



Illustrations by Nasheen Jahan, justURBAN

Fair Cities, Shared Prosperity

Mapping the Gaps on Understandings of Fair Urban
Transition in Khulna, Bangladesh

Shilpi Roy, PhD, Khulna University

Mohammad Azaz, Chair, River & Delta Research Centre

Eric Lindland, PhD, FrameWorks Institute

Efadul Huq, PhD, Smith College

With Contributions From

Quazi Arish Saif Mahi

Ferdous Hussain



JUNE 2025

Contents

Introduction	3
Research Methods	5
Expert Interviews	5
Cultural Models Interviews	5
Research Findings	7
The Expert Story	7
Public Views	16
Mapping the Overlaps and Gaps in Understanding	30
Overlaps in Understanding	30
Gaps in Understanding	31
Conclusion	35
Initial Recommendations	35
Endnotes	41
About FrameWorks and the River and Delta Research Centre	42

Introduction

Khulna—the third-largest city in Bangladesh—has seen unprecedented and exclusionary urban growth over the last three decades. This urbanization process has welcomed new residents and settlements but has resulted in the loss of essential high-quality land, including open spaces, green surfaces, and water systems. The city faces significant challenges, such as social and spatial inequalities, a lack of basic urban infrastructure and services, a weak economic base, unemployment, waterlogging, and poor solid waste management. Decades of limited investment, resources, and haphazard transformation have left Khulna unable to meet the demands of its growing population, even as national policy initiatives and local partnerships have shared a goal over the past few decades of addressing these problems in the urban core. Khulna deserves an urban transformation that will make it a livable city for all residents, providing access to urban opportunities, services, and infrastructure and guiding future development toward a sustainable future.

This research provisionally defines fair urban transition (FUT) as an urban transformation that prioritizes a city's sustainable future while ensuring the benefits of urban changes are equitably distributed among all residents. It particularly considers the needs of marginalized communities and aims to minimize adverse impacts on vulnerable populations during the transition process. All stakeholders involved should clearly understand the critical role that FUT plays in shaping the future of Khulna and other urban areas. Through its advocacy and communications, the urban sector in Bangladesh has played, and will continue to play, a pivotal role in informing, educating, and leading the effort to elevate people's understanding of FUT. This sector aims to build support for the policies and programs that best serve the needs of urban residents and the nation as a whole.

To this end, a research collaboration between the River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC) and the FrameWorks Institute, with support from Porticus Bangladesh, aims to create evidence-based stories about FUT that can be effectively used by community leaders and other stakeholders to build public understanding and support for new policies and solutions in Khulna and other urban areas of Bangladesh while strengthening the role and voice of marginalized communities in managing urban growth. This empirically grounded and culturally sensitive research project aims to empower Khulna's urban transition sector with narrative frames, communication tools, and strategies. These will enable stakeholders to shape public and policy conversations around urban growth, ensuring it is planned and managed in fair and participatory ways.

Phase I of this collaborative project is a body of *descriptive* research to map the cultural and communications landscape surrounding urban transition issues in Khulna. This first phase of research was conducted from March 2024 to February 2025, with the majority of data collected before the June–August 2024 uprising. This report summarizes both an *expert story* of FUT and patterns in *public thinking* around the same issues and then compares the two.

The expert story of FUT is derived from interviews with expert advocates and stakeholders working around urban policy, climate change, and social and environmental justice. The expert story defines their understanding of FUT and the associated challenges and opportunities relevant to Khulna and other major cities in Bangladesh.

Next, the report identifies the *cultural models*—understandings, assumptions, and mindsets—that are widely shared among Khulna residents and that structure their thinking around issues of urban growth, justice, climate change, and governance. These models illuminate the basic contours of the cultural and cognitive landscape of not only *what* people think about urban life but also *how* they think about it. Identifying these models is an essential starting point for developing and refining strategies to effectively communicate about FUT in Khulna and other cities in Bangladesh.

With a solid understanding of this cultural and conceptual landscape, communicators are better positioned to design messaging that can improve understanding and support for FUT interventions and policies.

Third, this report maps the gaps and overlaps between expert and public thinking, exploring the convergences and divergences between the expert story of FUT and the cultural models findings. This analysis identifies key areas of congruence and divergence between experts and the public. In the process, it identifies the major challenges and opportunities that communicators face in advancing the Bangladeshi conversation on FUT.

Finally, this report provides preliminary recommendations to advance the goals of a FUT in Khulna and other major urban areas in Bangladesh. A separate *Field Frame Analysis* report summarizes the dominant messaging and narrative practices of organizations that are communicating on issues of FUT in Khulna and Bangladesh more broadly.¹ That report provides a useful summary of the communications landscape around urban transition issues in Khulna that complements this report's cultural analysis of how residents of Khulna are thinking through those same issues. A subsequent *Phase II* of the project will involve *prescriptive* research to develop and test communications frames that address the challenges and opportunities identified in *Phase I* and to refine and clarify recommendations to the FUT sector about how they can strengthen their own communications practices.

This report demonstrates how the FUT framework represents a genuine commitment to fairness and moral integrity, aiming to overcome historical and systemic disadvantages in urban areas. It envisions cities without spatial disparities in opportunities for residents and is dedicated to creating an inclusive and prosperous city economy. Anticipating the subsequent *Phase II* research, the report takes a first step toward reframing the narrative around urban transition to more effectively communicate and build awareness for more inclusive and fair urban policies and programs in both Khulna specifically and Bangladesh more generally. In so doing, this report outlines pathways to a more prosperous and just Bangladesh.

Research Methods

Expert Interviews

To explore and distill expert messages on FUT, researchers conducted 15 one-hour in-person interviews with experts representing diverse and intersecting fields, including economics, youth empowerment, urban planning, poverty, transportation, renewable energy, architecture, waste management, climate change, urban governance, agriculture, labor rights, education, public health, and environmental activism. These interviews were conducted in May and June of 2024 and, with participants' permission, were recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The research team compiled the list of interviewees in consultation with their advisory board, and the final list was designed to reflect the diversity of disciplines and perspectives involved in work on FUT.

Expert interviews consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture expert understandings of FUT. In each interview, the interviewer went through a series of questions and prompts designed to challenge experts to explain their research, experience, and perspectives; break down complicated relationships; and simplify concepts. Interviews were semi-structured in that, in addition to preset questions, interviewers repeatedly asked for elaboration and clarification and encouraged experts to expand upon concepts they identified as particularly important.

The analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach. Common themes were pulled from each interview and categorized, resulting in a refined set of themes that synthesized the substance of the interview data. This integrated expert story was shared with Bangladeshi urban experts, who make up a scientific advisory group assembled by the Porticus Foundation to guide this research project. Feedback from this group was incorporated into this report as an expert account of FUT in Bangladesh. This process resulted in the distilled expert story of FUT presented below.

Cultural Model Interviews

Grounded in FrameWorks' Strategic Frame Analysis® approach to communications research and practice, a series of 30 in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents in and around Khulna from June through August 2024. A diverse set of informants was recruited to be inclusive of variations in gender, education, age, religious identity, and residential location. These interviews were used to explore the shared, culturally constructed, and often taken-for-granted patterns that structure how people think about urban life and transition in Bangladesh and the challenges that affect their quality of life in Khulna.

These cultural models are critical to investigate because individuals use internalized versions of culturally transmitted knowledge to interpret the world around them and interact with it. This includes their interpretations of messaging about what characterizes urban life and transition, what important urban challenges and changes they face, who has the responsibility for improving life in Khulna, and what should be done to make Khulna a better city.

A more detailed summary of the cultural models research methods can be found in Appendix A.



Research Findings

The Expert Story

The expert story of FUT outlines a clear set of understandings that position a set of regulatory, governance, infrastructure, and climate resilience solutions as among the most effective and achievable ways to realize a more fair, livable, and sustainable future for Khulna.

A. What Is Fair Urban Transition?

- 1. FUT creates cities that are genuinely livable for all residents.** In the expert view, FUT represents a genuine commitment to fairness and moral integrity, striving to overcome historical and systemic disadvantages in urban areas. The goal is to ensure a high quality of life for all residents. Guided by the principle of fairness, FUT focuses on development that meets the needs of all social classes. It safeguards human rights while maintaining the delicate balance of ecological systems. Under a dominating market-driven governance system, it manages the often-conflicting demands of social equity, environmental sustainability, economic growth, and aesthetic appeal.
- 2. FUT enhances residents' access to urban opportunities, services, and infrastructure.** To experts, FUT represents a vision of cities without spatial disparities in opportunities for the residents. It advocates for the organization and provision of essential urban services and opportunities that are adequate, equitable, inclusive, and adaptive to the diverse needs and abilities of all city dwellers, regardless of their social and economic status, place of origin, gender, age, or ethnicity. These services include water, sanitation, solid waste management, transportation, electrical infrastructure, education, safety, health care, access to nature, housing, and employment. To ensure inclusivity, FUT incorporates a gender and disability perspective in its development initiatives. It also protects infrastructures, resources, and residents, especially those most vulnerable, from the most harmful effects of climate change.
- 3. FUT promotes economic inclusion.** Experts assert that FUT is about a commitment to creating an inclusive economy through developing local skills, upskilling, providing livelihood assistance, formalizing the informal sector, and strengthening the formal economic sector. In particular, it seeks to enhance poor rural migrants' access to livelihood opportunities tailored to their needs. FUT revitalizes and boosts the city economy and prepares it to adapt to global and local economic shifts.
- 4. FUT promotes equitable development across the entire country.** FUT often arises from the fair transformation of urban and rural areas beyond the main cities. Experts advocate for a balanced development approach across Bangladesh, bridging the gap between rural and urban areas and addressing disparities in opportunities across different tiers of urban areas.

5. FUT endorses the principles of justice and equity in development politics. Experts call for political change to break free from oppressive mindsets and favoritism and to prioritize public welfare. This ethos is tied to a political commitment to building infrastructure and distributing resources, opportunities, and outcomes equitably, without favoritism. FUT advocates for legitimate and accountable governance and for empowering urban citizens with the values and capacity to lead the societal and environmental shifts necessary for dignified urban citizenship. Transparent decision-making, robust legal frameworks, active citizen participation, and effective checks and balances on power can support legitimate and accountable governance. In addition, providing citizens with education and resources and encouraging active participation in community and environmental initiatives can foster a sense of responsibility and develop leadership skills.

B. Why Is Urban Transition Typically Unfair?

- 1. An unstable and exclusionary city economy results from an undue focus on Dhaka at the expense of all other cities.** Experts assert that Dhaka's dominance as a primary city overshadows the growth potential of other cities, like Khulna. The disparity in investment and development has led to a concentration of opportunities in the capital, leaving Khulna and other cities struggling with untapped potential and slower growth. The lack of targeted employment opportunities and training for youth hinders their ability to engage fully in the city economy. Additionally, the urban informal sector, which could be a lifeline for rural climate migrants and the impoverished, often lacks the structure to provide meaningful employment support. Small entrepreneurs also face significant hurdles, including limited access to training, resources, markets, credit, and technology, impeding their ability to compete and thrive.
- 2. Wealth and class disparities drive unfairness as cities grow and evolve.** Experts note that disparities in urban amenities across self-built neighborhoods and peripheral areas have led to deprivation and social exclusion. Insufficient housing regeneration projects for unplanned inner-city areas leave residents with poor access to essential services. Slums and squatter settlements are often excluded from basic urban services, including water, sanitation, schools, health facilities, playgrounds, and other essential amenities, further marginalizing low-income groups. Despite the growing need, the supply of affordable housing remains inadequate, and resettlement projects for the low-income population have been unsuccessful. Meanwhile, experts note, the wealthy receive preferential treatment through cost-intensive infrastructure projects such as site and service schemes, parks, and improved roads.

- 3. Ill-managed urban growth results in the formidable challenges of inequity.** Experts argue that the scarcity of essential services and infrastructure is a major barrier to achieving equitable urban development and improving residents' quality of life in Khulna. They point out that pronounced disparities in urban amenities across neighborhoods and peripheral areas have led to deprivation and social exclusion. Slums and squatter settlements often emerge and expand rapidly in high-risk areas prone to flooding and other environmental hazards, complicating resource allocation for service delivery and necessary infrastructure. Experts fear that large-scale real estate projects and industrialization in peri-urban areas, which often replace water retention areas or agricultural land patronized by well-connected but corrupt individuals, exacerbate inequities and disrupt both the balance of nature and the city's market dynamics. Dispersed urbanization is taking over established villages and farmland from the peri-urban areas. Meanwhile, aggressive urbanization often involves evicting poor people from their housing areas. The poor lose their income opportunities and shelters while children often drift away from access to educational opportunities, further exacerbating inequality.
- 4. Neoliberal city planning and governance often prioritize capital interests over those of residents and communities.** Experts note that city planning structured by neoliberal assumptions favors market-driven approaches and investments that create significant disparities in resource allocation and access to essential services. This model selectively enforces laws and regulations, entrenching inequalities and allowing powerful interests to evade accountability, resulting in urban spaces that are comfortable for a wealthy minority while marginalized communities face inadequate housing, limited health care, and poor living conditions. The commodification of public goods exacerbates these issues, making essential needs unaffordable and contributing to problems like the loss of urban green and the heat island effect. As Khulna develops, many neighborhoods lack high-quality parks, playgrounds, and open areas, with less affluent communities suffering the most from this shortage.
- 5. Uncoordinated, non-inclusive, and unaccountable planning and management contribute to unfairness.** Experts observe that local bodies often lack accountability to the public in the absence of inclusive, participatory governance and do not collaborate effectively, leading to inefficiencies in public service delivery. Insufficient institutional capacity and expertise among planners and bureaucrats, as well as corruption, power politics, and the misuse of power, lead to noncompliance with existing laws, established guidelines, master plans, and the actual needs of the community. These oppressive mechanisms have led to people being denied basic rights and feeling trapped and voiceless within their own city.

- 6. Centralized decision-making is a barrier to localized development.** Experts note that due to centralized decision-making and insufficient funding from national sources, local actors and their institutions have limited autonomy in fulfilling the needs and aspirations of the growing city population. Nationally centralized education and health planning and management severely restrict financial autonomy and hinder the ability to respond to local needs effectively. According to experts, this top-down approach often results in one-size-fits-all solutions that fail to address the unique challenges and requirements of individual communities in Khulna. Consequently, local institutions struggle to allocate resources efficiently, innovate, or tailor services to their specific contexts, ultimately compromising the quality and accessibility of education and health care for the population.

C. Why Should Fair Urban Transition Be a Goal in Khulna?

- 1. FUT has the potential to leverage sustainable urbanization in Bangladesh.** Experts assert that because new settlements are growing before infrastructure has been provided, especially at the urban edge, a commitment to FUT is needed to systematically plan and manage these urban expansions. In response to uneven urbanization and urbanized poverty, FUT can balance development to eliminate disparities between rural and urban areas and ensure equal access to facilities for citizens in all regions. It can accommodate urban growth and manage the strain on resources and services in different tiers of urban areas.
- 2. A shared commitment to FUT can solve urban challenges.** Experts assert that Khulna has the potential to harness improved regional connectivity for economic growth and development. Its city regions can thrive economically with better infrastructure, investment, and incentives and suitable industrialization. FUT can be crucial in addressing youth unemployment, supporting the informal economy, and stabilizing the economic base. By embracing the principles of justice and equity, FUT can tackle marginalization and inequality, enhance livability, and eliminate unfair favoritism in ways that solve and mitigate problems.
- 3. FUT has the capacity to foster the development of climate-resilient urban and rural areas.** Experts argue that by embracing a climate-resilient and inclusive urban planning approach, FUT can protect its most vulnerable residents, reduce Khulna's vulnerability to natural disasters and ongoing livelihood challenges, and ensure sustainable development. Too often, climate funds are misallocated, favoring major urban areas over the regions that need them most. In the expert view, FUT aims to change this by also directing investments to the most vulnerable rural areas. This approach will help prepare, protect, and support the residents of these communities, building their resilience to climate-related challenges.
- 4. A shared commitment to FUT can make Khulna a more just and sustainable city.** As experts define it, FUT, grounded in the core values of fairness, equity, and justice, aims to create a livable and inclusive city where everyone can lead dignified lives and enjoy equal opportunities. Empowering citizens with rights and establishing an accountable governance system will lay the foundation for a sustainable future in Khulna. Protecting the environment will maintain ecological balance, ensure residents have access to nature, and enhance their quality of life.

D. Who Has Responsibilities for Fair Urban Transition?

- 1. FUT requires shared responsibility among various actors.** Experts say that creating FUT in Bangladesh will rely on the collaboration of various stakeholders, including local and national governments, private companies, civil society, and international organizations. Building a culture of cooperation is essential to blend the insights of urban experts with the real-life experiences of diverse communities in planning and governance. This multidisciplinary approach ensures that development projects and services are well-informed and efficient, making the best use of resources to improve urban infrastructure.
- 2. Local governments are the primary actors in FUT.** Experts believe the government, especially local and city governments, should take the lead in FUT. These local entities are essential for planning and managing land use, developing city services and infrastructure, and creating the legal framework for economic growth. In Khulna, the administration is shared among the Deputy Commissioner's (DC) office, the Commissioner's office, the Khulna Development Authority (KDA), and the Khulna City Corporation (KCC). According to experts, the KCC needs more authority to provide effective urban services, and it should collaborate closely with other public organizations to ensure that decisions are transparent and meet local needs.
- 3. Civil society organizations play a crucial role in alleviating pressing urban challenges.** Experts assert that civil society organizations and groups within civil society—such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community groups, and advocacy groups—can raise awareness and increase understanding about the specific needs and struggles faced by people living in urban poverty, equip policymakers with essential data, and advocate for policies and programs that address these issues. They are vital in tackling resource shortages and expanding services for those in need. With robust support and protection, civil society organizations can significantly improve political transparency, champion citizen rights, and encourage grassroots participation in decision-making, ensuring fairness and equity in decisions and services.
- 4. Business communities can contribute to economic inclusion.** Working with the government and private sector, business communities—such as industry associations, chambers of commerce, professional networks, trade groups, and startup ecosystems—can create job opportunities and offer skill training that fits the local context for young people and those in the informal sector. Experts argue that by teaming up with the KDA, KCC, and the DC office, businesses can help ensure fair wages and support the livelihood needs of the informal sector. In this view, businesses should focus on responsible development and actively collaborate with regulatory bodies to align their activities with the city's long-term growth goals.

- 5. Private investment in affordable housing initiatives is crucial for fostering sustainable urban development and ensuring economic equity.** In the expert view, public policies should encourage the private sector to support low-income housing projects, ensuring affordable homes that fit the budgets of these communities. By working together, the government and private sector can develop housing solutions for migrants and low-income populations, using private sector efficiency and innovation to address housing shortages. Governments and organizations can offer several incentives to encourage the private sector to invest in affordable housing initiatives—such as tax incentives, subsidies and grants, favorable financing terms, public-private partnerships, and inclusionary zoning.
- 6. International organizations and national NGOs provide resources to support FUT projects.** Experts point to how collaborations between governments, inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and national NGOs are particularly important for advancing education, health care, and water services. They can tackle local and national challenges more effectively by combining global expertise, resources, and policy advice. NGOs, with their presence on the ground, can address specific community needs, while INGOs provide technical support and foster cross-border cooperation needed to enhance urban governance and development. If integrated planning and resource coordination align, this collaboration will result in more equitable urban development.

E. What Should Be Done to Make Urban Transition Fairer in Khulna?

- 1. Introduce participatory planning and collaborative urban governance.** Experts assert that there is an urgent need for increased local autonomy and better coordination among city authorities to make decisions that truly reflect the needs and aspirations of the local population. Decentralization, localization, and a culture of collaboration among diverse stakeholders require:
- A shift in political mindset, focusing on inclusivity and sustainability
 - A shift toward equitable and participatory planning approaches to improve power practices in planning and governance
 - Enhanced knowledge of needed skills among stakeholders through targeted training programs, capacity-building workshops, and continual education on sustainable practices and inclusive governance
 - Investment in capacity-building programs and forums for community voices to be heard
 - Broader stakeholder participation in decision-making (multi-stakeholder collaboration)
 - Democratic governance with more public engagement
 - Empowerment of younger citizens to participate in governance, bringing fresh perspectives to urban challenges
 - Promotion of civil society advocacy for fair elections and political transparency
 - Public awareness campaigns to educate residents about their rights, responsibilities, accountability, and integrity in driving meaningful change.

- 2. Improve land use planning, management, and development control.** Experts advocate for strict adherence to land use plans as necessary for organized urban growth and to prevent land use inefficiencies and conflicts that arise from violations of plans and development control regulations. National and local plans must promote distributed urbanization to allow surrounding areas to develop independently and sustainably. Planning policies and implementation are required to ensure:
- Adoption of a comprehensive urban development strategy for managing migration and associated impacts
 - Equity in services between the urban cores and outer urban areas
 - Investments in affordable housing, health care, education, and employment opportunities
 - Introduction of inclusive urban transportation sensitive to the needs of women, transgender individuals, children, the elderly, and people with special needs
 - Self-built, mixed-income neighborhoods made more livable with the provision of sufficient facilities and services
 - Policies to address urban marginalization—ensuring slums have access to essential services and housing for the poor, developing programs that provide employment opportunities tailored to the skills and needs of the poor and migrant populations
 - Effective humane resettlement to respond to inevitable displacement
 - Corridor planning, which involves strategically designing and managing transportation and development along major routes to enhance connectivity, economic growth, and environmental sustainability while preserving valuable land uses.
- 3. Create safe cities for all genders.** Experts agree that bringing a gender perspective into policymaking is crucial for creating an inclusive society where safety, equality, and opportunities are available to everyone. Adopting this approach requires justice systems, transportation, and infrastructure that meet the needs of all genders. Activism and social awareness are key to building a culture that nurtures the potential of every individual, regardless of gender. Empowering people through equal participation in decision-making and asset ownership is fundamental to a society that accepts and celebrates diversity.
- 4. Establish adherence to existing law.** Experts argue for a planned development process where all stakeholders adhere to approved master plans, government regulations, and infrastructure guidelines. This kind of process prioritizes orderly and lawful urban growth, steering clear of haphazard development and guaranteeing the intended use of public amenities. Effective mechanisms are essential for enforcing existing plans, policies, and regulations. Concerned authorities need more staff and resources to monitor unplanned developments continuously. Effective management would require strict provision of penalties, promotion of participatory planning, and awareness building. In addition, institutions, such as electricity and water suppliers, would need to cooperate to ensure that illegal constructions do not receive essential services.

- 5. Build greater accountability, transparency, and efficiency.** Experts consistently speak to the importance of addressing corruption and enhancing efficiency, which require participatory governance, citizen awareness, and user-friendly digital platforms that prioritize inclusivity in service delivery. In this view, robust backing and protection for civil society organizations will enhance political transparency and fairness, while appropriate data can sensitize and equip policymakers on urban issues and drive informed decisions. Experts advocate for establishing monitoring and evaluation frameworks to track progress and impact in development projects and for a better use of data and feedback to inform adjustments to policies and projects.
- 6. Promote regional balance.** Experts say there must be more work to improve the quality of life in rural areas, housing, agriculture, health, and education and across vulnerable economic sectors. Regional disparities in urban development can be minimized through equitable distribution of resources and opportunities.
- 7. Develop innovative financing for equitable resource allocation in key infrastructure.** Experts recommend creating a viable pool of resources through partnerships among the public sector, private sector, NGOs, and civil society. The public sector and NGOs can provide education, health care, and water services. Urban transition projects would require funding from national and international sources. Efforts should be made to encourage private investment in green industries and affordable housing initiatives.
- 8. Foster the local economy through inclusive economic regeneration.** Experts endorse regenerating previously developed sites for industries in Khulna through planned industrialization, supported by infrastructure and tax incentives. The experts see this as pivotal for revitalizing the area's financial landscape. They advocate for a robust national initiative to catalyze this transformation, fostering local economic growth and addressing challenges such as youth unemployment and skill shortages. In this view, capacity-building through job creation, training, and support for the informal sector, alongside bolstering agricultural activities in the hinterland, will serve as key drivers for sustainable local economic development.

Figure 1: Expert Story of Fair Urban Transitions

What is fair urban transition (FUT)?	Why is urban transition typically unfair?
■ It creates cities that are genuinely livable for all residents. ■ It enhances residents' access to urban opportunities, services, and infrastructure. ■ It promotes economic inclusion. ■ It promotes equitable development across the entire country. ■ It endorses the principles of justice and equity in development politics.	■ An unstable and exclusionary city economy results from an undue focus on Dhaka at the expense of all other cities. ■ Wealth and class disparities drive unfairness as cities grow and evolve. ■ Poorly managed urban growth augments inequality. ■ Neoliberal city planning and governance prioritizes capital interests over those of residents and communities. ■ Uncoordinated, non-inclusive, and unaccountable planning and management contribute to unfairness. ■ Centralized decision-making is a barrier to localized development.
Why should fairness be a goal as Khulna transitions?	Who has the responsibility to ensure fairness in Khulna's transition?
■ FUT has the potential to leverage sustainable urbanization in Bangladesh. ■ A shared commitment to FUT can solve urban challenges. ■ FUT has the capacity to foster the development of climate-resilient urban and rural areas. ■ A shared commitment to FUT can make Khulna a more just and sustainable city.	■ FUT requires shared responsibility across actors. ■ Local governments are the primary actors in FUT. ■ Civil society organizations play a crucial role in alleviating pressing urban challenges. ■ Business communities can contribute to economic inclusion. ■ Private investors, especially in green industries and affordable housing initiatives, share responsibility. ■ IGOs, INGOs, and national NGOs provide critical resources to support FUT projects.
What should be done to make urban transition fairer in Khulna?	
■ Introduce participatory planning and collaborative urban governance. ■ Improve land use planning, management, and development control. ■ Create safe cities for all genders. ■ Establish adherence to existing law. ■ Build greater accountability, transparency, and efficiency into governance systems and agencies. ■ Promote regional balance across large urban, small urban, and rural areas.	■ Develop innovative financing for equitable resource allocation in key infrastructure. ■ Foster the local economy through inclusive economic regeneration. ■ Embrace and protect the country's natural and cultural heritages. ■ Adopt climate-resilient planning and action. ■ Invest in health care and education.

- 9. Embrace and protect the country's natural and cultural heritages.** Experts argue for prioritizing the building of high-quality parks, playgrounds, open areas, and places with cultural and historical value. Zoning should promote sustainable practices, such as integrating green spaces and preserving natural habitats, which can help mitigate the effects of urbanization and climate change. Experts add that effective land management policies can also support groundwater recharge by protecting ponds, lakes, and other natural water bodies from development pressures. They propose promoting and investing in green industries that safeguard nature and create sustainable job opportunities. In this view, providing incentives for green business initiatives can also encourage private sector investment.
- 10. Adopt climate-resilient planning and action.** Experts argue that FUT requires a critical reevaluation of traditional urban development paradigms that prioritize short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability and community wellbeing. Cities must integrate climate considerations into every aspect of planning and governance, conduct comprehensive climate risk assessments, redesign infrastructure to include nature-based solutions, and ensure equitable resource allocation. Experts advocate for a city-level adaptation and climate resilience plan aligned with national climate policies, genuinely addressing environmental concerns through inclusive governance structures, continuous monitoring, and innovation.
- 11. Invest in health care and education.** Experts say that health and education remain critically underfunded and overlooked in urban development discourses. This neglect undermines the potential for sustainable and equitable urban growth. According to experts, prioritizing investment in these sectors is not just necessary, but urgent. Supporting policies must emphasize equity and inclusiveness to ensure that these essential services are accessible to all urban residents, fostering a more just and resilient urban environment.

Having summarized the expert story of FUT, we now turn to a summary of how members of the Khulna public understand and think about urban life and Khulna's growth and change.

Public Views

This part of the report summarizes the dominant cultural models—shared assumptions and thought patterns—that guide and shape how Khulna's residents understand a range of intersecting issues having to do with urban life and Khulna's evolution as a city. These include infrastructure and services, wealth and neighborhood disparities, governance and corruption, population movements, and climate change. The models summarized below represent the conceptual constructs that are most powerful in orienting public thinking around these urban issues.

A. What characterizes urban life in general?

1. **The Cities as Service Hubs model.** Khulna residents think of urban life as offering better opportunities for transportation, communication, education, employment, health, commerce, and other services as compared to rural areas and rural growth centers. They describe cities as hubs for essential services, particularly education and health care, which are perceived as more accessible and reliable than in rural areas. Timely access to medical services, in particular, is thought of as a significant draw for city life, especially in emergencies. People think of cities as offering better schools, colleges, and higher educational institutions than do rural areas and rural growth centers. Infrastructure such as roads, clean water, and sanitation are also highly valued urban services in cities. Urban areas, residents highlight, offer technological advantages, including more consistent internet access, making everyday life more efficient than in rural areas. Overall, Khulna residents see cities as places where critical infrastructure and services are concentrated, providing opportunities for better livelihoods, greater quality of life, and higher prospects of progress. As one interviewee described (quotes have been slightly edited for clarity):

The place where I live [...] if I just take a short walk, I can find a market, a bit further there's a hospital, and a little distance away there's a shopping center, but in the [small] towns, you won't find these things so easily. You have to travel far to meet your needs in many towns. I think the quality of life in the city is better; there are many opportunities if you live here. We can enroll our children in good schools, but those living in the town can't do that. Their schools and colleges are far away, and many parents don't want their daughters to pursue education. In our city, there's no shortage of women's colleges, or colleges in general, so girls in the city are often more educated than those in the suburbs.

2. **The Cities as Income Locations model.** People also perceive cities as hubs of economic opportunities, particularly in contrast to rural areas and smaller towns. Income-earning possibilities are understood to be the primary reason people migrate to and remain in cities. While people apply this model to Khulna, they also recognize that Khulna is not as robust an income location as other urban cities, especially Dhaka, which stands out as a city with superior income opportunities. In that respect, this model of cities as places where incomes are earned structures people's thinking about how Khulna *should* be as a city, with potential for more income than it currently has.

There are more job opportunities in the city than in urban growth centers or villages. [...] Dhaka, [...] being the capital, offers numerous employment opportunities—far more than in Khulna, where even 10 percent of those opportunities do not appear to exist. All major companies, large offices, and head offices are located in Dhaka.

- 3. The Cities as Costly and Commodified model.** Even as people see cities as offering abundant employment opportunities, better education, and health care, people also recognize that these opportunities are accompanied by higher expenses, particularly for housing, food, and transportation. Residents understand that despite the increased income potential in major cities compared to rural areas, low-income individuals and rural migrants, in particular, face the pressures of rising living costs. They are aware that city life is commodified—where everything requires payment, unlike in rural areas, where people can live more self-sufficiently. In cities with commodified environments, personal relationships and community values often take a back seat to economic transactions, reinforcing the sense among residents that cities, while financially rewarding, are also isolating and competitive.

Even a two-bedroom flat will cost you no less than 7,000–8,000 BDT; this has become a good business these days. What I mean is that the landlords know well that if they can somehow put up an infrastructure and fix the rent, that will be it and they can make money.

My income is 30,000, which allows me to survive in the city, but I can't live a high-standard life. However, if that 30,000 were earned in the village, I could live comfortably.

- 4. The Cities as Unhealthy model.** People think urban life is increasingly unhealthy. In contrast, they associate the rural landscape—vast paddy fields, greenery, and water bodies—with beauty, openness, fresh and cooler air, and tranquility. Participants expressed their aspirations for similar natural resources in urban life, which suffers from pollution, congestion, and crime. In general, people saw more possibility for a healthy lifestyle in rural areas, where one can grow one's own food and food can be more nutritious and fresher than what cities offer, even as city prices are much higher.

If you think about amenities, the city is a good option. But for comfort and the environment, like in the village, you don't need much—just sitting by the river feels good. Sitting by the pond feels nice. The air is different; you get a sense of relief in the air that you don't get in the city.

The city is much more polluted, while the air in the village is much fresher. In the village, you get vegetables and fish directly, and they are much fresher. But these things take some time to reach the cities, and sometimes they are preserved with formalin to last longer in the market. We, the city folks, rarely get fresh food compared to the village, where you get pure cow milk, which we rarely get here. Mostly, in the cities, we buy UHT [sterilized] milk.

Implications

The above four models dominate how people think about the advantages and disadvantages of city life. These models have a range of implications relative to the commitments and goals of FUT.

- Both the *Cities as Service Hubs* and the *Cities as Income Locations* models acknowledge the critical role that cities play as locations for people to build wealth, improve their standard of living, and find services and opportunities for themselves and their children. These positive models of the city identify cities as essential and valuable locations and position people to be receptive to the idea that governments should value and invest in cities and do their best to ensure that all urban residents have access to opportunities to improve their lives.
- The *Cities as Costly and Commodified* model has mixed implications. It represents an important understanding among people that many of the economic and commercial forces that organize life in cities do so in ways that drive costs up; make life challenging for many, if not most, city residents; and drive disparities in class and wealth across the city. On the other hand, when thinking through this model, people may take for granted that because commercial forces structure urban life, many urban services and opportunities will *naturally and inevitably* remain beyond the reach of many urban residents. To that extent, FUT communicators will need help to identify ways to strengthen model of Khulna as a place driven by shared public interests and the need to ensure that services and opportunities are available and affordable to all.
- The *Cities as Unhealthy* model also has mixed implications. To the extent that people *assume* that cities are unhealthy places, they may be inclined to accept a range of unhealthy conditions, including air, water, and sound pollution, as intrinsic features of urban life. This assumption of unhealthiness can contribute to pessimism and apathy toward efforts to make cities more healthy places. On the other hand, the model does represent an accurate perception of contemporary urban problems in Bangladeshi cities. With the right framing, organizations have an opportunity to leverage the model to make the case that city governments and other key actors should put health concerns front and center in their efforts to manage urban transition. This can include drawing attention to the importance of the key infrastructure and resources necessary to support healthy living, including parks, recreational facilities, and affordable health care services. Future research should explore how to overcome assumptions about cities being *intrinsically* unhealthy and how to make the case for building healthy infrastructure and services, especially for those most marginalized.

B. What important urban challenges and changes do residents in Khulna face?

Residents articulated five dominant cultural models through which they understood the primary urban challenges affecting people's lives and livelihoods in Khulna.

1. **A City Under Water model.** Residents are keenly familiar with the problem of drainage and chronic waterlogging during the rainy season in Khulna, given the increased rainfall in recent years due to climate change. They understand that drainage infrastructure in this river city (served by the two rivers Rupsha and Bhairab) fails to perform effectively during the rainy season—due to waste disposal into drains and roads by residents and businesses, low cleaning frequency, and higher drain ground level than in adjacent areas. People see this problem as disproportionately affecting poorer residents, who live in climate-vulnerable parts of the city and endure income loss, unhygienic living conditions, and health risks due to waterlogging.

The drainage system was already poor, but recent 'improvements' have made it worse. [...] Before, my house was a hand's breadth above the road. Now, they've built a drain that's two hands' breadth above my house, so now my house is a hand's breadth below the drain. When it rains, you can find that the road has no waterlogging, but everyone's houses are flooded. Since I was born, I've never seen water flood the house, no matter how much it rained. But starting last year, water has started coming in—it's a terrible situation. [...] Those who had experienced minor waterlogging in the past, currently their homes are unlivable.

The Rupsha and Bhairab rivers are silting up, perhaps because of the Farakka Barrage. [...] As a result, the large water bodies around Dumuria [...] are not just 'knee-deep' but 'waist-deep' or sometimes 4 to 5 feet deep in water. This water doesn't drain out because the rivers haven't been dredged. [...] If they focused on [dredging] the Bhairab and Rupsha rivers [...] the old drains could have resolved the waterlogging in Khulna city.

2. **The Pollution model.** People see pollution, especially water and air, as a central downside of urban life in general and in Khulna specifically. They identified waste management as a core challenge for many in Khulna, particularly in neighborhoods outside wealthy areas, such as Sonadanga and Nirala. Residents reported that the lack of door-to-door collection, affordability issues in hiring private/community-based disposal services, and irresponsible waste disposal clog roads and drains with waste.

There is a rice mill here and a cement factory. The amount of ash in the air is overwhelming. [...] We can't even open the windows. [...] There is so much smoke coming in that I am genuinely worried my parents might develop lung problems. [...] I arrived yesterday from Dhaka, and it feels like I am in hell—it is unbearably hot [due to the summer heatwave]. We simply cannot open these windows.

If the waste collectors do not come regularly, many residents find the situation intolerable and end up dumping garbage into the drains. [...] In the past, I observed that the drains were cleaned routinely, but now the cleaners no longer come. [...] Although waste is being collected properly [and] the drains are being cleaned thoroughly, this service only extends up to Nirala. Since we live in Prantika, it seems that this area is considered a poor neighborhood and is therefore neglected. Furthermore, in Daulatpur—a commercial area—all market waste is being dumped into the water. Similarly, all the waste from Dakbunglow, the city's principal business district, is also ending up in the water.

- 3. The Joblessness model.** Reflecting on Khulna's history as a once vibrant and prosperous industrial hub, people perceive the city as a shadow of its former self, especially in terms of job opportunities and industry. Deindustrialization has stripped Khulna of its economic vitality, leading to a stark contrast between its past glory and current struggles and an inability to offer suitable employment opportunities for its diverse population. People pointed to numerous factors contributing to this economic downturn, such as limited access to appropriate skill training, poor access to education for the financially challenged, limited financing for entrepreneurship, and a weak economic foundation.

Big buildings are constructed, but employment is decreasing. [...] The building owners are not getting tenants. [...] People don't want to live in this city. As you can see, people are moving to cities like Dhaka, which is 500 times worse, [but they are moving out] because there are no jobs here. I can't name this development. There are not enough job opportunities here. But suppose I'm with a company [...] looking after your Khulna division. Districts such as Noakhali or Feni have more transactions than here. The middle class is suffering the most, isn't it?

- 4. A model of Incompleteness.** Residents think that the city leadership has started many good initiatives in the city, in both infrastructure and services, but believe that too many of these initiatives are moving too slowly and may never be completed, especially infrastructure projects and economic revival initiatives. People express frustration with the inadequate provision of quality education, health, and recreation facilities, as well as the ongoing insecurity in the city. Low investment, centralized decision-making for health and education services, and the lack of political will and accountability among city authorities and political leaders are perceived as key forces attached to the model of incompleteness.

Since my early childhood [aged 60 years plus], I have not found any changes except for roads [in Khulna].

In Rajshahi, the money we pay in taxes is reflected in the roads, lights, facilities, hospitals, and educational institutions—although education isn't really the city corporation's responsibility. But still, they've managed to set things up nicely. We in Khulna haven't received those benefits. For example, we pay 16,000 BDT annually for a flat. We pay the taxes, but what civic amenities are the city corporation providing us? I don't feel like we even get 10 percent of what we're supposed to get. Every house has a submersible pump, so what is WASA [Water Supply & Sewerage Authority] giving us? They're just collecting the bills without providing adequate services.

There are no playgrounds for the kids and no entertainment centers either. This affects not just the children, but also the youth, the newlyweds, and even the elderly.

- 5. The Naturalization of Inequality model.** Residents see class as a prevalent and intrinsic feature of society, with important implications for marginalization. They perceive that wealth grants political influence and ensures better services, infrastructure, and resources for affluent people and neighborhoods. People see the poor, particularly those living in slums, enduring harsh living conditions, precarious labor, seasonal unemployment, and constant threats of eviction. Marginalized groups struggle with poor access to essential services like health care and education, further entrenching their vulnerability. This unequal urban reality has been normalized in the perception of residents. People often view urban inequality with a sense of fatalism, accepting inequality as just the natural state of affairs—to be *expected* and, at some level, *accepted* in Khulna.

Residents of Niral are paying [holding tax]. [...] Bagmara is just behind. [...] Both are on the opposite side of an only 16-foot road. Nirala has drains, roads, and everything, but the other side [Bagmara] is left with nothing. [...] All facilities are there where the high-class society lives. [...] Those in power [...] have all the facilities. Those who are left with no power, they work hard [...] earn as per their ability, a separate class is developed for them.

We are getting better service here [Sonadanga Residential Area], which is why I am paying more to live here. Those residing outside these wealthy neighborhoods may be unable to afford to move here for various reasons. Surely there would be differences.

Poor people can't expect to have what rich people enjoy. [...] They can't expect to have everything.

We have to go away when the eviction happens. We have no other way.

- 6. The Pervasive Corruption model.** Corruption is widely acknowledged as a pervasive problem in Khulna, mirroring the broader context of Bangladesh. Many residents view the corruption of political leaders, bureaucrats, and government officials as an entrenched problem in Khulna. People closely linked the *corruption* model with wealth inequality and the expanded power of the wealthy elite who shape economic and political systems in Khulna.

What do you do with 100 crores, 500 crores, even thousands of crores? The government pays so much in salaries, yet they still take bribes. If an OC [Officer in Charge] has 10–15 houses, and if they have crores in the bank, how can you expect the country to function?

Let me talk about one of my seniors, an assistant engineer, who has a non-cadre job equivalent to a BCS [Bangladesh Civil Service] cadre job. He joined the Water Development Board as an assistant engineer. After finishing his few-month-long training, when he came home after a month of work in his new posted area, he bought fish from here at Vepuria Ferry Ghat for 56,000 BDT just for peace of mind. On his way home, he thought, 'I bought fish for 56,000 BDT; how will I preserve this fish?' Then he bought a fridge for 1 lakh taka. He started his job only two months ago.

Implications

- The *City Under Water* and *Pollution* models have mixed implications. As with other negative models of city life, these models can function to create pessimism about whether and how urban conditions can be improved, as people can assume that these negatives are intrinsic features of urban life. Moreover, the models reveal that residents have an incomplete understanding of the natural drainage system and its relation to urbanization and climate change in Khulna. On the other hand, as these problems are identified, the models provide a prepared stage for messengers to communicate the necessary steps to address those problems and build citizens' ecological awareness. Communicators should counter any tendency toward pessimism by emphasizing that there are feasible solutions to these problems and speaking to specific policies and investments in water and waste management that can succeed.
- The *Joblessness* model attributes Khulna's economic downturn to the lack of a robust financial base and inadequate access to resources and infrastructure. To the extent that the model is grounded in a recognition of Khulna's more prosperous and dynamic economic past, the model provides the basis for people to imagine a return to prosperity for the city and its people. It provides a starting point for communicators to emphasize the need to create employment opportunities for diverse populations through skill training, access to finance for entrepreneurship, and quality education. Communicators can likewise use the model to draw attention to broader systemic issues, such as governance, policy implementation, and socioeconomic disparities that contribute to joblessness, and to make the case that addressing these underlying factors is crucial for sustainable economic growth and development in Khulna.
- The *Incompleteness* model has largely positive implications, as it acknowledges that Khulna's urban residents are entitled to a comprehensive range of key infrastructures and services. It highlights the need for increased government efforts and investment to fulfill these obligations to residents. This baseline understanding establishes that more should be expected and demanded from the government. Communicators can leverage this perspective to advocate for greater public investments, ensuring comprehensive coverage of services for all city residents.
- The *Naturalization of Inequality* model has largely negative implications. To the extent that inequality is naturalized in people's thinking, it can be taken as a given—a normal feature of the urban social and economic landscape and one that can be only minimally addressed. In many respects, this model presents one of the biggest challenges to a FUT agenda, as people assume that unfairness is an inevitable feature of cities and efforts to address it may be doomed to fail.
- The *Pervasive Corruption* model has mixed implications. On the negative side, as with many models that identify a problem, there is a risk that people will feel fatalistic about the possibility of meaningful reform and improvement. This is especially so since corruption is perceived to be deeply entrenched and pervasive. Future research should develop and test ideas for how best to communicate messages about how and why urban residents can and should expect integrity and transparency on the part of their governments. On the other hand, the model has a positive side, as it recognizes a key barrier to FUT efforts. Especially in light of the recent uprising and change of government, people's attention to and concern about this pervasive problem provides an opening for direct and concerted communications about how best to root out the problem of corruption.

C. Who has the responsibility to make Khulna a better city?

Three models dominate people's understanding of who has responsibility to manage urban transitions in Khulna. Taken together, they show that people's attribution of responsibility for Khulna's development is distributed across government, youth, and individuals. There is, however, a notable absence of the third sector (investors, civil society, and community-based organizations) as key change agents.

- 1. The Job of Government model.** The strongest, most prevalent model of responsibility evident among Khulna's people is one that perceives government, across both national and local levels, as responsible for making Khulna a better city for its residents. In this model, there is a broadly shared understanding that the national government is the most potent agent and needs to take a lead role in making government institutions and actors more accountable and setting up a long-term vision for cities. Specific areas of responsibility around education, health, jobs, and social protection emerged in people's conversations. At the local level, a few residents identified the city corporation as a vital agent in adequately and efficiently expanding access to other city services and infrastructure while suggesting it has a limited role in dealing with health- and education-related challenges. Some identified the mayor as an important actor responsible for addressing many of Khulna's urban challenges. Some also identified local ward councilors as being responsible, though at present, they are often seen as ineffective. People were unclear about the role of the KDA in managing Khulna's development and about the roles of other authorities and directorates involved in delivering urban services, like water supply, electricity, social welfare, health, and education.²

The responsibility is with the government. Maybe the government is giving us benefits, but it is not reaching us. [...] The] city corporation has responsibility. [...] They cannot avoid their responsibility.

However, every government should maintain a long-term plan. The funny thing is, whatever plan our government adopts, the next government comes in and stops all those projects.

There is also uncertainty on the part of many about the effectiveness and accountability of local and city government agents, who are perceived as disconnected from the public. People emphasize that more interactions with residents and meaningful deliberation are needed to reflect local needs and foster accountability.

The MP we had, then your mayor, and the ward commissioner—local people hardly interact with them because once they become commissioners or mayors, they move to a very VIP level. They no longer think about the people or the problems in their area. To put it simply, you can't find the commissioner. Sometimes he sits in his office after 10 at night; sometimes he doesn't.

2. The Youth Change model. Residents were optimistic about the potential of youth to reshape governance, particularly considering youth leadership in the recent mass movements and demonstrations. This model was even stronger in those public interviews conducted after the success of the July–August 2024 uprising. Youth are perceived as energetic agents of change, capable of initiating political reforms within agencies and enhancing greater accountability in the city’s governance systems. Their involvement in political activism are viewed as pivotal in transforming and challenging existing norms. However, this optimism is tempered by skepticism about whether the deeply entrenched power of elites and corruption can genuinely be dismantled and whether depoliticization of governance institutions is possible, leaving many doubtful about the possibility of sustained change.

You all [young people] come into these jobs, and the capable ones among you manage the country [...] aside the old ways and bring your approach. Let’s see if you can make a difference.

3. The Generic Responsible Individual model. Many people attributed responsibility to the individual, arguing that every person should be informed and aware, demonstrate responsibility in their own behavior (for example, disposing of waste correctly), and hold those with power accountable. In this model, people understand the individual as a self-determining agent who has the capacity to act responsibly against societal pressures.

Self-initiatives could also be effective [to reduce corruption]. Can we not be a bit conscious about this? Say, to select the most eligible person, we could evaluate the drawbacks of five years before we vote in the election that takes place every five years.

Those who work in the development sector need to be transparent [this will bring fairness], and then again, the authority needs to be transparent; transparency is important for all the sectors; what I mean to say is that I am not sure about how effective that would be from one side. [...] All of us need to be responsible; it should be shouldered by all. If I hold only the government to shoulder everything, and if I do nothing, if we give no effort to remove disparity [...]

Notably, other than in the *Youth Change* model, people do not see collective actions and community organizations as potential sources of agency for urban change. In addition, people did not recognize the role of third-sector actors, civil society, community-based organizations, businesses, or other private actors as key responsible agents.

Implications

- Though it might be easy to take for granted, the *Job of Government* model is critically important to the work of FUT. It is a baseline positive model of public responsibility and provides the shared cultural starting point for making the case for how and why government—both national and local—is accountable for and must do a better job of providing essential infrastructure and services to all city residents. Future research should explore how best to use this model to help people better understand *how* the government can fulfill its obligations and do its job more effectively.
- The *Youth Change* model also has positive implications, especially in the wake of young people's central role in the country's dramatic recent political changes. It affirms that people recognize the power everyday people have when they collectively act to hold their government accountable and pressure those with power and responsibility to fulfill their obligations in the public interest. As with the *Job of Government* model, future research should explore how best to use the *Youth Change* model to integrate youth into leadership roles, overcome systemic challenges, drive innovation, and ensure long-term transformation for FUT in Khulna.
- The *Generic Responsible Individual* model has mixed implications. On the one hand, it is a productive model in that it recognizes the role that all city residents have in improving their city and making it a better place to live. On the other hand, by focusing on individuals, the model can too easily evade efforts for structural and systemic solutions realized through better regulations, investments, and governance.

D. What should be done to make Khulna a better city?

Residents' models of Khulna's main problems described above structured their thinking about how to make Khulna a better city in which to live and work. Six cultural models dominated people's talk and thinking about how those problems can be solved and how Khulna can be improved as a city.

1. **The Economically Revived City model.** People see Khulna's economic growth as key to its revival. The model frames Khulna as a historically industrial city and recognizes its economic decline through decades of disinvestment and significantly poorer economic performance compared to other cities in Bangladesh. Apart from highlighting the need for quality education and suitable skill training, however, the model lacks clarity and depth regarding the multidimensional political, economic, and infrastructure requirements necessary for Khulna's economic revival.

Those who are capitalists could create work opportunities. [...] If they could take over the industries, many job opportunities would be created. I wish we could reactivate the jute mills like platinum, or the hardboard mill.

Padma river has influenced rapid transition. [...] The mills that were closed once have now started operating. The transportation of goods from Mongla to other places is a benefit. [...] Training for females is necessary to include all. [...] They can work from home. The closed mills and industries also need to be re-opened to provide employment for the males. Once these are done, Khulna will develop automatically.

To develop the economy, we need goodwill and a stronger emphasis on education. We have to educate the people, and it must be modern. The old conventional education won't work out. We need an education that enables people to make a living.

- 2. The Essential Infrastructure and Services model.** People believe that there is a set of basic services and infrastructure to which all city residents should have access. These include access to safe water, sanitation, health, education, and security services and infrastructure. People see these services and infrastructure as necessary for advancing in life, even as access to them varies dramatically because of income and class disparities. The model highlights that all residents, regardless of socioeconomic status, should have access to the services and infrastructure that are necessary for a decent quality of life.

We don't get any medical treatment. When a disease gets complicated, they say, 'Brother, go to Dhaka or, if you have money, go to India.' But those who are going to India or Dhaka are in misery. They sell off their land, savings—everything—and may eventually become debt-free, but they're left with nothing to live on. I've seen many families like this. We don't receive basic citizen services, and I don't think anyone else here does either.

We often talk about underprivileged and poor children; I want to give them access to education. Basically, we want to move away from the world of Lalsalu. [Lalsalu is a famous novel by Syed Waliullah, translated as Tree Without Roots, that tells the story of simple-minded people who can easily be fooled through religious superstitions.] Everyone should be educated and understand the difference between right and wrong. If you go to the station, you'll see thousands of glue-sniffing kids. If you go behind Sonadanga, you'll see not only street children but also the homeless and underprivileged people who need help. If you can arrange rehabilitation for them, you'll cover 50 percent of the security issues.

Additionally, many people articulated their aspirations for more green space, open space, and recreational facilities in Khulna, as these are seen to contribute to the much-needed relaxation and wellbeing of urban residents of all ages, especially children.

[In terms of open space] Khulna almost has none. People are using food courts as open spaces. Food courts are popping up one after another because people have nowhere to go and spend time. I think the riverbanks should be made more beautiful.

There should be a club here where culturally minded people can come and practice arts, dancing, singing, and recitation. It should be like a club, similar to the various types of clubs in other countries, where people go to do different activities and spend their time.

- 3. The Good Governance model.** Residents share a generalized model of what a good government looks like and how it is established and sustained. Specifically, they want their local politicians to act more ethically and care more about the public good. In short, residents want visionary leadership. Notably, residents often expressed the need for improvement at the level of the individual leader, while the systemic issues that prevent these changes from happening remain less well understood among residents. People desire good governance, with an emphasis on transparency, accountability, and a fair system, and believe that the long delays in infrastructure projects and inadequate service delivery are due to poor governance and a lack of accountability. To solve these issues, some call for more participatory governance, where local leaders engage with citizens and make decisions that are in the public interest. However, few residents have a clear understanding of how to bring about systemic governance reform, and residents strongly believe that mindset changes among leaders are the key to good governance.

Do you know what's most needed? A change in governance. [...] You [young people] are the ones running the country now, so if you bring transparency, you'll see an improvement in the quality of life.

If a truly democratic rule can be established where the people participate in everything, and the center of all power is with the common people, only then can this be possible. [...] With the goodwill [of the political leaders], it will be possible.

Implications

- The *Economically Revived City* model has mixed implications. On the positive side, it represents a baseline understanding of how economic growth can be harnessed to create more opportunities for all of Khulna's residents, including its most vulnerable and marginalized residents. Those communicating around FUT issues can align themselves with this model and the call to bring economic revitalization to the city. On the other hand, the model presents a risk to FUT communicators—that people will assume economic revival automatically benefits all city residents in ways that serve the cause of fairness and justice, the idea that “rising waters lift all boats.” This assumption is incorrect, as urban economic growth in Bangladesh and elsewhere has often happened in unequal ways, created tremendous economic disparity, and sharpened vulnerabilities. Future research efforts should focus on finding ways to help FUT communicators leverage the belief in economic revival for Khulna while also helping people understand that some approaches to economic revival are more fair, equitable, and sustainable than others.
- The *Essential Infrastructure and Services* model is an important positive model built on the assumption that all city residents deserve and should have access to a basic level of infrastructure and services. FUT communicators can invoke this model as they make the case for public and private investments in essential services and infrastructure. They can also seek to build off this model as they strive to draw attention to those urban populations that have historically been denied access to essential services, including socially excluded communities such as ethnic

minorities (Biharis and Harijan), women, people with disabilities, transgender individuals, and the elderly. Future research can explore how best to invoke and strengthen this model as a way to ensure that all socially excluded groups are recognized and their specific needs are addressed in urban planning and development initiatives to foster a truly inclusive and just urban environment. The model's implications extend to forming cohesive national strategies to bridge inequalities in opportunities across cities. These disparities are particularly pronounced in access to health and education facilities, as well as recreational resources. Addressing these gaps requires a unified approach, a recognition of the systemic factors that contribute to such inequities, and a comprehensive and integrated strategy to ensure equitable distribution of essential services and facilities. However, this approach must also critically examine the underlying power dynamics and systemic inequalities perpetuating these disparities to create a truly inclusive and just urban environment.

- The *Good Governance* model represents a positive public awareness that governance is an important area for efforts to improve life in the city. To that extent, FUT communicators don't have to struggle to make the case that governance matters as an issue. Still, the extent to which the model often defaults to individual qualities rather than systemic solutions suggests the need for careful framing around calls for better governance. The public needs help understanding how governance systems can be improved to be inclusive and sustainable for the long term. The model offers opportunities for communicators to advocate participatory and accountable governance, ensuring that all citizens are empowered with the knowledge; resources; and freedoms of speech, expression, and movement necessary to participate actively in public discourse, as well as the ability to advocate for their rights and hold leaders accountable.

Figure 2: Cultural Models of Fair Urban Transitions

What characterizes urban life in general? ■ Cities as Service Hubs ■ Cities as Income Locations ■ Cities as Costly and Commodified ■ Cities as Unhealthy.	What important urban challenges and changes do residents in Khulna face? ■ A City Under Water ■ Pollution ■ Joblessness ■ A Model of Incompleteness ■ The Naturalization of Inequality ■ Pervasive Corruption.
Who has the responsibility to make Khulna a better city? ■ The Job of Government ■ Youth Change ■ The Generic Responsible Individual.	What should be done to make Khulna a better city? ■ The Economically Revived City ■ Essential Infrastructure and Services ■ Good Governance.

Mapping the Overlaps and Gaps in Understanding

The goals of this analysis have been to (1) document the ways experts talk about and explain FUT and its implications for improving life for Khulna's residents; (2) establish the ways in which the public understands urban life and change; and (3) compare and map these explanations and understandings to reveal the overlaps and gaps between the perspectives of these two different groups. We now turn to this third task.

Overlaps in Understanding

There are important overlaps between the perspectives of experts and the residents of Khulna concerning urban transition in Khulna and other cities of Bangladesh. These overlaps provide solid ground for engaging the public and from which greater understanding can be built. Experts and the public share the following understanding:

- 1. There needs to be improved access to essential infrastructure and services for all.** Both experts and the residents of Khulna share a critical understanding that the current infrastructure and services in the city remain inadequate in meeting the needs of a rapidly growing urban population, especially for marginalized communities and vulnerable areas. Both experts and residents call for expanded and inclusive services, targeted physical infrastructure improvements, and improved investment in health care and education to ensure these essential services and infrastructure are accessible to all urban residents.
- 2. Khulna needs an economic revival.** The residents of Khulna and experts both argued that Khulna's economic performance lags behind that of many tertiary cities and that it is unable to offer suitable employment opportunities for its diverse populations. Experts highlight the need for inclusive economic regeneration through improved investment, better infrastructure, tax incentives, and suitable industrialization, alongside bolstering agricultural activities in the hinterland. Experts and residents argued for targeted employment, informal sector support, skill training, access to finance and technology, and quality education to revive the economy and build a strong economic foundation.
- 3. Social and spatial disparities and marginalization need to be addressed.** The public and experts highlight significant disparities in urban amenities in self-built neighborhoods and peripheral areas, often excluding slums from basic services. Experts endorse housing regeneration for unplanned inner-city areas and resettlement projects for low-income populations, and, along with the public, they stress access to essential services to reduce class-based exclusion.

4. **There is undue focus on Dhaka.** Experts and residents highlight the concentration of investment in the capital, resulting in Khulna's poor infrastructure and overshadowing its growth potential. Both experts and the public see that centralized decision-making exacerbates inequality in resource distribution and call for addressing disparities across urban areas and for bridging the rural-urban gap.
5. **Climate change is challenging urban life, especially for marginalized communities.** Experts and the Khulna public share a knowledge of increased rainfall, prolonged summers, and heat waves in recent years due to climate change. Both also see how these new weather patterns disproportionately impact low-income communities.
6. **Government has a core responsibility.** Experts and residents both emphasize the crucial role of local, city, and national governments in expanding access to services and infrastructure, requiring greater capacity for collaboration with public organizations and stakeholders.
7. **Governance is undermined by corruption and inefficiency.** Experts and residents in Khulna highlight corruption as a root cause of unequal access to essential services and of inefficiency in governance. They emphasize the need for transparency, fairness, accountability, and participatory governance to address these issues.

Gaps in Understanding

Alongside these overlaps, there are also many important ways public thinking contrasts with expert knowledge. The most pronounced gaps were in areas where public thinking is highly generalized or “thin.” In these areas, people’s thinking is not necessarily incorrect but rather incomplete, and they can benefit from exposure to new and different ways of framing the issues.

1. **Identifying and solving problems: Systemic Interventions vs. Personalized Solutions.** Experts and members of the public share a focus on a set of core challenges that need to be addressed in Khulna, including insufficient infrastructure, lack of employment opportunities, and environmental challenges. While experts can identify a range of systemic interventions to take on these challenges, the public, however, lacks a structural or policy model for how these core challenges can be addressed and instead defaults to more personalized solutions at the level of the individual citizen or political leader. People need help to better understand the processes and mechanisms that amplify these problems as cities like Khulna grow. Likewise, they need help seeing the systemic pathways where viable, long-term solutions can be found.
2. **Achieving good governance and tackling corruption: Systemic Solutions vs. Better Individual Leaders.** Following directly from the first gap, experts propose systemic reforms to improve governance and tackle corruption, advocating for depoliticizing government institutions and fostering a culture of transparency, participatory governance, and institutional accountability to dismantle entrenched systems of corruption and inefficiency. The public’s perception of corruption is more immediate and personal, centered around daily experiences

of bribery and lack of transparency from local officials. While they express frustration with the lack of direct accountability, they focus less on systemic governance reforms and more on leadership failures and calls for better leaders. This gap could lead to misalignment in anti-corruption strategies, where institutional reforms fail to resonate unless accompanied by visible, immediate measures that address the public's daily frustrations.

- 3. Building an inclusive economy:** *Strategic Investment vs. Immediate Job Creation.* Experts suggest long-term, strategic economic investments in green industries, infrastructure, and public-private partnerships to stimulate job growth and economic inclusion. Residents are focused on the need for immediate job creation through reopening factories and increasing local employment opportunities, and there is frustration that the city's growth is not leading to sufficient job opportunities for educated people. The gap between long-term economic strategies and the public's demand for immediate jobs suggests a disconnect in time frames. While experts focus on future-oriented investments, the public needs more short-term, tangible results in employment to meet their everyday needs. Addressing this gap will require creating frames through which the public can appreciate the balancing act between long-term strategic investments and quick-win job creation projects that provide immediate relief.
- 4. Addressing inequality:** *Reformable vs. the Natural State of Affairs.* Experts advocate for structural reforms targeting social equity, focusing on expanding access to education, health care, employment, and affordable housing. The Khulna public, however, often perceive inequality and unfairness as natural elements of urban life, with poverty sometimes attributed to a lack of ability to succeed. Even as people call for changes, such as greater accessibility to educational or employment opportunities, they simultaneously believe and accept that fairness is unachievable within an urban context like Khulna.
- 5. Improving livability:** *Justice and Fairness vs. Basic Improvements.* Experts demonstrate more aspirational goals for making Khulna a livable city for all residents through a genuine commitment to justice, fairness, and moral integrity to overcome historical and systemic disadvantages. The public has more limited ambitions, calling for baseline infrastructure improvements to meet a bare minimum for functionality and livability. Although experts' aspirational goals may lead to visionary projects, the immediate needs of residents remain unmet, causing dissatisfaction and disengagement and potentially exacerbating existing inequalities.
- 6. Addressing neoliberal hegemony in planning and governance:** *Values-based Thinking vs. Market-based Thinking.* Experts' commitment to equity, justice, and fairness seeks to counteract neoliberal planning and governance that prioritizes capital over residents and favors market-driven approaches that result in inequality and environmental degradation. Meanwhile, the public has come to expect that many essential services, like health care, education, and transportation, are part of a commodified, market-based system that results in highly unequal access to those services. Bridging this gap will require efforts to strengthen people's understanding of these services as shared public goods not private interests and thereby reset people's expectations for what they can and should demand of their government.

- 7. Decentralizing governance:** *Critique of Centralization vs. Focus on Localized Forces.* Experts understand how centralized, top-down governance limits local autonomy in addressing local needs. In contrast, the public largely perceives localized factors as the key driver of urban incompleteness. The public's focus on local forces might lead to disengagement from broader policy discussions, reducing civic participation and advocacy for decentralized governance. Discrepancies in understanding can also erode trust between the public and authorities, hindering collaborative efforts to improve urban development.
- 8. Understanding climate change:** *Resilience and Mitigation vs. Impacts.* Both the experts and the public have strong models of the impacts of climate change in Khulna, but, unlike the experts, the public does not have strong models of resilience and mitigation. This limits the public's awareness and support for climate resilience and mitigation strategies and for the importance of ensuring that such efforts are inclusive in their planning and fair in their outcomes.
- 9. Understanding urban sprawl:** *Threat to Long-term Sustainability vs. New Possibility.* Experts agree that urban sprawl undermines long-term sustainability, while the public, with limited awareness of the drawbacks, views unplanned growth as relieving city pressure and providing economic benefits from newly created housing. This gap highlights the need for awareness building on the crucial role of planning and land management.
- 10. Instituting development control:** *Law Violation vs. Lack of Awareness.* Experts are attuned to how the violation of development control laws and regulations is a key barrier to planned urban growth. The public, however, does not see the issue as a significant urban challenge. Aligning public understanding with expert insights would require efforts to educate the public about the long-term benefits of planned urban development and the involvement of the community in the planning process.
- 11. Creating even urbanization:** *Urban and Rural vs. Urban.* Experts point to the factors driving rural-urban migration and its repercussions on quality of life in major urban areas. They highlight how concentrated investments in Dhaka, centralized decision-making processes, and an urban bias in climate-change funding have led to uneven urbanization. These experts advocate for investments in rural areas, especially in climate-vulnerable coastal regions, to enhance both rural and urban living conditions and ensure balanced development across the country. The public lacks this kind of comprehensive understanding of how rural investments shape urban outcomes and of the importance of a wholistic plan that distributes population growth and economic development more evenly.
- 12. Financing investments:** *Integrated vs. Narrow Model.* Experts advocate for a sophisticated financing model that integrates NGOs, civil society, investors, and community-based organizations. By leveraging these entities' unique strengths, resources, and grassroots connections, Khulna can address complex urban challenges and achieve meaningful and lasting impact. The public, however, primarily holds the government responsible for solving all problems and financing solutions, overlooking the roles of NGOs, foreign investors, civil society, and community-based organizations as change agents. This narrow view of responsibility and roles can hinder comprehensive and inclusive urban development in Khulna.

 Experts		 Public
Systemic Interventions	Identifying & Solving Problems	Personalized Solutions
Systemic Solutions	Good Governance & Tackling Corruption	Better Individual Leaders
Strategic Investment	Building an Inclusive Economy	Immediate Job Creation
Reformable	Addressing Inequality	The Natural State of Affairs
Justice and Fairness	Achieving Livability	Basic Improvements
Values-based Thinking	Neoliberal Planning and Governance	Market-based Thinking
Critique of Centralization	Decentralizing Governance	Focus on Localized Forces
Focus on Resilience and Mitigation	Climate Change	Focus on Impacts
Threat to Long-term Sustainability	Urban Sprawl	New Possibilities
Law Violation	Development Control	Lack of Awareness
Urban and Rural	Even Urbanization	Urban
Integrated Model	Financing Investments	Narrow Model



Conclusion

Initial Recommendations

This research report summarizes both expert understandings of FUT and the prevailing cultural models that shape how Khulna's residents perceive urban transition topics. It also highlights the dominant overlaps and gaps between these two approaches to understanding the issues. By doing so, the report lays the foundation for preliminary guidelines that the urban sector in Khulna, and Bangladesh more broadly, can use to enhance its communication strategies and practices. Implementing these recommendations can help align public perceptions with urban development goals and elevate support for policies and programs that promote justice, equity, and fairness in urban development.

The public's views align with experts in many aspects of FUT. They both understand that improved access to essential infrastructure and services for all is critical for enhanced livability. They both also recognize the importance of the city's economic revival, addressing social and spatial disparities and acknowledging the undue focus on Dhaka, which affects investment and overshadows Khulna's growth potential. Additionally, they are aware of the impact of climate change on urban life and the need for the government to tackle corruption and inefficiency. Shared responsibility among national, local, and city governments; public organizations; and stakeholders is also seen as vital for expanding access to services and infrastructure and ensuring political accountability.

Yet, despite these commonalities, significant gaps exist between experts and the public. These gaps encompass identifying systemic interventions for urban challenges, tackling corruption, decentralizing and improving governance, creating an inclusive economy, addressing inequality, enhancing Khulna's livability, promoting values-based over market-based planning and governance, fostering planned development and urbanization, mitigating climate change impacts, and supporting diverse actors and institutions in promoting a FUT.

To advance the goals of a FUT in Khulna and other major urban areas in Bangladesh, we present the following preliminary recommendations for those communicating around issues of FUT:

- 1. Embrace values-based thinking.** FUT communicators should assert a values-based and people-based approach to addressing urban inequality, marginalization, and environmental degradation. This is particularly important considering the extent to which a market-based model of urban services has taken hold in people's thinking and come to structure their assumptions about urban life and what they can rightly expect and demand of their elected leadership. A commitment to equity, justice, and fairness is crucial and should be reflected in communication materials for long-term awareness building.

- 2. Tell stories about systems.** People lack awareness of how centralized governance, unaccountable institutions, and exclusionary decision-making hinder equity in budget allocation, regional balance, and infrastructure planning. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for addressing local autonomy and the reluctance of political leaders and bureaucrats to implement necessary changes, leading to corruption and poor accountability. Efforts to reframe social equity should first focus on educating people about systemic reasons for social injustice, setting a cognitive foundation for broader structural reforms. Empowered residents are then better positioned to challenge entrenched power structures and promote more inclusive and equitable urban development. When it is helpful to tell stories about individuals, be sure that the systems that structure and limit their choices are prominent in the storyline.
- 3. Explain *how* challenges can be addressed, and transitions made fairer.** While the public is aware of the key urban challenges, they often struggle to grasp the factors that exacerbate these issues and the processes needed to achieve systemic solutions through structural reforms and policy. FUT communicators can't assume that people know how to solve core challenges. Instead, communicators must bridge this gap by providing clear, concrete explanations of *how* urban transitions can be made more equitable and the specific systems and efforts required to achieve this. This involves detailing the mechanisms of fair urban development, illustrating how policies can address disparities, and demonstrating the role of various stakeholders in fostering inclusive and sustainable urban growth. By enhancing public understanding, communicators can build a more informed and engaged community that actively supports and participates in the journey toward FUT.
- 4. Go beyond urban boundaries.** Communicators need to make the case that FUT is not just about making a better life for city residents. They should encourage thinking about urbanization as part of the broader national development trajectory of Bangladesh, wherein reducing the disparity between cities and urban areas and tackling rural-urban gaps can lead to a fairer and more prosperous nation. This comprehensive approach ensures that no one is left behind and that urban and rural areas can thrive together.
- 5. Build new understandings of power.** Neither experts nor the public believe power should be concentrated solely in the hands of the wealthy and politically influential. The *Naturalization of Inequality* model raises critical questions about how marginalized populations can be empowered to recognize and believe in alternative forms of power that bring equitable outcomes for all residents. Communicators can propose that new forms of power can be realized through systemic reforms, addressing inequality and empowering the people, especially youth and marginalized communities, with more resources and responsibilities. Relatedly, the prevailing pessimism about achieving more fairness within an urban system can be countered by framing strategies and policies that emphasize social equity, inclusion, and participatory governance. Further research can provide valuable insights and aid in developing effective interventions to that end.

- 6. Strengthen understandings of good governance.** For effective reform, FUT communicators should emphasize the importance of building trust between the public and their elected leadership through transparent and accountable governance systems. Communicators can support the introduction of digital platforms for civic engagement and feedback mechanisms on government performance to foster greater trust and cooperation between citizens and local officials. They can emphasize that strong oversight mechanisms are crucial to prevent resource misallocation and ensure that urban development benefits all residents, regardless of wealth or political connections.
- 7. Emphasize citizen participation.** While experts advocate for a multi-stakeholder model for urban change, the public often feels disconnected from broader collaborative efforts. Most people do not have trust in larger institutions. This disconnect suggests a critical need to genuinely foster public participation during urban transition. In their messaging, communicators can explain the importance of participatory planning strategies like participatory budgeting, which empowers residents to influence public fund allocations; community engagement workshops, which can gather diverse perspectives on urban planning projects; and digital platforms that can allow residents to report issues directly to local authorities. Likewise, communicators can explain how inclusive representation in decision-making bodies, advocacy for grassroots movements, and public consultations can further ensure broad and equitable civic involvement.
- 8. Communicate climate solutions, not only impacts.** The public is increasingly aware of and concerned about the impacts of climate change in Khulna. However, they need guidance and support in understanding and implementing mitigation and resilience measures to these challenges. Community-based initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and educational programs can provide the necessary resources and knowledge to enhance resilience. Communicators can message directly to members of the public about their role in urban farming and sustainable land use practices and their importance to climate mitigation and resilience efforts. Involving the public in these efforts can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility toward climate action.
- 9. Foster a holistic approach to economic revival.** FUT communicators must be clear that economic growth alone does not guarantee a fairer and more just city. As such, communicators must consistently frame all calls for economic revival as part of a holistic approach that includes investments in industrial zones, public services, logistics, and infrastructure, including in transportation, health care, and digital connectivity. Likewise, communicators can broaden the causal story of unemployment and underemployment in Khulna to include more than deindustrialization. For example, they can explain how social stigma and cultural norms about women's engagement in certain kinds of employment limits their access to suitable education, skills, and financial resources. That bias constrains not only the employment lives of women but the overall economic progress of the city.

This research highlights the many ways in which members of the public in Khulna need support to understand better how the city can grow and change in ways that promote the wellbeing of all its residents. It underscores the urgent need for a strategic, well-crafted narrative approach to foster a just and sustainable urban transition—both in Khulna and across Bangladesh.

The preliminary recommendations above aim to refine communication strategies so they more effectively align public understanding with development goals rooted in justice, equity, and inclusion. In the next phase of the project, researchers will design and test a set of narrative and reframing tools to evaluate how well they help the public better grasp and support fair urban policies and transition efforts. By doing so, this research seeks to equip stakeholders with the communication tools needed to build broader public support for urban transition strategies that are equitable and climate-resilient. Ultimately, the project aims to strengthen the efforts of organizations and individuals working to embed fairness and justice into the ongoing conversation about Khulna's future. The goal is to make a commitment to equity a central, assumed part of urban discourse—rather than an afterthought or omission. If successful, this approach can help shape a future for Khulna in which women, the poor, youth, Hijras (third gender), people with disabilities, recent arrivals, and other marginalized groups are not sidelined but instead recognized as vital contributors to the city's present and future.

This narrative project seeks to build connections to drive meaningful change. By prioritizing communication and actively engaging youth, the research—and the broader movement it supports—aims to shift power from city authorities to citizens. This approach aims to foster a cycle of grassroots leadership and systemic transformation by empowering citizens—especially young people—to step into leadership roles, hold decision-makers accountable, and advocate for structural solutions that promote sustainable and equitable urban transformation in Khulna and beyond.

Appendix A

Cultural Models Research Methods

Grounded in FrameWorks' Strategic Frame Analysis® approach to communications research and practice, a series of in-depth interviews were used to explore the shared, culturally constructed, and often taken-for-granted patterns that structure how people think about urban life and transition in Bangladesh and the challenges that affect their quality of life in Khulna. These cultural models are critical to investigate because individuals use internalized versions of culturally transmitted knowledge to interpret the world around them and interact with it. This includes their interpretations of messaging about what characterizes urban life and transition, what important urban challenges and changes they face, who has the responsibility for improving life in Khulna, and what should be done to make Khulna a better city.

The summary of cultural models is based on 30 in-depth, one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted with residents in and around Khulna during July and August 2024. This research understands members of the public as playing a critical role in FUT work. Diverse informants were recruited to account for variations in gender, education, age, religious identity, and residential location. Of the 30 members of the public, 14 men, 15 women, and one member of the Hijra community were interviewed. In terms of level of education, one participant had no formal education, four had completed primary education, seven had completed secondary education (grade 9–10), seven had higher secondary (grade 11–12), and 10 had some or completed tertiary education. Five were from peri-urban areas, and the remaining 25 were from city neighborhoods, five from each neighborhood category (wealthiest, higher-middle wealth, middle wealth, lower-middle wealth, and low wealth neighborhoods). These categories largely resemble the spatial and built environment qualities reflecting the wealth of neighborhoods, approximating the socioeconomic status of their residents (for details see Sowgat, T., & Roy, S. [2020]. *Khulna: the diversity and disparity of neighbourhoods from organic growth. SHLC research summary 09, Khulna University*). In terms of age, four were ages 18–21, four were 22–30, eight were 31–50, and six were over 50. By religious identity, 24 identified as Muslim, and six as Hindu. Finally, 11 were urban residents, five lived in peri-or sub-urban areas, and six lived in rural areas.

These 30 one-and-a-half-hour interviews were designed to elicit stories and messages that indicated the shared and durable cultural models participants used to make sense of their world. The interviews were transcribed, after which researchers used MAXQDA qualitative analysis software to code and analyze the assumptions, relationships, logical steps, and connections that were commonly made both within and across interviews. A subsection of the transcripts was translated into English so that a FrameWorks researcher could join the RDRC researchers in analyzing the interview data. Researchers were all siloed from one another during the coding and analysis process, with each researcher analyzing a subsection (10 interviews each) of the interview data in isolation.

For each researcher, codes were drawn together into themes, enabling the researcher to present the findings in a coherent and meaningful way. During this process, researchers analyzed both the text and subtext of people's responses, seeking to discern patterns from what was said (how things were related, explained, and understood) and what was not said (assumptions and implied relationships).

Adapting analytic techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology, RDRC and FrameWorks researchers used a grounded theory approach to identify common patterns in the data within and across the three research populations. This approach involved identifying standardized ways of talking across the data sets to reveal commonly made assumptions, relationships, logical steps, and connections. The analysis centered on ways of understanding that were shared across participants within each research population and among the three populations. These shared understandings and assumptions are the cultural models identified in the following analysis.

Researchers' individual analyses were then shared and discussed with their counterparts, and the group revisited transcripts to confirm findings concerning new codes and models. In many cases, the analysis revealed conflicting models that participants brought to bear on the same issue. In such cases, one of the conflicting ways of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other, in the sense that it more consistently and profoundly shaped participants' thinking.

Endnotes

1. The Field Frame Analysis report, *Stories for a Changing Khulna: Organizational Framing of Urban Transition*, dissects the dominant frames and narratives pertaining to urban transition as conveyed by leading urban development, advocacy, and environmental organizations in their communications materials in Dhaka and Khulna. It both highlights prevalent themes across these communications materials and sheds light on critical topics that are conspicuously absent or less emphasized. This comprehensive narrative study reveals the collective storylines being articulated and framed by the urban transition sector in Khulna. In the process, it seeks to offer a nuanced understanding of the FUT sector's current communications practices and suggests directions for how storytelling and narrative framing can be strengthened in the service of making urban growth and change in Khulna fairer. The report can be found at the FrameWorks Institute (www.frameworksinstitute.org) and the River & Delta Research Centre (www.rdrc.info).
2. These include the Khulna Water Supply and Sewerage Authority for water supply, the West Zone Power Distribution Company for electricity, the Divisional Social Service Office for social welfare, the Directorate General of Health Services for health, and the Directorate of Secondary & Higher Education for education.

About the River and Delta Research Centre

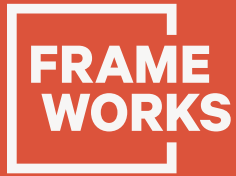
The River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC) conducts, coordinates, and integrates interdisciplinary research to address pressing national, regional, and transboundary challenges in water resources management and urban transformation. RDRC's work is grounded in the belief that inclusive, just, and sustainable alternatives are essential for the future of our social-ecological systems. It is committed to amplifying the voices of marginalized and frontline communities, working in close collaboration with them to co-create transformative solutions that restore ecological balance and promote environmental justice. Its research has significantly contributed to public understanding and policy debates surrounding river rights, fair urban transition, water justice, sand extraction, and industrial waste disposal. RDRC is a pioneer in urban waterbody restoration and stewardship through agroecological initiatives. RDRC publishes *Obobahika*, a journal dedicated to transregional water politics.

Learn more at www.rdrc.info

About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

Learn more at www.frameworksinstitute.org



Fair Cities, Shared Prosperity

Mapping the Gaps on
Understandings of Fair Urban
Transition in Khulna, Bangladesh

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the FrameWorks Institute.

Roy, S., Azaz, M., Lindland, E., & Huq, E. (with Mahi, Q. A. S., & Hussain, F.). (2025). *Fair cities, shared prosperity: Mapping the gaps on understandings of fair urban transition in Khulna, Bangladesh*. FrameWorks Institute and River and Delta Research Centre.

Designed by Constructive · © FrameWorks Institute 2025

This report is the result of a research collaboration between the FrameWorks Institute and the River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC).