

# The Struggle for Urban Livelihoods and the Quest for a Functional City - Reconciling Informal and Statutory Planning Institutions in Dhaka, Bangladesh -



## Megacity Dhaka

The megacity Dhaka, capital of Bangladesh, with a population of about 12 million, has experienced rapid urban growth during the past decades. Rural-urban migration is the main contributor to this rapid urban expansion, with 300,000 to 400,000 new migrants coming into the city every year. As a result, the number of squatters and informal settlements is increasing.



Currently around 5,000 of these informal settlements, ranging from clusters of only a few households to areas with 100,000 inhabitants, accommodate 37 percent of the total population of Dhaka.

The informal settlements are characterised by very poor living conditions, in particular concerning accessibility, public services, water supply and sanitation, and environmental health. High densities cause pressure on the availability of space including urban public space for the livelihoods of the slum dwellers. A disabled statutory planning system and an inappropriate institutional setup lead to inefficient urban management, especially with regard to catering for the urban poor. The regulation of the struggle for urban public space, infrastructural services

and housing is, therefore, largely left to non-statutory institutions with local stakeholders playing a lead role.

The research propositions are based on the notion that there is a mutual dependency between the livelihoods of the urban poor and the functionality of the city. In the pursuance of livelihoods the urban poor run the risk to sacrifice the functionality of the city by threatening public health, encroaching upon land reserved for public infrastructure, settling on flood-prone land, and blocking vehicular access. The statutory planning system is, however, ill equipped to establish an appropriate balance between the vital interests of individual households and enterprises on the one hand and public welfare on the other.

The research project is part of the priority programme "Megacities - Megachallenge: Informal Dynamics of Global Change" funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) which started in November 2006.

## Spatiality of Livelihoods

The first sub-project investigates the spatiality of livelihoods by exploring linkages between urban public space and livelihood activities, the informal processes of negotiating space, and the



meaning of gender in accessing space. The research will contribute to the understanding of the spatial needs of slum dwellers which have become an important subject of discussion following the current approaches to slum resettlement in South Asia. Furthermore, the observation of the dynamics of settlement development, which often negatively affect the shape and availability of urban public spaces, will lead to the identification of critical stages, where urban functionality is considerably compromised.

## Informal Urban Governance

The second sub-project is about the dynamics and politics of informality in urban governance in Dhaka. The research will investigate the formal and informal relations between the actors involved and assess their dynamics and



interdependencies, their meaning for social relations, their economic implications, and their impact on the livelihoods of the informal settlers. The study will focus on the provision of urban utility services, especially water and electricity, to search for interfaces between non-statutory and statutory institutions and the corresponding negotiation procedures.

## Student Workshop

In March 2009 ten students of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, and ten students of the Faculty of Spatial Planning, TU Dortmund, joined for a two-day workshop, 'Dynamics in Urban Informal Settlements'. The workshop was part of the German advanced students' project 'Urban Functionality of Informal Settlements'. It was held in Dhaka during the four-week fieldwork period of the project and jointly facilitated by Bangladeshi and German lecturers.

The workshop was designed as a role play on the problem of insufficient and illegal water supply in an imaginary informal settlement in Dhaka. Teams of two students represented different actors, such as slum dwellers, community-based organisations, NGOs, local leaders and politicians, the Water Supply Authority and the media. Based on their specific interests and strategies the actors got involved in improving the situation for the slum dwellers. However, each actor had an own agenda and the best individual outcome was not necessarily the best outcome for the inhabitants. One of the lessons learned was thus that the achievement of such a planning process highly depends on the interest and willingness of the local politicians and the institutional actors involved. The workshop gave the German students an insight into the planning process practised in Dhaka.



## Study Areas

The research project selected three informal settlements of Dhaka, namely Islambag, Korail and Badda, as case study areas.

Islambag displays a high building density with multi-storey buildings and very few urban public spaces left. The livelihoods of its inhabitants are primarily based on plastic processing industries.

Korail, on the other hand, is less dense with single storey tin houses. The location adjacent to high income residential areas, the so-called model towns, supports service jobs (e.g. cleaners, house maids, rickshaw pullers) as the dominant livelihood activities of its inhabitants. Of almost equal importance are activities which serve the local market, such as selling

goods for daily consumption and provision of basic services like tailoring or hairdressing.

The third settlement, Badda, has a moderate density. Access to urban public spaces is less contested than in the other areas, although the area is regularly subject to serious flooding. The inhabitants do not follow any predominant livelihood strategy as of yet; many are working in the garment industries, others are rickshaw pullers and lower level government or private company employees.

exchange of information and materials, joint publications, and exchange of researchers and students. Close cooperation was also established with the Department of Geography and Environment, University of Dhaka.

Within the megacities priority programme three other projects conduct research in Dhaka. Their topics include the megaurban food system (Bonn and Heidelberg), climate change, public health, remote sensing and the organisation of informal economies (Berlin) and flooding (Bonn and Köln). Close cooperation was established between all Dhaka research projects, especially in the fields of joint data collection, data exchange and exchange of results.

## Partnership

The research is embedded into a network of local scientific cooperation partners. Memoranda of Understanding were signed with the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) and the Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), Dhaka. The objectives of the cooperation are to deepen cultural and scientific relations and to foster joint research through

## Perspective

The research project successfully applied for a second phase of research for another two years which will commence in January 2009. A six-month field visit is scheduled from the beginning of 2009 for a detailed application of the research methods pre-tested in the first phase. To facilitate cooperation and exchange of ideas among all research projects of the priority programme, a workshop will be held in Dhaka in February 2009. Furthermore the project aims to strengthen joint activities with the partner institutions.



## Team

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## Cooperation Partners



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