep industries and workshops running and 30-year-old vehicles moving. Importantly, they can speak English.

### *Cultural Environment*

In spite of a low literacy rate, the population of Dhaka is culturally very active. Few cities in the developing world can boast of regular major international art events (such as Dhaka's Asian Art Biennial), open air poetry sessions, street plays, musical performances, book fairs, and so on. Dhaka is the home of significant social development innovators like Mohammed Yunus, F.H. Abed, and Zafrullah Chowdhury. All this has economic as well as social implications.

### *Homogeneity and Tolerance*

Dhaka's population is racially, ethnically, and linguistically quite homogenous. Compared to many other megacities, or even small metropolitan areas, Dhaka is unusually free from racial, religious, or ethnic violence. Civil strife is limited to political or economic problems.

### *Moral Values and Kinship Networks*

Dhaka's traditional value system is still very strong and helps keep society comparatively free from many modern urban vices, including AIDS. Family ties mitigate unemployment of educated youth, while the kinship network provides urban adaptation support to poor migrants.

### *Democratic Spirit*

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Bangladeshis are politically conscious people. They fought quite recently for freedom and democracy. Dhaka has always been at the forefront of such movements. The democratic process is in fairly good shape at the national level. At the city level too, democracy is in action, though not sufficiently strongly. Few cities in the developing world have a directly elected mayor.

### *Public Tolerance and the Flexibility of Rules*

The authorities (DCC as well as Central Government agencies) exhibit high levels of tolerance in implementing their rules and regulations. Although there are negative implications of this, the positive aspect is that because of such tolerance the poor can make a living in the city. Even traffic is often less congested because of flexibility. The traffic police, for example, frequently allow rickshaw drivers to proceed through red traffic lights at convenient times.

### *An Active Civil Society Emerging*

Bureaucracy has been identified repeatedly as a strong deterrent to progress in this country. An inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy and a weak local government cannot be made to work without pressure from the people. The role of a strong civil society is thus extremely important.

Human rights groups are active, women's groups are more vocal than ever, slum dwellers are organizing themselves with support from NGOs, professional associations are taking an interest in Dhaka's problems and governance, environmental action groups are forming coalitions and taking authorities to court. The day may not be too far when city authorities will be truly accountable for their actions (or lack thereof).

Communities are also initiating action programs to improve environmental, economic, and social conditions in the city. These developments are encouraging.

Given these positive scenarios, the responsibility of preparing Dhaka for the future lies squarely with the Government, which must take the other players in the urban environment — the private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders — into partnership and confidence.

## **ISSUES AND CONCERNS**

Like any other city in the developing world experiencing massive population growth, Dhaka's problems range from the mundane to the complex. These are discussed in the following sections.

### *Infrastructure Facilities*

Dhaka is an inefficient city. Its infrastructure is inadequate, weak, and unreliable. Traffic congestion is one manifestation of inefficient urban management.

Many roads are partially under hawkers' control. Journeys between one's residence and one's workplace have become longer, more expensive, and more hazardous. Public toilets are so few that no more than 2 percent of adult males can attempt their use and virtually none exist for females.

The environmental condition of the city has deteriorated significantly. Mosquitoes are an unsolved problem. In most areas piped water is unsafe to drink directly. Almost everywhere the air is polluted. Noise pollution is high. Visual pollution is on the increase with commercialization of municipal and other spaces. Fire is a common hazard in the city's slum areas. Festering garbage reeks in many places. Tree coverage is on the wane.

### *Delivery of Basic Services*

The provision of basic utility services is both in short supply and irregular. The allocation or distribution of these facilities is unequal. Fifty percent of Dhaka's population is poor, earning a monthly household income of Tk3,500 or less. These people cannot afford some of these services. Access to electricity, safe water, sanitary latrines, and gas is far from universal, and sometimes access to these services is accomplished through illegal means.

Educational facilities are not of acceptable quality for all social groups. There is strong spatial disparity among schools. Expensive schools have received disproportionately more private investment. Schools for the middle class are crowded and those for the poor are deficient of teachers, space, and facilities.

Health facilities have similar problems of social and spatial inequality. The level of service in public hospitals is low while in private ones it is high.

Recreational facilities are even worse. Even upper and middle class children are deprived of open playgrounds and other recreational facilities. Poor

children have nothing but streets to play on. Slum children who live near public parks are better off. Women have also few places to go, unlike 50 years ago when there was a park exclusively for ladies.

### *Waste Management*

Waste disposal is inadequate and inefficient, causing health hazards. In some areas, there has been some improvement, thanks to community action. Neighborhoods or settlements of the poor, particularly slums and squatter areas, are hardly ever served by DCC, except when implementation of the Slum Improvement Project is overseen by an international organization.

Drainage is inadequate and inefficient, although some improvement has been made during the present administration. The Buriganga River, once the lifeline of Dhaka, has become a polluted drainage channel.

### *Land and Housing*

Land for housing and other urban development purposes is in extremely short supply. As a result, marginal lands need to be developed at great cost. Within DCC, land for housing at market price is affordable to no more than 5 percent of the city's households. Even in locations outside DCC, land is beyond the means of more than 80 percent of the city's population.

Ownership of urban land is highly unequal, with only 30 percent of the population controlling ownership or access to 80 percent of the residential land, while the other 70 percent have access to the remaining 20 percent. The Land Reform Committee of 1983, headed by Mr. A.Z.M. Obaidullah Khan, for the first time had set an urban land ceiling, but this recommendation was never approved or implemented. As a result, inequality is increasing.

*An estimated 30-40 percent of Dhaka's population live in slums, squatter settlements, on the streets, or in other places that do not qualify as habitable shelter.*

### *Employment*

Employment opportunities have increased significantly over the years, both in the formal and informal sectors. However, wages are too small to enable the earners to lead decent lives. Also, most laborers are unskilled.

### *Law and Order*

The law and order situation in the city is bad and has become worse in certain areas. Social crime and violence are common and sometimes these do not even make news. Terrorism and extortion are common in business areas and on school campuses.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL CONSTRAINTS**

The primary reason most problems have not been solved or have become even worse is the weak leadership of the city's administration, management, and service delivery organizations. Inadequate or weak city planning activity and the poor implementation of plan recommendations are also major causes of failure.

### *Dhaka City Corporation*

The principal organization responsible for city management and welfare of its citizens is DCC. This organization lacks vision commensurate to the size and character of Dhaka. The people in this organization do not appreciate the complexities of a city system. DCC is weak administratively, managerially, and financially. It is also inadequately staffed.

Although an elected body, DCC is not sufficiently transparent and accountable to the people.

It has not been able to mobilize public participation in any of its major development programs, even in small area projects. DCC staff are not known for their honesty. DCC also suffers from a series of other institutional problems: it has limited authority and no role in city planning and physical development, the most essential aspects of urban development.

### *Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakhya*

RAJUK is Dhaka's physical planning and development organization. This function was part of DCC's mandate until 1955, when the Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT), RAJUK's former identity, was created as a special development body. DIT drafted Dhaka's first master plan for urban development in 1959. The plan was approved and partially implemented, but even this partial implementation took nearly 40 years against the stipulated 20. Gradually RAJUK has become a very weak, inefficient organization. Some people even accuse it of being a center of corruption and as an organization that serves only the interests of the rich and powerful.

Although the DIT Master Plan had lived its life by 1978, it is still being used today. In 1980, the Planning Commission undertook a full-scale planning exercise for the Dhaka Metropolitan Area through a British consulting firm. The product was quite good, but it never received Government approval and thus was not utilized. Finally, a new 20-year plan, known as the Structure Plan/Master Plan, was approved in August 1997, but its implementation has not been taken up in full earnest. At present RAJUK has only a skeletal planning department, with no more than a half dozen planners for its 1,530 square km of territory and millions of people.

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### *Other Organizations and the Coordination Problem*

Organizations like WASA, DESA, Titas Gas, and T&T Board also provide significant services. However, none of these organizations has the capacity to serve either the whole DCC territory or even most of the citizens. They all suffer from serious institutional limitations.

Enormous problems exist in coordination and interaction among DCC and other governmental stakeholders. An effort to solve the problems of coordination was made by forming a Coordination Committee. The Minister for Local Government and the Mayor convened the Committee and the membership included the heads of 16 development and service delivery agencies. Despite all these luminaries, the Committee has failed to achieve the desired results. Since it was initiated in October 1996, it has made only marginal impact. Its only significant achievement has been the smoothening of the construction of the Gulistan underpass and clearance of water clogging and stagnation in some spots.

Meanwhile, the Minister for Housing and Public Works has also formed an Advisory Committee to advise the ministries about city planning, building codes, and architecture. This committee is composed of engineers, architects, city planners, an artist, and a historian.

Neither the Coordination Committee nor the Highways and Public Works Ministry's Advisory Committee has a single representative from the private sector, an NGO, or other component of civil society.

The primary need is to develop a workable coordination system or advisory committee for DCC. There should not be more than one such advisory committee in the city. The Coordination Committee should be headed by the Mayor, while a highly respected person from outside the Government and DCC should head the Advisory Council, but with adequate understanding of the urban system and its governance.

## FUTURE OF DHAKA

Dhaka will remain the most important urban agglomeration in the country and one of the largest in the world. Given the political system, economic situation, and environmental condition, it is impossible to restrict migration into Dhaka, and therefore the city is likely to continue to grow rapidly for the foreseeable future. There are many other issues to be tackled that concern the future of Dhaka. A number of them are reflected in recently adopted policies and plans (Box 1). We should carefully review these documents and declare our total commitment to implement them. If we fail to do this, we have failed Dhaka.

Finally, as indicated earlier, the planning and development process of Dhaka (or any other city) cannot reach its desired objectives without direct and total participation of its residents. Equally important is efficient city administration, including planning, development, and service delivery.

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***Box 1: Existing DCC Plans and Policies***

- 1989 Dhaka Mahanagari Bastee Samasya Niroshan Committee Report.
- 1990 Paura Commission Report.
- 1991 Task Force Report on Urbanization prepared at the behest of the Planning Advisor. It stressed:
- deconcentrating Dhaka's population by accelerating growth of existing satellite towns and establishing new satellites,
  - discouraging new investments in DCC area, and
  - improving transportation between the central city and other towns in the vicinity.
- 1993 National Housing Policy recommended strong Government support for housing for the poor and facilitating private sector housing of higher income groups.
- 1994 Dhaka Land Management Project.
- 1996 National Habitat Report provided detailed action plans on various aspects of rural and urban development.
- 1997 RAJUK Structure Plan/Master Plan provided comprehensive plans for development of the megacity area. Link roads, bypass roads, satellite towns, and improvement of infrastructure were proposed. Most important, the plan proposed the adoption of a local area action planning process with participation of community members.