



The role of NGOs in public and private land development: The case of Dhaka city



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ABSTRACT

Through a series of case studies, this paper discusses the three stakeholders in land development for housing in Dhaka city: the public and private sectors, and NGOs. In a scenario in which urban planning merely serves to the fulfil formal requirements and benefit certain groups, in which the public sector is an accomplice to the private sector, and where NGOs have their own private interests; urban planning in the public interest is interlocked with private interests. NGOs are important tertiary stakeholders in planning and service provision. While they vary in their types and objectives, environment NGOs in particular often find themselves in an antagonistic position concerning public and private land development. However, the interventions to the public and private sectors placed by the NGOs can provide a platform for future negotiation and participation in policy formulation.

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Introduction

This paper concerns the role of NGOs in public and private land development for housing in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Access to buildable land is the precondition of well-ordered and incremental housing supply. The failure of the market, and of the government, to provide for basic needs, makes NGOs an important secondary agent of social development in Bangladesh (Ahsan et al., 2009; Momin, 2013). With particular focus on residential subdivision and slums, this paper investigates whether and how NGOs are influencing public and private land developments.

Since the mid-1970s and the establishment of neo-liberalism as the orthodoxy underpinning the policies of the IMF, the World Bank, and more recently the WTO, debates have tended to focus upon governance, rather than government per se (Lee and McBride, 2007). Dissatisfaction with the ability of the existing political system to respond to the views and needs of all social groups, and scepticism towards for-profit private sectors, demands some form of accountability (Stroker, 1998, 38). With the ascent of neo-liberalism in the 1990s, the topic of governance and accountability gained new relevance. First, the 'roll back of the state', which has sub-contracted delivery of public services to complex partnership for the quality, effectiveness and efficiency of delivery (Leat, 2004; Jepson, 2005, 516). This often refers to the expansion

of market mechanisms into previously relatively non-marketised domains, e.g., land and housing (Walker et al., 2008, 528). Secondly, relationships between the state and 'civil society' to create a public realm (Swilling, 1997) that leads to a collective benefit, which cannot be achieved by either acting separately (Rakodi, 2003, 524). Civil society is considered a third sector outside the private sector and the state. In the liberal tradition that views conservative governments and organised business interests in unison (Oommen, 2003, 128), civil society can become the primary locus for the expansion of democratic and civil rights.

The 'Civil Society Empowerment' initiatives in most developing countries have been focused almost entirely on the NGOs. This is due to the fact that in places where grassroots democracy has yet to take hold and where the private sector is still at the 'robber-baron' phase of maturation, there is so much corruption and nepotism that external donors do not trust the integrity or capacity of organisations normally associated with 'civil society.' NGOs, by virtue of their relatively independent and non-profit status, and their links to poor communities that they have generally served well, are treated as an entry point to the burgeoning civil society that donors will help shape (Stiles, 2002, 835–836). The World Bank estimates that more than 15% of total overseas development aid is channelled through NGOs (Lehman, 2007, 646).

Bangladesh is a pioneer in NGO activism. There have been several studies on NGOs focusing on various issues, such as, resources and governance (Gauri and Galef, 2005; Kabeer et al., 2012), corporate social disclosure (Jamil, 1998; Ahsan et al., 2009; Momin, 2013), social-economic and political consequences

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(Stiles, 2002; Naher, 2010), and housing the urban poor (Rahman, 2002). However, land development for housing in Dhaka has not yet been studied. The paper is organised as follows. The second section is the literature review that provides a background of the role of public, private sector and NGOs in land transformation. Methodology is in the third section and the land development process is in the fourth section. The paper concludes with the discussion and conclusions in the fifth and sixth sections.

Literature review

Government and land development

Rakodi states that "...the state-led approach to development implied that public sector organisations could plan and manage urban development and the debate focused on an appropriate allocation of roles and responsibilities between central and local government and between the administrative departments of government and semi-autonomous public sector agencies" (2003, 524). Translated into housing delivery and physical planning, government approaches have intended to provide decent housing directly and to plan cities by demarcating land uses.

First, public housing programmes could never make a significant dent in the housing deficit due to the combination of rapid urban growth, limited governmental capacity and resources, and the sheer number of people living in poverty. The whole system lacked a sound economic base due to the level of subsidies involved to reach the targeted groups (Choguill, 1988; Sengupta, 2006, p. 450; Choguill, 2009; Gilbert, 2009). Nor did public housing achieve its social equity objectives. Government provisions have been used to camouflage inequality rather than to redistribute income, land and wealth (Gilbert, 1981, 657; Shidlo, 1990; Fekade, 2000). Eventually, the majority of the urban residents are left to fend for themselves in grossly inadequate and usually illegal solutions (Hardoy and Satterthwaite, 1986).

Secondly, from the physical planning perspective, zoning to demarcate and to contain desired land use and master planning to ensure guided land development are typical examples of public intervention. For the most part, urban planning intends to control the private development driven by a sense of altruism leading to the greater good for the greater number, efficient service provision and justice to unprivileged groups. Among many planning tools used, one of the most prominent examples is the 'greenbelt'. In modern times, greenbelt policy was pioneered in the United Kingdom. The revision of Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 in the UK in 1995 suggested that greenbelts had a positive role in fulfilling several objectives. These include: (i) to achieve a compact urban form and to contain urban sprawl; (ii) to provide open countryside for outdoor sports and recreations; (iii) to retain attractive landscapes and to improve damaged and derelict land around towns; and (iv) to secure nature conservation interests, e.g., agricultural, forestry and related uses (Steeley and Gibson, 1998; Kim and Choe, 2011, 48).

Following the British example, greenbelts of different objectives were used as a planning tool in several Asian cities, e.g., Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Hanoi. The greenbelt of Seoul was successfully enforced because of the dictatorial regime backed by the military plan for the city. However, the greenbelt resulted in a bipolar urban density, high density inside and outside the greenbelt (Tankel, 1963; Kim and Choe, 2011, 47). The greenbelt for Tokyo failed because of strong opposition from the residents and landowners. The greenbelt policy is rarely an effective planning tool to curb land conversion and to protect environmentally vulnerable areas in Asian cities, which are characterised by population growth, demand for buildable land, speculation and corruption.

In addition to the failure to guide land development, the emergence of informal land and housing sub-markets (e.g., slums, squatters, informal subdivisions) is the result of planning regulations that practice unduly high standards in view of the financial capacity of low-income households (Fekade, 2000; Gilbert, 1981; Mehta et al., 1989; Sivam, 2002, p. 528). Between 70% and 95% of the all new houses that were being built in cities of the developing countries in the informal subdivisions (McAuslan, 1994; Kombe, 2000), were the response to the restrictive and high-standard planning regulations. The general dissatisfaction towards the traditional role of urban government is due to the lack of success in the use of limited resources, responsiveness to the needs of urban growth, sensitivity to the needs of the urban poor and concern for environmental protection. This has in many places given rise to advocacy of a managerial role of the state. The major deviation from the previous state-led urban approach was the influence of neo-liberal economic thinking that is expressed in the macro-economic policies and associated with structural adjustment from a desire to reduce the role of government in land and housing delivery (Devas and Rakodi, 1993; Rakodi, 2003, 525).

'Roll Back of State' and private land development

The World Bank (WB) is the flagship of neo-liberal policy promotion in urban management in developing countries. The Bank's policy paper New Urban Management Program (NUMP) states "a shift in the role of central governments from direct providers of urban services and infrastructure to enablers" (WB, 1991; RAJUK, 2006, 20). The components of the enabling policy are: (i) simple regulation so that the private sector can respond to market demand; (ii) the delivery of land and housing through the privately raised capital; and (iii) cost recovery of government investments and by formalising illegal land and housing so that taxes can be charged (Jones and Ward, 1994, p. 33; Zanetta, 2001). This is because the private sector is assumed to be more efficient than the public sector in providing land and housing (Cheung, 1978, 50).

There are several noted consequences of the enabling policy concerning the land and housing supply in cities of developing countries. First, housing became less of a priority for the government "...as its social allocation and cutbacks are justified as housing reforms which has taken many forms and manifestations" (Sengupta, 2010, 323). For example, public housing programmes disproportionately favours the middle and upper income groups in the name of cost recovery, but these bypasses low-income shelter needs. Secondly, the for-profit market is not interested in low-income housing. Firman (2009, 332) notes that peripheral land conversion by the local government and private sector in Jakarta is caused by political interests and pressure by placing what are perceived to be profitable economic activities. Thirdly, in all developing countries, with rare exceptions, implementations of planning regulations are so weak that land use plans are ineffective in controlling the physical development (Firman, 2009; Sivam, 2002, p. 529). With the consolidation of neo-liberalism, Roy (2009) refers the peripheral land subdivisions in developing countries as 'privatization of informality.' These subdivisions are no more legal than squatter settlements and shanty towns, but they are expressions of class power and can thus command infrastructures, services, and legitimacy (82–83).

Even though reliance on the enabling policy modifies the traditional role of the government, it also, paradoxically, broadens this role. In operational terms, enablement will often take the form of partnership arrangements that joins government policy makers, government agencies, community based organisations, NGOs, private builders and/or households (UNCHS, 1992; WB, 1993; Pugh, 1994, 358; Sengupta, 2010). Public-Private Partnership (PPP) for urban housing delivery (e.g., India), a tool to combine righteous

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