

# **Urban Resiliency through Transformative Governance: An Analytical Review on the Implications of Sen's Capability Approach in Dhaka**

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## **Introduction**

Cities are extremely complex networks of human activities. Running a city can often be as complicated as running an entire country. Now more than half of the world's population is living in large cities. In success or failure of cities to serve their populations, can have a critical impact on billions of people world wide. Catastrophic recent episodes in different parts of the world, both natural and man-made, have brought the terms urban shocks or urban vulnerabilities to the front of public attention. In most of the cases, these shocks take place in or near to urban areas, which have frequently a range of socioeconomic, political and environmental consequences (Gillen, 2005: 56).

However, the analysis of such urban scenario by the lens of Amartya Sen's concept on capability approach and freedom of choice can be instrumental of developing the conceptual frameworks for the study of urban resiliency and sustainability across a range of disciplinary fields. Recently, many parts of the world are experiencing that innovative governance is increasingly recognized as potentially significant terrains for fostering inclusive development process and planning and the response to the diversified vulnerabilities. Therefore, it is quite practical to presume that Sen's thoughts on urban issues, where the citizens should be the agents of change, could be new policy instruments in public policy domain considering human freedoms to choose their future.

This paper first describes different types of vulnerabilities that Dhaka is now facing or might face in near future followed by exploring the present scenario of political participation. The second part addresses the issue of urban resiliency and transformative governance and how Sen's capability approach could be instrumental in achieving those. In the third part, the implications of capability approach in contemporary urban development practice are highlighted. The final section presents some synergistic relationships among capability approach, political participation and urban resiliency.

## **Urban Vulnerabilities in Dhaka**

Planned spatial expansion in Dhaka is rather sluggish than the massive rural-urban migration. Spatial mismatch and laissez faire developments are some of the major reasons of present urban chaos. Human activities without proper institutional and infrastructural supports are impacting drastically on the quality of land, air and water in Dhaka. By virtue of its geography, governance, population and urban form, Dhaka suffers extensively urban shocks or vulnerability traumas what threaten lives, damage buildings and infrastructures. In pursuits of urban resiliency, a clear understanding on different types of shocks or vulnerabilities should be addressed in different phases of planning process. Therefore, a brief discussion is given below:

**Natural disasters:** Dhaka and many other cities in the developing world are exposed to two different types of natural disasters: i) disasters with forecasting, when minimal preparedness can avail and ii) disasters without forecasting, when there is almost no chance of getting

minimal preparedness. However, during urban floods, which are almost a yearly phenomenon for Dhaka, people can have some forecasting and preparedness. Nevertheless, urban floods make negative impacts on urban lives and economy. Apart from all perceived economic losses, people experience a tremendous impact on human lives combining social, environmental and political stresses. On the other side, where people get no forecasting, the chances for damage are more than perceivable limit. Several scientific findings highlight that geologically Dhaka is located in an earthquake prone location. The Great Bengal Earthquake attacked almost a hundred years ago. In the recent time, seismologists could identify several indications for upcoming earthquakes. If earthquake hits Dhaka, the amount of damage would be simply huge due to unplanned development and lack of preparedness. The recent earthquake of Haiti and Chile could be an evidence of showing perceived human damage and economic loss.

**Unplanned urbanization:** It puts tremendous pressure on infrastructure and the performance of basic services delivery to the citizens such as health care, water and sanitation and energy. In Dhaka, water logging, spread of diseases, depleting or contaminated ground water are some of the public health risks outcomes due to *laissez faire* urban development with little or no planning interventions. In the last 50 years, the population increased more than 35 times in Dhaka, but the spatial expansion experienced only 18 times. Therefore, the pressure was huge on city governance and infrastructures and overall quality of life. The Livability Index 2010, published by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), highlights the abject situation of urban living in Dhaka, which has ultimately direct impacts on workforce performance, economy and social sustainability.

**Rural-urban migrations:** Rural-urban migration is a regular phenomenon for most of the big cities in Global South. In Bangladesh, government has virtually failed to promote country-wide decentralized development. Now Dhaka, being the capital of Bangladesh, is the center of political, economic and social attentions. In most of the cases, rural-urban migrants or the migrants from small and medium sized towns can provide some short-term employment in informal or formal sectors for the time being. But the perceived opportunities or developments of this enormous human influx remain mostly unattained.

**Commodity price increase and inflation:** Increasing commodity price is one of the regular phenomena. It has drastic impacts on urban livelihoods and food security particularly among the low-income and poor families. Hyper inflation could be an integral part of this entire phenomenon. In the 1990s, the world had experienced the structural shocks by massive inflation in Buenos Aires and afterwards massive social turmoil as consequence.

**Climatic impacts:** Dhaka is prone to different climatic impacts; preliminarily in two different ways: firstly, by increasing the floods and by heat stress. Water-logging and drainage congestion due to river floods and excessive rainfall during the monsoon costs huge urban economic and public health damage. In addition to this, in the recent years, urban heat shocks during the mid-summer are becoming a regular phenomena, which also have negative impacts on public health and urban livelihoods (Alam and Rabbani, 2007:85).

**Political Chaos:** Dhaka was always the center of politics and business since it had become the provincial capital of East Pakistan in 1947. The erratic nature of national politics puts Dhaka always in the front of rigorous political demonstration, which frequently creates huge negative economic and social impacts, particularly during the recent democratic regime. Therefore, even though the city is the home of millions of poor and low income families, frequently political instabilities push them to different types of urban uncertainty, e.g., loss of employment, social unrestness, severe food or health insecurity.

### **Scenario of Post Colonial Urban Governance**

Governance issue in Dhaka is quite complex and interdependent with different socio-economic and political factors. To understand the scenario, it is important to analyze the colonial influence on post colonial urban governance practice.

The purpose of colonial administration was its own preservation, and the preservation of its status of distinctness and aloofness from the people they ruled. In usual cases, the functions of the colonial administration were to maintain law and order, and to ensure a minimum level of infrastructure services in urban areas (where their functionaries usually lived), e.g. water, electricity, railways to connect urban centers. These functions were to be maintained so that the objective of surplus extraction would continue smoothly without any obstacles (Mehrotra, 2008a:390).

On the other hand, the post colonial state was merely superimposed on the structure of the colonial state (Mehrotra, 2008b:414). The colonial bureaucrats had relatively little reason to be a rent seeker at the personal level. Their primary objective was to facilitate surplus extraction for their Kingdom. But very soon after the independence, comparisons were being made among the post-colonial citizenry between the morally uprightness of the colonial administrators and their post colonial successors. The colonial administrators could afford to be morally upright at an individual level, even in the absence of democracy, let alone deep democratic decentralization and accountability to the people (Mehrotra, 2008c:391). However, the present (urban) local governance in Bangladesh shows mostly all the vices and shortcomings of national politics and its weaknesses is rooted mainly in institutional weakness and national political culture (Siddiqui 2000:12, Rahman and Rahman 2005a:148; World Bank 2007a:109, Osman 2009a:50).

The City Corporation suffers from the paucity of financial resources and political autonomy to promote development programs or deliver mainstream public services. The World Bank (2007b:109) highlights that there is a considerable imbalance where most 'urban' functions are the responsibility of the central government. The World Bank points also the overlapping responsibilities and legal authorities of different line ministries and government's agencies to provide urban services to the poor. This polarization of power and responsibilities between center and periphery is a typical trait of postcolonial states. At the end, there is corruption, what is pervasive and involves public officials' unaccountability both to their superiors and to the public scrutiny (Ullah, 2005a:433).

### **Present Scenario of Political Participation**

In Bangladesh, except the voting, citizens have little power to exert political pressure to ruling class and local decision-makers (Rahman and Rahman 2005b:153). A formal democratic order is not enough to produce a democratic system where citizens control public policies and force the leadership to take responsibility for their actions, i.e. accountable governance. Effective accountability depends majorly on having systems and processes in place that are understood, accepted and respected by everyone concerned, with effective sanctions applied when transgressions occur (Kamal 2000a:5). In Bangladesh, instead, governance seems to lack these requirements. The main reasons for people's lack to influence and participate in decision-making are related to dysfunctional institutions, misconduct of the administrative personnel, lack of information, articulation of local bodies and politics of patronage (Kamal, 2000b:6-11).

In simple form, political participation is about taking part in politics for shaping the dimensions of public policy domains. The general level of participation in a society is the

extent to which the people as a whole are active in politics, e.g., the number of active people multiplied by the amount of their actions, to put it arithmetically.

Inclusive development or the planning for urban resiliency largely depends on the quality and extent of political participation. Bangladeshis are experienced in mobilizing through either conventional forms of political participation (in the last election voter turnout was approximately 80%) or unconventional ones (strikes, protests in the streets, etc.). However, these elements provide a bias picture of reality without a contextualization. In truth, the quality of political participation seems not so positive considering scholars' claims that describes Bangladesh's political regime as unconsolidated or illiberal democracy, and essentially based on patronage and neo-patrimonialism system (Kamal, 2000b:3; Islam, 2006b:16; Khan, 2007a:5; Rahaman, 2007a:106; Quadir, 2007:1). Political phenomena are often described with two concepts: criminalization of politics and politicization of crime<sup>1</sup> (Khan, 2007b:5).

To analyze political participation in Bangladesh, it is important to consider the "gatekeeper" role of political parties between citizens and the state. After independence, Bangladesh has expressed a polarized pluralist party system (nowadays there are over one hundred parties), dominated by two parties: the Awami League (AL) and Bangladesh National Party (BNP). These two parties collect the majority of voters' preference and have been at the top of government alliance since 1991. Political competition between the major parties is extremely confrontational and violent (Devine, 2008:2). Regardless of the ruling coalition, the opposition and the government accuse each other of not respecting the democratic rules (Islam, 2003:13; Rahman, 2007b:106).

Although, the two major parties by their political discourse tend to differ from each other, fragmentation and political conflict in Bangladesh is not rooted in social cleavages. Political parties in Bangladesh do not fulfill either classical functions or educating citizens to democracy. Parties are more like instruments of power based on patronage relation and on a neo-patrimonial system (Islam, 2006:12; Rahaman, 2007c:107). The leadership of parties is not selected by a democratic process, where members indicate who should lead them but follows dynastical lines (Rahaman, 2007d:108).

Therefore, this is clearly evident that in Bangladesh, political freedoms are not fully effective rights. Political participation is biased by inequalities in socio-economic status and is strongly constrained by the party system and dysfunctional political culture. The biggest cost is paid by unprivileged social classes and citizens, who can exert limited powers in setting the political agenda.

### **Urban Development and Sen's Philosophy**

Urban planning and development is often reviewed from the perspectives of different philosophical, ideological and methodological approaches by planners, architects and social scientists (Levent and Nijkamp, 2009:1). Conventionally, the policy experts decide how to promote and plan for development. This entails a limited set of values and ethics, which are selected and prescribed by powerful nations or international development agencies. In case of urban planning, this actually reflects a tradition of classic urban development models, either of planned city (e.g 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris) or the garden cities developed by chocolate manufacturers and steel barons (Bamberger, 2006b: 498). However, both of the approaches ignore the spontaneous and unplanned "middle city" of Global South, which is the home of

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<sup>1</sup> Criminalization of the politics happens when a political force accuses its political rivals of being criminal; instead, politicization of crime occurs pursuing political ends by illegal means.

millions of people, restricting the ability of its inhabitants to lead the lives they value for their lives and living. Despite the huge investments in urban development, the number of people has grown dramatically in urban region. Now it is almost a fatalistic acceptance that cities and their problems will continue to grow in the coming years.

But Sen differs from this type of conventionalism. He believes the capability approach and freedom of choice enable the citizens in any spatial territory to live the kinds of life that they value. Urbanization is no longer just a response to employment creations for the people; it is also driven by other factors like empowerment, entitlement and sense of belongingness. Policy makers will continue to make the mistakes if the primary focus continues to be economic issues, employment creation or physical improvement of the city (Bamberger, 2006c:499). A 30 year panel study in the favelas (hillside slums) of Rio de Janeiro shows that even though physical conditions have improved significantly, favelas continue to suffer from social poverty as residents still fight for communication space in the media and violence continues to be a major determinants of deprivation (Perlman, 2002:16). A successful urban development strategy must consider the process of ensuring increasing freedom and capabilities for individuals and communities (Bamberger, 2006d:499).

During the cold war era, there were always debates between the competing socialist and capitalist models of development for the control and use of the factors of production. However, none of them paid proper attention to the role of the individual as agent rather than patient. The nature of the debate has now changed, because of the discrediting of the socialist model and the growing importance of non-governmental organizations, media and civil societies. Policy objectives have widened, and social investment is now a crucial component of development (Bamberger, 2006e:499).

Till to date, no country has yet fully implemented the freedoms approach in promoting resilient urban development. Latin America experienced always creative transformation of the urban governance models developed in the North (Irazabal, 2004:3). Several researchers and development practitioners mentioned this process Precisely, a resilient urban development planning requires a greater understanding by giving priority to inductive, community defined priorities and approaches and development evaluations must place greater reliance on individual and household level indicators and use more participatory, community led approaches with less emphasis on top down data collection and analysis (Bamberger, 2006f:500).

The key to urban development policy making is the involvement of the political representation of the people and communities at the local level-primarily through local government, municipal and service authorities (Berwari and Mutter, 2005a:6). The Capability Approach with the emphasis on localized development decision making, provides an enviable model of coordinated municipal development for the whole of the newly emerging democratic countries and their institutions (Berwari and Mutter, 2005b:7).

### **Urban Resiliency and Transformative Governance through Sen's Capability Approach**

Urban agglomerations have seen always as the benchmarks of the greatness of human civilizations. The settlement planning and governance of Mohenjo-daro, Babylon, Alexandria, Rome, Pompeii and Naples are some of the mentionable demonstration of human innovation and engineering works. Some of these great historical cities were completely destroyed due to different natural and man-made disasters, while many others survived from catastrophes. The resilience of cities in the modern ages has been demonstrated time and again, as cities as engines of economic growth have bounced back to life, but often at huge costs and miseries.

This could be avoided if the cities are better planned to mitigate the hazards of nature and the vulnerabilities of socioeconomic and environmental conditions that confront them (IDMC 2, 2009:1). Therefore, planning for shock resilient cities is at the center of contemporary urban development initiative and public policy domain.

The systematic analysis of resilient cities is relatively new in public policy domain. A resilient city is capable of withstanding severe shock without either immediate chaos or permanent deformation or rupture. Designed in advance to anticipate and recover from the impacts of shocks, resilient cities are based on principles derived from past experience with disasters in urban areas. While they may bend from hazard forces, they do not break. Composed of networked social communities and lifeline systems, resilient cities are able to adapt and rebound to new levels of sustainability (Godschalk, 2003:137). A city without resiliency planning could be extremely vulnerable to different types of disasters or shocks, particularly when we are experiencing the increasing concentration of people, infrastructure and human activities in the urban spatial boundary.

What do all types of urban shocks, disasters, vulnerabilities or political instabilities have in common? They all reflect threats and challenges, which have impacts on human security. Thus the need to establish the transformative practices is at the core of human survivability and sustainable planning practice. Transformative practices are needed to cope with the continuing and unabated pace of change driven by the (structural) developments and challenges and also cannot be dealt with and managed adequately with the intellectual apparatus and mind-set of traditional planning. So a shift is needed from a more regulative, bureaucratic approach towards a more strategic, synergistic, peoples' centered, implementation and development-led approach for tackling the urban challenge in developing world. People around the world seem to have lost confidence in the effectiveness of their governments-and often seem to be losing faith in democracy (UNDP, 2002:1)<sup>2</sup>.

Almost all aspects of urban development challenges are closely connected to issues of governance. While good governance contributes to human development and prosperity, poor governance can shatter the lives of those who are most vulnerable and need it most; the urban poor. Good governance is an effective public policy instrument in bringing government closer to the people and building trust, transparency and accountability. But there have been disappointments in this endeavor as well. An UNDP study reveals that sometimes, decentralization can actually reinforce the power and influence of the local elites (UNDP, 2001a:45). The same study concludes from a 12 country survey that there is weak evidence that decentralization automatically empowers more people, reduces poverty or mitigates spatial inequality, but rather decentralization works and empowers people only when structures are open to participatory practices (UNDP, 2001b:45). Sen perceived the need for re-evaluating the framework of development governance to encompass a much wider concept that centers on development and freedom of choices rather than a scientific debate on poverty versus prosperity (Removing Freedoms, 2007: 1).

The urban transformation is characterized by a growth in scale and complexity of the economic, social and political networks in which actors take place (Dijst and Schenkel, 2002:289). In recent years, in several low income and transitional developing countries, "Transformative Governance" appears to be a rational choice for dealing the urbanization challenges. Sen's theory on capability approach is at the center of this change dynamics. This

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<sup>2</sup> UNDP (2002) reports that in a global survey when 500000 people in 60 countries were asked "Would you say that your country is governed by the will of the people". Nearly 70% said "no". The same survey also asked, "Does the government respond to the will of the people?". Only 10% said "yes".

newly developed governance framework can offer the state and its people more openness, participation, legitimacy, accountability, effectiveness, equity, coherence and efficiency through the capability development in different levels of public policy domain. In addition to this, Transformative Governance involving capability approach and freedom of choices philosophy can play an instrumental role for integrating economic, social and political considerations with equal importance. Sen (1999a:53) perceives the Transformative Governance as the people have to be seen as being actively involved-given the opportunity-in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs. Sen also argues that humanistic dimensions of development should be measured in terms of increasing capabilities within five broad areas, which he mentions as five freedoms: political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency (guarantees of openness and rights to information) and protective security (Bamberger, 2006a:498). Sen views development not only based on the standard economic framework, but also focusing on poverty, inequality and human development. Since his Tanner Lecture on “Equality of What” at the Stanford University in 1979, he has refined and defended the framework, which directly concerned with human capability and freedom (Clark, 2005a:2).

Capability Approach suggests the overriding objective of development, which is the expansion of human capabilities rather than mono-centric economic growth. Growth is necessary for development, but it is not always sufficient (Clark, 2005b:10). Freedom of choice is one of the core issues of capability approach and democratic political freedoms and civil rights are at the center of development debates. Therefore, Sen presents three arguments in supporting his positions: (a) the direct importance of democratic political freedoms and civil rights for basic capabilities, including that of political and social participation; (b) their instrumental role in enhancing the hearing the people get, including their claim to economic needs; and (c) and their constructive role for conceptualizing needs (Mehrotra, 2008d:385).

### **Synergistic Relations among Capability Approach, Political Participation and Urban Resiliency**

In recent years, there is increasing public and policy attention for greater democratization of decision-making processes. UNDP (2002:vi) perceives democratic governance as a set of principles and core values that allow poor people to gain power through participation while protecting them from arbitrary, unaccountable actions in their lives by governments, multinational corporations and other forces. In fact, the need for democratic governance lies in the conviction that the issue of development is strictly linked to the extent of political participation and implementation of a substantial democracy. For a shock resilient urban strategy, political participation is the integral part of the entire system dynamics. There is a need, therefore, to expand the range of solutions to the problem of human sufferings and to search afresh for ways to achieve a situation where continuous improvements to the goals of human development and the resiliencies to the vulnerabilities can become policy for our urban settlements (Berwari and Mutter, 2005c:17)

Sen perceives individual freedoms as the main trigger of meaningful and sustaining development. Capabilities Approach shows us, the development and resilience of a society has not to be intended as the level of income per capita and GDP growth. They rather are to be considered a process of expanding substantive freedoms (capabilities), that empowers individuals’ ability to choose what to be or what to do following their values, attitudes and sensibilities in pursuits of resiliency (Sen 1999b:78). Economic and social security depends strictly on political freedoms and democracy. It happens because the political freedoms produce the political incentives that encourage good governance. In democratic regimes, governments in order to maintain consensus and power have to meet social needs and to work

for the people. In other words, deep democratic decentralization endows citizens the weapons of protest, voice and loyalty, what can be instrumental of punishing or rewarding governments.

### Conclusion

In many countries, Innovative attempts to implement reforms have been doomed because the failures of cities to develop their civic capacities-the capacity to build and maintain a broad social and political multi-sectoral coalition in pursuit of common goals. In Dhaka context, if the government needs to develop a framework for shock resilient urban management, there is almost no ways without developing an inclusive and capability approach oriented development strategies, where people can enjoy their belongingness and freedom of choice in different phases of planning, development and management. Actually, where the functional performances of democracy and freedoms of choices are good, information spreads more quickly and public criticisms come more easily, making a quick response by the government to the extreme events' essentials and, therefore, resiliency becomes not any longer a theoretical or paper concept, it works rather in reality.

Sen believes "Development" is a participatory and pleasant working process and people can make it even more pleasant and inclusive by allowing everyone to take active part by sharing their voices and arguments. The key is to let people make decisions about their own lives so they can choose the kind of life they value. If we observe the present increasing trend of urban exclusion or poverty, we can also realize the importance of freedoms of choices and capability development of the people and their political participation, where deep democratic decentralization will play the pivotal role. In a megacity like Dhaka having a population of more than 15 millions, if it is not possible to introduce Transformative Governance ensuring freedom of choice, probably Dhaka will have no other choices without being entrapped in poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities along with systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or over-activity of repressive states and virtually all urban vulnerabilities and shocks will turn into disasters costing impassable human loss.

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