



Only a sustainable, inclusive, and people-centric strategy can rescue Bangladesh's urban future. Concept plan for a new public space by Bengal Institute.

An urban breaking point we can no longer ignore

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infrastructure, housing, and environmental management, integrating economic growth with social equity and climate resilience. This initiative seeks to address rapid urbanisation and environmental challenges by creating planned, liveable cities and resilient ecosystems across the country.

REDISTRIBUTING URBAN DENSITY ACROSS BANGLADESH FOR DECENTRALISING DEVELOPMENT
Although Bangladesh's level of urbanisation is still lower than that of many developed countries, its rate of urbanisation among the highest globally and has increased significantly in recent years. In 1961, the urban population was 2.6 million, which was about 5 percent, and in 1974, only 9 percent of the population lived in cities. According to the 2022 Census, the urban population reached 53.7 million, about 32 percent of the total population. According to a recent World Urbanisation Prospects 2025 report by the United Nations, Dhaka is the world's second-largest city by population, with about 36.6 million people, behind Jakarta and ahead of Tokyo, with projections suggesting

Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), excessive growth of Dhaka causes losses equivalent to 6-10 percent of GDP annually due to congestion, inefficiency, and hampered development in other regions. This Dhaka-centric growth hinders national economic potential, slows job creation, and strains urban infrastructure. To address this, Bangladesh's Eighth Five-Year Plan prioritises development decentralisation. Major infrastructure projects—such as the Padma Bridge and the upcoming Jamuna Rail Bridge—create opportunities to stimulate regional urban economies through planned urbanisation. Redistributing urban density in Bangladesh is no longer just a policy preference; it is a geographic and economic necessity. With nearly 32 percent of the country's urban population currently concentrated in Dhaka, the capital has reached a breaking point. The transition towards a “multi-centric” urban model involves moving from a single dominant mega-city to a network of vibrant divisional cities, secondary cities, and smart rural hubs.

REDUCING THE PRIMACY OF DHAKA AND DEVELOPING THE DIVISIONAL AND DISTRICT TOWNS
The core of decentralisation in Bangladesh lies in empowering divisional cities (like Khulna, Rajshahi, and Sylhet) and district towns. Currently, resources often bypass these mid-tier cities, flowing either to Dhaka or directly to rural areas—a phenomenon experts call the “missing middle.” Key pillars of density redistribution could be industrial and administrative de-concentration. Moving the garment industry and manufacturing hubs towards specialised economic zones (SEZs) in under-densified regions (e.g., Mirsarai, Mongla) could be prioritised. Relocating certain government offices and specialised institutions to divisional headquarters and district towns could reduce the “pull” of Dhaka for legal and administrative needs. Additionally, the government's vision to provide modern urban amenities (better education, healthcare, internet, community facilities) at the village level to reduce the “push” factors that drive rural-to-urban migration should be given special emphasis as well. Spatial analysis of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) budget is also required to ensure that the development budget is targeted at lagging regions to pull them up.

NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS ARE NEEDED FOR URBAN REVIVAL
Our cities are dying, as traffic jams, waterlogging, and all sorts of pollution—such as air, water, and soil pollution—are common phenomena in Dhaka, Chattogram, and many other cities. A healthy urban ecosystem requires 20-25 percent green space and 10-15 percent water bodies to effectively manage drainage and recharge groundwater. Yet, Dhaka's core has been entombed in 80 percent

concrete coverage, leaving a measly 5 percent for water and less than 10 percent for greenery. We have effectively turned our city into a giant, non-porous bowl. The situation in other urban areas is not much more encouraging either. Canals and water bodies have been destroyed in the name of urban development over the past decades in most urban centres in Bangladesh. Hence, waterlogging is seen on urban streets after even moderate rainfall. The systematic filling of canals and the replacement of natural waterways with rigid box culverts has proven to be a catastrophic error. Nature-based solutions—preserving wetlands,

various central agencies. True reform requires a “single-window” authority where elected mayors have the budgetary and legal autonomy to manage their cities. Manifestos must treat the urban poor as economic engines rather than “encroachers.” This involves formalising the status of informal workers and ensuring that urban growth does not come at the cost of mass displacement. To decompress Dhaka, parties must propose fiscal incentives for “growth poles”—secondary cities like Mymensingh, Cumilla, Bogura, Faridpur, and Moulvibazar—ensuring they do not replicate Dhaka's chaotic blueprint.



Excessive density has pushed cities like Dhaka far beyond their carrying capacity.
FILE PHOTO: STAR

restoring canals, and increasing permeable softscapes—are not “aesthetic luxuries.” They are the only sustainable drainage infrastructure we have left. If we continue to prioritise concrete over canals, no amount of pumping technology will save us from the next monsoon. We must restore our city's blue and green arteries before the “heart of Bangladesh” stops beating under the weight of its own stagnant water.

FROM LARGE AND MEGA PROJECTS TO PEOPLE-CENTRIC PLANNING: VOICE OF THE PEOPLE MUST BE HEARD
Bangladesh stands at a critical juncture. With nearly forty percent of the population already urbanised, the transition from unplanned sprawl to sustainable living is no longer a policy choice; it is a prerequisite for national survival. Therefore, political parties intending to participate in the next election should focus on the actual needs and aspirations of urban residents of the country. We must shift from a “concrete-only” mindset to one that restores natural drainage systems, prioritising mass transit such as BRT, commuter rail, light rail, monorail, MRT, and pedestrian-friendly roads over private car infrastructure to reduce the carbon footprint and improve air quality.

Parties must pledge to empower City Corporations. Currently, urban governance is fragmented across

PRIORITISING AFFORDABLE HOUSING IN BANGLADESH: A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR THE UPCOMING GOVERNMENT
Affordable housing is a critical national challenge in Bangladesh due to rapid urbanisation, land scarcity, widespread informality, and low-income realities. As cities—particularly Dhaka—continue to grow, market-driven housing alone cannot meet the needs of the majority. The upcoming government must therefore adopt a comprehensive and Bangladesh-specific approach that treats affordable housing as a social and economic priority rather than a purely commercial product. Clear and detailed guidelines for affordable and social housing are essential. The government should define affordability based on income groups and set benchmarks such as limiting housing costs to no more than 30 percent of household income. This policy must align with the National Urban Policy, Five-Year Plan, and SDG 11 to ensure coherence across development goals.

Land reform is the most decisive factor in reducing housing costs. Government-led land banking, the use of underutilised public land near transit corridors, higher-density zoning, and measures to curb land speculation are necessary to expand affordable housing at scale. Without land reform, affordability will remain unattainable. A shift towards

public and rental housing is equally important. Public rental housing and social housing authorities should be developed in major cities, with rent-controlled units for low-income households and essential workers. At the same time, slum upgrading should be prioritised over eviction through in-situ improvements, secure tenure, and community-led housing initiatives, which are more humane and cost-effective than relocation.

Inclusive housing finance and subsidy reform are needed to reach low-income groups. Low-interest loans, government-backed guarantee funds, targeted subsidies, and support for incremental housing can make housing finance accessible to those currently excluded. The private sector must be engaged through incentives such as Floor Area Ratio (FAR) bonuses and tax benefits, combined with mandatory inclusionary zoning and strong regulation to ensure quality and price control. The Detailed Area Plan (DAP 2022-35) for Dhaka city has introduced FAR incentives for affordable housing that can be a good step if implemented properly.

Transit-oriented affordable housing should be promoted near MRT, BRT, and rail corridors to reduce transport costs and improve overall affordability. To reduce pressure on Dhaka, the government should promote secondary cities through decentralised housing, industry, and infrastructure development. Additionally, construction cost reduction and innovation, streamlined approvals, and the use of local materials can lower housing prices.

PARADIGM SHIFTS ARE REQUIRED FOR THE PLANNING AND DESIGN OF CITIES IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh needs a paradigm shift in planning, designing, and reorganising urban areas. Strong institutional coordination, governance reform, and legal enforcement are essential to implement urban plans. Engaging communities in the formulation of various plans and projects for urban areas is also essential. In the wake of the July Uprising, which demanded an end to systemic discrimination, political parties must pivot their manifestos. The focus should shift from high-visibility large or mega projects to the fundamental civic facilities and amenities of the urban dweller. Bangladesh has never lacked plans; it has lacked the political will to enforce them. The government must insulate urban planning bodies from the “capture” of powerful real estate, industrialist, and corporate lobbies that frequently bypass the spatial, physical, and detailed plans of urban and regional areas. Only a sustainable, inclusive, and people-centric strategy can rescue Bangladesh's urban future. Without a radical shift in planning, our urban areas are destined to mirror the stagnation and crisis currently paralysing Dhaka.

KEY POINTS

1. Rapid, unplanned urbanisation has made cities like Dhaka among the world's most unliveable, with severe air pollution, congestion, and informal settlements.
2. The National Urban Policy (NUP) 2025 and National Spatial Planning Ordinance 2025 provide a framework for planned, sustainable, and inclusive urban growth.
3. Prioritising secondary cities through decentralised housing, industry, and infrastructure development is essential to reduce pressure on Dhaka.
4. Nature-based solutions, green spaces, and waterway restoration are critical to managing drainage, reducing pollution, and improving liveability.
5. Transit-oriented affordable housing, community-led planning, and governance reform are necessary for equitable, people-centric urban development.

it could become the largest by 2050. The World Bank's World Development Indicators report states that despite rapid urbanisation, Bangladeshi cities are unprepared to accommodate the growing population. Excessive density has pushed cities like Dhaka far beyond their carrying capacity, resulting in traffic congestion, waterlogging, air pollution, and public health crises.

Urban economies contribute nearly three-quarters of Bangladesh's GDP, with Dhaka alone accounting for 40 percent. However, Dhaka-centric growth has stifled the economic potential of other cities. According to the