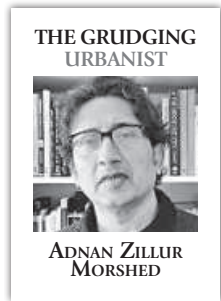


# What makes a city inspiring?



undergoing accelerated urbanisation and envisioning the next phase of their social, political, and national evolution. As experts demonstrate, cities have become not only the drivers of economy but also sites of national soul-searching.

I answered the students this way: a city is most inspiring when it is fair to all its inhabitants. A city is fair when it creates a culture of social justice across all its domains. A city ensures social justice when it offers equal opportunities to all its people.

But fairness, social justice, and equal opportunity are abstract ideas. How does one institute them in the physical conditions of the city? Is it possible to transform the abstract idea of social justice into something that we can visualise, feel, and experience in the spaces of the city?

As I pondered these questions, I recalled what the American poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou once said: “I always knew from that moment, from the time I found myself at home in that little segregated library in the South, all the way up until I walked up the steps of the New York City library, I always felt, in any town, if I can get to a library, I’ll be OK. It really helped me as a child, and that never left me.”

A public library in the city—accessible to all, irrespective of their economic and social backgrounds—could be one of the most poignant symbols of a city that values social justice for all. Maya Angelou’s racial discrimination in a segregated library in the American South could be mitigated by the robust publicness of the New York City library, where she didn’t have to face the inhumanity of racism. She could walk up the steps of this library and feel that she could enter it without having to pass any discriminatory barriers. Angelou provided a most incisive physical portrayal of social justice in an urban condition with this simplest statement: “... in any town, if I can get to a library, I’ll be OK.” The feeling that you can access any opportunity and facility in the city without any social

As part of a class assignment last semester a group of architecture students asked me a question: what makes a city inspiring? This set me thinking. It could very well be a policy question, particularly for countries that are



and economic hurdle is a monumentally empowering condition. When that feeling is pervasive among the city’s people of all ages, economic and social classes, gender, ethnicities, and physical abilities, a city is fair and practices social justice as its moral foundation.

As the year ends, I have been thinking about the “fairness” measure of cities in Bangladesh. As I go around in Dhaka I keep wondering, is this city fair to all its people? Is this city guided by a basic philosophy of social justice? Again, fairness and social justice are abstract notions, and often ignored quietly and cleverly as left-leaning obstacles to a neoliberal worldview, typically rigged to favour the privileged and the powerful. But we need to decide how we develop our cities and what kind of humanity we institute in them.

This is important for two main reasons. First, the middle-income status that we seek will be meaningful and sustainable only when that status is fair and achieved not at the expense of a vast majority of people. Second, around the world today, city administrators tasked with creating liveable cities are increasingly concerned with how to embody fairness in the city’s planning. Liveability is not guaranteed by Smart City and its techno-glitz and seamless mobility. A Smart City could be liveable, provided it is fair to all its people, not just to its power-wielding CEOs and corporate executives.

So, I ask: How do we qualitatively measure something as abstract as fairness in the city’s infrastructure, roads, footpaths, buildings, water sources, public transportation, green spaces, shops, and public places? Let me offer an example before I address my key contention today.

Consider public transportation from a fairness or social justice angle. Are we offering safe and gender-friendly mobility options for women in the public domain? If not, we are perpetuating patriarchy by means of public transportation, complicit in the creation of a biased social system that is inherently unfair.

For me the most glaring case of unfairness in the city resides in the way we define, confine, and manage poverty in our cities. It is unhelpful that in Bangladesh urban poverty is still largely understood through the lens of slum studies. To frame urban poverty in terms of the inadequacy of urban amenities (such as toilets and piped water supplies) in slums alone is to ignore a deeper social question: What is society’s attitude towards the “poor”? It is important to revisit this age-old question to disrupt the cycle of urban poverty in a sustainable way.

Urban economists, social analysts, urban planners, and others produce a vast body of data on poverty in cities. But the big data can also overwhelm our compassion, our humane instincts. Any empirical study of the poor must be coupled with a fundamental ethical position that the poor is not the Other. The poor shouldn’t be abstracted as a social category—a binary opposite of the bourgeois self—to be quarantined for research and experimentation. While empirical research is essential, without human compassion it bureaucratises the concept of poverty and dehumanises the poor.

It is not that empirical knowledge of the poor is unnecessary. But without compassion as public policy, big data keeps on calcifying the poor as a category, one that is isolated from any decision-making power structures. Without

any real agency, this category is on perpetual life support. In his work on gender justice, Amartya Sen argued that real societal progress is made when women’s empowerment takes a strong hold on the public’s ethical imagination. A similar argument could be made in the case of poverty studies. An ethically based view of the poor as fellow citizens, rather than as an objectified research category, is urgently needed for any sustained alleviation of poverty.

It is time policymakers, municipal administrators, and urban planners rethought urban poverty as a problem of social justice, not just as a problem of economic development. The issue of urban poverty should be examined with a bit of moral quandary and introspection into how the class-conscious bourgeoisie defines itself as the opposite of the poor. This very definition constitutes the central problem

*In designing cities in our country, urban planners can begin by acknowledging that urban poverty is, first and foremost, a crisis of social justice. City professionals must debunk the urban mythology that the poor is a closed social group in need of an improved ghetto.*

of urban poverty. The poor must be seen with a human face, not as an abstraction. The problem is that the poor’s social invisibility is very much embedded in how we define poverty as an unrelatable experience of the Other. And, big data tends to preserve the invisibility of the poor.

Let us forget, the idea of poverty has not been static in history. Both the idea and strategies for its relief have changed since the Industrial Revolution and industrial cities grew manifold in the modern era. Consider London, for instance. In the wake of the city’s

intense urbanisation in the 19th century, a highly divisive political and philosophical debate raged about reforming laws related to poor people. At the centre of this vexing debate was this question: would top-down “help” (from the state and wealthy private citizens) diminish the poor’s ability to take personal responsibility? So intense a philosophical discussion was it that even Tocqueville and Hegel followed the English turmoil with much fascination.

The dichotomy of state- and donor-driven top-down strategies of poverty alleviation and empathetic, bottom-up, and activist NGO efforts in capacity building among the poor continues to animate the urban poverty debate. In designing cities in our country, urban planners can begin by acknowledging that urban poverty is, first and foremost, a crisis of social justice. City professionals must debunk the urban mythology that the poor is a closed social group in need of an improved ghetto.

It is important not to forget that the poor are typically stuck in spatial traps, often legitimised through official planning processes. These spatial traps are slums, unsanitary industrial zones, flood-prone river banks, and footpaths. By keeping the poor confined to the urban fringe and hazardous areas, cities often deny them social justice and access to networks of economic mobility. By ghettoising the poor in undesirable, environmentally precarious areas, both cities and capitalistic systems seek to fortify a false sense of social hygiene. To mitigate this problem, urban planners need to see the disenfranchised classes not as the poor but as fellow “social citizens,” who deserve, like anybody else, equitable access to healthcare, housing, education, and economic opportunities. But, at the same time, social citizenship comes with responsibility. All people of the city must accept the basic idea of the greater good—Greeks called it *eunomia* or good order—for the city to function as a fair place.

An inclusive and liveable city treats all its citizens with fairness and humanity. Only when we agree with the moral argument of this hypothesis can we begin to overcome the tyranny of GDP-centric economic philosophies, in which the majority of the people don’t have access to opportunities that cities offer. A just city is the most liveable.

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## PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

# There is more to life than the GDP



“NOT everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.” This old adage is particularly pertinent as we look ahead to

2020 and beyond. Part of the popular backlash against political and business elites may simply be that people feel the elites are not really focused on what matters to them. But while the single-minded obsession with maximising market output and profits is being challenged, a more meaningful replacement is not yet in clear view.

Gross domestic product (GDP) has long been the preeminent metric for measuring the size and success of national economies. It is the key target of economic policy, closely watched by politicians, economists, businesses, and investors. But GDP is also deeply—and increasingly—flawed.

Widely regarded as a reliable and objective benchmark, GDP is actually a complex statistic shaped by a history strewn with errors, unresolved controversies, and changing methods and definitions. The core problem is that GDP is not a measure of economic welfare, but rather of output. Its architect in the 1930s, the economist Simon Kuznets, would have preferred to place greater emphasis on welfare. But the US government had tasked him with devising a metric that could guide fiscal policy and shape taxation and spending decisions, so that is what he did.

The result was a statistic focused solely on market-based activities, based on final goods and services to avoid the double-counting of intermediate inputs like raw materials. Yet non-market activities, such as home care and housework, contribute to welfare. Likewise, some market activities harm welfare: think of negative side effects of production such as pollution. Moreover, normative judgements have driven multiple changes in the definition of GDP over the years. Notably, government services, and later financial services, were eventually deemed productive and valuable, and so were added to the definition of GDP. Remarkably, none of this has stopped GDP being widely used as a measure of welfare.

But the problems don’t stop there. Another issue is how to account for inflation, given that rising prices can boost

nominal GDP even when the volume of output hasn’t increased. Measuring output has become increasingly tricky as the mix and features of products and services evolves ever more rapidly.

Consider the complications posed by digitalisation, embodied in smartphones, which have little in common with the mobile phones of just a dozen years ago. Statisticians have been trying to account for the advent of smartphones (and the relative demise of cameras, calculators, portable music players, and other devices) by adjusting prices to reflect quality changes, but, in the process, they are making a distinction between market prices and value, that is, their contribution to well-being.

A related problem is that more money

assets. But NDP still tells only part of the story. To get a fuller picture of the sustainability of economic activity, one would also need to account for investments in human capital and the adverse effects of resource depletion.

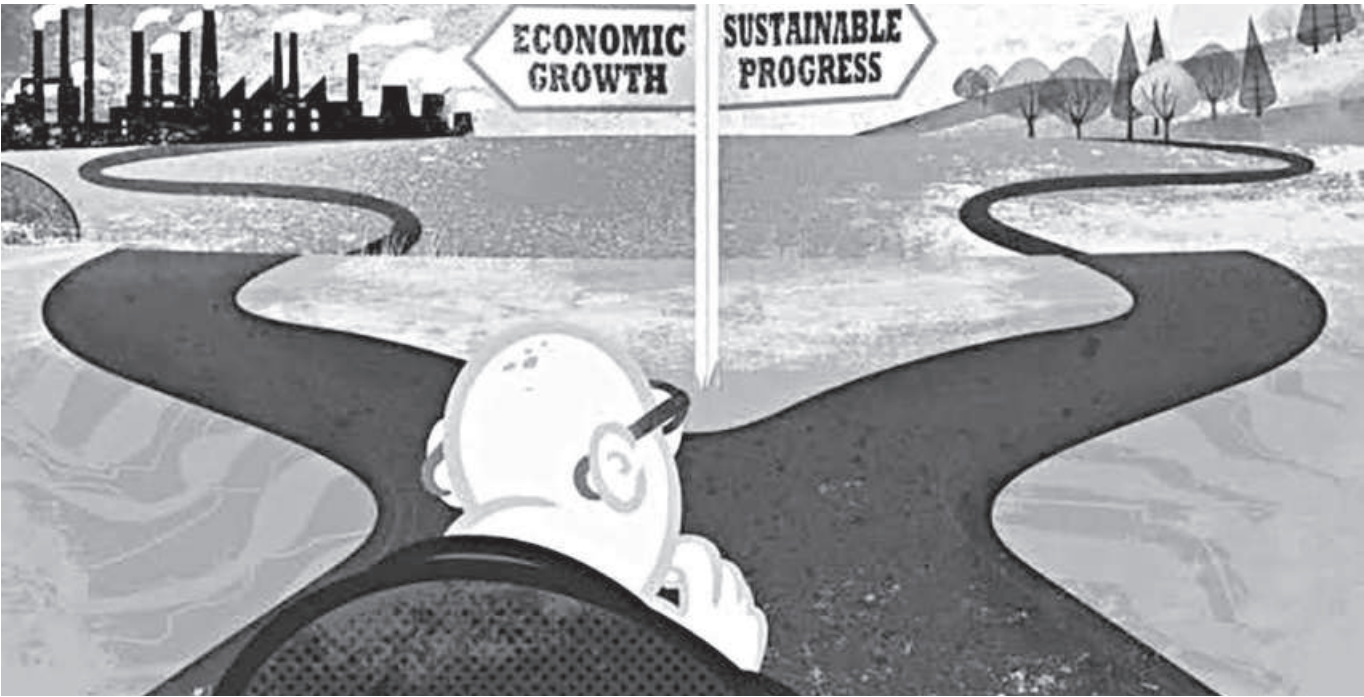
If it is true that “you manage what you measure,” these problems with GDP are particularly troubling, because they are liable to distort government policy and economic decisions. Moreover, if we accept that GDP is not a measure of welfare, we have to ask whose interest it is really serving.

To be sure, GDP at least has an established infrastructure of statistical collection, and its market focus is useful for fiscal decision-making.

Moreover, while GDP can be distorted

against GDP-obsessed elites—suggest that a suite of alternatives is needed. Ironically, while digitalisation has made GDP all the more difficult to measure, it could also facilitate the creation of alternatives. The explosion of data collection—some of it real-time and geolocated—that we are now witnessing could open up many new measurement possibilities.

There is a parallel here to the growing range of indicators for corporate performance. Quarterly and annual profit figures once came in a plain vanilla, standardised form. Now, they come in a wide variety of flavours, and are supplemented by a range of additional indicators of balance-sheet health. Moreover, the Business Roundtable, an organisation of American CEOs,



does not always make people happier. In part, this is because people are concerned about their status and may be content with less money so long as they have more than others. As such, the distribution of GDP, not just its total, also matters for national welfare. Or as one woman put it in response to an economist’s warnings about how Brexit might reduce the UK’s output: “That’s your bloody GDP. Not ours.”

Yet another problem is that GDP does not take account of future prosperity. If the current output comes at the expense of future output, future welfare may be jeopardised.

True, statisticians do calculate Net Domestic Product by accounting for depreciation (wear and tear) of physical

in various ways, there are economists who doubt that such distortions are growing over time. In their view, GDP may be flawed, but it is still the best indicator of national prosperity that we have.

After all, GDP has maintained its dominant position largely because there are no ready-made alternatives without shortcomings of their own—many involving conceptual questions, such as what an aggregate measure is actually for. Is it to measure household welfare? To capture changes in sustainable national wealth? Other issues are more practical: Do we have the right data? Are we missing forms of capital, such as intangibles and natural endowments?

But whatever the drawbacks, GDP’s obvious flaws—and the public backlash

announced a seminal shift in August by committing to delivering value not just to shareholders, but also to customers, employees, suppliers, and communities.

This is not the first time that the corporate sector has pledged to look beyond short-term profitability. But as we enter 2020—amid a climate that is deteriorating both literally and figuratively—businesses and politicians alike will be under intense pressure to improve societal welfare.

To succeed, they must first figure out how to count what counts.

Mark Cliffe is chief economist and head of global research of the ING Group. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2019. [www.project-syndicate.org](http://www.project-syndicate.org) (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

## ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY



**JANUARY 2, 1492**  
**Granada reclaimed by Spain**

On this day in 1492, Granada, home of the Alhambra palace and the seat and final stronghold of the Moorish kingdom in Spain, was surrendered to the Catholic Monarchs, Ferdinand II and Isabella I, ending the Reconquest.

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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1 Nick and Nora’s dog	29 Carryall	6 Singer Amos
5 Police trap	31 Numerical prefix	7 Furious
10 Moves clumsily	32 College award	8 Spot to jot
12 Pay tribute to	36 Field worker	9 Waves to, perhaps
13 Indian faith	39 As done by	11 Gambler’s cinch
14 Make a speech	40 Digression	17 Long swimmer
15 Here, in Quebec	41 Manners	19 Informant
16 Watch recipient, perhaps	43 Oxford features	22 Reverses
18 Edict	44 Cumin or coriander	24 Pitch cousin
20 Gifted	45 Used up	25 Building
21 Skilled	46 Young ones	27 Coat rack part
23 Methane or ethane	<b>DOWN</b>	28 Wall art
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26 Went 90	2 Pizzeria buy	33 Ham’s device
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	4 Say further	35 Moves carefully
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		38 Take five
		42 Choose

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## YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

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