

An uninspiring budget proposal

It fails to commit to reforms and address people's sufferings

Despite having a few positive features, the proposed budget from FY2024-25 fails to recognise the immediate needs and medium-term challenges facing the economy. There are three key problems that the budget somewhat correctly identifies: runaway inflation, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and increasing debt burden. However, the strategies for curbing inflation and providing relief to the poor and fixed-income groups are grossly insufficient. For starters, duties have been reduced on only a few essential items, and the government's poor track record does not give a lot of hope as to whether this will ultimately result in lower prices for consumers. Moreover, the government's target to reduce inflation to 6.5 percent appears overly ambitious in light of the fact that average inflation has remained above nine percent for two consecutive years. Most importantly, the budget does not provide any detailed roadmap on how to change that.

The government has correctly decided to slow down on expenditure, and the budget deficit has been set at 4.6 percent, the lowest in 10 years—indicative of a contractionary fiscal policy supplementing the contractionary monetary policy of the central bank. But it has failed to recognise where to prioritise its spending. Allocation for the social safety net programmes, for example, saw a small increase from Tk 1,26,272 crore in FY2023-24 to Tk 1,36,026 crore. Not only is this amount insufficient, but it's also misleading as the proportion of the social safety net programmes as a percentage of the GDP actually dipped from the outgoing fiscal year's 2.55 percent to 2.43 percent proposed in the new budget. And if government employee pensions and interest payment for savings certificates are discounted, the share further drops to 1.62 percent of the GDP. Similarly, allocations for education and health also remain grossly below what's needed to develop our human capital.

Keeping the tax-free income threshold unchanged when prices have skyrocketed is disappointing. The government should have sought to acquire more revenue through tax reforms instead, and by bringing tax evaders under the tax net. Instead, it has focused on increasing revenue collection via indirect taxes, which will disproportionately affect lower-income groups, increasing inequality. The government's immoral decision to allow corrupt individuals a scope to whiten black money by paying a low flat rate of 15 percent is another point of contention. Add to that the absence of any mention of how it plans to bring down the non-performing loans, and it seems that the Awami League government has performed a complete U-turn on its so-called policy of "zero tolerance" against corruption.

In fact, the overall budget speech delivered by the finance minister was disappointing on the structural reform front in light of the expectations from this being the first post-election budget. The government, it seems, has again opted not to rattle any cages by undertaking politically challenging initiatives that are critical to strengthening our economic pillars. So, the mantra seems to be to recognise the challenges, promise changes, but commit very little to actually achieve them.

A future without farmland?

Govt needs to act now to address soil degradation

We are alarmed that around 270 square kilometres of land in the country—roughly the size of Dhaka city—is losing fertility every year, posing a serious threat to the nation's food security. A recent study by the Soil Resource Development Institute (SRDI) found that 76.2 percent of the land in Bangladesh suffers from moderate to very severe soil degradation. This translates to a staggering 1.124 crore hectares of degraded land, an increase from the 1.07 crore hectares estimated in 2000.

The reasons behind soil degradation in Bangladesh are complex and interconnected. To begin with, there is the overuse of chemical fertilisers, which boosts crop yields in the short term, but their long-term use depletes essential soil nutrients and organic matter. In the coastal areas, rising salinity levels due to climate change and shrimp farming have further disrupted the natural balance of salts in the soil, making it unsuitable to grow most crops. Industrial pollution from factories, deforestation and the improper disposal of electronic and medical waste are additional factors accelerating soil degradation. Trees play a vital role in maintaining soil health by preventing erosion and regulating water flow, so when forests are cleared, the soil becomes more vulnerable to erosion and degradation.

Degradation of soil fertility reduces crop yields, diminishes the nutritional value of crops, and increases vulnerability to droughts and floods. This not only impacts food security, but also harms the environment and livelihoods of millions of Bangladeshis. Unless immediate action is taken, our country could face a future with no cultivable land within the next 63 years, according to experts. This is no doubt a frightening prospect for a nation of 17 crore people who are still heavily reliant on agriculture.

But is the government aware of the severity of the issue? It needs to play an urgent role in reversing soil degradation by phasing out profitable but harmful industries, such as tobacco and shrimp farming, which are causing irreparable damage to scarce agricultural land. It should invest in research and development of sustainable agricultural technologies and encourage farmers to adopt green agricultural practices—such as crop rotation, cover cropping, and composting—to improve soil health and fertility. Finally, the government must implement strict policies to limit industrial pollution and harmful waste disposal practices, and put an end to our destructive spree of deforestation around the country.

Our love-hate relationship with university rankings



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is a professor of English at
Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

We love university rankings, especially when our names grace the list. Without this recognition, we'd easily find 10 reasons to criticise the process. The prestigious QS World University Rankings (WUR) 2025 naming Dhaka University as the most improved university in the country makes us revisit our love-hate stance.

Recently, Dhaka University, over 100 years old, achieved its best-ever position in the QS world rankings, landing in the 554th position among 1,500 shortlisted universities. To be eligible for QS WUR, an institution needs at least 100 papers indexed by Scopus and published over five years. This predominantly anglophone ranking landscape overlooks non-English and non-indexed journals, often favouring science or quantitative subjects over humanities and social sciences.

As Bangladesh's first fully fledged university, DU has significantly contributed to forming a middle class and laying the foundation for civil bureaucracy and political leadership. Ranking agencies will not test DU for its prestige and exclusivity. It will rather use a distinct methodology that often disregards the university's heritage, legacy, and social impact. To be ranked among the best global universities, we must meet a different set of data-driven expectations. It is a different ball game.

For example, the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) prioritises universities with Nobel laureates, field medallists, highly cited researchers, or papers in nature or science, resembling the fabled stork inviting tigers to eat from narrow jars. This elitist system can perpetuate societal inequities, countering higher education's goal of eradicating inequalities for a just world. This idea of sustainability has been included in QS WUR as well as Times Higher Education Impact Rankings.

For evaluation, QS uses specific criteria and weighted factors. The table shows a comparative performance analysis of the three Bangladeshi universities in the

top 1000 list. This year, DU and Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) have moved up from their previous bands of 691-700 and 801-850, respectively, while North South University (NSU) has slipped from its previous year's 851-900 rank. The improvement in top universities' performances suggests strategic interventions by our premier institutions.

Previously, many public officials and university leaders have publicly criticised rankings, arguing that data-driven quality measurement is flawed.



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

Can we quantify quality, particularly in light of rumours that many ranking actors manipulate data to achieve high scores? A huge scandal erupted in 2021 when Columbia University faced accusations of data fabrication. Many universities do this because ranking is one way to attract better students. To join the elite group of top academic institutions, one requires substantial subscription fees, visibility efforts, and costs for international collaboration. Competing with resource-heavy institutions is challenging for a state-funded university like DU that charges minimal tuition.

QS WUR's unique data collection

emphasises internationalisation (45 percent). Achieving global academic perceptions requires higher budgets, which many faculty members lack. Going to international conferences and forums are expensive affairs. Then, there are the heavy processing fees for research publications in indexed journals, sometimes up to \$5,000 per paper. Meeting QS's criteria necessitates a minimum of 100 such publications annually. Our academic perceptions depend a lot on what we present and write on international platforms.

Both DU and BUET perform relatively well in terms of employability and employer perceptions. NSU, being newer, has progress to make in terms of employer outcomes. BUET's employer reputation score is concerning, showing a disconnect between students' studies and their eventual employment. For example, a customs or police officer with a mechanical engineering degree

international students as a potential revenue source and come up with a comprehensive branding strategy like those in Malaysia and India. Even in the 1980s, Bangladesh was a destination for higher education. We need to regain that status by updating our facilities like dormitories and social security. The inclusion of sustainability as a ranking category is another case in point. Our infrastructure, policies, curricula, and extracurricular activities must demonstrate our commitment to sustainability and inclusivity to perform better in this category.

As the director of DU's international affairs office, I know how difficult it is to attract international students and faculty. Some MoUs have allowed us to host about 15 foreign faculty members, largely thanks to our partners' contributions. This earned DU a score of 1.6 out of 5. BUET scored zero, while NSU, with generous incentives for foreign faculty and dual nationals, outperformed its local rivals with a score of 7.9. BUET's international research network is far from satisfactory. Given the number of brain-drained NRB scholars that BUET has, one hopes to see better results in the future.

Academic reputation, crucial in rankings, has become a PR and networking activity, requiring our scholars to participate in international forums and conferences. Limited budgets often prevent faculty from travelling abroad or paying conference fees. Researchers face hefty processing fees for publication in indexed journals, which is necessary for QS consideration. If the government is sincere about university ranking, it must allocate dedicated research funds with specified desired outcomes.

In the age of globalisation, we cannot ignore the pull of ranking. We need to incentivise the local institutions so that they can improve their global footprints. Then again, we should not bifurcate the higher education system by promoting a segment of elite institutions. Real changes will come once we find the right balance between our primary, secondary, and tertiary systems. An improved higher education system will have a trickle-down effect on the other two. The sooner the stakeholders realise the importance of shaping our higher education system in alignment with the global system, the better it is for all of us.

WORLD OCEAN DAY

Navigating the blue frontier

Md Rony Golder
is a PhD student at the School of Earth and
Planetary Sciences in Curtin University, Australia.

MID RONY GOLDER

The ocean, a vast expanse of blue mystery, has long been a source of sustenance, wonder, and intrigue. As we observe World Ocean Day today, it is imperative to reflect on the relationship between humanity and the sea, particularly for maritime nations like Bangladesh, whose destiny is inextricably linked to the marine waters that surround it.

Cradled by the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh boasts a maritime area almost as vast as its terrestrial territory. This marine space is not just a buffer against the elements, but a treasure trove of resources that, if harnessed sustainably, could propel the nation into a future of prosperity and stability. However, an issue persists: how can Bangladesh navigate the complex waters of marine resource management to ensure a balance between economic growth and environmental preservation?

The answer lies in the adoption of marine spatial planning (MSP), a strategic approach that goes beyond traditional resource management. MSP is not merely a tool for allocation; rather, it is a vision for harmony between human activities and the marine ecosystem. It is a process that calls for stakeholders—fishermen, policymakers, scientists, and conservationists—to come together in crafting a blueprint for the ocean's future.

At its core, MSP is about understanding the spatial distribution of marine resources and the myriad

interactions that occur within the marine environment. It is about making informed decisions that account for the cumulative impacts of human activities, ensuring that the ocean's health is not compromised for short-term gains.

The Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC) of UNESCO describes MSP as a "public process of analysing and allocating the spatial and temporal distribution of human activities in marine areas to achieve ecological, economic and social objectives that have been specified through a political process." This definition underscores the multifaceted nature of MSP, highlighting its role as a mediator between competing interests and its potential to foster sustainable development.

A central debate in the realm of MSP revolves around its primary focus. Should MSP prioritise the extraction of marine resources, or should it champion the cause of environmental protection? This contradiction, however, is a false one. The true purpose of MSP is to find a middle path—a path that allows for the responsible use of marine resources while safeguarding the marine environment for future generations.

Expert researchers have weighed in on this debate, offering insights into the purpose of MSP. It is a decision-making framework that aids planners and policymakers in optimising the use and management of the sea, and is also a means to implement ecosystem-based management, helping countries identify areas for biodiversity conservation and sustainable economic development. MSP equips policymakers with the

necessary information for strategic planning of current and future resource use. It seeks to balance the objectives of nature conservation and resource utilisation in a manner that is sustainable and equitable.

For Bangladesh, the implementation of MSP is both a challenge and an opportunity. This is because the MSP implementation process in any country depends on certain necessities, such as adequate legal and policy adoption and application; coordination and integration of complex political and economic elements including national, regional, and global institutions; improving mechanisms to avoid and resolve marine environmental conflicts; preventing and reducing environmental degradation; strengthening and developing marine environmental laws and compliance; and above all, ensuring community participation.

Bangladesh has successfully delineated its maritime boundaries through two landmark legal victories against India and Myanmar, laying the groundwork for MSP. However, the journey ahead remains challenging. The lack of an integrated legal and policy framework is a significant hurdle. Existing plans and laws are fragmented, spread across various sectors and departments without a cohesive strategy. This fragmentation hinders the effective management of marine resources and the adoption of a holistic approach to MSP.

Coordination and integration are also lacking. No single policy or law has succeeded in uniting all relevant departments under a common MSP agenda. The result is a patchwork of sector-specific plans that fail to

address the interconnectedness of marine issues.

Information and data on marine resources are scarce. Without robust marine research and data collection, MSP cannot be effectively implemented. The limited scope of existing marine research institutions and their activities underscores the need for a concerted effort to gather comprehensive data on the Bay of Bengal's resources.

As Bangladesh strides forward to become a developing country, sustainable resource management has become even more imperative. The spectre of overfishing, species extinction, and habitat destruction underscores the urgency of implementing MSP.

The government's Blue Economy Cell has taken commendable steps in coordinating stakeholder efforts towards sustainable marine development. Yet, there is a pressing need for regular stakeholder meetings to identify conflicts, analyse disputes, and foster involvement in the MSP process.

In the global context, developed nations have already embarked on significant maritime plans, reaping the benefits of the sea's bounty. Bangladesh must follow suit, leveraging MSP as a tool for sustainable marine governance.

On this World Ocean Day, let us embrace marine spatial planning as the guiding principle for Bangladesh's maritime future. With MSP, we can chart a course that ensures the sustainable use of marine resources, the conservation of the marine environment, and the fulfilment of the country's social and economic needs.