

Citizen's Agenda 2023

Towards a Different Bangladesh



Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh
এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

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Providing Public Utilities and Services in the Backdrop of Unplanned Urbanisation

The Initiative

Preparation of the Policy Briefs builds on a wide range of activities undertaken over the past two years (2022-2023) by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh. These activities sought to capture the views of the country's left-behind stakeholders at the subnational level as regards Bangladesh's dominant development narrative. Citizen's Platform's engagements in this connection included stakeholder dialogues, town hall meetings, focus group discussions, perception surveys and consultation with the media. Also, a Public Hearing was organised at the national level to create opportunities for the disadvantaged people to voice their concerns and aspirations in the presence of high-level policymakers and opinion builders.

It emerged from this exercise that a significantly large number of citizens and certain communities in Bangladesh have continued to remain vulnerable to various risks, which relegated them to the "left behind" situation in the revealed process of economic development. However, the *Leave No One Behind* spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) requires that all citizens, without exception, are ensured an equitable share in the country's development outcomes. Consequently, appropriate actions are needed to address these overarching national concerns to advance the interests of the country's vulnerable citizens and communities.

Accordingly, through country-wide interactions with spokespersons of key stakeholder groups, Citizen's Platform identified 11 themes requiring urgent attention for immediate action. As a follow up, now a series of Policy Briefs has been prepared with a set of concrete recommendations in each of the identified areas, underpinned by the specific context and contestations concerning the articulated theme. In each of these cases, the concerns and interests of the vulnerable groups have informed the suggestions for reforms and policy uptakes.

Each of the Policy Briefs in the series has been prepared by a dedicated team of experts of high national and international repute. Each Policy Brief Team had an eminent personality as the Chair to lead the process, with a recognised professional as the Penholder Expert to prepare and finalise the successive drafts with input from the team members. Each team got together several times, reviewed the notes of the sub-national discussions and the FGDs, and consulted relevant resource materials. A 22-member Advisory Committee, which included eminent professionals and leading personalities, provided guidance to the Policy Brief initiative.

The initiative was led by *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya* and *Professor Mustafizur Rahman*, Distinguished Fellows at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD). CPD, as the Secretariat of the Citizen's Platform, provided all necessary support for the smooth implementation of the initiative.

Disclaimer

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1. Background and Context

Over the recent past years, the pace of urbanisation in Bangladesh has been growing at a very fast pace. This is manifested in the increasing number of urban settlements, both large and small, and the growing number of people residing in urban areas. At present, besides 12 city corporations and 327 municipalities, there are 570 urban centres in Bangladesh. This unprecedented growth tends to be driven by four broad factors: (i) high natural growth of population in urban areas; (ii) territorial expansion of urban settlements; (iii) rural-to-urban migration; and (iv) newly emerging urban settlements. Regrettably, this growth in urbanisation has not been matched by provisioning of basic urban services.

As would be expected, growing urbanisation has given rise to new challenges, including in areas of delivery of public services in urban areas. Dhaka exemplifies the attendant challenges in a most visible manner. According to the World Bank data, the city covers only 1% of Bangladesh's total area but is home to 13% of the country's total population and accounts for almost 21% of its GDP. However, Dhaka also features regularly among the least liveable cities in the world according to the Economic Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index –indeed, it was ranked as the 7th least liveable city in EIU's 2023 report. This ranking is reflected in the sorry state of affairs with respect to provisioning of public services such as urban transport, housing, social services including health and education, and as per an array of other basic urban services (water, electricity and gas supply, sanitation, sewerage, drainage, garbage disposal, and solid waste management). Environment in urban areas (air, sound and water pollution) has also emerged as a significant concern in recent times. Within this general context, a large gap exists in the availability of services between the advantaged and the disadvantaged groups of citizens in urban areas. This scenario is not unique to Dhaka; indeed, this represents the general picture in other urban and peri-urban areas. Evidence suggests that the overall process of urbanisation in Bangladesh has also been afflicted by spatial and demographic factors.

All these have resulted in a growing number of problems facing urban governance in Bangladesh. Consequently, urban centres are being confronted with rising pressure as regards access to utilities and services including, amenities, transport, living environment, public health and education and other areas. As a result, over the recent past years, there has been a secular decline in almost all the Quality of Life (QoL) indicators in the urban areas. Also, with continuing rural transformation, many new secondary cities are coming up, which have their own specific needs and demands.

'Slumisation' due to push factors and 'urbanisation of rural life' due to economic development are becoming common features of urbanisation in Bangladesh. When policies and practices fail to take these newly emerging realities into consideration, it is the disadvantaged urban groups who suffer the most because they are disproportionately more dependent on delivery of basic public services. Such a scenario hardly corresponds with Bangladesh's aspiration of transitioning to an upper Middle-Income Country by 2031 and a High-Income Country by 2041. In this backdrop, the demands of public service delivery in the context of urbanisation need to be seen from economic as also social lens, and from the perspective of inclusivity.

Urbanisation in Bangladesh is often characterised as 'haphazard', 'disorganised and 'unplanned'. It is evident that

an unbalanced distribution of population is creating immense pressure on a few major cities, particularly in the capital city, Dhaka. Unplanned and unbalanced urbanisation is adversely affecting the quality of life of the urban population, particularly the quality of life of low-income groups. The left behind groups are trapped in the 'vicious urban life cycle' where they have to pay more for public services that are of poor quality, if at all available. For example, in Dhaka city, only about 11-16% of the low-income households are covered by institutionalised water supply (from Dhaka WASA). The majority of the rest of the households with informal access to various services are having to pay 7 to 14 times more than households with formal access. Households in informal settlements suffer from low quality of essential services: about 94% of such households reported suffering from bad odour from water bodies; nearly half of the urban population have no access to improved sanitation facilities. The space for parks, public amenities and children's playgrounds are shrinking. Often, these are taken over by vested groups with the tacit support of elected representatives and city officials. Solid waste management remains a challenging task in urban areas. On average, 55 per cent of solid waste remains uncollected. Only 14 per cent of medical waste is properly managed. E-waste is growing at 20 per cent annually. With a three-fold increase over the past 15 years and the recycle rate of only at 31%, managing plastic waste has emerged as a key problem in urban areas. Indeed, plastic pollution has become a major health hazard, polluting cities, clogging drains and causing flooding in urban areas.

Although several initiatives towards planned urbanisation were put in place over recent years, the desired outcomes in terms of delivery of quality services have remained unattained. The political economy of urban governance becomes apparent from the fact that the disadvantaged groups of the urban population, who are in need of urban public services more than others, suffer the most in this situation. Scarcity and inadequacy of public services and utilities and lack of proper service management have now reached a crisis point, with low-income and disadvantaged segments of society being impacted most adversely.

Against this backdrop, the objective of this Policy Brief is to prepare a set of recommendations towards better delivery of urban public services and utilities, keeping in perspective the particular interests and needs of the disadvantaged groups of the urban population. These include slum dwellers, people with disabilities, women and elderly population who tend to remain neglected in the context of provisioning of urban services. The recommendations are geared to ensure inclusive and sustainable urbanisation and effective urban governance in Bangladesh in a way that is aligned with the SDG spirit of Leave No One Behind (LNOB).

2. Recommendations

This section presents a set of recommendations to address some of the key concerns as regards making quality public services available to disadvantaged and vulnerable urban populations towards sustainable urbanisation in Bangladesh.

Strengthen Local Government Institutions

To bridge coordination gaps and strengthen public service delivery in urban areas, Local Government Institutions (LGI) should be empowered with the mandate and capacity to manage public utilities and services in respective urban jurisdictions

efficiently. The LGIs at present face many challenges, particularly with respect to finance and human resources. These institutions are overburdened with many responsibilities and do not have the required capacities to address the growing needs of the urban population, more specifically, the needs of the urban disadvantaged groups such as the slum population, low-income groups and persons with special needs. Urban local governments need to be strengthened with appropriate power, financial and human resources and technical capabilities so that they are adequately equipped to prepare plans and implement deliverables in the areas of providing urban public services and utilities.

- Empower local government institutions with appropriate mandates to deliver good quality public services and ensure better coordination among various concerned service providers. Addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups must be at the centre of this mandate.
- Undertake capacity-building measures and provide adequate resources to enhance ability of urban LGIs to manage public utilities and services efficiently, more specifically, by taking into cognisance the needs of the marginalised communities.

Revise and Amend Policies and Laws, and Reform Concerned Institutions

It is important to address gaps and inconsistencies in existing laws and policies relating to urban governance. Regulatory frameworks should be revised to cater to newly emerging needs. Responsibility for coordination should be vested in appropriate authorities to avoid duplicity in implementing policies and plans. Accountability should be ensured through transparency in decision making and good governance in implementation.

- Prepare, amend and update policies and laws, as required, to eliminate ambiguities and inconsistencies as regards the responsibilities of urban public service delivery institutions.
- Allocate primary responsibility to a relevant single authority to avoid duplication and ensure coherence in the design of policies and implementation of programmes as regards the delivery of urban services.

Ensure Decentralisation and Devolution of Power

Urban local bodies in Bangladesh are subject to strong control from the central government, particularly in the context of planning, implementation, and finance. Different levels of urban local government institutions tend to exercise similar powers in the same urban area. This creates gaps in coordination, accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness in delivery of urban services. Local governments should be strengthened to enhance their capacity to mobilise more local resources and adopt innovative investment strategies according to their comparative advantages.

- Following the directives of the Government's Perspective Plan for 2021-2041, urban LGIs should be empowered by establishing autonomous city governments that are accountable to citizens residing within respective jurisdictions.
- Decision making and implementation processes need to reflect institutional restructuring recommended by the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of the RAJUK.
- A performance-based budget allocation approach needs to

be put in practice for optimum use of resources to promote balanced urban development.

Set Up Local Monitoring Groups

The cause of planned urbanisation suffers significantly because vested groups work against its core elements. These groups undermine implementation of policies and violate rules in place which accentuates the challenges facing planned urbanisation in Bangladesh. Co-producing urban planning with participation of citizens should be seen as the preferred way to ensure accountability in delivery of urban services. For example, given the difficulties in monitoring the public services with the help of a limited number of city officials, formation of ward-level informal/ semi-formal monitoring groups should be encouraged and incentivised. To note, this is a common practice in all well-governed cities of the world. These groups could play an effective role in enhancing accountability and efficiency in delivery of urban public services. In overpopulated urban centres such as Dhaka, the number of wards and elected representatives should be increased to keep the task of providing public services manageable. Encouraging community engagement is also crucial for replication of good practices. Changing mindsets and promoting a sense of responsibility and belonging among urban citizens will contribute to sustainable urban development.

- Create ward-level informal/semi-formal monitoring groups, following successful examples of other cities, to improve accountability and service efficiency.
- Put in place mechanisms for reporting concerns and addressing grievances as regards access, affordability and quality of public services.
- Conduct awareness raising campaigns to change mindset and encourage community involvement to promote the cause of sustainable urban development that ensures effective public services, allows for adequate urban space for children, amenities for recreation of urban population and caters to the demands of low-income groups.
- Establish community-level forums to promote regular dialogues and feedback between citizens, policymakers, and service providers towards better public service delivery in urban centres.

Promote Stakeholder Engagement in Urban Policy Design

Design and implementation of urban policies, programmes and projects should prioritise inclusivity and participation. In this regard, stakeholder consultations should be seen as one of the key and mandatory measures for designing any public sector project aimed at providing utilities and services to the urban population. However, to ensure that the inputs from the community/citizens are actually incorporated in plans and their concerns are appropriately addressed, holding Public Hearings of the draft plan/ design should be seen as a must. Thus, for example, in solving street vendors or traffic congestion related problems in urban centres, policies and programmes should be designed through a consultative process and by taking cues from the best practices of other global cities.

- Encourage community participation and feedback mechanisms to effectively address inclusivity issues in urban planning.
- Implement best practices from other cities. For example, designate specific areas and time slots for street vendors, considering the needs of low-income groups and lower-end consumers.

Ensure Equitable Service Provision

The government must take the responsibility to provide city services and utilities for all segments of urban population. When private sector is involved in delivery of public services (such as transport, housing, education, health and utilities), due regulatory mechanisms and monitoring systems will need to be put in place by concerned entities to ensure quality control and equitable access to services by citizens. Pricing of public utilities and services needs to be made in a way that ensures equitable and affordable access. This is particularly required in providing services to people living in low-income areas, slum dwellers, pavement dwellers and underprivileged communities such as elderly poor, dalit, transgender people, persons with disabilities, gypsies etc. Pursuant to the spirit of the LNOB, the demands of persons with disabilities, women, children and elderly people must be considered in designing urban service provisions. For example, public transportation must be planned to address these people's needs to ensure easy access and comfortable mobility. Public provision of such services as primary health care, daycare services and entertainment facilities must cater to the needs of marginalised groups in the urban centres. Housing needs must be met in a way that addresses concerns of overcrowding, living conditions, health and hygiene needs and affordability. Residential zoning in urban areas must be sensitive to the needs of marginalised groups and slum dwellers. The urban marginalised population tends to be deprived of the required social safety net support that is available in rural areas. This needs to be corrected.

- Ensure that all city services and utilities provided by both public sector and private entrepreneurs and businesses ensure equitable access for all citizens at affordable prices. Urban planning must be sensitive to these demands.
- Implement robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure that service delivery is consistent in terms of quality, access and affordability.
- Ensure that urban marginalised groups, including slum and pavement dwellers, are able to do birth registration and have NIDs to facilitate their access to public services.
- Formulate and implement adequate social safety net programmes for urban population as in case of the rural.
- Provide daycare service for the children of working parents in urban low-income communities.
- Strengthen primary health care and nutrition services to reduce out-of-pocket expenditure of the urban poor and extreme poor people.

Align Urban Development with SDG Targets and other Global as also National Goals

Integrating the SDGs in the planning and implementation of public utilities and services is required in order to embed inclusivity in the delivery of services. Monitoring and assessment of progress of SDG implementation should also cover whether and to what extent needs of vulnerable groups for public service delivery are being met. In the same vein, all development projects in the urban areas must be aligned with the Paris Agreement on access to climate financing and ensure long-term financial viability of projects.

- Integrate the SDGs in urban planning to ensure inclusivity and quality of public utilities and services, particularly for low income and left behind people.
- Establish clear check and balance mechanisms to monitor progress and prioritise the needs of vulnerable groups with

respect to public service delivery and delivery of utilities. Engage citizens in monitoring access and quality of public service delivery.

Put Special Emphasis on Waste Management and Limiting Single Use Plastic

Bangladesh took commendable initiative to curb plastic pollution by being the world's first country to ban single use plastic shopping bags back in 2002. However, due to lack of proper enforcement and monitoring, plastic pollution and related problems have emerged as a major problem in Bangladesh's urban areas. A pragmatic and radical action plan is needed to reduce plastic pollution. So is the case with solid wastes management. These ought to be seen as an integral component of promoting green growth in urban centres.

- Implement the National Action Plan for Sustainable Plastic Management which has set the target of recycling 50% of plastics by 2025, phasing out single-use plastic by 90% by 2026 and reducing plastic waste generation by 30% by 2030 (with the 2020/21 baseline as the reference point).
- Pursue multi-stakeholder and multisectoral approach which is aligned with needs of circular economy, by identifying needed policy and regulatory reforms and highlighting manufacturers' responsibility, and by deploying economic instruments and appropriate technology. Towards this, there is a need to put in place the required infrastructure. Undertaking awareness raising activities for informed pesticide usage, promoting behavioural change and strengthening capacity building in concerned areas are also important steps in this connection.
- Bring producers of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) under extended producer's responsibility (EPR), particularly concerning plastic packaging and reducing plastic waste. The Ministry of Environment must take the required steps for this plan to be put into action.

Address Data Availability

The availability of disaggregated, high-quality data is critically important for effective policymaking and decision-making in the context of planned urbanisation. Efforts should be made to bridge existing data gaps and ensure access to reliable information for evidence-based planning with respect to providing public services in urban areas, especially for urban disadvantaged groups. For instance, urban LGIs often do not have adequate data to make informed policies for urban development. Qualified planners do not feature in the organogram of the development framework of divisional, district and municipality entities. Lack of awareness of political leaders and top level implementors in public administration as regards the emergent demands in this connection remains an endemic challenge. This needs to be addressed.

- Invest in strengthening data collection systems to ensure the availability of disaggregated and high-quality data for evidence-based urban policymaking and planning. Foster collaboration between concerned government agencies and research institutions think tanks and civil society organisations to bridge the data gaps.
- Undertake surveys to collect detailed and disaggregated data, particularly regarding small and remote urban centres, to assess the demand for public services in those areas and take appropriate actions.

Formulate and Implement Long-Term Planning

To ensure equality and inclusivity in public service delivery, it is important to integrate sustainability and quality-of-life targets in Bangladesh's long-term city planning and urban governance. However, though a significant number of the paurashavas and city corporations in Bangladesh have Master Plans, actual implementation of the plans has been rather limited because of financial and human resource limitations. Also, a number of Master plans were prepared quite some time back. These are not aligned with the needs of climate change impact, disaster management, SDG timeline, needs of housing, waste management, traffic management, and conservation of natural resources and are not in line with current national policies. Moreover, in many cases, the quality of these plans is also questionable. These need to be updated on a regular basis in view of the emerging realities and shifting needs of old and new urban centres. The focus of implementation must be prioritised accordingly. Legal provisions and administrative procedures to execute the Master plans, Building Codes, etc., must be designed keeping in view the needs of the disadvantaged groups. The Master Plans need to be revised by incorporating short- and long-term considerations. This will help avoid expensive ad hoc measures, which often tends to be the case. The needs of gender, older adults, children, and persons with disabilities must be considered to ensure that urban planning is sensitive to the LNOB spirit of the SDGs. Properly designed programmes and projects and allocation of resources based on identified action plans are required for sustainable and efficient city development.

- Include long-term issues in city master plans, including resilience to climate impact, sustainable housing, waste management, traffic management and conservation of natural resources. Identify concrete actions to address these emerging needs. Avoid expensive ad hoc solutions.
- Take into cognisance the opinion of relevant non-state stakeholders and experts in designing plans for sustainable urban growth, keeping in perspective the current and future needs of disadvantaged groups.

Engage Local Philanthropic Organisations

The capacity and strength of local philanthropic organisations should be recognised and activated to facilitate effective public-private collaboration in the provisioning of public services in urban centres. Urban centres lack availability and access to welfare measures in areas of nutrition, schooling, health, and housing, especially those that concern the interest of socio-economically challenged groups. Setting up of day-care centres for working mothers may be mentioned in this connection. Often, lack of financial resources is the key reason driving the non-availability of these services. In this backdrop, collaboration with non-state actors and philanthropic organisations should be promoted and incentivised to generate additional funds. Such partnerships could also help broad-based decision-making process in respect of urban planning.

- Recognise and activate the role of local philanthropic organisations to strengthen public-private collaboration and partnerships in the delivery of public utilities and services.
- Leverage capacity and expertise of non-state actors and organisations to address specific community level needs in urban areas. This will strengthen inclusive decision making as regards design of urban plans and urban service delivery.

Regulate Informal Practices

Appropriate policies should be formulated with respect to regulating and supporting informal economic activities pursued by disadvantaged segments of urban population such as street vendors, rickshaw pullers and various other service providers. Informality needs to be addressed through proper urban planning. Livelihood concerns of disadvantaged groups must not be neglected in urban planning. This will help avoid unintended and adverse political economy consequences in managing urban development and ensure security of livelihoods of urban low-income people.

- Formulate and implement appropriate policies to regulate informal activities pursued by disadvantaged groups in such a way that these are sensitive to the needs and livelihood concerns of the disadvantaged urban groups.
- In designing urban plans, take lessons from past mistakes to avoid repetition.
- Ensure that delivery of urban public services maintains a balance between planned urbanisation and livelihood concerns of urban disadvantaged communities.

Address Skills Gap Issues in Delivery of Urban Services

Provisioning and quality of public utilities and services in urban areas often suffer from lack of skilled service providers. With expanding urban population in Bangladesh, there is an emerging pressing need to bridge the skills gap so that essential urban services could be delivered with efficiency. There is a need to significantly raise public sector investment in developing trained human resources capable of providing quality services in urban areas.

- Develop and implement comprehensive vocational training programmes with a special focus on young women and adolescent girls from underprivileged communities so that they are equipped and technically skilled to provide urban public utilities and services.
- Undertake targeted programmes to rehabilitate and create opportunities for meaningful engagement of socially excluded and disadvantaged communities such as beggars, dalits, transgenders and gypsies. Take measures to ensure their mainstreaming in urban economic life.
- Establish specialised Urban Service Academies that offer targeted courses in urban planning, management and administration.
- Establish a culture of continuous learning and professional development for urban service providers. These activities should focus on skills upgradation through training, workshops, seminars and online courses. Sensitivity to the needs of urban disadvantaged groups should be an integral part of these activities.

3. Concluding Observations

In view of rapid urbanisation, the legacy of unplanned urbanisation in old urban cities and rapidly rising new urban centres, issues of urban governance and quality delivery of public services in urban areas have assumed heightened importance and urgency in Bangladesh. Indeed, the cause of planned urbanisation in Bangladesh is at present at a crossroads. Without realising the full potentials of old and new urban centres, Bangladesh's dream to be a developed country by 2041 will be difficult to realise. Addressing the challenges

of providing adequate public utilities and services in the backdrop of unplanned urbanisation in Bangladesh calls for a comprehensive and pragmatic approach to urban planning. Delivery of adequate public services in general, and for disadvantaged urban population groups in particular, must be central to this.

Sustainable urbanisation and urban planning must meet the future needs of the urban population, be sensitive to the requirements of disadvantaged groups, and be aligned with the needs of climate change impact and environmental sustainability. Implementation of this type of plan will call for innovative approaches, modern skill sets, new types of multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships at local levels.

Bangladesh can have a more equitable and sustainable urban development by strengthening local government institutions, regulating informal practices, aligning with measures to attain the SDG targets, addressing data gaps, prioritising inclusivity, and fostering community involvement. Partnerships with non-state actors and collaboration with civil society think tanks, experts, and philanthropic organisations will ensure that urbanisation in Bangladesh is sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged urban groups. Inclusive city planning will ensure that urban public services are delivered with efficiency, equity and sensitivity. A well-governed urban management will ensure that past mistakes are not repeated, and urbanisation in Bangladesh is sustainable.

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Policy Briefs

Economic Cluster

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2. Providing Decent Employment for Youth in view of Domestic and Overseas Markets
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Social Cluster

5. Triggers to Ensuring Quality Primary Education
6. Reducing Out-Of-Pocket Expenditure to Improve Universal Access to Quality Health Care
7. Promoting Universal Social Protection System and the Need for Targeting Disadvantaged Groups
8. Dealing with the Manifestation of Localised Vulnerabilities of Climate Change

Governance Cluster

9. Effective Implementation of Laws and Judicial Process for Eradicating Gender-Based Violence and Discrimination
10. Access and Justice for Ethnic and Religious Minorities
11. Giving Voice to the 'Silent' and Establishing Democratic Accountability

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