1-2-3 – it looks so harmless on the map: a thin line that runs eastwards, then takes a sharp 90-degree turn northwards and again 90-degrees eastwards up to the edge. Yet on the ground, the line is a concrete wall, built to demarcate the boundary between two worlds, the “legal” and the “illegal”, the accepted and the barely tolerated. That these boundaries are merely fictional becomes evident once you take a walk along and then cross that wall. Because the “legal” neighbourhood, with its rusty huts leaning on decrepit-looking apartment buildings and the children playing barefoot on the roads, doesn’t actually differ from what you’ll see on the other side – only that the majority of its residents prefer to take care of their everyday purchases at the shops and often send their children to the schools of the neighbourhood behind the wall. On that side, the same oneand two-storey buildings made of corrugated iron create an even more dense pattern, and the roads are only partially paved. When taking a closer look, you realise how the construction of the wall must have cut certain houses and courtyards in two, and considering the number and shape of the tin sheets fixed onto it in order to form roofs and carve out rooms, you may conclude that this has happened some time back. Why have the two neighbourhoods been separated? Who built that wall? And what does it all have to do with our map? From the map to the ground and back, reads its subtitle. It points at the work process from which the map emerged and at its double function: to represent social relations and personal memories, experiences, insights, and simultaneously encourage self-reflection. But I’ll better explain one thing at a time.

The neighbourhood behind the wall, surrounded on all other sides by what remains of a former canal filled with detriments and illicitly disposed construction waste, is Karail Basti, one of Dhaka’s largest and oldest self-organised settlements. We – a loose network of students and researchers coordinated by the non-profit Habitat Forum Berlin – have been studying the circumstances and preconditions of its social production since 2009. It is widely known that Bangladesh, low-lying on the world’s biggest delta, is exposed to serious risks vis-à-vis global warming and is prone to seasonal floods and land erosion, due to both the long monsoon periods and ill-implemented river embankment projects. When people are forced to leave their villages in the aftermath of related calamities or out of sheer poverty and migrate to Dhaka, the majority ends up in one of its numerous basti: residential settlements of spontaneous, that is unplanned, origin (“slums”, as they are pejoratively called by many). How do they organise themselves there? How do they ensure the provision of basic services – water, electricity, roads, gas – which the authorities generally refuse to deliver on grounds of the illegal land occupation? How far does self-organisation reach, and where does its scope end? These are the main questions we asked ourselves at the beginning of the research. The sketches and diagrams placed around and inside the “proper” map offer answers to some of them on the basis of data gathered within a baseline study in 2012, 2013 and 2014. At the time, we were mainly concerned with issues such as housing conditions and production, built infrastructures, as well as public amenities (open spaces, mosques, market facilities, schools, etc.) in Karail. Progressively, we embedded all information into a map of the settlement, drawn on the basis of its Google Earth-picture of 2013 and amended through on-site verifications, discussions and workshops with selected groups of inhabitants.[1]

Our decision to fill a map with the fieldwork evidences (while also reflecting on it in articles for newspapers and academic journals, field reports, a blog[2], etc.) had first of all a practical reason: We felt that a visual outcome would be easier to review with the inhabitants of Karail, whose language, Bengali, few of us could speak. The second reason will resonate with other practices of counter-mapping collected in this book. We wanted to oppose official maps of Dhaka, in which the area covered by Karail Basti was (and to this date is) portrayed as an empty spot, a state-of-the-arts map, in order to call attention to the existence and everyday struggles of its more than 100,000 inhabitants. Like many others in this city, they are literally made invisible by the state and its overall anti-poor attitude in questions of urban development and planning. Thereby, the continuous shifts from the map to the

ground and back that were required to amend the Google Earth-picture confronted us with the benefits, but also the limitations of mapping. Depending on the perspective, a satellite image reveals overwhelmingly much, or very little of Karail Basti. You are astonished by the density of dwellings only to find out, once you are at someone's home for a tea, that the single housing units are subdivided into even smaller rooms and lent to respective sub-tenants: one family, one room – this is the standard. You are proud you've located each and every mosque only to be asked why you haven't recorded the trees, palms and especially the banyan trees, on whose branches benign as well as malign spirits dwell, as the local residents say. You get familiar with the whole basti to realise when returning after six months that your favourite spot, the overall fabric of a particular area, and even the population structure, have changed considerably due to the replacement of tin structures with brick buildings.[3] In other words, the plural views on what the map ought to show and the steady transformations we came across thanks to the personal interactions and the longue durée-approach of our study (we'd chosen to cover at least ten years of developments in the settlement) presented us with a dilemma: We would either have to make our map more general and abstract or accept that it may become outdated in no time.

In spite of this probably well-known limitation we could see some of our main goals coming to fulfilment. Variations of the main map helped us to tackle increasingly complex questions related to spatial development with individuals and groups of residents; moreover, from time to time, Karail's community-based organisation (CBO) leaders used them in their ongoing struggle for recognition and legalisation of the basti. It was during a meeting with them, back in 2012, that we discovered their samajer manchitra, community maps (see first map at the end of the article). One of the main differences between NGOs that pursue a rather emancipatory programme and those that simply distribute aid is that the first encourage community-based organisation among members of the disadvantaged social groups. The activists of DSK, a prominent representative of this kind of NGOs in Bangladesh,[4] are trained to turn development projects, generally focused on infrastructural upgrading, into occasions to collaborate with the inhabitants, foster their networking and thus "help them to help themselves". This somewhat inflationary slogan, taken seriously, means that the aim of an NGO should be to make itself unnecessary in the long run if not sooner. It will accompany the concerned groups in the process of detecting their own needs and forging coalitions so that they become able to carry out projects and campaigns by and for themselves. Mapping together facilitates such a process, as shared problems are identified and possible solutions emerge "naturally", by means of comparison, and from an occupation with space that conflates its physical and social factors in the drawing. It stood out that the CBO leaders had been producing one or two community maps per year since 2009, initially under the guidance of DSK activists, later independently, and that the regular exercise had increased not only their understanding of technical and infrastructural requirements, but also their sense of "ownership" of the settlement. They also performed regular countings of the population: That their census' results matched with our own estimates was all the more important, as most statistics circulated by the state, but also by NGOs and international agencies, are strongly flawed.[5]

So, now we knew that Karail's inhabitants, and in particular its CBO leaders, were able to produce and use maps in order to plan and execute localised development interventions. This gave us one more reason to try and push our mapping practice to a new level, experimenting with personalised expression forms and mixing the geographic logic with other logics. The inhabitants' community maps acted as an inspiring model for this endeavour: They were highly synthetic yet innumerable stories emanated from them nonetheless. We reckoned this had to do with their collective and manual generation and with an approach that didn't at all pretend to explain or reduce the complexity of relations and relationships, structures and negotiations so deeply entrenched in Karail's everyday life. Similarly, our interpretation ought to pass on this information poetically and function poietically, that is, trigger

an ideally infinite generation and regeneration of observations according to changing perspectives. In short, the samajer manchitra compelled us to turn mapping into (a way of) storytelling. This is the radical lesson our Information Overload map entails: Stop counting; start talking with the inhabitants of a place. Do it excessively. And while searching for words to name what your ears resonate of, what you've got before your eyes and what your memory and body won't ever forget, you'll notice the place is already speaking to you with its own voice. "And, what about the wall?", you will ask now. The wall, a symbol of how the powerful would like to regiment space in a city whose population growth is tagged the fastest of the world and where land prices are constantly rising, has been standing between Karail and T&T Colony until today. It is our hope that, also looking at this ridiculously thin line on the map, people on both sides will soon dismiss their fear of distinctions, such as "legal-illegal", forged only in order to retain the status quo in a city deserting its duty to cater to all inhabitants, and jointly demand a fair redistribution of living space.

Notes

Text by Elisa T. Ber tuzzo, Photos by Günter Nest

Illustrations

Maps right column: The right map INFORMATION OVERLOAD – From the Map to the Ground and Back was created by Günter Nest, Marcus Jeutner, Paul Klever, Anna Sauter, Louisa Scherer, and Elisa T. Ber tuzzo. The reproduced community map (left map) from 2013 was drawn by Mohiuddin with inputs from Selina, Md. Mannan and Shahid Gazi.

Footnotes

1. Ours is a no-budget study that runs thanks to each participant's personal and political commitment, scientific passion and friendship.The local teams were built by Louisa Scherer, Paul Klever, Farhana Kaniz Sharna (2012), Abdul Kader Khan (Komol), Anna Sauter (2013), Marian Knop, Lisa Lampe,Tamanna Siddiqui (2014), and guided by Günter Nest and Elisa T. Ber tuzzo.
2. Cf. habitat-forum-berlin.de/page/adda-discourses.html
3. Building with bricks instead of corrugated iron makes it easier to pile, onto the ground floors, mezzanines and first floors. Whereas the mezzanines are generally allotted to single men, especially cycle-rickshaw pullers and construction workers, the tiny rooms on the first floors are being increasingly rented out to students, young couples and professionals.
4. Acronym for Dushtha Shashtya Kendra, dskbangladesh.org. Habitat Forum Berlin has collaborated with this organisation since 2014.
5. In particular, the government's census downsizes the population of Karail and other basti, whereas most NGOs (local and international) and donor agencies tend to overestimate the numbers, clearly to cater to respective agendas.