

PROJECT SYNDICATE

# Data Protection is Social Protection



MAGDALENA SEPULVEDA

**I**N recent decades, social assistance programmes around the world have been strengthened to the point that they now benefit more than 2.5 billion

people, usually the poorest and most vulnerable. But rising pressure to apply biometric technology to verify beneficiaries' identities, and to integrate information systems ranging from civil registries to law-enforcement databases, means that social programmes could create new risks for those who depend on them.

Private companies, donor agencies, and the World Bank argue that the application of biometric tools like iris and fingerprint scanning or facial and voice recognition, together with the integration of databases, will boost efficiency, combat fraud, and cut costs. And many governments seem convinced.

While there is no systematic information available on the use of biometric technology in social-assistance schemes, a look at certain flagship programmes suggests that it is already on the rise. In South Africa, 17.2 million beneficiaries of social grants receive biometric smart cards. In Mexico, the 55.6 million beneficiaries of Seguro Popular (public health insurance for the poorest citizens) must provide their biometric data to the authorities.

The world's largest biometric database—Aadhaar—is in India. Because inclusion in Aadhaar is a prerequisite for access to several social programmes, 95 percent of the

country's 1.25 billion inhabitants are already recorded. The provision of biometric data is also required to receive benefits in Botswana, Gabon, Kenya, Namibia, Pakistan, Paraguay, and Peru.

Biometric data stored in one social-protection programme database can easily be linked to other systems using a common identifier, even those unrelated to social protection, such as

public and private entities alike. For example, Nigeria, which aims to issue 100 million biometric e-ID cards, has a National Identity Database connected to various other databases, including those maintained by law enforcement agencies.

Pressure to share sensitive social-protection data, including biometric identifiers, with law enforcement—domestically, as well

social-assistance programmes or to arrange for businesses to accept those cards. For example, South Africa's social-assistance biometric card is a MasterCard.

Worse still, such agreements—which often are not publicly disclosed—tend not to include mechanisms for redress in cases of abuse and misuse of information. Yet recent media reports suggest that these risks are considerable. For example, in Chile, millions of patients' medical records—including those of HIV patients and women who had been sexually abused—were publicly exposed for almost a year.

Moreover, in South Africa, private companies used the information of millions of social-protection beneficiaries to increase corporate profits to the detriment of beneficiary interests. In India, a newspaper claimed that its reporters had gained unrestricted access to the Aadhaar database. Another report documented how Aadhaar numbers, with sensitive financial information, had been made publicly available on government websites.

The threat to social-protection beneficiaries is not eliminated even when data are accessible only to government. As the political scientist Virginia Eubanks recounts, in the United States, automated decision-making in social-welfare provision enables the government to "profile, police, and punish poor people."

As technology continues to advance, these threats will only grow. For example, facial-recognition technology may enable governments to identify protesters who receive social assistance using the digital photographs they have provided in exchange for access to benefits. Malta, for example, is already considering using CCTV cameras with

facial-recognition software to prevent "antisocial behaviour."

The lack of regard for privacy and data protection in social-assistance programmes should not come as a surprise. These programmes serve the most vulnerable groups—people who are already at a disadvantage in defending their rights. Entrenched stigma and anti-poor prejudices often prevent other, more privileged members of society from recognising those risks, much less advocating on behalf of social-protection recipients. Many seem to believe that if you are receiving "free" benefits, you cannot also demand privacy.

Social-protection programmes are supposed to do just what the name implies: protect those segments of society that are most in need. Demanding that these people effectively renounce their rights to personal privacy and data protection amounts to just the opposite.

That alone should be enough reason to lobby for the adoption of adequate legal frameworks, well-resourced data protection authorities, and, as a last line of defence, an independent judiciary and media. But if people need a stronger incentive, there is always self-interest, because the risks faced by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged today may well become reality for a much broader cross-section of society tomorrow.

Magdalena Sepulveda is a senior research associate at the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development and a member of the Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation (ICRICT). Previously, she was the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

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for law enforcement or commercial marketing. In most European countries, however, such database integration is prohibited, owing to the threat it poses to privacy and data protection. After all, social-assistance programmes require the processing of significant amounts of data, including sensitive information like household assets, health status, and disabilities.

In many of the developing countries that are expanding their social-protection and biometric-identification programmes, the frameworks for protecting personal data are underdeveloped. Yet donors and government authorities often advocate the widest possible integration of databases, among

as internationally—is compounded by concerns about terrorism and migration. This pressure threatens not only basic privacy, but also civil liberties. Add the risk of negligent data disclosure or unauthorised third-party access—including by cybercriminals and hackers—and social-protection beneficiaries could also be exposed to stigmatisation, extortion, or blackmail.

Then there is the possibility that access to sensitive social-protection data, including biometric information, will be given or sold to private companies. Social-protection authorities and private companies, such as MasterCard or Visa, frequently enter into commercial agreements to create smart cards for

# Making the most of our demographic dividend

## Lessons from the Labour Force Survey



SHEKH FARID

**O**VER the last few decades, the decline in fertility and mortality rates in Bangladesh and subsequent increase in number of working-age population (15-59) relative to the dependents (0-14 and 60+) offer the country an opportunity of accelerated economic growth. Economists optimistically call this potential for accelerated economic growth the "demographic dividend". Until the early 2040s, Bangladesh is expected to gain an average 1 percent additional yearly GDP just because of this growing working age share—yet realising that potential has been one of its major challenges.

The unemployment rate is still 4.2, which is slightly low compared to the 4.6 percent in 2010. The proportion of jobs, both in the formal and informal sectors, did not grow keeping pace with the growth of population. In order to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend, the government should prioritise on expanding the labour market and creating mass employment through economic policies.

Secondly, the youth should be the focus of development targets if we want to make the most of our demographic dividend. While the labour force participation of Bangladesh is 58.2 percent, the rate is only 48.7 for people aged 15-29, which is a 31.6 percent share in the total labour force. That means more than half of our younger-aged population (aged 15-29) are doing nothing—they are not employed, nor are they looking for a job. Even if an opportunity of work arises, they would not, reportedly, take the opportunity either. This applies to those who are studying at the tertiary level. All possible efforts need to be made to get our youth into the labour force from the time they enter the working age bracket (work opportunities for them also need to be increased).

It is not just the labour force participation rate that is alarming; the higher unemployment rate is also largely a consequence of unemployment among youth aged 15-29. Whereas total unemployment is 4.2 percent, the rate is 10.6 percent among the youth. Universities should take the lead role to address this. More involvement of universities with "subject related organisations" through internships and partnerships will not only benefit the organisations and contribute to the country's economic output, it will also help the youth equip themselves with skills needed for the fast-changing job market.

Thirdly, there is an apparent gender



The youth should be the focus of development targets if we want to make the most of our demographic dividend. FILE PHOTO

gap in labour force participation, employment rate, wages and economic opportunities for women in Bangladesh. Only 36.3 percent women participate in the labour force compared to the 80.5 participation rate of men. Like the total participation rate, the rate for women has also remained constant over the last decade. Nearly 81 percent of women who do not participate in the labour force are not being able to work outside the home because of their role as homemakers. The high unemployment rate among women also contributes to the overall rate. Unemployment among women is 6.7 percent compared to 3.1 percent for men. Interestingly, among the young working-age group, the rate is 15 percent for women in contrast

to 8.2 percent for men. There is also a gender gap in terms of the nature of employment: 8.2 percent of employed women are in the formal sector compared to the 17.9 percent men. Therefore, addressing the gender gaps in terms of these economic indicators is a must, if we want to harness maximum benefits of the demographic dividend in Bangladesh. Fourthly, high unemployment rate is also associated with fewer employment options in rural areas. What is surprising is that 1.8 million unemployed persons live in rural areas compared to 866,000 living in urban areas. In order to seize the opportunity of demographic dividend, the government should focus more on job creation in rural areas.

Finally, encashing the demographic dividend is irrevocably linked with human resource development. Good health, quality education and skilled manpower are important prerequisites for such desired growth. Surprisingly, 25.3 percent of men are out of the labour force because of illness or injury. Promotion of health, especially maternal and child health, is also linked with greater productivity. The proportion of allocation for the health sector as part of the total budget needs to be increased. Moreover, among those who are in employment, only 5 percent and 6 percent have completed tertiary and higher secondary levels of education respectively, while 26 percent are primary graduates. This indicates a serious gap in education and skills even among the employed section, automatically leading to lower wages and income. The report also shows that around 30 percent of the youth are not in education, employment or training. The government should invest more in education and skill development to build human capital. It can adopt models of skill development for enhancing skills of those out of education.

To sum up, Bangladesh can realise the full potential of its demographic window of opportunity with decisive policies to expand labour markets though ensuring participation of the young working-age cohort in the labour force, investing in youth and skill development, enhancing health services, and generating mass employment, particularly rural and formal sector employment. Moreover, if we cannot reduce the gender gaps in education, employment, skills and in the labour markets, we stand to miss out on the opportunity of reaping the benefits of our demography.

Shekh Farid is a Statistical Officer at Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Email: Fariddu100@gmail.com

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**VOLTAIRE**  
(1694-1778)  
French Enlightenment writer and philosopher

*It is not sufficient to see and to know the beauty of a work. We must feel and be affected by it.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Hound's hands
- 5 Satchel part
- 10 Baghdad's nation
- 11 Less taut
- 13 Lima's nation
- 14 Relaxed
- 15 Qualify
- 17 Workout unit
- 18 Hospital's recreation space
- 19 Salt Lake City
- 20 Ewe's mate
- 21 Highlands family
- 22 Gave a hoot
- 25 Heart's place
- 26 Ship frame
- 27 "Vive le—!"

**DOWN**

- 1 Played like Pan
- 2 Sports site
- 3 Like a 16-Down
- 4 Acorn lover
- 5 Ski event
- 6 Tribe symbol
- 7 Fish eggs
- 8 Generally
- 9 Old Spanish money
- 12 Advice to sinners
- 16 Frog's cousin
- 21 4-Down cousin
- 22 Berates
- 23 Coinop eatery
- 24 "Goosebumps" author
- 25 Robin Cook book
- 27 Overnight flight
- 29 Small pier
- 30 Islands veranda
- 31 Send a Dear John letter
- 32 Purloined
- 36 Martini base

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWER**

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**BEETLE BAILEY** by Mort Walker

HOW CAN BEETLE SLEEP WITH ALL THIS NOISE?  
BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!!  
I'LL GET HIM CHECKED OUT  
MAYBE I CAN FIND OUT HOW I CAN SLEEP LIKE THAT

**BABY BLUES** by Kirkman & Scott

GOOD MORNING, MOTHER!  
MOTHER?  
PERHAPS I COULD HELP OUT WITH THE FOOD PREPARATION.  
HAMMIES' JUST BEING NICE BECAUSE IT'S ALMOST DECEMBER. HE'S STILL A JERK.  
NAME CALLING! DID YOU HEAR THAT, SANTA?  
KNOCK IT OFF, YOU TWO.