

Don't let our youth waste away

Reform must focus on skills development, expanding job market

It is gravely concerning that a large number of university graduates in the country are unable to secure decent jobs, many for years on end. According to a recent report by *Bonik Barta*, nearly 19 lakh students graduated from public and private universities between 2021 and 2023, but a significant number of them remain unemployed. In fact, according to a 2019 World Bank report, one in three graduates remain unemployed for at least a year or two following graduation. For that, lack of work is not the only major reason.

True, the country's job market, rather than expanding to accommodate a larger workforce, has been shrinking due to domestic and international stresses on our economy. But the above report quotes industry insiders who have identified another key reason—a severe lack of skills due to inadequate, outdated education—as a major barrier to recruiting fresh graduates. For example, according to the 2022 annual report of the University Grants Commission (UGC), an average of around 12,000 computer science and information technology students graduate every year, but only around 5,000 get recruited partly because employers cannot find workers skilled enough to meet their needs. The skills issue was also highlighted in an analysis of the Asian Development Bank that found that as many as 80 percent of jobseekers fail in basic coding, English and maths tests despite having passed such courses at university.

Clearly, there is a disconnect between the skills our universities provide and the demands of the ever-evolving job market. It is astounding that none of the past governments have taken meaningful actions to address this gap. Our universities, both public and private, need proper investment and curriculum upgrade so that they can produce graduates competent enough to take on the challenges of the job market and advance our economy.

According to the Labour Force Survey 2022, only 25.41 percent of workers with tertiary education are employed in the formal sector. In a country that is preparing to graduate to the developing country status in two years, this cannot be acceptable. If we want to make our mark in the world and outperform our competitors, we must put greater emphasis on upskilling our youth and properly utilise their skills. As Bangladesh heads for a massive transformation in the post-uprising reality, investment in quality education and vocational and technical training is a must-have to build a more productive youth labour force. Expanding the job market to accommodate more graduates must also happen simultaneously.

Flood-hit people need urgent support

Authorities must learn from past failures to improve response

While people in many districts are still reeling from the fallout of the August floods—deemed by some as the worst in the country since 1988—reports say that recent occurrences of heavy rainfall and onrush of water from upstream have yet again inundated vast tracts of areas in northern districts, marooning over 60,000 people in Lalmonirhat and Kurigram as of Sunday night. Many low-lying areas in Rangpur and Nilphamari have also been flooded. As a result, many of the affected have had to leave their homes, taking shelter on roads and embankments. Moreover, thousands of hectares of croplands, including Aman and vegetable fields, have been submerged. The Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre has said the situation may improve by Tuesday, but if water does not begin to recede as expected, it may damage early-winter crops. This needs immediate action from the authorities.

The question is, how prepared is the government to deal with such frequent floods and the devastations caused by them? Its response to the August flood has been often slow and ineffective, with the rehabilitation programmes for victims yet to begin. The priority now is to provide those stranded in the four northern districts with shelter, food and drinking water, and necessary medicine. They will also require help to protect their livestock and poultry as their livelihoods depend on them. Once floodwaters recede, there will be the gargantuan challenge of rehabilitation, reconstructing their homes and repairing damaged infrastructure, including roads and embankments, etc. The affected, especially those in worst-hit areas, will also need financial support to rebuild.

The government's proactive role in these endeavours is crucial. The NGOs and wider society should also come forward to support these endeavours. During the devastating flood of August, we saw how people from all walks of life came forward to support the victims. However, coordination became a big issue in conducting relief operations in remote areas with the local administrations struggling to do their part. Therefore, the government must take lessons from these shortcomings and prepare to efficiently support the victims this time. It also must build a robust flood management and rehabilitation system for dealing with such natural disasters in the future.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

People's Republic of China is established



In Beijing, with most of the Chinese mainland held by the communist People's Liberation Army, its dynamic leader, Mao Zedong, proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China on this day in 1949.

RETHINKING DISASTER RESPONSE

We ignore indigenous knowledge at our peril



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Natural disasters such as floods, cyclones, heatwaves, or droughts create vulnerabilities in ecosystems and human life. A hazard does not increase the risk of harm equally for everyone nor does everyone suffer equally. Economic, environmental, social, and political factors play into this equation. Besides, hazards like floods do not occur after issuing a notice. Therefore, preparations are necessary so that these hazards don't increase harm. This preparation should occur at individual, familial, societal, and state-level ecosystems, as well as transnationally, regionally, and globally. The better the preparation, the lesser the risk and damage.

While the same disaster does not affect everyone equally, the suffering of certain groups or communities is intentionally kept away from the public eye. Social marginalisation, structural inequality, neoliberal corporate markets, or state authority increase the risks for people and ecosystems. Simply providing relief, assistance, or infrastructure development is not enough, in any measure, to tackle disaster-borne risks and the resulting destruction. We need thorough reforms at all levels and establish a universal, participatory, and inclusive

If the August 2024 floods caused varieties of rice, beliefs, folklore, songs, indigenous knowledge, or native seeds to be lost, will the state include them in their national loss report? These lost genetic and cultural resources are integral parts of the history and identity of rural communities. What steps will the post-July uprising state take to protect the country's indigenous biodiversity and traditional knowledge systems in flood-affected regions?

disaster management system.

It is not just enough to include people of all classes, professions, ages, and genders from all parts of the country in the disaster management process. Their participation must be meaningful. The contributions and work of the people involved in disaster management



Much of the indigenous knowledge and strength to prepare for disasters have tragically been lost.

PHOTO: RAJIB RATHAN

must be recognised, and a dignified disaster management framework must be established. Even though we have celebrated the golden jubilee of our independence, we have not been able to build an inclusive disaster management framework. The reason behind this is the deeply rooted hegemony, the arrogance of power, binary perspectives, and authoritarianism within us. This has been true with all the authoritarian regimes of the past.

Bangladesh's disaster management framework is often presented as a good example on the global stage. People say that the state responds quickly to disasters. However, the state is only active when a disaster strikes, spending



There's a long-standing debate about agricultural, fisheries, and livestock rehabilitation.

PHOTO: MONIR UDDIN ANIK

the rest of the time in outright hibernation. Besides, our disaster preparedness and management are not uniform across regions. Only cyclone-prone coastal areas have shelters, but drought-prone Barind and flash flood-prone haor regions don't have many.

In the recent floods in Feni, Lakshimpur, Khagrachhari, and Noakhali, we saw increased suffering and losses due to the lack of disaster preparedness. The state must give equal importance to all geographically diverse regions and social classes in disaster preparedness. We must change our tendency to ignore and neglect the protection of people, biodiversity, and ecosystems. There are 30 agroecological zones and 17 hydrological zones in the country. Then there is the Barind region, wetlands, chars, coastal areas, forests, hills, plains, and urban areas. The nature of disasters and damage is not the same across these regions, neither is the impact on various social groups equal. Knowing and understanding local knowledge and community actions on disaster management is crucial.

We have not yet integrated indigenous disaster preparedness knowledge into the national disaster

region-specific disaster management expertise. It's also crucial to examine the role of the state and authoritarian regimes in this loss.

Loss and damage debate and community resilience

In every disaster, three phases of preparedness are critical—before, during, and after. According to the global Sendai Framework targets, the top priority during a disaster is to respond quickly and save lives and property. Another post-disaster priority is rehabilitation. However, there's a long-standing debate about agricultural, fisheries, and livestock rehabilitation. Instead of genuinely helping the devastated and impoverished, this kind of rehabilitation covertly targets the poor to turn them into consumers of multinational corporations.

It has been observed that floods, cyclones, hailstorms, cold injuries, droughts, or salinity cause the loss of many crop varieties, including rice. Many fish and livestock are lost, and wildlife either vanishes or leaves their habitats. Every disaster leaves a painful scar of loss on nature and culture. Is it possible to "rehabilitate" this loss? Can mere financial compensation ever restore the lost resources? Can sacks of money bring back the grains and the songs lost to floods? If native salt-tolerant varieties disappear from a coastal village due to a disaster, offering hybrid seeds in sealed packets is not a sustainable solution for agricultural rehabilitation. Instead, it creates new crises and sufferings.

So, what should our post-disaster agricultural rehabilitation system look like? Essentially, we must develop a protection and rehabilitation system based on indigenous knowledge and local genetic resources that are severely affected by every disaster. In modern climate discourse, this is called Loss and Damage (L&D). L&D can be both economic and non-economic and the latter is not discussed frequently. The state has never created any list or report of non-economic loss and damage.

If the August 2024 floods caused varieties of rice, beliefs, folklore, songs, indigenous knowledge, or native seeds to be lost, will the state include them in their national loss report? These lost genetic and cultural resources are integral parts of the history and identity of rural communities. What steps will the post-July uprising state take to protect the country's indigenous biodiversity and traditional knowledge systems in flood-affected regions? What kind of rehabilitation programmes is the state planning? Will the state continue to ignore the people's genetic resources and knowledge systems, just like the previous authoritarian regimes? Will it flood the villages with packet seeds from stores? Will it promote the business of multinational seed companies in the name of post-flood agricultural incentives? How different will the post-flood rehabilitation in

terms of agricultural issues be from those of previous regimes?

We need to search for the answers to these fundamental questions as part of state reform. Protecting genetic resources and traditional knowledge as part of disaster preparedness and management must be included in the constitution. Neoliberal authorities must be dismantled in national

disaster management and agricultural rehabilitation. The spirit of the student and people led July uprising can fuel this effective transformation.

We must avoid a repeat of post-1998 flood actions

Following the 1998 floods, the National Seed Board authorised private companies to import 2,200 metric tonnes of hybrid seeds to avoid a shortage of food grains. Companies such as ACI, Ganges, McDonald, and Molika Seed were awarded contracts to import hybrid seeds under certain conditions, but none fulfilled the contract terms. Later, it was found that many companies were registered for seed trade. These companies deceived farmers by selling substandard seeds. The deception of Syngenta, which sold the hybrid tomato seed "Sabal" in 2010 in the Barind region, became widely discussed. Despite protests and lawsuits against Syngenta, the state could not ensure seed justice for farmers. The student-people uprising of July called for state reform. We need similar reforms in our authoritarian perspectives and activities when it comes to post-flood rehabilitation and disaster management. For each flood-affected region, disaster relief and rehabilitation programmes must be

So, how should we prepare for disasters? Should we continue to validate false neoliberal solutions repeatedly in the name of disaster management, that do not foster disaster-resilient communities in any way, but rather legitimise corruption, mismanagement, profiteering, land grabbing, and corporate markets in the name of disaster management?

formulated based on farmers' opinions and participation to create a nature- and culture-friendly approach. Indigenous genetic resources and traditional knowledge protection should be recognised as a powerful community-based disaster preparedness strategy. The establishment of seed banks in every village and a national farmer-to-farmer seed exchange programme must be incorporated into the state's agricultural strategy. The August floods have also caused extensive damage to fisheries and livestock. Our native breeds are more capable of withstanding disasters. Therefore, prioritising indigenous breeds and traditional livestock management systems is crucial.

A longer version of this article can be found in Bangla on our website.