



Ground reality requires concerted efforts

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RUNNING efficiently a megacity and that too as old and physically volatile as Dhaka is no mean task, for it performs even when most of its wearied citizens are asleep.

Its operation, management and organization requires the proactive involvement of professionals all round. Its functions are not run by functionaries merely lending their autograph at the bottom of an official order. The role of administrators, architects, business people, climatologists, engineers, economists and social scientists, not necessarily in that order, cannot be over emphasized. But indeed the most significant contribution to a city's well-being can be made by its beneficiaries, often a missing link in the chain that is repeatedly faltering.

The World Town Planning Day, today, observed for almost sixty years now, gives town planners an occasion to impart education, to celebrate issues and to recognise personalities related to planning. Planner Md. Musleh Uddin Hasan's article is an endeavour to that end. His emphasis on the need to tackle social inequality and the widening rich-poor divide is noteworthy because that holds one of the master keys to seeing that this 400-year old capital city evades a long-standing threat of it becoming 'unlivable'.

Urbanisation, a precondition to economic and social development, shall continue as long as people are driven by their innate desire to improve the quality of life. Landlessness, limited food production, poor investment in farming, natural disasters, joblessness, lack of services-healthcare-and-education in the affected (usually rural areas) coun-

tered by the city's allure of expectations, comfortable housing, job opportunities, schooling, medical treatment and entertainment shall sustain the difference between the pulling 'bright lights' and the pushing 'hopelessness'.

Under the circumstances it is essential that each and every public service organisation plan their projects as part of a comprehensive, all-inclusive whole, by taking into consideration the opinions of all parties with a stake in the matter, both in the rural and urban areas, for they are interdependent. Also people have to find the situation encouraging and to their ultimate benefit if a decision is to last the test of time. And, in this day and time, only fools can afford to ignore expertise. Furthermore, mere provision of a singular item, and that too by poor design and high-handed attitude that whatever provided will work, is not the solution to any problem; often it can be the beginning of a series of undesired events. And, have we not seen enough of them?

Our felicitations to all the planners on this auspicious day, and here's wishing they serve this country that is in dire need of their expertise!

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WORLD TOWN PLANNING DAY, 2008

Town planning for Bangladesh : Vision 2020

PLANNER MD. MUSLEH UDDIN HASAN

Our Cities

There is no denying of the fact that urbanization is the inevitable destiny of the human civilization. But, the way cities, both at home and abroad, are growing is not at all sustainable. Therefore it is imperative that governments across the globe should fundamentally rethink policies and approaches towards managing urbanization before it is too late. To be true, "we have ten, maybe fifteen years, to get on to a new track. After that the slum problem, environmental damage and urban insecurity will become so entrenched that they will dominate international relations for the rest of the century", says Planner Christine Platt, President, Commonwealth Association of Planners (CAP). WTPD gives an opportunity to "advance public and professional interest in planning both locally and abroad" and create "a special day to recognize and promote the role of planning in creating livable communities." WTPD recognizes community-wide needs, the significance of neighborhood and centre, the need for personal involvement in community policy making, the fragile nature of the environment, and the necessity to consider future impacts in community and regional development for the present and the future.

Here in Bangladesh, one of the fastest urbanizing countries in the developing countries, living in urban areas is not at all a different experience than it is anywhere else in the world. For instance, in the morning when parents drop their children at school on their way to work they do not find any public or private transport. After dropping their kids they have to travel to the other parts of the city as the transport and land uses are not integrated. Before they reach their workplace they have to overcome traffic jams, inhale polluted air and suffer deafening noise.

In the city, electricity and water supply is not ensured, quality is a far cry. The poor are the worst sufferers and they are further exposed to diseases due to poor sanitation. Yet they cannot replace the unhygienic latrines, if any, in their shanties. Open dustbins on roadsides overflow with garbage. Roads and drains go under knee-deep water not only in monsoon but also after a sudden shower.

The housing shortage is so acute that one third of the city's population lives in slums. Parks and open spaces are gradually disappearing. The influx of migrants from rural areas and deprived towns continues. The city authorities can neither respond to the problems nor coordinate their work.

Although the above is the picture of capital Dhaka, the other cities are not faring any better. The problems are particularly acute in coastal cities where the growing threats from rising sea levels and extreme weather conditions are not matched by growing capacity to plan and manage settlements in sustainable and equitable ways. Because the poor live in the most hazardous locations they are disproportionately vulnerable to the local impacts of climate change.

Our Pledges and Failure

Although Bangladesh has already made important gains in the fight against poverty, till now the principal goal of the Bangladesh Government's economic policy remains poverty alleviation because aggregate poverty rate remain dauntingly high. Pockets of extreme poverty persist in several cities,

villages and regions. In fact, according to experts, poverty is a broad front. It is about income levels, food security, quality of life, asset bases, human resource capacities, vulnerabilities and coping. It also entails gender inequalities, human security and initiative horizons. It is each of these and all of these together.

Being a signatory to the declarations of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) -- a renewed commitment of the global community at the United Nations General Assembly 2000 to overcome persistent poverty and address many of the most enduring failures of human development, Bangladesh is bound to achieve the following eight goals by 2015: (i) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, (ii) Achieve universal primary education, (iii) Promote gender equality and empower women, (iv) Reduce child mortality, (v) Improve maternal health, (vi) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, (vii) Ensure environmental sustainability, and (viii) Develop a Global Partnership for Development.

While many of the targets set under these goals are related to urbanization and urban living, those under goal number seven directly affect urban growth, housing and environmental management. These targets are as follows: (7a) integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse loss of environmental resources, (7b) Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and (7c) Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

Apart from MDGs the national vision statement 'Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP)' of the Government of Bangladesh has also many components (including infrastructure provisioning, electricity and water supply, disaster management, other than poverty alleviation and income generation) which are somewhat or other related to safe and sustainable urbanization and urban growth.

As regards Bangladesh's progress toward the MDGs and achieving PRSP objectives, the country is seemingly on the right track in many of the aspects. Notwithstanding the progress in social MDGs, there are two emerging concerns as expressed in PRSP. They are:

First, a high degree of social inequality, which cuts across all the key social targets.

Second, the rich-poor divide (however measured) is striking, but more worrying is the gap between the poorest and the rest of the society.

Given the association between growth, inequality and poverty, it is important to understand the extent and dimensions of inequality in order to devise strategies for poverty reduction. Several features are noted in PRSP:

First, the income distribution situation has changed in a major way since the early nineties. The Gini coefficient for urban areas has shot up from 0.33 in 1991/92 to 0.44 in 2000. Similarly, the rural Gini has increased from 0.27 to 0.36 during the same period. (Please remember that Gini value '0' represents no disparity and '1' means highest).

Second, rising income (consumption expenditure) inequality has reduced the poverty reducing potentials. Had the urban growth rate during the 1991/92 and 2000 period been distribution neutral, the incidence of urban poverty would have fallen by 13% instead of 7%, or almost twice the actual observed rate. Similarly, the inci-

Today, November 8, is the World Town Planning Day (WTPD). It is celebrated in about thirty countries on four continents by the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) (i) to draw attention to the aims, objectives and progress of urban, regional and environmental planning i.e. Education, (ii) to highlight the contribution that good town planning can make to the quality of our environment i.e. Celebration, and (iii) to appreciate the ideals of community planning which bring professional planners and the general public together i.e. Recognition. WTPD was founded in Argentina by Professor Carlos María della Paolera in 1949.

Planned Urbanization: Vision 2020 and Panacea for Development and Sustainability

By the year 2020, on the 50th year of our independence, total urban population in Bangladesh will increase up to 50 million (five crores) from 30 million now. And around half of them will be attracted or compelled to live in Dhaka and its conurbations unless a careful and well-thought-out urbanization policy is undertaken and implemented. This huge population in Dhaka will on the one hand make living in city a horrible experience, and on the other hand such an enormous and all devouring growth of Dhaka will act as a barrier against the soundly distributed urban growth throughout the country.

Thus, all our efforts for (economic) growth and better quality of life for the mass people will remain the usual (day) dream. On a fine (!) morning we will find that even after making some progress in overall poverty reduction endeavour we have opened many other emerging problem fronts like rural-urban divide, urbanization of poverty, etc. along with traditional urban problems.

Recently, supplying food to the urban dwellers has also become a burning concern. And we will find many such issues or problems faced by people of different strata in the society and raised in different platforms. We are sure even then we will be trying to solve the problems in some ad-hoc and uncoordinated approach, as done nowadays. In fact the traditional 'sectoral development planning approach' is bound to generate such byproducts which offset the success achieved in other fronts.

In such an ever-tightening

dilemma, well-devised and professionally-handled planning (urban and regional) can go a long way not only in solving the problems of housing, transport and utility infrastructures, and water supply and sanitation, but also of poverty, growth and environment.

"Urban growth is going to be huge in this generation. It will create a great wealth that can lift people out of poverty. However, we have to take the cities right, and that needs smart planning", said Christine Platt, who recently visited India to see how they are handling the urban consequences of an economic boom. So our vision should be Planned Urbanization. However the panacea is not cheap at all. We should at least undertake the following measures.

Regional Consideration in Urban Planning

In developing countries urbanization is not only an indicator of development, but ironically an outcome of abject poverty and joblessness in rural and marginal urban centres. Therefore, only urbanization will not serve the objectives of reducing or eliminating urban problems like slums and squatter settlements, congestion in roads, supply failure in housing, water, transport and infrastructures, depletion of parks and open spaces, etc. Planning must be done to distribute the demand in the surrounding urban centres and also for providing required facilities there.

Today here in Bangladesh migration is the prime source of urban population growth particularly in the major urban centres. So, to retard pressure on urban system/infrastructure, both push and pull factors of urbanization are to be considered. On the one hand we have to make employment, facilities (health, education, recreation, etc), utilities (gas, electricity, water, etc), infrastructure (housing, transport) etc. available to the people in the villages, or at least to the citizens of upazila and district towns. On the other hand we have to make cost of

haphazard practice and development excessively charged in large and alluring urban areas (particularly Dhaka) to reduce the pressure on rampant urbanization.

Consideration of spatial implication of sector based (economic) development planning

Integration of both sectoral and spatial plans is a long overdue in Bangladesh. Although consideration of spatial implication of sectoral/economic planning decisions could, firstly, help the decision makers to distribute the investment in a more equitable basis and thus to generate more economies and positive externalities, ultimately, compared to that generated from the current trend of regional/urban biasness in investment trends. Therefore, Spatial Impact Assessment (SIA) of all the large scale, multi-sectoral projects taken by the government, donors, private sectors, and NGOs should be made mandatory.

Urbanization policy and compact development to save agricultural land

Currently we do not have a policy for urbanization in the country. Dhaka has become excessively large and an unmanageable city, and has started to experience huge diseconomies of scale. On the other hand, Khulna, a vibrant industrial city in the Pakistan period and even two decades back, is facing deurbanization. Similar is true for other metropolitan cities and divisional towns. Again, there is enormous need and scope for creating more jobs, business opportunities, health and education facilities and redistributing/accommodating unnecessary and extra-large administrative bodies of the government functionaries to divisional, district and upazila towns. Thus urbanization policy must be formulated with recommendations for hierarchical urbanization in the country.

It should also include recommendations for arresting sporadic and

haphazard urban growth and indiscriminate conversion of agricultural land to other uses. Currently, Bangladesh is losing agricultural land at a gross rate of 2% per year. Again population is still increasing at a faster rate. Moreover, inflow of foreign remittance is causing rapid land speculation in urban peripheries and rural areas and land purchased is most often used for anything other than agriculture. Since these establishments (residential or business) are developed sporadically and unplanned, during the rainy season they either become vulnerable to flooding or obstruct recession of water. Therefore, to ensure land for agricultural production, to prevent land speculation and to facilitate more cost-effective provisioning of heat and other facilities, electricity and other utilities, flood protection measures with compact (urban) land use development should be a priority objective.

Integrated land use development in urban areas

All the urban areas in the hierarchy of the national urban policy should have land use plan in the form of structure (strategic) plan, detail area plan and special local area plan. Concerned development authority of the metropolitan areas (like RAJUK, CDA, RDA, KDA), or local paurashavas, or any special department of the government will be solely responsible and adequately strengthened to prepare the plans.

Design and distribution of urban land uses should be such that it should necessitate less vehicular commuting. Citizens should be able to do their daily regular activities (shopping, schooling, accessing primary, even secondary, health care, recreation and sports, etc) within a walking distance. A large number of the primary and school-going children in the capital Dhaka use private/office vehicles for going to school, while another significant number use rickshaw, public buses, etc. This practice not only causes enormous pressure on the city

transport system, but also causes excess and unnecessary commuting by the accompanying persons, wastage of time, tiredness of the children, etc. So, elementary and secondary schooling should be zone/area based. Regulations should be formulated so that no elementary school can admit students outside the ward in which it is located and no secondary school can admit students outside the thana in which it is located. It will also stop mushroom growth of educational institutions in a single locality (Dhanmondi for example) and would create a competition among the existing institutions to increase the quality of education.

To reduce vehicular travel, demand facilities and use-needs like post offices, supermarkets, community centres, dispensaries and small clinics, small scale markets or one stop shops and such facilities should be distributed, and only permitted near or around a bus stop within a maximum of 15-30 minutes of walk.

It may be proposed, for instance, that before permitting any building on a site of 15 katha, Traffic Impact Study (TIA) should be made mandatory to calculate the extra traffic generated for the development. If the development increases the traffic volume by more than 5% in the adjacent road or one percent in the nearby collector road the developer should pay at least one percent of the total construction cost to the government as charge to offset road users' miseries added, and as a discouragement to such practice.

Transport infrastructure in urban areas

Water and rail transport should be introduced and used to reduce pressure on the road transport. Waterways should be properly linked with the existing road networks. In all the growing cities the tendency of the authority is to relocate the central bus and rail terminals repeatedly after every 20-30 years. Rather than doing so, whenever the need for relocation is felt, authorities should start thinking about development of underground establishments including terminals and road/rail networks. It will not only reduce the congestion on the ground in the future and save the cost of relocation, but will also save the cost of relocation of business activities and help the authority towards optimum allocation of land uses and its strict application and execution.

Policies should be streamlined for all the cities, irrespective of size and hierarchy, to restrict the use of private vehicles. It will not only reduce traffic jam, but also facilitate compact development of the city (as opposed to linear and sporadic one occupying valuable agricultural land), save a huge amount of fuel which is going to be more costly in the near future and make operation of subway economically feasible.

Land taxation and checking land speculation in urban areas

Under the current land taxation structure building house on a piece of land is more tax burdensome than keeping it vacant. Therefore, land speculation is encouraged and consequently supply of land for the real land seekers is enormously constrained and supply of housing has more seriously fallen short in metropolitan areas. Thus, there is an urgent need of restructuring urban land taxation, making vacant land ownership excessive costly to reduce the demandsupply gap. Again, city development agencies (RAJUK, CDA, KDA, RDA, etc) and real estate companies should also be prevented from land speculation and plot business. Aggressive profit-only motive of private developers in

collusion with private banks or credit supplying institutions should be monitored to prevent any inflationary boom leading to financial depression.

Retaining canals and water bodies, and reducing water logging

In the land use plan, great care should be taken so that flood-retention points, wetland and canals are saved and used unharmed by temporary/seasonal users. Canals encroached by residential, business or even by the government authorities should be identified and reclaimed, and any future occupation should be penalized exemplarily. To prevent pollution of the water bodies and keeping them usable for recreation or other compatible purposes, no storm water outlets should be permitted in these.

Less electricity and water using building and green oriented regulations

Building regulations and zoning provision should consider, along with privacy, comfort, daylight and air circulation, the electricity consumption and heat generation (development of Heat Islands i.e. pocket areas of excess temperature in the summer). Urban electricity supply authority must make solar panel installation mandatory for high-rise buildings. Moreover, setback rules and Floor Area Ratio (FAR) considerations of building construction rules should make tree plantation in all setback areas mandatory and provide incentives to encourage adherence to it. At least half the setback area should be kept as water-absorbent green, where grass may grow.

Such measures will help reduce heat generation and electricity consumption in residential areas during summer and enrich the ground water level by recharging rainwater in the monsoon. Apart from these, buildings should also be encouraged to harvest rainwater in the wet season. For all these measures, electricity, water providing agencies and city corporations or paurashavas should provide effectively calculated waiver in the total utility fees or tax, etc.

Planning : Professional Vs. Amateurism

Finally, it should be stated that planned urbanization as a panacea will not be achieved even if only the stated measures are undertaken without deciding who are going to oversee the process. We need a quantum leap in management capacity: more trained people with better skills, and planning legislation that is fit for the purpose in today's world. Too often, even in developed countries, the approach of governments to urban development (carried out by amateur planners, in fact bureaucrats and administrators) is one of curative medicine: too little too late in environmental protection. Planning is proactively providing preventive medicine by professional planners. It's about acting now so that our cities and rural areas are not allowed to degrade to the extent that recovery becomes a prohibitive cost.

So there is a need to reinvent planning. It is important to recognize the good work that goes on in planning, and just as important to let the outside world know the good things planners do and the positive role planners play in local communities across the country. WTPD can provide an opportunity to recognize, celebrate and educate professional planning instead of traditional ad-hoc amateur planning.

The author is Member, Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), who presented the paper at the BIP roundtable in observation of World Town Planning Day 2008.

