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Why and how Uttara Apartment Project, a housing project on 214-acre land, failed its target group: the low and middle income families

Ariful Islam Mithu

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The infrastructure in the area leaves much to be desired. Photo: Noor-A-Alam

If you walk along the Ashulia-Mirpur Flood Protection Embankment Road, some sleek sky-high buildings are sure to catch your attention. It is not far-fetched to think that one day you can have a flat in those sleek buildings, also known as Rajuk's Uttara Apartment Project - the country's largest government apartment project.

The hype for this project has already died down. Now people have been showing less interest in buying flats in the project.

The Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakkha (Rajuk), the capital's development authority, took up this apartment project in 2011, setting a target for completion by 2016.

The project began with three blocks on a 214-acre of land for 240 sixteen-story buildings to be erected consisting of 18,732 apartments in total. The projected cost was, at the time, Tk9,030 crore.

One 16-storied building has 84 flats. The flat includes three bedrooms, a dining room, two living rooms with attached bathrooms.



In 2021, out of three blocks, the construction of Block 'A' is almost done. Out of the 79 buildings, Rajuk has so far constructed 73 buildings. The rest of the six buildings, consisting of 504 flats, are under construction.

Mozaffar Uddin, the current project director of Uttara Apartment Project, told The Business Standard that they have already handed over flat keys to nearly 4,000 flat owners.

However, the project is yet to ensure basic amenities like public schools, hospitals and markets in the apartment project. The infrastructure in the area leaves much to be desired.

The flat owners have a lot of complaints. Most of the people who received flats do not live there, instead they have rented out the flats.

The target group and the project delays

The primary objective of the Uttara Apartment Project was to provide residential flats to low and middle-income people at an affordable price. But that did not happen.



Photo: Noor-A-Alam

The Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED), the government's apex body for public project monitoring and evaluation, conducted an in-depth monitoring report on the project in 2019.

Moreover, the IMED analysed the flat owners' income and financial situation and found that 68 percent of flat owners fell into the middle-income group while the remaining 32 percent of flat owners were from the high-income group.

No individual from the low-income groups owned flats in the project. This is because the prices of the flats are beyond the reach of those in lower-income groups.

There is no crisis for housing for middle-income and high-income people in Dhaka. There is an abundance of private real estate companies, with a vast supply of flats, catering to the rich.

"Our current crisis is about offering housing facilities to the low-income people," said Adil Mohammed Khan, general secretary, Bangladesh Institute of Planners. "In the name of benefitting the low-income people, the authority basically served the rich, as usual."

In the beginning, the price per square foot of the flat stood at Tk3,500. As a result, the price of a 1,620 square feet flat amounted to approximately Tk56 lakh and 70 thousand. Later, Rajuk raised the price of the flats to Tk4,800 per square foot.

The project director said the main reason for increasing the flat price is the cost of construction and administration so that the applicants could get ready flats.

Photo: Noor-A-Alam

When asked why the lower-income people did not get flats in the project, Rajuk chairman ABM Amin Ullah Nuri, said "The project was taken up to create homes for low-income people, where else will you get a 1600-square-feet flat in Dhaka for Tk80 lakh?" He said, "When no one bought, the rich did and still there are 800 flats vacant, anyone can buy it."

The IMED report also said that Rajuk did not conduct any baseline survey or feasibility study at the time of taking up the project. As no feasibility study was done, the time and cost of the project have increased.

As a result, Rajuk has extended the date of completion to June 2022 with the project cost rising to Tk10,586 crore. In other words, the project cost has risen by 17.23 percent. The Rajuk project director and chairman claimed that they have done a feasibility study, while the IMED report said otherwise, stating that Rajuk did not conduct any baseline survey or feasibility study at the time of taking up the project.

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Many applicants, due to project implementation delays, had to face financial losses with many buying the flat with a bank loan. Not only do they now have to pay house rent for where they currently reside but also have to pay monthly loan instalments as well.

Frequent changes of project director hinder project implementation, say experts. To illustrate this point, the current project director, Mozaffar Uddin is the 11th person to take up the role as a director of the Uttara Apartment Project.

Moreover, his project director role for this project is an additional duty while he works as the Superintending Engineer of Rajuk.

A house without basic amenities

Most of the flat owners who do not have their own vehicles said that they have to suffer a lot due to a lack of proper infrastructure. There are no markets, government schools or hospitals yet so they have to go to Uttara or Mirpur for groceries, clothes and access to education and medical care.

As a result, they have to spend additional money on transport.

Flat owner Abbas Uddin Ahmed, however, is very happy with the way the project has been implemented. A mechanical engineer by profession, Abbas Uddin Ahmed worked in Qatar for 15 years.

> "What has happened is that some high-income people have bought these flats and are used to living in large lavish apartments, as a result, they do not like these small flats. Then they blame us for building them in such a way" ... Rajuk chairman ABM Amin Ullah Nuri

"Overseas, the project authority ensures amenities like schools, hospital and community centres and communication facilities first, then they allow people to live. This project's implementation is totally the opposite," said Abbas while walking along a road inside the project. "As a result, the flat owners are suffering every day."

When asked about the lack of basic amenities. Rajuk chairman Nuri responded saying that it was unusual for shopping complexes to be built first, and then the people to come. Once when the people settle down, markets are established, he explained.

"The history of civilization says so," Nuri said.



Photo: Noor-A-Alam

Recently, The BRTC has provided four buses to the project area which run from 7:30 am to 9:00 am. No buses ply the roads all day long. The buses start from Gate no: 1 to Motijheel which return in the evening.

"Rajuk has set up a daily shop but the price of products is too high. I have to go to Uttara to buy groceries. There are also no facilities to buy clothing here. If I need to buy beef, I still need to go to Uttara," said Abbas. "The market is still under construction," he added.

Nasir Uzzaman, senior vice president of the Rajuk Uttara Apartment Malik Kollan Somity (Rumas), a cooperative consisting of around 400 flat owners, said that there is no government primary school built inside the project area. So far, only a private primary school has been operating in a rented flat inside the buildings.

"The school is costly. It charges Tk28,000 for admission. There is no other school within five kilometres of the project. The closest one other than this is in Diabari," said Abbas. "There is also no hospital in the area, so people have to go to a different area for treatment."

"If you go to Uttara on a battery-run auto-rickshaw, you have to spend Tk50. The round trip costs Tk100," said Abbas. "If you take a CNG-auto-rickshaw, you will spend Tk400," Abbas explained, regarding the expenses associated with sending his son to a school in Diabari.

Sirajul Islam is a government official who lives in a flat in the Surma Building.

"I do not face any transportation problem because my office provides me with a vehicle. Those who have school and college-going children suffer most," Islam said. However, he said that it is the best place in Dhaka to live in because of the huge open spaces.

"You will not get such living conditions in Gulshan or Baridhara," said Islam.

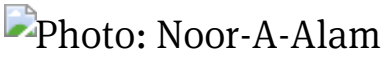

Photo: Noor-A-Alam

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Planner Adil Mohammed Khan said that when the project is completed, the resident population will be around 80,000. If that is the case, a minimum of 16 primary schools and 10 high schools will be needed, Khan added.

"A place with 80 thousand people is basically a city. This is not a joke. Without the necessary support infrastructure, you should not put people inside the high rise buildings," Khan explained. "There is now only one primary school which is an English medium school."

Flat owners are also concerned about the security arrangement for the area even though some Ansars have been deployed.

Are the flats as sleek as how the buildings look?

The flat owners are also unhappy with the flat condition of the project. The lifts often malfunction, the walls leak and their bathrooms have faulty designs, for example.

Abu Hena Mostofa Kamal, the president of the Chamali-1 (11-C) building said just too many things are problematic in regards to the flats.

He complained that during the rainy season, the walls of the building become damp which ultimately damages the furniture in the rooms. In many buildings, the plaster has started to come off.

"One of the lifts is inoperative in my building as we speak," said Kamal. He said that one-third of all lifts have become inoperative suddenly. "I cannot close the door and windows smoothly because some of them have already become bent," said Kamal, "I think they [developers and builders] did not use good quality wood for construction."

He also said that the tiles on many floors have come off. Moreover, "The shower is fitted directly to the commode and as a result, you cannot stand properly for a bath. The design of the bathrooms is faulty," said Kamal.

He alleged that Rajuk as well as the Public Works Department (PWD) authorities did not monitor the work earnestly.

When asked about this issue, the project director said that the lifts have been used for the last three years. The supplier serviced the lifts for one year and now it is the flat owners' job to maintain and service them. Unfortunately, they do not do it, he said.

"When we get complaints about damping or other problems. We address them as soon as possible. I do not think this is unusual as there are thousands of flats," the project director explained.

Regarding the design of the shower and commode, the project director said that he has seen such problems and has been trying to fix them as they come.

Who lives here now?

"Around 2,000 families live in the area now. Of them 800 are flat owners, the rest are tenants," Kamal mentioned.

In numbers, 65 percent of the people living in the apartment are tenants. The tenants include mainly Uttara-based businessmen, private service holders, buying house officials and bankers. Their reason: the rent here is cheaper.

"You can get a whole flat between Tk10,000 to Tk15,000 in the project. The rent price for a similar place would be between Tk20,000 to Tk25,000 in Uttara," said house owner leader Nasiruzzaman.

Rajuk chairman ABM Amin Ullah Nuri said, in regards to the woes of the project residents, "What has happened is that some high-income people have bought these flats and are used to living in large lavish apartments, as a result, they do not like these small flats," said the chairman. "Then they blame us for building them in such a way."

"We have constructed the flats to accommodate the poor. But rich people have bought them instead and moved in," Nuri added. "This is a successful project for the government. After the launch of the metro rail, all flats will be sold out. Most of the people I have met are happy."

He believes that in future, there will be a flat crisis in the project area. The demand for flats is increasing. He said that now a single flat's price in the project has gone up to Tk1 crore already.

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