

Save Chattogram hills from destruction

Reports indicate widespread damage over the decades

We are concerned about the ongoing trend of hill cutting in Chattogram which has persisted despite the political changeover in the country. Recent findings in this regard paint a troubling picture—with one report saying that the port city has lost 120 hills over the past 40 years. Another report claims that only about 80 of the 200 hills the city once had remain, with at least 30 real estate projects having contributed to hill flattening over the last five decades. While data on hills can be sketchy at times, available studies clearly indicate widespread destruction in the name of constructing residential colonies, commercial ventures, and road infrastructure, largely due to poor oversight by the authorities.

During a recent visit to Chattogram, a correspondent for this daily documented the extent of damage in areas such as Khulshi, Akbar Shah, and Bayezid Bostami, where hills were levelled for multiple housing projects. Locals revealed that plot owners often erect walls first to dodge scrutiny. Although Department of Environment (DoE) officials claim to take action after receiving complaints—including filing 34 cases against violators in the past two years—the scale of destruction suggests that such actions are neither sufficient nor timely enough to deter further violations. Developers continue to operate with impunity, exploiting legal loopholes and weak enforcement of environmental laws. As a result, the city's hills and green spaces have diminished sharply, while landslide and waterlogging risks have escalated.

Under the Environment Conservation Act 1995, razing hills without permission from the DoE is a punishable offence. Permission should also be obtained from the Chattogram Development Authority (CDA). Authorisation or lack thereof is not the only issue here, however. According to a CDA official cited by *Desh Rupantor*, while there is no outright prohibition on building in hilly areas, construction requires caution due to the region's topography. The hills in Chattogram are primarily composed of sandy soil, which is prone to erosion, especially during heavy rainfall. This geological feature makes the hills particularly vulnerable to destruction when cut or disturbed.

Clearly, there must be stricter and more specific guidelines for construction in these hilly areas, and they must be effectively enforced. Over the years, enforcement has been hindered by corruption and political influences, issues that should be easier to address under the interim administration. Experts say that if the current trend of hill cutting continues, Chattogram's remaining hills could be halved by 2035. The authorities, therefore, must take stronger measures to prevent further damage. Otherwise, the region's ecological balance will be irreparably harmed, increasing the frequency and severity of landslides and flooding.

Address the causes of internal migration

We need solutions for a more balanced future

It is concerning that approximately 71 percent of internal migrant workers in Bangladesh move due to livelihood challenges or a lack of job opportunities. According to a recent survey, around 69 percent of internal migration is further driven by low wages. This underscores the persistent lack of opportunities in certain regions of the country. Internal migration also imposes significant costs both on those being compelled to move and on the areas they are migrating to.

The survey, which included 2,505 individuals across 10 districts (five source districts and five destination districts), also found that around 48 percent of internal migrants are motivated by the prospect of better healthcare when choosing a destination, while 85 percent seek higher wages. Naturally, this drives many towards Dhaka—and occasionally a few other major cities—resulting in overpopulation and straining the city's ability to provide basic services for such a large population.

Additionally, the survey revealed that climate change affects 55 percent of migrants from source districts. To cope with extreme weather, over 30 percent of migrants from these areas rely on their savings, further pushing them down the economic ladder. As witnessed during recent floods, thousands of families lost their homes and livelihoods, with their cattle or farmland either washed away or damaged. With extreme weather patterns becoming more frequent, such struggles are increasingly affecting a larger number of people, especially those who are already vulnerable.

The opportunity gap between rural and urban populations in Bangladesh is significant and well-documented. Numerous development agencies, including the UNDP, have identified various factors contributing to this divide, such as over-centralisation, poor infrastructure and communication networks, and the impacts of climate change. According to a 2018 report by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), one of the primary drivers of migration is economic necessity. Since most migrants come from agriculture and fisheries backgrounds, they often find themselves seeking opportunities on the margins of the urban economy. Lacking the necessary training or skills for formal sector jobs, many face limited chances of escaping the poverty cycle.

It is high time the government developed a comprehensive strategy to address internal migration. It should focus on developing underprivileged regions, ensuring better economic opportunities for residents, and reducing the need for migration. Additionally, it must work to mitigate the impacts of climate change in vulnerable areas so that affected populations can better withstand extreme weather events. Introducing a Universal Basic Income scheme for vulnerable populations and expanding social safety net programmes could also provide crucial support.



CPD'S 30-YEAR JOURNEY

A testament to growth and resilience

MACRO MIRROR

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The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has completed an exciting journey spanning over three decades. In 1993, Prof Rehman Sobhan, an eminent economist and civil society leader in Bangladesh, took the initiative to establish the centre in response to the growing need of the country's civil society for a platform of its own after democracy returned in the early 1990s. It was a period when important policy reforms were being pursued in Bangladesh.

Prof Sobhan invited several eminent personalities to join CPD's board as distinguished members. It has been fortunate to have on its board globally acclaimed personalities and social entrepreneurs, such as the late Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC, and Nobel Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank.

At the time it was established, CPD's board members perceived that it would contribute to strengthening the country's democratisation process by promoting a demand-driven developmental agenda and facilitating a process whereby stakeholders would have a say in the design, implementation and monitoring of developmental policies. CPD's journey in a country with limited space for independent voices offers ample experiences and lessons that can guide the think tank landscape in Bangladesh and other developing countries.

Demand-driven and policy-relevant research

CPD's overarching objective is to contribute to good governance by promoting accountability and transparency and ensuring equitable development. Towards that, the think tank makes significant strides in ensuring high-quality research, capacity development of researchers, institutional sustainability, and smooth leadership transition. During the initial years, e.g. 1993-94, CPD's activities included mainly organising dialogues and discussions on macroeconomic management, governance, and donor-recipient relationships. However, the need to incorporate research was recognised early on, both as input to and outcome of the dialogue process, ensuring that research themes are identified based on felt needs.

It is at this time that the proposal for CPD's flagship research programme, the Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD), was developed as a study to provide home-grown development alternatives to the government and donors. With the first IRBD completed in May 1995, CPD

developed a tradition of preparing its own research proposals in areas that were perceived to be important from a national perspective, and where it had the relevant competencies. Its research programme covers a wide range of issues, including governance, economic reforms, environmental sustainability, energy, women's empowerment, social development, the SDGs, trade, and the financial sector.

Dialogues for constructive policy engagement

At the core of CPD's activities lies its dialogue programme. It designs



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

the dialogues in a manner that is not just a mere exchange of rhetoric and opinion but also promotes and stimulates constructive engagement and informed sharing of views. The dialogues are designed to come up with specific recommendations in terms of both redefining the policies and ensuring their effective implementation. These recommendations are then placed before the country's current and prospective policymakers as inputs to the policymaking process.

CPD brings together high government officials, senior agency executives, members of parliament (MPs), the business community, professionals, academics, non-government organisation (NGO) activists, and development partners to discuss specific policy issues in which they have relevant expertise. CPD dialogues also engage public interest groups such as trade unions, workers' and women's organisations, professional associations, and local community groups. Through these dialogues, policymakers and academics can engage directly

with those who experience the real consequences of policies and may have valuable ideas and concerns about the validity of such policies.

Non-partisan stance, engagement with diverse stakeholders

Because of the importance of bringing together political parties to promote a consultative process for designing the reform activity, it is CPD's policy to be non-partisan in its outlook and to retain independence in designing its dialogues. Such a stance has enabled this organisation to bring together cabinet ministers and opposition leaders around the same table, even at times when the contending parties were not communicating with each other in parliament.

Thus, CPD dialogues are held in an environment where controversial issues may be discussed in a non-confrontational manner, and constructive solutions can be jointly explored. These initiatives have extended over several successive political regimes. Indeed, CPD can be credited for playing an important



FILE VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

role in creating the tradition of multi-stakeholder consultations in Bangladesh.

Professional excellence and independence

CPD faces several challenges since it sees itself not just as a research institution but also as a think tank engaged in policy activism. Whenever it undertakes an assessment, including projections on GDP growth and assessment of other economic indicators, it has been exposed to criticism, particularly from government policymakers, who are not happy when their policies and policy outcomes are scrutinised. CPD also faced criticism from the private sector when it released its research findings, for example, on the banking sector crisis or living wages for the workers of the ready-made garment (RMG) sector. However, CPD has been able to withstand this because its research is evidence-based and analytically sound.

Broader alliances are critical

CPD's independent position created challenges in implementing its activities as it did for many NGOs

and civil society organisations (CSOs) during the previous regime. Indeed, political polarisation in Bangladesh has significantly impacted the regulatory environment for NGOs and CSOs. Over the past decades, the country has witnessed a decline in policymakers' tolerance of objective criticism, leading to the use of new laws as a censorship tool. The remit of the NGO Affairs Bureau, the institution that regulates NGO activities, has been strengthened, posing challenges for NGOs and CSOs.

While the vigilance of regulatory bodies is crucial for ensuring transparency and accountability of NGO and CSO activities, the bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining clearance certificates often lead to delays. These regulations were often politically motivated to undermine specific organisations, creating an environment that hinders the development of a culture of free thinking and free academic practices. This underscores the need for streamlined processes and efficient governance. CPD has been engaged with like-minded CSOs in discussing these issues with policymakers, though it seems difficult to convince the regulatory bodies as they were politicised by the previous government.

CPD will continue to articulate people's concerns

CPD is a think tank deeply invested in Bangladesh's future. Therefore, for more than 15 years, it has been vocal in identifying the inherent weaknesses of the growth model pursued by the previous autocratic government of the Awami League. Following the ousting of the autocratic government on August 5, 2024 by a student-led mass uprising, the interim government led by Prof Yunus is pursuing the difficult task of improving Bangladesh's macroeconomic stability by reinstating discipline and raising efficiency in economic management. In addition to addressing the immediate issues, the government will have to work in several areas, such as improving the competitiveness of the economy, enhancing productivity, developing sustainable infrastructure, participating in regional and global value chains, addressing climate change challenges, and mitigating economic and social inequalities in the short to medium terms.

CPD has flagged these issues and articulated concerns over Bangladesh's deteriorating socioeconomic situation, while the previous fascist government presented the false narrative of growth. CPD has always suggested reforms since economic vulnerabilities have been visible through the poor performance of all important sectors as well as increasing inequality due to a lack of good governance, accountability, transparency, and the rule of law. By remaining true to its mission, CPD will continue to contribute to the country's institutional and policy reform efforts in establishing an equitable and just society.

Let the textile tussle begin

RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN



The return of Donald Trump to power in the United States and the likelihood of increased tariffs on Chinese imports, including textiles, could shift the trade dynamics between these two economic giants dramatically.

If Bangladesh plays its cards right, it could emerge as a key beneficiary of this geopolitical shift, solidifying its position in the global garment trade and significantly boosting its presence in the US market.

If Trump raises tariffs on Chinese textiles, US buyers potentially will seek other sources to maintain profitability. Historically, countries like Vietnam, India, and Bangladesh have been the go-to alternatives. However, I believe, Bangladesh has a unique edge. Vietnam is experiencing rising labour costs, and India faces inefficiencies in its garment sector, leaving Bangladesh as one of the most viable options for US retailers. The US is already one of the largest markets for Bangladeshi garments, with imports reaching nearly \$10 billion in 2024. If Chinese garments become less cost-competitive, this figure could grow significantly as new buyers enter the

market and existing ones increase their orders.

Moreover, I think this shift could, and should, encourage Bangladesh to expand its product range. Traditionally focused on basic apparel like T-shirts and sweaters, the industry could now branch out into higher-value items such as sportswear, outerwear, and technical textiles, opening new revenue streams. A surge in demand for Bangladeshi garments would likely lead to job creation, benefitting millions of workers and their families. The ripple effects could extend to sectors like logistics, packaging, and transportation, contributing to overall GDP growth. However, seizing this opportunity will require Bangladesh to address several critical challenges.

First and foremost, I think Bangladesh must tackle its infrastructure issues. Delays caused by inefficiencies at ports, outdated road networks, and congested transport systems could undermine our ability to meet the demands of international buyers. Improving infrastructure should be a top priority

for both the government and private sector. Buyers in the US are unlikely to tolerate shipment delays, especially when alternative suppliers might be more reliable.

In today's global market, buyers care deeply about ethical practices and environmental responsibility. US retailers will be paying close attention to labour standards and factory conditions, and in my view, Bangladesh must ensure it is meeting these expectations to avoid reputational risks and maintain its competitive edge. Additionally, adopting sustainable practices is equally important. Buyers are increasingly drawn to suppliers that use renewable energy and other sustainable factory practices, and Bangladesh could cement its reputation by investing in green technologies. But government policies and investments play a crucial role in this process.

Another issue is our industry's heavy reliance on imported raw materials. Despite our strength in garment production, Bangladesh imports much of its textiles, particularly cotton and synthetic fabrics. This dependency increases costs and lengthens production timelines. I think investing in domestic textile manufacturing could be a game-changer, enabling our industry to reduce costs and improve efficiency while becoming more self-sufficient.

Diversification is another critical step. By moving into higher-value products and niche markets,

Bangladesh can increase its revenue and reduce dependence on low-margin items. Additionally, I think proactive trade negotiations with the US will be vital. Securing favourable terms could make Bangladesh an even more attractive sourcing destination for American retailers.

That said, I recognise that Bangladesh isn't the only country with its eyes on this opportunity. Competitors like Vietnam, Indonesia, and even Mexico are also well-positioned to attract buyers seeking alternatives to China. In my opinion, Bangladesh must differentiate itself by emphasising its ability to deliver quality products at competitive prices while ensuring reliability and sustainability.

While we do not yet know what Trump will do—there is talk of a 10 percent tariff on all imports from China—this moment represents a pivotal opportunity for Bangladesh. If managed wisely, the benefits could extend far beyond the garment industry. Increased export earnings could fuel investments in other sectors, such as home textiles and accessories, creating a more diverse economic base.

A potential shift in US-China trade relations is a rare chance for Bangladesh to take a giant leap forward in the global garment trade. With careful planning, strategic investments, and a commitment to addressing its challenges, Bangladesh can position itself as a key player in the US market and beyond.