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## City profile

## Dhaka, Bangladesh: unpacking challenges and reflecting on unjust transitions

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## ABSTRACT

The paper initially provides an succinct overview of physical growth and socio-cultural distinctiveness of Dhaka (the capital city of Bangladesh) - shaped by its primacy in the national and regional hierarchy for more than 400 years. The paper primarily assesses the challenges that Dhaka is currently facing. It is Bangladesh's most unequal city. Despite a historical legacy of formal and civic committee based planning experience, it has remained an organically developed city without effective interventions from planning and implementing agencies to make it more liveable for the poor. Transport policy and interventions are antagonistic towards rickshaws, walking and cycling. The mega city has neither efficient public transport nor mass transit. It only has insufficient urban water transport. Informality of living and jobs are highly ingrained in its everyday lifeline, mainly contributed by the bosti dwellers for whom land use distribution and land ownership are much disproportionate, skewed and unjust. Although they are the majority, service and infrastructure provisions including housing, health, transportation, and safety remained highly compromised for them. With 'systemic invasion' of its land around rivers, lakes and other water-bodies and wetlands by the 'elites', the city is becoming less liveable. It is more prone to floods as it currently has no formal adaptation, disaster risk reduction or prevention policies, practices or initiatives in place.

## 1. Introducing Dhaka - setting the scene

While in Bengali, the word 'Dhaka' means something that is wrapped up, this article unpacks the city of Dhaka – the capital and prime city of Bangladesh. It is one of the fastest growing mega cities in the world, with an estimated population of over 17.6 million people within its 1528 sq. km area, and expected to have near 26 million people by 2035 (The World Factbook, 2015; RAJUK, 2015; UN (United Nations), 2016<sup>1</sup>). Geo-morphologically Dhaka is located in the flood plain of one of the largest river systems of the Earth (Dewan, 2013). The extended megacity comprises of six municipalities: Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), Gazipur City Corporation, Narayanganj City Corporation, Savar Paurashava, Kanchan Paurashva; many other Upazila (sub-district) towns, and rural areas (RAJUK, 2015). The municipalities in Dhaka mega city have a

total of 10,634,347 people (BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics), 2012; BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics), 2013a, 2013b) of which 82.83% i.e. 8,807,894 population are from DNCC and DSCC. According to the BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics) (2012), the population density in these two city corporations is 28,748<sup>2</sup> per sq. km, which is more than triple than the mega city average of 7918.

Although its population growth trend may look similar to other mega-cities of the Global South, including Rio de Janeiro and Mumbai, it is unique, fluid and vibrant like many big cities in the world. It is moulded by policy, power, and politics interplay between city and government authorities, non-governmental organisations and intermediaries that "...shape the relationships between built environments and the identities, practices, struggles and opportunities of everyday social life in the city" (te Lintelo, Gupta, McGregor, Lakshman, & Jahan, 2017, p.2). Sitting on the north bank of the Buriganga, Dhaka has

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always enjoyed a distinct primacy in the national and regional hierarchy for more than 400 years. Being the primate city, it is experiencing an unparalleled shortage of land supply and rapidly deteriorating urban environment. Such strains on its environment already make Dhaka the most vulnerable city in Asia, which is further aggravated by climate change induced negative externalities - including higher intensity of cyclones and flooding, and subsequent water logging (Dewan, 2013). Given this recurrent exposure, most of the built-up areas and informal settlements have become labelled as highly vulnerable (see Section 4). Yet, the bureaucratic and ‘quick-fix’ nature of urban planning and development practices does not offer much to deal with the contemporary and emerging challenges. Therefore, this paper pivotally aims to identify and discuss the key challenges of Dhaka by reflecting on its historical backdrop of formation and consequent evolution, contemporary planning practices and other attributes that make it a unique megacity. In Section 2, we discuss the history of Dhaka's physical growth and planning. In Section 3, we highlight key physical, cultural and socio-economic features that make it unique in the world of megacities. We then focus upon key disaster risks, vulnerabilities and health implications in the following section. In Section 5, we narrate briefly the key actors in planning and management of the city, followed by depiction of informal practices around land and services. At the end, we draw our concluding thoughts.

## 2. Dhaka's history of growth and planning – the melting pot of the East

In this section, we look into how Dhaka's growth has been shaped by its historical legacy in the national and regional hierarchy over 400 years. We also narrate its history of planning and management since the British occupation.

### 2.1. Dhaka's growth history - shaped by multiple actors from around the globe

Dhaka is older than many of the surrounding South Asian and other mega cities. In its 900 years it has seen people from different parts of the world shaping Dhaka with their culture, religion, and architecture. The growth of Dhaka can be distinguished in five distinct phases: Pre-Mughal period (until 1602), Mughal period (1602–1764), British occupation (1764–1947), Pakistan regime (1947–1971) and Post-independence (after 1971) period. Dhaka's Pre-Mughal history is quite obscure. It was a small settlement confined by the ‘Dholai Khal’<sup>3</sup> and Buriganga, and was mainly settled by people of the Hindu community (Tayesh, 1910; *Banglapedia*, 2015).

The settlement came into prominence when the Mughal General Man Singh, who was from the Hindu community, chose Dhaka as his administrative outpost. It was the strategic location that provided natural safeguard against enemies and navigable primacy for easy accessibility to vast array of the regions (Hyder, 1994; Basu, 2012). Dhaka was chosen as the Capital of a province of the Muslim led Mughal Empire. Since then the European traders of Christian origin, including the Dutch, French, Portuguese and British started trading. The city continued to grow until the early 18th century when the capital was moved to ‘Murshidabad’, a town to the west Bengal of India (Chowdhury & Faruqui, 2009; Islam, 1996; Islam, 2007a, 2007b; *Banglapedia*, 2015).

In 1757 when the British East India Company took over political power of the region, Dhaka suffered further setback; Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) was made Bengal's capital. The economy of the city plummeted (Chowdhury & Faruqui, 2009). By 1840, nearly 42 sq. km of Dhaka's urban space had been deserted with about 700,000 inhabitants leaving their homes (Ahsan, 2009). The British rulers later took

initiatives to revitalize the city: the municipal community was launched in 1840; a race-course and garden was built in 1825 in Ramna (Islam, 1996; Islam, 2007a, 2007b). Dhaka again became the Capital of Assam and Bengal province in 1905 for a period until 1911 and experienced a dramatic 21% rise in the population between 1901 and 1911 (Islam, 1996; Karim, 2009).

After Pakistan and India gained independence from the British in 1947, Dhaka was made the capital of East Pakistan and had to accommodate a huge number of Muslim migrants from India. To take care of growth and management of the city, the Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT) was established in 1956. By 1961, Dhaka had grown to cover an area of 12 sq. km. (Ahsan, 2009) and a population of slightly less than a million (Ahsan, 2009; Chowdhury & Faruqui, 2009; Islam, 2007a, 2007b) (Fig. 1).

In 1971, Dhaka became the capital of an independent country - Bangladesh. People, mainly rural migrants, started to flock to the city. The city continued to grow rapidly. Dhaka's population density rose to 220,246 persons/sq. km. leading to the development of many informal settlements (Angel et al., 2005; Islam, Angeles, Mahbub, Lance, & Nazem, 2006).

### 2.2. A city planned by many

Modern city management is quite old in Dhaka. The first civic committee titled ‘Committee of Improvement’ was formed in 1823 to consider solutions to the urban problems. It was reshaped as the Dhaka Municipal Committee in 1864. The municipality was given the status of a corporation in 1984, and in 1990 it was renamed as Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) (Ezaz, 2005). Apart from local government with a view to promote organised development and tackle future urban growth, the Dhaka Improvement Trust (DIT) was established in 1956 under the Town Improvement Act, 1953. The name of the organization was changed to Dhaka Development Authority in 1987 (‘Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkhya’ – RAJUK) (RAJUK, 2015). Section 73 (1) of Town Improvement Act empowers RAJUK to be the central planning authority for the area under its jurisdiction. However, along with RAJUK, other planning organisations were established since British regime, which - operated under different hierarchies - made planning and management of the city more complicated (Ezaz, 2005) (for more on the actors, see Section 5).

Again, the history of city planning is similarly old in Dhaka. In 1917, Patrick Geddes, made the first formal planning effort for Dhaka by a short field investigation at his ‘Dacca’ (Dhaka) Town Planning Report, 1917. He emphasised the conservation of indigenous character of the city and provided directions to accommodate the future growth (RAJUK, 2015).

The next plan, ‘Dacca’ (Dhaka) Master Plan, 1959, was made by DIT, after 38 years of the 1917 report, for the then jurisdiction area of 828.80 sq. km. After the end of its 29 year lifetime, the first attempt was made to prepare a strategic plan i.e., Dhaka Metropolitan Area Integrated Urban Development Plan (DMAIUDP), in 1981 (RAJUK, 2015). It was distinct from the previous master plans for the following reasons (Ahmed, Bramley, & Verburg, 2014): (i) aggregated land use and footprint analysis of the city; (ii) land development strategy around the city core with an emphasis on northern expansion strategy coupled with flood protection plan. However, as DMAIUDP was not gazetted by the government (revealed during a personal communication with a RAJUK official) due to unknown reasons, the plan was never published nor implemented, which meant the Master Plan of 1959 was allowed to lead the city until Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (DMDP) was formulated in 1995. DMDP consisted of a (i) Structure Plan (1995–2015), (ii) an interim Urban Area Plan (1995–2005) and (iii) Detailed Area Plan (2010). The DMDP offered new development strategies, plans and programs for the next 20 years for the entire RAJUK's jurisdiction of 1528 sq. km., consisting of unified Dhaka City Corporation and five adjoining municipalities i.e., Savar, Narayanganj,

<sup>3</sup> Khal is the Bengali word for canal.

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