

Dhaka North, Bangladesh



Atiqul Islam

Mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation, Bangladesh

Atiqul Islam is Mayor of Dhaka North City Corporation. He is currently serving his second term, having first been elected by popular vote in 2019. As Mayor, he governs the administration of approximately 10 million residents in Bangladesh's capital city.

He is an active participant in, and leader of, various international city-focused forums such as the Mayor's Migration Council (MMC) and C40 Cities. He is a member of the MMC Leadership Board, Vice Chair of C40 Cities, and a member of the C40 Steering Committee. He is also Co-Lead of the C40-MMC Task Force on Climate & Migration, and Chairman of the C40 Steering Committee for the South & West Asian Region. For over three decades he has been a key figure in Bangladesh's RMG manufacturing industry. He is Managing Director of Islam Garments, which he founded in 1985 and today employs over 20,000 people.

He served as the President of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers Exporters Association (BGMEA) from 2013 - 2014. During this time, he led the industry's crucial response and recovery after the Rana Plaza industrial crisis of 2013. Previously, as a Director of BGMEA, he was a part of the leadership team that eliminated child labour from the RMG sector. The President of Bangladesh appointed him as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of Manarat International University in 2022, and he also is a member of the senate of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology. In the sphere of sports and community leadership, he is the President of the Volleyball Federation of Bangladesh, and was a Paul Harris Fellow at The Rotary Foundation.

He and his wife have been happily married for 33 years, and are proud parents to a daughter, and doting grandparents to a granddaughter.

Green Skies & Blue Ground: Dhaka North's Climate Innovations

Dhaka North is a city like very few others. With nearly a century of organic, and largely unplanned growth, it today is home to a scarcely believable 49,000 people per square kilometres.

The various cycles of population booms that the city has seen has resulted in a very densely packed urban settlement which has developed at the expense of the natural environment. Water was once a defining characteristic of the city, with rivers, canals, lakes and other waterbodies throughout. Sadly, over the years many such running streams have been filled up to make space for the crush of people. As the waterbodies reduced, so too did the greenery in the city. While the older parts of the city still retain

much of their greenery, the newer parts built in the last sixty years are largely shorn of tree cover.

The reality is that today, large scale tree plantation initiatives are hampered by a lack of land. To make way for trees, one is required to displace buildings and people - hardly a practical solution. The effect of both loss of tree cover and the reduction of waterbodies has been temperature increases and disruptions to indigenous ecology. We've now started walking the long road to fix these problems.

Wherever possible, we are reclaiming and restoring illegally occupied or filled-in water bodies. We're doing our best to restore the waterway system, and revitalize the blue ecology of the city. These waterways are in fact also now being used for water taxis - reducing the snarl of traffic on the roads. For these reclaimed waterbodies, we are now taking a nature-based, innovative approach to ensure that they do not meet the same fate of being filled-in and illegally occupied, as has happened before.

This approach is to demarcate the outline of the waterbodies by planting trees to form a natural boundary around them. To this border of trees, we are also adding walkways and bicycle lanes, and together these demarcate our lakes, canals, rivers and ponds. When the waterbodies are no longer flanked by flat empty land, any illegal encroachment of it becomes a complicated undertaking thanks to the ring of trees. This strategy, as simple as it is, provides a two-pronged solution. It conserves water streams and envisions developing pockets of green spaces across the city.

Lack of open land in the city posits similarly complex challenges for restoring greenery, as it does our natural water channels. Substantive afforestation efforts in available spaces throughout the city has prioritized planting native species to make our urban ecosystems more resilient, but as climate impacts facing our city intensified, we knew that a more holistic approach is called for. We analysed the physical infrastructure of the city, and quickly realized that the most underutilised surface area throughout the city was that of all the rooftops of buildings.

After consultations with local urban planners, architects, engineers and botanists, we concluded that rooftop gardens could potentially play a tremendous role in helping trap pollution, reducing energy usage in buildings and lowering extreme-heat exposure of residents. Thus, we made the decision to embark on a campaign to encourage homeowners to install rooftop gardens in their buildings.

This however, led us to confront another reality. The spatial demographics of the city sees almost all people living in apartment buildings, which are collectively co-owned by multiple people. The rooftops are thus co-owned communal spaces. Individual owners may well agree with the concept of rooftop gardens, but ground-level realities suggest that no one apartment owner is willing to dedicate time and resources into maintaining a communal shared space. Achieving consensus amongst multiple-owners proved to be difficult in practice.

Thus, we had to reflect on how best we could find a path around this behavioural bottleneck. After some deliberation, we decided that the best way to incentivise the outcome we wanted was to offer some reward mechanism. The reward would necessarily have to incentivise the apartment owner, and not the renter or occupant. We then approached the national government, to float the idea of allowing for targeted municipal tax breaks for buildings which install rooftop gardens.

We are pleased to report that the national government not only approved our proposal, but also decided to roll this out across every jurisdiction in the country. Thus, Dhaka North now offers a discount on property holding taxes for owners of all buildings which install rooftop gardens.

The project is still in its infancy, but the early signs are encouraging. Building owners have responded enthusiastically, residents are driven to 'think green', and a cottage industry has started employing garden designers and landscape consultants. We hope to continue finding similar innovations within the confines of the city to combat the effects of climate change, and to improve our city for all its dwellers.ⁱ

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