

Informal Dynamics of a Megacity – the Case of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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At present, megacities in developing economies are the hot spots of social, economic and environmental change and stress. The rapid population increase in these cities exceeds by far the formal urban absorption capacities, e.g. in terms of housing, medical care, food supply, job creation or governance. Informal solutions are often the only way to keep the city and everyday life in the city running. Informality has become a constitutive element of megacities. For a long time, formality and informality were seen as polarised elements of the socioeconomic structure with only limited interactions; in accordance with this notion, they were regarded as forming a dualistic or fragmented system in stagnation. More and more recent studies, however, show that intensive linkages and diversified networks exist between both arenas; informal activities and solutions seem to be a new element of a flexible urban production-consumption system thereby contributing substantially to the functioning of the socioeconomic system of a megacity. So far, it is still an open question whether these informal activities are only a temporary phenomenon or an expression of a newly developing socioeconomic urban landscape. Irrespective of the answer to this question the informal sector needs improv-

ing because of the existing problems, stress and negative side effects. Informality often means insecurity for the people living and working in this sector, and the activities cause pollution, environmental stress and health risks.

Based on the open research questions and the need for improvement in the informal sector, the German Research Foundation has started an interdisciplinary thematic research programme – “*Schwerpunktprogramm 1233*” – on “Megacities – Megachallenge. Informal Dynamics of Global Change”. The two case study areas for investigation are the Pearl River Region in China and Dhaka in Bangladesh. In an interdisciplinary approach, scientists from different fields – including medical studies, economics, social sciences, climatology, remote sensing, geography and planning – and from several German universities analyse characteristics, problems and potentials of informality in these megacity areas. This special issue of DIE ERDE documents first results of the ongoing research in the individual working groups focussing on Dhaka.

The first article by *Benjamin Etzold, Markus Keck, Hans-Georg Bohle* and *Wolfgang-Peter*

Zingel presents the new scientific approach towards informality which no longer understands formality and informality as distinct antipodes but, instead, regards them as interwoven and intertwined socioeconomic processes and practices with different degrees of informality or formality. The authors use this approach to analyse interactions in the rice supply chain and to highlight livelihood strategies of street vendors. *Elmar Kulke* and *Ronny Staffeld*'s contribution also follows this new approach and analyses the function, linkages and development potentials of informal production systems, using Dhaka's plastic recycling and processing industry as an example. *Kirsten Hackenbroch*, *Sabine Baumgart* and *Volker Kreibich* deal with urban public

space, exploring the importance of urban public space as a livelihood asset for the inhabitants of informal settlements in Dhaka. The interdependence between urban informality and the health situation of the population is analysed by *Md. Mobarak Hossain Khan*, *Alexander Krämer* and *Oliver Grübner*. *Katrin Burkart* and *Wilfried Endlicher* continue this discussion by focussing on climatological and air pollution factors in informal settlements and their impact on diseases and health outcomes. Altogether these articles show the strong interrelation between formality and informality on the one hand and between the social, economic and natural spheres on the other hand.

Elmar Kulke (Berlin)