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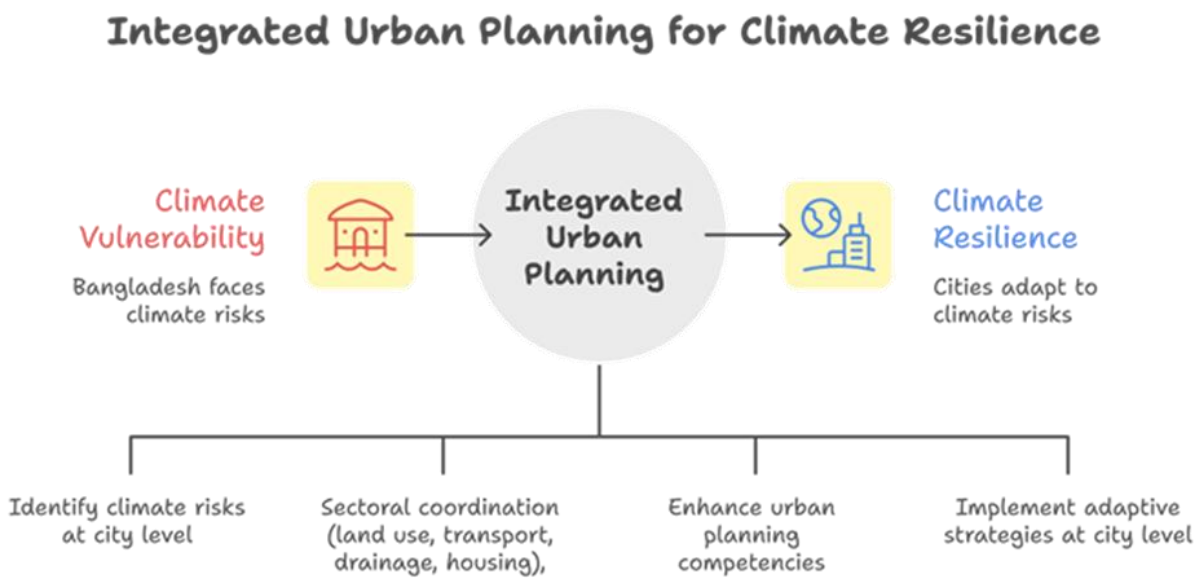
Strengthening Integrated Urban Planning Skills to Make Climate-Resilient Cities in Bangladesh

Integrated planning in Bangladesh shows how stronger skills and cross-agency coordination help cities address climate risks and deliver resilient urban development.



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1. Executive Summary

Bangladesh is experiencing rapid urbanisation while facing severe climate risks such as flooding, heat stress, waterlogging, salinity, drought, and the expansion of informal settlements. Cities including Dhaka, Chattogram, Khulna, Rajshahi, and a growing number of secondary cities struggle to deliver housing, transport, water, sanitation, energy, and livelihoods within fragmented institutional arrangements and limited resources.

Urban planning responsibilities are spread across multiple agencies, often working independently. Climate adaptation and mitigation priorities are not consistently integrated into legislative planning, budgeting, or project implementation, despite national commitments under the National Adaptation Plan (NAP). This has highlighted the need for integrated planning approaches and, critically, for the skills and competencies required to apply them in practice.

This case study draws on practical experiences from Bangladesh to demonstrate that integrated planning relies less on the availability of plans and more on institutional coordination and professional capacity. It highlights essential skills for sustainable urbanisation, including systems thinking, climate risk literacy, stakeholder engagement, data use, and adaptive management. The key lesson is that developing these competencies, alongside supportive institutional incentives, is crucial for turning policy ambitions into climate-resilient, inclusive urban outcomes.

2. Urban Context and Structural Challenge

Bangladesh's cities are expanding at an unprecedented rate, driven by economic changes and climate-induced migration from rural areas. Urban centres are absorbing millions of new residents while facing increasing exposure to climate hazards such as flooding, waterlogging, heat stress, drought, salinity intrusion, and others. Informal settlements continue to grow in high-risk areas, worsening vulnerability among low-income urban populations.

The institutional framework for urban planning in Bangladesh is highly fragmented. City corporations, development authorities, utilities, and line ministries operate under separate mandates, with limited coordination across sectors such as land use, transport, drainage, housing, and environmental management. As a result, urban interventions are often planned and executed in isolation.

Climate change has further complicated this situation. While national frameworks like the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) recognise urban resilience as a priority, climate adaptation and mitigation measures are not always systematically integrated into city-level statutory plans, zoning regulations, or investment decisions. This gap between policy intent and implementation poses a major challenge for Bangladesh and other Commonwealth countries facing similar patterns of rapid urbanisation, institutional fragmentation, and climate vulnerability.

The primary challenge, therefore, is not only technical or financial but also institutional and skills-based: how to equip urban professionals and institutions with the competencies needed to plan, coordinate, and implement integrated, climate-resilient urban development.

3. Approach and Delivery Model

Experiences from Bangladesh show that effective urban outcomes rely less on formal plans and more on the capacity of institutions and individuals to collaborate across sectors, scales, and mandates. Integrated planning has emerged in practice through problem-solving around specific urban challenges rather than through standalone planning reforms. One illustrative example can be seen in Khulna, a coastal city increasingly affected by waterlogging, tidal flooding, and other climate-related risks. Addressing these challenges required coordination among the Khulna City Corporation, the Khulna Development Authority, the water and drainage authorities, and local communities. Early interventions primarily focused on improving drainage infrastructure. However, over time, it became clear that infrastructure solutions alone were insufficient to address the underlying drivers of flooding and urban vulnerability. Planning efforts gradually began to incorporate broader considerations, including land-use planning, solid waste management, and community-level adaptation measures. Development partners also supported technical assessments and capacity-building initiatives that strengthened the ability of city officials and engineers to interpret climate risk data and incorporate it into planning decisions. This experience demonstrated that effective implementation depended not only on infrastructure investment but also on stronger coordination mechanisms and improved planning skills among institutions responsible for urban management.

Similar lessons have emerged from other urban initiatives across Bangladesh. In urban flood management, projects have traditionally focused mainly on drainage infrastructure. These interventions often failed to align with land-use planning, solid waste management, or informal settlement upgrading, which limited their long-term effectiveness. Where coordination improved, such as linking ward-level planning processes with city-wide drainage investments and community engagement, outcomes became more sustainable and locally appropriate.

Another experience, such as secondary city planning initiatives supported by development partners, has provided further insights. Local governments demonstrated greater capacity to adopt integrated approaches when provided with practical planning tools, relevant data, and ongoing mentorship. In contrast, one-off training sessions without follow-up support had limited influence on planning practice.

Across these experiences, integrated planning has functioned as a collaborative process involving city governments, national agencies, technical professionals, development partners, and communities. The approach emphasises learning by doing, cross-sector coordination, and adaptive decision-making rather than rigid adherence to pre-defined plans. These experiences underline that integrated planning is fundamentally a skills and capacity challenge, closely linked to governance structures and institutional incentives.

4. Transferable Insights

A key insight from Bangladesh is that short-term or isolated training programmes are not enough to develop the skills needed for integrated urban planning. Skills such as systems thinking, climate risk literacy, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive management grow through ongoing learning, mentoring, and direct exposure to real planning challenges. Embedding planners and technical staff within multi-agency teams has proven more effective than sector-specific capacity-building. Peer learning between cities and alignment between national policy frameworks and local planning practices have also strengthened the application of integrated approaches. These experiences emphasise the importance of linking skills development to everyday planning and implementation processes. Another lesson is the need to align skills development with institutional incentives. Even well-trained professionals encounter constraints when mandates, budgets, and performance systems remain sector specific. Without mechanisms that promote collaboration and shared accountability, sustaining integrated planning approaches is challenging. The Bangladesh experience also highlights the value of locally led approaches. When city corporations and local government are given space to experiment, adapt, and learn, integrated planning becomes a practical tool rather than just a policy aspiration.

These insights are directly relevant to the CSSC Integrated Planning Action Group and intersect with other CSCC themes, including housing, urban finance, and climate resilience. They show how national frameworks such as the NAP can be translated into practical, skills-based, institutionally grounded planning practices.

5. Key Lessons

- Integrated urban planning depends as much on professional skills and institutional coordination as on formal plans or funding.
- Systems thinking and climate risk literacy are essential competencies for climate-resilient urban development.
- Hands-on tools, mentoring, and multi-agency collaboration are more effective than standalone training programmes.
- Skills development must be aligned with institutional mandates, budgets, and performance systems to be applied in practice.
- Locally led and adaptive approaches enable integrated planning to move from policy to implementation.
- The case supports national frameworks such as Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plan and broader Commonwealth priorities on sustainable and climate-resilient urbanisation.

This Case Study was prepared by Istiak Ibne Rouf, Senior Research Associate (Climate Change and Climate Finance Specialist), Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research (C3ER), BRAC University, Bangladesh, by way of contribution to the work of the CSCC Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group, 16 March 2026.

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