



## Decentralisation is key to sustainable urban growth

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FROM PAGE 33

While relocating the capital could help decongest Dhaka and promote economic decentralisation, it would require substantial investment in infrastructure and administration. Constructing a new capital would cost billions of dollars, a financial burden that Bangladesh's economy may struggle to bear. In this context, administrative decentralisation and strengthening other divisional cities—such as Khulna, Rajshahi, Rangpur, and Sylhet—could be a more practical solution to reducing Dhaka's overwhelming urban pressure.

Historically, shifting a capital city has been an extremely expensive endeavour. For example, Indonesia's planned capital relocation is projected to cost around \$32 billion, while Egypt's new administrative capital is estimated at \$45 billion. Some countries have adopted alternative approaches: South Africa has three capitals—Pretoria (administrative), Cape Town (legislative), and Bloemfontein (judicial); China has developed cities like Shenzhen and Chengdu to ease pressure on Beijing; India has strengthened cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad alongside Delhi; and Indonesia has invested in Surabaya and Medan to alleviate congestion in Jakarta.

Rather than relocating the capital, Bangladesh could focus on balanced urbanisation by developing divisional and secondary cities. This approach would foster a more liveable, economically dynamic, and environmentally sustainable future. Instead of completely shifting Dhaka's administrative functions, Bangladesh could consider establishing an additional capital city while prioritising decentralisation. Any decision on capital relocation should be preceded by a thorough cost-benefit analysis. Given that Bangladesh remains a lower-middle income country, investing in administrative decentralisation should be the primary focus.

### DEVELOPING SECONDARY CITIES: THE KEY TO BALANCED URBAN GROWTH

Developing secondary towns should be a top priority for achieving balanced urban growth. Strengthening secondary cities will distribute both population and economic activity, reducing excessive pressure on Dhaka. Promoting regional economic growth will play a pivotal role in ensuring equitable development across Bangladesh. Investments in cities such as Chattogram, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Barishal, Mymensingh, and Rangpur will create jobs and industries outside the capital.

To encourage investment in new business hubs—thereby reducing dependency on Dhaka—the infrastructure, services, and facilities in divisional and secondary cities must be improved. Well planned urbanisation in these areas can prevent the chaos and mismanagement seen in Dhaka.



Enhancing transport, healthcare, education, and housing in smaller cities will improve overall living standards.

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Decentralised development is essential for ensuring a sustainable and balanced urban future for Bangladesh. Rather than focusing on costly capital relocation, the government should prioritise strengthening divisional cities, improving infrastructure, and implementing effective governance reforms. A strategic, well-planned approach to urbanisation will create a more sustainable and prosperous Bangladesh.

Strengthening regional connectivity is crucial for the effective development of secondary cities. Emphasis should be placed on improving railways, highways, and waterways to enhance accessibility between cities. 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. Expanding basic services and infrastructure, as well as developing modern hospitals, schools, and recreational facilities in zilla and upazila towns, is essential. Reliable electricity,

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

water supply, and internet access must also be ensured in secondary towns.

We must promote smart and sustainable urban planning in secondary cities. Planned housing and transport systems should be ensured to prevent future slums and congestion. It is imperative that secondary towns have parks, green spaces, and waste management systems for sustainable growth. Greater authority and resources should be delegated to urban local governments, such as city corporations and paurashavas, for urban planning. Public-Private Partnerships should be encouraged to fund infrastructure projects in these cities.

The potential for a provincial system in Bangladesh to ensure balanced urban development is an important discussion. Introducing such a system would bring significant changes to governance, administration, and resource distribution. At present, the Development Authorities and City Corporations of Dhaka and Chattogram receive the lion's share of the Annual Development Budget. A provincial system could support balanced regional development by ensuring a more equitable distribution of national resources. It could also address regional disparities in infrastructure, education, and healthcare, while promoting local industries and employment. By decentralising governance, it would reduce over-reliance on the central government and accelerate decision-making at the regional level, allowing policies to be formulated according

to local needs. This system could also mitigate bureaucratic bottlenecks and decrease dependence on Dhaka for administrative approvals. Additionally, provinces might compete to attract investment, improve services, and enhance governance.

However, implementing a provincial system in Bangladesh would come with high costs. Government expenditure on salaries, infrastructure, and governance would increase. There might also be a risk of heightened regional political conflicts. Unequal development between provinces could create resentment, as provinces with more industries or natural resources may develop faster, while poorer provinces might struggle to generate revenue. The central government may need to subsidise weaker provinces. In this context, urban local governments in lagging regions such as Rangpur, Barishal, and Mymensingh should be strengthened to negotiate with the central government for increased services and facilities in urban areas.

By and large, for sustainable urban development, National Spatial Planning must be given the utmost priority. The "City Government" concept could integrate various agencies operating within urban areas, helping to reduce public suffering and save public funds. Land use zoning and other planning regulations should be strictly enforced. The project-centric development model, which has disregarded both people and the environment under past governments, must be abandoned immediately.

Development intensity management and density planning should be carefully considered when planning urban areas in Bangladesh. Vested interest groups—particularly industrialists, housing developers, and real estate businesses—have historically disregarded planning and zoning regulations. These groups have even influenced physical plans and planning laws in their favour by manipulating ministries and authorities. A prime example is the repeated amendment attempts to the Dhaka Detailed Area Plan (DAP 2022-35), driven by real estate sector interests seeking to maximise business profits at the expense of public welfare, environmental protection, and liveability.

To ensure balanced and sustainable urban development, district and upazila towns must formulate structure plans, master plans, and detailed area plans. Decentralised development should be the government's primary policy focus, with long-term efforts directed towards strengthening district and secondary cities. People, communities, and the environment must be at the heart of future urban planning and development to ensure long-term sustainability.

