

AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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Without proper urban facilities, quality life is unachievable

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and this is in a city surrounded by four rivers. The sustainability of groundwater is seriously challenged because of an imbalance between extraction and rechargeability. The result is gradual subsidence of land, which is reported to be over 20 metres during the last two decades. This has great implications for other natural hazards like earthquakes. With the surrounding river systems rendered extremely polluted, the WASA plans to divert water from less polluted rivers from up to 45km away.

Now let's look at pricing of water. Dhaka WASA claims (as one of its achievements) to provide the cheapest water in the world, pricing one cubic metre/1000 litres of water only at around Tk 9 (USD 0.11). But at what cost to the WASA itself? How much of the investment or operating costs are recovered? What about the unaccounted-for water, which still stands at about 30 percent of total supply? For households with sewer connections the tariff is around Tk 14 (USD 0.15) per cubic metre. Unmetered residential

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More than a quarter of Dhaka citizens live in about 4,000 informal settlements/slums where residents do not have a proper piped supply of water.

PHOTO:
RASHED SHUMON

water connections were billed at Tk 128 (USD 1.72) per month.

Dhaka WASA claims to have made a number of achievements including significant increase in water production, improved service quality, increased revenue, reduction of non-revenue water, and provision of water supply at low cost. But it faces a number of challenges, such as increasing billing and collection efficiency, reduction of operating expenses, rehabilitation of water distribution pipelines, full coverage of metering of distributed water and full implementation of on-line billing system. Finally, one serious challenge is to reduce dependency on groundwater.

Drainage system in Dhaka is extremely precarious. Both the natural

and built drainage systems are proving inadequate for managing natural flooding or rain-induced overflow. Because of increasing but totally unplanned urbanisation, illegal occupation and encroachment into *khals*, wetlands and water bodies, which served as retention areas, a little flooding causes an overflow into the city areas. About 80 percent of the city area is drained by these channels to the surrounding rivers. But closing or filling of many such channels including the Dholaikhal has far-reaching implications on the natural drainage system of Dhaka city. Even after the enactment of the Water Body Conservation Act 2000, the city has lost many of its wetlands.

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area. Dhaka WASA utilises the existing canals and sewerage pipes to collect the waste water from different areas, carry the effluent to dispose most of it into surrounding river systems, lakes and water bodies without any treatment. Many canals are cut off and transformed into lakes, such as Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banani or Baridhara lakes. Against the 40 percent requirement, the Detailed Area Plan 2007 recommends 21 percent of Dhaka's land as water bodies where no development would be permitted. But the DAP was never implemented. Still filling of water bodies goes on unabated by the powerful, politically-connected vested quarters, where the government proves itself powerless.

The whole city is so concretised that

rainwater cannot seep into the groundwater system, causing flooding even with just an hour of torrential rain. This causes heavy economic and social costs. Inadequate drainage channels and their ineffective management mainly cause these floods. The result is waterlogging for hours, creating adverse social, physical, economic as well as environmental impacts.

Now let's look at toilet facilities. Let me begin with a cultural shock that my little daughter experienced back in 1998. After spending 7 years of her life in the US, she was shocked to see a man urinating openly by the side of Manik Mía Avenue. As if thunderstruck she put her face down on my lap pointing with her finger towards something I could not figure out first. I later realised what she was pointing at. As a little girl, she was never exposed to such a horrible sight. But this still happens so frequently that a few years ago, one western journalist called Dhaka a "city of toilets."

Public toilets are one basic need for travellers and shoppers. On average, there is one toilet for more than two lakh citizens, which is totally inadequate. And most of these facilities do not have cleaning service, or even regular water supply. Women particularly suffer from a lack of toilets in Dhaka city. They are even afraid of drinking adequate water before leaving home or while out in the city. This abstinence from drinking water and being unable to relieve oneself cause urinary tract infections. Whatever limited number of toilets there are, there are no separate facilities for women. Research has shown that more than 90 percent of public toilets run by the Dhaka City Corporation are extremely dirty and unhygienic, rendering them totally unusable by most citizens.

However, things have gotten a lot better in the last few years. Both the city corporations—Dhaka South and Dhaka North—have built 26 modern public toilets in partnership with WaterAid and H&M Foundation. The two city corporations have plans to build 200 more toilets by 2021. Instead of the earlier leasing system to some politically connected persons/companies,

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The absence of a proper drainage system is one of the reasons behind the chronic problem of waterlogging in Dhaka.

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