

Equality in the City: Making Cities Socially Cohesive

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Introduction

The World Town Planning Day (WTPD) 2014 celebrates plans and policies that advance equality, justice and human rights around the world. These three aspects are being considered for minimizing the inequality in the society to achieve a greater degree of social cohesion. The 2014 WTPD online conferences are being organized on a selection of themes, such as inclusivity, governance, law/regulations, knowledge, grassroots involvement, access, unintended consequences, etc. The conferences themes are pertinent in regards of addressing inequality and social cohesion in a society and community.

In the case of Bangladesh, the theme of World Town Planning Day 2014, “Equality in the City: Making Cities Socially Cohesive” is relevant and important. At present, less than 30% population in Bangladesh live in the urban areas and it is expected that about 50% population in Bangladesh will live in urban areas by 2040.

Cities in developed countries have opportunities of ensuring a minimum quality of life across communities and neighborhoods. This is not the case in the developing countries, where both large and small urban centers have diverse problems in varying degrees. Large cities in developing countries have the largest concentration of poor and low-income people who face difficulties in everyday life. It is necessary to plan our cities and towns with an inclusive urban development approach that may pave the way for adopting measures in improving the quality of life.

Issues for Attaining Equality in the Cities

Jahan and Kalam (2010) made some important observations in a paper on integrated approach for inclusive urban development in Bangladesh. According to their study, the following two major issues are very important and relevant for attaining equality and social cohesion in our cities.

i) Making Planning a Policy Priority for Inclusive Urban Development

In this context, the principles that were mentioned in the message of the executive director of UN Habitat are relevant. For an inclusive approach in urban

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development, the following measures may improve the conditions for reducing inequality:

Improvement in the Quality of Life: To improve the quality of life of urban dwellers, we need to ensure improved access to safe and healthy shelter, secured tenure, basic services and social amenities, such as health and education. This means to have a plan for each city to provide basic facilities that urban dwellers need to live in cities. Most of the Zila and Upazila towns in Bangladesh do not have their plan documents legally ready for implementation. These plans should be made legally available for implementation as soon as possible.

Investment in Human Capital: For an equitable distribution of human well being, program on human capital development will enable cities and towns to implement policies more effectively towards the improvement of life of various population groups. This is possible when cities are developed with plans to support economic growth and development. The government's target in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has been supportive for human resource development as well. The annual economic review reinforces that government is allocating substantial amount of resources in social sector to bring about human development (GoB, 2009).

Fostering Sustained Economic Growth: Cities should create economic opportunities for various section of the population. It can stimulate sustained economic growth involving poor people in labor-intensive projects, such as construction industry and projects on public works. Social security has to be ensured so that none remain victim of extreme poverty. Cities in the developing world are starting to provide social security to give better access to economic opportunities for those traditionally excluded. The cities and towns in Bangladesh with their plans completed may endeavor to achieve such goals.

Enhancement of Political Inclusion: More and more municipal and national authorities share the same basic philosophy: bringing government within the reach of ordinary people through enhanced mutual engagement. This means engaging people and their neighborhoods in dialogue and participation in decision-making as a fundamental aspect of local democracy. The city corporations and municipalities in Bangladesh having democratic structure may initiate a process of encouraging people to participate in the activities that are related to their well being and empowerment.

Promotion of Cultural Inclusion: Culture has a profound impact on social cohesion. More and more local development policies take into account the cultural dimensions of urban life, such as social capital, tradition, symbols, a sense of

belonging and pride of place. This helps integrate ethnic minorities, preserve regional values, safeguard linguistic and religious diversity, resolve conflicts and protect the heritage. The democratic practice in our cities has opened up the scope of providing values to the cultural needs of the diverse groups of people.

ii) Making Physical Planning Sustainable for Future Development

Our approaches in physical planning should ensure that conditions for sustainable development are met. An important issue is to consider the place and the people first while making physical plans for cities and towns. The future of economic, social and environmental conditions has to be considered seriously so that justice is not denied for the place and the people. A judiciously planned city or town may well take care of these aspects of sustainability through its physical plan, such as Master Plan, Structure Plan, and Land Use Plan. The government's policy on national land use, water, environment, forest and agriculture may bring about positive results in inclusive development in both urban and rural areas in the future (GoB, 2009). Emphasis should be made on the effective implementation of these policies.

Planning for Equality and Social Cohesion in Bangladesh

The cities and municipalities have opportunity of functioning as democratic institutions as per authority and responsibility provided in different Local Government Acts for City Corporations and Municipalities in Bangladesh. The other rural Local Government Acts function for local development mainly in rural areas. But they scope to compliment in the overall local development process for mutual benefits in infrastructure, law and order and other purposes.

The local governments in Bangladesh are, however, not yet fully capable of carrying out their functional responsibilities, and have some major weaknesses to implement planned development in their respective areas of jurisdiction. The local governments are not yet equipped with professionally trained manpower to implement planned development. The Master Plans that are mostly prepared in the recent time might have been facing serious constraints because of the lack of trained professional, especially urban planner, inadequate resources, and above all lack of experience and motivation in planned urban development. These are some of the major weaknesses that our local governments in general and urban local governments in particular are facing to render required services for their communities. The national authorities though have made some progress in the implementation of local plans for planned development in the cities and municipalities, because of their existing weaknesses as mentioned above, the City Corporations and Municipalities are not capable of producing the desired results.

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Dimensions of Inequality and Poverty in the Cities

It is not easy to achieve equality in socio-economic terms in the cities. In most cases, urban poverty is considered to be the major constraint to achieve equality in the cities and towns. No single measure can help reduce the inequality in economic, social and environmental terms. While certain economic measures are necessary to target reducing economic inequality in the cities, achievements in sustainable development through physical plans, such as Master Plans, Action Area Plans can improve the overall quality of life in urban or rural areas, and in combination of both.

The problems in our major cities are becoming increasingly important in view of the potentials these have for creating negative externalities for growth due to congestion, pollution, poor sanitation and lack of access to services, all of which affect the poor. The city is location for increasing proportions of national population who must create livable habitat for their daily lives. In large cities, the poor are shunted to the areas where ownership is ambiguous or outside of the interest of the market- the urban fringe, public land, including garbage dumps and sidewalks, all of which are either areas unsuited for any development or are tiny pockets of land. The government also does not have any effective urban land policy nor does it have policies on land development that are capable of improving the conditions urban habitats.

Poverty is seen to be principal constraint to minimize the income and social inequality in a society. Poverty is understood to encompass many different aspects including inadequate consumption, inadequate income and asset base, and inadequate access to basic infrastructure and services. Poverty is often measured in terms of the population falling below income-based or consumption-based poverty lines. The result is that large sections of the urban population which official statistics classify as not being among the 'poor' still face serious deprivations because of very inadequate asset bases and inadequate access to basic services. The poor are always faced with some major difficulties to come out of the deprivation trap (as Robert Chambers argues, this happens due to poverty, poor health, powerlessness, etc.) and thus poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon and should be understood as a condition that manifests itself in a number of ways, including (Jahan and Kalam, 2010):

- Inadequate household income resulting in inadequate consumption of basic necessities;
- Limited asset base including both material assets such as housing and capital goods, and non-material assets such as social and family networks and 'safety nets';

- Inadequate provision of ‘public’ infrastructure and services such as piped water, sanitation, drainage, health care, schools, emergency services, etc.;
- Inadequate legal protection, especially regarding health and safety in the workplace, environmental protection, protection from violence etc.;
- Voicelessness and powerlessness within the political system making it difficult to make demands within the political system and get a fair response; and
- Exploitation and discrimination often on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity etc.

Economic growth and consequent increase in income does not necessarily lead to reduction in urban poverty as poverty reducing measures outside of economic growth is important which depends on local institutions that can address one or more of the inadequacies as mentioned above. Poverty reduction thus refers to a situation where specific manifestations of poverty are systematically reduced, resulting in a change in short and long-term conditions (Jahan and Kalam, 2010). At the local level this means improvement in the following:

Land, housing and basic services: Tenure of land and housing, housing finance, improved water, sanitation, drainage and garbage collection, basic health care, transportation etc.;

Income and/or asset: Employment creation and micro-enterprise development, access to credit scheme for informal activities, and

Legal and social protection and social services: For ensuring quality of life, these aspects are very important. Appropriate laws, rules and measures help building people’s confidence.

Approach for Reducing Inequality and Poverty in the Cities

It is necessary that poverty reduction programs combine physical, economic and social dimensions to have the greatest impact on reducing poverty, with a focus on improving the quality of life. To be truly effective, urban poverty reduction initiatives should be broad-based and integrate mutually reinforcing components so as to provide for a healthy and safe living environment for the poor, improve their access to income and assets, and promote the integration of less fortunate citizens including disadvantaged groups and the disabled within the community. As Jahan and Kalam (2010) observe, the following measures may help reduce inequality and poverty in the cities:

Ensuring Access to Land and Housing: Urban poverty is invariably associated with poor quality housing, often in overcrowded unsanitary slum settlements without any environmental services – water, drain clearance, solid waste disposal system,

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and with ill health which is related to the spread of infectious diseases. The slum dwellers are constantly under threat of exposure to environmental hazards such as mosquito infested drains, and fires and floods, which could destroy their homes altogether. The problem is further exacerbated by the fact that infrastructure and services cannot be extended to most of these slums as these are considered as illegal settlements and therefore the slum dwellers are in constant fear of eviction or relocation.

Increasing the supply of land for the poor: In order to increase the supply of land for the poor steps should be taken to grant land tenure to the poor on government or municipal lands. Required application, cadastration, and approval procedures for this should be as simple and transparent as possible. Tenure security in terms of centrally registered rights such as freehold cannot be provided to majority of the low-income people.

Special zones for the urban poor: The local authority may zone specific land areas for micro-enterprises, farmer's markets, and areas for hawkers' stalls. This will address the issue of land for economic activities of the urban poor. This could also increase flexibility in zoning regulations to allow rights of ways and river banks to be used for urban agricultures.

The need for in-situ upgrading/improvement of slums: It should be recognized that slums are an integral part of urban areas and contribute significantly to their economy both through their labor market contributions and informal production activities. An approach based on positive attitude and seeking to improve the lives of the slum dwellers through slum upgrading/improvement should be pursued to meet the millennium development goal. Even where slum clearance is considered essential in public interest, the slum dwellers are entitled to receive basic minimum services until proper relocation and resettlement provisions have been made. The local authority should draw up elaborate resettlement guidelines so as to reduce the impacts on and sufficiently compensate the livelihoods of the affected people.

Low-Income housing loan: The government should take up low-income housing loan program for providing 'collective credit', that is, offering loans through community organizations for collective housing development. This will allow for greater efficiency and cost-effectiveness in the production process.

Rental housing: Development of rental housing, which caters for the needs of the majority of the low-income households, should be encouraged. This renting ranges from getting and / or sharing a room in a slum area to being provided affordable cluster housing by private developers. Far too often, the emphasis in housing delivery is exclusively on providing home ownership, which does not improve access for those poor urban households who cannot afford to own even basic shelter.

Ensuring access to infrastructure and services: The urban poor have limited access to such services as water supply, sanitation (including solid waste management) drainage, flood protection, local roads, public transport, street lighting etc. Without provision of such infrastructure and services, ultimate objective of improved quality of life for the urban poor cannot be fulfilled. It is, therefore, necessary to undertake programs for physical improvement of the slum/informal settlements that will greatly facilitate the integration of the settlements with the wider urban area and also improve quality of life of their residents. Any such program, however, should take the following into consideration:

- A community-based approach involving active participation of the members of the community at all stages of design and implementation of infrastructure projects and in subsequent maintenance should be pursued.
- Upgrading/improvement works and delivery of services may be contracted out to NGOs or other private companies if such arrangement is necessary for the sustainability of the system.
- If possible, delivery of services should be made on an individual basis. This will facilitate recovery of charges and proper maintenance of the systems.
- In the design and implementation of physical infrastructure and delivery of services, particular needs of women and children should be given due importance.

Ensuring access to Income and/ or Assets: Inadequate asset base lies at the root of low-income groups' vulnerability to economic shocks or to the economic consequences of ill-health. Inadequacy asset base usually results from low-income which also makes it difficult for poor households to invest in social assets such as education that can help reduce their vulnerability in future.

Supporting informal sector activities: The contribution made by the informal sector to employment and income generation must be recognized by the local authority. The growth of economic activities in the "informal sector" or micro-enterprises is an important component of economic development in urban areas. Therefore, any strategy to alleviate poverty should focus on this heterogeneous sector which covers multiple economic activities ranging from petty trading and domestic services to manufacturing, transport, and construction. The local authority should not impose regulatory impediments limiting the opportunities for informal sector operators such as hawkers, daily laborers, craftsmen, scavengers, street children and women seeking to supplement their family incomes. The local government can provide a favorable environment for informal sector activities in a number of ways that may include:

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Providing access to credit: Credit for small scale and micro-enterprises should be established through encouraging and supporting commercial banks to create special purpose facilities for poor groups, such as hawkers and petty traders. The local government may encourage the establishment of community-based credit unions or banks and facilitate links among such groups and with the formal banking system. Instead of embarking upon banking operation, the municipality should work as an enabler in this regard.

Providing training and capacity building: Vocational and other practical training and skills development and capacity building courses and opportunities should be provided. These should focus on and encourage the participation of women, incorporating child-care, crèche facilities and other such provisions to facilitate their participation.

Supporting home-based income-generating activities: Home-based production (or cottage industry) is also an important income-generating activity among the poor. In view of the potential importance of home-based production for the urban poor, the regulatory framework can be adjusted to permit those activities while maintaining safety and providing infrastructure. The local government can:

- Provide infrastructure and services which would increase efficiency and productivity of home-based activities;
- Provide information and advisory services for marketing and access to credit facilities;
- Provide information and training on safety measures; and
- Organize practical vocational training courses.

Providing Social Protection: The governments can pursue to enhance the ability of the poor to cope with major hazards in their life. A combination of social protection mechanisms can be effective (Jahan and Kalam, 2010), which may include the following:

- Social Safety Net for the poor through works and income transfer programs which may include various food assisted and cash assisted programs such as VGD, FFW, old-age pension schemes, support for the female destitute etc.
- Addressing the specific problems of chronic poverty and socially disadvantaged groups such as women, children, elderly poor, the disabled population etc. through programs such as
 - improving social, educational, and health services and housing;
 - enforcing laws dealing with child labor;

- promoting programs to eliminate malnutrition;
- enhancing the protection of children, women and the physically challenged against all forms of abuse and oppression;
- extending services for children of working mothers;
- Creating informal and home-based income-generating activities for women
- facilitating women's involvement in community development
- facilitating women's access to housing, land and finance;
- promoting equal participation of men and women in public policies and programs etc.
- Policies for preventing and/or mitigating risks so as to
 - ease the burden of shocks, reduce distress sales and 'negative' methods of coping through providing credit
 - ease income and consumption shocks from health hazards due to injuries and accidents by providing emergency health care services
 - enhance the coping capability of the poor in times of natural and man-made (such as fire) disasters by strengthening disaster preventing and mitigating mechanisms including community resilience and empowerment.
- Policies for ensuring access to justice for the poor through a broad-based program including
 - improvement of law and order;
 - establishment of linkage between community groups and law enforcement agencies;
 - institution of procedures and criteria to deal with specific local cases within the community themselves, effectively formalizing and legalizing informal practices;
 - decentralizing and democratizing the functioning of state institutions to reduce harassment and transaction costs;
 - simplification of rules and procedures;
 - legal and judiciary reforms to reduce high coping costs involving legal/court expenses;
 - supporting citizen action against violation of human rights;

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- creation of a department or a cell within the urban local government to address the needs of the poor; and
- institution of an “ombudsman” and/or of a legal advisory service by volunteer lawyers to enhance administrative justice for the poor

The need for Institutional and Governance Reforms

Reforming the local institutions is a pre-requisite to any meaningful attempt to evolve an efficient urban system. This would include strengthening and democratization of urban local governments. Local governments and other local institutions are best placed for responding to local needs and priorities. Local decision-making power can result in increased efficiency and, with democratic structures in place, be more responsive to local needs and demands. The financial support from the central government is required in poor regions, where local authorities often fail to generate sufficient revenue at the local level but where provision of infrastructural facilities is very important for economic growth. For strengthening the local organizations, the following aspects are important:

- Proper definition of institutional responsibilities
- Strengthening of the municipal laws
- Mobilization of resources
- Effective coordination and management

In the process of strengthening the local governments to work for equality and social cohesion in their respective areas, the following aspects are important, and these are therefore discussed in brief.

i) Involving Local Stakeholders in Urban Development

Effective partnerships between local governments and the private sector can generate considerable benefits. Private companies, informal sector enterprises, CBOs, and NGOs can provide urban services, mobilize finance (or voluntary labor), introduce innovative technologies and undertake land development activities. For involving private sector in urban development and management activities supportive legal framework should be developed and institutional setting should be ensured. Private sector actors with whom partnership arrangements can be made include the following:

- Community-based organizations (CBOs)
- Non-governmental organization (NGOs)
- Private enterprises

- Regulatory framework

ii) Establishing Transparency and Accountability

Transparency is widely recognized as a core principle of good governance. Transparency means ‘sharing information and acting in an open manner’. Good governance also implies accountabilities of local authorities to their citizen. The free access to information plays an important role in promoting transparency, which involves regular, organized and open consultations of citizens on city financial matters and other important issues. There are quite a good number of tools which can be used to enhance transparency and accountability as shown below (ADB, 2005):

- Participatory budget
- Annual development report
- Open-door policy
- Transparent tendering process and independent audit
- Anticorruption policy
- Public feedback mechanism
- Codes of ethics
- Conflict of interest laws
- Disclosure laws
- Ombudsman for local governments

iii) Decentralization for Equality and Social Cohesion in the Cities

Decentralization consists of a transfer of public functions from higher tiers to lower tiers of governance. Decentralization is a commitment to sustainable development through empowering citizens and their locally elected officials, accompanied by a reduction in monopolization of resources and powers by central authorities. Theorists on decentralization see local governments as equal partners in the national development process. There are compelling reasons for developing countries to pursue decentralization policies, which, properly conceived, will greatly improve the management of urban areas and support the better delivery of urban services. A prudent decentralization program should include:

- the simultaneous decentralization of responsibilities, resources, and autonomy;
- strengthening of local government capabilities, powers, and responsibilities;
- the collection and diffusion of information on local government services;

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- the retention of central government of certain functions for reasons of efficiency, such as income distribution and macroeconomic policy; and
- review of local government remuneration, incentives, and career structures.

Decentralization represents a profound shift in the manner and system of urban governance and empowerment of elected local officials. By decreasing the role of central government and augmenting the authority of responsive local institutions, accountability between the providers and users of local services can be greatly increased. In the Eyes of Robert Chambers (undated), decentralization is the key to address and solve the societal problems at local level.

Recommendation and Conclusion

A planned urban growth and development can contribute not only to economic advancement but also to reduce poverty and improved quality of life for all citizens, including the poor.

Reform in urban policies in favor of balanced and sustainable urbanization is required. Achieving balanced and sustainable urbanization would depend on the planning and design of urban areas in the country.

An urban center is not an isolated unit. It is a part of the local and regional system and has social, economic, physical and environmental linkages with other urban centers and rural settlements.

Regionally an integrated district plan covering social, economic, physical and environmental aspects should be prepared and implemented with a view to assisting local governments, private firms and other local institutions and actors to locate services, facilities and economic activities in ways that build the productive capacity of the urban and rural areas within the district and strengthen linkages among the urban centers as well as linkages of the urban centers with their rural hinterlands.

As a basic local government unit, however, an Upazila is comprised of both an urban center and a number of rural growth centers within rural settings. The urban municipalities spread all over the country are basically the Upazila Headquarters. Each Upazila is comprised of a number of Unions with their Headquarters mostly in rural settings. These Union Headquarters and other rural hats and bazaars mostly form small growth centers of commercial development within the Upazila. Again, a Zila is comprised of some Upazilas with the role of coordinating development within its jurisdiction. As a result, physical planning at Upazila level should be the foundation for economic and social development and environmental preservation and conservation.

Initiatives to minimize the inequality need to be broad-based and integrate mutually

reinforcing components so as to provide for a healthy and safe living environment for the poor, improve their access to income and assets, and promote the integration of less fortunate citizens including disadvantaged groups and the disabled within the community. An approach to inclusive urban development is a dire necessity in prioritizing the measures for improving the conditions for inequality in order to make our cities socially cohesive.

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