

Make the most of young population

Authorities must not let this great opportunity go to waste

As per the latest census, Bangladesh's youth population has increased by 15.81 percent to 4.59 crore over the last decade. This has provided the country with a great opportunity to make the most of what is known as "demographic dividend", an economic growth potential that can result from shifts in a population's age structure, mainly when the share of the working age population (15 to 64) is larger than that of the non-working age population (14 and younger, and 65 and older). What is unfortunate, however, is that till now Bangladesh has largely failed to utilise this once-in-a-lifetime window of demographic dividend due to its inability to create jobs and other opportunities for them to flourish.

One may recall that in 2018, the International Labour Organization (ILO) ranked Bangladesh second out of 28 countries in the Asia-Pacific region for having the highest rate of educated unemployment. The ILO also estimated that between 2010 to 2017 – close to the same period when Bangladesh's youth population increased – the rate of youth unemployment had doubled. Before releasing the most recent Labour Force Survey 2022 (where, unbelievably, Bangladesh was shown as having the lowest unemployment rate in South Asia), the government's last survey on the labour force came out in 2016-17, which also showed a lack of seriousness on part of the authorities to address issues related to unemployment. In that survey, it was also seen that the youth unemployment rate stood at more than double the national unemployment rate, with the rate being higher among the more educated youth. For example, unemployment rate was 13.4 percent among youths having a tertiary-level education and 29.8 percent among youths having secondary-level education.

There has been little change in this scenario since then, with recent reports highlighting their continued struggle.

Experts have pointed out that the "economic miracles" experienced by Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan between the early 1960s and 1990s, and the economic boom witnessed by Ireland in the 1990s, were all down to the utilisation of their respective demographic dividends. For Bangladesh, this window is expected to close within the next decade or two. If we are to take advantage of it to propel the nation forward, then the government has to do much more in terms of creating jobs and overall opportunities for young people.

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that having such a large group of young people could prove to be a double-edged sword. Along our current trajectory, where the youth are basically being starved off opportunities, they might become increasingly frustrated and disillusioned. In the absence of opportunities to contribute to the nation and society, or to improve their own lives, where are these young people supposed to channel their energy? It might well be towards criminal activities that may exert tremendous pressure on the country, which will worsen our economic and societal outcomes. Therefore, it is high time the government formulated a holistic strategy to provide the best opportunities for our young citizens.

The poor deserve a fighting chance

Mess residents' struggle highlights vulnerability to high food prices

The fallout of Covid-19 coupled with the Russia-Ukraine war continues to haunt Bangladesh. Far from ushering in an era of economic recovery as predicted, the end of the pandemic has been anything but transformative for us, with the war, now in its second year, further exacerbating the situation for ordinary citizens. In particular, the poor and those with fixed income continue to struggle with the ever-increasing prices of nearly every essential. As a result, many have been forced to compromise on their standard of living.

One section of those grossly affected, as per a report by this daily, live in arrangements generally known as "mess" located in urban households. These people, mostly comprising students and people in low-income jobs who share flats among themselves for cheaper rent, are struggling to cope with the exorbitant prices. Many have had to modify their diet by, for example, bringing down their fish or chicken intake from every alternate day to just two days a week. Even a year ago, the cost of one meal averaged around Tk 40-45. That has now gone up to Tk 60-65, while prices of housing and utilities have also gone up simultaneously. Experts say that dietary modifications of the kind that these people are being forced to undergo may lead to protein deficiency, and even result in chronic diseases. Unfortunately, this is a reality that most ordinary people today can relate to.

The government has time and again blamed the global pricing trends and supply-chain disruptions for the rising cost of essentials at home. In March, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, food inflation was 9.09 percent while non-food inflation was 9.72 percent. While the influence of external factors like the war-induced disruptions cannot be denied, it is also true that our price hike problem is, to a large extent, of our own making. Poor policy, lax market monitoring and lack of accountability for price manipulators have allowed businesses, including large firms and importers, to continue raising prices of essentials.

The extent of the crisis can be understood from a recent review by the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), which said that the monthly food expense for a family of four is now about Tk 22,664, which was Tk 18,115 a year ago. It also suggested that the government should increase the salary in the private sector by 5 percent. Income stagnation or lack of decent income has been flagged as another major hurdle for those struggling with high food prices. This is another area that needs urgent intervention from the policymakers.

We urge the authorities to take the issue of price hikes, especially the affordability of ordinary citizens, with the seriousness that it deserves. The government cannot shirk responsibility for domestic factors contributing to people's vulnerability to high prices. It must take stern action against market manipulators regardless of how influential they are.

Is unemployment actually declining?



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Some results from the 2022 Labour Force Survey (LFS) conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) have been released recently. The survey was long-awaited as it was conducted after a gap of more than five years. But what has been released now is a preliminary report that contains data on a small number of variables. Some observations may, however, be made on the basis of this report.

One important finding of LFS 2022 is a decline in the rate of open unemployment, which the government has claimed to be a positive development. But one cannot come to such a conclusion simply because of the definition of unemployment used and the manner in which the unemployed have been identified in the survey. Although the measure is in line with what is recommended by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and is globally used, it cannot provide the true picture of the labour market in Bangladesh. One was regarded as unemployed only when they did not work even for an hour during the reference week of the survey, was willing to work, and was actively looking for work.

In countries like Bangladesh, where there is no provision for unemployment allowance, poor people cannot afford to remain without work. Hence, it is not surprising that the number of people who didn't work even one hour in a week is so small. In fact, most of the previous labour force surveys in the country showed the unemployment rate to be around four percent. If this is indicative of the real situation of the labour market, that could be the cause of envy for many countries, including the developed ones.

The real situation is that many who don't have access to a good job and are in desperate need of an income try to eke out a living by engaging in some work – whatever its nature is. While the standard measure of unemployment is not able to capture them, many of them are working but poor. What happens to their number and condition is extremely important.

Given the limitations of measured unemployment, alternative indicators of the labour market situation are necessary. Examples include: i)



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rate of growth of employment in manufacturing, modern services like trade, banks, insurance, and professions like education, health, law, etc; ii) share of the formal sector in total employment (because around 85 percent of employment is in the informal sector); iii) share of regular paid jobs in total employment; and iv) productivity and income in self-employment. What is important is to see if workers are able to move from low productivity sectors to those with higher productivity and income.

However, open unemployment can be a good indicator for the youth, because many of them may have support from family and be able to remain unemployed while searching for jobs. Moreover, they often encounter special difficulties in entering the labour market. As a result, the rate of youth unemployment is usually much higher than the overall average. And Bangladesh is no exception in this regard. The results of the 2010 and 2016-17 LFS show that youth unemployment had increased during that period. Although the preliminary report of the 2022 survey does not provide this figure, recent studies on the topic, especially

from the manufacturing sector and reverse migration to rural areas.

The number engaged in agriculture is reported to have risen from 24.7 million in 2016-17 to 32.2 million in 2022. How an additional 7.5 million additional people joined agriculture within this period and what its impact has been on per capita income of those engaged in the sector should now become the subject of serious research.

In a country like Bangladesh, where agriculture is still characterised by surplus labour and economic growth is expected to be associated with a transfer of that surplus to modern sectors including manufacturing, a rise in the number and share of people employed in agriculture has to be regarded as a reversal of the process of structural transformation. This reversal is not only an indicator of a difficult economic situation, but also of policy failure.

An apparently positive finding of LFS 2022 is a rise in women's labour force participation rate. But is that indicative of positive development in the labour market or some other development? While a full analysis of such issues has to wait for the detailed

be important to see whether the jump in the rural rate has been helped by rising opportunities or simply due to other reasons, like girls who were out of school during the pandemic doing unpaid family work. Needless to say, research is needed to understand the diverging trends in the participation rates for women in rural and urban areas.

Another riddle that comes out from LFS 2022 is the sharp rise in labour growth between 2016-17 and 2022. Compared to 2002-03 to 2010, there was a decline between 2010 and 2016-17. Likewise, the absolute number joining the labour force every year was also declining. There has been a sharp rise in that number as well after 2016-17. Given the continued decline in population growth, it would have been natural for the earlier declining trend in labour force growth to continue. But the sharp rise after 2016-17 defies rational explanation.

While reliable data are essential for making good policies, it is also important to look at data carefully and examine their causal relationships before conclusions are drawn from them.

If only breathing were optional



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After suffering an intense "change of season" cough for several days and trying herbal remedies (hot water with ginger, lime and salt; bitter teaspoons of *kalijira* oil) without success, I finally went to the doctor. When I asked him if I should get a Covid test done, he laughed, as if to say, "You live in Dhaka and are surprised that you have a cough?"

In an online meeting, when an Indian colleague asked how I was, I replied, "I'd be fine if breathing were optional."

Upon reflection, I added, "Which our governments seem to think it is, given how relaxed they are about air pollution."

"True," he succinctly replied.

The coughing is now better, but persistent. When I lie down, I promptly start coughing again – those deep, rip-up-your-insides kinds of hacking coughs.

I would love to believe that I'm just having a severe reaction to dust, or that it's all normal seasonal illness, but the evidence suggests otherwise. While Dhaka did not (surprisingly) make it to the list of the five most polluted cities in the world in 2022, Bangladesh is one of the top five most polluted countries, and Dhaka's air is notoriously filthy. We all know this, and mostly we choose to ignore it and

hope for the best. What's a little lung damage among friends?

But breathing in a cocktail of pollutants and dust does not only affect our lungs. Cigarettes destroy not just smokers' lungs but other organs as well, as the toxic chemicals in tobacco travel throughout the body. The same thing happens with air pollution, which also causes strokes, heart disease, and other non-communicable diseases in addition to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung cancer. Beyond making us sick, air pollution – indoor and outdoor – reportedly causes 6.7 million premature deaths in the world every year.

As if that weren't bad enough, small particles of pollutants can pass the blood-brain barrier and contribute to dementia. Think about this the next time you struggle to remember someone's name or where you left your glasses (on your head, dummy!).

So here's the thing about ambient air pollution: it's not a problem that can be solved through individual action. Sure, those who can afford it can live in less polluted environments, but given that 90 percent of the world's population now breathes dirty air, it's not entirely clear where one should migrate to. And even if the wealthy could escape, are we

okay with subjecting everyone else to toxic air? Obviously, a problem of this magnitude requires some serious solutions. Where does one start?

One very simple measure would be a massive campaign educating people about how wrong it is to set up fires in the city. The burning of rubbish is a nightmare for those with particular

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susceptibility to polluted air. Many years ago, I fell dangerously ill due to hours of inhaling smoke, thanks to a fire someone had deliberately lit near our office. Such a campaign, of course, should be accompanied with strong enforcement and fines for non-compliance.

But that's only the beginning. A major source of air pollution

is motorised vehicles. Various international organisations suggest reducing or removing motorised traffic in areas with high levels of air pollution, reducing or banning heavy vehicles in the city centre, and restricting the speed to 30 km/hour for all vehicles. They also suggest requiring the delivery of goods to shops by smaller vehicles (which, in Dhaka, could mean rickshaws vans). They suggest that cities could promote bicycle use and increase the number of "calm areas" such as parks and courtyards. Fortuitously, such measures, while aimed at air pollution, would also reduce noise pollution.

Many European cities institute car-free days when air pollution spikes. These car-free days are popular, with 62 percent of people in five major European cities supporting the idea of one car-free day a week, and replacing cars with walking, cycling, and clean air. According to Barbara Stoll, director of the Clean Cities Campaign, car-free days can "deliver a quick drop in toxic air pollution... Besides, they are a great way to demonstrate to the public what life can be like in cities when the roads are not dominated by cars."

A report from Barcelona's Public Health Agency (ASPB) found that the city's "superblocks" scheme – which transforms intersections in the most polluted urban areas into attractive plazas (thereby keeping motorised transport away from homes) – has resulted in a 25 percent decline in NO2 levels in some areas. Overall pollution and noise have declined significantly.

In other words, there are effective measures that government officials can take. But first of all, we must convince them that breathing isn't optional.