

Time to raise the bar in labour migration

Bangladesh must prioritise sending skilled labour overseas

Bangladesh has been at once a steady beneficiary and an unwitting victim of its labour migration boom over the last 40 years. While remittances sent by migrant workers have been a key pillar of its economy, its inability to change with time – as evidenced by the continued reliance on unskilled or low-skilled labour – has led to stagnation in inward remittances. For example, during the just-finished fiscal year 2022-23, the country witnessed a surge in overseas employment, reaching a six-year high with over 1.1 million workers venturing abroad. But it saw only a marginal increase in terms of remittances earned compared to the previous year.

The reason for this is not a mystery. Data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) show that the rate of skilled workers sent abroad reached a record low of 22.22 percent in 2022. The rest of the workforce has been composed of unskilled and low-skilled workers. It is because of this reality that Bangladesh is still seen as a primarily unskilled workforce provider. Unskilled labour means not only lower salaries – and thus a lower revenue for us – but also higher vulnerability to economic shocks, violation of labour rights, abuse and exploitations.

Looking at other countries like the Philippines, China, India, and Pakistan, one can see that the per capita average monthly income of their migrants is significantly higher than that of our migrants, mostly due to the higher proportion of skilled workers in their labour force. Bangladesh can achieve similar economic benefits if it strategically promotes and sends more skilled labour abroad. The question is, why isn't it? A major challenge is the lack of a robust system to create and promote skilled manpower. There are not enough vocational and technical training programmes to equip our workforce with necessary competencies. Experts also point to the reluctance of workers themselves to acquire skills, the weaknesses of the national education policy, and importantly, the lack of a proper government policy.

True, there is still a demand for unskilled labour, particularly in the Middle East, but what has worked before may not work as well going forward, due to the global drive for knowledge-based economy. We must then prepare our workforce accordingly. For that, coordinated efforts from all stakeholders including the government, educational authorities, and manpower recruiters are essential. The next phase of our labour migration project must focus on sending skilled labour.

Two polar opposite examples for nature

Authorities must protect our forests and hills at any cost

Two stories coming out on Saturday have left us quite baffled. One is the announcement of the country's first-ever "urban forest" in the Purbachal Residential Area, which in a city that has lost most of its greenery is like a breath of fresh air. The other story is about influential people cutting a hill in Chattogram's Lohagara upazila to build houses – in blatant disregard for environmental regulations. How do you reconcile such totally contrasting cases? The latter example, unfortunately, is the norm, while the former, an exception.

In the case of the razed hill, the Department of Environment (DoE) has confirmed that the individuals responsible did not obtain permission when they started their construction work. It is strange that despite stringent laws prohibiting such acts, they continue to occur on a regular basis. But can the DoE just absolve itself by saying the culprits did not take any permission? How can they get permission for an unlawful activity? That an official has said they would take action if they "find evidence" of hill cutting is befuddling indeed.

Chattogram city has already lost around 120 hills over the past four decades, which has had devastating consequences for both humans and wildlife. It is ironic that Bangladesh is praised internationally for its disaster management plans and for leading negotiations on climate change, but what is it doing on the home front? We have ministries, departments, laws and local administrations – all responsible to protect the environment. Yet, on the ground, it seems the power of influentials override all such responsibilities. The result is that acres and acres of forestland and hills are being destroyed across the country under various pretexts.

We commend the Purbachal project, of course, and appreciate that it will be designated as a "special biodiversity conservation area", giving it additional protection. But our appreciation is dimmed by the knowledge that in Chattogram such commitment to preserving our hills and trees is absent. The government must stop sending such mixed signals, and prevent destructions of our natural resources at any cost.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Prevent child mortality

Child mortality rate in Bangladesh has increased unexpectedly, setting us back in our journey to achieving SDGs. Although recent studies have not analysed the reasons behind this increase, the leading causes of child mortality have been found to be jaundice, diarrhoea, malnutrition, acute respiratory infections, and drowning. What are our policymakers doing to address this situation? They must adopt a comprehensive approach to address the reported causes of child deaths in the country. Take the issue of child mortality seriously and call for the introduction of necessary facilities in child healthcare. The government should also conduct region-wise awareness campaigns to promote health and safety for children.

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Understanding the regional income dynamics in Bangladesh

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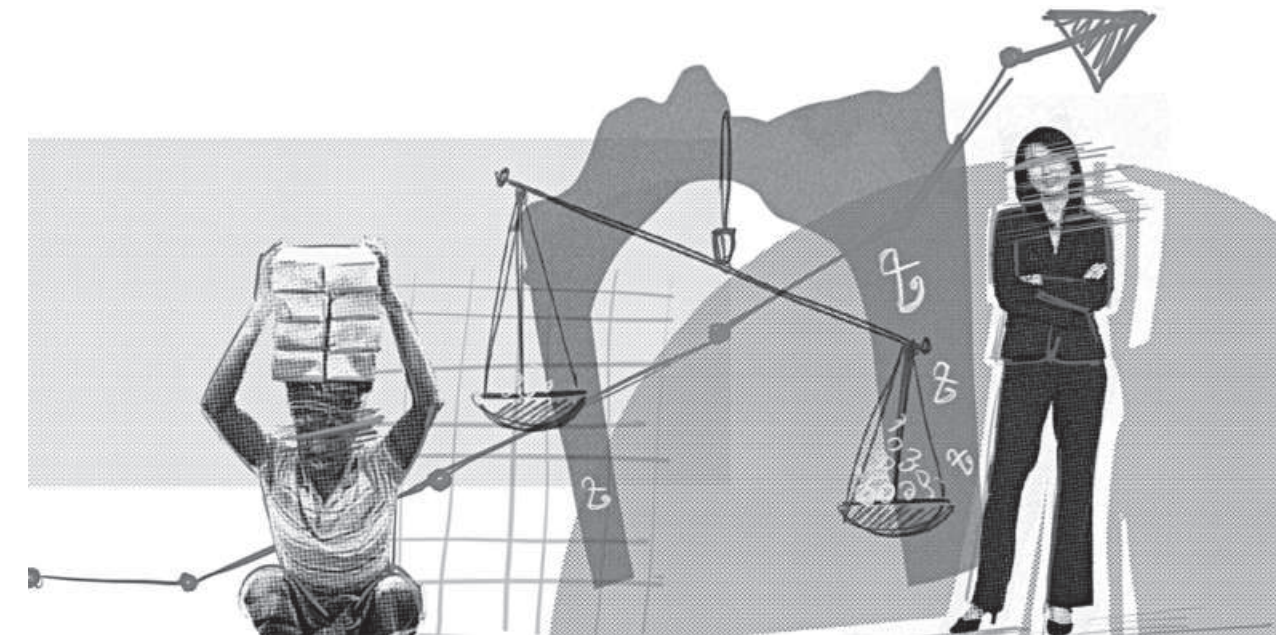
Despite impressive gains in various development indicators compared to other developing countries, individual regions within Bangladesh are not faring as well as the country as a whole. Before delving into the details, allow us to provide some background.

After gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh outperformed many other developing countries in two distinct ways. First, within a remarkably short period, the fertility rate plummeted from 6.9 in 1971 to 3.1 in 2001. In other words, within a single generation, Bangladesh managed to halve its fertility rate, a feat that took English-speaking and northwestern European countries over 100 years to achieve. We owe this impressive achievement to the efforts of NGOs, donor countries, and the government, accomplished within a constrained financial environment. The only other country to demonstrate a comparable rate of reduction was Japan, but it must be noted that Japan was in significantly better financial and physical conditions than post-war Bangladesh.

Second, despite Bangladesh's lower per capita income compared to India and Pakistan post-independence, it has achieved better social development outcomes in education, health, demographic factors, and gender equality since 1980. An essay published by *The Economist* in 2012 showed that Bangladesh outperformed India and Pakistan in every development indicator. The development literature has dubbed this unexpected combination of higher social development and lower income level as the "Bangladesh conundrum" or "development surprise." Recently, one of us asked our students to update this development narrative with more recent data. We found that between 2011 and 2021, Bangladesh's per capita income exceeded that of Pakistan, and Bangladesh still outperforms India and Pakistan in most development indicators.

So there is no doubt that the country as a whole has shown remarkable progress in development within a short period of time, despite many unique challenges post-independence. However, overall progress can conceal significant details regarding regional variations in development. A question thus arises: have the gains in development outcomes been distributed equally across all regions of the country?

Renowned economist Arthur Lewis famously stated that "development



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

must be inequalitarian because it does not start in every part of the economy at the same time." Has this been the case for Bangladesh as well?

In a new research paper, we tackle this question for the 64 districts using per capita income data for years 2000 and 2016-17. Since district-level income data is not published in Bangladesh, we circumvent this limitation by constructing income data from household income and expenditure surveys published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Gauging district-level income from household incomes is not straightforward, and a great deal of care in econometrics must be applied.

Before sharing the results we found, it's important to understand the concept of income convergence. Convergence is a mathematical property, but it's widely used in economics to illustrate whether the income gap among two or more countries is converging (narrowing down) or diverging (widening) over time.

Our results reveal that, contrary to what is predicted by the neoclassical models of economic growth, poorer districts are not growing rapidly enough to eliminate their income gap with the richer districts. The speed of convergence is exceedingly slow, at only 0.4 percent, suggesting that it would take about 170 years to eliminate half of the income gap between the poorer and richer districts in Bangladesh. This result is disappointing, as one would expect poorer regions to grow quickly

meaning the time it takes to halve the initial income gap – amounts to roughly 35 years, or just over a generation.

Geographical proximity does not necessarily facilitate income convergence between poorer and richer districts in Bangladesh. This surprising finding can be explained in light of the concentration of economic activities in just two districts: Dhaka and Chattogram. Without the presence of appropriate economic conditions, policies, and institutional frameworks, the benefits of geographical proximity are not uniformly realised across all districts of Bangladesh.

Recognising the considerable challenge for a poorer district like Gaibandha to eliminate the income gap with a district like Dhaka, we also examined whether poorer, middle income, and richer districts are converging among themselves. This concept is known as "club convergence" in the economic growth literature. To our great surprise, the results were once again extremely disappointing. There was no evidence of income convergence even among the different income tiers within Bangladesh. We also employed two machine-learning routines to endogenously determine income convergence among different income groups across the country. However, we failed to find any evidence of income convergence among the districts of Bangladesh.

The finding of no income convergence in Bangladesh is surprising, as a unique

possibility could be that household incomes are measured with substantial errors, which in turn, complicates the task of detecting convergence. Additionally, it is possible that regional income dynamics in Bangladesh are characterised by persistent income inequality and the existence of multiple stable income levels – a situation referred to as "multiple equilibria" in economic terms. Regardless, the persistent income disparity among the districts in Bangladesh is a matter of grave concern. Further research is needed to understand the missing link between development gains and income divergence.

The unequivocal rejection of conditional convergence in income reinforces Arthur Lewis' notion that the process of economic development has been uneven among the districts of Bangladesh. In terms of policy implications, our results suggest that large-scale policy interventions may be required to invigorate the more impoverished regions of the country in the face of escalating economic disparity. Furthermore, while small-scale interventions such as microfinance are not the ultimate solution to persistent disparity, recent research emphasises that education remains the most effective pathway out of poverty and disparity in Bangladesh. To paraphrase Confucius, for the sake of 10 years' benefit, we must reinforce our social support, and for the sake of a hundred years' benefit, we must educate children.

Threads is much bigger than you may think



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If you have not heard of Threads by now, you are either missing out on the new corporate replacement for one of the most active userbases in the world of social media, or you are just being cautious enough to stay away from the massive web of dopamine and oxytocin-manipulating social media products. Threads is a relatively new social media app launched by Meta, the company that owns Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, that allows users to share interactive posts with a select group of friends and has an algorithm-managed public feed. It is designed to be more intimate and private than other social media platforms of its kind, with a focus on real-time communication between close friends.

It may appear to merely be another shot at creating a Twitter-killer microblogging platform by Meta, but Threads stands for something much bigger.

Hear me out: Threads is not the "new big idea," nor is it a basic Twitter clone. Fediverse has made a sustainable approach towards decentralisation with its suite of programmes for a while now. Meta's plan to use ActivityPub to expose Threads' userbase to the fediverse is what makes this new initiative stand out. This approach would inject the fediverse with a new bubble of millions of people who would



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have otherwise never understood the idea of a federated network.

Fediverse is a network of decentralised social media platforms that are linked together. This means that each platform is independent and has its own rules and members, but users can still interact with each other across different platforms. It is like a bunch of smaller social media communities that are connected to form a larger network. Its approach to decentralisation is meant to ensure that users are not beholden to a single platform or corporation. This means that even if one platform goes down or changes its policies, users can easily

switch to another one without losing their data or connections.

Meta's plan to connect Threads to the fediverse marks a notable step towards decentralisation in social media. By utilising the ActivityPub protocol, which has already gained traction through platforms like Mastodon, Threads will join a movement that aims to empower

users and provide an alternative to the dominant web of siloed platforms. Decentralisation ensures that the power dynamics shift away from a few large entities, putting users back in control of their data and fostering a more open and transparent digital environment. It may not be Meta's intention to lose their grip on so much data, but the approach will open up a door for concerned users to stay away from Meta products, yet access the massive userbase of the platform.

The potential for interoperability with Mastodon and other ActivityPub-powered platforms will allow Threads users to communicate and connect across different networks, regardless of the specific platform they choose. This break from the isolated nature of social media can foster a sense of inclusivity and broaden our social circles beyond the confines of a single platform.

Another critical aspect to consider is the potential for Threads to spur innovation and competition in the social media landscape. The emergence of a massive decentralised social web will encourage diversity and new players to enter the arena. This healthy competition can drive platforms to offer better, less exploitative services, as users gain the freedom to switch providers without abandoning their social connections. By embracing interoperability and promoting user choice, Threads may pave the way for a more dynamic and user-centric social media ecosystem.

What does all this mean for Bangladeshi users? Threads and fediverse integration may help expose more people in the country to the concept of decentralised social media. This could be particularly beneficial for those who are concerned about privacy and data security, as decentralised platforms give users more control over their data. Fediverse's decentralised structure may help reduce the power dynamics that exist within social media groups, which could be beneficial for anyone facing issues with censorship and control.

While Threads may seem like a mere addition to the microblogging landscape, its adoption of ActivityPub and its possible alignment with the players of decentralisation, privacy, and interoperability make it a catalyst for change. Its potential to disrupt the status quo and create a more equitable and democratic online space is significant, and should not be underestimated.