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## **Civic Society - its Engagement and Promises**

How to make cities work for ALL has not really been on the agenda of successive governments. Though Development Plans for the two cities ( Dhaka and Chittagong) emphasized on issues of equity, efficiency and environmental sustainability, in the name of development and economic progress they have been largely ignored. For instance one of the eight objective of the Chittagong Metropolitan Master 1995 ( which is the statutory Plan) is:

“ Give priority to meeting the needs of the poor”, another is “ Take environmental considerations fully into account in making decisions related to urban development.” In the current process of promoting and controlling development in the urban areas sadly, these directives are not only ignored but blatantly contradicted. Thus protected wetlands are filled and occupied and hills discriminately razed to give way to high rises apartments for the affluent. These are just a few cases.

This is when conscious citizens, particularly academia voiced their concerns. Over the past few years civic society organizations in Bangladesh have expanded to more grassroots and they have been more and more vocal not only in identifying problems and expressing concerns but have voluntarily networked themselves to analyze situations, provide recommendation and assist the government. Media has always been providing immense support. However, the voices of civic society members are largely ignored and instead of using their potentials such as voluntary engagement and skills their role is often questioned, sneered and noble intentions doubted. In spite of such attitude, members of the civic society continue to voice their opinion against misjudged programs or policies of the government.

As a member of BAPA (Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon), it is my honor to make note of this civic society organization which is the largest in Bangladesh. With a pool of talented and committed personalities BAPA has persistently brought burning environmental, and socio cultural issues into the forefront. From a modest beginning in 1997 as POROSH, subsequently emerging as BAPA since 2000, it has expanded its network to far flung corners of Bangladesh and has not limited itself to the confines for a few within the capital city – Dhaka. It has also joined hands with professionals all over the globe BEN (Bangladesh Environmental Network) to share and benefit from each other’s experience and expertise.

In bringing urban issues into focus, BAPA has all along joined hands with other similar organizations such as SUJON , NGO’s and professional bodies such as BELA (Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association), TIB ( Transparency International Bangladesh), IAB ( Institute of Architects Bangladesh), BIP ( Bangladesh Institute of Planners) etc. All such efforts are voluntary and springs from a genuine concern for the betterment of the country and its people.

In a situation of political clout and mafia-ism and, weak and non transparent urban institutions, land grabbing and illegal occupation of the "**commons**" ( rivers, forests, roads reserves, water bodies, protected wetlands, grasslands etc) is rampant. CSO's such as BAPA, BELA along with others have been fighting uphill battles against land grabbers. Protecting the shore lands of the rivers around Dhaka is an example. Even with legal verdict for protection of the Turag river, bureaucratic action was a mockery. Boundary demarcation pillars of the river were affixed leaving the shoreline area open for grabs!

One of its recent movement is for retaining the planned rapid mass transport route thereby protecting the heritage Assembly Building and its precinct. A larger movement would be to bring into the Public Realm areas that are unjustifiably kept out of limits. The types of environmental and socio cultural issues that BAPA stands up against and / or raises is unending. These range from protecting historical sites, protecting residential neighborhoods from threat of chemical pollution and fire risks, establishing mass river transports, cross border water sharing issues. Sites are not limited to Dhaka but span across Bangladesh. A comprehensive list of past, ongoing and future programs are available at [www.bapa.org.bd](http://www.bapa.org.bd) .

Moving to organizations beyond Dhaka, it is my privilege to introduce "Forum For Planned Chittagong" (FPC ) which emerged in mid 1996 consisting of citizens from various professions. Being far removed from the capital its voice is feeble. A major achievement of FPC was the movement to save the Century Old Chittagong Court Building. It started when the government decided to demolish the buidligh citing reasons of dilapidation and need for expansion. The struggle to prove that the building was structurally sound and should be considered a heritage spanned over three successive government: the AL, BNP and the Caretaker! When requests, logic, analysis, and mass protests failed recourse to law was the only option. Even though one battle was won – to retain the building elected government failed to renovate it and thanks to the caretaker government a major part had been renovated.

A six storey new building has built engulfing its northern perimeter and recently the Law Ministry has laid the foundation stone for another building along the south western slope defacing the building and site completely, making a mockery of heritage protection as recommended in the statutory Plan. So, the CSO has to again start pleading with the government ! This is frustrating and challenging.

Over the past few years FPC has made repeated appeals to save the protected hills both within the city and its periphery, provide footpaths and make provision for street vendors, expand the Open space network, conserve heritage sites/ buildings, protect the Karnaphuli and Halda rivers and catchments, take actions to reduce traffic congestion and ease flow, etc. Monthly Open Discussions ( MOD) were held to share and exchange ideas with citizens. Efforts were made not only to present problems but to make recommendations. Unfortunately these efforts are rarely taken into cognizance by the government development partners.

The challenges of the CSO's are many. Lack of a knowledge based societies, biases, time, energy and operational costs are amongst many others. This is coupled with lack of access to information, non transparent mechanism of government decision making etc.

There is a need for a mechanism within the local governance where dialogue and discussion with CSO's, stakeholders is the normal working practice and not just an eyewash. SUJON has been relentlessly crying for establishing effective local government tiers. With opportunity to engage in meaningful debates and discussions on local development issues CSO's would make valuable contribution in making cities and towns of Bangladesh livable for all. With skilled, empowered and engaged local government tiers the ill conceived decision to divide the Dhaka city would not arise. There would be multiple centers of delivery with the local names and not all named Dhaka this or that.

Now the local government offices ( Wards) are the most neglected edifices in the urban areas. This just reflects how important common citizens are ! It may be interesting to find out what percentage of citizens go to their Ward Offices for any service or even know where it is located. From my experience in Chittagong, I can say that the local government Ward Offices are marginalized in terms of space allocation and maintenance. In the true democratic spirit, the local offices should be the focal point and one of the most inviting and areas within the area.

Recommendations for making the Ward office the focal point of the community have been made in the Detailed Plan of Chittagong. Each planning Zone consisting of a number of wards can be a major 'Community Focus' area in terms of various service provision and civic engagement. It should have the ambience and the intent of service provision for all. In the age of communication and networking delivery of services and information opportunity for skill building and research and meeting of ideas, and stakeholders would work wonders. Routine Town house type meetings for various purposes such as proposed new developments by private and public bodies would help in creating healthy local environments and make urban settlements more livable for all.

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