

Urbanization and Conservation of Water Bodies: Necessity for Coordinated Policies and Laws

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Bangladesh is a densely populated country. The man-land ratio is very low here and Bangladesh falls among the countries with lowest man-land ratio in the world. Here the employment opportunity is very limited. Moreover the available amenities are also urban based and hence the population density is very high in urban areas (928 person/sq. km). The per capita land area is only 0.28 acre (Economic Survey, 2005).

In the last few decades Bangladesh experienced very rapid urbanization. At present 23.39 percent of total population of Bangladesh live in urban areas. Of the total urban population about 52 percent live in four major metropolitan areas (Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna and Rajshahi).

Bangladesh has been experiencing the extreme pressure of more than 140 million people on its natural resources and environment, as the whole population is dependent on its limited resource and land. For environmental conservation of the country various laws and regulations have been formulated from time to time. These relate mainly to land use, water, air, environmental conservation etc.

Since the rate of urbanization in Bangladesh is very high, an appropriate urbanization policy is very much required at this moment. But till now there is no policy for urbanization in Bangladesh. As the urban population is increasing at a very high rate, so the need for housing and other amenities is also increasing.

To ensure a healthy and livable environment in any area, the presence of adequate water bodies is a basic requirement. Considering the present extent of urbanization the existing scenario of Dhaka City has been discussed in this article.

Dhaka is a city of about 12 million people and the population is increasing day by day. To meet the increased housing needs and other necessary amenities of the increasing number of population lots of structures are being built in the city and consequently the amount of vacant land is decreasing. As the total land amount is fixed and unchangeable so to meet the ever-increasing demand of land for housing and other purpose the water bodies and low lands are being filled up gradually. Lack of proper policies and regulations and mismatch among the existing various rules and regulations lead to the loss of water bodies of Dhaka City.

Loss of water bodies and low lands results in water logging, depletion of under ground water table etc. These in turn lead to various sufferings of the city dwellers. Besides, water bodies play a very vital role in the beautification of the city. Water bodies also play an important role in the recreation of city dwellers.

The “*Jaladhar Songrokkhon Aain 2000*” was passed for protecting water bodies of urban areas. But the definition of water bodies given there is debatable. This law defines water body as follows (unofficial translation):

“Natural water body means any river, creek, lake or pond, or a water body indicated as such in a master plan, or any area declared as flood flow zone by the government, local government or an organization through government gazette notification; and any land that contains flowing water and rain water shall also be included.”

There is hardly any area in Bangladesh that does not retain rainwater for a certain time. According to the definition of water body given in the law almost 70 percent of the total land area of the country can be defined as water body.

In Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan 1995 different areas have been designated as water bodies or flood flow zones or water retention ponds. But for identifying those areas specifically, the required digital mauza maps are yet to be prepared. In DMDP certain areas have been indicated by circles as water retention pond or flood flow zones but no mouza or plot has been specifically demarcated as such. Moreover these areas cannot be identified as specific mouzas in C.S. or R.S. maps. Detailed Area Plan (DAP) has to be prepared to identify those areas and protect them as water retention areas or water bodies. This process is now going on and after its completion the required digital map will be available to protect the indicated lands.

Taking advantage of weaknesses of this “*Jaladhar Aain*” various individuals and organizations are filling the low lands and water bodies for development works. Moreover in this law the definition of water body or water reservoir is not clear and hence it is not possible to protect water bodies using this law. Interestingly, allegations or objections are not only against the individuals or private developers but also against the government agencies like RAJUK, DCC etc.

Electronic and print media, various environmentalists and other such organizations are now very much concerned about the environment especially about water body conservation. They are trying to make the people understand the importance of water bodies by arranging various awareness generating programs such as rallies, seminars, public gatherings etc.

In fact no law can be implemented if there is no coordination between the formulating and implementing agencies. Besides other related laws such as “Building Construction Rules, 2006”, “Private Land Development Regulation 2004” etc., should be in accordance with the laws related to conservation of water bodies or water reservoirs. There should be certain provision for adequate open space or non-built areas in building construction

Rules. If Floor Area Ratio (FAR) is applied properly then it will be possible to have adequate open space. This will ensure proper recharge of ground water and will also prevent ground water depletion. Rules and regulations should be properly formulated and activities of different government agencies responsible for formulating and implementing various laws and regulations regarding urbanization and environmental management must be properly coordinated and synchronized.

On July 2005 a new Act namely "The Rivers, Flood Plains and Water Bodies Conservation, Development and Reclamation and Filling Restriction Act 2005" was finalized in the cabinet meeting but this law is yet to be enacted.

We all dream of a livable lively city where all required amenities would be available to all the inhabitants. Everybody should get required water, open space, park etc. to ensure a lively and healthy environment. Proper formulation and execution of related laws and policies is required for achieving the stated goal.