

THOUGHTS ON URBAN PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is a densely populated and predominantly rural country. Resources to bring about development are limited and will remain so in the future. The expected growth of urban population will put greater pressure on the already inadequate basic urban services and bring even greater imbalances in development. Strategy for urban development realistic to the situation and replicable on the large scale necessary. It must concentrate on expanding and increasing the efficiency of urban economy, strive to promote urban services by means that are cost effective and introduce planning controls that will promote desirable growth without stifling private initiative and support.

INTRODUCTION

Growth of towns and urban planning are comparatively recent but increasingly important process in Bangladesh. But there is no comprehensive development plan, which has been adopted or is being implemented even in the major cities. Comprehensive city planning on a deliberately loose and open definition may include "all the subject concerns for which the city claims responsibility". Comprehensiveness also "refers primarily to an awareness that the city is a system of interrelated social and economic variables extended over space".¹ But comprehensive planning incorporating all aspects of urban dynamics is hardly possible in an environment beset with primary constraints of data, finance and skilled personnel.

The level of available skill for urban planning exercise is minimal. There are only a few physical planners (about 100) and only a handful (on an average of about 5 planners) are added to the list every year.² There is no way that this deficiency will be made up in the near future. This, however, should not be a matter of deep concern. The control of physical environment is not among the first priorities in a country struggling with the fundamental problems of increasing agricultural output, establishing a more effective communication, education, public health, utilities and striving to create more employment opportunities for its burgeoning population. There is little prospect of resolution of these problems in the near future. It is unlikely that serious damage can be done in the next few years by the inadequacy of physical planning mechanism except in a few key areas of major cities.

Advocates of immediate and strong planning interventions often forget that industrialization, high level of urbanisation and growth of wealth in developed countries started more than a century ago, but it was only after the World War II that governments in those countries established a comprehensive and partially effective landuse control. In the initial periods bye-laws, controls and

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standards were more important. It is premature to assume that Bangladesh will establish a strong and effective planning overnight. To start with planning, in Bangladesh has no legislative backing. A draft Physical Planning Legislation is under the consideration of the government, but is yet to be enacted into law. Whatever little planning and land use control powers the pourashavas have are seldom acted upon and the procedure of land acquisition is painfully slow. Furthermore the little urban planning that is practised in Bangladesh draws inspiration from western concept of organisation of space and activities. The morphology of urban areas in Bangladesh is different from cities of the west. So are the circumstances of their origin, the context and the social system that gave rise to the cities. Should we emulate the west or attempt principles and standards born of our own experience? It is only through a slow and steady process that answers to such questions and support for planning will evolve. For the present incremental development with some controls seems a realistic option.

IMPORTANCE OF URBAN PLANNING

Urban growth and development in Bangladesh depend on actions taken by numerous individuals based on immediate needs and without reference to a plan or what others are doing. There is no indication in the history of land development that individuals left to their own, serves public interest.³ Unfettered market forces leads to congestion, land speculation, social deprivation for the poor and deterioration of the environment. It is for these reasons that the questions of spatial distribution of population vis a vis urban-rural, urban-urban and a land-use control mechanism have to be grappled with. A pattern must emerge to bring together the numerous activities of the private and the government such that they supplement each other in an ordered growth. It is not sufficient to integrate the sectoral investments of different ministries with five-year plans. The integration must be in time and place. To put it in specific terms, creation of industrial opportunities must be accompanied by better access to urban functions, public utilities, workers' housing, educational and social facilities and all other activities necessary to develop a satisfactory physical, social and cultural environment. Every investment must supplement each other as pieces in a zigsaw puzzle. For separating them would be encouraging failures and wastages. The national government must have a clear locational policy and the local agencies must be able to give shape and supervision to the integral development before and while it is taking place.

In Bangladesh there is a progressive imbalance developing between its population and its land. From one third of an acre per person in 1974 land-man ratio has decreased to one fourth by 1981. No other country of major importance suffers such an acute shortage of land. Yet this consciousness is not reflected in the way land is used for urban activities. Though national figures do not exist for the amount of land which has been taken from agricultural use for the purpose of building, but bits and pieces of information indicate that more agricultural land is being used than necessary. Rajshahi University, for instance, had acquired 743 acres of land in the fifties, but even after a few decades of development it has used only about 300 acres.⁴ By the year 2000 the loss of agricultural land may be 2 million acres — about 10% of the total cultivated land.⁵ There is therefore, a very strong case for minimising this loss by planning controls and guidelines.

PLANNING PROCESS

For rational planning it is important to examine the past shift of population and the likely changes in future in relation to the land resources and what an optimal pattern of urban growth might be.

Upon this likely future state and the existing conditions of social and physical services, future investments in land development and infrastructure can be based. The process of urban planning will require the consideration of the present nature of urban settlements, their urban to-urban and

urban-to-rural relationship. It must also consider the effective organisation for implementing the desired pattern of growth, eradication or alleviation of the present weaknesses and what consequences there are for skilled personnel and training.

STRATEGY FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The towns of Bangladesh face an overwhelming problem of population growth and extreme poverty. In this context, the objectives of an urban development strategy through public and private initiatives should be (i) to expand the urban economy in order to create greater amount of productive employment and (ii) to provide increased urban services to the urban population.⁶ It would first be necessary to improve the planning, executing and administrative capacities of the urban sector institutions. It would also be necessary to revise many of the existing sub-sector strategies for the provision of urban services. If Bangladesh is to cope with its urban problems, it must begin by improving the institutional framework in the urban sector and develop the capacities of the individual institutions. An improved planning capacity at the National level to co-ordinate national sectoral planning with local priorities and capacities. Responsibility for local physical urban planning should be clarified. The development authorities should take the lead in this function. Traditional master planning should be replaced with the type of planning used in the 'Dhaka Metropolitan Area Integrated Urban Development Project (sponsored by UNDP and the Asian Development Bank).⁷ Cities are dynamic social organisms in a process of growth. The variables are too numerous and dynamic to draw an end-state map of any settlement. Preparing such master plans as are being presently done, is using scarce human and financial resources to little purpose.

Instead urban development guidelines should first be established based on economic, social and administrative realities and then plans for specific areas should be developed when needed and resources are available. This type of planning can be more closely linked with project implementation and national sector planning and budgeting.

Most project implementation will continue to be the responsibility of national sectoral ministries. For example, in the case of shelter, the present agencies within the Ministry of Public Works and Urban Development could continue to implement shelter projects but on the basis of an improved sub-sector strategy focusing on area development schemes. In the larger cities the development authorities could play a role in land acquisition and development. At the same time, the capacity of the pourashavas to provide urban services and maintenance should be improved. This will, however, require an improved local administrative capacity and financial resource mobilization. Ultimately, some of the larger pourashavas may be able to shoulder responsibility to plan and implement urban development projects.

The overwhelming population growth forecasts for towns in Bangladesh and the extremely low income levels of most of the urban population require decisive new strategies for providing land, shelter and urban services. Means should be sought to increase the supply of urban land for low income settlement through large-scale, very minimal standard development. This could be combined with other measures such as improved land taxation to reduce speculative demand in the urban land market. The present government policy of providing subsidised high cost shelter to the rich should be reassessed.

A strategy for urban transport should aim at making better use of the existing circulation network through improved traffic management, rather than high cost new construction. Transport policies should not aim at reducing the use of rickshaws which provide affordable service and large amount of employment. At the same time, urban transport development strategies should help to increase the access of low income groups to land and urban functions. Accessibility to urban functions is very often confused with mobility. It must be realised that it is accessibility and not mobility which is

important in urban communication.

Environmental sanitation needs to be improved, especially in medium and large cities. A greater co-ordination of sanitation, drainage and solid waste management is necessary. Such improvement should be combined with improvements in pourashava management and finance.

The improvement of institutions in the urban sector and the re-orientation of sub-sector strategies are long term efforts. Initial project support should be considered as only the first steps of a long term programmatic effort to augment the capability of Bangladesh to manage its urban problems. The success of initial urban sector projects should be measured in terms of their contribution to increasing the capability as well as immediate benefits to the intended beneficiaries. Projects that provide the opportunities for both institutional development and sub-sector strategy orientation as well as for meeting immediate needs should include area development schemes, transportation and environmental sanitation schemes.

CONCLUSION

The problem of urban planning and development has to be seen in the regional and national context. The planning of a single town or area in isolation will not solve the long term urban problems. A strategy of urban development in Bangladesh must be formulated within the context of overall national development goals and objectives. Bangladesh is a very densely populated and predominantly rural nation. Throughout the country there is very low labour productivity, under-employment and unemployment. Resources to bring about improvement are limited and will remain so in future. The expected growth of urban population will put greater pressure on basic urban services and bring even greater imbalances in urban development. Strategy for urban development should be realistic to our context and replicable on the large scale necessary. It must reckon with high rate of urban growth and poverty of government and people. It must concentrate on expanding and increasing the efficiency of urban economy, strive to provide urban services by means that are cost-effective and introduce planning controls that will promote desirable growth without stifling private initiative and support.

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