

# Advocacy for improved walking conditions: experience from a low-income country

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## Abstract

In Dhaka, Bangladesh, as in many low-income cities, serious obstacles exist to walking. While most trips occur by foot, those walking must do so in dangerous and unpleasant circumstances, and the main victims of road crashes are pedestrians. Far more important than encouraging people to walk is creating the environment in which it will be enjoyable and safe to do so. Our working methods include research, networking, communications, capacity building, and advocacy. A key tool is the media, which can bring important issues to the attention of policymakers and the public for little or no cost. Our experience indicates that the neglected issue of walking can gain serious public attention if efforts to do so remain focused and a wide network of interested and relevant parties are recruited to the work. The media as well as various professionals in transport policy and urban planning are vital in these efforts. Advocacy results of our work include new attention given by policymakers to the importance of walking and the creation of an active advocacy movement to work together to improve conditions for walking. While success to date has been limited, the new attention to the issue and a change in the focus of much reporting on transport and urban planning issues indicates the great possibility for future improvements. This presentation focuses on how activists can work to raise awareness of the need for policy changes that result in better conditions for pedestrians and thus contribute to a better living environment for all.

## **Author biographies**

Maruf Hossain (Rahman) is National Advocacy Officer at WBB Trust (Work for a Better Bangladesh), where he has worked since 2004. Mr. Hossain has given many talks on urban planning and transport, has written a book on parking (in Bengali), and co-written publications on transport and poverty and liveable cities.

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## Introduction: Why walking is so important in low-income settings

As important as walking is for transport, health and the environment in wealthy countries, its importance may be even greater in low-income settings where the costs associated with vehicular use are even less affordable. Walking as a form of transport reduces transport costs, fuel dependency, traffic congestion, obesity, and air and noise pollution, and improves health. It also contributes to the liveability of cities by increasing safety, social interactions, and conviviality (Efroymsen et al. 2009a, Efroymsen et al. 2009b).

Unfortunately, policymakers often view walking not as a positive contributor to quality of life in cities but rather as an unimportant activity, too trivial to be regarded as a form of transport, and one that interferes with the free movement of cars. Rather than pass measures to improve walkability in cities, policymakers may instead pass measures and contribute to infrastructure that makes walking more difficult and unpleasant, and penalizes pedestrians in various forms. They may be entranced by the idea of “globalized” cities with no personality, cities that actively discourage free outdoor movement, and instead cater to driving, to large and anonymous chain stores, and to an existence with no sense of place (and thus, again, nothing to encourage walking) (Douglass 2009).

Low-income settings face another challenge. While many organizations exist to promote a variety of issues, and civil society and the media may be quite active and influential, they tend to focus on certain issues, with transport in general, and walking in particular, often not on their agenda.

For those who have received formal training in urban transport, their entire bias may be towards improving the flow of cars, with government agencies measuring only movement by car and other motorized means, while completely disregarding pedestrians or, worse, treating them only as obstacles to cars. Organizations working to improve the condition of the poor generally fail to consider the related issues of transport costs and how transport policies affect the availability of urban jobs (for instance by banning hawkers and pedicabs). The media typically contributes to the problem by taking a car-centred approach to urban transport issues, leaving nobody to speak out for the beleaguered, non-polluting, space-efficient pedestrian.

## The current situation of pedestrians in Dhaka

In Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh with a population of roughly 12 million people, walking is an essential but often ignored and belittled form of transport. Walking is in fact the main form of transport, with 60% of trips made by foot and only 4% by car (Hoque and Alam 2002), something made more feasible by the fact that 76% of all trips are under 5 km, and 50% under 2 km (Barkat et al. 2004). The crowded urban conditions, the exorbitant space demands of the car, the fact that the vast majority of people do not have access to cars and rely on walking for transport, all indicate that walking would both improve traffic conditions

(Bari & Efroymson 2005a, 2005c) and improve the conditions of the poor (Efroymson & Rahman 2005).

Despite the prevalence of walking in Dhaka, conditions for it are generally extremely poor. While most trips occur by foot, those walking must do so in dangerous and unpleasant circumstances. The main victims of road crashes are pedestrians, but the government's main response to the problem is to prevent people from crossing the street, rather than to make it safe to do so. Even where sidewalks exist, they are often in poor condition and frequently completely blocked by car parking. The level of car traffic in the city makes walking dangerous and unpleasant, with pedestrians assaulted by the noise and smell of vehicles.



Photograph 1 Footpath blocked by car parking

Pedestrians are consistently ignored in policies, plans and initiatives, while all privileges and priorities are given to the car. Footpaths (sidewalks) are sometimes cut to expand the road; zebra crossings are virtually non-existent. The main "pro-pedestrian" measure taken by the government continues to be the construction of pedestrian bridges, forcing those on foot to climb about two flights of stairs in order to cross the road, in a move that is clearly meant to improve the situation of drivers, not pedestrians. Worse, a new edict has been announced that will punish those failing to use a pedestrian bridge, where available, with 24 hours in jail.



Photograph 2 Forcing pedestrians to cross road by foot over bridge

In sum, walking in Dhaka is as neglected as it is important.

## **Improving the situation: the work of WBB**

WBB Trust (Work for a Better Bangladesh) began working on urban transport in 2004, with the work gradually expanding to include urban planning issues. The program evolved into "liveable cities", and WBB is part of an Asian regional network of such programs supported by the Canadian NGO HealthBridge. The purpose of the liveable cities program is to improve health, equity, and the environment in cities in low-income countries, through sound urban design and transport policies that focus on access, fuel-free transport, mass transit, and qualities that make cities more liveable such as accessible public spaces and green space.

Two main approaches can be taken to encourage walking, to make it both safe and enjoyable, in the recognition that walking should be not only convenient but also a pleasure, a celebration of one of the most basic facets of being human. One is to engage in public campaigns or other approaches meant to motivate the individual to make more daily trips by walking, or otherwise to incorporate walking into their daily routine, usually as a form of

exercise. The other main approach is to recognize the obstacles in the built environment that prevent walking and address those, so as to reach entire population groups – and to avoid the absurdity of encouraging a behaviour that the environment actively discourages (Frank et. al. 2003, Gehl et al. 2004). That actions taken to improve walking can be followed by proper evaluation in order to measure the situation of pedestrians and improve it has been well demonstrated (Gehl 2001, Gehl & Gemzøe 2003, 2004).

As the built environment has an enormous impact on the situation of urban residents, with low income cities being no exception (Daniel & Efrogmson 2010), the focus of WBB's liveable cities program is to work to improve policies on urban planning and urban transport through research, preparation and dissemination of materials, media work, direct advocacy, capacity building of NGOs, and networking (as to tips on engaging in research for advocacy and low-cost, effective media work, see Efrogmson 2006). While walking is a vital form of transport in cities, WBB realizes that walking cannot be improved without improving the situation of cities in general. The high rates of walking as transport in Dhaka are not due to good conditions for walking, but rather to the lack of alternatives, especially for the very poor. People should be rewarded, rather than punished, for moving about by foot; cities need to be designed to make most trips short ones, easily covered by foot or bicycle. Transport policies should encourage short trips and discourage longer ones.

Given these beliefs, WBB works on a range of issues to improve the conditions for walking. These include conducting research on urban transport issues; publishing a book on walking issues and disseminating it widely to the media, NGOs and policymakers; including information on walking issues in their quarterly newsletter ("For the country"); organizing seminars, demonstrations and other events on walking issues; regularly meeting with and providing information to electronic and print journalists; contributing letters and articles to the newspapers; working with institutes, government and non-government organizations and individuals; distributing news, articles and information to relevant stakeholders; and demanding that pedestrians be given first priority in transport planning in every event WBB organizes on transport and urban planning issues.



Photograph 3 Demonstration program for demanding pedestrian friendly environment

The importance of working with the media cannot be overstated. The media can bring important issues to the attention of policymakers and the public for little or no cost; it has vast influence on those with power, and is the least expensive way to reach a broad audience. Media can do much that is detrimental on transport and urban planning issues, or it can contribute to the public debate and understanding that gradually leads to positive change.

### **A demand and a message**

The conditions for pedestrians are unlikely to improve in any significant way unless they are accorded genuine priority (as opposed to lip service) in policies and planning. This is not going to happen without a good deal of effort from those advocating on behalf of pedestrians and, more generally, sensible, environmentally-friendly, and pro-people urban planning.

In its advocacy campaigns, WBB and partners address a number of issues. First and foremost, as emphasized throughout this paper, is the need to give first priority to pedestrians in policy, plan and investment. That is, it is not sufficient in urban transport plans to claim that there is a “pedestrian first” policy and accord only a tiny fraction of the urban transport budget to improving walking conditions (and that mainly towards building pedestrian bridges as opposed to genuinely pedestrian-friendly infrastructure) – as has been the case with urban transport plans in Dhaka to date (Bari & Efroymson 2009, Efroymson & Bari 2007).

More specifically, giving pedestrians priority includes ensuring that pedestrians have the right and opportunity to cross the road safely at street level (in order to avoid the delays and extra effort required in using bridges); banning all parking of cars on footpaths and regulating car parking elsewhere (in recognition that car parking can be a major obstacle to walking, and free parking of private vehicles in public spaces represents an unjustified subsidy for the wealthiest and an unaffordable cost to society [Shoup 2005]); maintaining footpaths in good condition and ensuring that they are of adequate width (depending on the level of pedestrian traffic in each area); ensuring sufficient shade, from trees and awnings, to protect from sunlight and rain, as well as providing adequate lighting at night; and preventing the disposal of garbage and construction materials on footpaths. Where such policies already are in place, strict enforcement is needed, so that the message is clear: pedestrians are welcomed, desired, important contributors to urban life rather than obstacles to the free movement of cars.

Beyond these issues come those of improving the experience of walking in other ways. This includes trying to reduce rather than encourage movement by car and other motorized vehicle, as it is highly unpleasant to walk next to busy streets, with all their noise and vehicle exhaust...and at least in Dhaka, the main cause of noise would appear to be vehicular horns (Dey et al. 2002).

It includes urban design laws that prevent long blank surfaces (such as walls) and designs that allow buildings to “turn their back” on the street (Gehl et al. 2004). It would include changing the current disastrous policy in Dhaka of requiring all new residential buildings to provide car parking, such that not only is car use actively encouraged even on narrow streets, but entrances to buildings are designed to accommodate cars, not people.

It could take more active steps as well, including encouraging street art, “interactive” shop fronts (for instance, ground floor windows that allow people to see in and out, maintaining eyes on the street [Jacobs 1989] as well as attractions for pedestrians), allowing hawkers to sell goods on footpaths where there is sufficient space (again for both safety and attractiveness). Once the policy of improving the situation for pedestrians is in place, and monitoring of the conditions for pedestrians and the length of time people spend out of doors, both moving and sitting, begin to be monitored, further measures will easily be achieved. Get the policy right, and the actions will follow.



Photograph 4 Pedestrians buying flower tree from hawker on foot path in front of New Market, Dhaka

## **A note on equality (and the lack thereof)**

Growing trends towards inequality in the last few decades are worrisome (Stiglitz 2003, Krugman 2009), not least to those who wish to see city streets full of contented pedestrians. Those trends are by no means inevitable; even in the United States, at various periods in the past equality has been actively and successfully promoted (Krugman 2009, Cohen 2004). Why is this important for walking? For one, equality, security, and a sense of safety accompany each other. When there is a sense of people being “in it together” and looking out for each other, more people will feel comfortable to walk the streets (Jacobs 1989). For another, the priority given to car drivers versus pedestrians sends a clear message about government priorities and values, in terms of the perceived worth of those who can and cannot afford a car; a genuinely civilized city is one in which those on foot are fully respected (Peñalosa 2004).

Civilization is sometimes misunderstood by policymakers to mean policies that make cities look cleaner and neater, by removing beggars and hawkers, and even pedicabs, rickshaws, and sometimes bicycles. Such policies punish the poor while contributing to traffic congestion, pollution, transport costs, and the unpleasantness of urban life. Clearly prioritizing the rich over the poor, for instance in allocations of urban space (providing significant quantities of space for the movement and parking of cars, for golf courses and luxury shopping malls) while doing little or nothing to improve the conditions of the poor can of course also lead to social unrest (Efroymsen 2010).

The vital role of the poor in maintaining the liveability of cities through their active presence in the streets should be recognized and encouraged; the results will be manifold, improving equality, reducing poverty, but also making cities more convivial, liveable places that will in turn attract more people on foot (Efroymsen et. al. 2009a, 2009b, Drummond 2009).

## **Can advocacy succeed?**

Advocacy is by no means easy, and those engaged in it might well be discouraged at times by the results. However, experience in Bangladesh, as elsewhere, indicates that advocacy can indeed be successful. Major successes will usually take years to achieve, and it is thus important to measure incremental successes as well: recruitment of new allies, changes in the way issues are raised by media and policymakers, statements of intent (which may or may not materialize into action), and so on. But in various countries such successes are occurring (Efroymsen 2009).

In Bangladesh, policy successes include the following:

1. More people are now demanding a walking-friendly environment. What was formerly a non-issue (who works on pedestrian rights?) has become an area of discussion, activism and advocacy.
2. Bans on cycle rickshaws have slowed. The government had made plans to ban rickshaws from most major roads, but for the most part has been unable, thanks to concerted protests, to do so. Rickshaws are vital to the transport system in a city where only a tiny majority uses a car, and the presence of rickshaws means that the noise and air pollution in the city is no worse than it is (Bari & Efroymsen 2005b; Efroymsen 2005, Efroymsen & Bari 2005).
3. Press coverage of traffic congestion has changed dramatically. In the past, rickshaws were regularly blamed for traffic, despite government studies (and practical experience) indicating that rickshaw-free streets are often in worse shape than those

which allow rickshaws, and that general traffic speed is so slow that cars often do not move any faster than rickshaws (see for instance Bari & Efrogmson 2005b).

4. Some key stakeholders have made statements about the need to control private cars in Dhaka. While this may not sound significant, it was unimaginable a few years ago. Fewer cars would mean vastly improved conditions for pedestrians.
5. The government has imposed a fixed tax and increased the import tax on private cars. Again, any measure, however minor, to try to reduce the spread of cars is significant.
6. The government has taken initiative to improve the railway. Just as public transit and walking go hand in hand in cities, so rail and walking are related in inter-city movement. Better scheduling and movement of trains will help discourage private car use; many people can reach train stations by foot. Again, measures that emphasize the importance of moving about without the use of a car will play a major role in improving the conditions of pedestrians.

## Conclusion

There is a world of difference between the difficult and the impossible. While economic interests, common myths about transport and urban planning, trends towards industrialization and globalization, and beliefs about the need to cater to the rich rather than provide basic services to the poor all can make life in cities difficult for many (UNESCO 2002, Efrogmson 2010a), and make improving conditions for walking in low-income settings difficult, such a task is in no way impossible. Concerted, thoughtful efforts to gain attention to the importance of walking and to ways of improving conditions for it can succeed; people working in coordinated fashion can indeed make cities far more liveable, for the low-income as well as for others (DelBello 2006, Kunstler 1996, Register 2006, Hellberg & Johansson 2008, Efrogmson et al. 2008).

Our experience in Bangladesh, and that of our partners in other low-income cities in Asia, indicates that the neglected issue of walking can gain serious public attention if efforts to do so remain focused and a wide network of interested and relevant parties are recruited to the work. The media as well as various professionals in transport policy and urban planning are vital in these efforts, and people can contribute to raising the importance of walking and the need for effective, genuinely pro-pedestrian solutions, if they are approached in the right way.

Advocacy results of our work include new attention given by policymakers to the importance of walking, the creation of an active advocacy movement to work together to improve conditions for walking, and various other successes in transport policy. While success to date has been limited, the new attention to the issue and a change in the focus of much reporting on transport and urban planning issues indicates the great possibility for future improvements.

Thus while there is much yet to do to improve walking conditions in Dhaka, some progress has occurred. Once groups are mobilized to work towards an issue, and once that issue begins to receive attention from policymakers, the likelihood of eventual success is greatly increased. With proper appreciation for the importance of walking and the need to improve conditions for it, policy, planning, and projects to make a change will be more likely to come about.

Knowing what we do about the impact of the built environment on people's activities, it is clear that approaches to improve walking, particularly where such conditions are currently

abysmal, are vital. It is thus also important to recognize the possibility of successful advocacy, so that rather than encouraging the individual to do what the environment prevents, one can successfully create an environment that brings out the desired change. It is hoped that more groups in other countries will appreciate the need to engage in concerted advocacy campaigns to improve conditions for walking, and that as a result, many of the problems associated with our current cities will decrease, and liveability and vitality in cities will flourish.

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