

Planned urbanisation and environment

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The three-decade old real estate sector has predominantly been a business composed of private entrepreneurs catering to the needs of the urban upper middle class, not concerning itself with the low income groups. Public sector initiatives have been limited to the development of some townships and residential colonies mostly concentrated in the capital. As a result, equitable housing opportunities remain a far cry for most urban-dwellers.

In this backdrop, 'posh' apartment development in urban centres made a humble beginning in the mid 1980s, thanks to initiatives by private entrepreneurs. Private developers embarked on housing plot development vigorously, many of them having turned a blind eye to environmental conservation concerns since the late 1990s.

Powerful developers' business opportunism and sheer lack of govern-



nance in the field have virtually dominated the entire housing issue debate. Inevitable consequences have been the lack of mass housing, environment conservation and most crucially, planned urbanisation.

Despite having had a draft national housing policy in 1993, governments have been apathetic towards adoption of the policy over the last two decades. The policy has gone through at least five revisions and scrutiny by 25 government departments, but it has yet to gain the seal of approval, far less adoption.

Needless to say, the housing demand is conspicuously acute in urban areas, particularly in the capital Dhaka, port

city Chittagong and Sylhet metropolitan area. This is driven primarily by constant migration to those destinations for economic reasons, access to health service, education and social identity.

As Dhaka city remains heavily centralised as the hub of administration, employment, better healthcare, higher education, business, culture, urban amenities and splendour, people of all social strata like to make it their home. This results in an unmanageable influx of population into the city and consequent high demand for housing facility.

But it is estimated that at least one-third of the city-dwellers have no roofs over their heads, their living conditions

being almost sub-human, with a high proportion of them being destitute and floating.

As an integral of urban economy, the so-called urban poor eventually lands up in unauthorised slums and as squatters paying heavily for 'housing', but deprived of basic amenities like safe water, sanitation, waste disposal, electricity and gas.

The city slums are built mostly on public lands, but in absence of government management, they in effect, remain hostage to exploitation and domination by local thugs invariably backed by influential godfathers.

We urge for a speedy adoption of the national housing policy by the govern-

ment. For this would oblige the government to ensure low cost affordable housing for all across the country based on population ratio and proportionate housing needs, says Salma A Shafi, an architect-planner.

The policy advocates for equal and inclusive affordable housing for all, adds Salma, who is honorary treasurer of the Centre for Urban Studies and has worked on low cost and affordable inclusive housing solutions over the past three decades.

Citing Mirpur housing township that was initiated by the then Pakistan government and continued through the

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