

PHOTO: MD RAJIB RAIHAN

# LDC GRADUATION Implications for Bangladesh beyond 2026



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**Bangladesh needs to collaborate with other LDC countries to ensure that WTO's previously committed LDC-friendly initiatives (e.g., DFQF market access, LDC-friendly rules of origin, etc.) are materialized as soon as possible so that the country may enjoy the full benefits until it formally graduates.**

ATIUR RAHMAN

It is now more or less recognized that Bangladesh is one of the world's fastest-growing and relatively more resilient economies. The country's macroeconomic performance during the pandemic-induced economic slowdown and the ongoing global supply chain disruptions caused by the Russo-Ukrainian war bear testimony to such an inference. Bangladesh's commendable successes in terms of reducing poverty, coupled with its consistent achievements in human development indicators such as the hunger index, average life span, and maternal and child mortality rates, also prove that gains from positive macroeconomic performances have been able to improve the 'quality of life' for those belonging to the bottom of the social pyramid. Yet, it must also be acknowledged that Bangladesh has faced unprecedented challenges related to the external economy and some internal structural issues. The new government faces critical challenges associated with managing persistent inflationary pressures, making the exchange rates market-friendly, managing the financial deficit, bolstering the forex reserve, creating further employment opportunities,

improving the investment climate, and enhancing capacities to mobilize revenue.

Bangladeshi policymakers must make quick, potent, and prudent moves to address the above-mentioned macroeconomic challenges to further realize the country's economic potential (e.g., becoming the ninth largest consumer economy by 2030, a trillion-dollar economy by 2035 or 2040, etc.). It must also be remembered that these challenges, though critical, are only immediate ones. Policymakers must not lose focus on the bigger picture as Bangladesh is to become a 'developing country' within another couple of years (by November 2026). This graduation from the 'LDC category' will create an additional set of macroeconomic challenges for Bangladesh that must also be flagged now.

Given this context, analyzing the challenges likely to emerge due to LDC graduation and looking into the possible ways forward are very relevant. The UN General Assembly has rightly set Bangladesh to graduate from the LDC status and officially become a 'Developing Country' by the end of 2026. In 2021, when this decision was made, Bangladesh's GNI per capita stood at USD 1,827 (graduation threshold is USD 1,222). Bangladesh's scores in the other two indicators, i.e., the Economic Vulnerability Index (EVI) and the Human Assets Index (HAI), were also significantly above the graduation thresholds. The country's EVI score stood at 27 whereas the graduation threshold is 32 or below. Bangladesh's HAI score stood at 75 whereas the graduation threshold is 66 or above. These certainly proved that Bangladesh's journey of inclusive and sustainable

development over the previous 10-12 years had yielded the desired results. However, this brought up burning questions about the challenges associated with this graduation.

What are these challenges? As an LDC, Bangladesh has enjoyed preferential access for its exports to many countries. This has particularly contributed to the rapid growth of the RMG exports (which have reached almost USD 50 billion annually by now). Graduating may result in Bangladesh losing such preferential treatment. Secondly, as an LDC, the country has remained flexible in implementing intellectual property rights (IPRs). This has significantly benefited Bangladesh's pharmaceutical and software industries, which have significant growth potential as export-oriented sectors. However, after graduation, Bangladesh must be further stringent in implementing the IPRs. In other words, these industries will then face increased competition in the global marketplace. Finally, Bangladesh has leveraged long-term soft loans from international development partners as an emerging economy. After graduating from LDC status, Bangladesh will have to pay higher interest rates and deal with shorter grace periods for these International Support Measures (ISMs).

All these make it obvious that without revamping the policies and practices related to international trade, Bangladesh may lose its competitive edge to a significant extent once it becomes a 'developing country.'

A UNCTAD projection from 2023 shows that the potential loss of export earnings due to losing Most Favored Nation (MFN) tariffs and withdrawal of the Duty-free Quota-free (DFQF) facilities may range from 7 to 14 percent. It must be noted that this will happen if Bangladesh follows a 'business as usual' course even after graduation from LDC status. Commentators and experts remain optimistic that Bangladesh will live up to its reputation as an ever-evolving and resilient economic engine and cope with this new set of challenges. Yet, the question remains: how to deal with these new challenges most effectively? The country, i.e., its policymakers, will have to combat these challenges in two frontiers: negotiations (mainly more brilliant economic diplomacy) at the international level and bolstering capacities at the domestic/internal levels.

Fortunately for Bangladesh and other economies in transition (e.g., Nepal and Lao PDR), the global bodies appear to be sensitized (at least to a significant extent) to these newly emerging economic challenges. The formal statement from the 12th Ministerial Conference of the WTO (publicized in June 2022) states, "We acknowledge the challenges that graduation presents ... We recognize the role that certain measures in the WTO can play in facilitating the smooth and sustainable transition for these Members after graduation from the LDC category." Given this backdrop, now seems to be the high time

for Bangladesh to go for a three-pronged approach to economic diplomacy in the international arena.

Firstly, Bangladesh needs to collaborate with other LDC countries to ensure that WTO's previously committed LDC-friendly initiatives (e.g., DFQF market access, LDC-friendly rules of origin, etc.) are materialized as soon as possible so that the country may enjoy the full benefits until it formally graduates.

Secondly, policymakers from Bangladesh should focus on forming and leading a coalition of soon-to-graduate LDCs to push for a new set of support measures to meet the demand for countries in transition (especially in the context of currently prevailing geopolitical turmoil).

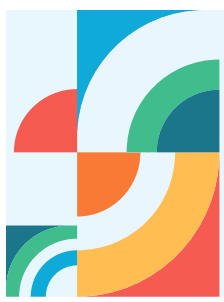
Finally, looking beyond 2026, Bangladesh's economic diplomacy should focus on expediting negotiations with the WTO related to new/emerging sectors such as fisheries subsidies, e-commerce, investment facilitation, and promoting MSMEs.

Along with economic diplomacy, Bangladesh must prioritize domestic preparedness for smooth and sustainable graduation. The country needs to diversify its export basket (over 80 percent from one sector- RMG) and diversify its export destinations (an overwhelming share of exports going to 9 to 10 countries only). Structural transformation of the export sector will also be pivotal as 93 percent of Bangladesh's exporters are low-tech manufacturers (the ratio is 33 and 21 for Vietnam and India, respectively). While Bangladesh has made excellent strides to develop hard infrastructure, this trend needs further bolstering. A Bangladesh exporter still requires 28 days to complete

an export process, whereas the average for Asia is 18 days. Private sector investment in infrastructure development must grow significantly (currently, private sector participation is only 1.1 percent of GDP). To reduce reliance on international development support/assistance, Bangladesh must also significantly improve its capacity to mobilize revenue domestically. Tax-GDP ratio for Bangladesh has been hovering below 10 percent for many years now, whereas an economy of such size and potential should have a ratio over 15 percent. This calls for fast digitization of resource mobilization and improving the governance of revenue management. Also, special attention is needed to ease the tax administration to attract more foreign direct investors.

In conclusion, it may be safely said that Bangladesh, with its extraordinary resilience and entrepreneurial zeal, has done very well in laying the foundation for a vibrant, developing country. However, the challenges remain, particularly in skilling and reskilling human resources to make the production process more efficient. In addition, the geopolitical challenges, including the latest tension in the Red Sea on the movement of ships and the threat of deglobalization or truncated trade cooperation, may constrain the potential gains from the graduation. The country may have to focus more on regional and subregional economic cooperation and greater emphasis on domestic production. The financial sector will have to reorient itself with more cooperation in the regional payment system to cope with the new landscape of trade cooperation in the new context.





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# READYING FOR THE NEXT BIG LEAP

## TOWARD 2030

# Strategies for SDG success in Bangladesh



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**There is an urgent need to strengthen up-to-date and periodic data generation. It will be hard to allocate resources, prioritize, design evidence-based policies, and establish partnerships without reliable data analytics.**

**STEFAN LILLER**

Let's start with the big picture: How is the world doing with the SDGs?

As we reach the halfway point since the Agenda 2030 and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were unanimously adopted in 2015 by 193 countries at the UN General Assembly, sadly, only 15 percent of the targets are on track, and many, according to the UN Secretary-General, are going in reverse. If that is the status worldwide, the situation for the Asia-Pacific region

### A HALFWAY BALANCE FOR BANGLADESH: THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE MISSING

It could be the case that the UN ESCAP database is not up-to-date, or that not all indicators are reported in line with official sources. Therefore, it is important to verify the official reporting mechanism established by the government.

The most important official reporting mechanism is the Voluntary National Review (VNR), where countries present at the High-Level Political Forum organized every year at the UN Headquarters in New York. Bangladesh has so far presented two VNRs, the first in 2017 and the second in 2020, and is already on the list of countries to present a VNR in 2025 - demonstrating its firm commitment to the SDG agenda.

In the most recent VNR, Bangladesh highlighted progress in several key areas. This included notable reductions in poverty (SDG 1) and hunger (SDG 2), a decline in neonatal and under-5 mortality rates (SDG 3), achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education (SDG 4), and expanding access to electricity at 96 percent (SDG 7). In addition, there has been an increase in the annual growth rate of real GDP per employed person (SDG 8), a rise in the share of GDP of manufacturing (SDG 9), and an increase in budget allocations for social protection (SDG 10).

Additionally, Bangladesh has undertaken a number of initiatives to advance the SDGs. These include the SDG Action Plan, the launch of the SDG Tracker webpage, the development of an SDG Financing Strategy, a collaboration framework between the Government and UN agencies, the adoption of 39+1 priority targets for localizing the SDGs, the establishment of two committees for data coordination and subnational implementation, and the integration of SDGs into the school curriculum and official training programs for government officials.

However, it is hard to assess progress on the SDGs based on the official reporting mechanisms. For example, the



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of the 39 targets adopted as national priorities are off track, namely: increase in female labor participation rate to 50 percent, increase in annual GDP growth to 10 percent, reduction of an unemployment rate below 3 percent, and increase in the share of manufacturing employment to 25 percent.

Moreover, for 27 of the 39 priority targets, 69 percent of them, it is not possible to assess progress, as there is no data for 15 of these targets, or the available data is only for the baseline year for 12 targets. Essentially, all environmental targets fall here. Other than target 32, which refers to the reduction of deaths due to natural disasters, and is on track, all other environment-related targets such as protected natural areas, forests, waste management, and even water, sanitation, or public transportation, have no data or only the baseline is available.

### TIME TO DO MORE, BUT MOSTLY IT IS TIME TO DO BETTER

While there is still time to get back on track on a number of targets, it is clear that Bangladesh needs to double down its efforts on a number

of fronts. To start with, there is an urgent need to strengthen up-to-date and periodic data generation. It will be hard to

allocate resources, prioritize, design evidence-based policies, and establish partnerships without reliable data analytics. It will also be important to think strategically about what targets should be prioritized. As it is a colossal task to achieve the SDGs, or even achieve as many goals and targets as possible in the remaining time, focusing on those targets that have a multiplier effect, considering the interlinkages between them, will be instrumental.

The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP's) Integrated SDG Insights Report produced in 2023 provides insights on this for more than 90 countries, including Bangladesh. Leveraging Artificial Intelligence, these reports consider national priorities and local contexts, alongside empirical evidence from around the world to establish synergies and trade-offs between various targets. The Insights Reports help to identify the potential targets to be used as departure points for policy pathways. In the case of Bangladesh, the report identified the following four SDG targets:

- Target 1.1: Eradicate extreme poverty
- Target 8.1: Sustainable economic growth
- Target 8.5: Full employment and decent work with equal pay
- Target 10.1: Reduce income

inequalities Building on the achievements already made on poverty reduction and successful public programs like the "Skills for Employment Investment Programme" and the "Employment Generation Programme for the Poorest," the report recommends further investment in income-generation activities of the poor, as well as tackling multidimensional deprivations and vulnerabilities. These investments could create positive synergies and multiplier effects on other SDGs, including those related to health, water and sanitation, productivity through education, entrepreneurship, and overall economic growth.

Concurrently, it is important to consider potential trade-offs and mitigation measures, as these interventions can strain water resources increase pressure on water conservation, and degrade natural habitats and biodiversity. Thus, according to the Integrated SDG Insights Report for Bangladesh, poverty eradication policies should also promote responsible use of natural resources and develop biodiversity-resilient sustainable urbanization.

macroeconomic stability in general. Maintaining this pace will help to further achieve goals like poverty eradication, better health outcomes, energy efficiency, infrastructure, and technological innovation.

However, the trade-offs of economic growth include pollution-related deaths and illnesses due to hazardous chemicals and byproducts, and environmental damage to air, water and soil, and water ecosystems, gravely impacting SDGs. It is, therefore, crucial to count on policies emphasizing green growth, circular economy, climate resilience, and disaster loss recovery, as well as sustainable housing, among the economic growth measures.

### THE NEXT BIG LIFT: FROM COMMITMENTS TO ACTIONS

There is no doubt of Bangladesh's commitment to Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. This was reinforced during the SDG Summit held in September 2023 with national commitments to SDG transformation in 1) social protection and jobs, 2) essential services and transforming education, 3) energy for all and shift to renewables, 4) securing food, water, and sanitation systems, 5) digital transformation, 6) protecting biodiversity and nature, 7) gender equality, and 8) disaster risk reduction. The country also committed to improving the institutional arrangements for a) data ecosystems for monitoring and reporting, b) public sector capabilities for implementation, c) financing needs and mechanisms, and d) awareness raising and localization plans.

The level of ambition of these SDG commitments aligns with the goals to reach Upper Middle-Income country (UMIC) status by 2031 and developed country status by 2041. However, key intermediate milestones include a smooth transition from Least Developed Country (LDC) status, set for November 2026, with multiple concessions and other preferential treatments phasing out.

To successfully achieve LDC graduation by 2026, the SDGs by 2030, and UMIC status by 2031, Bangladesh will have to move from commitments to accelerated actions, policies and interventions, and financing, alongside the necessary reforms. There is no time to waste. Business as usual will not produce the much-needed results to meet these ambitions.

The government that formed following the January 7 elections, has a renewed opportunity to reshape and refine the development course of Bangladesh. A few days before the election, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed a desire to correct past mistakes. Bangladesh and its partners should therefore, press ahead with new impetus to accelerate reforms that will help the country achieve Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, ensuring progress and prosperity for all.

The SDGs have the potential to be the means and the motivation. As the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres emphasized, "The SDGs, aren't just a list of goals. They carry the hopes, dreams, rights, and expectations of people— everywhere." The United Nations Development Programme, together with Bangladesh's multilateral partners and bilateral, is ready to support Bangladesh for its next big lift.



The Turag River is shrinking and gradually diminishing due to illegal sand mining activities. Photo taken from Amin Bazar Point.

PHOTO: STAR

is similarly concerning. The 2023 SDG Progress Report by the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UN ESCAP) reveals that the region has achieved only 14 percent progress towards the goals, and at the current pace, it would take another 42 years to achieve the SDGs in the region.

From some perspectives, the SDG progress in Bangladesh is not that grim. The UN ESCAP SDG Gateway highlights that the country has demonstrated notable performance in 31 percent of all 248 indicators. A much better-performing rate, if compared to the averages in the region and the world. Furthermore, Bangladesh is mentioned as one of the countries making better progress than the regional average on SDG 7 on Affordable and Clean Energy, and SDG 4 on Quality of Education. However, there is still much to do, as 11 percent of the indicators are stagnant, 14 percent of them are regressing, and there is insufficient data to assess progress on the remaining 44 percent.



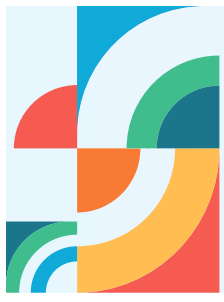
SDG Tracker webpage reports progress in only 8 out of the 39 targets adopted as national priorities. On the other hand, 4

of fronts. To start with, there is an urgent need to strengthen up-to-date and periodic data generation. It will be hard to

economic growth Target 8.5: Full employment and decent work with equal pay Target 10.1: Reduce income

Economic growth in Bangladesh has improved a number of socioeconomic indicators and contributed to





# Writing just climate transition: A reporter's notes



MD TAHMID ZAMI  
is a Climate and Just  
Transition Reporter.

**Journalists need to guard against such active or passive attempts at platform capture and instead seek to cultivate a media ecology that harnesses fairness and objectivity. Raising questions about the actions of powerful actors is thus stock-in-trade for climate journalism.**

MD TAHMID ZAMI

In his work on the climate crisis, historian Dipesh Chakrabarty speaks of two kinds of time — a human time of phenomenologically meaningful events that converged a few centuries ago into a globality on the back of techno-economic transformations, and a deeper geobiological time of the planet that is not centered on humanity. The human-centric globe — made up of nation-states, corporations, and social groups — is now trying to cobble together a climate transition to prevent the ruination of its deeper planetary entanglements necessary for its survival. It is now dawning on the modern, globalized humanity — a 'planetary force' — that they need to wield their agency for reining in the ruinous processes of climate change, biodiversity loss, and manifold ways of degrading our habitat.

Climate journalists grapple with the asynchrony of these two timelines. They chronicle on the one hand how the evermore rapid and irreversible heating up of the atmosphere is harming the earth's human and non-human denizens, and on the other hand, how actors with decisive power are timing their responses for containing the threat. The crucial problem, Chakrabarty tells us, is that while the earth's 'system' is arguably one, humanity is not one in any conceivably concrete way.

Humans are, thus, a pharmakonic agency who now have a Noah-like, messianic responsibility of "katechoning" the coming great extinction or omnicide — if only they could unite and enact their agency as a concrete-universal. Dipesh Chakrabarty urges us to make kin across our myriad differences based on our being common as "earthbound" creatures.

One climate problem and



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

future are often stacked against each other and the fairness of any action could be on that account contested. The justness of the climate transition is thus, a political problem.

The concept of just transition had its origin in labor activism in the 1980s in the United States, where the main concern was whether the environmental transition would negatively affect workers. Linking climate change and labor rights is thus a crucial originary aspect of just transition. In places like Bangladesh, the climate-labor nexus is not well integrated either in policy-making or development programming given the often fragmented pattern of governance. As a climate-vulnerable land and a peripheral economy, Bangladesh has moved fast to develop a set of detailed strategies and policies for tackling climate challenges, but there is no adequate policy guidance on how workers of industries like the apparel sector would be protected

main types of climate action: cutting carbon emissions, helping people cope with rising hazards, and instituting reparations for the harms people nevertheless suffer due to climate change. Changes are traced in a wide array of sectors like energy, industry, agriculture, transport, and so on.

A key metric of just transition is counting and weighing the brown jobs in fossil-fueled sectors that will have to be phased out as opposed to the green or mixed jobs that should be phased in as decent livelihoods. Given the sprawling informality in peripheral economies, 'green jobs' can be sometimes hard to count or measure, and a broader notion of livelihood may be more useful if it encompasses the domestic sphere as well where many women "give" unpaid labor and care.

Building upon such caveats and correctives, the scope of 'just transition' has over time expanded beyond climate-labor linkage and turned into a broader intersectional problem that pays attention to gender, class, race, indigeneity, and other potential forms of differentiability that present myriad forms of otherness within the human family. Indeed, the very concept "communities" — in sociological parlance *gemeinschaft* — seen as survivors as well as agents concerning the climate crisis, is necessarily sublated with the intersectional problem of just transition, since the same solutions to climate-induced problems can affect men and women, the rich and the poor, or urban and rural people differently.

In the international political economy made up of rich and poor nations, just transition is also linked with international climate justice. As Chakrabarty mentions in relation to countries like India or China — these countries claim a certain "carbon space" for raising their socio-economic levels while the planetary climate problem should be primarily taken care of by the rich countries. Meanwhile, richer countries point at the growing share of carbon emissions by developing giants. This rift — annually

dramatized in the COP debates — relativizes the link between climate and development. What is true for developing giants is also relevant for Bangladesh, *mutatis mutandis*, a country that aspires to become a developed country by 2041 with extensive urbanization and significant growth of per capita energy use. Chakrabarty argues that such national developmental aspirations should not merely be read off as mimetic desires passively modeled on original Western modernity, but should be understood as the non-West's self-fashioning (repetition as difference). This suggestion alerts us to how the intra-national, national, and international collide in the space of the complex political ontology of the climate-development nexus.

The often-paradoxical entanglement of developmental telos and climatic nightmares entails the further question of just adaptation. As geographer Kacia Paprocki warns, the epistemology of climate action itself can be geared toward particular teleologies of what is viable and nonviable in the imaginable future. Epistemic biases and vested interests of powerful actors involved in knowledge production and ground-level interventions can often lead to what Paprocki calls anticipatory ruin, i.e., the adaptive process itself precipitating the ruin it sought to help people against. Having done her ethnographic work in coastal Bangladesh and West Bengal, she notes that sometimes key adaptation measures demanded by the marginalized communities — such as peasants calling for land redistribution — are not even considered as an option. Ideas like participatory planning, locally led adaptation, or engaging community-based organizations are salutary if people on the ground can be critical of the processes without fearing punitive consequences. Community voices should not be filtered and curated only to suit preconceived solutions.

In this complex unfolding, the media's role is primarily to represent what is happening objectively and impartially. However, what happens on the

ground is entangled with how people think about what exists and what needs to be done. Language and concepts are essential ontological tools that shape our practice, and media can have an important role in setting agendas and framing issues as they make choices about the representations. In other words, beyond reporting just transition, the media itself is a secondary actor in enabling just transition, triggering conversations that would otherwise not happen — bringing together perspectives from actors, experts, and marginalized people. Media can shine a spotlight on the invisible and the subaltern as a matter of affirmative justice by curating and counter-curating the voices of the most vulnerable groups.

A major challenge for reporting just transition arises from the phatic and the performative conditions of reporting. Institutions that can provide or gatekeep access to information may often seek to attach strings while granting access, expecting favorable reporting in return. A related phenomenon is what media observers informally call "churnalism", whereby sections of media uncritically derive their stories from motivated or one-sided content developed by the PR wings of a business, a ministry, or a lobby group — a pattern that would reduce news production itself to a phatic token of exchange. Journalists need to guard against such active or passive attempts at platform capture and instead seek to cultivate a media ecology that harnesses fairness and objectivity.

Raising questions about the actions of powerful actors is thus stock-in-trade for climate journalism. A fundamental insight of the environmental movement was that powerful economic actors (e.g., large corporations) often treat the costs of their ecological footprint as an externality, but such externalization may also assume international dimensions. As the geographer Laurie Parsons argued: rich countries often exported carbon-emitting production activities abroad, and since climate accounting ignores

consumption-based emissions, this helped them appear cleaner than they are. Recent legislation in Europe and the US holding corporations responsible for supply chain emissions (scope 3) are important steps towards addressing this inequity.

Aside from these universal aspects of climate journalism, there are also deep asymmetries across societies that journalism needs to be sensitive to. One such asymmetry pertains to the realm of language. There is no justice beyond the realm of language, even though justice is inevitably elusive to hegemonically-configured language. Most of the discursive transactions on climate change happen in particular Western languages, while vernacular languages are often relegated to the task of informing, calquing, and catching up with those privileged language transactions. The up-translation of vernacular phenomenologies of climate change from around the world into English, its processing up there, and then, its down-translation filtering back into vernaculars is itself an interesting process whose fairness bears examination: what gets translated and what gets lost or how lived experiences are processed across idioms and institutional habitues are essential considerations for academic, journalistic and other epistemic work concerned with just transition.

To return to the original theme of human disunity, any "unjust" transition is a sacrificial process of scapegoating vulnerable others — human or non-human beings who cannot articulate their victimhood — to the unfolding planetary catastrophe. Yet, these sacrificial politics are unsustainable and self-defeating as powerful sacrificers and the powerless sacrificed are ultimately beings in common. The climate journalist's task in just transition is to include the voices of those facing the existential risk of being dispensed with. That is how journalism could contribute its two cents for ecological accountability within and across borders.



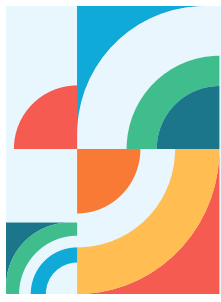
PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

disunited humanity: that is where 'just transition' comes into the picture. Indeed, even if the world united in making timely and transformative decisions about containing the climate crisis, the "how" of the process could still be a divisive matter as different interests and desires about our climate

from climate hazards like heat or flooding, or how industry and local governments could join hands to create decent adaptation opportunities for climate migrants in cities and towns.

In just transition newsrooms, the intersectional lens is applied in making news about the three





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# Improving the Human Development Index: The Bangladesh perspective



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schooling and expected years of schooling; and a decent standard of living, measured by gross national income per capita. The theoretical maximum value of the HDI is 1.0.

Over the years, Bangladesh has made tremendous progress on economic and human development fronts, as measured by the HDI. From 1990 to 2019, Bangladesh's HDI improved from 0.394 to 0.632 – a nearly

three-fifth increase. In fact, with China leading the race, Bangladesh is one of the top five countries in terms of the largest absolute gains in the HDI score during that period. Over the last 30 years, Bangladesh has moved to the medium human development category from the low human development category.

And on many human development fronts, its

progress has been better than its neighbors. Bangladesh has achieved a life expectancy at birth of nearly 73 years, compared to nearly 70 years in India and 67 years in Pakistan. In 2019, the under-5 mortality rate per 1,000 live births was 31 in Bangladesh, 34 in India, and 67 in Pakistan respectively. Its mean years of schooling at 6.2 years is better than that of Pakistan (5.2 years) and Nepal

(5.0 years).

When the male and female HDI of Bangladesh are compared, in 2019, while the HDI value for women in Bangladesh was 0.596, that of men was 0.660. The overall Gender Development Index (GDI) score for Bangladesh in 2019 was 0.904, higher than those of India (0.820) and Pakistan (0.745). Even though both Bangladesh and India started from the same GDI score (0.702) in 1995, by 2019, Bangladesh surpassed India, reflecting better progress in gender equality in human development, as measured by GDI.

The potential gains in human development are sometimes lost because of existing socio-economic inequalities. When measured by the income-inequality adjusted HDI (IHDI), Bangladesh loses 24 percent of its overall HDI. However, the good news is that during the last decade (2010-2019), the IHDI value of Bangladesh increased from 0.387 to 0.478, implying that inequality in human development declined during that period.

On the health front also, Bangladesh has made notable progress. During the last three decades, (1990-2019), Bangladesh reduced its infant mortality rate from nearly 100 per 1,000 live births to just

21 per 1,000 live births: the maternal mortality rate from 165 per 100,000 live births, down from 594 deaths per 100,000 live births. The country has also fared better in child immunization. The diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus (DPT) immunization rate now cover 98 percent of children aged 12-23 months. The situation of child nutrition has improved substantially in Bangladesh. During the period 1990-2019, the prevalence of stunting in children declined from 55 percent to 28 percent, and the incidence of underweight children reduced from 56 percent to 22.8 percent. Over the years, Bangladesh has successfully reduced its total fertility rate (TFR) from 4.5 births in 1990 to 2.04 births in 2019.

The country has also made notable progress in the area of education. The adult literacy rate in the country has improved to 74 percent in 2018 from just 35 percent in 1990. Between 1990 and 2019, the net primary enrolment rose from 75 percent to 97 percent, and the secondary enrolment up from less than 20 percent to 66 percent. One remarkable progress has been in female secondary education enrolment and in that indicator, Bangladesh has done better

SEE PAGE 9

**Even with all the phenomenal human progress over the years, Bangladesh still faces several human development challenges. Some of the challenges represent lingering challenges, like poverty; some deepening challenges, like climate change; and some emerging challenges like pandemics.**

People are the real wealth of a nation. The fundamental objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy a long, healthy, and creative life. Human development is simply defined as a process of enlarging choices and creating opportunities for everyone. In the ultimate analysis, human development is the development of the people, development for the people, and development by the people. The human development framework has also introduced a composite index—the Human Development Index (HDI) for assessing achievements in basic dimensions of human development. It consists of three basic dimensions of human development—a long and healthy life, measured by life expectancy at birth; knowledge, measured by mean years of



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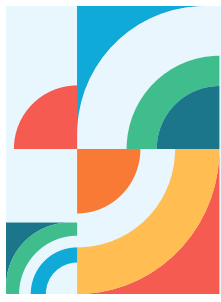
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# READYING FOR THE NEXT BIG LEAP

## Improving the Human Development Index: The Bangladesh perspective

**Over the years, even though remarkable progress has been made in the area of women's empowerment, women still face several deprivations. About 58 percent of women face domestic violence by their intimate partners.**

FROM PAGE 8  
than countries like India and Pakistan. One of the major achievements in education is reducing the drop-out rates from around 50 percent in 2005 to below 18 percent in 2019. Even though over the past 50 years, Bangladesh has made impressive progress in overall human development, the achievements have been uneven across several planes – socio-economic groups, regions, gender, and rural-urban divide, and so on. Such disparities are also prominent in various human development areas. Thus, in 2019, while 85 percent of the babies born to the richest 20 percent of the population were delivered by a skilled professional, the corresponding figure for the poorest quintile is only 32 percent. The same year, the literacy rate for the population aged 7 years and more was about 75 percent in Barisal, but only 60 percent in



Korail Slum, Dhaka

PHOTO: SK. ENAMUL HAQUE

challenges, the Covid-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented human development crisis for Bangladesh. In the future, pandemics may appear as another emerging challenge. The global economic system has become more fragile and inward-looking because of the COVID-19 pandemic, global conflicts, and extreme nationalism. Bangladesh may adversely be affected by these emerging challenges. Similarly, while we celebrate the graduation of Bangladesh from a low-income country into a middle-income country, we should also be aware and mindful of its implications – lesser tariff advantages; higher imports, increased non-concessional aid or grant. These would be emerging challenges for enhancing human development in Bangladesh.

In conclusion, human development for everyone in Bangladesh is not a dream, but a reality. In January 1972, while he was returning from his captivity to an independent Bangladesh, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman described his homecoming as a journey from darkness to light, from captivity to freedom, from desolation to hope. Today, hopes are within the reach of Bangladesh to realize. The nation can build what has been achieved and can attain what once seemed unattainable. For days to come, the country will ensure a journey from deprivation to prosperity, from challenges to opportunities, from ideas to actions. And in this journey, if those who are the farthest behind are reached first, none will be left behind.



gender disparities in human development. Even though gender parity has been achieved in primary and secondary level enrolment, drop-out rates remain higher for girls than boys. At the tertiary level of education, the female rate of enrolment in 2017 was 17 percent, as opposed to 24 percent for their male counterparts. The female labor force participation rate in the country is only 36 percent, while that of males is 81 percent. The women's share of employment in senior and middle management was just about 12 percent in 2017.

Sylhet. In 2019, the mean years of schooling among girls in Bangladesh was slightly over 4 years, but that of boys was 6 years.

Like any other country, Bangladesh also experiences

Even with all the phenomenal human progress over the years, Bangladesh still faces several human development challenges. Some of the challenges represent lingering challenges, like poverty; some deepening challenges, like climate change;

and some emerging challenges like pandemics.

In terms of lingering challenges, over the years, Bangladesh has been able to quantitatively expand its basic social services, yet the quality of such services has remained a lingering concern. This is true of health and educational services. Thus, expansions of services in many cases have been achieved with qualitative compromises. Given the current situation and the projected demographic dividend till 2030, ensuring jobs for people, particularly young people remain a lingering challenge. Over the years, even though remarkable progress has been made in the area of women's empowerment, women still face several deprivations. About 58 percent of women face domestic violence by their intimate partners. Furthermore,

for every 100 unemployed male youths, there are 150 female youths. Of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) graduates, only 8 percent are women. One in every three women does not have access to financial institutions with mobile banking services.

In terms of deepening challenges, inequality has become the defining issue of the Bangladeshi society. In Bangladesh, the Gini index of income, a measure of income inequality, has increased from 0.39 in the early 1990s to 0.48 in 2016, suggesting an increasingly uneven income distribution over time. But the inequalities have also expanded in non-income areas, such as health, education, ownership of natural resources, etc. as well. Furthermore, there are inequalities not only in terms of outcomes but also in terms of

opportunities – opportunities in health and education, as well as in productive resources, such as credit. Climate change-induced extreme weather events are estimated to have caused an estimated yearly loss of GDP of \$1.7 billion. Loss of arable lands and livelihoods, displacement of people, loss of agricultural production, and food insecurity are caused by an increased frequency and intensity of various natural disasters, induced by climate change. In the ultimate analysis, climate change is not only an environmental challenge, but it has become a deepening human development challenge for Bangladesh. The issue of governance, efficiency, and effectiveness of the institutional structure of Bangladesh remains a deepening challenge.

In terms of emerging



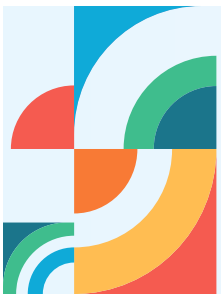
### BGMEA SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGIC VISION: 2030



BGMEA's Sustainability Strategic Vision 2030 outlines the key ESG priorities for the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh on its path towards sustainability. Aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this vision underscores BGMEA's commitment to fostering a more environmentally conscious and socially responsible future for the country's garment industry.







# Utilization of marine resources for the benefit of Bangladesh



**REAR ADMIRAL  
MD. KHURSHED  
ALAM (RETD)**  
is a Secretary,  
Maritime Affairs Unit,  
Bangladesh Foreign  
Ministry.

paints. However, looking ahead to the mid-century, meeting the needs for food, jobs, energy, raw materials, and economic growth will be essential to sustain an anticipated population level of between 9 and 10 billion people.

Bangladesh is endowed with a vast marine ecosystem. Following an international legal ruling, led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, on

rich reserves of both living and non-living resources in its extended coastal and maritime areas, presenting significant opportunities for development. The United Nations Sustainable Development agenda prioritizes the conservation, sustainability, and utilization of oceans, seas, and marine resources, particularly for the benefit of least developed countries. This

areas encompass oil, gas, sea salt, and freshwater. Renewable resources, vital for sustainable development, include wind, water current, and solar energy. These resources support various sectors such as maritime transport, tourism, industries, ports, shipyards, shipbreaking, agriculture, aquaculture, islands, coastal protection, carbon storage, and waste disposal. Among living

plant species of 245 genera, with significant economic value. Additionally, the mangrove habitat supports a diverse array of wildlife, including 53 species of pelagic fish, 124 species of demersal fish, 24 shrimp species, 58 wildlife species, and 270 bird species.

Saint Martin's Island, covering approximately 7.5 square kilometers, stands as Bangladesh's sole coral-bearing island. Researchers have identified four coral species belonging to the Acropora genus and documented 66 coral species in total. Furthermore, the island boasts a rich diversity of seaweeds, with around 20-22 species present, the most abundant being Hypnea.

The nearshore and offshore regions along Bangladesh's coast hold potential reserves of oil, gas, and commercially important heavy minerals. Notably, 17 deposits containing valuable minerals such as Zircon, Rutile, Ilmenite, Leucocene, Kyanite, Garnet, Magnetite, and Monazite have been discovered in beach sands stretching from Patenga to Teknaf. Sea salt production through solar evaporation techniques presents another economic opportunity, with approximately 67,757 hectares utilized for salt cultivation in coastal areas. Despite this, Bangladesh still imports salt, indicating the potential for further increasing domestic production to meet demand.

Bangladesh's coastal areas boast unique attractions, including Cox's Bazar, the world's longest sea beach, and the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest globally. However, the potential of coastal and marine tourism remains largely untapped, as reflected in Bangladesh's tourism and recreation performance score, currently standing at only 8%. Additionally, the country's commercial use of marine waters is facilitated through four international ports: Chittagong, Payra, Matarbari, and Mongla.

A comprehensive assessment of all marine resources in Bangladesh is hindered by data limitations. The total marine fish catch reached 564,687 tons during 2017-18, accounting for 16% of the total fish production.

Both inland and marine

fish catches have shown a long-term increase. Over 0.8 million individuals are directly and indirectly involved in the marine fisheries sector for their livelihoods. Presently, there are 225 industrial trawlers, including 24 mid-water trawlers, and approximately 38,000 mechanized and non-mechanized boats operating in marine waters. However, deep-sea and tuna fishing are non-existent. Bangladesh boasts the world's largest shipbreaking industry, employing over 200,000 people. Currently, 10,000 inland and coastal ships, along with 102 foreign-going vessels, transport more than 90% of total oil products, 80% of cargo, and 35% of passengers domestically and internationally. The country also hosts over 10 shipyards constructing ships of international standards.

In Cox's Bazar, approximately 263 square kilometers of land and around 20 square kilometers in Chittagong are dedicated to sea salt production. This sector generates over 5 million jobs and contributes approximately \$35,313,000 to \$41,198,500 annually to the national economy. A target of producing 1.8 million tons of salt annually from a 247 square kilometer area in Cox's Bazar has been set, sufficient to meet domestic demand. Salinity in salt pans provides an ideal environment for artemia culture and cyst production, with a current market price ranging from \$50 to \$100 per kilogram.

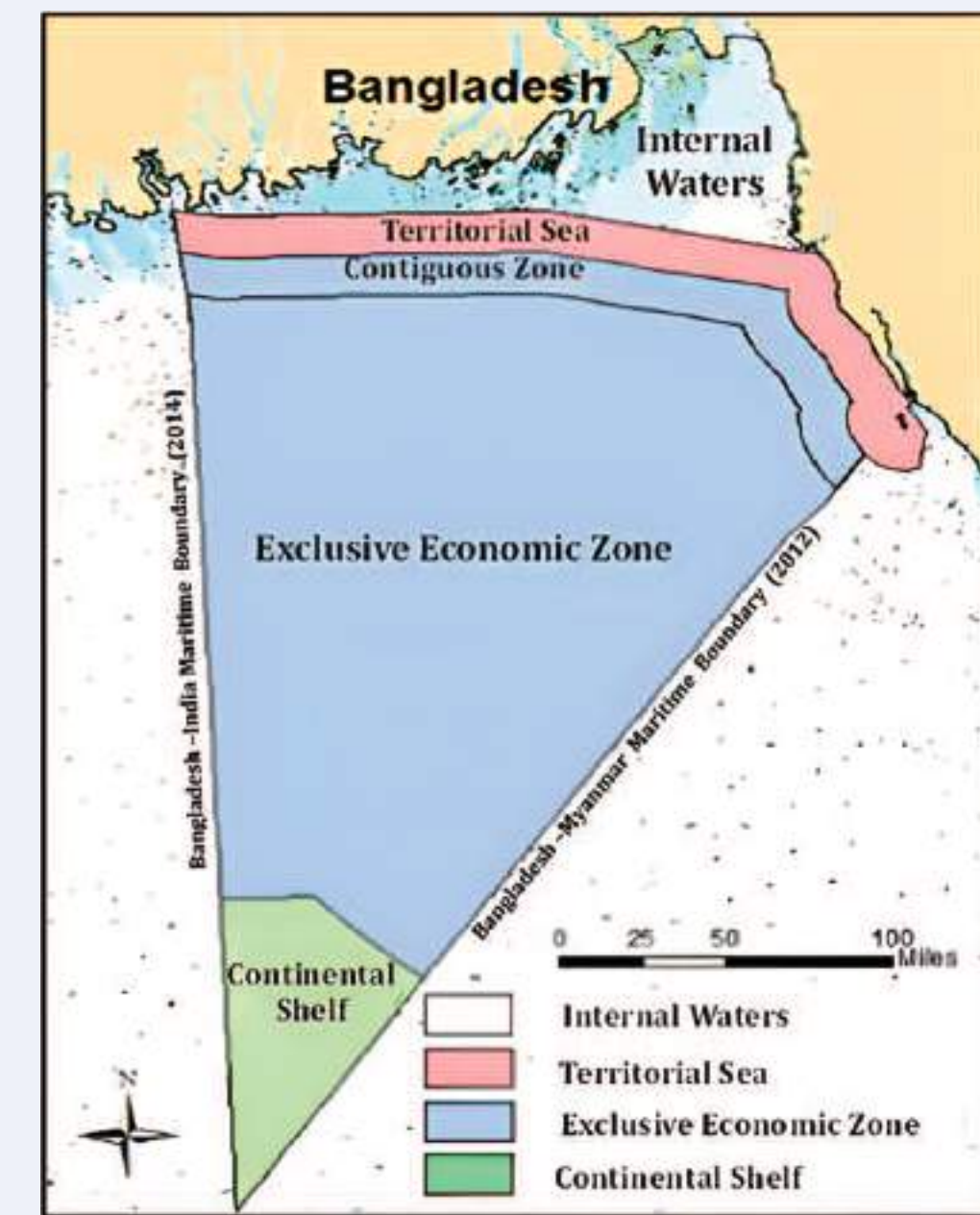
In Bangladesh, it is projected that 40% of productive land in the southern region could be lost due to a 65cm sea-level rise by the 2080s, affecting approximately 20 million people already grappling with saline water intrusion impacting their drinking water supply. Moreover, approximately 1 million hectares of land in southern coastal areas are at risk from saline water intrusion.

Seaweed cultivation costs \$2.4 per square meter, with cultivated seaweed selling at \$7.8 per square meter, yielding a net profit of \$5.4 per square meter. Hence, only 34 square meters of seaweed cultivable area would suffice to cover the monthly expenses of a typical family. Non-target marine fish species like goby fish can be

SEE PAGE 12

Oceans, covering 71% of the planet's surface and containing 97% of its water, serve as a sanctuary for 2.2 million species. The utilization of marine resources, encompassed by the Blue Economy, aims to bolster economic growth by sustainably harnessing oceanic resources to foster social inclusion, enhance livelihoods, and meet increasing job demands while ensuring the environmental sustainability of ocean and coastal waters. This approach supports food security, the management and protection of marine environments, the creation of high-value employment opportunities, and diversification to exploit new resources such as energy, pharmaceuticals, protein sources, deep-sea minerals, security services for human welfare, and measures to combat climate change resilience. The estimated value-added output of the ocean-based Blue Economy exceeds 1.5 trillion USD, representing approximately 2.5% of the world's gross economic value.

Overall, the marine fisheries sector contributes a substantial \$230 billion to the global economy, directly or indirectly supporting the livelihoods of 9% of the world's population. Additionally, oceans serve as vital transportation routes, facilitating approximately 80% of global trade in goods. Coastal tourism plays a pivotal role in driving economic growth for numerous coastal and island nations, generating an annual revenue of about \$161 billion globally. Furthermore, the emerging field of "ocean energy," including aquatic biofuels and renewable energies, holds promise as a significant future source to meet the world's energy demands. The ocean also harbors potential for various valuable industrial products such as pharmaceuticals, antibiotics, antifreeze, and



Maritime boundary of Bangladesh

disputed maritime areas with neighboring countries India and Myanmar, Bangladesh's maritime territory is estimated to cover 118,813 sq. km, including a continental shelf spanning approximately 37,000 sq. km with depths of up to 50m. Bangladesh boasts

agenda emphasizes sustainable management practices for fisheries, aquaculture, and tourism, aiming to maximize economic benefits while preserving marine ecosystems for future generations.

Non-living resources in Bangladesh's coastal

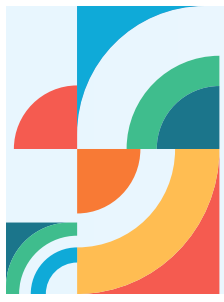
coastal resources, mangroves stand out as the second most important in Bangladesh. The coastal region boasts an impressive 531,000 hectares of mangroves, with 99,000 hectares designated as 'the Sunderbans'. These ecosystems harbor 345

**Bangladesh's coastal areas boast unique attractions, including Cox's Bazar, the world's longest sea beach, and the Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest globally. However, the potential of coastal and marine tourism remains largely untapped, as reflected in Bangladesh's tourism and recreation performance score, currently standing at only 8%.**



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS





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12

## Utilization of marine resources for the benefit of Bangladesh

**Establishing a robust set of mandatory environmental regulations to promote sustainable use of marine resources across all operational domains is imperative. Additionally, developing localized strategies to bolster a sustainable blue economy falls within the purview of ocean governance initiatives.**

FROM PAGE 10

utilized for poultry feed production, with approximately 11,185 metric tons of prawn grow-out feed producible from 3,699 metric tons of dried goby fish, selling at \$0.24 to \$0.25 per kilogram.

Additionally, with a wind velocity of 7.34 meters per second, the extractable wind energy through windmills amounts to 0.0279 kilowatt-hours from a 1 square meter area. Thus, a family would require approximately 8,853 square meters to meet their monthly electricity demand of 247 kilowatt-hours. In Bangladesh's coastal areas, daily sunshine hours vary between 3 to 11 hours, with insolation ranging from 3.8 to 6.4 kilowatt-hours per square meter per day on average. Therefore, solar panels covering a 50 square meter area would suffice for a family's household electricity needs. Additionally, tidal and wave energy, with tidal ranges of 4 to 5 meters and wave heights of 0.5 to 2.4 meters respectively, present further



PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

of sea-based activities, and maritime monitoring to gain insights into oceanic dynamics. To implement this framework effectively, integration of existing institutions is essential, and the establishment of a multidisciplinary maritime division, drawing from the experience of the Blue Economy Cell over the past decade, is recommended. Identifying bottlenecks will further facilitate cooperation, coordination, and exchange of best practices for sustainable blue economy management.

Coastal and maritime tourism, fueled by the extraordinary beauty and rich diversity of coastal areas, has emerged as a crucial sector attracting both domestic and international holidaymakers. Strengthening the blue economy serves as a long-term strategy for promoting sustainable economic development and ensuring livelihood security in Bangladesh. By harnessing proper strategies, the full potential of the blue economy can be realized, making the marine ecosystem a primary driver of the national economy. However, achieving a sustainable blue economy necessitates the development of a strategic planning and management framework, with a particular focus on sectors with high economic potential such as fisheries, shipping, shipbuilding, coastal and maritime tourism, marine biotechnology, ocean energy, mangrove forest preservation, and renewable resources. These efforts are integral to fostering smart, sustainable, and inclusive economic development in Bangladesh.



renewable energy options in coastal areas.

The coastal region harbors islands with significant economic potential, offering opportunities for innovative management approaches. One such approach is the conversion of existing islands into "Model

Islands." This concept involves optimizing economic returns by strategically utilizing multiple resources with available technological inputs while preserving the environmental integrity of the islands. Desalination of water emerges as a viable solution, particularly for remote and rural areas where small quantities of potable water are required. Solar stills, such as the single-effect basin-type, have traditionally been the most cost-effective method for producing drinkable water using solar energy. Although daily production is limited due to latent heat condensation rejection, typically yielding less than 4-5 liters per square meter with a specific energy consumption of around 7000 kJ/kg, the implementation of

appropriate techniques can yield significant economic benefits in this sector.

Promoting the blue economy and advancing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 14, are closely intertwined objectives. Therefore, marine resources should be integrated into development planning at both local and national levels to foster the blue economy and achieve SDGs. The escalating pressures from population growth and the increasing demands for jobs and food underscore the urgency of aligning development efforts with SDGs.

Ocean governance entails managing and utilizing ocean resources in a manner that ensures the ocean's health, productivity, safety, security,

and resilience. Adopting a holistic approach that addresses all marine and maritime issues is essential for effective ocean governance in Bangladesh. Establishing a robust set of mandatory environmental regulations to promote sustainable use of marine resources across all operational domains is imperative. Additionally, developing localized strategies to bolster a sustainable blue economy falls within the purview of ocean governance initiatives.

The Chittagong port annually handles over 4000 ships and 100 oil tankers, while the Mongla port manages about 1000 ships. Approximately 3000 power-driven trawlers and boats operate in fishing and shrimping activities within the Bay of

Bengal. However, shipbreaking activities in Chittagong result in the discharge of significant quantities of heavy metals, waste oil, and other pollutants during washing and dismantling operations. Oil spills from ships have severe consequences on the biotic community, particularly mangroves, which are highly susceptible to oil exposure, leading to their deterioration and potential death within weeks to months.

Research activities play a crucial role in fostering the certainty and security of sustainable blue economy growth. Priorities include enhancing ocean literacy to improve understanding of marine information, spatial planning for efficient and sustainable management

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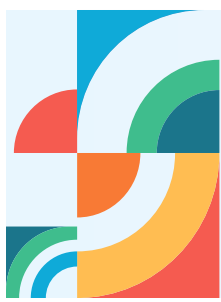
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# READYING FOR THE NEXT BIG LEAP

# Transforming education: Five tasks



**MANZOOR AHMED** is an Emeritus Professor at Brac University, Chair of Bangladesh ECD Network, Adviser to Campaign for Popular Education, and Associate Editor, International Journal of Educational Development.

## IDENTIFYING CRITICAL TASKS

Which five tasks should be on top of the list of someone appointed as the education tsar of Bangladesh? The question was posed by Dr. Binayak Sen, Director General of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in a public discussion about this writer's recent book *Ekush Shotoke Bangladesh – Shikkhar Rupantor (Bangladesh in the 21st Century – Transformation of Education)*, published by Prothoma.

My off-the-cuff response was two-fold. That reforming the education system, a complex and multi-dimensional area of national endeavor, called for more than "silver bullets" or ticking off a short list of specific actions. And, that educational leadership required collective consensus-building, rather than the mere inspiration of a supremo. I went on to say that areas of priorities in policy and actions have to be identified, a broad consensus built on these, and plans and strategies

formulated and implemented accordingly, in which committed and bold leadership would have a critical role. So would be good-faith political backing that supports the process of academics and professionals interacting with major stakeholders, while politicians and bureaucrats restrain their urge to micro-manage and make ad hoc interventions.

Grasping the large picture,

setting policies and goals based on this understanding, planning pragmatic short and longer-term actions accordingly, and implementing the actions effectively and in an accountable manner – this is what was discussed in the book on the subject of the transformation of education. Twenty action points were proposed as the distillation of what needed to be done in six major subsectors, from school

education to tertiary level and vocational skill development to madrasas. Also, included in this enumeration necessary actions in four cross-cutting areas, such as preparing the education workforce, moral and ethical development of the next generation, governance of the system, and financing the sector. A chapter of the book was devoted to each of these topics.

## PARTIAL VIEW AND REACTIVE RESPONSE

As argued in the book, the initiatives, and efforts in reforming and improving the education system of Bangladesh are characterized by three tendencies: a) fragmented and partial actions rather than strategies and actions based on a comprehensive view of the education sector, thus, neglecting the links to and

effects of specific steps on rest of the subsectors or the whole education sector; b) a reactive approach to symptoms of disease or manifestation of a problem rather than diagnosing and addressing the roots of the problem; and c) the habit of pursuing "within the box" familiar solutions for reform and change, without rocking the boat.

The fragmented, reactive, and "within-the-box" character of education development actions is reflected in some major features of the system in Bangladesh. First, we do not have an education sector development plan. There are proclamations regarding very general goals such as the Sustainable Development Education Goal (SDG4), the "smart Bangladesh" slogan, and a compilation of the two ministries' intentions in the five-year development plan document. In respect of actual activities, there are various subsector projects, such as those for primary and secondary education or parts of vocational and tertiary education. Missing is an overall education sector plan that ties together or guides various sub-sector activities that contribute to well-articulated and time-bound national education and human development objectives.

With assistance from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and UNESCO, a national team prepared a medium-term draft education



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SEE PAGE 14

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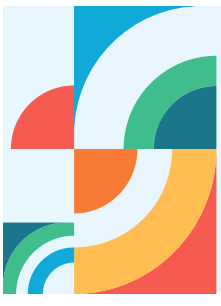
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## Transforming education: Five tasks

**The ambitious aim of curriculum revision and new textbooks is to equip the new generation with relevant skills and competencies for the 21st century, weaning them away from memorizing guidebooks and relying on private tutors and coaching centers to pass tests without real learning.**

FROM PAGE 13

sector plan in 2020, which remains a hardly noticed document due to a lack of interest and ownership by the two ministries of education. The draft sits on the website of GPE, an international education funder based in Washington DC, as a document sent as a draft by the former Minister of Education, but cannot be found on the website of either of the Education Ministries even as a provisional draft.

Secondly, the divided jurisdiction of education, especially school education, between two ministries unlike in any other country, has become a major obstacle to adopting a holistic and comprehensive view of K-12 school education. Bangladesh has accepted for a long time the state obligation to ensure quality school education for all children up to class VIII. Now under SDG4, it is also pledge-bound to provide equitable and free secondary education of acceptable quality to all children by 2030. However, the turf battle between the two ministries has thwarted concerted action to achieve universal education up to class VIII and preparing a plan to move towards fulfilling the goal of universal secondary



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON



PHOTO: UCEP

education. The divided jurisdiction is also partly an impediment to resolute leadership for preparing an education sector plan.

Thirdly, under the Awami League government, in power since 2009, the National Education Policy 2010 was adopted and endorsed by the Parliament. However, a coordinated and comprehensive action plan and mechanism for its implementation have not been taken up by the government in the last 15 years. As a result,

not much progress has been made concerning major objectives of the policy, such as ensuring school education of acceptable quality for all children adhering to minimum common standards of facilities, teaching staff, and a core curriculum shared by all; major moves towards decentralization of education governance and management; and significant departures in teachers' professional preparation, standards, performance and adequacy of their numbers.

Recognizing the complexity and barriers that have to be overcome to realize these objectives, the 2010 policy recommended the formation of a permanent, statutory education commission to monitor, guide, and report on the nation's progress toward implementing the policy objectives. The decision makers have remained averse to heeding this advice.

### FRAGMENTED APPROACH TO REFORMS

The pattern of partial, reactive,

and fragmented approaches to problems is illustrated by the new curriculum and textbooks for school education being rolled out in 2022. The ambitious aim of curriculum revision and new textbooks is to equip the new generation with relevant skills and competencies for the 21st century, weaning them away from memorizing guidebooks and relying on private tutors and coaching centers to pass tests without real learning. Major changes are foreseen in classroom pedagogy

and student assessment.

Outcomes somewhat similar to the above were also promised when national public exams were introduced at the end of Classes 5 and 8 in 2009 and 2010, and when "creative questions" began to be used in all public exams. The objectives of the initiatives or the theoretical justification for the public examinations and the creative questions (structured questions based on Bloom's taxonomy of knowledge used in many countries) were not wrong.

SEE PAGE 15



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- । চার্জমুক্ত
- । সাথে সাথেই অ্যাকাউন্ট নম্বর
- । শাখা হতে, পাই ব্যাংকিং অ্যাপসে এবং কার্ডে লেনদেনের সুবিধা
- । ফ্রি ডেবিট কার্ড ও চেক বই সুবিধা
- । বাংলা কিউআর কোডে লেনদেনের সুবিধা

যা প্রয়োজন



## ঘরে বসেই ব্যাংক অ্যাকাউন্ট খুলুন



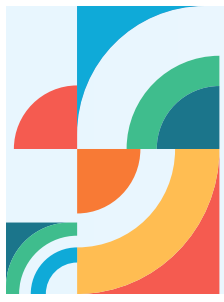
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## Transforming education: Five tasks

FROM PAGE 14

The past experiments did not work because the basic conditions for implementing the changes were not present in our school system. Most critically, the teachers were not prepared and did not have the skills and necessary motivation. They could not be trained to do their part and were not given the support and supervision needed. They were not motivated because of the adverse working conditions and lack of incentives to perform. Too meager public investments in education meant too large class sizes, poor physical conditions, and little by way of learning aids (other than textbooks, which apparently students did not want to use). It is often said that a major expansion of education has been bought cheaply by sacrificing learning outcomes for children. This situation has not changed enough to produce visible results.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

**The 2030 SDG agenda and the 2041 vision of reaching the status of a developed country call for wide-ranging change in the education scenario, but the pace and nature of change do not show that we are on track to bring about the envisioned difference.**

The newly appointed Minister of Education has promised to listen to stakeholders and experts beyond those who have been too closely involved with the present initiative to avert the looming risks to children. A pragmatic solution requires taking some time for reflection and learning and adjusting the timetable for rolling out the reforms.

**FIVE CRITICAL TASKS**  
So what about the five

critical tasks in education? As noted, silver bullets will not provide the solutions. At the same time, everything cannot be done all at once. Setting priorities, identifying catalytic measures that may trigger a chain of positive changes with cumulative results over time is necessary. In fact, the new curriculum and textbook initiatives, as well as other activities, such as the distribution of millions of free school textbooks at the beginning of each year, ICT-assisted multi-media classrooms, and monthly stipends to millions of primary and secondary students have been presented as game-changers in education. It did not quite turn out that way.

Each of the actions individually is important and has made a varying degree of difference in our school

education. But overall, these activities, individually or collectively, have not made a sufficient difference, beyond expanding access, in learning outcomes. As has been reported in official student assessments and other studies, the needle has not moved significantly concerning learning outcomes over the last three decades. More than half of the children completing primary education do not acquire a functional and self-sustaining level of literacy and numeracy. With this weak foundation, there is a knock-on negative effect at secondary and tertiary levels of education and vocational-technical skill formation. Evidence also suggests that education, with the predominance of private tutoring and coaching, has become more of a commodity in the last two decades, available only to those who can pay. It

appears that we are stuck in a "learning poverty" trap.

The 2030 SDG agenda and the 2041 vision of reaching the status of a developed country call for wide-ranging change in the education scenario, but the pace and nature of change do not show that we are on track to bring about the envisioned difference. As noted above, analyses of the education sub-sectors and the cross-cutting issues across the sector show evidence of the partial, reactive, and conventional 'within-box' activities in educational development that have not quite produced the desired results. A more comprehensive and holistic transformation of education has to be conceived, designed, and implemented. The priorities and strategies have to be set within a framework of transformative development. This is what is

attempted to be explained in the book on educational transformation and presented in the 20-point action agenda grouped under five themes - policy, goals, strategies, organizational capability, and political commitment. These themes help to define the five areas of critical tasks.

**1. Policy priority: Promoting an equitable society through education.** Education will be the instrument for combating disparity and discrimination in society and not the tool for aggravating and creating new inequality. This overarching policy priority would subsume as policy objectives enhancement of the public good character of education, and making the four fundamental principles of the constitution - nationalism, democracy, socialism, and secularism - the touchstones for policy guidance in education. Contemporary and contextual implications for the education of these generic concepts have to be worked out and reflected in policy and programs.

**2. Foundational goal: Implementing a time-bound plan for equitable and inclusive K-12 school education of acceptable quality for all children.** Sub-tasks related to this basic goal would be setting and achieving targets for early childhood development and preschool education, vocational-technical skill development, tertiary education, madrasa education, and lifelong learning. Universal school education is the foundation of the system.

**3. Key strategy: Strengthening the education workforce in their professional skills, motivation, performance and adequacy of numbers.** Ways have to be found within a ten-year time frame to attract to

the education workforce the brightest young people and keep them in the profession. Related strategic actions would be area-based decentralized education planning and management, shaping education response to climate change impact, and effective use of digital technology in education.

**4. Organizational capacity-building: Establishing district education authorities for delivering equitable K-12 education.** This would be the key element of education sector planning and management covering sub-sectors and cross-sectoral issues, bringing education and human capital development under one central ministerial authority, and creating a strengthened higher education commission.

**5. Political commitment: Vowing to promote academic autonomy of the education system and education institutions and protecting education from partisan and narrow political interventions.** Related tasks would be to establish a high-power permanent education commission, adopt a right-to-education law, and education resource mobilization for equitable and inclusive education with acceptable quality for all.

The five tasks and related sub-tasks do not by themselves constitute an action plan for educational transformation.

The 20-point action guides and five-point thematic priorities derived from critical analysis of subsectors and cross-sectoral areas can provide the building blocks of such a work plan with further priority setting and phasing of implementation.

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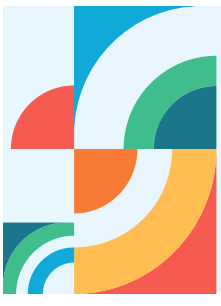
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- ভোক্তা, ক্ষুদ্র, মাঝারি, ক্ষুদ্র অর্থ প্রদান ও অর্থের ক্রিয়াকর্ম গ্রহণ
- সঞ্চয়ী, চলতি, এসএনসি ও স্কুল ব্যাংকিং হিসাব
- চলিফা, মাসিক ও মেয়াদী সঞ্চয় প্রকল্প হিসাব
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# READYING FOR THE NEXT BIG LEAP

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DHAKA WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 28, 2024

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## IN-DEPTH PLANNING AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION Keys to Bangladesh's mega projects



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to transform into a society in which techno-economic advancement will address the societal needs of the twenty-first century. Deep integration of physical space with digital cyberspace is on the horizon. For this to be achieved, several critical factors are meticulously weighed to ensure the optimal success of our mega-projects. Support for the agro-economy will be a focus.

**ADAPTABILITY AND FORWARD-THINKING**  
What may be deemed crucial infrastructure today might be obsolete in the next century. Without foresight, projects run the risk of becoming obsolete before their intended lifespan concludes. This underscores the importance of adaptability and forward-thinking in infrastructure planning to ensure relevance and

sustainability over time. In Bangladesh, mega-projects are developed strategically, anticipating future requirements in a phased manner. For instance, in the construction of a large bridge, provisions are made for cars and trains. The primary framework of these mega structures is built robustly for long-term durability, whereas consumable features designed for shorter life cycles are considered



PHOTO: NAIMUR RAHMAN

Purbachal Expressway, Sheikh Hasin Swarnari.

**What may be deemed crucial infrastructure today might be obsolete in the next century. Without foresight, projects run the risk of becoming obsolete before their intended lifespan concludes. This underscores the importance of adaptability and forward-thinking in infrastructure planning to ensure relevance and sustainability over time.**

Multiple mega-projects were initiated last year amid high expectations. In pursuit of these ambitious endeavors, Bangladesh has placed strong emphasis on careful decision-making, adopting a forward-thinking approach, engaging in extensive long-term planning, and ultimately formulating a comprehensive strategy for social integration. Through this integration, a significant portion of our large population struggling to achieve a quality of life, will need to quickly absorb new technologies, facilities, lifestyles, and amenities that they have been deprived of for generations. Faster absorption into society will hasten the economic returns of investments.

In the coming years, we anticipate stronger efforts, aiming to realize both national and global aspirations. We have



Dhaka Metro Rail Project.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

for eventual replacement with more substantial structures. The consumable parts of the design are adapted to the present vehicle types, allowing for modifications if heavy vehicles of a different kind emerge in the next two decades. This approach prevents economically unviable investments, such as installing heavy auxiliary elements prematurely.

**INVESTMENT**

In recent years, several infrastructure initiatives have been undertaken using public-private partnership (PPP) models, providing flexibility in execution through diverse approaches. In one scenario, the private sector covers construction costs through toll collections for a specified duration. Alternatively, the public partner may reimburse construction costs to the private investor in installments, contingent upon adherence

to agreed-upon performance criteria. When examining the terms and conditions of PPP projects, investments are consistently rooted in financial viability. Strategic investments are made, considering the significance of the national assets envisioned to be acquired through a PPP project with the foresight of its service lifetime.

**SOCIAL VIABILITY**

Social viability is an important aspect. Mega-projects, introduced through what we term 'soft openings' and gradual launches, execute a dual integration strategy: technical and social. For example, the metro rail's user base is steadily growing after overcoming the initial wave of use based on curiosity, reflecting a solid rising trend. This presents the possibility of faster social integration of the next metro

SEE PAGE 18



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THE HEIGHT OF SUCCESS



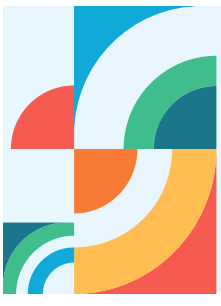
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## Keys to Bangladesh's mega projects

FROM PAGE 17

lines, which are now under construction. Understanding rules, maintenance, and safety measures have become integral to the operation. It is crucial that mega-projects, such as the metro rail, are not planned exclusively for a specific societal class; integration across all strata is essential. Rushing the integration process, akin to introducing a new house or car, risks a sunk investment. Therefore, a gradual approach, familiarizing people over time, is pivotal.

The integration strategy extends also to projects such as the Padma Bridge and the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel. The goal is to avoid immediate saturation upon opening, signaling a project's limitations in meeting future demands. The successful



Padma Bridge, the longest bridge in Bangladesh.

PHOTO: STAR

could expand lane capacities for a larger throughput. This stepwise investment strategy allows for adaptability and optimal resource utilization.

### COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

We are currently working with the City Corporation, and our plan is to improve footpaths for pedestrians. To enhance the productivity of the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) line and make metro projects suitable for wider user groups and income levels, it is crucial to widen footpaths, providing sufficient space in front of and behind them for people to walk comfortably. Pedestrian-friendly footpaths will enhance access to MRT stations.

including amenities such as benches, accommodating social activities, and providing users with free spaces to walk.

### ADOPT MASS TRANSPORT SYSTEM

With the gradual adoption of a mass transport system for a broader user group, the need for a vehicle carriageway is expected to diminish. Plans should be in place to enhance the adaptation of the mass transport system beyond the MRTs.

In a developed city, door-to-door car trips are seldom preferred by the majority of commuters. Walking, a universal mode of transport, is introduced at the beginning, in between, and at the end of

cost. Slowly, people will depend more on public transport, but at the moment, buses as public transport are not up to the mark. Currently, a significant number of people in the country use buses as public transport out of sheer necessity. Safety and comfort are compromised. However, the situation could be different. We are keen to witness the implementation of safe bus routes as public transport for everyone in all income groups and differently-abled user groups.

### LEARN, UNLEARN, AND RELEARN

There is a plan to implement dedicated Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lanes to aid metros. In London, bus lanes are on the left, adjacent to safely accessible footpaths, with no presence of slow-moving vehicles, such as rickshaws or rickshaw vans. Taxis are considered part of public transport, making them suitable for dedicated bus lanes. Taxi cabs can navigate these lanes efficiently, reaching certain destinations more quickly than personal cars. Since our driver seats are also on the right, if dedicated bus lanes are on the left, people can transfer easily to the footpath without the need for additional foot overbridges, particularly on roads where rickshaws and rickshaw vans are absent. However, the presence of rickshaws and rickshaw vans on the left side of the corridor may require a different solution. To thrive in the 21st century, we must learn, unlearn, and relearn.

After the construction of the Padma Bridge, the demand for launches and airplanes to commute to the Barishal division decreased. With the introduction of the metro, the

use of other less efficient modes of transportation may decrease on many routes. Dedicated bus lanes can be piloted on roads that are free from rickshaws and rickshaw vans. Where there is no metro, buses on dedicated lanes can be provided; these buses and metro should complement each other, offering similar comfort and safety levels. Introducing dedicated bus lanes from the airport to the Shahbagh crossing is a good choice to explore because we do not see any rickshaws or rickshaw vans on this corridor. Dedicated bus lanes, along with comfortable buses, will alleviate the pressure on the vehicle carriageway, especially when the inclination to use private cars is greatly reduced.

### EARTHQUAKE RESISTANT CONSTRUCTION

Most existing constructions may not withstand a strong earthquake, and our goal is for facilities in redeveloped spaces to be earthquake resistant. In addition to earthquake-resistant structures, we must establish a warning system for earthquakes. Warnings will be sent to mobile phones before an earthquake, with specific messages sent to designated places, resulting in the closure of national assets, such as electricity and gas transmissions, as well as rail and metro operations. However, care must be taken to ensure that the message is reliable and that false shutdowns do not occur. Casualties can also be reduced through preparedness for disasters.

### DEVELOPING HUMAN RESOURCES

When the Bangabandhu Bridge was built, there were not enough skilled people in the country to design and construct a box girder of that scale. The box girder technique used there can now be widely seen in all MRTs in Dhaka, including bridges, viaducts, and expressways. Many who worked on the construction of the bridge are now valuable technical resources for the country. The learning process began with that project. Repair work on the Bangabandhu Bridge has been performed at a significantly lower cost compared to its present asset value, considering the increased property value over time due to social integration.

### PROPER ASSESSMENT

Many major development projects have been completed in Bangladesh in recent years, and it is time to see the returns from these projects. The returns need to be calculated carefully with justifiable accuracy, avoiding underestimation and

overestimation. Short-term vision or exaggeration can be problematic. In 2024, we need to focus on this meticulous calculation—a self-assessment. At the moment, gauging the breadth and depth of the impact is challenging, but it is undoubtedly showing positive results.

With the soft opening of the First Dhaka Elevated Expressway, the city is now gaining some breathing space for several routes. After the project's completion, a positive outcome is expected beyond the current experiences, as the road capacity of Dhaka city for various origins and destinations will significantly increase. In the long run, a bypass facility over Dhaka City is expected. Savings in fuel costs from the use of the expressway are much lower than the gain in time savings for the users, contributing directly to the national inputs.

Sometimes, we had to accept construction defects within a tolerable range because there was already an investment there, and the identified defect did not compromise safety. The Bangabandhu Bridge was repaired after many years of severe use, but it has truly served for decades, operated and maintained efficiently without compromising safety. Social integration took place, contributing to unfathomable economic growth by bonding the north with the rest of Bangladesh. Considering the life cycle cost, the project was very beneficial because it achieved the desired objectives and earned enough money for its own treatment.

### INTEGRATION AND THE FUTURE

We should not be short-sighted in our vision. Integration between projects in partially or fully complete states is crucial; with integration, our infrastructure as a system will be increasingly effective. Integration between our physical spaces and a secured cyberspace will make the infrastructure system more robust, safer, user-friendly, and sustainable. When infrastructures are connected, a dramatic change must manifest to achieve social transformation. The dynamics of demand and supply are essential and produce positive results. In the next cycle of our development, faster transformations can occur in a society where deeper and broader roots of education will exist. People will use infrastructure to have sweet dreams at night, but daydreams are the gears that motivate the next cycle for social emancipation.



launch of Bangladesh's mega-projects aligns with demand predictions, but the challenge lies in societal adaptation which the nation is now overcoming.

### METICULOUS PLANNING

In the realm of larger projects, meticulous planning becomes imperative. As society increasingly relies on this infrastructure, secondary and tertiary alignments in mega-planning take precedence. An exemplary illustration is the Bangabandhu Bridge, where foresighted leadership included a railway track provision along with the roadway. Initially, it was a single-track railway; subsequently, a completely new double-track bridge on the same alignment is being constructed because train frequency rose through social acceptance, leading to demand saturation which proved astute planning.

The forward-looking approach extends to future scenarios. If the rail track is removed from the existing Bangabandhu Bridge, conversion of the space to roads

Footpaths in Dhaka have yet to receive adequate attention for uninterrupted door-to-door pedestrian friendliness. Without providing decent space for people to walk, it is difficult to encourage footpath usage and keep pedestrians away from the vehicle carriageway. Our objective is to make footpaths social activity- and pedestrian-friendly. We aim to ensure a minimum footpath width suitable for comfortable walks, alone or in groups. We are adopting a comprehensive approach by

a trip. A 5-minute walk, then mass transport (e.g., metro/bus), followed by perhaps some more walking to reach the destination is convenient in terms of time and cost. Walking serves as a versatile mode of transportation for every commuter who starts and ends at their doorstep.

When this is implemented, the use of private cars will become more comfortable as public transports will take a larger share of commuters through dedicated fast corridors at a more affordable

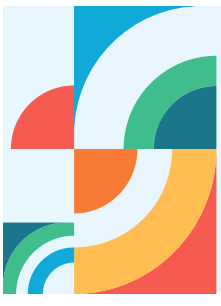
**With the gradual adoption of a mass transport system for a broader user group, the need for a vehicle carriageway is expected to diminish. Plans should be in place to enhance the adaptation of the mass transport system beyond the MRTs.**



Dhaka Elevated Expressway.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN





# Transforming Dhaka: Strategies for mega project implementation



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**Transportation projects must transcend the mere reduction of travel time. They should embark on a mission to give the city a complete socio-economic makeover, otherwise, the costs involved cannot be well justified.**

Bangladesh is currently buzzing with a multitude of mega projects. Specifically, in the vibrant tapestry of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. The narrative of transformation and progress is carved in the city's transportation infrastructure. Mega projects, including the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), Mass Rapid Transit (MRT), Elevated, and At-grade Expressway emerge as the cornerstones of this transformative journey. Over the past decade, Dhaka has also experienced a remarkable surge in road network development, fueled by the implementation of such mega projects. These initiatives have not only reshaped the city's physical landscape but have also intricately woven new patterns into its mobility fabric. The Dhaka Metro's MRT Line 6 has an impressive capacity of 60,000 passengers per hour and is expected to cater to a daily influx of about 500,000 passengers. Residents along the MRT Line-6 route are fully embracing this transportation system, utilizing it to the maximum extent, while others are eagerly waiting for the network to expand to their neighborhoods. This enthusiastic response shows the excitement and anticipation these transportation mega projects generate among the people of Dhaka city.

In my opinion, these mega projects need to be mega in terms of their footprint too, and not only in terms of financial investment. These large-scale initiatives mustn't confine their impact to a single domain. Take MRT projects, for instance – their scope should extend beyond merely enhancing and reducing the travel time of the commuters. It's a part of it, but it should bring revolutionary changes. For example, a well-planned MRT network could decentralize the people from the central city. Similarly, if we look at Dubai Airport, we can see that it is a catalyst for Dubai's social

and economic development constituting 28% of its GDP. So, this airport did not only connect it to the outside world but also uplifted the entire country. Another example is the Panama Canal. The canal not only shortens the distance between ports on the east and west coasts of the America, but also provides potable water to the cities of Panama and Colon, promotes tourism activities, and contributes to the

overwhelming population burden, with approximately 2 crore trips being made daily in the city. The remedy, however, is straightforward – relocating people from the city and then addressing the underlying issues and correcting those. But, the real question is: why would anyone want to live outside Dhaka when the living standard in Dhaka is significantly higher? To address this challenge, we

businesses to relocate outside the city center. Similarly, the construction of Hong Kong's airport also played a pivotal role in turning the city into an efficient, unified, and polycentric urban landscape. It is worth mentioning that the Calcutta Metro also serves as an example, aligning closely with our context. Once operational, their Howrah Metro station will stand as the primary gateway to the bustling

wish. These will make it easier for people to travel to and out of Dhaka and decentralize the city to a great extent offloading road traffic pressure. Making this transition could relieve the strain on Dhaka, opening up opportunities for an expanded road network and the implementation of transit-oriented development plans.

With the current population density in Dhaka, transforming it into a smart city will be challenging. Specifically, the challenge is evident in transportation because automated signals will never work as long as the traffic demand is greater than the road network capacity. And how can we even plan a smart city, when our traffic is being controlled manually by hand gestures? Moreover, for this plan to be successful, we must also address the elephant in the room – Dhaka dwellers' fascination with private cars. Mega projects like elevated expressways strongly favor car users, often causing inconvenience to bus commuters. It seems like the city is endorsing the use of private cars. In Dhaka, private cars are still seen as a symbol

commutes. However, in Dhaka city, only a handful of roads have dedicated bicycle lanes. While large-scale projects are crucial, we shouldn't overlook the importance of maintaining and expanding our footpaths, pedestrian zones, and bicycle networks. We have to remember that roads are like the veins in a living organism, and they demand care and maintenance. Neglecting the roads beneath newly constructed ones is similar to building castles on shaky foundations. We have to keep that in mind in case of building new infrastructure. For instance, if the roads leading to and from an MRT station aren't adequately maintained, the roads won't be able to handle the influx of commuters, potentially leading to the failure of the entire MRT project. The same principle applies to expressways. It doesn't matter how fast you can cross the expressway, as soon as you get off its ramps, you will be stuck in the traffic jam for hours unless the roads underneath is also maintained.

As Dhaka continues its journey of development, mega projects become significant milestones.



**Purbachal 300 ft Road**

PHOTO: STAR

development of the national maritime sector. In 2021, net income from the Panama Canal reached US\$2 billion, contributing about 3 percent to Panama's GDP. It proves that mega projects can be powerful catalysts for holistic growth. Now, shifting our focus to Dhaka, transportation projects must transcend the mere reduction of travel time. They should embark on a mission to give the city a complete socio-economic makeover, otherwise, the costs involved cannot be well justified.

But, when contemplating a makeover for Dhaka city, the biggest challenge that comes to mind is the high population density. Transforming Dhaka into a smart city seems like an impossible feat given the

need to carefully reconsider how we use our land. One viable option is to relocate our capital, a strategy that has been successfully implemented by countries like Malaysia and India and is currently being actively considered by Indonesia and Egypt. However, it calls for strong political commitment. At least, we should take the initiative for administrative decentralization in the outskirts of the RAJUK area. The key is to establish high quality institutions – schools, colleges, hospitals, and recreation centers. This intentional approach may be able to entice people to make the shift to the regions outside of Dhaka city. However, we have to keep in mind that the success of this strategy relies on maintaining a lower cost of living compared to Dhaka city. Additionally, it is crucial to ensure seamless connectivity with the capital to other parts of the RAJUK area.

An example that comes to my mind is the Hong Kong Metro, which, by spreading across the entire city, made commuting between different areas easier. This approach not only influenced the movement of residents but also encouraged

city of Kolkata, alongside the already commissioned Sealdah Metro station. This is an integral part of the East-West Metro project, which will seamlessly connect the twin cities of Howrah and Kolkata. It is anticipated to serve a daily ridership of approximately 6.7 lakh passengers along its entire corridor. In Howrah station, all primary modes of Calcutta metros, commuter rails, and buses are connected. This makes it easier for people to get in and out of Calcutta which will help to decentralize it. A similar strategy should be applied to Kamlapur Railway Station. It has a high potential to be turned into a multimodal transportation hub. As MRT lines 1, 2, 4 and 6 will extend to Kamlapur, it is only logical to turn this into a hub for the public transportation network. Kamlapur also has commuter rails that go to Narayanganj and Tongi. We need to strengthen this commuter rail network too. City-centric MRT and long-hauling commuter trains can be connected at this multimodal hub. Elevated expressway also has ramps close to this station so it has to be ensured that cars can come easily from those ramps to the station and park-and-ride the trains as they



**Padma Bridge**

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQUE

of social status or prestige. We need a cultural shift to break the notion that public transport is beneath a certain social class. We can draw inspiration from cities where taking a bus or metro is as prestigious as driving a private car.

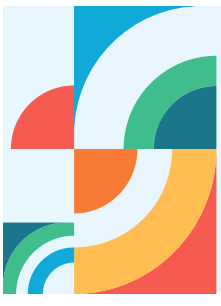
Bicycles are also not a common sight on our roads. Even though we occasionally spot young people cycling, it's rare to see them being used for commuting to work. Many still opt for cars, even for 5-10 minute rides. In Utrecht Netherlands, 51% of people use bicycles for their daily

However, it's not just about celebrating the present; it's about laying the groundwork for a sustainable city for future generations. Dhaka is currently experiencing a wave of development, instilling hope for a brighter future. Yet, it's essential to ensure that this progress doesn't strain our infrastructure without thorough research. If we are mindful of the changes and decisions we make, then the next significant lift awaits. By proper planning, careful decisions, and vigilant implementation, we can surely prepare our beloved Dhaka for the next big lift.



**Rampura U-loop**  
PHOTO: PRABIR DAS





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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

# Comprehensive urban and spatial planning for a balanced and sustainable Bangladesh



**PROFESSOR DR. ADIL MOHAMMED KHAN**  
is the President at the Bangladesh Institute of Planners, the Director at the Institute for Planning and Development (IPD), and a Professor at the Department of Urban and Regional Planning, Jahangirnagar University.

**Significant differences are being observed in the budget allocation at the district and regional levels of the country which is deterrent for balanced spatial and urban development of the country.**

Bangladesh has celebrated its fifty years of independence in recent years with immense joy, and expectations. However, at the same time, we have to ponder what more should we be aiming to achieve in this journey. We are in the broadway of graduating from LDC to a middle-income country and hence, we are at the crossroads of development where we have success in attaining sustained economic growth. Urbanization has been a major driver behind the gradual economic growth of our country. However, the pattern of urbanization and urban growth has been mostly organic, unplanned, uncontrolled as well as demand driven, having limited or less control over urban development from Government Authorities. Therefore, urban development, which is called the engine of economic growth, has flourished here at the cost of environment, social equity, and justice. Against this backdrop, we should reassess and rethink the strategies, techniques, and processes of spatial planning and urban development to guide it in a way to make urbanization sustainable, equitable, and inclusive for Bangladesh.

## VISIONING PLANNED AND BALANCED URBAN DEVELOPMENT ACROSS BANGLADESH

The urban population of Bangladesh increased from 9% in 1974 to 40.5% in 2023 growing at an average annual rate of 3.13%. The concentration of our urban population is predominantly centered around Dhaka, with only Chittagong City showing some degree of comparability in terms of employment opportunities, urban facilities, and amenities, while other divisional cities lag behind.

Our urban growth and economic activities are agglomerated in some major urban areas - namely Dhaka, Chittagong, Gazipur, and Naryanganj. Therefore, the transformation of Dhaka into a megalopolis has evolved at the expanse of balanced urbanization in Bangladesh. Our divisional cities like Rangpur, Rajshahi, and Barishal lack adequate employment opportunities which could contain the regional migration or climate-vulnerable people.

Khulna city has experienced a decayed population trend in the past, however, economic activities are now on the rise due to some large projects around Khulna.

This is high time to plan for big investments in divisional cities and secondary cities as well as to decentralize development from Dhaka city for balanced urbanization.

## EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF DEVELOPMENT BUDGET AND INVESTMENTS ACROSS REGIONS

Balanced urban and spatial development requires proper

planning supported by judicious investment as well. However, over the years, Dhaka city has successively received the lion's share of an annual budget of our country. A recent Institute for Planning and Development (IPD) study, unveiled in 2023, reveals that only seven districts receive 50% of the Annual Development Programme (ADP), while just 13% goes to the 25 lowest recipient districts.

In terms of regional

for balanced spatial and urban development of the country.

Balanced spatial and urban development should be supported by the distribution of the annual budget and other investments from the Government as well. The government has policy directives to uplift lagging district through appropriate interventions and budgetary allocations, however, significant initiatives have not been observed in this regard



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

considerations, the Greater Dhaka region (old large district) is getting 32% and the Chattogram region is getting 15%. At the district level, Dhaka district is getting 21 percent of the development budget of ADP. As a result, significant differences are being observed in the budget allocation at the district and regional levels of the country which is deterrent

to uplift the lagging regions in Bangladesh. It is high time to take appropriate planning, initiatives, and financial allocation towards lagging regions for a balanced spatial development of the country.

## LIVABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT CHALLENGES IN URBAN AREAS

Our cities are facing tremendous challenges in terms of livability.

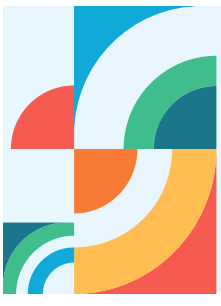
All sorts of pollution like air pollution, water pollution, soil pollution, and noise pollution are prevalent not only in big cities like Dhaka or Chittagong but also in secondary cities like Gazipur, Habiganj, Noakhali as well. Dhaka city has been persistently ranked among the least livable cities, however, other cities like Gazipur, Naryanganj, Cumilla, and many other secondary cities are lagging far behind in terms of

people. Land share for low and lower middle income should be increased through provisioning an adequate amount of land for this quarter in physical plans for urban areas. Private and real estate sectors should be encouraged through appropriate policy directives to develop housing units for lower income brackets of society.

The National Housing Policy framed in 2016 suggests a 'National Housing Committee' that has not been formed yet. The government should formulate a Committee without any delay to ensure quality housing for everyone.

Urban and environmental authorities should concentrate on improving the air and water quality of our cities. Cities should have the required balance of 25-30 percent green, 10-15 percent water, and 40-50 percent grey or built-up area. Hence, we should make proper efforts to preserve our existing parks, open spaces, vegetation, and waterbodies; plus a plan to create new green areas or waterbodies. Interconnected blue and green networks will reduce the waterlogging problems of the cities as well. However, it is ironic that waterbodies and open spaces are encroached on or illegally occupied by socially or politically-powered people. Government authorities, nowadays practice very limited power or authority to stand against these illegal encroachments. Therefore, without strong political will, supported by proper engagement of local communities, these conservation areas or public spaces could not be retained for urban people and the urban environment.





## Comprehensive urban and spatial planning for a balanced and sustainable Bangladesh

**IPD research in 2023 reveals that there is a shortage of 795 playgrounds in Dhaka, the densely populated capital, while Chattogram lacks 541, to meet the urban planning standard. Moreover, number of playground shortages is 37 in Rajshahi, 65 in Khulna, 40 in Sylhet, and 45 in Barisal, according to this study.**

FROM PAGE 22

### INCLUSIVE PLANNING FOR URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Parks, playgrounds and open spaces are very important recreational facilities for sustainable urban living. The number of population is increasing in urban areas whereas access to recreational facilities is declining in the city areas in Bangladesh. IPD research in 2023 reveals that there is a shortage of 795 playgrounds in Dhaka, the densely populated capital, while Chattogram lacks 541, to meet the urban planning standard. Moreover, number of playground shortages is 37 in Rajshahi, 65 in Khulna, 40 in Sylhet, and 45 in Barisal, according to this study.

Different types of playgrounds should be planned for different age groups in urban areas. In densely populated urban areas, one playground is needed for every 3,000-5,000 individuals under three age group categories - playlot for children (3-6 years, 0.5 acres), playground for teenagers (7-15 years, 1.5-3 acres) and playfield for adults (above 15 years, 5 acres), according to planning criteria.

No significant initiative has been observed so far to plan three types of playgrounds for children and adolescents in the urban areas in Bangladesh, depriving children and youth of sports activities and subsequently hindering their physical, mental, and social development. Additionally, three types of parks should be planned in urban areas - neighborhood parks, community parks, and urban or city parks which are mostly absent in the urban planning

practices in Bangladesh.

Only 16% of the residents of Dhaka city live within playground facilities as there are only 42 public playgrounds in the two city corporation areas. Also, 41 out of 129 wards in Dhaka North and South do not have any playgrounds according to the Detailed Area Plan (DAP, 2022-35) by Rajuk. Many of the public playgrounds and parks of Dhaka city are controlled and even restricted to common people by clubs or other vested quarters.

We should create new parks and playgrounds in urban areas. The land acquisition should be done in addition to utilizing available khas land in urban areas for recreational space development. Privately developed residential projects and educational institutions should have an adequate number of playgrounds. Parks and playgrounds should be accessible to all sections of a society and a community management committee should be formulated to manage and protect these important public spaces from vested interest groups.

### INTEGRATED AND EFFICIENT TRANSPORT INFRASTRUCTURES FOR URBAN AREAS

It is perceived that better transport infrastructure in urban areas can help to combat traffic jams in urban areas. However, it has been observed in many cases that investment in transport infrastructures alone cannot solve traffic problems in the city. Rather cities should concentrate on traffic management, road governance, travel demand management, and better integration of land use-transport relationships to ensure efficient and affordable

transport systems in urban areas. An efficient urban transport plan generally prioritizes pedestrian-friendly facilities, roadway development, improvement of bus services and bus route franchising, and development of Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and Mass Rapid Transit (MRT).

However, in the case of Dhaka city, in the different phases of the Strategic Transport Plan

flyovers have been constructed in various levels of urban areas across Bangladesh without detailed transport and planning impact assessment. For example, flyovers of Chittagong City have been constructed without a detailed feasibility study. Ultimately traffic chaos could not be resolved in Port City, even after huge investments in infrastructure. Urban authorities should

Rapid Transit (MRT) due to its financial viability. As metro rail is usually a subsidized project - for developing countries like Bangladesh - any plan for MRT network development should be judiciously planned and designed for reaping maximum socio-economic benefits and lessening economic burden and debt for the country as well.

Speedy rail connectivity among different regions in

### A WAY FORWARD TOWARD BALANCED URBAN DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh highly demands planned, balanced, and sustainable development of its urban areas for its sustained growth. Comprehensive urban and spatial planning is necessary to achieve this goal. Development authorities like RAJUK, CDA, RDA, and KDA have been planning Structure Plan, Master Plan, and Detail Area Plan (DAP) for divisional level cities for many years. However, the implementation rate of these physical plans is very low. Master plans prepared long ago by LGED have not been gazetted by the government yet. Therefore, our secondary towns are growing in an unplanned manner, having detrimental effects on people and the environment. On top of that, even 50 years after independence, we do not have a National Physical Plan for Bangladesh to guide its urban and spatial development. Recently, Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP) has formulated a 'Spatial Planning Framework' for Bangladesh to ensure proper planning practices in Bangladesh in a coordinated way. The government should take appropriate steps in this regard to ensure that urbanization and spatial development around urban centers follow this framework to ensure the planned and sustainable development of Bangladesh. We need comprehensive urban planning of all levels of our urban areas and their appropriate implementation so that further damage to urban areas is not done - lest it is too late to respond.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

(STP, 2005) implementation, appropriate attention and importance on low investment priorities like pedestrian-friendly facilities, improvement of bus services, and bus route franchising were not given due importance by the successive governments. Rather, high investment projects - which were not preferred in STP - like expressways, flyovers, and Metro Rails, have been prioritized by the authorities for traffic solutions in the capital.

Over the years, unnecessary

devise comprehensive plans to integrate transport-land use relationships effectively. This includes the implementation of intra-city bus and paratransit services, alongside the development of pedestrian-friendly footpaths throughout all urban areas in Bangladesh.

Light Rail Transit (LRT) and Commuter Rail services could be very beneficial to increasing the connectivity of big cities with their surrounding regions. LRT could be a better option in many cases than Mass

Bangladesh should receive priority to promote balanced urban and spatial development of Bangladesh. Rail link to Cox's Bazar has been a new introduction, though, there are some criticisms regarding environmental issues relating to the protection of three Conservation areas along this route. Regional decentralization can be functional and effective if we could connect our divisional and regional centers with Dhaka by speedy rail network.

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## এক্সপোর্ট ইমপোর্ট ব্যাংক অব বাংলাদেশ লিমিটেড

আধুনিক ইসলামী ব্যাংকিংয়ের পথিকৃত এক্সিম ব্যাংকের  
শরীয়াহ্ ব্যাংকিংজগতে আপনাকে স্বাগতম  
আপনাদের সেবায় আমাদের অনন্য দুটি সঞ্চয়ী সেবা



**মুদারাবা হজ্জ আমানত প্রকল্প**

আর্থিকভাবে সামর্থ্যবান না হলে হজ্জ পালন আবশ্যকীয় নয়। তথাপিও মুসলিম মাত্রই জীবনে একবার হলেও হজ্জ পালনের আকাঙ্ক্ষা লালন করে থাকে। এই তীব্র আকাঙ্ক্ষাকে সহজতর করতে এক্সিম ব্যাংক নিয়ে এলো মুদারাবা হজ্জ আমানত প্রকল্প।

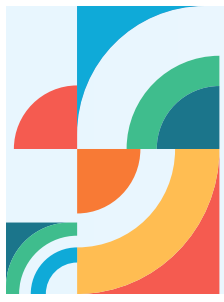


**মুদারাবা ক্যাশ ওয়াকুফ আমানত হিসাব**

আপনার সক্ষিত সম্পদ থেকে অর্জিত আয় আর্ত মানবতার সহায়তা ও সমাজকল্যাণমূলক কাজে ব্যবহারের মাধ্যমে সওয়াব অর্জনের উদ্দেশ্যে এক্সিম ব্যাংক নিয়ে এলো মুদারাবা ক্যাশ ওয়াকুফ আমানত হিসাব।

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# READYING FOR THE NEXT BIG LEAP

SEGMENT 5

ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENTS 2024

DHAKA WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 28, 2024

FALGUN 15, 1430 BS

25

# Empowering Bangladesh's youth for the next leap



**DR. MD. ABDUL KARIM**  
is the Executive Director  
and former Principal  
Secretary at UCEP.

**According to Labor Force Survey 2022, approximately 9.6 million individuals in Bangladesh, find themselves not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET). Among them, 65.5 percent are females. This high NEET rate among young women is fully undesirable.**

In the vibrant landscape of the 21st century, Bangladesh strategically leverages its significant youth population, comprising about 28% of the total population aged 15 to 29, to propel itself into a transformative era. Positioned at the crossroads of progress, Bangladesh is keenly investing in proactive initiatives for education, skill development, and capacity building to prepare the younger generation for a significant leap forward. Out of the country's total population of 16.98 crores, the youth labor force accounts for 36.53% of the total labor force. Despite this demographic advantage, challenges like higher youth unemployment rates, and low wages persist.

As the backbone of the nation's progress, the youth must be adequately prepared to take on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Improving the quality of education, greater emphasis on technical and vocational education and training, and ensuring access of marginalized youth to education and

entrepreneurship are essential for youth capacity development. Bangladesh's education system needs to prioritize job-oriented technical and vocational education and training (TVET). Bangladesh needs to start a transformative process, emphasizing diverse skill sets beyond traditional academics and ensuring seamless alignment with job market demands. TVET can ensure a smooth transition to decent workplaces. As Bangladesh aims for a knowledge-based economy, the education system stands as the linchpin for realizing this ambitious vision.

As the country shifts from an agricultural to a manufacturing and service-based economy, vocational training for the youth becomes a key strategy for creating a productive skilled pool. Despite the potential, there is a prevalent apathy towards vocational education in Bangladesh, often associated with the misconception that it is intended for the poor or less meritorious students. Government and non-government agencies are implementing large-scale programs to promote vocational education. 73% of the German population are skilled which is 66% in Japan, 65% in Singapore, and 55% in China. Against this, Bangladesh's skilled population is only 14% of the total population.

Bangladesh, like the rest of the world, is grappling with the adverse effects of climate change. Our youth need to be equipped with green skills that align with sustainable

development goals. The integration of environmental awareness, renewable energy, and eco-friendly practices into educational curricula is essential. Initiatives aimed at fostering a sense of environmental responsibility among the youth will contribute to a greener and more sustainable future.

Currently, our economic growth is not accompanied by expected equity. Our youth need to be educated

the graduates' employability.

The advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has ushered in unprecedented opportunities and challenges. Bangladesh's youth must be technologically adept to thrive in this era. The Government's 8th 5-year Plan and Perspective Plan 2021-2041 also focused on integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into the education system to prepare the youth for the digital age. While commendable

spirit, supported by Government initiatives like iDEA, contributes to economic growth and innovation. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report highlights Bangladesh's impressive entrepreneurial activity, positioning the country as a dynamic hub for startups. Bangladesh's Delta Plan 2100, Education Policy 2010, National Youth Policy 2017, and Skills Development Policy 2022 collectively lay the foundation for nurturing a skilled and empowered youth population. Effective implementation of these policies is crucial for preparing youth to face the challenges and create a knowledge-based society.

Youth's preparedness in education and skill development capacity building requires concerted efforts by the government, private sector, and educational institutions. However, the journey towards ensuring a workforce ready for the next big lift requires continuous collaboration, adaptation, and innovation. With a youthful population eager to contribute to the nation's progress, Bangladesh stands on the cusp of a transformative phase, provided it remains committed to empowering its youth through robust skill development initiatives.

According to Labor Force Survey 2022, approximately 9.6 million individuals in Bangladesh, aged 15-29 find themselves not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET). Among them, 65.5 percent are females. This

high NEET rate among young women is fully undesirable. The prevailing skills mismatch contributes to elevated rates of youth unemployment, underemployment, and economic inactivity.

However, it is gratifying to note that female participation in Bangladesh's labor force has increased to 42.77% in 2022, up from 36% in 2010. It is crucial to tackle the skills gap among adolescent girls.

Tackling gender disparities involves not only economic empowerment but also fostering societal change. Embracing these opportunities will position Bangladesh to rise above challenges and chart a course toward a more inclusive society with an economically vibrant future.

As Bangladesh paves the way for the future, the preparedness of its youth becomes a critical factor in determining the nation's success. Green skills, technological proficiency, strategic plans and policies, job creation through skill education, and youth development initiatives collectively shape the trajectory of Bangladesh's youth. The synergy between government policies, private sector initiatives, and the tireless efforts of NGOs is imperative for creating an environment where the youth can thrive and contribute meaningfully to the nation's development. ICT Policy 2018, Youth Development Policy 2017, NSDP 2011, etc. will play a catalytic role in empowering our youth for the country's sustainable growth and development.



to ensure sustainable growth with equity. Private sector involvement is crucial for fostering partnerships between educational institutions and industry. The industrial zones of Chittagong and Gazipur showcase a symbolic relationship between academia and industry. Internships and on-the-job training have become integral components of

progress is evident, Bangladesh faces challenges like technological evolution, gender disparities, and regional variations in educational access. Transformative opportunities emerge in leveraging artificial intelligence, promoting entrepreneurship, and nurturing innovation among the youth.

Dhaka's entrepreneurial

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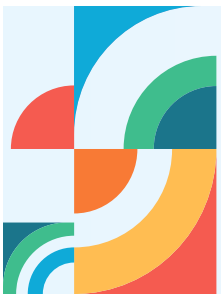


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# READYING FOR THE NEXT BIG LEAP

## Are we ready to tackle digital inequality?



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The article seeks to explore the readiness of Bangladesh to rein the persisting digital inequalities. Therefore, it is of great importance to understand the meaning of digital inequalities, the spectrum of digital inequalities, and the extent or depth of such inequalities. All these would help us understand where to focus and how to address the challenges embedded within the digitization process to make Bangladesh Smart by 2041. More importantly, understanding digital inequality would help

detect the underlying factors contributing to digital inequality and realize whether we are ready to rein digital inequality in Bangladesh. Today social and economic advancement of any country relies to a great extent on the country's access to modern information and communications technologies (ICTs) like computers, smartphones, and the internet, which play a pivotal role in improving the well-being of the citizens. However, this does not hold such promises for all segments of the population due to the persisting digital divide or digital inequality within a country and Bangladesh is not an exception to this case. While the digital divide focuses mainly on the differences in access to ICTs (i.e., the first-level digital divide), digital inequality refers to the differences in skills of the users (i.e., the second-level digital divide), implying that the high level of digital inequality is a challenging barrier to the digitization process, deployment of digitization process in organizations and businesses and adoption by citizens. Bangladesh dreams of realizing its Smart Bangladesh Vision by 2041 resolving the existing barriers in deployment and adoption through an inclusive manner. Realizing the dream by 2041 would require including the citizens who are lagging behind others in terms of the digitization process. More importantly, digital inclusion would help play a pivotal role in harnessing social and economic development. For the very first, the government of Bangladesh should consider the underlying reasons behind digital inequality for undertaking necessary plans and actions to address the root causes of digital inequality in Bangladesh.



PHOTO: STAR

Let's start with a discussion on the digital divide between rural and urban areas of Bangladesh. The government data from Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics shows that the prevalence of internet usage among the rural population is around 37 percent and it is around 54 percent among urban population, implying a gap of 17 percent. Similarly, it finds that such a gap also persists between males and females by around 13 percent. Moreover, a more acute gender gap in the digital divide also persists within rural and urban areas. These simple statistics imply that approximately half of the population is out of internet usage, which would be a great challenge for the government to bring them under the digital umbrella by 2031. Considering the facts, the government of Bangladesh should set up the visionary milestones of

achieving access to the internet by all citizens of the country within 17 years (i.e., 3 percent annual growth of internet coverage with a greater focus on rural areas where digital connectivity such as WiFi or broadband connection is still in scarcity). This would help establish the balance in internet usage between rural and urban areas. However, internet access provisioning in remote villages in rural areas would not be as easy as it is expected. As digital inequality by gender is also a major concern, the expansion of digital facilities should inclusively prioritize women. In order to make the digitization process, the government has introduced "One Country, One Rate", but in reality, it differs charging higher prices in rural areas. The two underlying factors behind the low penetration of internet usage in rural areas include infrastructure

and technological resources. However, socioeconomic ability and digital literacy among rural people are thought of as constraints in the digitization process. We can guess that internet access among rural people would move positively with the increase in their incomes. However, a huge investment from the government's end is necessary for provisioning digital literacy, especially among the rural youth so that they can employ themselves starting e-commerce, f-commerce, and outsourcing. In addition to these factors, the cost of internet access is around 6.5 times higher compared to the rest of the world, implying that reducing the cost of the internet might help expand the coverage by bringing internet access to more rural people within their affordability. However, the higher level of current inflation,

which is around 10 percent in Bangladesh, would pose a serious challenge as the real income of the underserved rural population falls due to higher inflation.

Living in an era of technological change, led by digital revolution, gives rise to societal discontent if disruptions caused by technological changes drive the income and wealth inequality in the country. However, the inclusive socioeconomic outcomes resulting from such digital revolution point towards a society with more societal well-being, which requires matching of a country's policies and actions with technological changes favoring the people living in the left tail of the income and wealth distributions. It is evident from empirical evidence that the failure to match policies and actions with technological change may result in slower productivity growth, i.e., slower overall economic growth. Therefore, if Bangladesh wants to reap the benefits of digitization from the viewpoint of societal well-being and reduce digital inequality, it should prioritize rectifying the causes of digital inequality, match the timely policies with actions, and establish the shared dynamics between income distribution and productivity. Last but not least, the elements of digital inequalities include varied forms such as educational, infrastructural, social, economic, and usable design which would require a large volume of activities with huge investments. With a low revenue generation of the government of Bangladesh would pose a serious challenge to undertake necessary actions and this might delay in achieving the vision of a country with digital equality.



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ILLUSTRATION: BIPOB CHAKRABARTY

# Women's economic empowerment through financial inclusion: A myth or a reality?



**LILA RASHID**  
is the former Executive Director of Bangladesh Bank.

Women share over half of the population in Bangladesh. The BBS's Bangladesh labor force survey, 2022 mentions that the female labor force is only 42.6% in Bangladesh, as against 79.7% of male labor. Again, according to the Gender Statistics of Bangladesh 2018, female labor force participation was only 36.3% in 2016-17. Among them, 8.2% were active in the formal sector which is 17.9% in the case of males. Besides women's lower participation in economic activity, their daily wage rate was also lower compared to their male counterparts. Even after taking many initiatives from the government, women still have lower economic, social, and political opportunities. This situation leads them to many risks, such as poverty, violence, exploitation, and disaster.

Financial inclusion is considered an

full range of available financial services. In Bangladesh, mobile phones remain the primary way that people get access to the internet, which is vital to enjoying the facilities of digital financial service (DFS). However, access to mobile phones, mobile coverage, and the internet remains a critical barrier to digital services and is a particular obstacle for women. GSMA 2023 report mentions that in Bangladesh, only 67% of women own a mobile phone compared to 84% of men, and that quotes a 20% gender gap in mobile ownership. From a gender point of view, the role of technology, especially in using MFS/DFS, also raises concerns about the digital divide. To ensure inclusive, sustainable economic growth and to bring all adult individuals and small businesses into a 'financial ecosystem,' it is crucial to minimize the persistent gender gap in various forms. In recent years, many initiatives have been taken both by the public and private sectors to improve the situation. There is a long list of those programs that directly or indirectly help women get the benefits of digitization and access to finance. This list may include; a) policy supports to bring financial services nearer to the clients through, microfinance, Agent banking system, and MFS, b) programs for digitization of G2P (Government to Person) payment for SSN (Social SafetyNet) beneficiaries, c) introduction



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

**To ensure inclusive, sustainable economic growth and to bring all adult individuals and small businesses into a 'financial ecosystem,' it is crucial to minimize the persistent gender gap in various forms.**

incremental strategy to overcome poverty that offers complementary solutions to promote inclusive development. Through financial inclusion, the unbanked population is brought into the formal system so that they can access financial services like savings, credit, payment, transfer, and insurance. However, the gender gap in financial inclusion in Bangladesh has grown from 9 percentage points in 2014 to 29 percentage points in 2017, which recently has been showing a decreasing trend of 19 percentage points, due to the positive growth of mobile financial services (MFS). Another study has revealed that while two-thirds of men have an account with a financial institution, the percentage is less than half for women. Moreover, the vast majority of females who do have bank accounts use them less frequently than their male counterparts and many who maintain MFS accounts do not enjoy a

of E-KYC (digital system to open a bank account), d) modification of SME policies by emphasizing women entrepreneurs, e) establishment of Union Digital Centre (UDC) to provide easy access to various government services including finance, f) digitalization of microfinance, g) wage digitization, h) initiatives to improve financial and digital literacy of women, i) policy support to open a digital bank in the country, etc. These steps are important for Bangladesh's journey towards sustainable financial inclusion through digitization and innovation. Now, the question is how can we move forward to reduce existing gender gaps in various spheres and ensure women's economic empowerment through meaningful financial inclusion? A few years ago, CGAP identified poverty as the number one reason for not having a financial institution account.

SEE PAGE 28



# Building a Stronger Bangladesh

With a commitment to innovation, Concord has delivered iconic infrastructure and architectural feats for half a century. From constructing National Martyrs' Monument to landmark commercial high-rises & First Satellite City of the country, Concord leverages the nation's best engineering talent to manifest definitive landmarks.

By consistently raising benchmarks and embracing new frontiers, Concord sets the pace for the future of business – and lives – to be built.



**1972** Re-constructed 6 bridges of DHK-CTG Highway damaged in the great liberation war  
**1980-83** Crafted the skyline of Motiheel C/A by building Shilpa Bank Bhaban, Jibon Birna Tower & Janata Bank HQ  
**1980** Constructed Main Passenger Terminal of HSA



**1990** First Concrete Batching Plant of Bangladesh was set up by Concord  
**1984** Constructed Telecom Building in Singapore  
**1982** Constructed National Martyrs' Monument in only 89 days



**1998** First commercial production of Concrete Blocks in Bangladesh were started by Concord in 1998  
**2000** First satellite township of Bangladesh, Lake City Concord was built at Khikhet with over 4000 apartments, shopping & commercial blocks, school, mosques, landscaped gardens and all other lifestyle facilities



**2006** Introduced Top Down Construction Method in Bangladesh through construction of WTC in Chittogram  
**2005** Developed Foy's Lake Amusement World in the picturesque hill area of Chittogram  
**2002** First international standard amusement park, Fantasy Kingdom was established

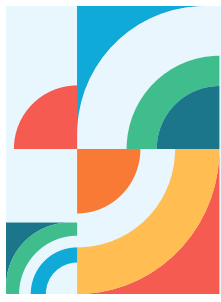


**2008** Constructed iconic Police Plaza Concord on the bank of Hatirjheel, a leading shopping & lifestyle destination of Dhaka  
**2010 & BEYOND** Building its reputation as Bangladesh's most trusted developer of luxury residences and iconic commercial spaces, setting the benchmark for quality and service



AA+ Rating by AIC, The Best Entity Award, ESSAB Excellence Award, BII International Quality Summit Award, President's Award for Industry Development, International Quality Circle Award, Super Star - IFA, Bangladesh Business Award, National Environment Award, Highest Turnover in Real Estate





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FALGUN 15, 1430 BS

28

## Women's economic empowerment through financial inclusion: A myth or a reality?

FROM PAGE 27

If someone is not in the labor force and doesn't have any source of income then what she will be doing with an account? Getting little money via G2P payment under Social Safety Net, or receiving remittance via an account certainly helps them to enter the financial market, but it is not sufficient to ensure their economic empowerment. A woman can be an active user of an account if she has her income or assets under control. Not only her effective ownership of her mobile phone is essential, but also, establishing her ownership right and control over other assets is crucial to ensure her upward mobility up the socio-economic ladder. Women's restricted mobility and limited security in the public sphere also hinder their active participation in the financial market and business. These markets are very much



PHOTO: AP



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

dominated by patriarchal values.

If we look at the women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh, we see that most of them are in a very backward position in

business compared to their male counterparts. They are either involved in small informal retail businesses or engaged in household-based businesses as unpaid laborers or both. Many of them don't have any business license, or any such assets to offer as collateral, and have limited financial and digital literacy. Therefore, they have no access to bank credit, many of them are locked in microcredit for years after years and they don't grow as anticipated. They should be brought out from this trap of low investment and low-income, and always remain small and informal.

During the 90s, 'microcredit' was a hype. It evolved as one of the most important policy and program interventions to reach the poor, especially

women, from the perspective of development and finance. That is currently showing downward trends and has been replaced by the word 'MFS/DFS'. Now, 'MFS/DFS' is considered a magic tool to bring women under a formal financial system from the perspective of financial inclusion. However, we need to remember that an MFS account ownership can ensure very basic or entry-level financial inclusion till now and MFS is not the only DFS. So, we need to consider DFS from a broader perspective. Moreover, policy planning should be there to link women with the wider financial market, so that they can reap the full benefits of financial inclusion and achieve economic empowerment. But, there is no such clear strategic plan

yet in the National Financial Inclusion Strategy Paper (Goal# 5) circulated by the government in 2022. Not only that, there is no comprehensive gender-disaggregated financial data available anywhere.

Bangladesh Bank (BB) is the most influential financial sector regulator in Bangladesh, the Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA) is considered as another important regulator from the perspective of financial inclusion. These two regulators make policies, supervise and monitor the financial service providers such as banks, MFS providers, and microfinance institutions (MFIs) so that people get easy and affordable access to finance. In recent years, technology has been playing a vital role in bringing

financial services closer to its clients at low cost. The Ministry of Post, telecommunication, and ICT is another policy maker that provides policy support to promote technology. Digital financial inclusion combines both technology and financial services, so it demands policy attention and coordination from both sides. Considering these, policymakers, from both the standpoints of technology and regulation have the following main roles to make the financial market more inclusive, especially for women.

a) The regulators need to check whether the current strategies of financial inclusion brought any meaningful improvements in women's livelihood. If that doesn't happen and if only status quo

inclusion is maintained, then it will not be a meaningful financial inclusion. Policy needs to be revised based on reality.

b) In doing so, a comprehensive national database on women's financial inclusion should be in place to understand the gaps and to identify the areas of interventions.

c) Steps need to be taken to reduce the digital divide, protect women from public harassment, and secure women's privacy in the digital environment.

d) Policy and program interventions are needed to build up their capacity in the areas of financial and digital literacy, business skill development, and helping them connect with the broader market (both financial and business).

e) There must be a practice for mandatory gender awareness training programs for all stakeholders involved in the financial sector so that they can take gender-sensitive approach in formulating and implementing financial sector policies, as well as in maintaining gender friendly office environments for women.

f) Policy intervention is needed to upgrade women's economic activities to a high return engagement, instead of limiting them within small business ventures struggling to survive at the periphery or remain as an unpaid labor force in a family business.

g) Finally, policy intervention is also essential from the top to reduce barriers related to gender norms and values, child marriage, unpaid care work etc. that obstruct their potentials to move forward and to gain economic empowerment.

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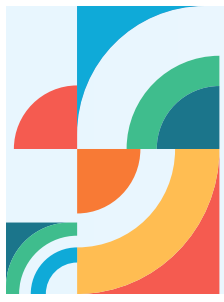
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29

# Gender disaster nexus: Toward an intersectionality approach



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**The increasing rate of frequency and intensity of disasters, along with different impacts have identified Bangladesh as one of the most vulnerable countries. Living with hazards have contributed to develop disaster coping and adaptation mechanisms based on the affected people experiences.**

Bangladesh is highly susceptible to natural and human-induced disasters due to its geophysical location, land characteristics, and anthropogenic causes. Over the last three decades, the region has developed disaster risk reduction (DRR) and mitigation mechanisms to address the adversities that populations frequently experience. However, there are inclusion challenges in risk management in the region as, in most cases, exclusion cuts across intersectional groups and contexts. Physical, economic, and social factors of vulnerability are closely linked with people's age, gender, (dis)abilities, and other identities. Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as ethnicity, caste, aging, disability, mental health, sexual and gender identity, class, religion, indigeneity, membership to certain groups, etc. as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.

### GENDER AND DISASTER

Although a disaster affects all segments of the population, there are gender variations to

vulnerability and resilience during disasters. Women and girls in disaster prone areas face number of problems due to their gender identity. As a result, women and girls in poor and marginal households become more vulnerable and distressed. All of the human population become vulnerable to time management and efficient productivity due to absence of employment opportunities. Pioneering study (Nasreen, 1995) argues that "disaster affects both women and men but the burden of coping falls heavily on women". For example, during an aftermath of a disaster, men in rural areas lose their places of work while women shoulder the responsibilities to maintain households' sustenance. However, even if poor and rural women have very few options open to them to overcome their problems, their role in disasters are certainly not simple: they relate to a complete range of socioeconomic activities. During a disaster, such as floods, women continue to be bearers and care givers to children, collectors, and providers of food, fuel, water, medicinal herbs, fodder, building materials and keeper of household belongings; they also represent a productive potential which was not discussed earlier. Despite challenges, women have proven an incredible potential to respond to disasters effectively, which often go largely unrecognized (Nasreen, 1995; 2019). It is women's strategies, developed over the years that are vital in enabling the rural people to become resilient to disaster (Nasreen, 2019). To build gender-sensitive resilient strategies

in the disaster risk reduction process, it is necessary to address the gender needs of all using an intersectional lens.

### IS THE PANDEMIC A DISASTER?

The COVID-19 pandemic an unexpected disaster, calls for a new preparedness for Bangladesh as one of the affected countries around the world. Now, the question arises: can a pandemic

the capacity of a community or society to manage such crises"; secondly, the pandemic is triggering risk and shocks for existing social structure on which the system has no firm control; thirdly, the pandemic also urges for managing risk and improve social safety net supports for the vulnerable people during a frequent disaster in a pandemic situation and finally, the experiences

Due to disasters, women face multiple challenges which have become more visible during the first and second waves of pandemic and are combined with i) increased burden of unpaid work; ii) increased domestic violence; iii) Increased rate of unemployment. Accompanying current health crisis, pre-existing health conditions, healthy practices, social behaviors, norms, and gender inequalities

of one party (especially women considering Bangladesh context) more vulnerable and victim to domestic violation, economic stress (Nasreen, 2008). Policy response mechanisms do not always necessarily incorporate gender analytical data or gender-responsive plans for COVID-19 (Dutta, 2020). To understand the broad picture of the relational analysis between COVID-19 and gender-based resilience and intersectionality, more in-depth research needs to be executed.

### REDRESSING GENDER AND DISASTER: WHY INTERSECTIONALITY MATTERS?

To build gender-sensitive strategies and initiatives in the disaster management process, it is crucial to address the needs and interests of different categories of people adopting intersectional approaches. Intersectionality offers a way to understand and respond to the ways different factors, such as gender, age, disability, and ethnicity, intersect to shape individual identities, thereby, enhancing awareness of people's needs, interests, capacities, and experiences. Intersectionality is extensively documented as one of the important and distinct contributions of feminist theory to critical thinking (The Intersectionality theory originates from Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, 1989), to understand how different forms of discriminations and power relations have impacts on individual's experience in an event of disaster). It is an



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Women are seen bringing water from a 2km walking distance in Khulna.

be termed as a disaster? Several reasons have been identified for linking COVID 19 pandemic with a disaster: Firstly, from the perspective of the concept of disaster ("a relatively sudden event which causes threats for lives, properties and go beyond

of managing the Covid 19 pandemic has inaugurated rooms for redressing the multi hazard, multi risk and emergency management activities through strengthening risk governance (Revet, 2020; Montano & Savitt, 2020; Nasreen, 2020).

embedded in various sectors, compel to scrutinize pandemic impacts through gender lens. Gender-inclusive pandemic study is the demand of time as re-enforced gender roles often make gendered division of labor critical where violation

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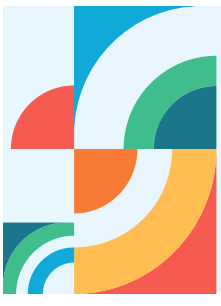
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30

## Gender disaster nexus: Toward an intersectionality approach

**Over the last decades Bangladesh played crucial role in strengthening women and men's indigenous knowledge-based disaster response and provided support to build resilience of different categories. Government, non-government and development actors, academia and other actors unitedly contributed to make the country a resilient one.**

FROM PAGE 29

open ended calling to theorists and pedagogues, practitioners and policy makers to recognize the various vectors of power that operate on identity. A woman in lower income category with disability, for instance, will not experience discrimination "separately" or "chronologically" for being a woman, or for being lower income group, or for being a person with any disability. The interlocking nature of oppression (Collins, 1989) is an important feature of intersectional thought.

### ATTEMPTS IN REDUCING DISASTER RISKS AND VULNERABILITIES

Over the last decades, Bangladesh played a crucial role in strengthening women and men's indigenous knowledge-based disaster response and provided support to build resilience of different categories. Government, non-government and development actors, academia and other actors unitedly contributed to making the country a resilient one. The National Plan for Disaster Management (NPD 2021-2025) focuses on the 'whole of society' in managing disaster risks and response initiatives. It adopts gender responsiveness and disability-inclusive approach for resilience as well as promotes mainstreaming of climate change adaptation and mitigation to reduce risks for all categories of people. However, to implement the strategies and plans for reducing disasters and building resilience in facing the challenges of disasters and pandemic, the voices from the intersectional communities and/or their representatives need to be on the centre of discussion.

The increasing rate of



People within a rural area traveling by boat after a tremendous flood.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

frequency and intensity of disasters, along with different impacts have identified Bangladesh as one of the most vulnerable countries. Living with hazards have contributed to develop disaster coping and adaptation mechanisms based on the affected people experiences. Disasters have also enhanced the management capacities of the government and other actors to device policies including regulatory frameworks over the time. However, it is crucial to have gender-inclusive intersectional disaster management strategies as there are significant

differences amongst and within a single category. It must be mentioned that disaster risk is socially constructed, and thus, who will be most at risk should be understood by context and characteristics, such as gender, class, and age. It should also be noted that vulnerability is constituted by the combination of specific economic, social and cultural characteristics in any given context (Bradshaw and Nasreen, 2023). This notion of the combination of characteristics and the context in which they occur as key, must be the major focus of intersectionality

approach in disaster risk reduction mechanism.

A global project Gender Responsive Resilience and Intersectionality in Policy and Practice (GRRIPP, 2020-2023) led by University College London, UK has been implemented in South Asia, Africa, Latin America and Caribbean countries. Under the leadership of the author, the GRRIPP-South Asia (implemented by the Institute of Disaster Management and Vulnerability Studies, University of Dhaka) has awarded several research on disasters, violence against

women, reproductive health of women during the pandemic, people with disability, realities of elderly, curriculum development and others adopting gender and intersectionality approach. Based on the research findings and workshops at various levels, a framework for gender, disaster and intersectionality has been adopted and validated with government, non-government and relevant other actors. This framework has the potential to revolutionize disaster response and recovery strategies. By integrating these principles into every aspect of disaster

management, it is expected that it will increase resilience, reduce vulnerability, and establish a more inclusive, and equitable society. However, the success of the framework depends on the cooperation and dedication of academia, governments, non-government actors, and communities. The gender and intersectionality in disaster risk reduction framework, essentially will provides a visionary path to disaster resilience in achieving goals, plans and policing alignment with international drivers.



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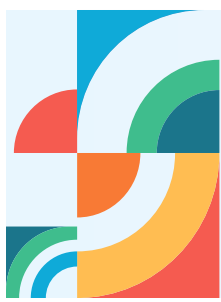




## আধুনিক ও প্রযুক্তিনির্ভর ইসলামী শরীয়াহ্ ডিজিটাল ব্যাংকিং সেবার প্রত্যয়





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31

## Can Bangladesh take advantage of digitised supply chains?



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that is visible, resilient, and agile managers need to adopt more comprehensive digital approaches.

A digitally transformed supply chain provides real-time visibility into its members, allowing managers to identify gaps that may cause disruptions and address them. McKinsey research found that on average companies that aggressively digitize their supply chains can expect to boost annual growth of earnings before interest and taxes by 3.2 percent and annual revenue growth by 2.3 percent. Hence it is expected that investments in digital technologies represent

region that is more tech-savvy than older generations, rapid infrastructure developments towards urbanization are driving the demand for digital offerings both in products and services. Bangladesh is no exception to DT adoptions.

Bangladesh has been able to achieve an inspiring level of success in bringing digital revolution through the Digital Bangladesh Vision, declared by Sheikh Hasina's government on December 12, 2008. Since then, the software and hardware sector has created 20 lakh employment opportunities and has earned USD 1.4 billion from exports,

Industries such as agriculture, ready-made garments, and pharmaceuticals among others, are crucial for Bangladesh's strategic sovereignty. Hence it is important to examine how DT can be adopted in these industries.

### AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES, AND FOREST

In FY 2020-21, agriculture, livestock, fisheries, and forest products accounted for about 12.5% of Bangladesh's total GDP and employed approximately 40% of the total population, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. Currently, farmers can meet the domestic demand for main staples such as rice. However, the self-sufficiency situation might not last long because of decreasing arable land, frequent natural disasters, and population growth. Generally, the outcome of the practices addressing climate change issues can only be seen in the long term. So, adapting to the new climatic conditions through the uptake of technologies is a viable solution. Bangladesh should closely follow global adaptation technologies emphasising agricultural mechanisation and the use of ICT in farming. Farming decisions driven by data will help in fighting back against climate change. For example: satellites in the sky and sensors in the field will be able to detect nutrients and water in the soil and assist in making decisions regarding nutrition to be used.

### READY-MADE GARMENTS

The readymade garment industry is Bangladesh's principal export earner with a value of over USD 46.9 billion in export earnings in FY2022-23. However,

the industry faces regular criticism regarding worker safety, operational efficiency, management's unfair labor practices, and its environmental footprint.

Cutting-edge computer vision technology assists in tracking workers' movements and understanding their activities thus ensuring the safety of workers in real-time. By analyzing video streams, the AI system detects potentially hazardous behaviors, such as operating machinery without proper safety gear or lifting heavy objects incorrectly thus fostering a safer and more productive work environment. Moreover, the implementation of block chain technology would enable tracing of the details of the product origins, the conditions in which they are produced, and the carbon footprint of the garment in a complex apparel supply chain.

### PHARMACEUTICAL

Bangladesh is the only least developed country (LDC) that meets nearly 98 percent of its domestic demand for pharmaceutical products, with a market size of approximately USD 3 billion. In addition, Bangladeshi pharmaceutical products are exported to approximately 150 countries and generated \$169 million in fiscal year 2020-21. The promising growth of the pharmaceutical industry in Bangladesh is threatened by the drug adulteration. Some estimates suggest that the flow of fake medicine in the open market at any time could be around 2,500 crore taka making up 30% of all medicines sold. Internet of Things (IoT) and

block chain can play a major role in collecting, sensing, and recording information from the environment and transferring that data over a network without human interaction. These technologies would enable pharmaceutical companies to track their medicine during the entire journey from labs to consumers. This would improve drug safety, making sure of a verifiable provenance of who delivers what to whom, when, and where.

As evident in all the three major industry sectors successful supply chain DT requires organizations to deploy Industrial Revolution 4.0 related technologies across all supply chain members. However, a recent McKinsey study found that the average supply chain has a digitization level of 43%. Only 2% of the surveyed executives said the supply chain is the focus of their digital strategies.

Having the right, digital-savvy leaders who can translate their business needs into relevant digital applications and who encourage employees to experiment with new technologies is key to successful digitally transformed supply chains. It requires significant reskilling of existing employees and developing skills among graduate students. Globally, in-house training is considered the most popular method of developing competencies amongst supply chain professionals. Meanwhile, universities along with peak industry bodies should design new curricula that include supply chain digitalisation aspects.



Chittagong Port. Photo: Rajib Raihan

**Bangladesh government is now in pursuit of the "Digital Bangladesh to Smart Bangladesh: The road to 2041" vision. Under the vision, the government is encouraging business supply chains to adopt digital technologies and contribute towards achieving national sustainable development goals.**

### CAN BANGLADESH TAKE ADVANTAGE OF DIGITISED SUPPLY CHAINS?

Ongoing geopolitical tensions, trade disputes between major economies, climate change-related disruptions, and rapid changes in consumer preferences collectively pose a complex set of issues for the global supply chain, impacting operational efficiency, financial performance, and the ability to adapt to changing market conditions. In a PWC study, 46% of 4000 CEOs surveyed confirmed that they are concerned about the disruptions in their supply chains due to recent geopolitical conflict, while 78% predict climate risks will impact their supply chains over the next 12 months. Complex supply chains with a series of largely discrete and siloed processes from product development, manufacturing, and distribution of the product have resulted in vulnerable supply chains. For a fully integrated supply chain

a growing percentage of organizations' IT budgets. Global digital technology (DT) spending is expected to reach nearly USD 3.9 trillion in 2027 with a five-year compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 16.1%. Asia/Pacific region will account for a 33.5% share of worldwide DT spending, according to the International Data Corporation. With the young and growing population in the Asia/Pacific

which was only USD 26 million in 2008. To continue with the remarkable progress Bangladesh government is now in pursuit of the "Digital Bangladesh to Smart Bangladesh: The road to 2041" vision. Under the vision, the government is encouraging business supply chains to adopt digital technologies and contribute towards achieving national sustainable development goals.

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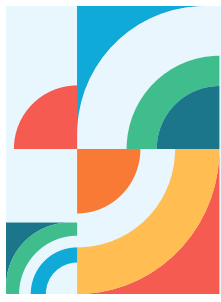
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# READYING FOR THE NEXT BIG LEAP

# The rise of personalistic autocracy: What should we do?



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These counterfeit democracies are described as hybrid regimes. Those who are in power in hybrid regimes manipulate the constitution to their benefit and rig the election to the extent that it is no longer an instrument of democracy but becomes a tool to gain a veneer of legitimacy. These rulers unleashed a process that would ensure democracy's death by a thousand cuts. They claim that

their system is a different kind of democracy and use culture and/or religion as the justification for discounting the defining elements of democracy, such as freedom of speech and assembly, representation through fair process, and accountability. The number of such regimes has increased over the years because the incremental nature of the decline and decimation of democracy are

overlooked by citizens. Besides, these counterfeit democracies can fool the international community. These rulers have external backers who shield them from any kind of adverse consequences. Many of these hybrid regimes continued to be in the grey zone for decades, but some have muted to become closed autocracies; very few experienced successful democratization.

### WHAT IS A PERSONALISTIC AUTOCRACY?

The second phenomenon – personalistic autocracy – is an evolving characteristic of the global scene and warrants our attention. According to available data, in 1988 these regimes constituted 23 percent of all autocracies, by 2010 the percentage reached 40 percent. In one sense personalism in politics is nothing new, but what

makes it distinctly different in recent decades is that this has become a defining feature of a regime, or in other words, it has become a category of existing regimes. Autocratic regimes which emerged after WWII were led by parties or military juntas. They were, in large measure, collective leadership. Until the late 1980s, this was the major trend. As the Third Wave of democracy began in the mid-1970s, this particular feature of the undemocratic regime dissipated. After the end of the Cold War, personalistic rule in non-democracy began to emerge.

Political scientists Andrea Kendall Taylor, Carisa Nitsche, Erica Frantz, and Joseph Wright, who have been studying this phenomenon for the past decade, identified personalism as the 'domination of the political realm by a single individual'. They noted that, in some instances, personalist leaders dominate a respective country's political system 'to such a degree they become virtually indistinguishable from the regimes they rule.' Erica Frantz elsewhere described this kind of regime as a 'personalist dictatorship'. In her description, 'personalistic dictatorships [are] those regimes where power is concentrated in the hands of an individual rather than a political party, royal family, or military junta.' It is common knowledge that autocratic leaders are characterized by their centralized and unilateral decision-making style, and they demand unquestioning obedience to their directives and personal loyalty.

SEE PAGE 34

Since the middle of the 2000s, the world has witnessed a precipitous decline in democratic countries. After almost three decades of proliferation of democratic governance, described by Samuel Huntington as the Third Wave of democracy, the third reverse wave is sweeping the globe. Two previous waves, 1882 through 1926, and 1945 through the mid-1970s, were followed by similar reversals. During these reversals, countries that regressed from democracy became outright autocracies. There was no grey zone in between. But the third reverse wave is characterized by two important phenomena. The first is the emergence of counterfeit democracy while the second is the rise of the personalistic autocratic system.

### WHAT IS COUNTERFEIT DEMOCRACY?

Counterfeit democracies are those that have some traits of democracy, for example, periodic elections and limited space for opposition parties, while the essential system of governance is authoritarian.



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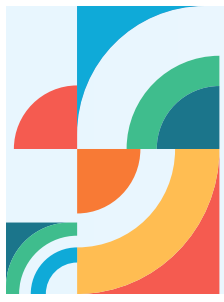
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# Corruption control: Can the righteous and benevolent exercise of monopolized power help?



**IFTEKHARUZZAMAN**  
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Transparency International  
Bangladesh

with many countries in similar situations. We also have a fairly elaborate façade of state capacity backed by policies, procedures, strategies, laws, institutions, and systems in place, which have so far delivered precious little.

### POLITICAL WILL - THE RHETORIC & REALITY

Bangladesh Awami League's election manifestos over the years show specific anti-corruption pledges repeated since the election manifesto of 1986 when Sheikh Hasina took over the leadership of the party. Anti-corruption pledges have featured in important public documents like the successive five year plans, perspective plans, laws, and policies adopted during her successive regimes. Starting from the Right to Information Act 2009 enacted in the very first session of the ninth parliament, a series of laws and policies have been created like the Protection of Information Disclosure Act 2011, National Integrity Strategy 2012, Anti-money Laundering Act 2012, and many more. That the pledges and the anti-corruption legal and institutional capacity remain unenforced and that many of these have also been undermined many times in the name of reforms is also well-documented.

administrative changes that have curbed the authority of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) include the 2023 Income Tax Act which thwarted the ACC's access to income tax-related data of individuals under investigation for corruption. Nothing but the agenda of selective protection of officials can explain the discriminatory and unconstitutional provision for ACC to obtain prior

and wealth statement of parliament members, ministers, and respective families has not been met. Abuse of power related to public contracts, illegal grabbing, and occupancy of land, water bodies, forests, and khas lands by the leaders, agents, and activists of political leaders have become part of the political culture.

Public procurement rules were amended to provide

except an abortive creation of a so-called tax ombudsman's office intended to reward a favored individual rather than a stated purpose. Defying the Constitutional provision and electoral commitment the provision has been successively made to and legalize black money which for all practical purposes encourages further corruption.

enjoying impunity but also accumulating vast wealth. The election affidavit data showing mind-boggling rates of increase of income and wealth of the candidates for the 2024 parliamentary elections represent just the tip of the iceberg that explains why the number of super-rich grows at one of the fastest rates in the world. Nothing but discriminatory implications of

Corruption is a global menace that no country has succeeded in bringing down to zero level. However, some have succeeded in effectively controlling and preventing it. International good practices show political will and uncompromising enforcement are the key drivers for corruption control, especially through exemplary accountability and systemic integrity mainstreamed across politics, governance, and society. Above all, a strong evidence-based message across society that corruption is a punishable offense for anyone irrespective of status or identity is indispensable.

In terms of pledges against corruption, Bangladesh may be at par



ILLUSTRATION: BIPOLOB CHAKRABORTY

permission under the Civil Service Act before taking into custody public officials for corruption-related investigations. No less damaging is the amendment of the Money Laundering Prevention Act, 2012 to deprive ACC of the authority to investigate all but one of the 27 scheduled offenses related to illicit financial transfers. ACC itself set in January 2023 an unprecedented example of motivated self-disempowerment when by an administrative order bulk of the Commission's executive authority was transferred to its bureaucracy perceived to be designed to protect those linked with power. The commitment to annually disclose the income

participation in bidding without expertise or experience for contracts up to a certain threshold. Good initiatives like Electronic Procurement have been manipulated to benefit the politically linked. To facilitate kleptocratic control of procurement in the power sector an initially short-term provision to freeze the scope of checks and balances has been subsequently given permanent legal status. Nothing has been done to keep the constitutional commitment repeated under the election manifesto to establish the Ombudsman's office

### CORRUPTION - THE 'VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM'

There is no doubt that pervasive corruption is among the top-ranking issues of public concern in Bangladesh, especially for the common people who are not only the worst victims of petty corruption in service delivery sectors, but also the load bearers of grand corruption that eats up 3 percent of GDP by conservative estimates. Bangladesh has acquired a dubious reputation as a global leader in money laundering with at least \$12 billion illicitly transferred annually out of the country. The beneficiaries of power abuse are not only

corruption can explain why the top 10 percent of people own 40 percent of income, 5 percent own 30 percent, and just one percent own more than 16 percent.

Although grouped in the second lowest category of 'hybrid regime' as per the Democracy Index of the Economic Intelligence Unit, Bangladesh's score is not only twelve points lower than its group average of 36 but also five points less than 29 for the lowest category of authoritarian regimes. Our performance is also seven points worse than countries having no electoral democracy as per Freedom House research.

SEE PAGE 36

## The rise of personalistic autocracy: What should we do?

FROM PAGE 33

The political system which has a 'personalistic dictator' at the helm of power, is a personalistic autocracy.

### HOW DO PERSONALISTIC AUTOCRATS RULE?

How does a personalistic autocrat rule a country? These leaders, according to Alexander Baturo and Jakob Tolstrup, do not always rely on an institution. Instead, even if any institution exists, rulers depend on patron-client nexus networks and informal politics for governance. Ekaterina Schulmann, while



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

institutions with the sole aim of consolidating power in the hands of a leader and his (or—far more rarely—her) closest associates.' Kendall Taylor and her colleagues underscore that in a personalistic autocracy, an individual trumps institutions and rules. They write such a personalist autocracy, the leader governs absent the constraints of other actors: Not even the leader's political party (should it exist) or the security apparatus exerts independent control. Policy choices, in turn, REFLECT the whims of the ruler.

### POLICY CHOICES OF PERSONALISTIC AUTOCRATS

There is wide agreement among political scientists that

personalist autocracy 'produces the worst policy outcomes of any political system'. These policy choices are not limited to domestic politics or governance, instead, they are also about foreign policy choices and priorities. They tend to pursue 'the riskiest and most aggressive foreign policy'. Torrey Taussig, in a commentary published by the Brookings Institute in 2017, identified four factors for personalist autocrats' aggressive foreign policy. First, the inherent characteristics of the individual - 'ambitious, cut-throat and divisive'. Second, these leaders perceive a lower cost of fighting. Third, due to the absence of strong institutions that would

hold him/her accountable, he/she does not fear defeat. Fourth, subordinates are unwilling to challenge the leader which creates a groupthink situation. Other experts have noted that 'personalist dictatorships are also the most likely of all dictatorships to invest in nuclear weapons and least likely to engage in international cooperation'. Domestic policy choices based on a personal network create a crony system to the detriment of national interests and protect the beneficiaries from any kind of accountability, and often foreign policy choices are based on who would act as a shield in case of external adversities.

### HOW DO PERSONALISTIC AUTOCRATS RISE?

Personalistic autocrats do not emerge out of nowhere, instead, they rise incrementally. These leaders use weak institutional contexts as their springboard, cultivate pernicious polarization in society, and utilize the democratic system, including elections, to come to power. Once in power, they adopt a pathway that has been described by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt as the pathway to the death of democracy. In their book titled "How Democracies Die", Levitsky and Ziblatt showed the

three-step process of the rise of autocrats - targeting the referees (that is capturing the judiciary, law enforcement bodies and intelligence, tax, and regulatory bodies), targeting the opposition (that is, persecuting the opposition voice, from political parties to media to civil society, through coercion and using the judiciary), and changing the rules of the game (changing the rules which determine how the legislature will work, elections will be held).

As such personalistic autocrats rise through the decimation of institutions to create a complete dependence on the leader, first as de facto, then as de jure; through marginalization, and, if necessary, annihilation of the opposition using whatever state apparatuses the leader has brought under his/her control, and through changes in the constitution and laws which would create a playing field which is not only tilted but also under the control of him/her. Elections are manipulated through various mechanisms, including banishing the formidable opposition candidates and parties using laws. These are done both stealthily and openly, through machination, intrigue as well as coercion, and cooptation.

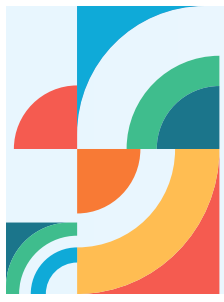
### THE DO'S AND DON'TS WHEN PERSONALISTIC AUTOCRATS RISE

Although a personalist autocrat cares less about the electorate, portrays any critics as the enemy, and disregards public sentiment, he/she longs for adulation and would like to be praised for 'successes'. The autocrats would like to hear that reaching this stage is a testimony of his/her ability and the abject failure of the opposition. How the opposition was rendered inoperative by unlawful use of the state seems to be completely ignored. This is how personalistic autocrats find legitimization in a rule which has decimated institutions of state, and silenced contrarian voices - in the political scene and civil society. What appears to be a victory through strategic thinking and meticulous planning, is often nothing short of a pyrrhic victory, the cost of which is borne by the nation - in the short and long terms. As such, these leaders don't deserve congratulations, instead, citizens need a reminder that the rise of the personalistic autocrats has pushed the nation towards a precipice. Until that can be said, perhaps 'silence is golden' is a better option.

**There is wide agreement among political scientists that personalist autocracy 'produces the worst policy outcomes of any political system'. These policy choices are not limited to domestic politics or governance, instead, they are also about foreign policy choices and priorities. They tend to pursue 'the riskiest and most aggressive foreign policy'.**

discussing the Russian political scene, highlighted the relationship between institutions and the leader; she said, 'Personalist regimes tend to dismantle, subvert, or imitate





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SEGMENT 5

ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENTS 2024

DHAKA WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 28, 2024

FALGUN 15, 1430 BS

36

## Corruption control: Can the righteous and benevolent exercise of monopolized power help?

FROM PAGE 34

Bangladesh remains the second lowest in South Asia, above only Afghanistan. We have the fourth lowest score among 31 Asia-Pacific countries, while our score is also lower than the average for the globally lowest-performing Sub-Saharan Africa region.

### WHERE LIES THE KEY

Reasons for our poor performance in corruption control are not far to seek. Corruption – grand or petty – has rendered our institutions dysfunctional which has in turn prevented the rule of law, and granted impunity to the corrupt, especially the

**The Government may consider commissioning an independent task force to develop a White Paper on a time-bound Anti-Corruption Action Plan. It can be constituted by an equal number of Government representatives and independent experts.**

politically and governmentally connected. State institutions mandated to control corruption including the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) have been under political and bureaucratic influence. The Parliament, the apex accountability institution has been converted into the monopolized territory of the ruling party denying it the due role of holding the government to account and control corruption.

Other institutions of national integrity and accountable governance, especially law enforcement, administration, rule of law, and justice have also been subjected to partisan political influence. Policy



CARTOON: TIB

capture using lobby power, especially in the banking sector ravaged by loan default, financial fraud, and money laundering has flourished. Governance has become dependent on surveillance for targeted control and intimidation of media and civil society driven by intolerance of dissension, disclosure, and reporting on corruption.

### THE RECIPE IN THE 2024 MANIFESTO

In this context, the recipe for corruption control as listed in the 2024 election manifesto of the ruling party, perhaps the most elaborate set of pledges so far against corruption in such a document, deserves particular attention. Pledging continuation of the zero-tolerance policy against corruption, the manifesto recognizes that "corruption stands as the primary impediment to the economic development, poverty alleviation, infrastructure improvement and moral advancement of the nation. It hinders the realization of overarching

developmental goals for the country. Combating corruption necessitates more than just law enforcement and punishment, it requires the establishment of a social movement." It also pledges to add education curriculum content addressing the evils of corruption and prevention measures to instill an anti-corruption attitude among students.

The ruling party commits that "strict measures will be implemented to eradicate illegal wealth acquisition, bribery and abuse of power, nepotism, muscle power violence, and racketeering". It further pledges that "transparency and accountability in project selection, cost determination, quality audit of completed projects, and government procurement and tender verification will be consistently ensured." It goes on to commit that the "use of information technology will be expanded across all areas including administration, the police department, courts, education, and healthcare,

to prevent corruption in the administration."

All these are like music to the ear of any Bangladeshi today. However, the only question is whether and to what extent these lofty promises will be translated into practice and what is the roadmap, or whether these will once again remain just a wish-list to gather dust.

### IN BUILT NO BREACH OF THE SYSTEM

Countries that have consistently performed at the top levels in credible global corruption control assessments over the years include Singapore which is attributed to the arguably benevolent authoritarian rule of Lee Kuan Yew and his uncompromising practice of zero tolerance against breach of the system. That is not to say corruption does not exist in Singapore. High-profile politically connected people including Ministers in Singapore have been involved in corruption. In a recent such episode, on January 16, 2024, the powerful Transport Minister resigned after being charged with allegations of accepting gifts from a Malaysian billionaire for a business favor. Singapore's reputation as the least corrupt country is also tainted by the fact that like many of its peers of the least corrupt club, it remains one of the most attractive destinations of illicit financial transfers facilitated by syndicates of various 'professional experts'.

Although Singapore has lost five points in twelve years since 2012, in terms of CPI it continues to be among the top ranking countries in terms of corruption control. Many often attribute Singapore's success to one of the highest-paid public sector officials and politicians,

which is only part of the story. The most important factor is the built-in deterrence against corruption in the system. In 1986, soon after the Singapore Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) started an investigation in November for corruption against Teh Cheang Wan, incumbent Minister for National Development since 1979, he resigned and committed suicide, leaving a note that said, "I feel it is only right that I should pay the highest penalty for my mistake".

What Lee Kuan Yew said in a parliamentary speech a few weeks after the incident, is pertinent for any political leader, Leader of the House, and Head of the Government committed to corruption control, "there is no way a Minister can avoid investigations and a trial if there is evidence to support one. The purpose is not just to be righteous. The purpose is to create a system which will carry on because it has not been compromised... if I had compromised, that is the end of the system."

Delivering her opening speech at the first meeting of the Cabinet formed after the 12th national election, the Prime Minister stated that she would not tolerate any corruption, particularly in the public sector and public procurement, and stressed the need for financial discipline as well as transparency and accountability. One would expect the message to be not only to her Cabinet and public officials but also to every component of the power base of the Government. The extent to which corruption in Bangladesh will be effectively controlled consistent with these lofty pledges and pronouncements will depend on whether the

individual and collective lobby-power lobby power of the key actors in political and governance space will be exercised with some semblance of public interest instead of treating their respective positions of power as a license for private gain.

### RIGHTEOUS AND BENEVOLENT EXERCISE OF THE MONOPOLIZED POWER?

Only a righteous and benevolent exercise of the monopolized authority in political and governance space can take us anywhere near any meaningful implementation of the anti-corruption election pledges of the government. To prevent more of the same, the Government may consider commissioning an independent task force to develop a White Paper on a time-bound Anti-Corruption Action Plan. It can be constituted by an equal number of Government representatives and independent experts.

The Prime Minister started her fifth overall and fourth successive tenure with much higher authority and power. She has made it incumbent upon herself to walk her talk, especially her declaration while launching the party manifesto 2024 that lessons will be taken from past mistakes to serve the public interest. The problem is that within her power base lie the perpetrators, protectors, and promoters of corruption. It remains to be seen if she can exercise the unrestricted and unaccountable authority that has no conventional institutional structures of checks and balances, with righteousness and benevolence putting public interest on top where no one will enjoy impunity irrespective of identity or status.



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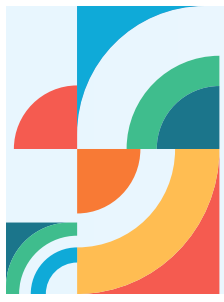
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DHAKA WEDNESDAY FEBRUARY 28, 2024

FALGUN 15, 1430 BS

37

# Without the restoration of democracy press freedom remains unattainable



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“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”- This is what article 19 of the Universal Human Rights Declaration promised 75 years ago. As a signatory to this declaration, Bangladesh is duty-bound to uphold these rights for all its citizens. At the heart of this commitment lies the crucial role of journalists and media outlets, entrusted with the responsibility of delivering fact-based, unbiased information. Nevertheless, within the current political environment and economic realities, the cherished ideal of press freedom appears increasingly elusive.

**In Bangladesh, a national rights group called Ain-o-Salish Kendra in its annual review noted that 290 journalists were subjected to assault, intimidation, and harassment last year. Undoubtedly, assaults on the media surged with heightened intensity in the run-up to the national election, and the year 2023 was no exception.**

Even more disheartening is the unprecedented level of assault on journalism worldwide. Governments, large corporations, tech giants, transnational criminal syndicates, and various interest groups are all intimidated by revelations, fiercely striving to conceal them from public scrutiny and resorting to every

conceivable method to target the media.

Statistics may vary, but 2023 was the deadliest year ever for journalists. During the last 100 days of the year, the ongoing systematic destruction of Gaza and indiscriminate killing of Palestinians by occupying Israeli forces saw, on average, more than one journalist lose their lives each day. Due to varying counting methods, the International Federation of

has systematically destroyed the Palestinian media in Gaza by bombing their offices and facilities.

This distressing toll in Gaza comes on top of the worldwide worsening media environment which is consequential to the gradual weakening of democracies and the rise of authoritarianism. Collating data from the Observatory of Killed Journalists of UNESCO the PEC reports that outside the

rights group called Ain-o-Salish Kendra in its annual review noted that 290 journalists were subjected to assault, intimidation, and harassment last year. Undoubtedly, assaults on the media surged with heightened intensity in the run-up to the national election, and the year 2023 was no exception. Rather it is part of a disturbing trend developed throughout the AL government's shift towards authoritarianism

has become the norm. A glaring example of the failure to bring the perpetrators to justice is the case of the double murders of Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Runi, a well-known journalist couple. A court has allowed the investigating agency more than 100 times of extensions to complete its probe.

Furthermore, several journalists have been forcibly disappeared and later sued on spurious charges after their eventual release. Some have also had to flee the country. A study by the Centre for Governance Studies (SGS) found that journalists were the second most victimized professional group, subjected to abuse by the dreaded Digital Security Act (DSA) which eventually was replaced last year. Bangladesh slipped eleven places in the World Press Freedom Index between 2021 and 2023, leaving it at 163rd place – the lowest rank in South Asia.

This grim glimpse of the state of press freedom is not an aberration, but rather commensurate with the rapid backsliding of democracy in the country. More than a decade-long suppression of dissent and crackdown on the potentially challenging force, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, (BNP) and capturing major state institutions have transformed the country from a multi party democracy to a virtual one-party state. Two leading research organizations engaged in global monitoring of democracy and freedom; the V-Dem Institute of Sweden and Freedom House of the United States have been consistently

flagging these backsliding in democratic practices and personal freedoms both offline and online ranging from freely expressing opinions to political, civil and cultural rights. The V-Dem Institute's Democracy Report 2023 puts Bangladesh in the group of countries that are in the process of autocratizing and Freedom House classified us as a country partly free.

National and international rights groups have long been documenting incidents of curtailing civic rights including freedom of association, organizing protests, and expressing opinions and thoughts freely which the authorities do not approve of. These restrictions also extend to shutting down the internet or frequent slowing down of mobile connectivity during anti-government protests. A New York-based non-profit organization working on the digital rights of people globally, Access Now reported in 2022 that Bangladesh was one of the top five countries of internet shutdowns. It observes that governments wield Internet shutdowns as weapons of control and shields of impunity.

Paradoxically, the last 15 years have witnessed a proliferation of news outlets in the country with over 50 licenses for television channels, dozens for radio stations, and hundreds for newspapers and online news portals. However, this growth is tainted by a lack of independence, as media ownership is often entwined with party allegiance.

SEE PAGE 39



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Journalists (IFJ) toll stood at 120, while the Geneva-based Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) put the figure at 140.

According to the rights group, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), no other war has taken so many journalists' lives in such a short period. PEC also states that the Israeli army

Gaza Strip, 59 journalists have been killed in 27 countries with Mexico standing second in the list of most journalists killed with a total of 9 deaths recorded. Bangladesh is also on the list with two victims. According to them, 547 journalists spent New Year's Eve in jail worldwide.

In Bangladesh, a national

since it succeeded in holding a one-sided election in 2013. Since then, physical attacks on journalists causing deaths have risen sharply taking the tally to 16 in a decade, mostly victims of violence by the activists of the Awami League. Attacks causing physical harm remain high as impunity for the perpetrators



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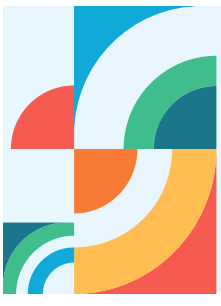
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38



The National Parliament Building of Bangladesh

PHOTO: STAR

## The future of elections in Bangladesh



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Elections as a political game changer is a global phenomenon. The concept of election is a legitimate process of 'choosing leadership' to run a sovereign state and its government. Despite many of its limitations, democratic communities globally accepted the device of 'election' as the only viable method and governance tool for a peaceful change of power that ensures citizens' choice, voice, and participation.

Below the national level, other subordinate political institutions such as regional governments (provinces or component states), sub-national governments (local governments of different nature and types), and even private, voluntary, and professional institutions also arrange elections at regular intervals as an inherent device to democratically appoint their management. According to a 'Freedom House' assessment, approximately 70 national elections are expected to take place worldwide in the year 2024. Notably, the Indian parliamentary election scheduled for May-June and the US Presidential election in November are anticipated to be among the most significant electoral events of the year.

When discussing the future of elections in Bangladesh, two distinct discourses emerge. The

first discourse inevitably draws upon a logical analogy of the processes, consequences, and outcomes of the country's past electoral events since its independence, particularly focusing on the Tenth, Eleventh,

Through a systematic process over the years, parliaments have devolved into what can be described as a 'single party club,' and the multi-party system has been eroded with remarkable precision.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

and Twelfth parliamentary elections. Examining the current electoral stalemate necessitates a retrospective analysis of events spanning from 2011 to 2023.

The second discourse is likely to involve listing some steps that can be carefully initiated in the future to contribute towards a sound political and governance

Bangladesh's journey towards establishing an authoritarian single-party state is nearly complete. The process involves marginalizing dissenting voices from all civil spheres and gradually rendering pluralistic social and liberal cultural values irrelevant in mainstream society. Bangladeshi society, to some extent, resembles China during Chairman Mao's Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and the Soviet social and political system before perestroika and glasnost initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. However, history has shown that people never succumb to defeat indefinitely, as individuals persist in creating avenues for self-expression.

During the Soviet Union era, people often gathered in communal kitchens where lively discussions gave rise to countless political jokes, humorously reflecting the realities of Soviet politics and its leaders. Nowadays, social media serves a similar role as a platform for dialogue and debate. However, unlike the communal kitchens of the past, social media is fraught with

socio-economic framework.

In the long term, Bangladesh cannot afford to sustain an anti-democratic regime, particularly within a burgeoning economy fueled by the aspirations of its citizens. The nation's future prosperity and stability depend on upholding democratic principles and ensuring governance that respects the rights and aspirations of its people.

We should look at the 70 elections to be held this year, especially those of India and the USA, which may teach us valuable lessons and demonstrate certain standards. In the USA, there are 520,000 positions filled through elections, including the president, governors, senators, house members, and federal and state-level judges. Elections are held under state legislations, which vary slightly from state to state, and voters are voluntarily registered. Despite the transparency of the voting system, there are complaints such as gerrymandering, registration fraud, and vote trafficking, especially in mail-in votes, which

**Through a systematic process over the years, parliaments have devolved into what can be described as a 'single party club,' and the multi-party system has been eroded with remarkable precision.**

Over these 12 years, Bangladesh underwent significant milestones, including a major constitutional amendment (the Fifteenth Amendment in 2011), six city elections in 2013, and three highly controversial national elections in 2014, 2018, and 2024, respectively. Furthermore, all local government elections held in Zilas, Parishads, Upazila Parishads, Union Parishads, Pourashavas, and city corporations during this period warrant critical review.

It is noteworthy that all elections held since 1973 have been marred by irregularities, regardless of whether under civil or military rule. As a result, the political landscape has witnessed unprecedented events, including opposition-launched movements and government responses characterized by brutal police actions and motivated court cases.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

system while maintaining electoral governance perspectives, considering the background of both the immediate and distant past.

**ELECTION SYSTEM IN BANGLADESH IS DEAD, LONG LIVE THE ELECTION!**

In discussions about monarchy and the British constitution, there is a saying, "The king is dead, long live the king." It implies that the monarchy exists primarily for ceremonial purposes, with its role and function reduced to a minimum. To summarize,

misinformation and fake news, which can significantly mislead society.

Despite the advent of social media, Bangladesh has faced successive elections since 2014 marked by unprecedented irregularities, irresponsibility, and opposition tactics. The gradual rise of authoritarianism is undoubtedly disheartening, threatening the nation's resilience and unity. Yet, it's crucial not to despair, recognizing that Bangladesh is intricately connected to the global community within a

are later addressed through stringent review, recount, and court cases. Interestingly, former President Donald Trump is facing court cases as a defendant of voter fraud and conspiracy to change results, highlighting the importance of accountability in democratic processes (Dennis W. Johnson, 2020; John Fund and Hans Von Spakovsky, 2021).

Our closest neighbor, India, which is the world's largest election manager, presents an interesting case to follow.

SEE PAGE 39

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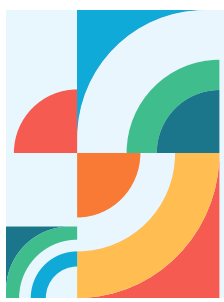
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## The future of elections in Bangladesh

FROM PAGE 38

It conducts elections for various positions, including the president, vice-president, 543 Lok Sabha and 323 Rajya Sabha members, and state legislative assembly members across almost 29 states and territories. For instance, in Assam, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh, 120, 294, and 403 Vidhan Sabha (state legislature) members are elected respectively. Additionally, there are 250,000 local bodies at different tiers or territorial units, and 3 million representatives for these units are elected, including one million females. All these primary elections are managed at the national and state levels by Election Commissions with the assistance of state and federal-level bureaucracy. The elections are held in two or three stages. Primary elections are popular elections managed by election commissions under stringent electoral laws, with civil bureaucracy remaining at the helm. Secondary elections are held within the respective houses to select and appoint political executives at all levels, from the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha to the Gram Panchayats. The President is elected by three houses of parliament—the Lok Sabha, Rajya Sabha, and Vidhan Sabha. Mayors, Chairpersons, Sarpanches, and Pradhans of respective institutions are elected by the members and councilors, and it is the prerogative of the chief executive to choose his/her executive council.

There are positions similar to speakers in each local government unit all over India, and leaders of the opposition party or group inside all the local bodies are also formed, similar to the national and state legislatures. Like the Prime Minister at the center and Chief

Ministers at the states, Mayors, Pradhans, and Chairpersons of local government bodies are entitled to form their cabinets and executive councils. For a detailed historical analysis of Elections in India, see Pranroy Roy and Dorab Sopariwala (2019).

### WHAT CAN BANGLADESH LEARN?

Stringent electoral laws and their strict application are crucial. While we have good laws, their application is in shambles.

Transparency and the rule of law at all stages of the electoral process are key to credible elections. However, our law enforcers, civil administration, and even the magistrates deployed in the field do not feel accountable, fail to maintain transparency, and lack the courage to protect victims by implementing the law.

A sound party system with democratic practices is absent. While political parties preach democracy, they hardly practice it within the party. Party leaders are not democratically elected, and the top party bosses are often permanent and hereditary. There has been hardly any change in top leadership positions of political parties for generations. In many cases, they groom their wives, children, and near relatives for future political inheritance. The nomination system in competing parliamentary seats is equated with business deals, and many nominations are bought and sold.

Members of parliament spend nominal time in legislative deliberations. They enjoy the prerogative of unlimited personal economic gains through business, lobbying for contracts, and gaining appointments for themselves and others. A modest reflection of their economic gains is evident in the declaration forms

of 'wealth statement' in election applications (Majumder, 2024).

Persons on the Government payroll should be non-partisan, independent, professionally, impersonal, and neutral. They should serve the state, not any political party. However, gradually, the state machinery is becoming party machinery, aiming at personal extra gains.

There is no alternative to an independent and impartial judiciary with the right courage and high moral and common ethical standards. However, these are often missing in the lower judiciary, and the higher judiciary does not take measures to prevent it.

Law-abiding, non-violent, and politically conscious citizenship is also in the process of extinction from Bangladeshi society. Civil society is also in decline. Showing courage in public affairs is regarded as foolishness, and protest is often rewarded with punishment.

### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLITICAL AND ELECTORAL REFORM

**Electoral reform**  
Our 'winner-takes-all' simple majoritarian electoral system needs to change, and the adoption of 'proportional representation' (PR) may ease the aggressive political character to some extent. Under the current majoritarian system, we are continuously ruled by the minority, which turns into a brute majority. We understand that democracy is the 'rule of the majority.' Historically, our election statistics regarding the rate of voter turnout and the general impression of neutrality and accuracy of vote counts are never beyond question. Out of 12 elections, only four

(1991, 1996, 2001, and 2008) earned reasonable credibility. Even statistics from those four elections show that minority votes prevailed over the majority.

In 1991, the BNP formed the government by securing 30.81% of the popular vote and 140 (46%) seats. The AL was in the opposition with 30.08% of the popular vote and 88 (29%) parliamentary seats. The same trend was seen in 1996, 2001, and 2008. In 1996, the AL formed the government with 37.44% of the vote and 146 (49%) seats, while the BNP sat in the opposition with 33.61% of the vote and 116 (39%) parliamentary seats. The 2001 election is even more depressing. The BNP formed the government with 40.97% of the vote, while the AL sat in the opposition with 40.13% of the popular vote. The vote difference between BNP and AL was 0.84, but the seat difference was 131 (44%). In 2008, the AL got 48.90% of the votes and won 230 seats (76.66%), while the BNP-Jamat combine polled 37.20% of the votes and secured only 32 (10.66%) seats. The difference in votes was 11.7%, but the seat difference was 198 (66%).

Under the PR system of election, such disparities would be less likely to occur. All parties would ensure parliamentary seats in proportion to their vote share. Every vote would count and affect election results. Voters would vote for policies rather than individuals, and practices like vote buying and rigging would be discouraged. Out of the 193 UN member countries, 97 major democracies practice the PR system, adopting many different methods. The PR system has brought significant changes to the polling system. Nepal and Sri Lanka practice limited PR systems in conducting their elections.

## Without the restoration of democracy press freedom remains unattainable

FROM PAGE 37

A survey by the Centre for Governance Studies found most outlets supportive of the government are owned by businesses using their media ownership as a means of furthering other commercial interests.

These outlets largely survive on state patronage in various forms or subsidies from their owners, who consider them an investment for furthering other interests including political ambitions. About a dozen owners of media companies participate in the just concluded parliamentary elections and their outlets' reporting was markedly different from others, either by disproportionate coverage of or apparent bias towards respective owners. Government ministers and leaders of the ruling party, however, have consistently argued that media plurality is proof of media freedom in Bangladesh. In reality, most of these outlets thrive on state patronage, shaping a media landscape heavily influenced by the ruling party and stifling independent voices.

The recent questionable election outcome is poised to further consolidate

Bill, and criticized for its restrictiveness, heightens fears of additional encroachments on freedom of expression. Concerns have been expressed at the fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) at the United Nations Human Rights Council over the potential abuse of the CSA and at least two countries - Canada and Belgium - have called for repealing it. Additionally, the proposed Regulation for Digital, Social Media, and OTT Platforms raises concerns about replicating the restrictive nature of the abolished DSA, exacerbating worries over media freedom.

Indeed, the citizens' empowerment provided by technological advancement and global open platforms like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), TikTok, Instagram, and many others have also derived increased risks of harm to vulnerable groups by the spread of misinformation, fake news, and cybercrime. While governments worldwide grapple with these challenges posed by the digital age, there is a pressing need for a balanced approach that protects vulnerable groups without compromising freedom of expression. Initiatives like the Online Safety Bill in the United Kingdom and the European Media Freedom Act in the European Union serve as examples of this balanced approach.

The Online Safety Bill in the United Kingdom contains safeguards for news publisher content and wider journalistic content when it is shared on social media platforms. The European Union is also in the process of enacting the European Media Freedom Act aimed at 'better protect editorial independence, media pluralism, ensure transparency and fairness and bring better cooperation of media authorities through a new European media Board.' The EU Commission says that the act includes unprecedented safeguards for journalists to perform their jobs freely and safely.

As the financial landscape of journalism transforms, the concept of journalism as a public good gains traction. UNESCO suggests three urgent measures to safeguard journalism: public financing for trustworthy news outlets, enhanced support for genuine public service media, and increased donor aid and philanthropic investments in news production.

In Bangladesh, however, these issues can only be adequately addressed within a democratic framework, which is absent at present. The tainted renewal of the Awami League regime further distances the dream of a free press, emphasizing the urgent need for the restoration of democracy.



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

unchecked power, tightening the government's control over the media. It was common knowledge that editors/producers of television talk shows are used to getting frequent advisories on who can and cannot be invited. Private business houses were advised not to place advertisements in newspapers critical of the government. However, these practices are unlikely to end soon. The newly appointed State Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mohammad Ali Arafat has already warned that the government was planning to establish a framework to ensure accountability for spreading what it determines 'disinformation and rumors', though recent scrutinies by several fact-checking groups have identified pro-government groups as the most sources of generating and spreading disinformation.

The controversial Cyber Security

### ডিজিটাল ব্যাংকিং-এর সকল সেবা

#### সেবাসমূহ

- মোবাইল গ্র্যাপস
- ইন্টারনেট ব্যাংকিং
- ই-একাউন্ট (হিজের একাউন্ট হিজের করি)
- ডেবিট কার্ড

২৪/৭ এখন বাংলাদেশ ডেভেলপমেন্ট ব্যাংক পিএলসি.তে

- বিকাশ ও নগদ টাকা পাঠান ফ্রিতে
- NPSB এর মাধ্যমে মুহূর্তেই টাকা পাঠান অন্য ব্যাংকে
- ক্রেডিট কার্ডের বিল পে-করুন
- ইএফটিএন ও আরটিজিএস সেবা নিন
- এ চালান সিস্টেম (ACS) এ আয়কর, ডায়টি, ট্রাফ ও পাসপোর্টের ফি জমা দিন
- NESCO, DPDC ও BGDCL এর বিল সেলেক্ট করুন
- সকল অপারেটরে মোবাইল রিচার্জ করুন

বাংলাদেশ ডেভেলপমেন্ট ব্যাংক পিএলসি.

(একটি রাষ্ট্র মালিকানাধীন বানিজ্যিক ব্যাংক)

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