



City profile

Chittagong, Bangladesh

Md Aslam Mia^{a,*}, Shamima Nasrin^a, Miao Zhang^{a,b}, Rajah Rasiah^a^a Department of Development Studies, Faculty of Economics and Administration, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia^b Institute of China Studies, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Located in the southeast, metropolitan Chittagong is the second largest city in Bangladesh. Its strategic location as the busiest seaport in the region has made it a major economic hub attracting strong inflows of foreign investment into the production of apparel, ship breaking and oil refinery activities. The city boasts a deep harbor that supports strongly commerce, business and industrial activities. However, despite its rich scenic and natural endowments, population growth and poor planning has caused serious social, infrastructure and environmental problems so that about a third of its population live in slums. This profile captures the historical origin, and socio-economic and spatial development of Chittagong city. It also discusses the growing infrastructure and environmental challenges facing the city and the need for the introduction of an integrated multidimensional framework to make the city more livable than its present situation.

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1. Introduction

A number of cities in South Asia have been profiled before. Examples include Chennai and Delhi in India (Ahmad, Balaban, Doll, & Dreyfus, 2013; Rashmi & Desouza, 2015), Rangoon in Myanmar (Morley, 2013), Kathmandu in Nepal (Thapa, Murayama, & Ale, 2008), Thimphu in Bhutan (Walcott, 2009) and Colombo in Sri Lanka (van Horen, 2002). A similar profiling of Chittagong from Bangladesh will be useful to expand our understanding of cities in the sub-continent.

Located in the southeast of Bangladesh (22°13'N–22°27'N and 91°40'E–91°53'E) and facing the Bay of Bengal, Chittagong is well-known as the commercial capital and the busiest seaport city in the country. With a land area of 157 km² Chittagong is the second largest city in Bangladesh. Inheriting its traditional role as an important harbor for seafaring spice trade between Europe and the East in history, Chittagong stands out with its strategic location and friendly business environment, which makes it a national economic hub of hundreds of the oldest and largest industries in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2013b). Being a major contributor toward national exports and imports, Chittagong has become a thriving city with strong linkages to the domestic economy.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: mdaslam.mia@siswa.um.edu.my (M.A. Mia), shamimanasrin@siswa.um.edu.my (S. Nasrin), miaomiao@siswa.um.edu.my, september870922@hotmail.com (M. Zhang), rajah@um.edu.my (R. Rasiah).

With production accounting for over 40% of national industrial output in 2012, the Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ), which employed over 150,000 employees, contributed more than 50% of Bangladesh's tax revenue earnings and Chittagong contributed 11% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Muzzini & Aparicio, 2013). Rapid growth has helped to attract a growing number of national and international investors into the city's manufacturing sector, which is poised to become the 'regional manufacturing hub' in the future. CEPZ was already ranked fourth and third respectively in the categories of best economic potential and best cost competitiveness in 2010/2011, while metropolitan Chittagong region was ranked as the tenth fastest growing city in the world in 2010 (FDI, 2011; The Telegraph, 2010). In addition, the port city is very much crucial for the regional development of South Asian land-locked countries like Nepal, Bhutan and parts of Southern China, Northeast India and Myanmar (Ahmed, 2013; Rasiah, Al-Amin, & Tin, 2012).

Despite its immense potential, Chittagong faces great challenges because of high population growth, scattered industrial locations and poor infrastructure, which have reduced its charm as a desirable city to live in South Asia (Herrmann & Svarin, 2009; Hossain, 2001; Mahmood, 2011; Uddin & Firoj, 2013).

Hence, this paper aims to contribute to the growing literature on cities by highlighting the evolution of Chittagong from a small port to the region's main engine of economic growth, as well as, to highlight its socio-economic and environmental issues, which will have ramifications for its future planning and growth. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. We start the discussion by