



**Working with the Media to Change Social Attitudes:
A Livable City case study from Dhaka, Bangladesh**

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Introduction

Livable Cities programs work to make cities better for all the people who live in those cities, regardless of income, gender or age. Livable cities allow people to walk to school, work, stores, and parks. They allow people to take transit to visit places outside of their neighbourhood. They provide people with access to sanitation, water, clean air, safe affordable housing, and healthy foods. They also ensure that everyone has access to parks and public spaces. Livable cities ensure that the most vulnerable, including women, children, the elderly, and the poor, can move about conveniently and safely, with plenty of opportunities to interact with others.

Much of the work of the Livable Cities programs requires changes in policy at a city, state, or national level. In order to achieve those changes, policy makers need encouragement from the public. This means that the public needs to understand and support the issues. But much of what Livable Cities programs promote is very different from what people have heard and have learned to believe. People understand issues based on a wide variety of sources including the internet, television, newspapers, billboards, advertising, and even friends and family. Today's "information age" gives people ready access to a wide variety of competing information sources. Therefore it becomes very important to work with these sources to shape how our issues are being portrayed. One critical group to help achieve this is the media given their important role in shaping public opinion.

Unfortunately, the media does not always report on issues accurately or in the best interest of public understanding. In some cases this is because of a lack of understanding among the media itself. In other cases, there may be influence from corporations who advertise or policymakers who promote their own specific message. In order to create the changes we want, we must go beyond our role as advocates to also become skilled communicators who can explain the key livable cities messages simply and dependably to media.

The purpose of this case study is to highlight the media advocacy efforts of a local organization in Bangladesh called Work for a Better Bangladesh (WBB Trust). They created a media strategy that successfully changed the way the media portrayed the causes of traffic congestion in Dhaka. This led to changes in perception among the public and policymakers and ultimately led to a partial reversal of government policy. While this case study addresses a specific issue in Dhaka, the intent of the case study is to show the ways in which you can work with the media to shape how your issue is portrayed. The topics may be different but the strategies are the same.

Background on Dhaka and the Rickshaw

Cycle rickshaws are a small-scale local means of transportation, which are human-powered by pedaling. Cycle rickshaws are an important pollution-free sustainable mode of transportation because they provide a low cost and accessible alternative to motor vehicles, which is particularly important for vulnerable groups such as women, children, and the elderly. Estimates suggest there are over 500,000 rickshaws in the Dhaka, making it the most popular form of travel after walking and an important source of employment. The rickshaw is so popular that Dhaka is called the “rickshaw capital of the world”.

Dhaka is a megacity with a population of somewhere between 12 and 15 million people. The city has no mass transit other than a poor-quality bus system. Despite having a high modal share, the conditions for walking are poor. Most traffic deaths in the city are pedestrians. Despite the fact that only about 5% of trips in the capital are made by car, virtually all transport investments go into a road system catering to the private car. Although the vast majority of trips are by walking and cycle rickshaw, almost no attention or funding is given to the pedestrian environment, and for decades politicians have been focused on banning, rather than promoting, rickshaws.

As traffic congestion in Dhaka has grown steadily worse over the years, policy makers needed to explain the worsening situation and chose to blame the city’s traffic problems on the rickshaw. The reasons for this are complex. Internationally, a strong lobby exists that encourages road building and the purchasing of cars and motorbikes. No such lobby exists for the rickshaw. Similarly, the wealthy and powerful residents of the city travel by car, while it is mainly the middle class and the poor who take rickshaws and walk. Hence it was easy to make rickshaws the scapegoat for traffic congestion. Over the years a concerted campaign was carried out through the media to convince people that rickshaws are the source of traffic congestion. The campaign did not stop with blame but included a plan to ban rickshaws from an increasing number of city roads.

Media’s messages

By the time WBB Trust began working on transport issues in 2004 the government had been carrying out an anti-rickshaw campaign for many years. The media played an important role in that campaign and were being used to try to influence the public to accept a series of rickshaw bans and encourage greater car use. Article after article, letter after letter blamed the rickshaw for growing traffic congestion. The following is a small sample of the types of things being written about rickshaws at that time:

- “[The World Bank] argued that after banning rickshaws from these routes, the flow of traffic will increase and traffic congestion will decrease.” (The Daily Star June 25, 2003.)
- "Rickshaws are not an environment-friendly vehicle at all. They create traffic jams that cause vehicles to burn more fuel which in turn greatly increases the pollution levels in the city", said the Executive Director of DTCCB. (The Daily Star, September 08, 2003.)
- “Many consider rickshaw pulling an inhuman profession. Even the communist government of West Bengal in India[,] did [they] not ban rickshaws?” added DTCCB Director. The Daily Star, Monday, September 08, 2003.
- "After creating these roads off-limit to rickshaws, one may argue that many in the industry will become unemployed. This is not entirely true. Dhaka is a city where these people can find alternative informal employment," said the Executive Director of DTCCB. The Daily Star, Monday, September 08, 2003.

There was, however, little factual basis for the comments included in these media articles. Removing rickshaws from the specified routes did not, in fact, improve traffic flow but rather made the traffic worse. Motor vehicles cause pollution regardless of whether they are idling, whereas rickshaws are a sustainable fuel-free mode of transportation. West Bengal did not ban bicycle rickshaws but rickshaws pulled on foot,

which is an important distinction, and attempts to ban the cycle rickshaw in Delhi were overturned by the High Court. Finally, compared to many forms of employment in Bangladesh, such as bidi workers or garment factory workers, rickshaw drivers have a relatively high degree of control over their own work and better pay.¹

Working for change: a multi-faceted approach

Staff at WBB and other like-minded organizations knew that to get policymakers to change their mind about rickshaws would require a change in public discussion. A key element in this strategy was to change the way rickshaws were discussed through conventional media. But changing the news coverage of rickshaws, and traffic in general, was no easy matter. Journalists and editors had been persuaded by years of anti-rickshaw propaganda, and were reluctant to consider other ways of addressing the situation. To be fair to the journalists, in 2004 when WBB began working on this issue, no one was challenging the government messages and presenting the case for rickshaws.

Changing the media's message involved a comprehensive and multi-faceted effort.

WBB and its allies:

- ❏ Organized discussion events to introduce new ideas on transport. These events supported the use of the rickshaw by presenting the arguments for and against. In addition, they focused on introducing the concept of car controls, which, unlike rickshaw bans, would actually be successful in reducing congestion and pollution.
- ❏ Organized activities for *World Carfree Day* including a press conference focusing on the car control issue and a seminar for World Carfree Day where they showed a video on public opinion about traffic jams.
- ❏ Drafted articles and press releases for major national newspapers. In Bangladesh many newspapers will run a press release verbatim as long as it is fairly well written. There were also many opportunities to contribute articles to the newspaper, either as an op-ed or elsewhere. Thus WBB



¹For more information about the facts surrounding the arguments made against the rickshaw, visit the WBB Trust website www.wbbtrust.org and view the document Bari, M and D Efroymson (2005), *Rickshaw Bans in Dhaka City: An Overview of the Arguments For and Against*. Roads for People, Dhaka.

combined its intensive work to convince journalists to write about the issue with its own writing on the topic. This also meant working to convince editors to publish articles that ran counter to the stated views of the newspaper in question. Thanks to their persistence, WBB succeeded in getting a number of pro-rickshaw letters and articles published.

❏ Maintained a blog. Social media have taken on an increasingly important role in social activism. Where conventional newspapers may block access to opposing views and the independent media is weak or non-existent, social media, including blogs, are a great way to spread a message and recruit allies. WBB’s media officer regularly maintained a blog (<http://dhaka-rickshaw.blogspot.ca/>) and checked that when he Googled “rickshaw Bangladesh” his blog would appear.

❏ Developed personal relationships with journalists. When WBB sent out a press release, staff would follow up with phone calls and even visits. WBB staff would inquire about whether the media outlet received the press release, if they would run it, and if not, why not? The WBB media officer regularly visited journalists and editors, and spent many hours on the telephone discussing the merits of rickshaws and the problem of cars, and challenging assumptions of the journalists. Those discussions were often carried out over months but the intensive effort paid off.

Signs of success: car newly discussed as culprit for traffic congestion

As a result of hard work, strategic alliances, and ongoing efforts, the media coverage changed from being almost entirely anti-rickshaw to being focused on the benefits of rickshaws and the harm of the bans. Pages of weekend magazines such NewAge Xtra² and Weekly 2000³ were devoted to the topic, presenting almost exclusively a pro-rickshaw view. As time passed, the dominant focus in coverage on traffic congestion was the role of the automobile. At first, this coverage seemed to have a business bias. For instance some articles stated that the problem was insufficient car parking and the city should thus build multi-storey car parks. However, as WBB continued and expanded its work on transport under its Livable Cities initiative, newspaper coverage gradually began to broaden in scope and depth. Transport no longer meant just the car; the problems faced by pedestrians and cyclists, and the need to restrict car ownership and use, all became topics in the newspapers.⁴

The pro-rickshaw coverage was almost entirely new. In 2004, prior to WBB working on their campaign, there were 20 negative articles written about rickshaws. However, by 2005 there were 157 news articles in



Above: 5Articles that focus on rickshaws, problems of cars and parking, and congestion.

² AKM Atikuzzaman, “Poor Prescription”, New Age Xtra, April 22, 2011.

³ Shanjid Arnob, “Rickshaw Ban: Solve Congestion Problem or Sufferings of Citizen”, Shaptahik (Weekly) 2000, April 22, 2011.

⁴ <http://www.thedailystar.net/forum/2010/march/traffic.htm>

favour of the rickshaw and only 24 anti rickshaw articles. In addition, media coverage began pointing out that cars were only used by a mere 5% of the wealthy and not by the majority of the population. By 2010 there were 83 news articles focused on describing the problems associated with car use in Dhaka. This represented a huge change in the way transport issues were reported in the press.

WBB's initial belief that the media would play a key role in changing attitudes among policy makers proved correct. As pro-rickshaw articles began to appear with greater frequency, policy makers began speaking out in favour of rickshaws:

- The Minister of Communications emphasized the importance of rickshaws and suggested increasing the number of licenses by 50,000 at a seminar on "Rickshaw Bans in Dhaka City: An Overview of the Arguments for and Against" organized by the Civil Engineering Division with support from WBB Trust, on 22 December 2005.
- One former minister and political leader was quoted in the newspaper as saying that: "Rickshaw is the main transport of the middle and lower middle class people... Above all, the poor rickshaw pullers too will have an opportunity to earn some money." (Tawfique Ali, "Take a breath, ride a rickshaw: Environment friendly three wheelers dominated city streets during siege yesterday." *The Daily Star*, November 13, 2006.)
- "We shall have to devise a mechanism so that people are discouraged to use private car and encouraged to use public transport," said Sharif Mohammad Tariquzzaman, representative of Urban Development Directorate. ("Parking guideline needed to ease traffic congestion." *The Daily Star*, 17 November 2008.)

Prior to WBB's campaign, such statements were unheard of in public settings.

Key approaches and lessons learned

WBB's work demonstrates that success is achievable but requires persistence, patience, intelligence, and a sustained commitment. It is not enough to hold one event, or draft one press release, and expect a sudden and strong response. If no newspapers publish your press release or article, it is not enough to say that the media are set in their views and resistant to alternative viewpoints. We will not achieve change through being passive. When WBB organized an event, it made sure to tell newspaper reporters repeatedly and well ahead of time, then followed up with phone conversations to ensure that reporters were there. WBB staff then called after the event to ask if the newspaper would publish the report. Staff also called TV channels to see if they would use the coverage and then followed up by sending video clips.

Similarly, rather than organize just one colourful event that may be well-publicized, WBB organized many events. As this can be burdensome for staff; also because it is best to have more than one organization doing similar events, WBB spent a good deal of time convincing other organizations to organize similar events, and where needed, offered assistance in event planning and media coverage. It was a lot of work, but the result is both happier allies and more extensive coverage.

Lastly, WBB built relationships with the media over many years. They took the time to learn about what the media understood about their issue, and worked to educate journalists and change perceptions. WBB invited journalists to their office and provided them with information on transport issues, but also on other topics that are of interest to them. The purpose was to build up a strong, friendly relationship. It is that sort of collegial relationship that allowed WBB to influence reporting.

For those who wish to bring about positive change in the world, the problems may seem insurmountable. It helps to remember that the most important work is generally also the most difficult. There are plenty of people prepared to do the easy stuff; it takes true conviction, courage, and vision to take on the difficult tasks. But if one goes about the work wisely, it is possible to achieve success. And the most significant successes are those that are won with the most effort.