The perils of premature globalisation and the birth of megacities: social exclusion and spatial injustice in Dhaka.

ZAMAN, Q.M.

2024

MEGACITIES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH
IN THE 2020's

Growth Transformations, Contested/Negotiated Spaces and Changing Liveabilities

Edited by Tasleem Shakur and Shayer Ghafur

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This special unique volume of GBER published in collaboration with 'Knowledgists Without Borders' on Megacities of the Global South in the 2020s edited by Tasleem Shakur and Shayer Ghafur provides an excellent collection of state of the art research on contemporary major cities of Asia and Africa. Mega-urbanisation processes are no longer only under the influence of local actors but are very much embedded in transnational/global development processes, activated by internationally connected actors. These continue to exacerbate inequalities globally and locally, accelerating irreversible planetary environmental damage as explained by the editors and exemplified by the diverse range of contributors.

The notion of understanding space from a local vantage point, looking inwards rather than towards to the west or far east has been discussed by a couple of authors. 'Maqamiat' is introduced as a local concept of place that is more relevant to the context of Karachi than the imported 'place making' concept that fails to embed local informal spatial practices, unique to socio-cultural dimensions of urban spaces in Pakistan. The case of Cairo megacity, described in this issue by Kamal and Abdel Mohsen, is another example that illustrates the fragile connections between the tangible and intangible heritage of places such as the Ataba area of Cairo. Once the main cultural hub of Cairo in the 19th Century, the Ataba has been transformed into the largest informal vendors' market in Cairo.

Planning processes can also exacerbate informality as demonstrated by the investigation by Halsall and Sidiqqui on Dharavi, one of the largest slums in Mumbai and Asia. The aspect continuous densification of megacities' urban fabric, that is likely to jeopardise the health and wellbeing of millions of urban dwellers, although it tends to be culturally acceptable is very well illustrated by Syeda Jafrina Nancy.

Questions of social and environmental injustice interweave, with the loss of centuries-old heritage are intricately illustrated by Ian Cook's comparative analysis of *hutongs* of Beijing and the *lilongs* or *shikumen* of Shanghai.

This rich collection of diverse but very relevant study on Megacities of Global South from Beijing, Cairo, Delhi, Dhaka, Istanbul, Mumbai and Shanghai would be of a great value and should provide guidance to planners, architects, engineers, environmentalists, activities and students from both Global North and South of the contemporary world to combat the upcoming challenges of ever-increasing mega-urbanization.

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gber
global built environment review

Edited by Tasleem Shakur and Shayer Ghafur

KNOWLEDGISTS WITHOUT BORDERS

Megacities of the Global South in the 2020's : Growth Transformations, Contested/Negotiated Spaces and Changing Liveabilities

Cover Design:
Imamur Hossain

Cover Photo:
A 360 degree drone photographic construction of residential/
commercial section of Dhaka (Dhanmondi)

The perils of premature globalisation and the birth of megacities:
Social exclusion and spatial injustice in Dhaka.

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Dhaka Megacity

Megacities and globalisation are two global connubial phenomena. Asian and Latin American cities dealt with globalisation prematurely, hastily transforming into mass producers to serve global consumers. However, since the late 20ᵗʰ century, these cities emerged as the powerhouse of mass production, attracting low to medium skills labour as a response to the worldwide dynamics of consumerism, thanks to the West that planned to transfer production to Asia, Africa and Latn Americas as part of the global vision for seeking cheaper labour.

Asia, Latin America, and Africa have benefited from the globalisation process at the cost of an influx of migration to the capital cities and other key cities, giving birth to many new megacities. Planning policies never envisioned the rapid onset of an international obligation to be a global producer. A fixative of spatial orders and arbitrary land use provisions for production spaces demonstrates spatial injustice and poor life qualities. This hasty and random provision of make-shift small-scale industries within the inner cities failed to receive planned urban and peri-urban development strategies. Today, China is in anguish from the diminishing agricultural land due to the production-led oncogenic expansion of tertiary space, while stacking the population in a compact and congested habitat that now faces confinement syndrome—treating people as goods and services and parting humanity out of the equation of spatial justice. Dhaka similarly bowed to globalisation by becoming a megacity with growing urban slums.

The World Development Report published by the World Bank in 2009 considered no obligation to contemplate how increasing urban social inequality and poverty appeared in the newly born megacities. Environmental degradation is a testimony to 'capitalism's market-led patchy geographical provision'. Slums and megacities seem to be the twin birth – a sudden shock of a new and a gift from the Asian and Latin American illegitimate association with globalisation. The argument appears: Are all megacities global cities? This question must be asked due to the association of Dhaka with globalisation without the safe provision of social and spatial justice.

David Harvey (Harvey, 2009, p. 1272) states the birth of unplanned megacities as 'unfortunate residuals produced by rapid migration to the cities'. Moreover, Harvey

stresses that concurrent creations of exclusion and marginalisation of a disposable supply of cheap labour and global production capacity demonstrate rising economic transactions at the cost of the premature birth of global cities. Although newly born megacities are frugally vibrant, these Asian and Latin American cities are not yet global and well-planned as London, Tokyo, and Shanghai worked out cautiously and strategically.

This paper presents a contentious debate on the birth of premature globalisation, aiding the formation of megacities hastily taking Asian and Latin American perspectives. The objective of this paper is not to undermine the formation of megacities but to examine how globalisation could be used as a strategic tool to tackle social exclusion and spatial injustice.

The debate begins with a reflection on one Asian city, Dhaka, and its radical shift to the complex, compact, congested formation of urban land use in 1980s by two significant economic changes. One is the global production-led economy, and the other is the arrival of an emerging real-estate culture to provide infill space in urban areas catered to those connected to the international trade community. The influx of the in-migrant population running the engine of make-shift production of cheaper garments is based on the economic formula, 'cheaper-at-source', at the cost of illegitimate situated shanty housing provision. The high price at the end-user by the fast-fashion technique (Buchanan, 2023) allows various mid-agencies to accumulate profits. However, it is debatable whether fast fashion and its developments spawn a net positive or negative impact on society, the environment and the overall liveability of these Asian and Latin American cities (Williams, 2022).

Dhaka's four decades of unplanned provision and infill of garment and small-scale industries within residential areas are visible as a juxtaposition of myriad typologies of the pseudo-urban form (Figure 1 and 2).

Figure 1: Global production line (source: Russel, 2021)

Globalisation has primarily been driven by the interests and needs of the developed world (Grieco and Holmes, 1999) by integrating most economies into the global capitalist economy. A quickly rising share of economic activity in the world seems to be taking place between people who live in different countries (rather than in the same region). This growth in cross-border economic activities takes various forms: 1. International Trade; 2. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI); and 3. Capital Market Flows.

Figure 2: Complex juxtaposition of industry and residential building (source: Khaled Hasan for The New York Times, 2013 (accessed: After Disaster, Bangladesh Lags in Policing Its Maze of Factories - The New York Times (nytimes.com) on 14 January 2024)

Developing countries' contributions to globalisation are also far from homogeneous. Globalisation has created unprecedented wealth and resources in Dhaka's few urbanites, creating a widening income gap both inside and between countries and prevailing intolerable levels of absolute deprivation of proper wages and sustainable liveability. The lack of legitimacy of the intergovernmental institutions is worsening as there is less socio-economic framework for the equitable distribution of wealth, revenues and resources. Poor institutional designs in the global marketplace support wealth-creation hegemony through export-led growth and the benefits of expanded international trade of goods, services, and access to new technologies. Globalisation often increases poverty and social strains incoherently connected to spatial injustice and an ill-health environment. The effects of globalisation on income distribution and social differentiation are another area of policy concern.

Pseudo Urban Form

Dhaka's 14.6 million people live in just 125 square miles (325 square kilometres), with more than 115,000 people per square mile (Figure 3), or 45,000 per square kilometre, which is 75% more dense than Hong Kong (Cox, 2021).
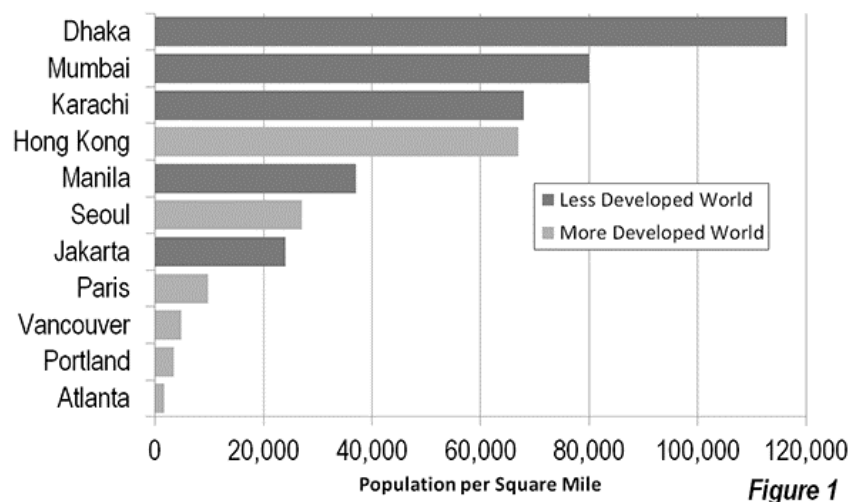

Figure 3: Urban Areas average population density (source: Cox in New Geography, 2012)

New Detailed Area Plan (DAP): A double jeopardy

Adding to the current crises of urban transformation into more chaotic land uses, the new DAP encourages more mixed-use development – a planning flaw that needs to be scrutinised before this puts further pressure on the infrastructure (Devnath 2024). The DAP's wrong approach to land use regeneration resounds the old-fashioned approach to undermining the city's quality of life (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Dhaka's mixed-use development (Source: author, 2022)

Journey-to-work Syndrome

Novaco and Gonzalez (2009) point to the stress of the long journey-to-work and commuting that leads to health impacts (Figure 5), including negative mood (both at work and at home), frustration, cognitive performance impairment, and work absence (Rachel et al. 2016)

Figure 5: Journey-to-work syndrome (Photo: Author 2022)

Social exclusion and spatial injustice

Dhaka's inclusivity in places and spaces is affected by the fragmented approach to densification that removes spatial rights and creates social exclusion from enjoying a habitable environment. The new generation living in Dhaka city has less connection to active space. The ageing population even suffers from a lack of inclusive space, making them confined indoors. Dhaka's growth has taken place without adequate planning, resulting in a city with extreme congestion, poor liveability, and vulnerability to floods and earthquakes. Many residents, including the 3.5 million living in informal settlements, often lack access to essential services, infrastructure, and amenities. The unplanned and uncontrolled growth has created mayhem of restless traffic movement and congestion: the average driving speed has dropped from 21km per hour 10 years ago to less than 7km per hour today. Congestion swallows up 3.2 million working hours daily, costing the economy billions of dollars annually (Figure 6). This points to the emergency need for rethinking the boundary of Dhaka city and restricting its growth without doubling the size of Dhaka and focusing the planning more towards decentralisation.

Figure 6: Transport frictions (Seize the Opportunity to make Dhaka a great, vibrant City (worldbank.org))

Micro-Urbanism in Dhaka

Figure 7: Micro-urbanism prevails in Dhaka as squatter settlement – an active workforce for the global economy (source: unknown, 2022)

Megacities and globalisation are two globally connected phenomena for Dhaka. As Frederick Van Der Ploeg and Steven Poelhekke stated, globalisation began in 1. revolutions in communications technology 2. global competition 3. In-migration and out-migration of low-paid and low-skilled jobs 4. This phenomenon is noticeable in many Asian and Latin American cities. Most migrants to Dhaka end up in the slums, home to an estimated 3.5 million people – 40 per cent of the city's population. According to the International Organization for Migration, some 70 per cent of slum dwellers in Dhaka moved there after experiencing some environmental hardship (Figures 7 and 8).

Figure 7: Economic powerhouse in slum dwelling (source: unknown)

Figure 8: Dhaka's in-migration for the job (source: unknown)

In developing and emerging countries, about 60% of urban growth is caused by rural-urban migration and 40% by high birth rates in cities (2018 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank). Cities are becoming wealth generators, creating ghetto communities.

Two challenges of premature globalisation

1. Social Challenges: In Dhaka, housing is in short supply, leading to the growth of slums and shanty towns that lack water, sewers and power supplies. Housing poverty is prevalent because wages are low and jobs are in short supply; many people have dangerous informal jobs. Another issue from the governmental financial tools is the lack of taxes, which means that the city governments struggle to supply essential health and education services accompanied by a lack of water and sanitation, leading to disease and illness common in slums.

2. Environmental Challenges: Sprawling slums at the city's inner space by syndication and at the edge by reclamation, both of which cause deforestation and loss of farmland and increase flood risk. Wood fires, old vehicles and industry mean high air pollution levels. Rivers and lakes are polluted with sewage and industrial waste, worsening health problems across the city. Critical resources, especially water, are in short supply because of soaring demand.

3. Traffic congestion leads to more significant emotional health effects, mostly stress (80.4%), nervousness (74.2%), and aggressiveness (52.2%), whereas long driving hours lead to more significant physical health effects, primarily back pain (66.8%), pain in the legs (56.7%), headaches (43.3%), and dizziness (28.8%).

Planning policies never envisioned the rapid onset of the international obligation of the supply chain. A fixative of spatial orders and arbitrary provisions for production spaces demonstrates spatial injustice by displaying urban chaos.

Dhaka is now a hyper-city:

Dhaka underwent mutation from megacity to hypercity. Similarly, megacities in South Asia became "big but not as powerful" and remain encapsulated and contested as the population struggles due to their lack of cohesive nature of urban qualities (Massey 1999, 115; cited in Robinson 2002, 540). South Asian cities remain contested as they fail to set an inclusive social structure and maintain spatial justice within the urban agglomerations, which is predicted to dominate for a while (Global Urban Observatory; cited in Koolhaas et al. 2001, 6). One billion people now live in the urban slums and shantytowns of the global South, and the astounding hyper-cities or metacities of 20 million or more have become the new "cities of the future." In metacities and hyper-cities, information and digital infrastructure surpass with hiccups of marginality. As Roy puts it: "There is an urgency for urban studies and planning to move beyond the dichotomy of 'First World models' and 'Third World problems.' • One possible route is through policy approaches that seek to learn from Third World cities' inherent potentials, such as seeing urban informality and their economic potential as "an important epistemology for regenerated planning" (2005, 147, 156), where the versatility of socio-economic entities would coexist with equitable share of spatial provision.

Dhaka city is the gravity of all national private and public investment, which is righteous but consistently creates marginalised societies struggling with rising consumer prices; lack of affordable houses, and difficulty accessing universities, hospitals, quality housing, and other pertinent investments. The way Dhaka city grew - the policymakers could have thought about the transformation with professionals and investors a bit early. Dhaka City suffers from premature globalisation, which indicates significant gaps between stakeholders, creating a lack of trust and creative solutions and making it incapable of seeking planning instruments to translate the daily tangible challenges Dhaka City experiences.

Decentralisation was an opportunity as part of the planning instrument. Why do remote districts not share the burden of running more prominent hospitals, universities, shopping malls, parks, affordable housing, and administrative setups? Why do we need the habit of packing everything in Dhaka city? We must agree: as professionals, politicians, and investors, we should refrain from greed and stop messing up with the idea that everything should be in Dhaka. We need to learn from our mistakes and not repeat them. It is deliberate negligence and accumulated negligence!
Now is the time to rethink – as Padma Bridge should be seen as the cardiac bypassing and urban tactics and the life-saving surgery Dhaka will be experiencing to reduce its chronic urban cholesterol!

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