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Stories for a Changing Khulna

Organizational Framing of Urban Transition

A FIELD FRAME ANALYSIS

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Introduction

Khulna, Bangladesh's third-largest city, is undergoing rapid urbanization shaped by expanding transportation networks, new economic zones, urban-to-rural migration, and low land prices. Nearly half of the city's built-up area emerged between 2010 and 2020 alone.¹ Situated on the coast, Khulna is also highly vulnerable to climate change impacts such as salinity intrusion, flooding, and extreme weather, which have intensified social challenges and driven migration from surrounding areas into the city. Despite this growth, Khulna's urbanization has been uneven. Many neighborhoods still lack access to basic urban services,² highlighting a need for a fair urban transition—one that ensures equitable development in the face of climate vulnerability, social inequality, and unplanned growth.

This report supports such efforts by examining how leading development organizations in Khulna frame and communicate pathways toward a fair urban transition. It draws on a *field frame analysis* of their public communications to understand the narratives shaping the urban development discourse. Field frame analyses are used to examine the communications patterns and narratives that organizations in a given sector use to frame issues relevant to their field and to communicate with their audiences. This report identifies dominant and missing frames in the communications of urban development, advocacy, and environmental organizations, focusing on materials from both Khulna and Dhaka, Bangladesh's capital. Although the term "fair urban transition" is not explicitly used by these organizations, recurring themes—such as inclusion, empowerment, participation, and equity—align with the concept. These shared themes point to an implicit commitment to fairness in the urban development and urban transition sector.

The findings reveal how the urban transition sector has collectively narrated Bangladesh's urban evolution in recent years. *Urban transition* here refers to the broad changes cities undergo, including economic shifts, demographic trends, and environmental transformations. Topics covered in the analyzed communications include urban poverty; climate vulnerability; water, sanitation, and hygiene; environmental pollution; public health; sexual and reproductive health and rights; food security; empowerment for youth, women, and minorities; urban resilience; and waste management.

A central assumption of this report is that a just, inclusive, and sustainable urban future for Khulna requires deliberate efforts toward a *fair* urban transition. This means ensuring that the benefits of urban growth are equitably shared and that the needs of marginalized groups are addressed, while minimizing harm to vulnerable populations.

This report is part of a larger empirically grounded and culturally contextualized research project—undertaken by the FrameWorks Institute and the River and Delta Research Centre, in partnership with Porticus Bangladesh—that aims to empower Khulna’s urban transition sector with narrative frames and communication strategies they can use to shape public and policy conversations about fair urban growth. Alongside this research to identify narrative patterns in the field’s communications materials, our researchers have also done in-depth research with members of the Khulna public to identify the dominant understandings and assumptions that structure how people view urban life and the processes of urban growth and change. Across this report, we will consider how the narratives that leading development organizations are telling likely intersect with patterns in public thinking. By better understanding the relationship between what communicators are saying and what their audience might be thinking, we can better consider the ways messaging and storytelling can be strengthened to help the public better understand and support the kinds of initiatives that can make Khulna a fairer city as it grows and changes.

The field frame analysis revealed eight dominant narratives in the communications materials collected from urban development, advocacy, and environmental organizations in Khulna.

1. **The *Deindustrialization* Narrative.** The invocation of deindustrialization as a central reason that marginalized populations live in and around Khulna.
2. **The *Climate Migration* Narrative.** Stories about how climate change drives involuntary migration to Khulna and presents fundamental challenges to services and infrastructure.
3. **The *Problem of Informality* Narrative.** Storylines that emphasize how low-income people’s informal status heightens their social vulnerability and contributes to unfairness in Khulna.
4. **The *Poor Urban Planning and Coordination* Narrative.** Stories about how urban planning and governance is failing to meet the needs of Khulna’s population because of a lack of coordination and capacity.
5. **The *Focus on the Vulnerable* Narrative.** A call for government to focus on those most socially and ecologically marginalized by framing them as vulnerable, including those most impacted by climate change.
6. **The *Call for Inclusive Governance* Narrative.** Stories that point to lack of participatory and inclusive governance and the resultant disempowerment of key groups, including young people, women, and low-income communities.
7. **The *Implicit Fairness* Narrative.** Largely implicit accounts about how Khulna’s future as a resilient, prosperous, and equitable city depends on it successfully carrying out a fair urban transition.
8. **The *Climate Change Affects Everything* Narrative.** A narrative theme running across organizational messaging about how Bangladesh is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change and that Khulna’s location along Bangladesh’s coastline heightens its climate risks.

This research understands that leading nongovernmental and governmental organizations in a sector often lead the broader field by driving conversations on specific topics. Their narrative frames shape the direction of a city's programs and policies: which policies should be adopted and what areas require stronger focus, research, or implementation efforts. In short, how an existing or emerging sector communicates about an issue has direct implications for whether and how that issue will be more widely addressed. Considered together as a sector, the organizations—both governmental and nongovernmental—that lead the effort to improve the lives of urban residents of Khulna certainly play this role.

In light of this, this report aims to help the urban transition sector understand how its communication practices might be shaping people's understanding of urban transition in Khulna and the factors that influence it. The report also provides suggestions for how the field might refine its storytelling strategies to more effectively advance its agenda and build support for desired urban policies and programs.

It is important to note that a field frame analysis for the urban transition sector has never previously been conducted in Bangladesh. Consequently, this report provides new insights into how leading organizations are currently framing urban transition topics to the public, policymakers, and others in the country. It is also important to note that this field frame analysis was conducted in the pre-2024 uprising period, when organizations faced political constraints in how they framed the fairness issues of urban transition. The post-2024 uprising period offers an opportunity to communicate differently and to collaboratively craft new communication strategies to develop a shared vision of fair urban transition that can guide Khulna's urban transition sector. This report and the research that will follow offer possibilities to reframe the story of urban transition to more effectively tell a story that communicates and builds awareness for more inclusive and fair urban policies and programs.

WHAT ARE NARRATIVES, AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Narratives are patterns of meaning that cut across and tie together specific stories (tales about particular events and people). Narratives are common patterns that both emerge *from* a set of stories and provide templates *for* specific stories. Narratives shape how we think about our social world because they pervade our discourse; they provide common ways of organizing and making meaning across the different ways we communicate with one another through words and images.

Narratives both *reflect* and *shape* cultural mindsets, or how we think about the world. Just as with other aspects of framing, by changing the *narratives* we tell, we can cultivate new patterns in thinking, fostering new understandings and perspectives. The distinctive value of narratives lies in the power of the stories that mobilize them to resonate emotionally, engage attention, motivate action, and facilitate memory of complex ideas.

For more information on narratives, see FrameWorks' foundational report on narrative, *The Features of Narrative*.

Methods

This research report identifies a set of narrative patterns that run across the communications materials of organizations working in urban transition. We sought to identify narrative patterns across these materials in recognition that storytelling is a pervasive and powerful method through which organizations communicate, and that narratives are a central way and means through which all people organize, remember, and make meaning of information.

Two specific questions guided this research:

1. What are the dominant narrative patterns in the communications practices of organizations working in the area of urban transition in Khulna, Bangladesh?
2. What are the implications of these narratives for fair urban transition efforts in Khulna, Bangladesh?

To answer these questions, researchers collected and analyzed communications materials from 32 organizations active in the field of fair urban transition in Khulna, Bangladesh. These materials were collected between April and July 2024, before the 2024 popular uprising in Bangladesh. Sixteen of these 32 were international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other international organizations, and the remaining were national organizations. The organizations sampled for this research were active in different areas of urban transition, each with different focuses. Researchers collected 204 sample documents from these organizations and randomly selected 132 of these documents for narrative analysis, representing the variety of issues organizations work on. These samples included brochures, reports, websites, newspaper articles, research articles, e-bulletins, policy briefs, posters, and booklets. The samples included both English- and Bangla-language materials. A fuller description of research methods is in this report's Appendix B.

Findings

Field Narratives about Urban Transition

The field frame analysis revealed eight dominant narratives in the materials produced by the organizations in this study. In the following section, the dominant narratives are laid out and their implications discussed.

1. The *Deindustrialization* Narrative

Most organizations invoke deindustrialization as a main reason that marginalized and vulnerable populations live in and around Khulna.

Organizations note that Khulna largely industrialized from the 1950s onward and that the city's population grew as a result. However, as organizations describe, since 2002 the closure of public industries like jute and textile mills has led to economic decline, job loss, and out-migration and has dramatically reshaped the city. Organizational narratives suggest that although private investment has created a service sector in the city, including hotels, hospitals, tourism, and education, the employment generated by the service sector cannot compensate for the effects of closed industries. Organizations generally do not explain why Khulna's deindustrialization took place during that time, but they highlight the impacts of deindustrialization, including leaving many people economically marginalized and compelling them to enter precarious informal work, opening them up to a host of other social and environmental risks.

Since 2002, the natural [population] increase continued but the negative net in-migration got to the extent that overall population growth became negative. The decline in economic activities in Khulna city over the last two decades, resulting from the closure of state-run jute and textile mills, newsprint mills, match factories, jute baling presses, hardboard mills, etc., and consequently, a rise in migration from the city to adjacent suburbs and other towns has resulted in the depopulation of Khulna city. Although the overall urban population has grown at a rate of 3.8 percent in Bangladesh during the last two decades, the closure of many state-run jute and textile mills has rendered thousands of workers unemployed in the formal sector. Khulna city is thus facing an economic downturn.³

Notably, this narrative overlaps with a public perception among Khulna residents that the city is a shadow of its former economic self. Many Khulna residents are familiar with the broad outlines of this deindustrialization narrative, and it informs their thinking about the city's current economic struggles, particularly the lack of available employment opportunities for its diverse population. They want to see economic revival in the city, even as they do not understand well how that might be achieved.

Why This Matters

Across the field's messaging, deindustrialization is a critically important historical storyline in Khulna's urban transition. It highlights the structural changes that shaped Khulna's contemporary economic precarity, and it sets the stage for imagining what economic inclusion could look like in Khulna. While some organizations present Khulna's economic decline as background context, others call for Khulna's industrial revitalization to stay apace with Bangladesh's overall gross domestic product (GDP) growth. However, the current story about deindustrialization as the driver of urban vulnerability in Khulna treats economic decline and the resultant poverty as largely disconnected from the broader notion of fairness in urban transitions.

Two issues need to be clarified here: first, that GDP growth does not guarantee fairness, and second, that it is within the very factors that drive growth where fairness can be built into Khulna's economic revitalization. In fact, economic growth is necessary for fair urban transition, but economic growth alone cannot guarantee fairness. Instead, it is the factors that can lead to economic growth—such as job creation, sustainable livelihoods, and equitable access to infrastructure and resources—that are also the ingredients for fairer growth. The current story overlooks the potential for fairness to be framed as a core component of economic growth, especially when growth is inclusive and equitable to marginalized populations.

Based on our parallel research with members of the Khulna public, we know members of the public also see deindustrialization as the key historical process that undermined Khulna's current economy and created its limited employment opportunities.⁴ We know they recognize that many communities are living in vulnerable and marginalized situations and that basic infrastructure is lacking for many. We know too that the public is calling for a return of industry and for new economic growth for the city, and that they believe a basic level of infrastructure and services should be available to all urban residents. In all these ways, public thinking is aligned with how urban development organizations are communicating urban transitions issues. At the same time, it is clear the public mostly lacks a good understanding of how Khulna's revitalization might be accomplished and, more pointedly, how it might be structured around an ethic of fairness and inclusivity.

If communicators can draw attention to the factors that create economic growth and make the case that fairness is a core economic development concern, it could shift the conversation from merely facilitating revitalization to actively working toward expanding the economic rights of Khulna's residents. In this way, organizations could strengthen a causal plotline within the story of urban development that recognizes that fair urban transition is about inclusive economic opportunities that enable all residents, especially the marginalized, to participate in and benefit from the city's economic development. These changes to the story of Khulna's economic revitalization could improve the public's understanding of how Khulna can experience an economic revitalization that works in the interests of all its residents.

2. The *Climate Migration* Narrative

Organizational materials focus on how climate change drives involuntary migration to Khulna and presents fundamental challenges to services and infrastructure. Yet, they often underestimate other key factors that drive migration.

For most organizations, climate change is identified as one of the most significant forces driving urban transition in Khulna. They point to how climate change–induced disasters, such as cyclones in Bangladesh’s coastal areas to Khulna’s south, have driven significant rural-to-urban migration, pushing displaced people to settle and build informal settlements. They note how these migrants inevitably face severe challenges, including inadequate housing, lack of employment opportunities, and poor public health infrastructure. Organizations stress that without climate-resilient urban planning, these populations will continue to bear the brunt of environmental disasters, worsening inequality. Organizations also note that climate change places increasing strain on already inadequate urban infrastructure, such as drinking water sources. They claim that unplanned urbanization in climate-affected areas has yet to integrate the emerging infrastructure and service needs due to climate change.

In Bangladesh, millions of people are being forced to leave their rural homes because of the effects of climate change already today. As a result, they are migrating to the cities. Within these recipient cities, climate migrants often have to settle in slum areas, where living conditions are poor and they have considerably limited access to few local job opportunities. Local governments do not have the required capacities and resources to provide sufficient support for the integration of climate migrants into the local labour market.⁵

Across the sample of organizations, this climate narrative about migration was, however, relatively one-dimensional. It focused on climate change as the driver of migration and vulnerability while excluding a range of other key factors that drive migration. For example, state-facilitated infrastructure projects lead to displacements, job prospects pull migrants to cities, and the lack of a social safety net in rural areas leads to out-migration. Moreover, Bangladesh is located in the active Bengal Delta, which implies a certain rate of river erosion and land formation that is difficult to attribute solely to climate change.

Why This Matters

Organizations’ focus on climate change as a key driver of migration to cities is an important story, one that should continue to be told as part of a larger story about the impacts of climate change. At the same time, the story of rural-to-urban migration is not just a climate change story, and storytelling practices should reflect this. Globally, there are few cases where climate change is the primary driver of migration (perhaps with the exception of the submerged Pacific Islands). In most cases, economic and political drivers together with climate change shape outward migration from rural and coastal areas. Along that line, a fuller story about out-migration from Bangladesh’s coastal and rural areas near Khulna could incorporate, along with climate change, dimensions of deltaic hydrology, government policies and practices, global and local market factors, and political representation and accountability. A multidimensional story about migration to Khulna could inform more grounded responses to addressing migrant vulnerabilities.

One way to do this would be to replace overgeneralized terms such as climate migrants or climate migration with terms like climate-impacted urban dwellers or migrants. This more nuanced language opens a space for communicators to highlight the complex relationships between climate change and economic and sociopolitical factors. Such a broader story of what drives migration can help expand and deepen how members of the Khulna public think about both climate change and migration. Right now, Khulna residents see economic opportunity and climate change as the two key drivers of migration to the city but lack a bigger picture of the range of factors in play. Identifying ways to effectively expand the migration story can help members of the public see the broader causal picture and can better serve to build support for policies that can effectively address the particularities of rural-to-urban migration and can advocate for people having more choices about where they live and move to.

3. The *Problem of Informality* Narrative

Many organizations emphasize that low-income people's informal status contributes to unfairness because it heightens their social vulnerability. However, this storyline generally overlooks the informality practiced by political elites and wealthy urban dwellers.

Many organizations communicating on issues of urban growth and change consistently point to the problem of informality, especially in the areas of labor and housing. They explain how informal workers, especially in the transport and rickshaw-pulling sectors, face unregulated employment conditions, a lack of unionization, and no access to formal safety nets. Without formal recognition, these workers are left vulnerable to exploitation and have no legal recourse. A few organizations also link informal work status to gender and caste positions and describe the lack of a social safety net as a significant feature of Khulna's urban poverty.

Organizations also point to how low-income informal settlement (slum) dwellers are severely impacted by inadequate infrastructure, lack of employment opportunities, and limited access to essential services, leading to a precarious landscape of inequality in Khulna. The informal housing areas, without secure tenure, are devoid of formal services such as health care and education and utilities such as water and electricity, which heightens residents' vulnerability. Their lack of formal housing status also means they are excluded from urban planning decision-making processes, further entrenching their marginalization. One organization explains:

Often, low-income communities living in informal settlements (commonly known as urban slums) remain excluded from these systems. These urban settlements, or slums, along with the broader low-income population, generally have access to the poorest quality sanitation systems, putting them at the greatest risk. The key characteristics of this population include poverty, extremely congested living conditions, fear of eviction, and limited access to basic services such as electricity, water supply, and healthcare.⁶

Meanwhile, elite informality, which contrasts with the survival-driven informality of marginalized groups, is largely absent in the organizations' narratives of informality. Elite informality refers to how political elites and wealthy urban dwellers exploit loopholes, bend rules, or engage in illegal practices to secure resources.

Why This Matters

The *Problem of Informality* narrative points to a deeper crisis in Khulna's local governance—the lack of recognition of the informal sector. Informal work and living practices predominantly function outside the scope of official urban planning and governance mechanisms. This disconnect results in low-income people who are surviving in informal urban spaces and economies being excluded from decision-making, which exacerbates their inequality and marginalization.

While this narrative highlights how the informal sector is excluded, it could be improved in two crucial ways. First, the conception of informality needs to also be expanded to include informalities of political elites and wealthy communities. Powerful actors, such as developers, politicians, and businesses, exploit loopholes, bend rules, and engage in illegal practices to claim and secure resources in Khulna. Bringing these practices into organizations' conception of informality would allow for creating more realistic narratives for ensuring fair urban transition.

Second, this narrative about the informal sector could be strengthened by articulating how supporting and regulating informal practices and integrating them into the official urban governance and development framework can be a win-win for both people and government. For example, if government recognizes the informal housing sector, the next step would be for authorities to identify land for settlements even if money is not available for urban services. Once people start living on that land and can envision a future there, they can be expected to invest their own resources and incrementally upgrade the area.

4. The *Poor Urban Planning and Coordination* Narrative

Some organizations describe how urban planning and governance is failing to meet the needs of Khulna's population because of a lack of coordination and capacity. However, this narrative usually leaves out the role of nongovernmental agents in urban development and planning.

Many organizations emphasize that rapid and unplanned urbanization in Khulna has led to severe challenges in livability, such as inadequate public services, poor infrastructure, and environmental degradation. They identify solid-waste management as a pressing issue in Khulna, with unregulated waste disposal polluting water, soil, and crops. They point to how poorly planned neighborhoods, especially informal settlements (or “slums”), are characterized by inadequate infrastructure, leaving residents with no access to essential services like health care, sanitation, and safe water. They note how the lack of coordination and capacity among local authorities contributes to fragmented and uneven urban development and how local government institutions lack the resources and capacity to integrate climate migrants into the labor market. Organizations observe how large groups of migrants enter the city daily and yet the government lacks a resilience plan for the growing urban population. They note too how these planning failures are exacerbated by the city's unpreparedness for environmental disasters and public health crises. One organization describes the sanitation problem in slums as follows:

Proper sanitation systems are extremely important for public health, the environment, and healthy living in urban areas. ... Often, low-income communities living in informal settlements (commonly known as urban slums) remain excluded from these systems. These urban settlements, or slums, along with the broader low-income population, generally have access to the poorest quality sanitation systems, putting them at the greatest risk.⁷

Importantly, organizational narratives about Khulna's haphazard urbanization are almost exclusively focused on "poor" planning among government actors. In this framework, city planning and development is understood to be the sole prerogative of government authorities. In practice, urban development is a more distributed and fragmented field, with national and international NGOs providing support and services to urban citizens. For example, NGOs providing sanitation and education services are taking on roles unfulfilled by city authorities. Yet, the urban development and planning role of these other agents do not feature in organizations' narratives, and neither do the planning and coordinating challenges they face.

Why This Matters

According to the field materials we analyzed, empowering local governmental institutions is crucial for achieving long-term, sustainable urban development. This underscores the need to rethink how local governments can be better supported through focused training, resources, and capacity-building to enhance their ability to meet their communities' diverse needs in a more equitable way. A central implication of this analysis is the opportunity to reform Khulna's governance structure to improve service delivery, participation, and accountability. Additionally, geographic specificity must be factored into understanding the complexity of local government institutions. For example, Khulna's peri-urban areas are urbanizing haphazardly not simply because of "poor" planning. In these areas, multiple authorities such as the Khulna Development Authority and Union Parishad are engaged in sometimes conflicting planning projects while also having planning approaches that do not address the issue of fairness.

Notably, members of the Khulna public are already somewhat attuned to governance problems, believing too many projects are started but remain incomplete for years, and that government can and should do a better job of providing essential infrastructure and services across urban communities. At the same time, the public is not well attuned to the specific challenges of poor planning and lack of coordination, nor to a broader distributed model of responsibility and action among public and private (for-profit and not-for-profit) entities. Future research for this project should develop and test narrative strategies that can be useful to communicators as they seek to help both members of the public and policymakers understand the critical importance of improved planning practices and better coordination across planning efforts. More effective storytelling can build support for governmental and nongovernmental efforts to create a more inclusive and transparent urban system in Khulna. Such reforms might involve revising governance frameworks to ensure greater citizen participation and foster greater collaboration between governmental bodies and among the government, NGOs, and local communities to more effectively address the complex challenges of urbanization.

5. The *Focus on the Vulnerable* Narrative

Most organizations recommend the government focus on those most socially and ecologically marginalized and vulnerable, including those who are impacted by climate change.

Across most messaging, organizations are calling for the government to address the marginalization and vulnerability of Khulna's residents, including factory workers, rickshaw drivers, slum-dwellers, women, and youth. Their marginalization and vulnerability, organizations emphasize, are heightened by climate risks and lack of sufficient infrastructure to cope with climate-related disasters or disasters in general. Organizations suggest robust social safety nets and effective disaster preparedness strategies to protect vulnerable populations. They recommend that local government institutions provide sufficient basic services—such as safe drinking water, waste management, and infrastructure—for peri-urban and informal populations.

Local governments do not have the required capacities and resources to provide sufficient support for the integration of climate migrants into the local labour market. Similarly, access to public social services is insufficient and hence there is very limited scope for climate migrants to improve their living conditions. This situation has worsened with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government of Bangladesh has acknowledged the considerable need for action.⁸

Rapid urbanisation has taken place in Bangladesh, and urban populations have increased significantly due to rural-urban migration. The unplanned expansion of urban areas forced a large number of the populace to live in slums, with slum-dwellers, squatters and pavement dwellers living in an extremely vulnerable position. Even though there are 145 social safety net programmes in Bangladesh, run by 23 ministries, most of these programmes do not address the concerns and needs of the urban poor and fail to support them.⁹

Climate change is now affecting every country on every continent, disrupting national economies and individual lives. Women and girls disproportionately bear the brunt of climate-related events and environmental stress. Women comprise 20 million of the 26 million people estimated to have been displaced already by climate change. And they are more vulnerable to the impact of climate change because they lack power. Ultimately, climate crises deny women the ability to control their own fertility and hence their own lives.¹⁰

Organizations often use vulnerability framing to highlight how certain populations are more exposed to risks and less equipped to cope with them. In Khulna's context, organizational narratives underscore the heightened vulnerability of Khulna's marginalized groups, particularly in relation to climate change and inadequate infrastructure.

Why This Matters

The vulnerability narrative that dominates organizational messaging does important work in drawing attention to marginalized populations and to the factors that create that marginalization in the first place, including inadequate planning and governance in the face of growing climate impacts. This narrative aligns with how the public also thinks about urban growth and change, as the public understands that Khulna's poorest residents, many of whom are new arrivals, generally live in the most marginalized and vulnerable conditions in the city, subject to waterlogging, pollution, improper sanitation, joblessness, and a city government that often prioritizes wealthier neighborhoods for infrastructure and service improvements.

The field's existing vulnerability narrative, however, often overlooks (with a few exceptions) the deeper, intersectional factors that shape how urban residents experience urban transition and that contribute to unfairness in those transitions, including gender inequality, caste-based discrimination, and the marginalization of specific ethnic groups. This more intersectional approach is also generally missing in how members of the public are thinking about vulnerability and marginalization. Instead, for the public, wealth differences loom largest, as there is a deep assumption that some level of vulnerability is to be expected as the "natural" state of affairs, as dynamics of wealth and power concentrate government's attention to richer neighborhoods.

All of this suggests the need for additional research to identify effective ways to strengthen the urban transition field's messaging on vulnerability and marginalization. This should include efforts to identify effective ways to tell a more intersectional story about how multiple social identities (gender, caste, class, ethnicity, migrant status) overlap to produce unique experiences of privilege and marginalization. This could help people better understand how vulnerability is built and established.

In the process, more research is needed to identify how best to challenge the idea that vulnerability and marginalization are natural and inherent features of a modern city like Khulna—and how to instead make the case that a fair urban landscape, where all residents can access the services and infrastructure their families need, is both necessary and possible.

6. The *Call for Inclusive Governance* Narrative

Many organizations point to lack of participatory and inclusive governance, which leads to disempowerment of key groups such as young people, women, and low-income communities.

Broadly, most organizations show an understanding that low-income communities, women, and youth are affected by the exclusionary nature of Khulna's governance structures. Depending on their scope of intervention, organizations tend to highlight one or more of these excluded groups in their communications materials. Many note that youth, despite their numbers, have historically had limited opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and that women are often excluded from leadership roles. Many also note how low-income communities' voices are not given appropriate weight in decision-making.

Organizations assert that the diminishment or absence of marginalized voices in local governance results in policies that fail to address the needs of these groups, leading to inequitable resource distribution and social exclusion. Some organizations specifically emphasize the importance of grassroots women's empowerment and youth involvement in governance to promote more inclusive urban planning. Some organizations also argue for a facilitator role for youths, asserting that youth groups have a key role to play in supporting other marginalized populations through advocacy and raising awareness. They suggest youth can advocate for participatory governance and engage with service providers to, for example, improve the conditions of slum- and pavement-dwellers. Some organizations mention how they offer training services to government agencies for capacity-building for greater participation by women, youth, and low-income urban residents.

Young people make up one-third of the total population in Bangladesh. National development policies ensured youth skill development and involvement in decision-making, particularly at the local level, but actual involvement of youth in decision-making and access to participatory practices is still very limited.¹¹

Aparajita project's goal is to politically empower grassroots women and to promote equal participation, representation, and leadership of women within local governance.¹²

Organizations suggest that greater inclusion of youth, women, and low-income communities in decision-making spaces through genuine participatory processes is crucial for building greater governing accountability and improving social welfare.

Why This Matters

The *Call for Inclusive Governance* narrative highlights a deeper democratic crisis in Khulna's local governance. Creating a more democratic local government in Khulna would entail providing the platforms and mechanisms necessary for integrating the voices of women, youth, and informal workers into the formal governance structure. The existing storyline could be further strengthened by considering the role of informal governance practices (such as patron–client relations or power brokering by elites) that currently shape the outcomes of public deliberation and participation.

Based on our parallel research with the Khulna public, we know they are already keen to see improvements to the governance of their city and that they have some awareness of how youth, women, and poor people have historically been marginalized in public decision-making. The leading role youth played in the successful 2024 uprising likely strengthened people's attention to the importance of building a more inclusive government. In that vein, instead of assuming youth to be default advocates to be trained, a strengthened narrative could highlight the barriers youth face in their activist efforts, such as lack of resources and political influence. It could also bring more attention to the quality of participation in cases where participation happens, and not merely the lack of participation, because focusing on participation solely—e.g. joining invited participatory spaces—can lead to tokenistic outcomes. More research is needed to identify how communicators can most effectively leverage the public's call for improvements to local governance, and more specifically how the case for a more inclusive model of governance can be built.

7. The Implicit *Fairness* Narrative

Most organizations implicitly communicate that Khulna's future as a resilient, prosperous, and equitable city depends on successfully carrying out a fair urban transition. In so doing, they situate the value of fairness as being key to Khulna's future and to the broader achievement of sustainability, resilience, and economic growth for Bangladesh.

Most organizations implicitly use a fairness value to communicate the steps that must be taken to create a resilient, prosperous, and equitable Khulna. In this implicit framing, fair urban transition refers first to improving local government institutions' capacity to ensure all urban residents have access to essential services and utilities, including health care, education, sanitation, and waste management. Second, it refers to guaranteeing local-level citizen participation in decision-making, particularly for marginalized groups such as women and youth. Many organizations have already focused on these areas as their intervention. Some organizations emphasize that the government needs to ensure the rights of marginalized communities, including low-income people, women, and youth. They suggest building strong civil society networks to create accountability, which they see as a foundation for good governance. Most organizations also argue it is essential the government address climate change impacts for Khulna.

Most organizations also highlight that achieving fairness in urban transitions is critical not only for Khulna, but also for Bangladesh's broader national goals of sustainability, resilience, and economic growth. Inclusive and equitable development, which prioritizes the needs of the most vulnerable and ensures their participation in governance, is seen as key to building a prosperous, resilient future for the country.

Bangladesh is extremely susceptible to floods, cyclones, storm surges, earthquakes, and droughts. Coupled with fluctuating global markets, political instability, inadequate governance, population growth, and gender disparities, exposure to these conditions disproportionately affects poor communities, making them more vulnerable to poverty and malnutrition. USAID's disaster readiness, humanitarian assistance and food security programs help nearly 3 million poor Bangladeshis strengthen their resilience by offering long-term solutions to raise incomes, improve health and nutrition, reduce vulnerability to disasters, and improve food security.¹³

Why This Matters

The Implicit *Fairness* narrative has mixed implications. On the positive side, it is already directly aligned with the call for a new self-identified fair urban transition sector in Khulna and all of Bangladesh. In this respect, many of the storytelling practices of organizations in Khulna are already doing positive work to build the case for fair urban transition. At the same time, there is reason to think the time has come for a more explicit invocation of the fairness value, especially in light of the country's recent political transformation. While organizations previously could only invoke fairness implicitly due to political constraints under the former authoritarian regime, the current moment offers an opportunity to acknowledge and address more directly structural inequities in access to essential services, governance, and climate adaptation and resilience. Fairness can move from being

an indirect theme to an explicit mode of analysis and commitment, with policy advocates targeting the needs of marginalized groups through participatory governance, equitable resource allocation, and transparent decision-making.

However, identifying whether fairness should be the frame and, if so, what might be effective ways to advance an explicit fairness frame will require more research. We know from our research to date that the public assumes inequality is a natural state of affairs and that there is some degree of fatalism about how much inequality can be addressed. At the same time, we also know the public believes that some baseline level of infrastructure and services should be available for all urban residents, including in the areas of sanitation, water management, transportation, and health care. The public does think the current distribution is unfair and would like to see the new government address it. More research is needed to explore whether a fairness frame would enhance organizations' storytelling practices and how the value of fairness can best be invoked in ways that speak to members of the public and help them understand both that a more fair city can be built and how that can be accomplished. More research is also needed to explore how the value of fairness intersects with and compares to other values regularly being deployed by urban transition communicators, including the values of sustainability, equity, and human rights.

8. The *Climate Change Affects Everything* Narrative

Woven throughout the field's messaging is a pervasive concern with the impacts of climate change and calls to address those impacts and make Khulna and the country more climate resilient.

Most organizations emphasize that Bangladesh is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change and that Khulna's location along Bangladesh's coastline heightens its climate risks. Organizations frame climate change as a threat to development, and many focus on adapting to climate change across their programs and interventions. They understand climate adaptation and disaster resilience to be tied to strengthening inclusion and socioeconomic opportunities for the most vulnerable. They also frame climate preparedness as advancing the national development agenda and acknowledge Bangladesh's progress in formulating and implementing several climate policies and regulatory frameworks for enabling climate-resilient sustainable development. Consequently, most organizations highlight how their work intersects with Bangladesh's climate adaptation and resilience agenda.

Why This Matters

The *Climate Change Affects Everything* narrative has largely positive implications. It is important that organizations are drawing attention to this critical problem that fundamentally shapes the capacity of Khulna's leaders to manage the city's growth and transformation in ways that benefit its residents, especially its most vulnerable and marginalized. It is also positive that organizations are pointing to programs and interventions that are focused on adaptation and resilience. This latter emphasis is especially important, as our research found that, while the public is well attuned to climate change impacts, they generally have a weak understanding of the kinds of interventions that are necessary to adapt and build climate resilience.

At the same time, the current story can be strengthened to not only identify vulnerable groups but also interrogate how climate policies and adaptation programs themselves may reproduce exclusions and deepen disparities. The story of climate change is not only about how it impacts the most vulnerable but also about how the collective response to the challenge of climate change can reinforce those vulnerabilities. A strengthened climate change storyline could, for example, shed light on how urban governance for climate adaptation privileges infrastructure solutions that undermine the survival strategies of the urban poor. Sluice gates to manage flooding in peri-urban Khulna, for example, have negatively impacted biodiversity and livelihoods of fishing communities. In short, a strengthened climate change narrative can advocate for more equitable and transformative climate interventions that do not merely buffer communities from climate shocks but also challenge the structural inequalities that make them vulnerable in the first place. Future research should explore how best to effectively tell this broader and more structural story.



Initial Recommendations

This analysis suggests strategies that advocates can begin to employ to shift and expand the public discussion on urban growth and changes in Khulna. Future prescriptive research for this project aims to further expand and refine these strategies in the months to come.

What to Do

- Tell complete stories that include the constituent elements of effective narrative, including providing a *causal* explanation for what creates problems, providing a vision of desirable *outcomes*, and providing a *solution* statement that matches the scope of the problem and provides concrete steps to achieve a fairer urban transition in Khulna.
- Tell stories that more explicitly call for fairness in urban transition and develop a comprehensive explanation for how leaders can build more fairness into public policy and investments.
- Tell stories that differentiate between the problems and the solutions facing core urban and peri-urban areas.
- Tell stories about elite informality and the problems it creates, while bringing attention to survival-based informality, and define the solutions necessary to address both.
- Tell a broader story of migration that acknowledges the important role of climate change but also includes how governance and market forces are key causal factors that need to be addressed.
- Tell a story of economic development that centers on the factors, like employment generation and more equitable access to resources, that will contribute to that development and revitalize Khulna's economy in ways that broadly benefit all its residents.
- Tell stories that locate improved planning practices and coordination at the center of the story. These stories might include calls to revise governance frameworks by ensuring greater citizen participation. They also might call for greater collaboration among the government, NGOs, and local communities to build people's understanding of the important role nongovernmental actors play in creating a more inclusive and transparent urban system in Khulna.
- Tell stories that use an intersectional lens for understanding marginalization and privilege, including when it comes to climate change. Rather than treating gender, class, migration status, and other social factors as separate vulnerabilities, taking an intersectional approach would allow people to examine how these categories interact to shape climate risk and adaptation. The purpose of such stories would be not only to demand that communities be protected from climate shocks but also to challenge the very structural inequalities that make communities vulnerable in the first place.

What to Avoid

- Avoid telling stories that frame informality as a problem of vulnerability only; informality can also be integrated as a solution into fair urban transition. Informal housing, labor, and governance structures often emerge as adaptive responses to systemic exclusions and can offer models for resilient, community-led urban transformation. By valuing and supporting informal systems rather than seeking to formalize or replace them, organizations can create more inclusive and context-sensitive approaches to fair urban development.
- Avoid *only* service delivery (distributive) framing of fairness; fairness also includes participatory and recognitional dimensions.
- Avoid buzzwords and rhetoric around urban transitions—such as *livable city*, *green city*, and *smart city*—without providing conceptual framing to define causes, solutions, and outcomes and clearly attribute responsibility.
- Avoid climate bias in framing urban transition. Climate bias is embedded in story frames where climate change is generalized as the primary driver for migration or vulnerabilities. A non-climate-biased framing would draw attention to the economic and political drivers that, together with climate change, shape people's realities. Instead of overarching terms like *climate migration* or *climate vulnerability*, a non-climate-biased storyline would use nuanced terms like *climate-impacted dwellers* or *migrants*, recognizing that Khulna's residents are impacted by climate, but not *only* or *primarily* by climate change.

Conclusion

Because of the pressing nature of many urban problems, urban development organizations often prioritize timebound projects, focusing on short-term goals and immediate tasks rather than critically re-examining the framing of the problems they seek to address. This tendency to deprioritize the evaluation of how problems are being defined often leads to solutions that fail to address root causes or adapt to complex, systemic, and evolving challenges. Taking a step back to reframe and widen the lens on Khulna's urban transition is crucial because we know from our research with the public that they need help to see a bigger picture of *how* Khulna can be made a fairer city as it faces the challenges of growth and climate change.

Many of the problems the field is communicating are also high on the list of public awareness and concern, including urban waterlogging, pollution, joblessness, incomplete infrastructure, income inequality, corruption, and unaccountable government. At the same time, the public assumes unfairness is simply an intrinsic fact of urban life in a market-driven society, as the wealthy influence politicians to secure the best infrastructure and services for their neighborhoods, while the urban poor struggle to survive and raise families with incomplete and insufficient roads, sewage, drainage, water supplies, and health and education services. The public wants change but does not have a clear understanding of the kinds of systemic and structural reforms that can bring about that change in widespread and sustainable ways. They think government should serve them, but they see market-driven forces all around that limit access to the infrastructure and services they and their families need. In short, the public needs help understanding how a long-term, systemic, values-based approach to urban growth and change can be realized in Khulna—one that is organized around a commitment to fairness and to building a city where all voices are heard.

The time for new and strengthened storytelling practices is now. As Bangladesh opens up to the possibility of a different political arrangement after the 2024 uprising, there is an opportunity to communicate Khulna's fairness issues directly and impactfully. This report's recommendations and findings can be used for collaboratively crafting new communication strategies to develop a shared vision of fair urban transition in Khulna.

Appendix A

Organizations Included in the Sample

- Actionaid Bangladesh
- Ashroy Foundation
- Asian Development Bank (ADB)
- Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP)
- Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)
- Centre for Sustainable, Healthy and Learning Cities and Neighbourhoods (SHLC)
- Concern Worldwide
- Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere (CARE)
- Dalit
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
- GEOSPATIAL WORLD
- Green Savers
- International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS)
- JAAGO Foundation
- Jagrata Juba Sangha (JJS) Khulna
- Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)
- JSI Research & Training Institute (JSI)
- Khulna City Corporation (KCC)
- Khulna Mukti Seba Sangstha
- Khulna University
- Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KFW)
- Nabolok
- Prodipon
- River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC)
- Rupantor
- SERAC Bangladesh
- Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwilligers (SNV)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
- Urbanophil
- U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)
- Winrock International
- World Vision

Appendix B

Research Methods

This research report identifies a set of narrative patterns that run across the communications materials of organizations working in urban transition. We sought to identify narrative patterns across these materials, recognizing that storytelling is a pervasive and powerful method through which organizations communicate and that narratives are a central way and means through which all people organize, remember, and make meaning of information.

Two specific questions guided this research:

1. What are the dominant narrative patterns in the communications practices of organizations working in the area of urban transition in Khulna, Bangladesh?
2. What are the implications of these narratives for fair urban transition efforts in Khulna, Bangladesh?

To answer these questions, researchers collected and analyzed communications materials from 32 organizations active in the field of fair urban transition in Khulna, Bangladesh. These materials were collected between April and July 2024, before the 2024 popular uprising in Bangladesh. Sixteen of the 32 were international NGOs and other international organizations, and the remaining were national organizations. The organizations sampled for this research were active in different areas of urban transition, each with different focuses. Researchers collected 204 sample documents from these organizations and randomly selected 132 of these documents for narrative analysis, representing the variety of issues organizations work on. These samples included brochures, reports, websites, newspaper articles, research articles, e-bulletins, policy briefs, posters, and booklets. The samples included both English- and Bangla-language materials.

Following identification of samples, researchers developed a set of topics and questions to guide their coding and analysis. The questions focused on how organizations do the following:

- Define the core issues in urban transitions.
- Explain causality and key urban change processes.
- Identify the agents of urban change.
- Frame the outcomes and impacts of their work.
- Invoke values in their writings about their work and goals.
- Assign responsibility for urban transformation.
- Identify core challenges to fairness in urban transition.
- Define and validate particular solutions to improve outcomes.
- Perceive the salience of fair urban transition as a central topic of public priority.

Researchers developed a codebook to guide the collection and interpretation of data from the sample materials. Each sample document was coded to track the presence of all the framing strategies (including definitional/terminological issues, causality, processes, agents, outcome/impacts, values, metaphors, responsibility, challenges, solutions, and salience).

In the next stage of analysis, three researchers separately identified patterns in the data to identify a set of prominent narratives that organizations are using to frame and advocate for specific pathways for urban transition in Khulna. Finally, these separate findings were shared among the researchers, and researchers discussed, combined findings, and reached consensus on the narrative patterns published in this report. Deciding whether a pattern qualified for inclusion was largely driven by its prevalence across materials analyzed from the final sample. Narratives that were featured in the majority of the 32 organizations were automatically included. Other narratives that were featured among a smaller subset of organizations were also included because of their consistency. Although none of the organizations explicitly use the terminology of fair urban transition, their focus on themes such as inclusion, empowerment, participation, and equity have been interpreted to be part of the *fair urban transition* framework for the purposes of this field frame analysis.

Endnotes

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About the River and Delta Research Centre

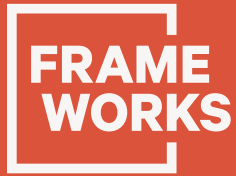
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Stories for a Changing Khulna

Organizational Framing
of Urban Transition

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