

POLICY BRIEF

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Political Economy of Urban Green Spaces of Dhaka City



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Urban green spaces provide innumerable health, social, economic, and environmental benefits. Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, has less than 8.5% of tree-covered land, while an ideal city requires at least 20% green space^{1,2}. Thus, green space as a land use is disproportionate to other land uses in Dhaka city. Different factors have contributed to Dhaka's present green space status, with the interplay of political and economic factors playing a significant role.

A study was carried out from July to October 2022 to identify the key stakeholders and their extent of involvement in managing the green spaces of Dhaka city. It also investigates the support of national policy frameworks and governance structures for maintaining green spaces. This policy brief is a direct output of the research.



"In our country, one government agency has to file a case against another agency to protect green spaces.

Why is this happening?"

- Government Official

Assessing the Urban Green Space Management

Data for this study were collected through key informant interviews, case studies, and other secondary sources. The study team interviewed 20 key informants from government and non-government organizations, academicians, activists, and private stakeholders.

Six case studies were carried out considering the scale, geographical spread, and political economy issues surrounding them – Ramna Park and Hatir Jheel at the city scale; Uttara Kallayan Samity Park and Tajmahal Road Park in the DNCC area; Tetultala Playground and Shahid Abdul Alim Playground in the DSCC area, with the latter four at a neighborhood scale.

Relevant journal articles, theses, reports, institutional websites, reliable news articles, and national and global policy documents were reviewed to identify the current scenario of green spaces in Dhaka and how the political economy affects this particular aspect.

Political economy is an interdisciplinary and multidimensional theory that explains the interrelationships among economic structure, the political environment, and relevant public and private institutions^{3,4,5}. In the context of green space in Dhaka city, political economy is defined as the influence of state agencies and market actors on the planning, implementation, and management of green spaces.

Complex Network of Green Space Management

A complex network of government and non-government organizations, civil society, activists, and individuals is involved in green space allocation, relevant project initiation, implementation, and management in Dhaka City.

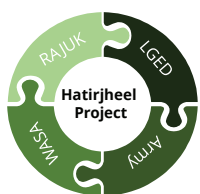
Table 1: Locations of urban green spaces that are managed by the key actors.

Key Actors	Locations Include
Dhaka North City Corporation	Green spaces within their administrative boundary
Dhaka South City Corporation	Green spaces within their administrative boundary
Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha	Green spaces within its jurisdiction area
Public Works Department	Ramna Park, Suhrawardy Udyan, Chandrima Uddyan, Farmgate Anwar Park (Recently handed over to DMTCL for metro rail landing station)
National Housing Authority	Green spaces in their housing projects, along with spaces in Mirpur, Lalmatia, Mohammadpur (Old part), and Badda
Bangladesh Forest Department	Botanical Garden and Baldha Garden

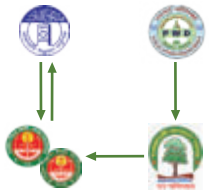
Inter-organizational Relationship

Three types of relationships have been found among green space management agencies: collaboration, cooperation and conflict.

■ Collaboration



■ Cooperative



■ Conflict



Conflicting Relationship among the Actors

- RAJUK has a conflicting relationship with the city corporations regarding the handover of green spaces for management.

"I can provide a long list of parks that RAJUK is maintaining and not giving to DSCC".

- Government Official

- Some government organizations are unwilling to hand over open spaces to the city corporation, even though this should be the ideal practice according to the Town Improvement Act 1953.

"City corporations build markets or shops in open spaces for revenue generation. Sometimes, this money does not go to the government's funds due to local political influence".

- Government Official

Problems of Park Renovation Projects

- Excessive civil works and loss of green space

"The major part of implementation is civil engineering work. We want to increase the amount of concrete or hard surfaces. We just think that we have to make significant changes. Whether these designs will create positive or negative impacts does not matter".

- Government Official

- Reduce accessibility of low-income groups

"The green/open space renovation projects created social inequality through design. The low-income group does not use the parks like before. The design and materials of parks with facilities like cafe, coffee shops, and playing equipment, automatically create exclusion of a particular group of society".

- Academician

Influences of Private Entities

Another modality of green space management is management through academies, clubs, or private entities. In some cases, city corporations hand over the management responsibility; in other cases, the entities acquire it by exercising power. This technique often leads to the commercialization of public space and causes social exclusion with controlled access.

In contrast, the research identifies successful co-management in selective case study areas. Therefore, management through community organizations cannot be adopted indiscriminately.

SDG: Goal 11 - Target 7

"By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces particularly for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities."



Global Policy Documents

Important aspects of global green space policy documents are environmental quality, connectivity or planned integration of green spaces with other services, easy accessibility, inclusiveness, safety, and community participation in all phases of green space development, from design to maintenance.

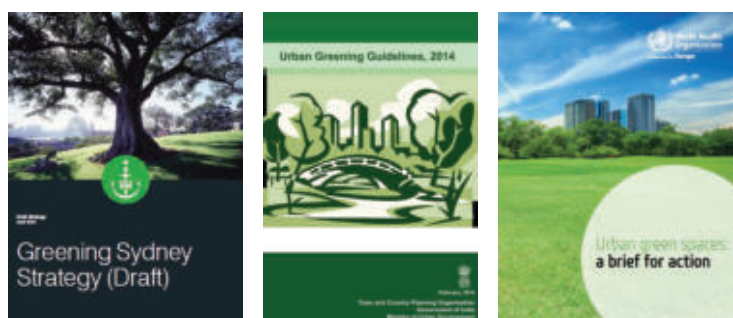


Figure 1: Some global urban green space policy documents.

Gaps among National Policies

■ Defining Green Spaces

- The existing policy framework of Bangladesh has **not clearly defined the term 'green space'** yet.
- The DAP (Detailed Area Plan) 2022-2035 of Dhaka does not display the precise size of green spaces but represents them as circular shapes.

■ Hierarchy of Green Spaces

- The planning and management of urban green spaces should vary according to their hierarchy.
- In Bangladesh, DAP 2022 - 2035 specifies two scales for providing civic and social amenities: **city/regional scale and local scale**. While BNBC 2020 has categorized recreational open spaces into three types: **local, ward and regional open space**. These inconsistencies need to be resolved.

■ Standards for Green Spaces

- In Bangladesh, the standard for green space only considers the **quantity** variable.
- Whereas, worldwide **quantity, quality, and accessibility** are considered when providing a standard for urban green spaces.

■ Planning and Design of Green Spaces

- **Design guidelines** are yet to be formulated in Bangladesh that can be followed to develop **high-quality** parks and playgrounds.
- According to global standards, **visual openness** is essential for open space. But in reality, renovated playfields are surrounded by fences. Even a cafe is permitted in front of the playfield's entrance.
- **Universal accessibility and inclusiveness** are essential parameters for a sustainable and user-friendly plan and design of green spaces.
In Bangladesh, guidelines need to be developed to ensure **inclusiveness**, including **entry fees** and **time of usage** for active use of urban green spaces.

■ Protection of Green Spaces

- The maximum penalty for any breach of the Park and Open Spaces Conservation Act 2000 is five years in prison, or fifty thousand BDT, or both. The clauses **related to punishment**, drafted in 2000, must be **revisited** and updated.
- Section 75 of the Town Improvement Act 1953 allows individuals to seek RAJUK's approval to use land differently than specified in the Master Plan, which can be **misused** for green space conversion.
- As per the Social Forestry Rule 2004, there are **scopes for cutting trees** for **government development projects**. These types of conflicts in rules and regulations hinder the protection of green space.

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Table 2: Issues addressed in national green space policy documents of Bangladesh.

Key Issues	Park Conservation Act 2000	City Corporation Act 2009	BNBC 2020	DAP 2022
Definition				
Typology				
Hierarchy				
Standard				
Quantity				
Quality				
Amenities				
Continuity and Integration				
Openness and Visibility				
Accessibility and Inclusiveness				
Conserve/ Protect				
Multifunctionality				
Monitoring				

Legend

Well Addressed Moderately Addressed Not Addressed

Key Findings

- ✓ RAJUK, DNCC, DSCC, PWD, NHA, and BFD are actively involved in the green space management of Dhaka city.
- ✓ Private entities, political leaders, and community people all contribute significantly to green space management. In some cases, successful co-management has been identified.
- ✓ Green space management by welfare societies or sports clubs sometimes leads to social exclusion with controlled access and hinders future development.
- ✓ RAJUK has a conflicting relationship with the city corporations regarding the handover of green spaces for management.
- ✓ City corporations sometimes introduce commercial activities in the green space or change their use in the name of revenue collection, which is a clear violation of the handover agreement.
- ✓ The governance structure makes inter-organizational conflict resolution initiatives complex.
- ✓ Till now, our policy frameworks have mainly focused on setting standards regarding the amount/quantity of green space. Significant issues like quality, accessibility towards green spaces, and monitoring are almost overlooked in the national policy frameworks of Bangladesh.

Recommendations

■ Immediate Interventions

- Under the careful vigilance of the Mayors, city corporations (North and South) should continue managing the local-level green spaces as they are closer to the city dwellers.
- The mindset of green space providers and managers needs to be changed. They have to be innovative rather than adopting commercialization principles for green space management funds.
- Community people's participation in any kind of project associated with green space must be ensured. However, management through community organizations should not be adopted indiscriminately.

■ Long-term Interventions

- Relevant laws and acts should be modified, specifying different government agencies' roles and adding guidelines on inter-organizational cooperation.
- A separate green space wing should be established in each management agency.
- Under the detailed area plan, area-specific action plans should be prepared considering the differences in requirements of various age and gender groups.
- The responsible agencies should prepare long-term and medium-term management plans to ensure efficient spending on civic amenities like green space.

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