

RETHINKING URBAN SPACES DHAKA AND BEYOND



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Mega projects and our hopes and concerns

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a specific purpose. Public meetings are established ways for people to come together to express their opinions, hear a public speaker or proposed plan, engage in shared learning about a topic, or work together to develop solutions. Such meetings help develop a kind of ownership among the people and reduce the gap between the masses and the government and bring the leadership closer to the people. However, it is unfortunate to see that no such public hearing has been conducted for the mega projects mentioned above.

In most cases, the necessity of these mega projects for the future

bandwidth to other neighbouring countries too. And there are plenty of commercial satellites around us leasing out transponders to serve our broadcasting needs at a much cheaper rate. Under such circumstances the justification of launching the satellite is hardly meaningful except for the purpose of national pride.

Slower than expected rate of implementation is a concern for the ongoing projects. The expected benefits are significantly affected by delays. When the idea of constructing the Padma Bridge was floated by the present government, it was forecast that this bridge alone would increase the GDP growth by an astonishing 1.2 percent while the project cost was

after eleven years and the cost has now increased to Tk 3820 cr. which is almost twofold. Other mega projects in the works, such as the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant, are also probably awaiting a similar fate. Our inefficiency in planning well ahead and lack of experience in dealing with such large scale projects combined with lack of transparency and bowing to political pressure in selecting the implementing agency are some of the primary reasons behind such delays.

Mega construction projects provide an excellent opportunity for training manpower through technology transfer. This is an important aspect for a long term sustainable development. While most of the current mega projects are being constructed by foreign firms and by their technology, we must educate ourselves along-with to become self-reliant in future. Although all the mega projects have some sort of arrangement for facilitating the knowledge transfer process, we're lagging behind due to incompetency of the appointed persons and lack of professionalism. Almost in all cases, the appointed persons from our side do not have enough academic competency or experience to understand the advanced technology being followed in the mega projects. The attitude towards these appointments is also problematic. It has been observed that the learnings from such projects are not considered as professional experience in many government offices. As a result, the involved person unduly lags behind his/her peers at the time of promotion. For these reasons, no effective transfer of technology has been occurred though many mega projects are being constructed. A specific example is the incapability of Roads and Highways Department to design and construct box girder bridges having spans over 100m like the Meghna or the Bangabandhu Bridge though many such bridges have been constructed in our country by foreign contractors since independence. Their capability is limited to designing and constructing simple pre-stressed girder bridges having spans not over 50m. In order to make a meaningful transfer of knowledge and technology in the mega projects, a team of local scientists, engineers and other representatives should be formed for each project. Such a team shall comprise university faculties, engineers from relevant government bodies etc. as well as other local organisations. Members of the team should be selected

in such a manner that they have adequate academic competency and experience to receive a new and advanced technology and at the same time young enough to serve the country for many years to come. There should also be some sort of professional incentive to such people once their participation in the technology transfer program is completed.

Most of the projects are funded through loan aids from other countries. Among the lending countries, China is a major contributor. During the visit of the Chinese premier Xi Jinping in October 2016 Bangladesh signed USD 25 billion (Tk 2,00,000 cr.) loan deals with China for nearly two and a half dozen projects. When agreements are signed between two heads of states, the loans are traditionally treated as soft loans. A few months later, in June 2017, China proposed that a part of the loan be converted to commercial loan. However, China later showed signs of softening its stance in the face of opposition from Bangladesh. In this context, we must take into cognisance the situation of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka borrowed loans from China to build domestic infrastructure. According to the published news, for the Hambantota Port project, Sri Lanka borrowed USD 301 million from China with an interest rate of 6.3 percent, while the interest rates on soft loans from the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank are only 0.25-3 percent. Sri Lanka is currently unable to pay off its debt to China because of its slow economic growth. This has put the country into a crisis which is the experts termed as *Chinese Debt Trap*. The Sri Lankan government has agreed to convert its debt into equity to resolve the issue. But the recent Sri Lankan decision allowing Chinese firms 80 percent of the total share and a 99 year lease of Hambantota port caused public outrage and violent protests in Sri Lanka. In addition, Chinese firms have been given operating and managing control of Mattala Airport, built by Chinese loans, because the Sri Lankan government is unable to bear the annual expenses of maintaining the airport. Having access to the Hambantota port and Mattala airport provides Beijing with a strategic military position in the event of an Indian Ocean conflict. The growing Chinese influence may also compel Sri Lanka to support China's position on the South China Sea dispute and "One China" policy. Pakistan is also probably

heading for a similar situation with its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project. Questions are being raised in Pakistan about where the resources will come from to repay the over USD 50 billion debt that will accrue from CPEC projects, where local participation is minimal. Moreover, Pakistan will soon be unable to credibly claim that it exercises its sovereignty in places like the Gwadar port, which is all set to become a Chinese-run military base, close to the strategic Straits of Hormuz. In dealing with foreign loans, Bangladesh government must take into account these scenarios.

Mega project activities in Bangladesh for the last few years reveal that while we may have short term development plans, we probably lack a long term one to follow. For sustainable economic development long term planning is essential. It appears that Bangladesh has fallen into the idea of economic plans that focus on year to year goals setting or in other words macro-economic stabilisation and has failed to link policies with long term plans. While the necessity of most of the mega projects may be justified from our national interest, it appears that many of the projects are undertaken on somewhat *ad hoc* basis rather than a part of a long term development plan. It is also important to note that short-term planning in developing economies like that of Bangladesh is indirectly in the favour of developed economies elsewhere e.g. Japan, USA etc. Import of goods and technology strengthens the industry in developed countries as most of the developed countries are industrial based and one step ahead in technological advancement. In this way, developed countries find this favourable when developing economies like Bangladesh make short-term planning and become a customer of their technological products. In order to make optimal use of local resources as well as to make best use of foreign loans, there must be a long term planning for the continued development of our country. We must have a vision of our future and plan accordingly. Most importantly, there must be a general consensus regarding such long term plans. In order to have steady and sustainable development, policymakers must be in consensus about such plans regardless of their political ideology.

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development of Bangladesh is undeniable. However, there may be a few cases where there would be better alternatives. A probable example of such a case is the Bangabandhu Satellite project. Satellites are good for broadcasting over a geographically large area. Launching a satellite for purely broadcasting purposes may not be justified for a geographically small country like Bangladesh. And certainly we are not going to use it to spy over other countries through our military intelligence system. Satellite communication is costlier than the alternatives which we are currently using. Our telecommunication requirements are more than adequately served by the submarine cable networks and the countrywide fibre-optic cable networks. We are even selling

estimated at less than Tk 10,000 cr. Unfortunately, with time, the cost has increased at least threefold and implementation is delayed by a few years. Sometimes, there are specific reasons behind such delays. The World Bank's baseless decision not to fund the Padma Bridge delayed the project significantly. The Holey Artisan incident of July 2016 caused Japan funded projects like the Matarbari Power Plant and the Dhaka Metro Rail Project to be delayed by several months. While there are a few such specific and unfortunate causes, in cases of other projects, the delay is difficult to justify. For example, the Tk 2200 cr. Dhaka-Chittagong Four Laning project started in 2006 and was supposed to be completed in 2012. However, it is not yet complete even

