

Current digital divide far too great to achieve Vision 2021

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

The government's plans for a 'Digital Bangladesh' by 2021 still seems far from fruition due to the disparity in access to information and communication technology (ICT) between low and high-income households, according to a study by the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (Sanem).

Besides, there is also a significant digital divide between genders in the country, the organisation said in a statement.

The study styled, 'Dynamics of gender and youth inclusiveness in technology in Bangladesh', was released yesterday at a webinar jointly organised by Sanem and ActionAid Bangladesh.

Mahtab Uddin, a research fellow at Sanem and economics lecturer at the University of Dhaka, disclosed the findings of the study.

cent of the young men in households belonging to the poorest income bracket own a smartphone compared with 92 per cent in the top income bracket.

Meanwhile, 24 per cent of the women in the lowest income bracket own the communication device as opposed to 73 per cent in the high-income bracket.

Therefore, it is evident that the disparity in access to ICT services among males and females in Bangladesh is 44 per cent in the poorest income decile and 19 per cent in the richest income decile.

The study pointed out three major aspects. First, the percentage of men that own smartphones is relatively the same across all wage categories.

Second, the number of young females from poor households that own a smartphone has remained the same at about 34 to 37 per cent

The prevailing bias against women is an obstacle for the mass adaptation of modern technology among young women, said Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury, the deputy minister for education.

"If we do not develop our social values, the use of technology among females will not increase."

Thousands of general graduates from public universities are added to the labour market each year but it is not possible to find employment for each and every one of them.

Therefore, these graduated should undertake technical education to diversify their skills and find a place in the job market.

Chowdhury also said that most politicians have no clue when it comes to automation and modern technology.

This, in turn, acts as a barrier for the youth to adopting these technologies, as was the case between 2001 and 2006. But over the last decade or so, the use of ICT tools has grown exponentially, he added.

Vision 2041, which is a continuation of Vision 2021, cannot be attained without full utilisation of the country's demographic dividend, said Md. Ayatul Islam, joint secretary of the education ministry.

Enrolment in technical education has reached 18 per cent but the government has targeted to achieve 30 per cent penetration by 2030, he said.

The government has reserved 35 per cent of the allotted seats at public institutions for female students while stipends will be given to encourage their participation, he added.

Bangladesh will have the next 15 years to make the most out of its demographic dividend and so, the government must support young entrepreneurs, said Anir Chowdhury, policy adviser to the Prime Minister's Office's Access to Information programme. Female participation is also crucial for developing innovative research processes, he added.

While referencing the study, Chowdhury said the national unemployment rate is 4 per cent due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and the graduate unemployment rate is about 39 per cent.

READ MORE ON B3

Traders stopped import-export business protesting double parking charges in Burimari land port

S DILIP ROY, from Lalmonirhat

Trade through the Burimari land port in Lalmonirhat has remained suspended since yesterday centring protests over a sudden doubling of parking fees, which the port officials denied bringing about.

Revenue generation at the port before the pandemic averaged at Tk 7 crore a month whereas afterwards, it has dropped to Tk 2 crore.

Vehicles entering the port for loading or offloading goods pay Tk 300 for a 24-hour stay.

But traders, truck drivers and workers there alleged that the port authorities started collecting the parking charge at a rate of Tk 600 per vehicle since yesterday without making any prior

announcement.

This led them to halt the import-export activities, they told The Daily Star.

"We are outraged that the port authorities have taken such a step. We are not interested in complying with an increase in charges without prior discussions," said Shamim Ahmed, a trader.

The parking rate has not been increased; rather, confusion has been created centring payment of extended stays, said Shaheen Alam, traffic inspector at the port.

If the charge is increased at the customs yard, traders and stakeholders will be informed in advance, he said.

The matter is being discussed with the port authorities, said Ruhul Amin Babul, convener of the Burimari Land Port Clearing and Forwarding Agents Association.



S DILIP ROY

Trucks stay parked outside the Burimari land port in Lalmonirhat yesterday following suspension of trade protesting an alleged doubling of parking fees since noon.



Only 50 per cent of urban households have access to the internet while the statistic is less than 30 per cent for homes in rural areas. However, just 10 per cent of the country's total female population have ever even used ICT services.

Moreover, in regards to internet speed, Bangladesh ranks 134th among 143 countries.

In his presentation, Uddin said that the government rightly adopted the Digital Bangladesh agenda in 2009. However, the fact that ICT tools have not become widely available across gender, age, region or income groups is a matter of concern.

A combined total of about 80 per cent of the male youth in rural and urban areas own smartphones while only 40 per cent of the country's females are afforded the same facility.

The study went on to detail that about 72 per

cent of young men in households belonging to the poorest income bracket own a smartphone compared with 92 per cent in the top income bracket.

And third, irrespective of their average income, the number of young women that own smartphones is significantly low compared with their male counterparts.

These issues could be mitigated if there were a substantial supply of ICT-related education and training. However, it was observed that participation rates in training are extremely low.

Also, a clear gender difference in participation is noteworthy as only 3 per cent of the female respondents to the survey said that they had engaged in ICT training compared with 5 per cent of males.

Bangladesh has about 71 technical training centres, 49 state-owned polytechnic institutes, 64 technical schools and colleges and 511 private polytechnic institutes that provide certified diploma courses on various trades.

Rawhide trade in Barishal only fetched losses this Eid

SUSANTA GHOSH, from Barishal

Rawhide collection saw a 30 per cent year-on-year drop this year in Barishal thanks to a drastic fall in the number of animals sacrificed during Eid-ul-Azha because of the coronavirus outbreak.

"Last year, we collected 65,000 pieces of cow skins during the Eid, which came down to 40,000 pieces this year," said Shahidur Rahman Shahin, secretary of the Barishal Hide and Skin Merchants Association.

Only 4,300 cows were sacrificed in the city this year, in contrast to 7,200 last year, said Rabiul Islam, conservancy officer of Barishal City Corporation.



The numbers of buyers and sellers were very thin this year in Chamarpaty and Padmabaty areas, a centre famous for rawhide trade in Barishal.

The animal skins were sold as per piece and not according to their sizes in square metres, according to Shahin.

A small cow's skin sold for Tk 200-250, the medium-sized ones at Tk 300-400 and the bigger ones at Tk 400 to 500, said Yusuf Ali, a regular rawhide trader of the market.

However, goat hide was sold at Tk 10 a piece and was even given away with the purchase of cowhide.

"My transportation cost is even higher than the price of the five goat hides I brought to sell," said Md Shahim, who came from Palashpur to

the market.

He blamed the fall in rawhide numbers and sales on the outbreak of coronavirus, which hit hard the financial health of the general mass.

Capital crisis, a lack of incentives given by the financial institutions and the arrears that are yet to be paid by the syndicated tannery owners of Dhaka are also to blame, Shahim said.

Muslims mostly donate the rawhides of their sacrificed animals to the mosques and madrasas, which are later sold in the market and the money is used in the religious places.

But this year, the mosques and madrasas have failed to even recoup

the labour and transportation costs they spent to collect the rawhides.

The buyers are offering prices as low as Tk 300 a piece, said Anwar Hossain, a teacher of a madrasa at Nabagram in Barishal Sadar, who came to the market with 250 skins of cows.

Abdur Razzak, another madrasa teacher of Natun Bazaar area of the city, said he had to sell the rawhides of 20 cows at prices hovering between Tk 200 to Tk 350.

"I have spent more on labour and transportation of the skins."

In 2014, each rawhide was sold at Tk 2,800 on an average. This year, 13 people worked all day to collect 20 skins, from which Razzak fetched only Tk 7,000.

Flood destroys Tk 141cr worth of crops in Tangail

MIRZA SHAKIL, from Tangail

More than 1 lakh farmers of crops and vegetables in Tangail incurred a loss of Tk 141 crore due to the prolonged and devastating flood this year.

As many as 11 out of the 12 upazilas in the district were affected by the flood due to onrush water from the upstream and heavy rains.

The areas beside the Jamuna, Dhalleswari, Louhajang, Jhinai and Banshi rivers were the worst hit, and the scale of devastation is becoming clearer with the receding floodwater.

Fields of different crops of 18,126 hectares of land were inundated in the flood, of which crops of 13,292 hectares were fully damaged, said Md Shariful Islam, a sub-assistant agriculture officer at the office of deputy director of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) in Tangail.

The damaged crops are: Bona (broadcast) Aman paddy of 10,588 hectares, seedbeds of Ropa (transplanted) Aman paddy of 1,359 hectares and Aus paddy of 1,808 hectares.

Different vegetables of 1,464 hectares were also damaged along with jute of 765 hectares, oilseeds of 1,652 hectares, sugarcane of 65 hectares, banana of 45 hectares and lemon of 380 hectares.

The DAE officials said different crops and vegetables of 5,928 hectares of land were inundated at six upazilas in the district by the first phase of the flood until 11 July.

Of these, crops and vegetables of 3,840 hectares of land were damaged fully. Some 27,233 farmers incurred a loss of Tk 41.55 crore in this spell.

On the other hand, crops and



MIRZA SHAKIL

A vegetable patch inundated by floodwaters in Bangra area of Tangail's Basail upazila. Vegetables on some 1,464 hectares of land in the district has been completely damaged by recent floods.

vegetables on 12,198 hectares of land were inundated in the second phase of the flood until 13 August.

Of these, crops and vegetables of 10,051 hectares were fully damaged, incurring a loss of Tk 99.70 crore for 80,158 farmers.

Both the coronavirus outbreak and the deadly flood hit the farmers hard.

Meantime, Agriculture Secretary Mohammad Nasiruzzaman visited

the flood-affected Nagarpur upazila in the district on 6 August.

"Many farmers have been affected by the floods this time. Many of them were unable to harvest their crops properly," he said after having chats with the locals.

The government has decided to distribute seeds and saplings for free among the affected farmers, he said.

"We will try to compensate by

listing the affected farmers in the aftermath of the floods, providing them with seeds and saplings so that they can grow crops again."

However, several farmers in the district said giving seeds and saplings at free of cost will not be enough for them to recover the losses.

They stressed the need for distribution of cash incentives as soon as possible.



AMRAN HOSSAIN

Meanwhile, in Hemayetpur of Manikganj's Singair, a woman collects what is left of a papaya plantation on four bighas of land. The farmer spent Tk 4 lakh in setting up the plantation last year and was hoping to make Tk 20 to Tk 30 lakh from sales this year. He shows what is left of his dreams, all the while trying to come to terms with reality. The photos were taken recently.