

PLANNING EDUCATION: ITS NATURE AND EVOLUTION IN BANGLADESH

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INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the subject of planning education, its nature and evolution in Bangladesh in the context of local, regional and national needs. It also briefly reviews the performance of planning education in the country, in its present state and provides recommendations for improvement. The term "planning" refers to the professional activity related to both development planning and planning for socio-physical environment of urban and rural areas. It also includes different specialized branches of spatial planning such as town/urban planning, rural/country planning, regional planning and environmental planning.

Need for planning:

The necessity of planning education arises out of the need for development in Bangladesh. The country's population is growing at an alarmingly high rate of about 2.3% per year. Since our land resource is limited the progressive imbalance between the growth of population and land is a matter of extreme concern. Possibly no other country suffers from such an acute shortage of land and in no other country there is so great a need to utilize every acre to the fullest extent. With increasing and often conflicting demand on land, and the growing importance of ensuring that land is put to use to which it is best suited. Bangladesh now, more than ever before, needs the service of professionals trained to assess present and future requirements for land to design the physical framework within which all forms of human activity and development can take place. The efficient use of land resources through an integrated plan is of utmost importance for Bangladesh. Also, to ensure equitable growth throughout the country and to take the pressure of urbanization off the few larger cities by distributing it on smaller centers, Bangladesh needs to organize her economic activities in space through a comprehensive plan. Added this is the conservation of the degrading environment that the planners have a key role to play. The planners can organize the present environment, mobilize the limited resources and monitor an environmentally sound and sustainable development.

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ESTABLISHMENT OF PLANNING AGENCIES

The awareness of the need for urban planners was first felt in the late 1950's when three major cities of the country, namely, Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna, started growing rapidly and consequence of partition of India. In the absence of any guideline plan or development control, an unplanned growth was taking place in all the cities that created a situation of total chaos in the expanding urban scene.

Traditionally, paurashavas or municipalities were and still are responsible for providing most urban services in the towns. But the role of the municipal organizations had little to do with town planning and they lacked in physical planning organs. Even today, the paurashavas and even the municipal corporations of the large cities do not have any planning setup of their own. In the absence of planning cells at the municipal level, unplanned development went on mounting and deteriorated the socio-physical fabric of the towns and cities. The progressive deterioration called for the immediate enactment of appropriate planning legislation and the creation of institutions to administer them. This led to the enactment of the Building Construction Act (1952) and the Town Improvement Act (1953) and the establishment of four urban development authorities, namely, the Dhaka Improvement Trust (Now Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakhha), Chittagong Development Authority, Khulna Development Authority, and after nearly two decades Rajshahi Development Authority. These four authorities have played vital roles in the process of planned urban development for the country.

But due to the dearth of qualified professional planners, the preparation of master plans for these cities proved to be a difficult task. Still, with the help of the Colombo Plan Technical Assistance Programme, a Master Plan for Dhaka was prepared by a foreign firm in 1959. The adoption of the Master Plan of Dhaka further highlighted the need for planning education in the country for implementing the plans.

The creation of institutions alone was not enough to help prepare a comprehensive urban development strategy. The rapid growth of other urban centers and unplanned location of industries in 1960's necessitated the creation of the Urban Development Directorate in 1962. In order to man these institutions a special programme was also undertaken with a view to having the professionals trained in the School of Ekistics in Athens. But to ensure a steady supply of qualified planners, the establishment of a school of planning was then felt imperative.

INCEPTION OF PLANNING EDUCATION

The Department of Physical Planning was established at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) in 1962 under the Faculty of Architecture and Planning to cater for the needs of the government and autonomous organizations. But the academic programme began in 1969. It provided the country's first ever degree granting programme in planning. Initially the department offered graduate work leading to the degree of Master of Physical Planning (MPP).

The education for planners was mostly directed to the needs of the country. The syllabus of the School was prepared by expatriate professors in association with the local experts. Subsequently the syllabus has been changed to meet the changing needs and the prevailing conditions of the country. Though the department started with the name of Department of Physical Planning, it was subsequently changed to the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (URP) in 1976.

Till today this is the only regular degree offering department for Planning Education which offers regular courses. Besides the Department of Geography Dhaka University offers few Courses on planning. The department of Geography, Jahangirnagar University has also introduced M. Phil. & Ph. D. studies through research on urban and rural planning. The Institute of Bangladesh Studies at Rajshahi University offers M. Phil and Ph. D. degrees through research. The Centre of Urban Studies at the Dhaka University is devoted to Planning Consultancy and Research in both Rural and Urban Sectors. The Housing and Environment Research Cell at Faculty of Architecture and Planning at BUET is also engaged in planning studies and research.*

THE CURRICULUM

The Board of Post Graduate Studies (BPGS) of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, at BUET looks after the curriculum and on the basis of national need the detail academic programme is worked out. At present professional planning in the country is non-statutory in character. The national goal is not well defined as yet. So in our academic programme for planning education we are trying to incorporate both substantive and generic skills in appraising complex interrelationship of socio- economic and spatial issues of both private and public actions. Planning is a multi-disciplinary subject. Planners require varying degrees of skills in engineering with respect to transportation, water supply, drainage systems. They must possess the mathematical skills for quantitative methods and drafting skills for graphic representation. They are required to have a sound understanding of the principles of economics sociological and anthropological roots of urbanization. The list can go on further and a variety of courses are offered to develop all these and other skills in the students so that they can turn themselves into competent planners. At present, a number of courses, e.g. human settlements and land economics, planning process and theories, urban planning, rural development planning, etc. form the core area and are compulsory. There are twenty-nine other courses from three broad categories of urban planning, rural planning and regional planning from which a student can select in order to specialize in a chosen direction.

In view of the dynamic nature of the discipline we look forward to the modernization of the programme in response to international trends and our own national and regional

* The Khulna University is preparing to introduce undergraduate programme in planning education in the department of Urban and Rural Planning beginning in July, 1991.

Further to add, Department of Urban & Regional Planning at BUET took an attempt to open undergraduate programme in 1979 without success. In the recent years a fresh attempt is made and the matter is under process by the University.

needs as well. The curricula are constantly reviewed and revised accordingly to incorporate progressive developments of the profession in planning skills, techniques and ideas. This has led, at present, to greater emphasis on the curriculum of computer aided techniques and environmental aspects of planning.

Most of the planning graduates are employed in government and semi-government organizations but a considerable number of graduates are also employed by the private consulting firms. The private consulting firms are at present involved in the preparation of upazila and zila shahar land use plans. It is desirable that the employers and practitioners provide some feedback and make suggestions for revising the curriculum to better suit professional requirements in our country. The author recommends to develop a mechanism that allows this to happen. So far this has not taken place at a desirable level. Even the role of the professional institution of planners has not been satisfactory in this regard.

JOINT DEGREE PROGRAMME WITH SHEFFIELD UNIVERSITY

The Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) had to start the planning educational programme in 1969 on request from the Government. However, neither an attempt was ever made to outline the necessity of planning in the country nor an adequate number of professional opportunities in Government and semi-government Institutions were created. Consequently the post-graduate programme was seriously plagued with the problem of a very high rate of dropouts. In 1972 a National Physical Planning Project was undertaken with the assistance of the United Nations Development Programme. The main responsibility for the preparation of a comprehensive national physical plan was entrusted to the government institution, namely the Urban Development Directorate. The first and foremost necessity, therefore, was the strengthening of national institutions (Urban Development Directorate) responsible for formulating planning projects on a national scale. To enable this Directorate to undertake these important responsibilities its staff capacity, in terms of professionally trained planners, had to be vastly expanded.

Therefore, the training of professionals manpower has become an integral part of the Directorate. In view of the limited capacity of BUET, a joint degree programme between the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology and the University of Sheffield, U.K., was initiated and pursued through the local training and the U.N. fellowship programme under the project in 1975. It was decided to train some thirtysix young graduates in four batches. Staff capacity and teaching quality of BUET was augmented by bringing in expatriate teachers and arranging of advanced training for the teachers of BUET to train the fellows. This programme has been successful to produce at least 19 planners in a period of three years. Due to dropout and lack of renewed initiative on behalf of the government, the programme could not be extended and the target could not be achieved.

THE JOINT EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME WITH AIT

Faced with the constant shortage of trained personnel in planning research and management, it was felt that the deficit could be partially compensated if immediate

provision could be made for advanced training and education of technocrats from various fields, who have been working at planning oriented positions in various ministries of the government, different agencies and institutions. In recognition of this need, a post-graduate diploma programme in planning was initiated in September 1988, jointly by the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), Bangkok, and BUET to provide inservice training and professional development to upgrade the technical competence and skills of the participants and to offer them the opportunity to acquire new professional and technical skills in assuming new responsibilities. The training is to be administered by the Human Settlements Development Division at AIT and the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at BUET. About 32 technocrats are expected to be trained in this programme within five years.

THE PERFORMANCE OF PLANNING EDUCATION PROGRAMMES VIS-A-VIS THE NEEDS

The need and importance of planning education in Bangladesh has hardly been emphasized. We shall now try to assess the minimum number of planners required to carry out planning operations and activities at a level that is just satisfactory. We then compare that figure with the number of planners that our education programmes have produced and are expected to produce in the immediate future.

At present there are about 460 urban centers in Bangladesh with a population of around 15 million. This figure is likely to rise to at least 35 million by the end of this century. Taking a very conservative estimate of one planner per 100,000 urban population, we need atleast 150 to 200 urban planners. To this figure we must add the planners devoted to rural planning at the upazila level. With various programmes aimed at rural planning and integrated rural development, there is clearly a need for some form of institutional training programme for skilled personnel at the upazila level to plan settlements, roads, drainage, irrigation and flood control schemes and environmental programmes for the rural areas. A desirable target appears to be atleast one such planner for each upazila. With 460 upazilas in the country, it is assumed that an equal number of rural planners would be required.

In addition to urban and rural planners, there is a need for planning requirements and spatial distribution of long-term infrastructural investment at different levels of government viz, at the national, divisional and district levels. With 64 districts, 4 divisions, several special development agencies, about 50 to 60 planners would be required in the short term and about 50 to 60 more by the year 2000. Summing up, we would require some 600 planners in the immediate short term and atleast as much as 900 by the end of the century.

At present, there are only around 30 qualified planners working in the national or local government or semi-government organizations. The programme at BUET and the joint degree programme with the Sheffield University has so far produced 76 and 19 planners, respectively. The joint programme with AIT is expected to train at least 32

technocrats with post-graduate diploma within the next 5 years. The post-graduate programme of BUET takes in about 25 fresh prospective planners each year, but a significant numbers drop out and the number of pass-outs in recent years has not exceeded the programme at its present state which would be able to supply even a significant fraction of the number of planners required, especially in view of the fact that a portion of locally produced planners manage to find employment abroad.

A CASE FOR UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMME

As already mentioned the insignificant number of planners obtaining post-graduate degree in planning from BUET is a result of high rate of dropouts. The pre-requisite for admission into the courses is graduation in engineering, architecture or masters degree in geography, mathematics, statistics, sociology, etc. This means, the admitants in the course already have four to five years of post-intermediate education completed. With a degree that can get them a reasonably decent job, economic pressure forces them to quit further study in favour of some employment. The only way to stop this trend is to offer enough financial incentives that can compete with the attraction of jobs. However, apart from the fact that such a measure would entail a huge sum of money, the measures itself may not be acceptable since, as a matter of policy, financial assistance in post-graduate education in all departments of BUET is kept identical.

A more practical and efficient approach would be to introduce an undergraduate programme where students would be admitted immediately after their higher secondary education. Naturally, the duration of the course would be longer than the post-graduate programme since a wider variety of subjects would have to be incorporated in it. The whole programme should fit in a 4-year time frame. Such undergraduate programmes in planning already exist in many universities of the West, on both sides of the Atlantic and in some Asian countries as well.

CONCLUSION

Bangladesh has already experienced the high social cost of unplanned development. Only planned developments may optimize the level of social benefits. An increasing realization to this regard is now being made at the policy and political levels. Very recently local governments at the various levels have either been already reorganized and revitalized or are in the process of reorganization of these more powerful institutions, the issues related to planned built-environment will get more attention and due emphasis will be made.

In the past, although there had been a recognized 'need' for planning, but due to weaknesses in the local governments and certain problems in the administrative set up, the need could not be transformed into effective demand for planning and thereby for planners. This has affected both the professional practice and academic training in the country.

For obvious reasons, the different professional opportunities will greatly influence the academic training. However, as planning is mostly a public sector activity, the

professional opportunities in turn will be influenced by the development in the country's socio-political environment. Therefore, at this stage, it is difficult to give a definite shape to the discipline as well as to the professional practice. We should keep our mind open to accommodate any change reflected either in the philosophical area of planning or in the socio-political environment of the country.

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