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## **URBAN GOVERNANCE IN BANGLADESH: EXPLORING THE CONTEMPORARY ISSUES**

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### **Abstract**

Bangladesh, an emerging democratic country in the developing world, has been facing rapid urbanization over the past decades. This has posed tremendous pressures on existing urban basic services delivery. The traditional approach to urban services has not been successful in meeting the demands of urbanities. For smooth functioning of urban government, practice of good governance, which goes beyond the urban government, has not yet been institutionalized. Focusing evolution and theorization of urban governance this paper has explored the legal and institutional basis of the urban local governance. Also attempted to identify some contemporary issues, which are crucial for good urban governance. The hallmarks of good governance such as decentralization, conflict of power, participation, coordination, transparency and accountability; and corruption have critically been discussed. Of course, there is no alternative to ensuring a practice of good governance for a sustainable city.

### **Introduction**

A society's well being depends on ensuring that all its members feel that they have a stake in it and do not feel excluded

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from the mainstream of society. This requires that all groups, particularly the most vulnerable, have opportunities to improve or maintain their well being (Barenstien, 1994) and urban government apparatus has to ensure these for its citizens. Dysfunctions of the urban government apparatus are said to be the initiator of bringing the issue at front line of today's governance discourse in developing countries. The term "governance" has been a much-talked issue in the political tempest in Bangladesh. Having being one of the least-developed countries in South Asia with current 130 million population within a space of 147,570 square kilometers, Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign country in 1971 and underwent many socio-political changes since its inception. Parliamentary democracy, reinstated in 1990s, is still at the nascent stage. Democratization process in the urban local government *albeit* very limited started during the Pakistan period. After the independence this process has been intensified. Other elements of governance have been taking shape at a slower pace. Since the beginning of 1980s, governance, emerged as a popular vocabulary in the development literature, has become a familiar term to the academics, development thinkers, think tanks, international donors and democratic countries as well. The practice of good governance in Bangladesh is yet to be institutionalized although the government and donor agencies frequently put emphasis on the necessity of it. Discussions of governance often generate more rhetorical heat than empirical light (Monem, 2002). Presumably, the discourse on governance has been limited within the developing countries and bureaucratic arena while, in reality it was even grasped by the Eurocrats as well when it existed in embryo.

The emergence of governance, having a long history, has provided new dimensions in development thoughts. Mainstream political science witnessed two significant alterations of scholarly focus during the past decade or so: renewed interest in political institutions and rapidly increasing number of studies focused on the concept of governance at different analytical and institutional levels (Pierre, 1999). It is now an established argument within political



science that we live within a pattern of governance rather than government (Rydin, 1999). Shifting the analytical focus from government to governance implies focus more on process and less on institutions. Government refers to the formal institutional structure and location of authoritative decision-making in the modern state (Stoker, 1998, p.34). It also embraces the legislative and executive branches of the state apparatus and those who control them (Rakodi, 2001). Governance, on the other hand, is the process through which local political institutions implement their programmes in concert with civil society actors and interests and within which these actors and interests gain influence over urban politics (Pierre, 1998, p.3).

This paper, against this background, aims to explore various issues and understand the distinctive features of urban governance in Bangladesh. Focus has been given on chronological background, the existing institutional and legal framework in order to demonstrate how urban governance has been shaped over the last decades. Next follows an exploration of emerging contemporary issues of urban governance. At the very beginning, elucidation of the concept and model of urban governance has been offered in order to better understand urban governance.

### **Defining Governance**

Due to different pressures from globalization, knowledge-based economy, information society, technological change, population pressure and environmental pollution, the retreat of government from its conventional role of controller towards facilitator has been prominent. In such a context, the term "government" does not fit well to describe the way populations and territories are organized and administered. In a world, where the participants of business and civil society are increasingly norm, the "governance" better defines the process by which citizens collectively solve their problems and meet society's needs, using the "government" as the instrument (OECD, 2001).

The concept of "governance" is as old as human civilization. It was used and defined as early as in the fourteenth century when the definition of the term had two sets of usage: one meant action; method or function of governing and another included action or manner of governing (Khan, 1997). Governance is used in several contexts such as corporate governance, international governance, national governance and local governance. The concept of governance is wider than what is implied by government, because the former focuses on the interdependence of governmental and non-governmental forces in meeting economic and social challenges. It is thus about relationships between the state and civil society, rulers and ruled, government and the governed (Rakodi, 2001). It, as Stoker (1998) asserts, implies joint action and thus a shared purpose and framework of values and rules, continuous interaction and the desire to achieve a collective benefit which cannot be achieved by either government or civil society acting separately. Governance is about the capacity to get things done in the face of complexity, conflict and social change (Kearns and Paddison, 2000). While all these definitions do not lead us to reach a universal definition of governance, the commonality is that governance goes beyond the government. It is not confined only to (the limit of) the government but also extends outside of the government. It is a mechanism, which compels every involved partner responsible in dealing with the interest of urbanities in a coordinated and systematic manner to provide quality urban services. Urban governance is a multilevel activity where three tiers, for instance, higher tiers of government, local government level and neighborhood level exist, through which urban governance operates.

### **From Urban Management to Urban Governance: a Shifting Paradigm**

In recent years urban governance is gaining much more importance than urban management. Why is this so? The realm of urban management is falling behind in urban context due to a series of factors. Many changes in cities are now being observed through the process of economic globalization, the emergence of worldwide



economic sectors, international institutions and the emergence of global spectacle (Kearns and Paddison, 2000). Cities, engines of national economy, are now trying to delink their relation with national economies. As part of other changes, cities have oriented themselves more towards the international arena through cross-border cooperation and trans-frontier networking (Kearns and Paddison, 2000 quoted in Church and Reid, 1996). All these changes have an implication on the role and activities of the urban governments. As such, urban governance has been gaining importance in development discourse. The importance of cities in terms of contribution of gross domestic product (GDP) to the national economy is increasing to a greater extent. Although the cities of Bangladesh are not as exposed as cities like Bangkok, Singapore and Hong Kong, the situation is transforming with the changes in urban policy.

### Factors of Urban Governance

Urban governance is the cumulative causation effect of multiplex relations between different socio-economic and political factors. It is shaped by different factors such as socio-economic; value system and norm; power structure and legal framework (Fig. 1).

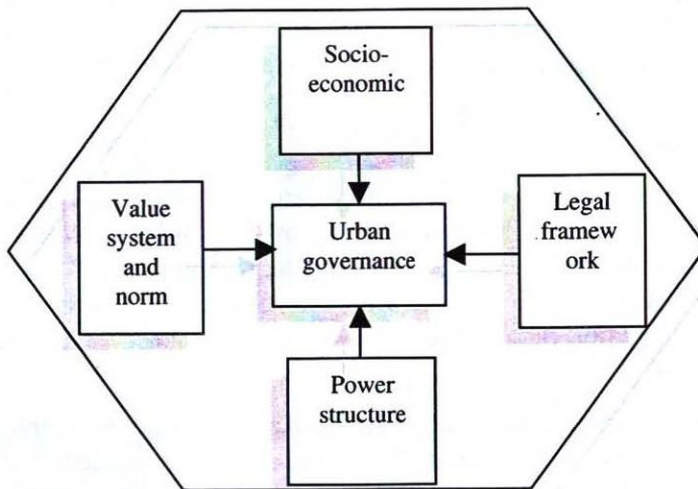


Figure 1. Factors of urban governance

Socio-economic factors influence on constituting urban governance. The mode of urban governance varies from country to country even within the country due to variation in the socio-economic and political context. Society, guided by social norms and value system, has strong impact on urban governance. The mismatch of governance system with value and norms of the concerned community or society results in vulnerable situation. The structure of power also varies from country to country. In some countries, for example, where power lies in the top of the hierarchy, the urban governance is conceived as a mandatory responsibility of the central government. But in case of some capitalist countries, urban governance goes beyond the boundary of existing governing body. A city government cannot function on its own authority in many cases because the legal system hinders the process that a government intends to do. Legal framework is very much related to the norms and values and the power structure of a country or a society. Therefore, urban governance is the outcome of processes that operate in the socio-economic and politico-cultural context of a country. Different institutional mode of urban governance reflects different systems and norms and values, beliefs and practices. Over time cities could move from one model to other model of urban governance because of the changes in national and or urban regimes and in the real world, one should not be surprised to find urban governance resembling more than one of the four models (Pierre, 1999).

## **The Model**

Before moving on to the discussion of the context of urban governance in Bangladesh the feature of four different models of urban governance (Fig. 2) developed by John Pierre (1999) based on the local governance in Western Europe is illustrated. Pierre's model has been a major breakthrough in urban governance discourse in recent times.

*Managerial governance:* In assessing local government, two dimensions, one is that local government is an instrument for the management of political conflict and the other dimension is the



managerial aspect, are significant. Local government in latter aspect, seen as public organization, resolves collective needs and interests through service production and delivery. In managerial governance, the role of elected officials is minimal. The public-private distinction in this type of governance is not clearly demarcated. The most popular slogan in this mode of governance is "letting the managers manage". Managers of organization producing and delivering public services are the key actors in managerial governance. Enhancing efficiency of public service production and delivery is the ultimate aim of this model.

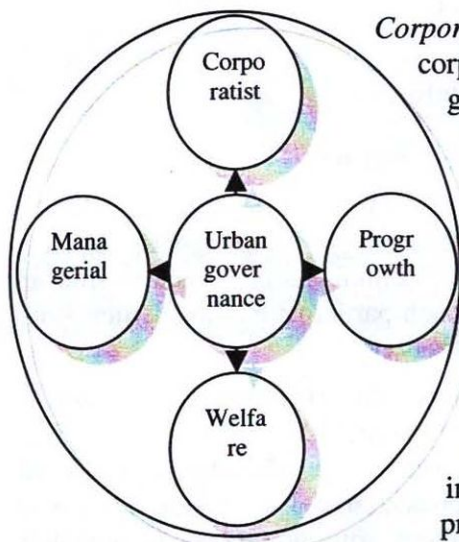


Figure 2. Model of urban governance  
(Modified from Pierre, 1999)

*Corporatist governance:* The corporatist model of urban governance is typical of the small, industrial, advanced democracies of Western Europe (Pierre, 1999). Participatory nature is the characteristic feature of corporatist governance, which sees local government as a political and democratic system for the inclusion of social groups and organized interests in the urban political process. The main objective of the corporatist governance is distributive that ensures that the interests of the organizations'

membership mould urban services and policies. Corporatist governance model not only is seen as the interest representation but also serves as a key instrument of governance as it brings all major actors and interests into the urban political process, which creates a high degree of civil society acceptance of urban political choice. Inequalities surface frequently in this governance between members of favored organized interest and other social groups.

*Progrowth governance:* Progrowth governance, characterized by close public-private interaction, facilitates accommodation between political and economic power. The political and social preconditions for such cooperation are related to national traditions of state strength and public presence in the markets (Pierre, 1999 quoted in Savitch, 1998). Progrowth governance is of course, least participatory of the four governance models. It focuses more on long term and sustained growth of the local economy, which is an interest shared mainly by the downtown elite and senior elected officials. Projection of the image of the city as place for attracting investment is a potent instrument in this model.

## **Urban Governance in Bangladesh**

### *Background of the urban local government*

The four consecutive periods: Mughal, British, Pakistan and Bangladesh period, offer the chronology of emergence of local governance and change of urban administration. A clear shift in urban local governance from non-participatory to participatory approach is visible from this illustration.

Mughal period: The development of urban government in Indian subcontinent traces back to the Mughal period. The emperors of Mughals were the urban people. At that time, the local government systems were not representative. It was a top-down type of governing systems where there was no scope of people's participation.

British period (1765-1947): The reign of Mughals period came to an end in 1757 and the British era started. Urban local government experienced remarkable changes in terms of actions relating to the establishment of municipal administration during this period. The responsibilities of basic services like water supply, sanitation and street lighting were given to the municipal committee. During 1871-1947, a number of acts were promulgated to make municipalities more representative of the populace (Khan, 1997, p.9). Like the Mughal period, the governing systems during the British period were



not representative. The urban administrations were mostly dominated either by the British officials or their nominated people.

Pakistan period (1947-1971): India and Pakistan emerged as two independent states in 1947 after the British colonization had ended. The urban local government experienced no changes in the first ten years of Pakistan period. Of course, some important changes in a number of laws relating to local government were made in provincial government of the then East Pakistan. The introduction of voting system and symbols in the system of voting by secret ballot took place in the Pakistan period and with the passage of time democratization process stepped forward slowly in the urban local government.

Bangladesh period: Over the last three decades urban local government has experienced many changes in its governing system. The most important changes are the introduction of six metropolitan cities and facilitation of women representation through voting. Mayors for metropolitan cities and chairman for Pourohavas (Municipalities) are elected by the popular vote in every five years.

### *The Legal Base*

In Bangladesh urban local government is given legal recognition either by an act of parliament or by incorporating relevant provisions in the constitution. Within a year of independence, Bangladesh got the constitution. Article 9 of the constitution under the heading of promotion of local government institutions says that the State shall encourage local government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women. The constitution has also given the power to urban local government to impose taxes, prepare budget and to maintain funds. The *pourashava* ordinance, 1977 has given the legal basis of *pourashava* (Municipalities). City corporations have been established by respective City Corporation Ordinance (Table. 1). The functions and organizational structure of

urban local government have been described in detail in these ordinances.

**Table 1. The Legal framework of urban local government**

Type	Established by ordinance/act
<i>Pourashava</i>	The <i>Pourashava</i> Ordinance, 1977
Dhaka City Corporation	The Dhaka City Corporation Ordinance, 1983
Chittagong City Corporation	The Chittagong Municipal Corporation Ordinance, 1982
Khulna City Corporation	The Khulna Municipal Corporation Ordinance, 1984
Rajshahi City Corporation	The Rajshahi City Corporation Ordinance, 1987
Sylhet City Corporation	-
Barisal City Corporation	-

The relevant acts and ordinances involve powers for making rules, by-laws and regulations. There are some laws relating to governing of the municipal government. Most of the laws derived from the British period. Since some laws are very old, they have lost their operational value. Of course, government from time to time has made some important rules regarding specific provisions of the relevant statues. The pressing issues that need to be addressed are that many of these laws, rules and regulations are no longer relevant to the current needs of the urban local government. There has been proliferation of rules with the passage of time. As a result, the execution of these rules has become very complicated. However, the current legal framework for the *Pourashava* and city corporations provides a little scope for considering alternatives approaches for basic urban service delivery especially for the poor.

#### *Institutions of Urban Local Government*

Urban governance institutions in Bangladesh can be categorized into various categories. Chowdhury identified the following institutions that are involved in urban governance (Khan, 1997 quoted in Chowdhury, 1994). He classified them under four broad headings: municipal government, special development bodies, special purpose authority and special government bodies.



**Municipal government:** Municipal government includes municipal corporation and municipalities or *Pourashavas*. Local government in urban and rural areas is entrusted to bodies elected by the people. Such bodies are called municipalities or *Pourashavas* (numbering 281) in urban areas (*The Prothom-Alo*, 10 August, 2003). Six of the largest municipalities namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Barisal, have been given metropolitan status and are termed as City Corporations. For many years these cities or municipal corporations were run and headed by nominated rather than elected mayors, although members of the city corporation council (Ward Commissioners) had been elected from the respective wards. Metropolitan cities have been experiencing elected Mayors since 1994.

**Special development authorities:** Special development authorities were established in four metropolitan cities to discharge such functions as local urban planning and activities pertaining to infrastructure and site development activities for housing, commercial and industrial use (Khan, 1997 quoted in Jahan, 1994). These authorities are semi-autonomous or autonomous bodies and run by the chairmen and boards. The chairman and most of the members of the boards are government officials. The dominance of government officials impedes the representation from the community. The decisions come from the higher level. There is no space for people's participation in planning process of these special development authorities. Special development authorities have not so far been successful in performing their activities owing to the lack of coordination with other agencies, the political inference, inadequate manpower, the overlapping functions with other urban institutions, inadequate management and financial system.

**Special purpose authority:** These, created by government, are confined only in Dhaka and Chittagong city. DWASA (Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority) and CWASA (Chittagong Water and Sewerage Authority) are the two organizations, which form the special purpose authority. In addition, DESA (Dhaka Electricity Supply Authority) in Dhaka is another special purpose authority.

Chairman and board members who are government officials run these organizations. These organizations claimed to be autonomous bodies, have failed miserably to serve city dwellers. For example, DWASA is currently facing a system loss of 40 percent (The *Ittefaq*, 23 February, 2004). It has reached only to 0.215 million people out of 10 million people of Dhaka city. Corruption engulfing all these organizations and their ineptness in management has compounded the sufferings of the city dwellers to a large extent.

**Special government bodies:** These bodies spread over the whole country but most of their activities are confined to urban areas. PWD (Public and Works Department) under the Ministry of Public Works and Housing (MPWH) is responsible for constructing and maintaining public buildings in urban and rural areas as well. The HSD (Housing and Settlement Directorate) operates under the purview of MPWH. Its functions include development and distribution of residential plots with services, construction of multi-storied flats in urban centres and development of government housing schemes. The Urban Development Directorate (UDD) under the MPWH is the main government agency concerned with the physical development of the country. Responsibilities of the Department of Public Health and Engineering (DPHE) include the development of water supply and sanitation in rural and urban areas excluding cities like Dhaka and Chitagong. DPHE is under the Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives (MLGRD & C). The Local Government and Engineering Department (LGED) responsible for low-cost sanitation, infrastructure and improving physical environment is under the MLGRD & C.

### **Urban Governance: Emerging Issues**

One has every reason to agree with Monem (2002) that good governance in Bangladesh is limited within literature and people's talk and it is not seen in practice in services delivery systems. At present, good governance in Bangladesh is far from the tangible consonance of the term. There are several issues that need to be



considered for the ensuring of good urban governance.

### *Delegation and devolution*

The present system of local government in Bangladesh is under decisive control of central government. Decentralization, which denotes delegation, deconcentration, devolution and privatization, with a minimum of central control, began in mid 1980s. But the successive governments showed a little interest in continuing this process resulting in the nip the initiative in the embryo. The unresponsive attitude of the central government towards decentralization is said to be the main bottleneck to this process. Government, elected by the popular vote, is reluctant to lose their control over the urban local government and targets to further control over them to establish supremacy at the grassroots level. Thus, the fate of delegation and devolution of power, an essence of good governance, remains uncertain as the decentralization process are kept at bay.

### *Conflict of power*

Besides municipalities and city corporations, there are some other urban institutions and organizations, which are functioning within the urban jurisdiction or beyond. Representatives of the City Corporation and municipality (Mayor, chairman and ward commissioners) are elected by adult franchise. But the officials of other urban institutions and organizations are government recruited. Consequently, conflicts between bureaucrat and people's representative surface. Within the city or community, political interference coupled with conflict of power hampers normal functioning of development activities. The less politically powerful groups are very often, deprived of their due rights as their voice remains unheard in power politics.

### *Coordination*

Coordination has been a complex and crucial phenomenon in the discourse of urban governance. Lack of cooperation and

coordination between municipal governments on the one hand and special government bodies, special development authorities and special purpose authorities on the other is well known (Khan, 1997). Elected bodies lead the former while the latter are government agencies. This could be a main reason for the lack of coordination and cooperation amongst them. Besides, multiplicity of institutions and overlapping nature of their jurisdiction has created major problems of coordination (Khan, 1997). To make the process of coordination between different institutions effective, face-to-face and regular meeting among the key persons of urban institutions could be held regularly. Only frequent dialogue could reduce the gap among the key actors, which would ultimately help lead effective coordination.

### *Participation*

Participation, a strong and popular concept in politics, is the process of involving different stakeholders in decision making in order to share information, resources and benefits among themselves (Cohen and Uphoff, 1980). It could be either direct or through legitimate intermediate institutions or representatives. Participation, needing to be informed and organized, means freedom of association and expression on the one hand and an organized civil society on the other. In Bangladesh, participation has been only in the election. It is very limited in development activities and non-existent in decision-making process. Lack of participation in urban affairs has led to the rise of bureaucratic influence and interest groups including ruling party. However, the importance of third sector like private sector, civil society, and community people are being increasingly felt in the delivery of urban services.

**Private Sector:** In Bangladesh, the presence of private sector in urban service delivery is very limited although a few private organizations such as "Waste Concern" have come up with innovative ways and means in dealing with solid waste management in capital city. The existing institutional and legal framework and the top-down approach in local urban government have made a little



space for involving the private sector in delivering urban services. NGOs (Non Governmental Organization) help inhabitants of slum areas with a number of services such as micro credit, informal education, health and vocational training. Only a small number of people benefit from NGOs. The government support for private sector housing has been spelled out in the draft of National Housing Policy (Islam, 1993). Besides, the special development authorities provide the site for housing. But the problem is nowhere the attempt to provide housing for the urban poor has been taken yet. Now the policy makers are realizing the need of third sector like NGOs in urban service delivery (Hashemi, 1993) and urban development, as the governments, burdened with huge budget deficit, are no longer in a position to support the increasing demand of the urban people.

Civil Society: Civil society is an integral part of social life which lies beyond the immediate reach of the state and which must exist for a democratic state to flower. It is the society of households, family networks, civic and religious organizations and communities that are bound to each other primarily by shared histories, collective memories and cultural norms of reciprocity (Mandelbaum, 1999 quoted in Douglass and Friedmann, p.2). Recently, civil society is taking shape in the name of *Nagorik* Committee (Citizen Committee) in urban areas of Bangladesh. They are getting stronger and more organized than ever. Very frequently, this committee comes up with various pressing urban issues and urges the government as well as city authorities to solve those problems. On some occasions, they have been successful in fulfilling their demands. People from different professionals are the members of civil society.

### *Transparency and accountability*

Transparency means that decisions taken and their enforcement are done in a manner that follows rules and regulations. Further, it also means information is freely available and directly accessible to those who will be affected by such decisions and their enforcement (Shawkat, 1993). Accountability and transparency are the key requirements for good governance. Not only governmental

institutions but also the private sector and civil society organizations must be accountable to the public and to their institutional stakeholders (Bertocci, 1996). In general, an organization or an institution is accountable to those who will be affected by its decisions or actions. Accountability cannot be enforced without transparency and the rule of law. Government decisions are less prone to corruption when they are predictable, transparent, and accountable.

In Bangladesh, lack of accountability and transparency in urban governments breeds corruption. Public officials are not accountable and decisions making process is not transparent (Khan, 1997). Not only public officials, people's representatives such Mayor and Chairman of the City Corporation and municipality respectively, also are hardly held responsible for their misdeeds, if any. Most of them, be it public officials or elected representatives, are involved in corruption practices due to lack of accountability and transparency. Public are kept in dark in decision-making process in any kind of development projects and programs. Ensuring transparency and accountability in urban governance might reduce the propensity of corruption significantly and hence sufferings and harassment of the people would have been lessened.

### *Corruption*

Corruption is a big obstacle in the way of good governance in Bangladesh. Rampant corruption slows down the investment and growth (TIB, 1997). It prevents a fair distribution of national wealth and broadens the gap between rich and poor. What is most dangerous is that it is mainly responsible for the breakdown of law and order in the country. The extent of corruption depends on the amount of monopoly and discretionary power that official's exercise and the degree to which they are held accountable for their action.

Bangladesh tops the list of most corrupt countries while evaluated against the indicators developed by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB). Corruption has griped all machineries associated with urban governance. It is the most



important factor that deters the functioning of urban governance smoothly. Both people's representative and bureaucrats are involved with this malpractice. The ineptness of the urban governments in mobilizing local resources has triggered their dependency on the central government for making annual budget. This dependency makes them more vulnerable to corruption as they have to bargain with the central government to get adequate budget allocation. Though the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development(LGRD) is responsible to oversee the works of the urban governments, political biasness jeopardizes the development activities in urban areas. Very often, people's representatives loyal to opposition party are subject to harassment in corruption cases.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The foregoing discussion reveals that the traditional mode of urban governance still persists in Bangladesh. National history, socio-economic, cultural and political factors have had significant impact on shaping urban governance. Lack of participation, conflicts of power, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability along with slow pace of decentralization process have jeopardized the governability of urban government. The definition of governance implies that public-private interaction is necessary to manage the task of governing. Unfortunately the involvement of other actors such as private sector in urban development activities has been very meagre. As such, Bangladeshi cities have to rely heavily on the central government since the lion share of the budget comes from them. Low return of tax from the local government compels them to depend on the central government for budgetary allocation.

Although the features of urban governance in Bangladesh show some similarities with the welfare model of urban governance, this does not necessarily claim that it resembles with this model or does it contradict. Rather urban governance in Bangladesh is unique and characterized by traditional top-down model. Policies reducing the dependency of cities on central government, which is still remarkable, have not been taken yet. The decentralization process

that began in 1980s remains stalled. Urban local government overburdened with huge budget deficit has been facing tremendous problems in providing services to its dwellers. Lack of good governance has compounded the blight condition of urbanites. There are no alternatives to upgrade the conditions of the city dwellers other than focusing on the key issues such as decentralization, conflict of power, coordination, participation, transparency and accountability, and corruption. Along with drastic institutional reforms, practice of good governance might bring tangible results in ensuring sustainable urban development in Bangladesh.

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