

## Turning Dhaka into a resilient city

City planners and authorities need to prioritise improving Dhaka's environment to make it more liveable



**I** recently attended a public seminar titled "Resilient Cities: An Integrated Economic Approach to Natural Hazard Risk Mitigation," held in Vancouver, Canada. The purpose of the seminar and the follow-up roundtable discussion was to identify key issues and challenges related to climate risks, better understanding of potential shocks and stresses, and how cities work, adapt and improve the general well-being of their residents. The focus was largely on cities in North America and Europe. The City of Vancouver was used as one of the "best practice" examples for resilient cities as Vancouver is working to maintain its high quality of life in the face of rising housing prices and environmental uncertainty. In all, there are 100 Resilient Cities (100RC) representing all regions worldwide. As a network of cities, 100RC was founded as a movement with an ambitious goal to help cities build resilience to the growing social, economic, ecological and physical challenges of the 21st century.

I gathered many ideas from the seminar that seem relevant to Dhaka and its ongoing struggles with the growing number of climate migrants to the city, poor housing, inadequate infrastructure, inefficient public transportation, environmental degradation, unemployment, poverty, and the rising income and urban-rural inequalities. Dhaka is turning into a metropolis with its population having doubled in the last 20 years. The present urbanisation is being driven by population growth and the search for economic, business, employment and social opportunity.

Despite being a major city struggling to adapt to the demands of rapid changes, Dhaka, unsurprisingly, is still not a member of the 100RC. Among members of the network are Bangkok, Chennai, Hanoi, Pune, Surat, Singapore, Mandalay, Da Nang, Jakarta, Semarang and many other cities in China and East Asia.

Resilience is both a framework and a process that help cities adapt and transform in the face of challenges and prepare the residents, communities and institutions to survive, adapt and grow. The resilience framework is an integrated and interdisciplinary approach that considers economy, society, health and wellbeing, and leadership and strategy. The framework provides an opportunity for the city to strategise and coordinate with various agencies and institutions to predict and prepare for, say, flood risks and climate change. A resilient city is a better place to live as it is creative, forward-looking, better prepared to withstand all kinds of risks, and is built for the future.

**The city planners must understand how climate challenges will likely change the course of future development, identify the risks and vulnerabilities, and know how to adapt and grow.**



Over the black waters of the Buriganga, merchants unload shipments of fresh produce destined for city markets. Colours of Water in Pictures by Daniel Lantigne is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License

Right now, Dhaka has more than its share of everyday disasters with traffic congestion affecting liveability and the quality of life. Most roads are in a perennially poor state without regular repairs and needed maintenance. The elevated highway, metro rail and mass rapid transit, currently under construction, are experiencing long delays, making it even harder for daily commute for the people to and from work. The sewers and drainage canals in Dhaka are practically waste bins; as a result, rains and floods wreak havoc on city life. The water bodies/waterways and the river systems around the city are clogged due to dumping of industrial waste and unplanned growth of the city. This speaks of poor leadership

on the part of Rajuk and other agencies.

The air quality, too, is very poor. Dhaka was recently ranked 169 out of 178 countries in an environmental performance index. The open spaces and parks are gradually shrinking due to encroachments by the slum-dwellers and squatters. In the near future, more people from coastal, floodplains and dry areas of the country will likely head to Dhaka due to climate changes, and to escape poverty and hunger, with added pressure to support millions of people on an emergency basis annually. The poor and the vulnerable—those living in slums and open spaces—with very limited livelihood options will be subject to

further social and economic distress and deprivation due to climate-related disasters. These cumulative factors, associated with weak infrastructure, poor governance, and lack of resources, will lead to greater risks in the future. I am not aware of any plan by Dhaka City to prevent and/or respond to flooding, fire, earthquake and other emergencies as it works to adapt to the risks posed by climate changes.

Dhaka faces many challenges to making it a more liveable city. The new urban life styles, growing income inequality, increasing consumerism, and the unplanned growth and development will likely exacerbate climate change risks with cascading impacts on all other

aspects of city life, because these are all interconnected. The city planners must understand how climate challenges will likely change the course of future development, identify the risks and vulnerabilities, and know how to adapt and grow. In this context, membership in 100RC will help in terms of shared experience, knowledge, technology, innovation and perhaps a comprehensive risk assessment as a step towards adapting to climate change.

For Dhaka, the immediate focus should be on finding solutions to manage the water bodies, rivers, mitigate flood risks, improve sewage and storm water systems, and increase climate resilience.

Further greening the streets and the city should be a priority. This will improve urban environment and social fabric of the city, and ultimately enhance liveability.

Finally, identifying climate solutions will require collaborative efforts of the various agencies and departments of the government (for example, environment, agriculture, forestry, transport, flood control, housing, emergency disaster management) and consultation with a range of stakeholders in the city—from research institutions, experts to community organisations/NGOs—on what a resilient city should look like. This is a very important task for the city administration and policy.

Needless to say, there is no alternative to a citywide, inclusive stakeholder participation in designing a climate adaptation and resilience plan for building a more liveable Dhaka for the future.

Mohammad Danar is an international development/transition specialist and advisory professor at the National Research Centre for Environment (NRCE), Naha University, Hainan, China. Email: mrdanar.10@gmail.com