The focus of this article is, however, to take urbanisation and urban growth in and around Dhaka beyond housing. It is to discuss the general approach to decentralising Dhaka using housing as one element of decentralisation, at the same time to providing options for its growth to surrounding new (satellite) towns. To get there, I will address the issue of housing and environment that will lead to discussion on new towns to areas surrounding Greater Dhaka. (i.e. areas beyond DMDP).

A recent study shows that the formal sector, the growing private market sector that provides housing to the upper income groups that is now gobbling up lands all around us, is actually contributing only about 5 per cent of the total housing supply. There is a lot of pressure being put by this group on the price escalation and supply of the land.

This group is also escalating much of environmental degradation by gobbling up land not only in the city and surroundings, but on all kinds of low-lying lands, lands subjected to annual flooding, and lands environmentally sensitive around the city. There is definitely a lack of planning and control on this sector. In the name of supplying housing to select few, this group is causing huge damage to the environment.

When I drive on the Dhaka Ashulia Road to Savar, what I see distresses me to the core. There are two major elements of environmental degradation that becomes obvious. From my car, I counted over 35 brick kiln towers, spewing out toxic fumes over the landscape in a span of only two miles. This is all geared to supply the insatiable demand of the building industry focused on providing housing to a very narrow group.

The other is signboards of different development companies announcing certain fantasy cities, all it seems to be placed on low-lying floodplain land and river drainage basin areas. Where is the Turag River, as I used to know even ten years ago? It is a dying shallow little canal, sorrowfully winding its way, not fit for navigation, let alone any other activities. It is a shame.

Where is the housing for the middle and low-income group? The question begs an answer. Where will the initiatives for housing development for this sector come? Statistically, the lower and the middle are the one largest group (more than 70 per cent) and most in need for housing. Who will frame policies for development and deliveries of housing to these groups? Rajuk certainly is not geared for it or is set up to provide housing in that fashion. Neither is the profit making developer groups. They have very little or no interest in such forms of housing.

Other Forms of Housing and Tenures

We need to develop more housing. But the bulk of the housing has to be for a different group. This is to meet the huge back-up demands. The growth and development of housing needs to be refocused. All the lands and assets cannot be given over to market-based developments. Further, this drive for more housing stock has to meet three other major criterions: environmental sustainability, housing tenures and accessibility, and affordability to the low-income sector.

When I worked for the City of Toronto Housing Department as a planning and development coordinator some three decades ago, one of the objectives of the City and the Department was, in addition to providing land for market housing, to provide for various mechanisms and schemes for affordable, accessible forms of housing with different kinds of tenure that were made available to other sectors of the society. This is an objective we need to pursue much more diligently here in Dhaka.

DMDP and Detailed Area Plans

Development of housing stock cannot be left in the hands of some unscrupulous private and land grabbing developers only. The minister of state for public works has recently correctly sounded the alarm and I applaud him. Let us put a plan in action.

I coordinated the DMDP (Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan) 1995-2015 Structure Plan in 1996 in a three-day national seminar on behalf of the World Bank. The directions were given in that structure plan. One extra year and additional budget were given to complete the Revised DMDP. Rajuk was to convert that plan into an implementable plan by developing the Urban Area and the Detail Area Plans (DAP) within five years. It has been 14 years, yet we do not have an approved Detailed Area Plan.

Further, the direction of the prepared Detailed Area Plans has also become controversial and is deemed by many experts as favoring developers at the expense of environment. The DMDP Plan is in its last quarter. There has been no implementation.

Meanwhile, the so-called development goes full steam ahead without a zoning and planning control and land use plan. Sensitive urban and fringe productive rural lands are lost every day. Forestland, or whatever we have left of it, is being lost every day to mindless urban growth.

It was reported that the Land Ministry even