

# Seize the opportunity to make Dhaka a great, modern city

QIMIAO FAN and MARTIN RAMA

*The simulation results show what a big difference a strategic approach to Dhaka's urban development would make. The opportunity to create a bright future for Dhaka must be seized now before it is too late.*

THE success of Dhaka, one of the megacities of the world, is critically important for the economic and social development of Bangladesh. The city's astonishing growth, from a population of 3 million in 1980 to 18 million today, represents the promise and dreams of a better life: the hard work and sacrifices made by all residents to seize opportunities to lift themselves from poverty towards greater prosperity.

However, as Dhaka has grown to become one of the most densely populated cities in the world, its expansion has been messy and uneven. Dhaka's growth has taken place without adequate planning, resulting in a city with extreme congestion, poor liveability, and vulnerability to floods and earthquakes. Many residents, including the 3.5 million people living in informal settlements, often lack access to basic services, infrastructure, and amenities.

Unplanned and uncontrolled growth has created unprecedented congestion: the average driving speed has dropped from 21km per hour 10 years ago to less than 7km per hour today. Continuing on current trends would result in a further slowdown to 4km an hour—slower than the average walking speed! Congestion eats up 3.2 million working hours each day and costs the economy billions of dollars every year. Some of the most important economic benefits from urbanisation are missed out due to this messiness, resulting in lower incomes for the city and the country.

These problems will not go away on their own. Dhaka's population is expected to double once again by 2035, to 35 million. Without a fundamental re-think requiring substantial planning, coordination, investments, and action, Dhaka will never be able to deliver its full potential. Dhaka is at a crossroads in defining its future and destiny.



A lot depends on the success of Dhaka's urban expansion. Based on the current path, East Dhaka runs the risk of facing the same low productivity and high congestion as the rest of the city.

Up to now, urban growth has mainly taken place in the northern part of Dhaka and expanded westward after the flood of 1988, when the government built the western embankment for flood protection. This resulted in high-density investments near the city centre, where infrastructure and social services were accessible. However, real estate investments were not coordinated with other infrastructure and transportation services.

A similar process is taking place eastward of Dhaka despite the absence of an embankment to protect it from flooding. If properly managed, the development potential of East Dhaka is massive, as it is mainly a rural area with parts that are within the walking distance of the city's most prosperous neighbourhoods. A well-planned East Dhaka could boost productivity and liveability,

while helping relieve congestion in the rest of the city; but with a business-as-usual approach, doubling the size of Dhaka could amount to little more than doubling the current messiness.

For Bangladesh to become a middle income country by its 50th birthday, a lot depends on the success of Dhaka's urban expansion. Based on the current path, East Dhaka runs the risk of facing the same low productivity and high congestion as the rest of the city, with greater vulnerability to floods and earthquakes. Retrofitting infrastructure in the current, dense and congested Dhaka is much more difficult and costlier than planning and building towards the East, with the future in mind. However, this needs to be done quickly, before East Dhaka densifies too. The time to act is now.

Today, ministries and agencies responsible for Dhaka's development and experts from around the world gather for the "Dhaka Toward 2035" conference to share global experience in managing urban development while presenting scenarios and options for Dhaka's future. Rigorous simulations of the city's development will be discussed, and the experience of other major developing country cities that achieved a radical turnaround will be reviewed.

For example, Shanghai's population growth from 6 million to over 24 million has been accompanied by improved access to services, economic activity, liveability, and mobility through greater transportation services. Much of this success has been due to its strategic approach to the development of East Shanghai (Pudong), and its integration with the rest of the city. The Pudong "miracle" transformed Shanghai into a global city in just 25 years. The experience of Shanghai and other cities shows that success requires a clear vision—one that is embraced by government agencies, private investors, citizens and development organisations, and supported by careful planning and tight implementation.

Leading up to a forthcoming report, to be released this fall, the conference presents four scenarios for Dhaka's future depending on the actions that it takes today, through decisions such as completing an embankment in East Dhaka, investing in transportation, and managing and enforcing planning and zoning laws. The simulation results show what a big difference a strategic approach to Dhaka's urban development would make. The opportunity to create a bright future for Dhaka, as a vibrant and liveable city, must be seized now before it is too late.

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## Cashing in fake news



NAZMUL AHASAN

ON August 21, 1835, an intriguing teaser appeared on the front page of the *New York Sun* announcing a series of articles revealing the supposed discovery of life and even civilisation on the moon. As promised, the

articles—six, to be exact—authored ostensibly by Dr Andrew Grant, and published as reprinted stories from "a science journal," started to appear four days later. With hand-painted portraits of giant "man-bats" and other peculiar hybrid creatures wandering around their "ruby amphitheatre," the fascinating details of the alleged scientific findings by Sir John Herschel, one of the leading astronomers of the day, created a buzz like never before. *The Sun* successfully cashed in on the hype; its circulation peaked and outnumbered that of its rival, the *Times of London*, making it the best-selling newspaper in the world.

Yes, the story was nonsense. And, everyone at *The Sun* knew it. The editor of the paper also knew it would take months for someone to find out the truth because Cape Town, where Sir Herschel was based in, was not a short trip.

Eventually, the rival papers debunked the stories. The whole saga was a wakeup call for the western press. The editors realised the need to uphold newspapers' reputation as a credible source of news. In the subsequent decades, the press became increasingly sensitive about adopting impartiality and objectivity as its impeccable traits.

Now, thanks to the internet, fake news has once again become profitable. Not just those Macedonian teenagers whose fake news factory was credited as a factor behind Donald Trump's triumph in the last US presidential election; but mainstream media outlets have also been accused of "chasing down cheap clicks at the



SOURCE: SPLICE TODAY.IMGIX.NET

expense of accuracy and veracity."

As parasite news portals in Bangladesh sprout like mushrooms thanks to increased internet penetration, we, too, aren't immune to this pervasive outbreak.

Spare the online news portals and social media posts. Websites of certain established newspapers and TV stations have consistently run unsubstantiated reports citing ambiguous sources. They are so determined to boost their traffic that they often resort to "clickbait" at best, and outright fake news stories, at worst.

A Bangla daily in 2009 made international headlines by republishing a report of *The Onion*—the famous (or notorious) satirical publication—that the Apollo moon landing had been faked.

"We thought it was true, so we printed it without checking," the then associate editor of the paper confessed to *The Time* magazine. That

was inadvertent, and the paper registered an apology and retraction afterwards. But they were unlucky; now many get away with even more serious blunders.

Fast forward to two weeks ago. The online version of a Bangla daily republished a satirical report by World News Daily saying a Pakistani man was sentenced to death for farting in a mosque during Ramadan. Also, consider the news about Unesco's alleged certification of Islam being the world's most peaceful religion or Imran Khan's alleged incendiary comments about the Bangladesh cricket team. These stories are among the thousands that went viral—shared and re-shared on Facebook hundreds of thousands of times, translating the traffic into profit.

Unfortunately, we see such ludicrous stories going viral all too often. In the process, quite a large number of people are fed with

dangerous misinformation.

In the face of this outbreak of fake news, if the mainstream media fails to provide the desired credibility and truthfulness, the point of having a rigorous press becomes invalid. The vacuum of trust created by this phenomenon may result in public apathy towards press integrity.

In this context, the mainstream western press may have found a way out. Against the backdrop of growing decline of ad revenue, the rise of clickbait journalism and fake news sites, and the blistering attack by populist politicians, they didn't stop doing what they do best. When Donald Trump went low by singling out their legitimate reports as "fake news," they went high.

They furthermore pledged to "rededicate" themselves to the core journalistic mission. They kept doing what they're good at, only with more robustness, caution and vigilance. When CNN became aware that one of its stories was not credible, it not only withdrew the

story and issued an apology but also accepted the resignation of three high-profile and Pulitzer-winning investigative journalists. CNN did so only for the sake of upholding its credibility.

The result is inspiring. *The Washington Post* has become profitable once again; while other media outlets are firing journalists and curtailing their operations, the paper is recruiting new faces. *The New York Times'* subscription has hit a new record.

The fake news epidemic is a watershed moment for global journalism. While some consider it as a black episode of the history of the press, it is also making journalism great again, as did the Great Moon Hoax 182 years ago. People are now realising the value of good journalism, and are ready to pay for it.

The quicker our media understands this truth, the better.

Nazmul Ahasan is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

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