The World Bank’s Metro Dhaka Transformation Platform (MDTP), a dialogue convening stakeholders and ideas on the city’s growth, organized a symposium to imagine the future of Dhaka 30 years from now, in the year 2050.

Thirty years ago, Dhaka was home to only 6 million people. It has tripled in size in a single generation. It is the administrative, commercial, political and cultural capital of Bangladesh, and now one of the most densely urbanized regions in the world. Today, Dhaka struggles to cope with major issues of urban concentration like traffic gridlock, poor air quality, lack of health and sanitation services, clogged drainage systems and environmental degradation.

Transforming Dhaka into a more livable megacity within the next generation requires thinking at the regional level, identifying holistic solutions, and implementing them at the community level. This will require strong leadership driven by a clear vision for the end goal.

The MDTP invited Dhaka’s top urban thought leaders to share their ideas for Dhaka’s future through the lenses of livability, prosperity and inclusivity. The objective was to spark an exciting conversation about what is possible in the next thirty years.

**Dr. Mercy Tembon, World Bank Country Director for Bangladesh and Bhutan**, described the profound economic transformation of Bangladesh as a whole over the past thirty years, driven in large part by urbanization and the economic power of Dhaka. Dhaka itself faces immense challenges, but also holds immense untapped potential. Dhaka can become an even bigger miracle than Bangladesh. But the time to act is now. The World Bank is ready to support the Government and citizens to shape their future.

**Ms. Catalina Marulanda, World Bank Practice Manager for Urban Development in South Asia**, introduced the MDTP, an endeavor to understand the complex cross-sectoral challenges that cut across the metropolitan area and to propose a strategy to transform Dhaka into a more livable, prosperous, competitive and resilient city. To date, the MDTP has engaged extensively with a broad section of government agencies, elected leaders and civil society institutions through direct dialogue and larger workshops. The purpose of the Dhaka in 2050 Symposium is to help anchor the discussion in the future and to begin to develop consensus around a shared vision for Dhaka.
Ms. Annie Gapihan, World Bank Urban Development Specialist, shared two examples of how the field of future studies can influence public perception and help stakeholders think about actively shaping the future. In the United States, vivid language about tornado damage in “impact-based warnings” have helped reduce fatalities by changing how people think and respond to potential threats. In South Africa at the end of the apartheid era amidst deep social conflict and uncertainty, a coalition of leaders published four narratives emphasizing potential futures, to shift consensus toward a rapid, smooth and sustainable transition. In Dhaka, citizens can use vivid storytelling about the future as a tool to influence actions and decisions by others and set a path toward a more prosperous, livable city.

Honorable Mayor Md. Atiqul Islam, Dhaka North City Corporation, shared his vision for a city that ensures the dignity, well-being and safety of all citizens at every stage of life: birth, infancy, youth, adolescence, adulthood, middle age, old age, and departure. The vision of a livable city is one that is safe and environmentally friendly, has integrated transport, with healthy neighborhoods and close-knit communities. He noted the experience of Bogotá, Colombia, shows how cities can be transformed from dire conditions of poverty, mistrust and violence through an incremental approach and engaging citizens in creative ways.

Dr. Rubana Huq, President of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporters’ Association, imagined the ideal city in which the next generation can thrive; a “people-first city.” It has a mix of density and diversity, which are active and accessible to people of all ages and incomes. Daily life all happens within walking distance of the home, with public transit available for longer distances. Across the city there are vibrant open spaces such as parks, plazas and courtyards where the community gathers at the end of the day to unplug, socialize and dream.

Dr. Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Director of Power and Participation Research Center, shared insights about potential pathways and levers of change to transform Dhaka into a city that delivers economic promise. The first important pathway is inclusion, such as redefining the informal sector as the entrepreneurial class. A second pathway is through transcending sectoral approaches, for example the direct link between water pollution and children’s nutrition. A third pathway is through bottom-up design ideas and harnessing the civic culture of the urban citizen.

Mr. Sanjay Srivastava, World Bank Program Leader for Sustainable Development in Bangladesh and Bhutan, facilitated an engaging discussion of the potential the future holds for Dhaka. The conversation explored the possibilities of future population growth being driven by climate change displacement, education as a means to counteract a rise in urban violence, an integrated system for mobility with solutions down to the “last mile”, and people arriving to Dhaka building skills to fully participate in the thriving economy. Participants highlighted that master plans have been designed to shape Dhaka’s future with strong community input, but there is a need for effective tools to translate those plans into action.

The symposium agreed on the need to quickly move from dialogue to action. First steps to raise awareness and interest include building a digital community of champions and quickly piloting pop-ups in public spaces to showcase ideas and potential. As a next step, the MDTP team will directly engage with participants to develop these proposals for rapid results and bigger impacts. The team will also kick start a broader conversation on social media to crowdsource ideas.

To share your suggestions, or to request more information about the Metro Dhaka Transformation Platform, contact Annie Gapihan (agapihan@worldbank.org) or Ishita Alam Abonee (iabonee@worldbank.org).