

BACKYARD FARMING IN ASHARYAN PROJECTS

LITTLE INITIATIVE, significant outcome

MIRZA SHAKIL, *Tangail*

Now they not only have a house, but found a way of earning their livelihood as well.

Alongside other occupations, many of them have become self-reliant by selling the items they produce to fulfil their nutritional needs through farming at their courtyards in a small scale.

The story of many residents living at the government shelter project in Tangail is almost the same.

Earlier, on the occasion of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary, a total of 2,304 landless or homeless families in 12 upazilas of the district received a paved house each at the government's Ashrayan Project.

Apart from providing houses, the government has taken various initiatives, especially for the women, to become self-reliant.

As a result, many women of the shelter project have already become self-sufficient by cultivating different vegetables like brinjal, gourd, pepper or raising nursery of fruit and vegetable seedlings at their house yard.

Homeless couple Ranju Miah and Fatema Begum, who got a house at the shelter project in Sialkhol of Bhanpur upazila, at first opened a tea-stall next to their house.

After failing to generate sufficient income, Fatema raised a nursery of fruits and vegetables in the balcony and the courtyard of their house.

Initially starting with a few species, her nursery now has at least 20 different species of fruit and vegetable seedlings and she is doing well with the income she now earns from selling seedlings every day.

Fatema said she spent her days in utter despair with her poor family as she has no home and cultivable land.

Later, she applied to the authorities and received a house at Sialkhol Asharyan Project and made the nursery



Many beneficiaries living at Chandulia shelter projects in Tangail are seen taking care of their vegetable or fruit gardens raised at the backyard of their houses. The photos were taken from Tangail's Mirzapur and Bhanpur upazilas.

PHOTO: STAR

in the balcony and backyard of their house with the help of her husband.

"Now I can earn Tk 500 to Tk 600 by selling seedlings from my nursery per day," Fatema said.

The couple expressed their gratitude to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for changing their lives by providing them a house in the Asharyan Project.

Now one can witness such success in every shelter project of the district.

During a recent visit to the shelter project in Mirzapur upazila, this correspondent saw various vegetables like cauliflower, cabbage, beans, beetroot,

eggplant, tomato, gourd, green pepper have been cultivated in the backyards of almost all the houses.

Mentionable, fungicide sprays and light traps are being used to prevent the insects in those vegetable gardens.

Apart from meeting the nutritional needs of their families, the beneficiaries are now able to earn some extra money by selling their produces.

Several residents living in these shelter projects said they opted to cultivate poison-free vegetables in their backyards in order to meet their nutritional needs.

Local agricultural officials are helping them in various ways, they added.

Mirzapur Upazila Agriculture Officer Sanjay Kumar Pal said a total of 512

homeless families have been provided land and paved houses at the shelter projects on 30 acres of government Khas land in Anaitara, Latipur, Asgana, Warshi, Banshtail, Bhatagram, Mahera, Bhaora, Jamurki and Banail unions of the upazila.

The upazila agriculture office has provided seeds, fertilisers and other materials free of cost for cultivating poison-free vegetables on the backyard of the houses in the shelter projects, he added.

Tangail Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Kaiserul Islam said the government is providing various supports to families living in the shelter project to make them self-reliant.



PHOTO: STAR

Cashew nut farming in plain land

MOHSIN MILON, *Benapole*

Although much of the cashew nut consumed in the country is cultivated in the hilly areas, a few are showing that it can be grown in the plain land.

Cashew nut is a crop mainly grown in the hilly areas, but the item is now being commercially cultivated in the plain land of Jashore region.

Withing just a year or so, the pesticide-free cash crop is successfully cultivated in the plain land with the help of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE).

According to Chougachha Upazila Agriculture Office, they have successfully completed a project titled 'Plainland Cashew Nut Cultivation' recently and now encouraging local farmers to cultivate the cash crop commercially on a large scale.

Farmer Mahbubur Rahman Liton of Patibila village in Jashore's Chougachha upazila said farming of cashew nut is more profitable than the other crops.

The upazila agriculture office provided him 33 cashew nut trees free of cost about two years ago, he said, adding that currently almost all the trees either bearing flowers or fruits.

Liton said he is expecting five to six kilogrammes of nuts from each tree.

A number of buyers have already contacted him and express their desire to purchase the nuts at Tk 1000 per kg, he said.

He does not apply any additional fertilizers or pesticides in the cultivation, Liton further said.

Muktar Hossain, deputy assistant agriculture officer under Patibila Agricultural Block in Chougachha upazila, said usually cashew nut is a mountain crop.

In August 2021, two local farmers were given cashew nut trees under the project titled 'Cashew Nut and Coffee Cultivation in Plain Land.'

Chougachha Upazila Agriculture Officer Mubasvir Hussain said with the aim to cultivate the cash crop in plain land some local farmers were given cashew nut trees as an incentive.

As part of a plan to expand cashew nut farming in plain lands they are now encouraging farmers to cultivate the crop on a large scale, he added.

Govt's overdependence

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in the world.

The CPD said the next budget should focus on restoring macroeconomic stability.

"In order to do that, the government must tame the inflationary pressure that has been hitting the poor and fixed-income people."

It urged the government to monitor the essential commodity market and restore discipline in the supply chain as prices are going through the roof.

"If anyone manipulates the market and makes money, they should not be just fined. Rather, they should be punished as per laws. The law even permits imprisonment for life. Without exemplary punishment, the problem can't be solved."

There were signs of inflationary pressures in Bangladesh even before the added impact brought on by the Russia-Ukraine war.

Quoting findings of the World Bank, Prof Mustafizur said 73.9 percent of Bangladesh's population, or 125.2 million people, could not afford a healthy diet in 2021.

"In the last two years, the situation worsened as inflationary pressure intensified."

The budget for FY25 will be formulated at a time when macroeconomic challenges persist, revenue collections are low, inflation shows no signs of abating, liquidity crunch in the banking sector deepens, and foreign currency reserves plummet.

"The budget will need to address these challenges to restore macroeconomic stability," said CPD Executive Director Fahmida Khatun.

The CPD urged the government to take steps to rein in the rising cost of essentials.

Bangladesh has been witnessing an elevated level of inflation since May 2022 and it has averaged more than 9 percent since March last year owing to both external and internal factors.

"Proper attention should be given to food production, social protection, subsidies for agriculture,

and energy, power, health and education sectors," the think-tank said in a paper presented at the briefing.

Supporting the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups should be the central focus when it comes to subsidy management, according to the research organisation.

"The government should focus on implementing foreign-funded development projects given the declining foreign exchange reserves."

The government should also give importance to the projects that are almost finished whereas the schemes that have 10 percent or lower implementation rate up as of March 2024 should be deprioritised, the CPD said.

It called for an independent commission to look into the issues related to the surging costs of public infrastructure projects and said the government should raise revenue receipts by expanding the tax net in order to create more fiscal space.

"Fiscal policies and proposals, especially subsidies, need to be aligned with Bangladesh's obligations as a future developing country, following LDC graduation," the CPD said. Bangladesh will leave the group of the least-developed countries in 2026.

Prof Mustafizur said the government should find a strategy to help the private sector so that it doesn't experience any troubles after the graduation since the country would not be able to offer direct subsidies after the transition like it does currently.

"In many countries, the government, for example, builds dormitories for workers and provides food items. Then, it is not a subsidy to industries but it still helps them."

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the CPD, called for participatory discussions on the budget in parliament.

He pointed out that the dynamism that is usually seen in a new government is yet to be there although the current government came to power more than two months ago.

Somali piracy

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in 2009, 2.67 million in 2010, and 5.04 million in 2011.

Among these ships was a Bangladeshi vessel named MV Jahon Moni. With 25 crew and 43,000 tonnes of nickel ore, the ship was captured in December, 2010, and then ransomed for USD 4.72 million.

Starting from 2008, with authorisation from the Somali government, foreign countries were allowed to fight piracy in Somali waters. Eventually, piracy attacks decreased. In 2012, only eight hijackings took place.

Since then, piracy off the coast of Somalia had largely been considered a problem solved. Attacks were few and far between, and meanwhile, Somalia began to stabilise. Although things have remained turbulent, with insurgencies like Al-Shabaab waging war, Somali piracy was kept in check.

In fact, in January 2023, the High Risk Area status was lifted from the Indian Ocean due to a lack of significant pirate activity.

However, the situation turned following Israel's invasion of Gaza last year. Houthi rebels in Yemen have created major disruptions in the Red Sea. With the international community's attention shifted elsewhere, in November, 2023, a Liberian-flagged ship owned by an Israeli billionaire was attacked, stoking fears that Somali piracy is making a comeback.

The hijacking of MV Abdullah, a Bangladeshi vessel, marks a return to large-scale attacks by Somali pirates. Bangladesh waits with bated breath for the safe return of each and every crew member.

Gaza truce efforts

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Since October 7, Israel has carried out relentless bombardment and a ground invasion that has killed at least 31,553 people in Gaza, most of them women and children, according to the health ministry.

Until Friday Hamas had insisted no further hostages would be exchanged without a permanent ceasefire and Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Now the militants are saying that, during a six-week truce, Israeli forces would need to pull out of "all cities and populated areas" in Gaza, according to the Hamas official.

The Hamas proposal also calls for ramped-up humanitarian aid, the official added.

Price cap is not working

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higher by Tk 10 to 40 per kg than the government-fixed rates.

Some retailers yesterday claimed they were unaware of the latest price capping, while others opined that this move will not work unless the supply of essentials picks up. They said they cannot cut the prices as the wholesalers charge them higher rates.

"The prices fixed by the government are much lower than our purchase prices from wholesalers. If the government can cut the wholesale prices of commodities, then we will be able to sell those at the government-fixed rates," Md Gofran, owner of a grocery shop at Karwan Bazar, told The Daily Star.

This means the government's move to rein in the commodity prices fall flat again.

Earlier on September 14 last year, the government fixed the prices of eggs, onions and potatoes after the prices of these essentials shot up. However, the authorities concerned could not enforce the price cap despite raids by different government agencies in different wholesale and retail markets.

Latest, the Department of Agricultural Marketing (DAM) on Friday fixed prices of 29 commodities from producer to consumer level. A day after the decision, most of the essentials were selling at a much higher prices.

The government fixed the price of goat meat at Tk 1003.56 per kg, but the item was sold for Tk 1,050 yesterday.

Chicken (Sonali) was sold for Tk 320-330 a kg, up from Tk 262 fixed

by the DAM.

Prices of different varieties of pulses, including red lentils, moong, and mashkalai, were Tk 5 to 35 higher than the cap prices.

Of the 29 items, only eggs and katla fish were sold at the government-fixed rates - Tk 10-10.50 per egg and Tk 300-400 per kg of katla fish.

Traders, however, said prices of these two commodities had been unchanged for three to four days before the government fixed their rates.

Amid such a situation, the people from limited- and low-income families are struggling to cope with the rising prices of essentials.

Many consumers say fixing the prices of essentials never worked before and it will not work in future either.

"It's nothing but a farce. I heard that the prices of 29 commodities have been fixed but I know the prices would not be effective," Abul Hossen, a consumer, told this newspaper at Kochukhet Bazar.

SM Nazir Hossain, vice-president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said the government had capped prices on some daily essentials before, but those were hardly enforced.

"The authorities just fixed the prices and didn't take measures to enforce those. Price capping should be done considering the actual market situation. The authorities concerned should sit with the traders, NBR and other stakeholders to find a solution and give some relief to consumers," he added.

Mujib-Yahya

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Tikka Khan rang up Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, then General Officer Commanding 14 Division in East Pakistan, and asked him to go to the Command House along with Major General Rao Farman Ali, then military adviser to the governor of East Pakistan. They both went there and found Tikka Khan and General Abdul Hamid Khan, Chief of Staff of the Pakistan Army, present. Tikka Khan informed them that negotiations with Sheikh Mujib were not proceeding well, and therefore, the President wanted the military to be ready for action. Khadim and Farman were asked to jointly prepare a plan, which became the blueprint for Operation Searchlight. [Khadim Hussain Raja, A Stranger in My Own Country: East Pakistan (1969-1971), UPL, 2012, p. 70]

Caption: Bangabandhu speaking to journalists after his second round of meeting with Yahya Khan. March 17, 1971. Source: Dainik Pakistan.

Passenger train

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percent for a passenger traveling between 101km and 150km; 25 percent for 251km to 400km and 30 percent rebate for distance over 401km.

All of these rebates are going to be cancelled.

However, the fare up to 100km will remain unchanged, which means fares of several local trains operating on routes like Dhaka-Narayanganj or Dhaka-Joydebpur will likely remain the same, they added.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has already given the go ahead to BR's proposal, Sardar Shahadat Ali, who is serving as director general as part of additional charges of BR said.

"We are planning on implementing this decision from April 1," he told The Daily Star yesterday, adding that an increase in fares would be the inadvertent outcome.

The last time BR hiked fares was in February 2016 by 7.23 percent.

Before that in October 2012, both passenger and freight train fares were raised by 50 percent to improve services and reduce railway losses, and that move came after 20 years.

According to the BR Information Book-2021, the average distance travelled by a passenger is 152.48km. BR operates 367 passenger trains and 42 freight trains daily on 3,554km of rail tracks.