The Spatiality of Livelihoods: Negotiations of Access to Public Space in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Kirsten Hackenbroch

In Dhaka, one of the densest cities worldwide, public space is a scarce resource while many urban livelihood activities are based on access to public space. Pavements, street spaces, vacant plots, public parks and city squares are used intensively for all kinds of economic activities, i.e. vending, production and provision of services. There has been considerable research on access to public space in the ‘visible arenas’ of cities, i.e. central areas that are to some degree controlled by state or municipal actors, even if these statutory actors apply informal modes of regulation. Access to public space for livelihood activities is, however, also contested on a neighbourhood scale and inhabitants and local actors continuously negotiate and dispute access arrangements to use public space for economic, social and religious purposes.

Four topics provide the main basis for this research, namely the spatiality of livelihoods, the negotiations of access to public space, the discussion of framing the concept of urban informality and finally the question of spatial justice. Accordingly the main objective is to explore and analyse the importance of urban public space for everyday life of urban dwellers and the mechanisms of how access to public space as a livelihood asset is negotiated among the actors in an environment characterised by informality as a dominant mode of the production of space. A second objective is more normative: the discussion of how the findings relate to concepts of spatial justice, and what could be the role of planning in establishing and guaranteeing equal rights to the city and equal citizenship for all urban dwellers.

The research arrives at the following results:

The spatiality of livelihoods: Public space constitutes an arena for a multiplicity of livelihood activities related to everyday and extra-everyday life. High pressure on public space to be used for livelihood activities in an environment characterised by excessive densities makes public space a contested resource, dependent on negotiations between a diversity of actors. The spatiality of livelihoods is furthermore influenced by social gender relations, producing spatialities of gender difference. Especially with regard to gender, the hierarchy of spaces as private, semi-private and public does not suffice to explain the hierarchies of space in Dhaka, as public spaces are not always equally accessible. The notion of (shifting levels of) ‘publicness’ perceived as familiar or strange can explain many of the everyday mobility patterns.

Negotiations: The negotiations of access to public space commonly taking place between the ordinary and elite groups, but also in entanglements with statutory actors, are foremost based on spatialities of power. The resulting spatial patterns point at exclusionary processes, where elite groups are able to sustain their spatial claims, while the ordinary experience their achievements to be temporary and to require continuous re-negotiations. Negotiations do not take place among actors with equal access to power but rather in a sphere characterised by differentiation and patron-client relations. Public space gradually disappears, despite the value generally attached to it. The dominant actors, although often committed to safeguarding public space in principle, are not able to effectively do so in practice. Instead, they themselves make the most permanent spatial claims endangering the functionality of the city.

Urban informality: Urban informality operates mainly as an expression of a dominant mode of the production of space. Informality thus enables the state and elite groups to make spatial claims and to dominate the conceptualised space which is then experienced as ‘repressive’ on the ground. For the ordinary, this means a limited agency and a temporality of achievements in spatial claim-making. An analytical model which takes note of the entanglements of actors and their potential operation in different spheres or spaces, namely statutory, informal and negotiated space, was developed as part of the research.

Spatial justice: entry points for planning: The research results point at the reproduction of prevailing spatialities of injustice as effects of the negotiations of access to public space and dominant modes of the production of space. In order to create an urban environment of spatial justice, four general considerations to be recognised in planning processes were formulated: the differentiated power structures and their implications; the diversity of actors and their specific interests and needs; the political processes at work and their effects on resource distribution; and the understanding of all neighbourhoods and inhabitants as integral parts of the city. Additionally, four entry points for spatial planning were formulated with specific regard to public space as an asset for a just and functional city.