

## Take steps to ensure our food security

Extreme weather events are affecting food supplies

As the country struggles with soaring food prices, the government's response so far has largely focused on addressing immediate challenges through various measures, including price caps, import tariff reductions, efforts to cut middlemen from the supply chain, etc. If properly executed, these initiatives will offer some relief, but there are larger factors posing threats to our food security that demand equal attention. This is according to a report by this daily that highlighted how extreme weather events are causing a chain reaction that is proving harder to recover from. These events have caused massive agricultural and financial losses as well as production shortfalls which, combined with supply chain disruptions and manipulations, are jeopardising food supplies and driving up prices.

Since May 2023, Bangladesh has experienced more than a dozen extreme weather events—four cyclones, nine incidents of flooding, and multiple spells of heavy rains, heatwaves, and cold waves. These events have severely affected farmers as well as overall crop production, with the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) estimating the damage of four to 15 percent of crops in seven to 50 districts. For example, the two recent floods in Chattogram, Sylhet, and Mymensingh divisions damaged an estimated yield of about 10 lakh tonnes of Aman just before the plants were to flower. The unprecedented flooding in the eastern region in August-September was also quite damaging, with the agriculture and forestry sector alone suffering a loss of Tk 5,169.71 crore. Through these floods and Cyclone Remal in 2024, the DAE estimates that the total damage to crops amounted to Tk 6,968.95 crore.

Because of these losses, experts fear that the government's crop production target for this year may not be achieved, which only means further risks to our food security. The question is, how do we minimise the impact of extreme weather events on our agricultural production and food supplies? Given the current trend of climate change, these events will likely grow in number and frequency in the coming years, so the government must plan accordingly. True, Bangladesh has decades of experience in dealing with natural disasters, but we must align our disaster response with our agricultural goals to ensure that our food security is not threatened under any circumstances.

Experts have recommended various measures that can help us—and our farmers—which deserve careful consideration. For example, they have urged the government to consider reducing import duties on essential agricultural commodities, including farm inputs. Ensuring uninterrupted access to agricultural loans, seeds, and fertilisers for farmers is crucial as they are at the centre of our food security. We also should adopt more resilient crop varieties that can withstand extreme weather, and enhance our early warning system. These are just some of the measures that can be taken considering the gravity of the challenge facing us.

## Create opportunities for educated youth

Education and private-sector reforms vital to address job crisis

The World Bank's latest report on Bangladesh draws a grim picture of the country's employment scenario, especially among the tertiary-educated youth. It shows that the unemployment rate has tripled among graduates in the last nine years. Moreover, job losses and wage cuts may push nearly 12 lakh people below the poverty line this year.

The report points to the lack of job creation in the formal private sector as a major reason for joblessness among the educated youth. Even the readymade garment sector—which generates nearly half of the country's total firm revenues—provides only 1 out of every 12 formal private sector jobs. While employment stagnation in large industries is a crucial factor, many employers also do not find the skills they look for among the graduates. Unfortunately, we have not seen any significant shift in our education policy to produce graduates with up-to-date and industry-specific skills. Over the years, private and public tertiary educational institutions have mushroomed without much thought as to the demands of the local and global industries.

Obtaining a tertiary-level degree remains largely a path to social status, rather than one to help in a specific career. There is also little encouragement for the educated youth to become entrepreneurs. Too many bureaucratic obstacles, combined with financial constraints, corruption, nepotism, and political instability, are also discouraging entrepreneurial pursuits. These also prevent small and medium enterprises from expanding and creating lucrative job opportunities for the educated youth. The employment situation is even worse for female graduates, as per the WB report. It is, therefore, not a surprise that a large section of graduates look for government jobs that offer better security and benefits.

Unfortunately, government jobs absorb only less than five percent of the total workforce, and as such, cannot be the solution for our unemployment crisis. We have recently written about this issue while discussing the recommendation to increase the entry age limit for jobs in the public sector. While this may address some concerns among the educated youth, providing them with upskilling opportunities in collaboration with industries would be the better way to tackle the perennial unemployment problem. In the long run, the objective should be to initiate reforms that lead to job creation in the private sector, encourage entrepreneurship, and restructure the education system to better prepare graduates and align their skills with the demands of employers.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Benazir Bhutto returns from exile

On this day in 2007, after eight years of self-imposed exile, Benazir Bhutto—who, as two-time prime minister of Pakistan, was the first woman leader of a Muslim nation in modern history—returned to her home country, and hours later she was nearly killed when her motorcade was bombed in Karachi; she was assassinated in December.

# EDITORIAL

## INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE ERADICATION OF POVERTY

# Poverty reduction requires long-term solutions



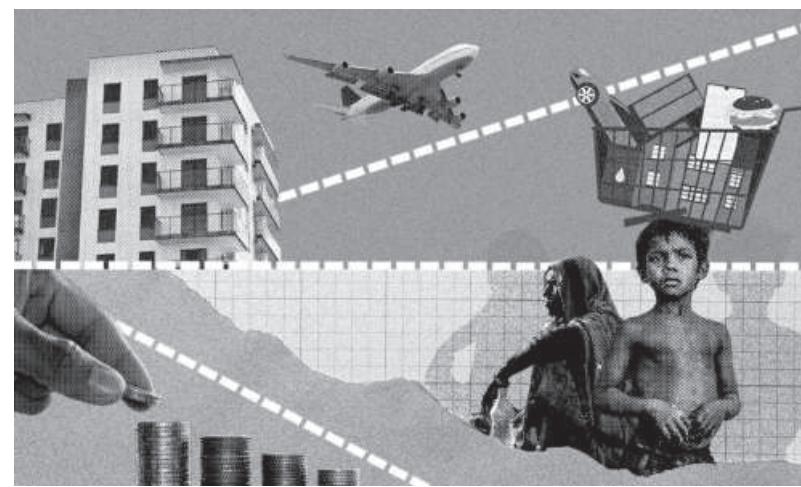
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Events like the Covid pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war are completely unexpected for developing economies like ours, and we are not prepared for such events in advance. As a result, these occurrences affect the economy in various ways, which leads to a risk of more people falling below the poverty line. Right after the Covid outbreak in 2020, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) put forward some assessments mentioning that poverty had risen. However, the latest Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES 2022) shows the proportion of the population below the poverty threshold to be 18.7 percent. At the time of the survey, the Russia-Ukraine war had just broken out. As it continued, it had an impact at the global level, which is why our import costs increased. Consequently, the availability and prices of essential food items, which are import-dependent, went up. That impact continued and resulted in high inflation, which reduced real income for people. So, it's not surprising that more people are at risk of falling below the poverty line.

We may not have the exact data on poverty right now, but it is likely increasing, and it is not unexpected. Over the past year, there has been persistent high inflation, limited job opportunities, slower growth in export-oriented industries and then, more recently, political instability. When we consider all these factors together, there is a significant risk of more people falling below the poverty line.

In terms of statistics, what we need is reliable data to understand whether more people have indeed fallen below the poverty line. The latest data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) is from 2022 and outdated; it shows that the proportion of population below the poverty line decreased to 18.7 percent (roughly 32 lakh) from 24.3 percent in 2016, which was an improvement. We know that the previous government tried to expand the coverage of social safety net programmes (SSNPs), despite some shortcomings and weaknesses.



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

At least there has been a gradual expansion in areas like food aid, financial support, and increased work opportunities. Per the HIES 2022, about 37.6 percent of the population under the poverty line benefited from the SSNPs. So, that was a significant achievement during that time.

However, there were also complaints that many people who did not actually qualify for SSNPs were included due to their political connections while some eligible individuals were left out.

Our own research showed that about one-third of the population enrolled in SSNPs weren't eligible, but they were included due to political favour or connection to the local ruling party leaders and administration. So, as poverty rises, expanding the social safety nets could be an initial step. But we also must remember that poverty has various dimensions and characteristics, so the same strategy may not work everywhere. For instance, poverty rates are higher in three particular regions—Barishal, Mymensingh and Rangpur—compared to the national average of 18.7 percent. In Barishal, it's nearly 26.9 percent, in Mymensingh 24.2 percent, and in Rangpur 24.7 percent. These poverty pockets need to be specifically addressed. Instead of distributing aid

Providing one-time food aid is not enough for them; they need something more sustainable, such as job-related training or skills education, so they can access work opportunities throughout the year. Younger individuals, particularly those aged between 15 and 30 years, are also more likely to be poor because they lack experience, skills and market networks. Therefore, it's important to create work opportunities for this group and help them avoid unemployment.

In addition, there are various minority communities, vulnerable groups and people with disabilities who face societal discrimination and mistreatment, which also increases their risk of falling into poverty. Targeted initiatives for these groups are necessary as it is difficult to reach these populations solely through general SSNPs like financial aid or food support.

Our previous research showed that even the allocations for these target populations were often insufficient, which means they receive only small amounts that don't meet their needs. If we truly want to sustainably lift them out of poverty, we need to provide them with access to employment, training and other such opportunities, while addressing the mistreatment they face

in areas like education and healthcare. These systematic, long-term strategies should guide us in reducing poverty over time.

In terms of immediate relief, the government is already working within the existing structure, offering food assistance or employment programmes. The government has around 142 SSNPs, such as benefits for disabled individuals, lactating mothers, freedom fighters, and the elderly. However, these programmes have two major weaknesses: their coverage is limited, and the financial support provided is very small. For example, some programmes offer only Tk 500-600 per month, but if the price of rice is Tk 60 per kg, Tk 600 would only buy 10 kg of rice. For a family of four that consumes two kg per day, this rice would last just five days. This equation shows how inadequate the assistance is.

If the government wants to act immediately, they could expand the coverage and increase the allocations within the existing programmes, focusing on specific target populations like those in certain geographic areas or sectors of employment, such as agriculture or transport workers, where poverty rates are higher. However, the government faces a challenge because financial resources are limited and the food reserves are relatively low.

One strategy can be to reduce leakage in these programmes. A recent study showed that about 30 percent of resources allocated to social safety nets are lost due to inefficiencies or corruption. If this leakage can be addressed, these resources could be redistributed to reach more people.

Governments often tend to focus on immediate needs, which is understandable, but we also need to ensure that long-term poverty reduction efforts are being developed parallelly. This should be a priority for the government, and even interim or caretaker governments must keep long-term plans in mind while addressing immediate needs.

I hope that the committees currently working on poverty alleviation will provide guidance to the government on both short-term and long-term strategies. There is also a talk of wage policies and future planning, and the government is considering taking action in these areas. The committees working on these issues should incorporate both short-term relief and long-term solutions into their recommendations.

## To achieve progress, we need bureaucracy-academia synergy



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Sound partnership between bureaucracy and academia is essential for establishing a strong governance framework. Bureaucracy, frequently regarded as the driving force behind policy execution, provides practical administrative experience, while academia offers research-driven insights and innovative concepts. Enhancing this partnership is crucial for fostering informed decision-making, effective policy execution, and comprehensive national advancement.

Bureaucrats are tasked with the implementation of laws, formulation of policies, management of public services, and supervision of national development initiatives. They act as intermediaries between political authorities and the citizenry, ensuring that government efforts yield concrete results. However, bureaucratic bodies often encounter obstacles such as a lack of innovation and limited exposure to contemporary research and global best practices.

On the other hand, academia is pivotal in knowledge creation, research activities, and supplying the intellectual resources essential for national development. Grounded in evidence-based research, academic institutions can provide fresh viewpoints on governance. The advantages of bureaucracy-academia collaboration warrant discussion. A primary benefit of this partnership is the enhancement of policymaking through informed

and evidence-based approaches. Bureaucrats, who frequently depend on anecdotal evidence or political mandates, stand to gain significantly from the data, analyses, and research produced by academics. Conversely, academics can acquire valuable insights into the operational challenges and limitations encountered by bureaucratic entities, resulting in research that is more grounded in reality. Free from the daily operational pressures of governance, academics are positioned to think creatively and propose innovative solutions to national challenges. Bureaucrats can then tailor these innovations to fit local contexts, ensuring their practicality and feasibility.

In Bangladesh, while the benefits of collaboration between bureaucracy and academia are clear, several obstacles have emerged as well. There is a notable absence of formal mechanisms that promote consistent engagement between bureaucrats and academics. Often, any collaborative efforts that do take place are irregular and unstructured, which diminishes their overall impact. Importantly, the academic community in Bangladesh, similar to many other nations, tends to be detached from practical issues. Researchers may engage in theoretical inquiries that don't necessarily yield practical solutions for policymakers. Concurrently, bureaucratic entities frequently function within a closed

framework, where hierarchical systems and strict protocols restrict outside engagement. Additionally, academics typically adopt a long-term perspective, concentrating on systemic challenges, whereas bureaucrats are often motivated by immediate objectives, such as executing the current government's policies. This disparity can also obstruct effective collaboration.

Global evidence underscores the necessity for such partnerships. For example, in the United States, the collaboration between government and academia has a rich history, particularly through think tanks like the Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, and the Heritage Foundation. These organisations serve as intermediaries, offering research-driven policy recommendations that connect academic insights with bureaucratic needs.

For example, the RAND Corporation has significantly shaped US policies in areas such as defence, education, health and labour through its data-driven research and analysis. South Korea, too, exemplifies a successful model of governance and economic advancement that is closely linked to institutional collaboration between bureaucracy and academia. The Korea Development Institute (KDI) stands out as a key institution, established to deliver research-informed guidance to the government on critical issues including economic growth, industrialisation and educational reform.

Drawing from global experiences and local contexts, we can formulate specific strategies. Bangladesh might consider establishing formal channels for continuous dialogue between bureaucracy and academia. This could take the shape of joint committees, policy think tanks or task forces that unite both sectors to address particular national issues. Additionally,

the creation of independent or semi-autonomous research institutions that act as intermediaries between academia and bureaucracy could facilitate ongoing collaboration. Such think tanks would provide evidence-based recommendations for policymaking while maintaining political impartiality. Moreover, the establishment of dedicated policy research units within bureaucratic agencies would further institutionalise the partnership with academia. The existing Reform Management and Policy Research Unit of the government should be effectively implemented across all ministries, receiving the necessary attention it deserves.

The government has the opportunity to finance collaborative research projects that unite bureaucratic institutions and universities. Such projects would promote teamwork on critical national issues. Establishing knowledge hubs or centres of excellence where academic and bureaucratic entities work together on research, policy formulation and innovation would also cultivate a spirit of partnership. These centres could act as venues for policy discussions, joint research efforts, and the sharing of knowledge. Furthermore, government agencies and funding organisations could motivate academic researchers to engage in policy-relevant studies by providing grants, accolades, and recognition for research that aids national development.

In Bangladesh, the synergy between bureaucracy and academia holds significant promise for advancing national progress. By leveraging the unique strengths of both sectors, the nation can formulate more effective policies and stimulate innovation. Enhancing this collaboration will not only improve governance quality but also support sustainable national development in Bangladesh.

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