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## BUILDING A DISASTER-RESILIENT, PROSPEROUS BANGLADESH

# Challenges and opportunities



ROBERT D WATKINS

Today Bangladesh stands at a vital crossroads in its development path. Having averaged a 6 percent economic growth in the past decade, the country attained lower-middle income country status in 2015 and achieved five out of eight Millennium Development Goals by the same year. The number of now widely adopted practices of development, which were first tested in Bangladesh, has given the country a global reputation of development innovation and leadership. As the world moves into the new era of the Sustainable Development Goals, Bangladesh is ideally positioned to sustain this impressive trend of poverty reduction and economic growth—if it can manage the threat of natural disasters. **Disasters: Disrupting economic growth and poverty reduction** Among the key factors enabling Bangladesh's strong development trajectory has been the growing economy. Households in the country are becoming more prosperous, industry is expanding, and government capital investments are growing larger. Remittances by workers abroad are steadily growing, and in 2015, the value of net foreign direct investment in Bangladesh exceeded USD 2 billion. The national budget for the fiscal year 2016/17—at BDT 3 trillion (USD 43 billion)—is the largest so far in the country's history, with one-fourth of the Annual Development portion going to megaprojects intended to boost economic growth. As a new middle income country, Bangladesh has entered a new development era.

Large-scale public and private investment is stimulating private sector growth and rapid improvement in the living standards of families across the nation. At the same time, disaster mortality is lower than ever before. The financial cost of disasters, however, has steadily grown in the past decades. Disaster damage and loss in Bangladesh is 10 times higher today than it was in the 1970s, with annual losses ranging between 0.8 percent and 1.1 percent of the country's GDP. In sum, the country reported over USD 180.3 million in economic losses from natural disasters between 1971 and 2013.

Experience from other countries in similar development situations shows that if public and private investment and assets continue to grow without being risk-informed, their vulnerability will only compound. At the national level, the frequency of disasters in Bangladesh has resulted in significant

increases in expenditure and reduction of revenue. At the local level, exposure to recurrent disasters and repeated economic loss suffered by the most vulnerable people is directly contributing to the persistence of pockets of extreme poverty. In the traditionally disaster-prone areas of the country, 44 percent of households have been affected by disasters more than once, and development outcomes in health, education, and access to electricity lag behind. The people living in these areas are not moving out of poverty, but are held back by the recurring need to rebuild and recover.

**Urban risks** With climate change predicted to cause changes in the intensity, patterns, and frequency of cyclones, storm surges and floods, the number of people in rural areas exposed to these hazards is likely to grow in coming years. In addition, the rapid urbanisation and concentration of industry in urban areas is also creating significant additional risk in cities. Poor construction quality, overcrowding, and inadequate infrastructure make rapidly growing cities vulnerable to the impact of natural hazards. This is true not just for major growth centres such as Dhaka or Chittagong, but also for the medium and small-sized cities where over half of the growth in urban population is taking place. Not only does this disproportionately expose the urban poor to disaster impacts, but it affects the larger economy. During the 2004 floods, employee absence due to waterborne illnesses and flooded transport paths was estimated to have cost the readymade garment sector USD 3 million per day.

Should a major earthquake affect Bangladesh, the country may not only have to recover from devastating trauma and loss of human lives, but also a potentially permanent disruption to its export industries. A 2009 study showed that in the event of a major earthquake, 376,000 structures in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet would be seriously affected, producing 96 tonnes of debris. With factories and roads likely to be damaged or blocked by debris, disruption of services and businesses would be extensive. In a global economy which does not wait for countries to recover from shocks, this would represent a significant threat to the income of the 4.2 million people currently employed in the readymade garment sector, as well as the well-being of families and communities dependent on them.

**Bangladesh: Facing disasters together** The risks created by the interplay be-

tween the changing disaster landscape, settlement patterns, and economic growth centres pose a major challenge to sustainable development and poverty reduction. Consequently, new courses must be staked out for building resilience to natural disasters. To prevent a major cyclone or earthquake from permanently arresting the country's economic growth, or seasonal floods from washing away the housing and assets of a family, development processes must remain stronger than disaster shocks.

The country's capacity for anticipating disaster risk, absorbing disaster shock, and reshaping development, must be strengthened. Fortunately, Bangladesh's robust disaster management capacity, supported by professional practitioners, engaged communities, and expanded disaster risk governance, provides a strong foundation for building national resilience.

The volunteer Cyclone Preparedness Programme supports early warning and mass evacuation when cyclones steer towards coastal areas, while local disaster risk reduction funds have enabled communities across the nation to manage risks in their community. 18 million students have disaster management lessons integrated in their curriculum, while more than a dozen universities offer disaster management programmes. Significant technical advances in forecasting ability are making it possible to track high-risk storms in the Bay of Bengal and warn against flooding in the major river basins five days in advance, while mobile phone services are enabling more than 100 million users to easily access warning information.

Bangladesh has shown remarkable solidarity of mutual support in times of crisis. This has been central in allowing the country to rebound after major disasters. These national characteristics must be nurtured, recognising that the will to volunteer is social capital for strengthening resilience in human development. Bangladesh must find ways to continue to support collective action and community risk management—in urban settings, as well as in the villages. While planners and rescue services play vital roles in managing disaster risk, empowering community members to respond to disaster and to demand resilient services will be key to building capacity for absorbing disaster shocks in cities.

There is also considerable promise in using the government's extensive social protection programmes instrumentally: to help families and communities plan and prepare for disasters, provide a safety net to meet basic needs

during shock events, and build adaptive capacity through promotion of sustainable, resilient livelihoods. If applied to the large social protection programmes implemented by the government, this approach has the potential to transform these programmes to deliver resilience benefits to those most vulnerable on a national scale. **Thinking outside the box about disaster risk management** While the past decade has seen an increase in spending on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation in Bangladesh, resilience to natural disasters cannot be achieved by through "business-as-usual" disaster management alone. Practices of successful disaster risk management and good development must be combined, with a willingness to find innovative solutions and include new partners in this crucial work.

Firstly, it is crucial that development becomes consistently risk-informed. This means taking into account the likely impact of disaster and building in mitigating features from the very beginning. The considerable base of disaster risk information which already exists in the country must be enhanced so as to be understandable and useful for planners at the local and national levels. Tools for risk assessment and guidance on how to mitigate risks within projects and plans must be made available and well-known. And most crucially, decision-makers' awareness of the cost of disaster loss and disruption to development programmes must be raised to ensure that there is demand for risk-informed planning.

Secondly, the country must find ways of including the booming private sector in its disaster risk management. Urban disasters present a complex challenge for business growth and sustainability, and business leaders and investors must be supported with the right knowledge and incentives to take on the cost of choosing more resilient options within a project or business model. Building the capacity of companies to assess risk and plan for business continuity in the event of disasters will be crucial in securing the resilience of national economic growth.

Thirdly, investing in socially inclusive, resilient recovery not only helps keep development progress on track in the face of disasters, but it can also help identify better, more resilient pathways. The recovery and reconstruction phase following a disaster presents a window of opportunity for building it back better than before, through incorporating disaster risk reduction measures in the rehabilitation of buildings,

systems and institutions. As disaster recovery takes place within all sectors, building the capacity of line ministries, local government, and NGOs in planning how they may support recovery will be crucial. Only then can the country emerge stronger after disasters, and ensure that those hardest hit, those most chronically vulnerable, receive the assistance which will reduce their risk and build resilience in the long term.

**Choosing the resilient path**

Economic growth and poverty reduction cannot be sustainable if they are not also disaster-resilient; lasting achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals can only be made possible by reducing the impact of disaster and climate shocks and stresses. The pursuit of "a sustainable development pathway that is resilient to disaster and climate change", as set out in the country's 7th Five Year Plan, needs to be prioritised in coming years.

Building national resilience to future disasters will require all—whether in the development, government, or private sectors—to consider disaster risk management as an integral part of projects, businesses, and programmes, and in order to unlock the transformative potentials within. By making disaster resilience a key element of the 7th Five Year Plan, the Government of Bangladesh is already emphasising the crucial role of risk-informed planning and disaster management to sustain and safeguard development gains.

This commitment must now be put into action by enabling all of society to contribute. This means, on the one hand, putting in place the structures for involving new professions and sectors: applying disaster and risk information to public planning, providing incentives to support risk-informed private investment, and allocating adequate resources for disaster preparedness, management, and recovery. But as importantly, it means facilitating the participation of the people—men and women, able and disabled, Bengalis and ethnic minorities, farmers and garment workers—in disaster risk management. Their experience, knowledge, and leadership will be crucial in ensuring that the development and resilience agenda serves those most vulnerable to disasters and climate change.

*The writer is the UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in Bangladesh. He has over 30 years of experience in development and post-conflict recovery programme areas.*