

## **The Implication of Local People's Perception of Development: A Prerequisite for the Mega Development Projects of the Government of Bangladesh**

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**Abstract:** This paper reconnoiters the concept of development through some mega projects of the Government of Bangladesh from the perspective of local people. This study is an initiative to conduct the ongoing mega projects with multidimensional perspectives regarding the idea of development that are experienced particularly by the local people due to the wave of mega development projects that have been supervening in multiple areas of Bangladesh. Local people's understanding of development through mega projects remains an unheeded issue within development research and initiative. This paper stresses the intersection of intention and agenda between development recipients, professionals and other agents because context-specific attributes of development that are derived from the local people can provide miscellaneous insights and each insight has its interest and explanation. We believe that incorporating such multiplicity in the mega project studies has unprecedented potentiality which can regenerate and reformulate the conventional framework of megaproject studies. While recognizing the contributing factor of a mega project, this study entails precisely focuses on promoting community participation thereby helping to prioritise the local people in development initiatives. Even though mega projects endeavour to strengthen the overall living standards for the people, factors like- local people's everyday negotiation and contestation which they are encountered because of urban-biased bureaucratic planning- are predominantly getting less attention with mega project research and action. This article contends that, utilizing local knowledge, acknowledging their needs and ensuring local people's participation can circumscribe inclusive attainment of these projects. This undertaking has been attempted to engage the local people in different levels of decision-making in order to understand their felt needs in a cooperative effort to mitigate their own problem which may result in a faster and more sustainable outcome. Having a keen insight into what happens at the local level can be an unerring basis for working out what to do regarding project planning or policy deployment in that particular region. Since the local people are the key agent of these development efforts a reciprocal collaboration between these two parties is indispensable as this paper has necessitated.

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## 1. Introduction

Since Bangladesh has been recommended to and expected to graduate from a least developed to a developing country in 2026 and also a developed and prosperous country by 2041, unquestionably, Bangladesh is standing at a landmark stage to accomplish a milestone transition. Bangladesh has been leading its staggering steps towards planning and implementing multiple mega projects in order to revitalize the economic landscape of the country. For instance, the February (2022) Chinese proposal for Chattogram Metro rail in return for a stake in developing a 'smart city' (located between Patenga and Mirsharai) immediately came after South Korea completed a pre-survey mission. China has proposed 6 million UD Dollar grant in aid to set up the metro rail in Chattogram. South Korea is also keen on funding soft loans for the Dhaka metro rail Line-4 construction at a marginal 0.1-0.5 percent interest rate. Besides, various new mega projects kicked off last year (2022) Such acceleration and boost in trade and investment partnership have made Bangladesh a hotspot for global investment from key development partners, which have broadened and enhanced the scope for enabling new development megaprojects. This upcoming transition will be conducive to alleviating lucrative possibilities to compete globally, creating new job opportunities, and a better living standard for the people of Bangladesh.

In the context of globalization, urban development policies around the world have aspired to transform cities into global cities (Robinson, 2002: 548). Implementing mega projects is seen as a prerequisite for such transformation. One of the key principles of sound development strategies and the well-formulated plans to execute those development programs is the fact that they are supposed to be grounded locally so that they can essentially bring logical, orderly, and consistent coordination to the function of implementation. Such strategies and policies are predominantly developed by governmental officials, agencies, agency bureaucrats, etc. But it is equally important to remember that, very often they manifest a 'parent-child' relationship when they promote development projects and unfold the practices of those development programs for the stakeholders (Doty, 1996). A close reading of Doty's seminal work *Imperial Encounters* suggests how the practice of representation by the North reinforces a discourse of the passive South. She put the analogy of the 'parent-child' relationship at the center of the North's initiatives to advocate development programs for the South. By 'parent' she signifies rational, mature, autonomous, responsible North, whereas by 'children' she signifies a completely contrary to such attributes namely- irrational, inferior South who are unfit to govern themselves. In the same vein, this 'parent-child' relationship can be equally deployed to the members, administrators, and experts of development machinery who exercise a naturalized power-conferring role and authority over their children- the primary stakeholders. With the entitlement of this constructed difference, they justify their parent mentality and exert their power to define, identify, recommend, and specify the solution of the problem for the people where these development projects are located and those people who are the key stakeholders of the outcome of these projects.

In Bangladesh, the implementation of megaprojects is making headway but the conviction behind the applied paradigm is remarkably influenced by Western construction of development thinking. With such Western biases, an inclination to universalize the practices and process of development is very evident within the very domain of development and there has been a tendency to impose preconditions and

prescriptions regarding what should be done or how should be done with the foreign funding for that Bangladesh is successfully attracting for mega deployment purpose.

An emphasis on local people's perception, their understanding, and their needs always remained at the outer limit of the development machinery. If the local people cannot relate to the language of these megaproject development narratives or if the value of such projects cannot reflect the living standard of the local people, then the agenda of megaprojects is yet to be fulfilled. The participation of local people is always considered vital for development (Baines-Johnson 2018, Bhatnagar 1992, Cornwall 2008, Eversole 2010, Ghai and Vivian 2014). Similarly community engagement and participation for sustainable development, capability development and community empowerment, etc. are endorsed by many social scientists (Head 2007, Blackstock, Kelly and Horsey 2007, Jennings 2000, Ansari, Munir and Gregg 2012). Development through community participation and peoples' engagement for sustainability are also focused in the writings of (Mohan 2007 & 2008, Oakley and Marsden 1984, Oakley 1995, Taylor 2007). This paper attempted to harness a locally specific, concentrated, and systematic understanding of local people's understanding of megaprojects within the sphere of megaproject studies. The purpose is to bring the picture of the stimuli that emerge from the lived experience of the local people which significantly contribute to their perception-making regarding megaprojects. It is therefore proposed that an association of micro points of view to the macro level approaches of megaproject where local understanding, their lived experience, etc. are embedded in so that development proprieties specifically the strategies and schemes of materializing megaproject are determined by the 'insiders'- the local people.

The participatory approach in development refers to a process in which individuals and communities actively participate in decision-making processes and the implementation of development initiatives that affect their lives. It aims to empower people, promote inclusivity, and ensure that development interventions are responsive to local needs and priorities. Here is a chronological discussion of the participatory approach in development.

The participatory approach emerged as a response to the limitations of top-down development models that often ignored the knowledge and aspirations of local communities. Early initiatives, such as Paulo Freire's work on critical pedagogy and participatory education in Brazil, laid the foundation for participatory approaches by emphasizing the importance of empowering marginalized groups and fostering their active involvement.

Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) methodologies were developed as tools for gathering information about rural communities and involving them in development planning. RRA focused on quick and cost-effective data collection methods, while PRA expanded on this by incorporating participatory techniques like community mapping, wealth ranking, and seasonal calendars. These approaches aimed to enhance local knowledge, promote dialogue, and create a sense of ownership over development processes. The World Bank recognized the importance of participatory approaches and began incorporating them into its development projects.

Participatory approaches were seen as a means to improve project sustainability, enhance social equity, and strengthen local institutions. The World Bank's "Voices of the Poor" initiative further emphasized the value of listening to and involving marginalized groups

in decision-making. Community-Driven Development programs gained prominence as a way to decentralize decision-making and empower communities. CDD projects allocate resources directly to communities, who then participate in project planning, implementation, and monitoring.

These initiatives promote community ownership, local capacity building, and the empowerment of traditionally marginalized groups. Participatory M&E emerged as a complementary approach to traditional evaluation methods. It involves engaging stakeholders in the monitoring and evaluation process, allowing them to assess the impact of development interventions, identify challenges, and suggest improvements. Participatory M&E enhances transparency, accountability, and learning in development initiatives.

The participatory approach expanded beyond project-level interventions to governance and policy-making processes. Participatory budgeting, citizen consultations, and multi-stakeholder platforms became common mechanisms for involving citizens in decision-making at local and national levels. These efforts seek to ensure that development policies and strategies reflect the diverse needs and aspirations of the population. It's important to note that the chronology provided here is a general overview, and the evolution and implementation of participatory approaches may vary across countries and regions. Nonetheless, the underlying principles of inclusivity, empowerment, and active engagement remain central to the participatory approach in development.

## **2. Perspectives on Development:**

The idea of development has acquired manifold meanings and interpretations from different standpoints. The word "development" connotes a state that constitutes advancement and growth. As a process, it has several dimensions and aspects of changing situations in society. In essence, it seeks to generate the growth of wealth and combat poverty, the improvement of health, technological advancement, social and institutional changes that endorse comprehensive societal welfare.

These multidimensional perspectives and ideologies have made the concept of development a complex one and there is no absolute viewpoint regarding the understanding of this concept. Consequently, it calls for our consideration and assessment concerning the historical and different theoretical standpoints of "development". However, the idea of growth, advancement, or progress is the most fundamental element of this concept which is somehow constant in many of these different points of view.

These notions are very much relevant to the development discourses and the very concept of development. It raises the question of what we actually infer by "growth", "advancement" or "progress". It's a fact that different meanings and their implication by different actors create different types of knowledge. Majid Rahnema (1997) in his argument towards post-development have pointed out that,

*"The hidden yet clear message that every development project has carried to the people at the grassroots has been that their traditional modes of living, thinking and doing have doomed them to a subhuman condition; and that nothing less than a fundamental change in their ways of confronting modern realities will allow them to emerge from that condition and earn the respect of the civilized world" (p. 384).*

Such notions have been conceptualized and embraced by public policies as a form of

knowledge specifically based on Western understandings. And the perspectives of that understanding basically focus on the "underdeveloped", "developing" or "less developed countries" (LDCs) of the "Third World." Inhabitants and the condition of these countries are viewed through the eyes of the scholars of "developed" countries. The hidden yet clear message that every development project has carried to the people at the grassroots has been that their traditional modes of living, thinking, and doing have doomed them to a subhuman condition; and that nothing less than a fundamental change in their ways of confronting modern realities will allow them to emerge from that condition and earn the respect of the civilized world.

Unquestionably, development has become a crucial aspect in this era of globalization. In order to gain a better perspective on development, we need to focus on how this process takes place. In the conventional sense, it has been posited that the inhabitants of the "less developed countries" are not capable of taking any initiative at a large scale. If we consider this phenomenon historically, we can see that, many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America had been under colonial rule.

The planning of projects used to be formulated, designed, and implemented by the colonial administrators. Local authorities, politicians, scholars, or even the local people did not get to play any role in these processes. After independence, major responsibilities had to be carried out by countries who were thought to have adequate experience in policy formulation and project implementation which led those nations to become dependent on former colonial rule again.

*"It has made the bad rich richer and the good poor poorer. It has destroyed the old fabric of communal societies. And it has created needs, envies, and services that can only make people more dependent on development, while systematically disposing the excluded from their means of sustenance." (Rahnema, 1997:391).*

In many instances, their future, and their way of life are essentially shaped by others who do not correspond to their hopes, values, needs, and expectations.

### **3. Unpacking 'Mega Project' in the Light of Local Community's Perception:**

With the accelerated impact of globalization, the close link between development and megaprojects has become quite evident for the last few decades. Megaprojects have the intention of achieving a life-changing implication on the lives of the adjacent area and its people. Ostensibly, megaprojects have been turning out to be the biggest breakthrough and it has been inputted in the vanguard of the agendas of policymakers. Seemingly, investing in megaprojects is very attractive for policymakers, leading policymakers to develop megaprojects as part of their global branding strategy (Swyngedouw et al., 2002).

The word "mega" can be regarded as a unit of measuring something. The word has derived from the Greek word "megas" which means very large, huge, or something so big and significant. Mega infrastructure projects are essentially divergent from any other type of project in every aspect. Megaprojects are usually defined as large-scale infrastructure projects involving substantial investments, a long period of development, numerous stakeholders, and the ability to transform spaces irreversibly (Flyvbjerg, 2014). In terms of lifecycle, budget, investment, multiple stakeholders involved in it, and the overall

aspiration behind it altogether constitute megaprojects a fundamental part of contemporary policy instruments. According to the Oxford Handbook of Megaproject Management, megaprojects typically cost \$1 billion or more. Hirschman (1995: vii, xi) described megaprojects as 'privileged particles of the development process', and Brohman (1996) termed as 'popular development'.

Apparently, megaprojects are signified as a landmark feature of modern society all over the world. Almost every country has put a great value to materialize mega infrastructure projects and we are witnessing a sharp increase in global megaprojects. In order to respond to the amplifying need of economic expansion, urban and national growth, advancement, Bangladesh has also paid significant attention and set some visions for the manifestation of several megaprojects. There are some widely talked about, known and esteemed megaprojects going on in Bangladesh. Some of these are in the stage of groundwork, and others have either been accomplished or are in the final stage of completion. Unquestionably, the manifestation of a megaproject is reckoned as a milestone achievement. And recently we have witnessed the enormous impact on the collectives by the completion of the Padma Multi-Purpose Bridge project.

The implementation of megaprojects comes with the determination of fostering sustainability and emancipating economic and social well-being for its population. Certainly, megaprojects bring immense influence over the local people but it is also essential to consider how people perceive the development of such projects and what is at the core of their vision regarding the development of mega projects.

The community's demands and needs are contingent on different variables. It is undeniable that their perceptions are induced by various social, cultural, and demographic features. Consequently, they tend to perceive their reality diversely. Advantages and drawbacks are always associated with such projects. But do the targets and aspirations concomitant to such projects live up to the expectations of the local people? Or how far the outcome of such projects actually falls together with their everyday reality? The experience of developing countries with megaproject development is unique due to the challenge of managing social complexity regarding the community's acceptance (Othman & Ahmed, 2013). Even though such projects usually fall under the framework of sustainable development goals, the agendas often incorporated with these megaprojects often do not fall in the same line with the local people whose lives are directly affected by the impact of megaprojects. Many urban megaprojects are formulated by powerful actors who define public interest and create urban space that later leads to issues of inequity and exclusion (Shatkin, 2008). Majid Rahnema critiqued that, *"Even when their 'managers' were of their own country and shared the native tongue, they nevertheless spoke a strange new language which the local populations had difficulty in understanding."* (1997:384)

Exclusion of the targeted local community from the decision-making processes and formulating or imposing the development process of the 'ideal world' can only bring disjuncture. David Lewis and David Moose highlight that, by formulating policy and project design, development actors endeavor to execute this 'ideal world' but *'disjuncture comes from the gap between these ideal worlds and the social reality they have to relate to'* (Lewis & Moose, 2006). It is crucial to underscore the social and socio-cultural context of the local people in order to ensure the actual delivery of the project benefits.

#### 4. People's Perception and Participation as an Approach to Mega Development Project:

There is an undeniably positive relationship between fostering sustainability and people's participation. People's participation is extremely relevant for manifesting any magnitude of development in a particular direction. As a development initiative, mega-development projects cannot bring forth the desired outcome without congruent communication with the local people and keeping their perception into account because the efficacy of any megaproject is based on the involvement and participation of these people. Majid Rahnema emphasized it by saying, "*Development has failed to meet the needs and preoccupations of those at the bottom of the social ladder. Often it has turned them into their own enemies, once they have internalized the developers' perception of what they need*" (1997:391). James Ferguson shows that very often such projects fail to bring any relevance to the underlying purpose of the regions and to the local people on which such projects are enacted. He found fault with the way "experts" of such projects execute the implementations that are significantly based on their assumptions. Arturo Escobar (1995) provided his insight into understanding development as a discourse. He suggested to focused on the 'system of relations'. In his words,

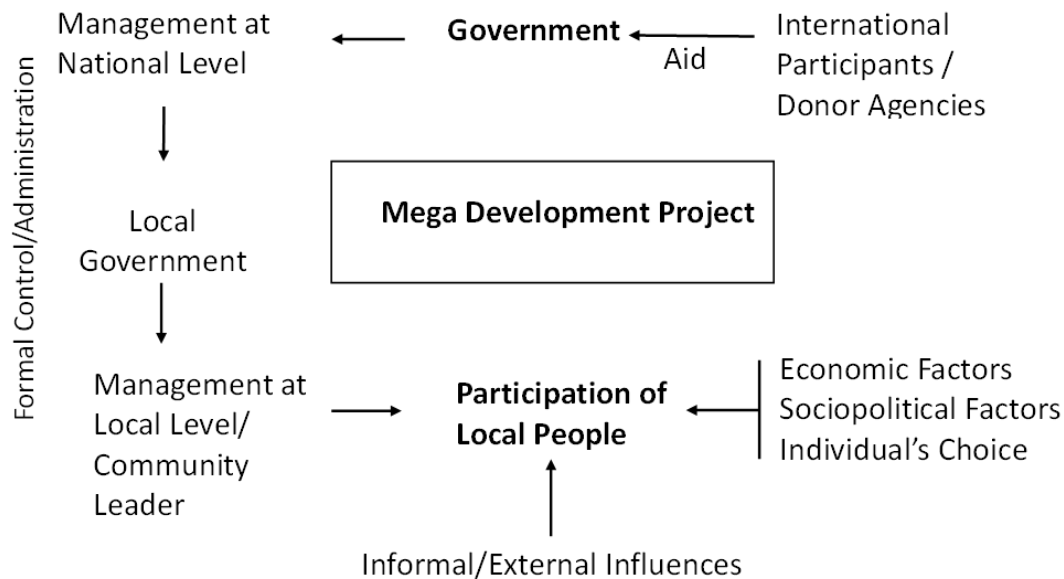
*"It is this system that allows the systematic creation of objects, concepts, and strategies; it determines what can be thought and said. These relations established between institutions, socio-economic processes, forms of knowledge, technological factors, and so on- define the conditions under which objects, concepts, theories, and strategies can be incorporated into the discourse. In sum, the system of relations establishes a discursive practice that sets the rules of the game; who can speak, from what point of view, with what authority, and according to what criteria of expertise; it sets the rules that must be followed for this or that problem, theory or object to emerge and be named, analyzed and eventually transformed into a policy plan"* (Escobar, 1995:7).

The failure of different megaprojects is evident because of the non-participatory nature of the development process. Ferguson estimates that such deployment of the development project can only strengthen the development providers and the bureaucracy. Merging the knowledge of the local people with the planning and decision-making process and providing a transparent exchange of information are the key underlying principles for deploying a megaproject that does not bear a conflicting justification regarding its efficacy. There is a wide range of opinions and interpretations on what constitutes participation depending upon the context and background to which participation is applied (Kumar, 2002). Here, the belief is accommodating the perspectives of the local people and acknowledging different opinions which will allow them to explicate their own challenges of their living conditions. In Chamber's (1997) term, "Putting the Last First", it has been proven that a lack of transparency and participation from the local community can lead to deprivations and inequalities among the targeted community. Mosse (2001:23) points out that "*local knowledge is undoubtedly a powerful normative construct that serves to conceal the complex nature of information production in 'participatory' planning, especially the role of outsiders*".

Paul (1986) describes community participation in developing a project as occurring when the beneficiary or client groups influence the direction and execution of a development

project with a view of enhancing their well-being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance, or other values they cherish. A sense of empowerment and self-reliance is strongly associated with such inclusion which is a determinative factor for estimating the real value behind a megaproject. Participation enables the facility for the local community to take part in reshaping the process of development that can ensure a favorable environment for them. It is at the local level where the externalities of mega-development projects are experienced in their most intense form.

The mega development projects includes the agents such as the international agencies which are relevant for aid and financial support, government that is committed to execute project and keep citizens' smile on its snaps or flash, local bodies of the government's administration which transfers the goodwill of the state to the people and local community. Based on commoner economic, social and individual's choice, the engagement and participation become visible (Figure 1).



**Figure-1:** Illustration of the relation between development projects and the local people.  
(Prepared by A. Hussain, 2023).

Werner and Warner (1952) predominantly put forward the stages of perception-making. They addressed that perception-making is considerably conditioned by certain stimuli. Consequently, stressing the process of perception-making essentially calls for particular attention in order to achieve the inclusion of all project partners and stakeholders, and ensure that they share a common understanding, in governing megaprojects (Van Marrewijk & Smits, 2016, IDS 2015). However, such inclusion is unattainable if there is a lack of understanding of the complex power relationships and an impartial sharing of political and economic power. An emphasis is was given on donor's participation as a part of development policy and understandings of politics (Black 1991, Danquah 2018, Hussain 2005).



### **5. Future of this Study:**

In a nutshell, this paper imparts an overview of the often-untapped insights of local people regarding development in the particular context of megaprojects to endorse, encourage and promote inclusion of their perception which furthers the goal of a deeper engagement with these direct stakeholders to learn from, collaborate and maximize the benefit of megaprojects in its true sense. It appears that there is a great deal of research regarding monitoring, maintaining, and evaluating megaprojects but megaproject studies where local people's understanding of development is the central theme is a less emphasized research priority which is yet to receive its required scholarly attention. Instead of looking only through the lenses of theory, this paper steers study by bringing people's perspectives emerging from their lived experience to the development process which is firmly grounded to bridge the knowledge gap between the policymakers and the local people.

It's a fact that we have limited access and knowledge about the situations of the local people where such megaprojects have been or have already been carried out. The results of our study will point a direction to gain a boarder view of how different social and cultural dynamics of a particular area influence the ways of perceiving megaprojects. The aim, utility, or significance of a megaproject bear divergent meanings to the people of an impacted area. This study will allow the policymakers to achieve shared prosperity and ensure a logical consequence of such megaprojects addressing the agenda of 'leaving no one behind'. This study might infuse inquiries about a more strategic approach to people's person making of the impacted area in an in-depth manner which will contribute to addressing the undressed potentiality that lies in the perception of local people. Three implications can be inferred from this study. First, the essence of this study can play an essential role in putting the perception of local people of prime interest in the megaproject studies. Second, this study can broaden the opportunity for the localities of the impacted area to take part in dealing with the risks that emerge at different levels in the establishment of megaprojects. Third, this study can set high priority for future researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders to accommodate a multi-polar approach to knowledge in megaprojects as a development effort.

To make the declared goals of any megaproject feasible, inclusive governance is immensely significant. A fruitful implication from this research will be accomplished if we can invigorate future researchers to rethink and reshape the future of megaproject studies by incorporating the functionality and dynamics of megaprojects from the perspective of the local people.

### **6. Conclusion:**

In this article, local people's perspective on development through mega projects has been viewed both as a condition that must be fulfilled as well as an indicator for achieving the ambition of mega projects. The growing concern was to learn more about public attitudes towards development through some mega projects and to connect these ideas with the development policies and strategies to make some potential contribution that can strengthen the development process to make the declared goals of mega projects feasible. It is a fact that previous studies have provided us with few leads in accounting for local people's voices, hence there has been a failure to integrate the diversity of perceptions

derived from the local people in ways megaproject developers engage with the idea of 'development'. This discussion reinforced that the perception of the recipient communities is a constructive tool for evaluating, designing the development strategy, and increasing the effectiveness of mega projects for the recipient.

It is needless to say that, plotting the development initiatives under the light of local people's perspective with a focus on their collective struggle and including the interrelated components that are associated with their perspective of development can essentially lead to better outcomes. The context of the host city is one of those interrelated components that crucially exert an influence on their perspective of development in a variety of ways. Disconnecting a megaproject from the social and cultural context of the host city has been one of the major shortcomings of the journey of development. Context is a social construct so context as a key analytical concept can guide us to understand which facts or conditions of mega projects are construed as relevant to the local people. Accentuating on the social and cultural context of the host city can put the social aspects of that particular area back into consideration which can bring unremarked developmental view shared by the local community and allow the policymakers and project planners to understand how that specific megaproject has been perceived and their idea of development has been re-defined by the host city over time.

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