

Asia's cities of opportunity

Partnerships for a sustainable future

Adopting inclusive and sustainable development strategies will not be easy. It will require transforming the way we plan, manage and govern our cities. The governments of Asia and the Pacific, at both the national and local levels, can work to promote integrated approaches to urban governance and development.

NOELEEN HEYZER

ASIA'S urban future is one of opportunity. Urbanisation, well-managed, is a chance to put our development paradigm on the right track -- on a track that will result in inclusive and sustainable development for Asia and the Pacific. However, keeping to this vision, we are cognisant of the threats that urbanisation in the region brings. Changing our development paradigm will not be easy. We must plan our path forward on a deeper understanding of the challenges to overcome.

The region's response to managing and making our region's cities livable for all was at the heart of discussions at the Fifth Asia-Pacific Urban Forum in Bangkok recently. Organised by UN Escap, with opening addresses from Thailand's Royal Princess Chulabhorn Mahidol and Prime Minister Mr. Abhisit Vejjajiva, the Forum brought together government ministers, mayors and city

officials from across Asia and the Pacific together with representatives from 30 United Nations agencies and international organisations to discuss emerging urban issues and exchange innovative policies.

There are four key urban challenges in Asia and the Pacific. The first challenge is the sheer scope and pace of urbanisation. Our cities are already home to 1.6 billion people. By 2025, the urban population in Asia and the Pacific will be 2.3 billion people. To put this figure in perspective: we need to provide jobs, housing, water, energy, transport, education and health infrastructure for a city the size of Melbourne -- almost every month -- for the next 15 years, which is an enormous challenge.

The second challenge facing our cities is unsustainable development. As a region, Asia and the Pacific have achieved spectacular economic growth and poverty reduction. Producing over 80% of

the region's GDP, cities have been at the forefront of this economic growth. However, this growth first strategy has come at a cost. Cities account for 67% of all our energy use, 71% of all our greenhouse gas emissions, and generate 300 million tons of solid waste per year. Our people suffer from congested roads, energy and water shortages, and air and water pollution.

While coping with the impacts of unsustainable development, we are faced with the third challenge: that of climate change. Over 50% of Asia-Pacific's urban residents live in low-lying areas and are at risk from extreme weather events such as floods and typhoons. The frequency and intensity of climate related disasters will increase -- affecting our economic, energy, water and food security. While natural disasters affect both the rich and the poor, it is the poor who suffer most because they do not have the assets to cope with risks and vulnerabilities.



Sigapore

The fourth challenge is most daunting: the urbanisation of poverty, manifested by slums and squatter settlements. 35% of urban residents of the region live in slums. Urban Asia includes persistent disparities in income as well as in access to services and opportunities. Without addressing this, the grievances that stem from these disparities will sap the hope we presently hold for our urban future.

Despite these challenges, our vision for the future is one where cities are socially just and inclusive, environmentally sustainable, and

increasingly resilient to climate change and other shocks, while being the engines of economic growth.

To get there, we need to reform urban planning and infrastructure design to make our cities compact and eco-efficient. We need to maximise the benefits of mass transit and transport systems. We need to invest in eco-efficient buildings and infrastructure, clean water, sanitation, waste management and smart energy grids.

Secondly, we need to engage civil society and businesses to promote more sustainable life-styles. The

private sector needs to embrace the well-being of our people and our planet, while generating profits. Our prosperity must be shared.

Moreover, up-scaling of innovative solutions, green infrastructure technology and services will not only improve the lives of the poor, it could also turn them into pioneers of a low-carbon and sustainable future.

Lastly, we need to ensure that the poor have access to more secure housing and strengthen their ability to recover from disasters through community-based finance, micro-insurance schemes and social protection.

Adopting inclusive and sustainable development strategies will not be easy. It will require transforming the way we plan, manage and govern our cities. The governments of Asia and the Pacific, at both the national and local levels, can work to promote integrated approaches to urban governance and development.

We can make our cities livable places of shared prosperity, social progress, cultural vibrancy and knowledge and ecological sustainability. If we get it right in Asia Pacific, we get it right for two-thirds of humanity. And our children will inherit a promising future.

The writer is Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations and Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

Salvaging Dhaka

MD. MAHBUBUL HUQ

THE engine behind a city is, apparently, its mayor. He is the chief of local government administration. Local government administration is responsible for providing services such as: fire safety, police protection, any emergency services, public school, water and sewerage, city planning, maintaining local environmental health, garbage collection, public transportation. Other services provided include: recording births, deaths and marriages; managing public burial sites, public parks, open spaces and other public land.

Local government functions at city, town or other levels and is the operation of a government closest to where people live. It has specific powers and functions not covered by other form of government. It is responsible for collection of taxes for services and ordinances on zoning. The mayor is the head of city council and has voting and veto rights as a part of this council. He is also in charge of the city budget and supposedly making sure city services are delivered.

But mass transit system, water and sewerage system, and annexing or zoning of land in Dhaka city are not under the purview of the mayor. Building plan permits are considered by the local government entity at appropriate levels whereas for Dhaka it is Rajuk. Water permit is considered by Dhaka Wasa which was previously under the local government. His scope to perform is grossly clipped.

In spite of a local government organization, most of the development programmes of Dhaka City Corporation (DMC) are implemented by an assortment of entities under different ministries apparently at the discretion of the policy makers. This flawed principle is the root of all miseries pertinent to the people such as: endemic traffic congestion choking streets, water supplied unfit to drink, bylanes-lanes-roads inundated with sewage in some localities, knee-deep water logging after a rainfall, air polluted with life threatening particles, river water polluted with traces of deadly toxic substances and acute shortage of parks. People are hapless; they do not know where to go to seek remedy.

The said entities cannot be reached for any incompetence, negligence as they remain protected in the cocoon of government service. On the other hand it would not be so, had the mayor been in charge for he owes explanation to the people about his performance. His capacity to deliver services is severely restricted whereas entities foreign to

There may be two choices left for a way out: 1) to transform the city into a federal capital, 2) to locate the seat of the government (capital) about 50 km away and connecting it to Dhaka with a high speed link. There are examples like Putrajaya for Kualampur and Islamabad for Karachi.



A section of crowded Dhaka City

local government are over stepping on his turf. Dhaka local government is not merely a question of moving headlong on sketchy programmes but an environment of unencumbered authority.

For any attempt to ease the sufferings of the people circumventing the mayor, probability of faulty ideas in the initiatives will be random. Let us consider a few. Residential plot allotment in thousands under the Uttara (3rd phase) and Jhilmilee project in 2009; fresh invitation for another 1200; for low-income people 94,000 units of flats; towns opposite the rivers around the city; 6 km elevated road all under the ministry of works and another 26 km long under the ministry of communications. Majority of plots would be developed into 10 or even 14 storied apartment buildings soon. People in lacs would move in to occupy. Zoning for business, education, health, shopping and entertainment for them need to go with the plots. But there is no zoning as such. They will have to count on Dhaka as those from Uttara are doing.

The same Dhaka dependency crisis applies to the towns and to the flats projects. If the idea is relieving population pressure on Dhaka then it will not only fail, may render it

inhabitable instead. I wonder whether the population of Dhaka is taken into account while planning.

The under construction elevated road network is dangerous from earthquake point of view. It may get inclined or ruptured in case of intense quake. Failure of this kind was sighted in California in 1971, 1989 and in Kobe of Japan in 1995. Implementation of the mammoth network at a huge cost covering the city may turn out to be suicidal when possibility of immediate earthquake is ripe. One may raise question as to the sense in similar work in progress in New Delhi and Kolkata of the neighbouring country. As far as it is known, there is no immediate danger of earthquake there. If the city population along with car, jeep and microbus keeps on growing, clogging of elevated road may be a possibility as the roads are not of infinite capacity.

The distortion suffered so far in the character of the city and DMC dwarfed in the process is beyond remedy. On top of that the city to remain as the capital and to draw up plans to further it has been adopted as a policy. In that case, financial growth will converge on an already crowded Dhaka, indications of which are visible on the city out-

skirts. It would economically stifle the rest of the country whereas Dhaka will expand by leaps and bounds, the extent of which is beyond imagination.

It will also attract people like a magnet to benefits which are not available to them. Living with blunders of this scale, one may be compelled to abandon the city at some point of time. Therefore it is imperative to take course before it is too late.

There may be two choices left for a way out: 1) to transform the city into a federal capital, 2) to locate the seat of the government (capital) about 50 km away and connecting it to Dhaka with a high speed link. There are examples like Putrajaya for Kualampur and Islamabad for Karachi.

For the first choice, there will be high court and secretariat in the province. Health facilities, educational institutions, business district, trading place, service industry will naturally spring up. Expatriates may think of living in their own province and may feel comfortable to invest there. Household expenses may go down as a result and as such may be considered a substantial gain to the general public. Grains from one's own field would be considered a bonus. The province may undergo a grinding change that may cause steady growth, an important objective in development economics. In case of natural calamities provincial government may respond at a shorter notice.

For the second one, government functions may be performed in a quiet, tidy and nice environment and inherent erosion in the quality of the mother city may slow down as a result. Parks and programme conducive to healthy and peaceful living may be taken up in the city. The secretariat may lead the procession of government establishments to the new capital town. As a consequence population pressure on Dhaka may drop. Tidy, nice and habitable Dhaka may emerge, be it with or without the seat of the government.

People of Dhaka are to decide which Dhaka they want. It sounds reasonable, to seek a mandate from them on it. The proposal may be completed in a period stretching over 20-25 years. Levying tax may be considered. Large area of land and huge amount of fund may be required. The government has successfully raised fund for the 'Padma Shetu', to do the same for Dhaka would not be a difficult task. But yes, if and only if the general public and the government are in agreement.

The writer, an architect, is former Director, Engineering Division, Bangladesh Atomic Energy Commission. e-mail: mhuq99@yahoo.com

Deep construction to ease congestion

S.K. LALA

TO have an environmentally tidy city free from undesired congestion, you have to go for multistoreys and thus deep construction. Multistoreys would provide areas to breathe while accommodating a multitude and their deep construction with tiers of basement hold most of the cars, freeing the roadside. However, we have to be quite cautious to avoid any mishap while constructing.

Deep construction having multiple basements is not exactly a new concept in our country. Back in late seventies, Jiban Bima Tower at Motijheel, Dhaka was constructed by Concord with three basements. But it is also true that in those days such constructions were but a few isolated ones and even though some site collapses have been experienced in different projects, it did not cause much alarm because density of buildings were much lower and apart from the individual loss of the builder, any third party was not effected to any significant extent.

The scenario has changed since then. Deep construction with multiple basements has become a necessity, primarily for car parking and accommodating many in the multistory above. Our major cities, with present huge population which is increasing at a geometrical pace, cannot afford the luxury of surface parking which is severely clogging Dhaka streets now. We have to go for high-rises automatically causing a need for deeper constructions as more and more people can now afford cars that need to be parked and necessary space has to be provided.

However, we have to be cautious in avoiding any site collapse or mishap. The best way towards this is to learn from our mistakes that perhaps can be attributed to the following, among others:

- The protection works not adequately designed.
- Dissimilarity of soil pattern from that on which the protection works are designed.
- The protection works designed without thoroughly taking into account the nature of adjacent structures, surface and underground drains etc.
- Lack of awareness or negligence of the site supervisors in reporting to the Design Team every time they notice any deviation in the field from the information on which the protective works are supposed to have been designed or any other unusual aspect that they should have noticed.
- Any act of commission, out of ignorance that is detrimental to the safety of construction.

Further, it is also necessary to establish a procedure that in the event of having a similar situation in spite of all precautions, the consequential loss can be compensated fast, without accusing and counter accusing anybody.

We have seen just in very recent past, two such incidents which possibly could have been avoided if proper approach would have been undertaken at appropriate time.

It is high time that we take it to be a national issue, where all relevant parties concerned should come forward, develop a system so that such a situation never happens again.

What I like to put now are some suggestions that I personally feel out of my long experience in the field of construction and my desire to be in the cause of development of construction techniques that will ensure more safety during construction. These are summarised below:

- The government should take initiative in the matter.
- Involvement of our engineering universities, the Institute of Engineers, the Association of Construction Industries to independently conduct serious studies of any collapse that has already happened and make their recommendation as to how such a situation could have been avoided.
- Formation of a high powered committee to summaries compare and analyse the report and recommend as mentioned in item 2 above and compile a manual that every builder must follow as a mandatory rule.
- Promulgate a law that all builders must take total insurance (contractor's all risks) coverage including workmen's compensation coverage for their constructions until those are finished and handed over. Surely this will increase their cost of construction but by an insignificant extent. Since the number of such untoward occurrence is only one in thousands, the insurance companies are expected to be more than rewarded and will readily agree to provide the insurance cover.

Dhaka city has already become too congested to live in, both construction and traffic wise. We have to come out of it creating a livable environment. One step toward that end certainly is deep construction and multistorey.

The writer, a civil engineer, is Managing Director, Concord Group.