

CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPLICATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED FOR MEGACITIES

Although the focus of this analysis was a single megacity, our examination of Dhaka raised some issues and questions that have implications for our understanding of all megacities. Cities have been part of human society for thousands of years. Population demands continue to drive their growth while technology and innovation have helped overcome the logistical problems associated with concentrating so many people in such small areas. But is there a functional limit to the size of a city? Our analysis of Dhaka shows how common problems of governance (lack of capacity, unclear lines of authority) and provision of services are magnified in both scale and impact in the context of megacities. Environmental pressures present another challenge to the effective functioning of Dhaka. Are these problems unique to Dhaka, or megacities in the developing world, or do they also have the potential to affect all megacities?

GOVERNING MEGACITIES

As a town or city grows, there is a matching need to develop and manage infrastructure, planning, and provision of basic services for the population. As such systems grow in scale they tend to also grow in complexity, requiring greater expertise, technical knowledge, and resources to manage effectively. As bureaucracies become larger, they become more complex and cumbersome, potentially compromising efficiency and accountability. Governance, then, faces a dual problem: scale of task and organizational complexity. In less developed countries (LDCs) these problems have been exacerbated by the speed of growth of megacities. In many such megacities, such as Dhaka, Cairo, and Santiago, the speed of growth has far outpaced urban planning capacity and infrastructure development. This has contributed to the scale of slum developments, which become effectively ungoverned sections of the city with limited access to many basic services. In contrast, New York, Tokyo, and many of the “established” megacities in more developed countries (MDCs) did not experience the same overwhelming speed of population growth that those in the LDCs have faced. Rather they have taken their present form and scale after their national and regional governments consolidated and developed the institutional capacity to effectively govern large urban populations.

One possible solution to the problems created by the scale of megacities is to divide governance of the city into smaller organizational units, or to devolve lines of authority to the sub-city level. This could potentially increase the efficiency of service provision and general governance, both by reducing the scale of these tasks and enabling public officials to focus more specifically on the needs of various groups or geographic areas of the city. This was the approach taken in Dhaka, with the division of the city into parallel administrative entities – Dhaka South City Corporation and Dhaka North City Corporation in 2011. It appears, however, that this approach brings with it a new set of problems, specifically, overlapping areas of responsibility that increase, rather than decrease, bureaucratic inefficiency and reduces transparency and accountability. Recent reporting suggests that the division of the city may have actually further compromised service provision and heightened the chaotic governance.

When considering the governance and administrative needs of megacities several critical factors emerge. First, governing capacity and technical expertise is essential to the creation of a functioning megacity capable of meeting the needs of all of its residents. Second, the speed with which a city grows to become a megacity places increasing pressures on governance and planning; the faster a city grows, the more likely it is to outstrip the ability of any governing authority to keep up. This suggests that identifying cities that are growing at a rapid rate and intervening early to increase governing capacity and plan for future growth could relieve some of the negative (crime, environmental quality, insufficient basic services) aspects of megacities. Better understanding of the causes of rural-urban migration may also offer the potential to slow the speed of growth of some of the most vulnerable megacities, such as Dhaka. It is possible, for example, that greater investment in rural development may help stem the tide of migration to major urban centers, providing greater potential for planned development and strengthening of governing capacity as cities grow.

QUALITY OF LIFE AND PROVISION OF SERVICES

As megacities grow, the demand for space increases, often pushing up the cost of land and housing to the point where it is impossible for lower earning workers to legally and safely live in the city. This issue affects megacities in both LDCs and MDCs; however, the solutions available to individuals differ. As recent protests by fast foods workers in New York highlighted, for those in minimum wage jobs, the higher cost of living in a megacity is often not compensated for by higher wages. In MDCs, many individuals solve this problem by moving out of the city and commuting long hours to work. In LDCs, the solution for many is to move to or remain in the slums that surround most megacities, commuting into the city-proper to work, or engaging in informal economic activities within these communities.

Both responses create costs for communities and individuals. As lower earning residents are pushed out of megacities in MDCs, the cultural and social make-up of the city changes, and diversity can decrease. The value of property in older, working class neighborhoods can increase, forcing out longtime residents and breaking social networks and community identities as more affluent groups move in. As the cost of commercial land and rent increases, smaller, independent businesses can be forced out as well, reducing the economic diversity of the city. The increase of traffic into and out of the city as more workers commute also places greater demands on the transportation infrastructure, which leads to congestion. Long commutes cost individuals time and money and reduce the time available for community and family engagement. Increased stress on often aging infrastructure places greater financial and planning demands on city authorities. If not addressed, infrastructure deficiencies can affect economic activity within the city and between the city and surrounding regions.

In the megacities of LDC's, high demand for affordable housing and business premises pushes many residents and small businesses into unplanned and unofficial developments – slums – surrounding the city proper. While in the short term these developments alleviate the chronic shortage of space, in the longer term they place additional burdens on the city. Illegal tapping of water, electricity, and other services strain already overextended infrastructure, lack of adequate sanitation increases the risk of disease, and unplanned buildings are often highly vulnerable to natural disasters, such as floods and earthquakes, or manmade threats such as fires.

Slums are not just residential areas. They are better thought of as a parallel city, with its own economic, social, and political life. The economic activity in these areas falls within the grey economy, not illegal in itself, but unregulated and untaxed. In the short term grey economies provide a buffer to social and political stability in megacities by providing a livelihood for rural migrants with few skills and little education. However, in the longer term they compete with economic activity within the formal sector and may fail to contribute to the cost of running the city and providing public services, while still relying, albeit marginally, on those services.

The effect of growth on quality of life for residents in LDC megacities may be more dramatic than for residents in MDCs, but several consistencies emerge. Growth increases the cost of land, and the resulting rise in residential and business costs force out the poorer residents and smaller businesses. In both cases, growth, whether regulated and planned (as in MDCs) or unregulated and outstripping planning capacity (as in most LDCs), places increasing pressures on infrastructure and public services. As services become less reliable and efficient, the quality of life for some or all residents in the megacity is negatively affected.

ENVIRONMENTAL PRESSURES

Any discussion of megacities at some point comes to the issue of environmental constraints on the growth and safety of the city. In both MDCs and LDCs we have seen megacities test the capacity of the physical environment to support their continued growth. Demand for land has seen development expand through reclamation of land (New York and Tokyo, for example), or on to flood plains and drainage areas (as is the case in Dhaka). Not only is such land more vulnerable to extreme weather events, in its natural state it also serves as a safety valve for the city, allowing strong tides and flood waters to dissipate before reaching the city. Development on such areas is not only hazardous to those occupying those areas; it also increases risk to the city as a whole. While careful and well researched planning and engineering can mitigate some of the potential dangers of this type of modification of the environment (Tokyo's newest airport is an example of this), it remains risky nonetheless. When largely unplanned or poorly understood, as we see in Dhaka, poor urban development can compound the existing environmental pressures faced by megacities and place their physical and human elements at much greater risk.

Additionally, populations of megacities require vast quantities of water to function and remain safe. Without adequate clean water, sanitation becomes much harder and the risk of disease much greater. Particularly for poorer residents in the slums of LDC megacities, lack of access to affordable clean water can significantly compromise health and quality of life more generally. The follow on effects of poor sanitation and unregulated dumping of waste into the rivers and water supply can also compromise the livelihood and health of downstream rural populations.

POLITICAL POWER OF A MEGACITY

The emergence of megacities can also have political ramifications at both the national and regional level, particularly if they are not balanced by other large urban centers. The influence of a megacity can result simply from its population density, or from the nature of the political process within the country as a whole. Whatever the cause, the actual or perceived dominance of a megacity for regional and/or national politics has the potential to affect not only political and social outcomes for the city itself, but also national and regional politics more broadly.

The political power of megacities in democratic MDCs derives from their population. The sheer weight of voters in a megacity can drive electoral outcomes at both the regional and national level. This is seen clearly in the case of New York City, which is predominantly Democratic, versus western New York State, which is predominantly Republican. At the state level, as the majority of New York's population live in the area from New York City north to Albany, Democrats dominate the state assembly and the governor is similarly most likely to be a Democrat. At the national level, western New Yorkers can gain representation in the House, however New York's senators (due to the state-wide election process) are nearly always Democrats, and represent both the choice and interests of New York City and northern New York voters. While it could be argued that this political imbalance is simply a reflection of the democratic process, it does have implications for the way in which political incentives drive policies in the state. Senators, governors, and presidential candidates know that to be elected they have to appeal to urban, Democratic voters, and Democrats dominate the state assembly. This political divide, however, reflects a more fundamental divide between the interests, values, and concerns of the largely rural western New York and the urban center. There is little incentive for senators, or the state assembly, to focus on the interests of this smaller segment of the population, marginalizing them and undermining their effective representation.

As with New York, concerns over the disproportional influence of Dhaka on national politics in Bangladesh are also rooted in the urban-rural divide. In Bangladesh the sentiment "as goes Dhaka, so goes Bangladesh" is frequently heard (BRAC University & Institute of Governance Studies, 2012), and there is a concern that whichever party manages to control Dhaka could control the country as a whole. However, there is a significant difference between the two cases, for Dhaka does not comprise the majority of the Bangladesh population. So from where, in a democratic country, does this concern arise? It appears that concerns over the political power of the city are less to do with voting patterns and more to do with the exercise of political influence. Politics in Bangladesh is dominated by the rivalry between the Awami League and the BNP. Both parties commonly use extra-institutional means, such as strikes and protests, to force political outcomes. This tactic is often effective, but can only really be carried out in an urban area where there is the population necessary to participate and economic and daily life activity can be effectively interrupted by such actions. The flip side of this is that politicians are aware that political protests and opposition is much easier to organize in urban areas than rural. For countries with weak political institutions and poorly performing governments and economies, large urban centers can easily turn from a source of power to a source of critical instability, as seen in the 2011 protests in Cairo that led to the ouster of President Mubarak. Keeping the populations of megacities at least marginally content with government policies is arguably a higher priority for politicians than satisfying the demands of rural populations. When the needs and expectations of urban and rural populations diverge, and there are not the resources to satisfy both, it is likely that rural areas and smaller cities will fear losing out to the megacity. In the longer term, failure to address the needs of rural communities and to invest in rural development has the potential to increase rural-urban economic migration, further stressing the capacity of the megacity to absorb and provide for a growing population.

While we can draw some basic inferences about the potential issues and problems facing megacities from our study of Dhaka, the reality remains that any community – megacity, rural, or nation – is unique. A myriad of factors determine the economic, social, and political stability of any political unit, many interacting to create second and third order effects that belie their

independent effects. For this reason, the more information we can gather on a specific megacity the better able we will be to understand its unique strengths and weaknesses and move away from more generalized expectations.