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Comprehensive urban and spatial planning for a balanced and sustainable Bangladesh



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Significant differences are being observed in the budget allocation at the district and regional levels of the country which is deterrent for balanced spatial and urban development of the country.

Bangladesh has celebrated its fifty years of independence in recent years with immense joy, and expectations. However, at the same time, we have to ponder what more should we be aiming to achieve in this journey. We are in the Broadway of graduating from LDC to a middle-income country and hence, we are at the crossroads of development where we have success in attaining sustained economic growth. Urbanization has been a major driver behind the gradual economic growth of our country. However, the pattern of urbanization and urban growth has been mostly organic, unplanned, uncontrolled as well as demand driven, having limited or less control over urban development from Government Authorities. Therefore, urban development, which is called the engine of economic growth, has flourished here at the cost of environment, social equity, and justice. Against this backdrop, we should reassess and rethink the strategies, techniques, and processes of spatial planning and urban development to guide it in a way to make urbanization sustainable, equitable, and inclusive for Bangladesh.

VISIONING PLANNED AND BALANCED URBAN DEVELOPMENT ACROSS BANGLADESH

The urban population of Bangladesh increased from 9% in 1974 to 40.5% in 2023 growing at an average annual rate of 3.13%. The concentration of our urban population is predominantly centered around Dhaka, with only Chittagong City showing some degree of comparability in terms of employment opportunities, urban facilities, and amenities, while other divisional cities lag behind.

Our urban growth and economic activities are agglomerated in some major urban areas - namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Gazipur, and Naryanganj. Therefore, the transformation of Dhaka into a megalopolis has evolved at the expense of balanced urbanization in Bangladesh. Our divisional cities like Rangpur, Rajshahi, and Barishal lack adequate employment opportunities which could contain the regional migration or climate-vulnerable people.

Khulna city has experienced a decayed population trend in the past, however, economic activities are now on the rise due to some large projects around Khulna.

This is high time to plan for big investments in divisional cities and secondary cities as well as to decentralize development from Dhaka city for balanced urbanization.

EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF DEVELOPMENT BUDGET AND INVESTMENTS ACROSS REGIONS

Balanced urban and spatial development requires proper

planning supported by judicious investment as well. However, over the years, Dhaka city has successively received the lion's share of an annual budget of our country. A recent Institute for Planning and Development (IPD) study, unveiled in 2023, reveals that only seven districts receive 50% of the Annual Development Programme (ADP), while just 13% goes to the 25 lowest recipient districts.

In terms of regional

for balanced spatial and urban development of the country.

Balanced spatial and urban development should be supported by the distribution of the annual budget and other investments from the Government as well. The government has policy directives to uplift lagging district through appropriate interventions and budgetary allocations, however, significant initiatives have not been observed in this regard



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considerations, the Greater Dhaka region (old large district) is getting 32% and the Chattogram region is getting 15%. At the district level, Dhaka district is getting 21 percent of the development budget of ADP. As a result, significant differences are being observed in the budget allocation at the district and regional levels of the country which is deterrent

to uplift the lagging regions in Bangladesh. It is high time to take appropriate planning, initiatives, and financial allocation towards lagging regions for a balanced spatial development of the country.

LIVABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGES IN URBAN AREAS

Our cities are facing tremendous challenges in terms of livability.

All sorts of pollution like air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, and noise pollution are prevalent not only in big cities like Dhaka or Chittagong but also in secondary cities like Gazipur, Habiganj, Noakhali as well. Dhaka city has been persistently ranked among the least livable cities, however, other cities like Gazipur, Naryanganj, Cumilla, and many other secondary cities are lagging far behind in terms of

people. Land share for low and lower middle income should be increased through provisioning an adequate amount of land for this quarter in physical plans for urban areas. Private and real estate sectors should be encouraged through appropriate policy directives to develop housing units for lower income brackets of society.

The National Housing Policy framed in 2016 suggests a 'National Housing Committee' that has not been formed yet. The government should formulate a Committee without any delay to ensure quality housing for everyone.

Urban and environmental authorities should concentrate on improving the air and water quality of our cities. Cities should have the required balance of 25-30 percent green, 10-15 percent water, and 40-50 percent grey or built-up area. Hence, we should make proper efforts to preserve our existing parks, open spaces, vegetation, and waterbodies; plus a plan to create new green areas or waterbodies. Interconnected blue and green networks will reduce the waterlogging problems of the cities as well. However, it is ironic that waterbodies and open spaces are encroached on or illegally occupied by socially or politically-powered people. Government authorities, nowadays practice very limited power or authority to stand against these illegal encroachments. Therefore, without strong political will, supported by proper engagement of local communities, these conservation areas or public spaces could not be retained for urban people and the urban environment.