

Decentralisation is key to sustainable urban growth



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Decentralising development is crucial for achieving balanced and sustainable urban growth in Bangladesh. Almost 40 percent of the population lives in urban areas, with the urban population growth rate currently around 3 percent. Approximately 7 crore people reside in around 500 urban centres across the country. At present, Bangladesh has 12 city corporations and around 330 paurashavas, which significantly contribute to the country's economic development.

With 36 percent of the country's urban population concentrated in Greater Dhaka, the capital has become one of the world's most densely populated cities. The Dhaka Metropolitan Area has long served as Bangladesh's economic and employment hub. However, Dhaka is also among the most unliveable cities in the world, plagued by extreme air pollution, traffic congestion, and waterlogging. Despite various infrastructure and development projects, the city's liveability continues to decline. Consequently, past plans and policies have recommended decentralisation and shifting development beyond Dhaka. However, successive governments have failed to take appropriate measures to ensure balanced urban growth across the country. The current interim government has formed various commissions on different issues, yet, ironically, no commission has been established to address urbanisation or spatial planning.

PROPOSED REFORMS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

The various reform commissions formed by the interim government have made several proposals that could significantly impact urban development if implemented. The Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC) has suggested creating a "Capital City Government" to govern Dhaka, Narayanganj, Keraniganj, Savar, and Tongi. This governance model, similar to that of federally controlled New Delhi, would have an elected legislature and local government. The commission has also proposed introducing a provincial

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Badda U-Loop. PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

- » People, communities, and the environment must be at the heart of future urban planning and development to ensure long-term sustainability.
- » The current interim government has set up multiple commissions on various issues, yet, ironically, none have been established to address urbanisation or spatial planning.
- » Instead of completely shifting Dhaka's administrative functions, Bangladesh could consider establishing an additional capital city while prioritising decentralisation.
- » Offering tax incentives to industries relocating to smaller cities and establishing special economic zones (SEZs) in regional cities to boost manufacturing and trade could be beneficial for decentralised development in Bangladesh.
- » National Spatial Planning must be prioritised to ensure sustainable urban development.

governance system by converting four older divisions into provinces. This reform aims to decentralise service delivery, reduce the concentration of power within a unitary government, and alleviate pressure on Dhaka.

Additionally, reform committees of the interim government have recommended relocating the capital and dividing the country into multiple provinces to ensure balanced and sustainable development.


SHIFTING THE CAPITAL: A COSTLY PROPOSITION

A task force on economic strategies recently suggested relocating the capital, arguing that this is no longer a question of feasibility but of survival—socially, economically, and environmentally. The task force's report, titled "Re-strategising the Economy and Mobilising Resources for Equitable and Sustainable Development," warns that if immediate action is not taken, Dhaka's ability to function as a sustainable capital will continue to erode, posing a serious threat to national stability and growth. To address these issues, the report recommends unifying city governance under an elected mayor, merging Dhaka's two city corporations. It also highlights the misalignment between Dhaka's central business district, which is located in the south, and large planned residential developments in the north,

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