

AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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'Existing policies cover most issues related to transportation, but very few of them have been implemented'

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Objection from the Air Force was raised due to the conflict with the vertical clearance requirement of aircrafts taking off and landing (although the top of the dome of the already constructed Bangabandhu Novo Theatre, which is right along the centre line of the runway, has an elevation higher than that required by MRT). These changes after finalisation of design were resented by JICA. However, JICA was finally persuaded to change the alignment and agreed to the current route which is being followed, viz. through Khejurbagan, east of National Parliament, and turning toward Farmgate south of Khamarbari. All these changes in the alignment have resulted in a delay of two years in implementation, which is going on now. In the meantime, another study was launched with support from JICA to thoroughly review the STP; the Japanese consultants collected more recent data and submitted a revised STP, known by its acronym RSTP.

In addition to MRT and BRT, other recommendations of STP include improvement of some of the existing roads. A total of 54 major links were identified in 2005 and it was recommended that these should be given priority in development. Some elevated expressways or flyovers were also recommended but it was also recognised that in many cities around the world, these elevated expressways have failed to provide a long-term and sustainable solution. Although not explicitly included in the terms of reference for STP, it was recommended that taking advantage of the fact that Dhaka is surrounded by rivers on almost all sides, the circular navigation system should be introduced. One of the major benefits would be to reduce the pressure on Sadarghat, Chawkbazar, Badamtoli, as the major commercial hubs. Unfortunately, the terms of reference for the consultants did not include a study of commuter rail system for Dhaka.

What is its current implementation status?

MRT-6 construction has already started and it is expected that the first phase starting from Uttara Phase 3 to Agargaon should be completed by the end of this year. The complete project will hopefully be implemented by 2021. The detailed feasibility studies for some of the other routes identified in RSTP and design of the exact alignment for the routes are being finalised. Unlike MRT-6, which would be elevated all throughout, the other MRT lines are going to be partly underground in central Dhaka and elevated

in other areas. Bangladesh Bridge Authority (BBA) has commissioned a design study for some of the subway routes. In most of the large cities in the world, the road system is based on a few circular ring roads and a few radial connections. RSTP has also recommended three ring roads and eight radial connections towards the centre of the city. These would have links with our eight national highways. A feasibility study for the middle ring road has been commissioned by BBA.

What are the existing challenges? Are there adequate projects under STP to tackle the traffic congestion in Dhaka?

The number one challenge is acquisition of land along the 'Right of Way' for all these new roads and MRT alignments and stations. Land prices are abnormally high in Dhaka city. Acquisition of land which requires displacement and resettlement of affected people is time-consuming, expensive and quite often faces legal hurdles. In fact, the alignment of the under-construction elevated expressway

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had to be changed a number of times due to objections from various government agencies as well as people affected by the project and they were supported by local political representatives.

The second challenge is relocation of utilities. Within Dhaka city, there are underground sewer lines, water supply lines, electricity and telecommunica-



tion lines, and gas pipelines. Unfortunately, accurate layout maps for these utility lines are unavailable. These buried lines have to be identified and relocated, which adds to cost and time.

Another major challenge is minimising disruption of existing pedestrian and vehicle traffic during construction and ensuring the safety of existing road users. Mobilising financial resources for implementing these projects, many of which are not viable as PPP projects, requires funding from our own government and from our development partners. Convincing our development partners, most of whom have their own priorities in lending, is difficult and time-consuming.

I think if all the projects initially identified in STP and later recommended in RSTP are implemented, and the policy recommendations in STP are implemented, the traffic situation in Dhaka city would improve significantly. The future scenario, maybe by 2030, would include implementation of most of the MRT and BRT projects. Implementation of some of the policy measures recommended in STP, recognising that public transport system has to be given priority and measures to ensure ease of use of personalised NMT (e.g. bicycles), would be the mainstay in ensuring easy mobility of people. A well-designed bus system with route franchising should lead to some immediate improvement. Similarly, a transparent policy on parking of vehicles with the objective of freeing the main arteries to ensure a smooth flow of traffic should lead to significant

improvement. Ensuring pedestrian-friendly footpaths throughout the whole city would require relatively modest investment and will motivate the road users to avoid using buses or rickshaws for short distance travel as is prevalent now. An automatic traffic light system, with traffic policemen not overriding the traffic lights, along with enforcement of existing traffic laws, should also lead to significant improvement.

Since several projects are running at once (Mass Rapid Transits, Dhaka Elevated Expressway), is there proper co-ordination among them?

Officially, Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) has been given the responsibility for coordinating all these projects. It has been found that the large number of government agencies involved in planning, design, construction and operation of many of the projects go ahead without DTCA approval. In some cases, this has led to conflicts among some of these projects.

What steps should the government take to ensure better efficiency of the STP? Are the existing policies sufficient?

DTCA should be strengthened and managed by professionals who have the knowledge and experience in transportation planning, design and construction. There should be an integrated computer model simulating the present and future traffic so that the impact of any future projects could be simulated and the conflicts identified. No project

should be taken up without a proper feasibility study as has been done in some of the past projects. The personnel deployed for managing the projects should have knowledge and experience in construction and relevant technical issues. The operational responsibility for managing traffic should be given to personnel who have been specially trained for this and are knowledgeable about traffic engineering.

I think the existing policies cover most of the issues related to transportation. Unfortunately, very few of the policies have been implemented. It should also be remembered that the policies need to be updated after a thorough review, taking into account some of the recent developments. For example, till a few years back the app-based ride-hailing services such as Uber and Pathao, or ride-sharing services like Obhai, Obon were non-existent. As far as I understand, the government is yet to come up with a policy to regulate their services. However, it should be recognised that they have already started playing an important role in providing facilities to the users and in the long run may reduce the motivation of owning personal vehicles. Moreover, they are providing employment opportunities to a large number of people. Similarly, recent years have seen a lot of development in autonomous vehicles. It is predicted that within the next few years, there will be driverless cars in many cities of the world. These would revolutionise the future of transport and obviously would need the formulation of appropriate policies.



Elevated Expressway construction at Airport Road.