

Sustainable Urban Development in Dhaka

A. S. M. Abdul Quium

Introduction

The rapid growth of population, increased level of economic activities, rising incomes and accelerated motorization have led to massive demand for social and physical infrastructure provisions in Dhaka City. Although Dhaka has remained the main catalyst of economic development of the country, unfortunately like many other rapidly growing cities in the region, the growth of demand for infrastructure and services has not been matched by sufficient development in these sectors. Consequently, the overall quality of urban environment in Dhaka has seriously deteriorated. Although some steps have been taken in recent years under the DUTP project and other initiatives (such as the introduction of CNG run public transport), they fall far short of what is required to be done, particularly with respect to providing a general guideline to accommodate the on-going growth in a sustainable way.

Our failure to manage the negative impacts of urban growth is threatening the health, safety and environmental quality as well as productivity of the city. Deficiencies of basic services and amenities, severe traffic congestion, and unmanaged densification and urban expansion and their wide impacts are some of the pressing problems. They are affecting efficiency of the city, limiting access to economic opportunities and social services by the poor and other disadvantaged groups, effecting environmental degradation, raising serious concerns for health and safety issues and as such are considered a major challenge for sustainable development.

In a rapidly globalizing world, major cities have become the main catalyst of economic development. However, there are trade-offs between higher productivity of cities and increasing costs of providing environmental infrastructure and managing spillover effects into and beyond their neighbouring regions. The challenge of rapid urbanisation will be to sustain urban growth while solving the environmental and social equity problems arising from the negative impacts of spatial concentration of a variety of urban activity systems. Failing which the costs of these problems will fall most heavily on current generations, particularly on the urban poor, in terms of poor health, lower productivity, and reduced real income and quality of life.

However, a balanced response to these complex issues of rapid urbanization, urban productivity, poverty, and environment involves difficult political and economic trade-offs for decision makers. For example, even when there exists a political commitment to environmental improvement, budget constraints may make it a difficult choice to set aside more pressing demands like investment in education or health in favour of improvement

in existing overall environmental quality. The environmental problems generally increase with urban growth if not properly managed from the beginning and are linked to the use and degradation of non-renewable natural resources. If they remain unattended, they can lead to a state that is not sustainable. It is also important to remember that complementarities exist between the objective of environmental amenity, and economic efficiency, equity and growth. In this situation what can be our response from urban planning considerations?

The purpose of this paper is to consider our urban development strategy for sustainable urban development in the future. It examines the objectives of sustainable development, considers the limitations of the present approach towards achieving these broad objectives, discusses some of the promising options available, and finally suggests actions needed to meet the challenges of rapid urbanisation.

Objectives of Sustainable Urban Development

The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) has defined sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. In case of urban development this means creating urban areas where various activities like living, work, schooling, shopping, recreation, etc. and the movement of people and goods, can be carried out safely, efficiently and with amenity, and that ensures optimum utilization of scarce natural resources, and where any negative impact arising out of these activities are within the capacity of the environmental system to absorb them. In more explicit terms these conditions require :

- Efficient use of scarce natural and physical resources
- Minimisation of capital resource requirements
- Management of the different forms of negative impacts on the environment
- Reduction of adverse impacts on safety, public health and other social concerns
- Conservation of energy
- Ensuring social equity
- Implementation of good governance, and
- Improvement in overall quality of life

What these requirements could mean to achievable broad objectives of sustainable urban development is now explained.

Economic Efficiency

Economic efficiency does not mean opting for the cheap. It means efficient utilization of resources and being realistic with budgets. It also means that quality and reliability must be maintained to a satisfactory standard in keeping with the overall objectives. Pricing should reflect the true cost of facilities and services so that distortions in choice, generation of externalities and misallocation of scarce resources can be avoided. However, targeted subsidies may be required to make the basic services accessible by the marginal groups in society.