The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Time to reform social safety net schemes

Task force report highlights barriers to poverty alleviation

We are not surprised by the findings of a government task force that has revealed significant shortcomings in the social safety net programmes. These challenges—including misallocations, beneficiary inclusion errors, inadequate provisions, poor programme design, and the absence of robust income support measures—have long served as barriers to achieving their core objective of addressing poverty. The task force's report, submitted last week, sheds light on these issues in considerable detail. Using the 2022 Household Income and Expenditure Survey, it estimates that between 2010 and 2022, social safety net programmes contributed to reducing extreme poverty by only 0.6 percentage points, and moderate poverty by only 0.8 percentage points.

It goes without saying that these outcomes could be improved significantly if the structural problems were resolved, despite resource constraints. Currently, 53.9 percent of the poor and vulnerable families are excluded from social protection programmes, mainly because of inclusion errors. On the contrary, 62 percent of non-poor households receive some form of benefit. Ensuring that the funds reach only the vulnerable and deserving families should have been a top priority, yet successive governments have failed to address it. Corruption by officials and local elected representatives who are in charge of enlisting beneficiaries is not the only factor here—the very manner in which this is one is also problematic.

There are also too many unrelated, often overlapping, schemes that not only inflate the budget but also limit their transformative potential. For example, we have repeatedly questioned the logic of including schemes such as pensions for government employees, subsidies, or interest payments on national savings certificates within the social safety net. The extent of this misallocation or rather manipulation can be understood from the fact that of the six largest schemes by budget allocation, only one—for old-age allowance—can be considered a genuine social protection measure. It is no wonder that while, on paper, social protection spending in FY 2024-25 accounts for 2.5 percent of GDP and 17 percent of national budget, it drops to only 1.2 percent and 7 percent, respectively, when schemes linked with pensions and subsidies are excluded.

These issues not only affect the number of potential beneficiaries but also the size of benefits received. The task force's report also talks about the fact that there has been virtually no progress in introducing interventions based on social insurance principles (such as unemployment insurance), while the capacities of different ministries and departments remain grossly inadequate, with persistent dependence on development partners. The lack of income support measures means that the beneficiaries remain trapped in the cycle of poverty, and in need of continued support, which is the opposite of what such measures should be aiming for.

These issues and inadequacies should be addressed urgently if the social safety net is to deliver its promised outcomes. The interim government is in a unique position to reform the whole structure and ensure that the poor are not only properly identified and supported but also given the means to be self-reliant over time.

Saving rivers is our duty

Outcome of govt actions must be more visible

It is hardly surprising that pollution sources around Dhaka's rivers have nearly doubled over the last five years, given the unchecked degradation of rivers and other waterbodies in the country. Industrial units, government agencies, and private individuals have all contributed equally and untiringly to poisoning the waters of Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakhya, Balu, Karnatali, and Dhaleswari rivers—Dhaka's lifelines for centuries. Despite repeated calls to save them, successive governments have failed to take effective measures to prevent pollution or hold the polluters and encroachers accountable, emboldening them further.

As a result, according to a recent River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC) study, the number of pollution sources—industries, kitchen markets, dockyards, municipal sewerage lines, private sewerage outlets, and waste dumping stations—has surged from 608 to 1,024 in just five years. Even sluice gates and service canals are contaminating major rivers like Buriganga and Shitalakhya by channelling pollutants directly into them. All this means that the Tk 1,000 crore spent by the previous government on projects to protect Dhaka's rivers literally went down the drain. Evidently, corruption and political favouritism compromised its commitment to saving rivers.

The interim government, free from such biases and with environment activist Syeda Rizwana Hasan in its ranks, is expected to show greater dedication to protecting rivers and the environment. However, while efforts to restore 19 canals across Dhaka have recently begun, actions against major river polluters and encroachers have remained inadequate. No one expects the government to solve the deep-rooted issues involved with river protection overnight, but its measures must be more visible, especially against key offenders, to deter others.

Additionally, the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) must be reactivated and empowered without any further delay. It is baffling that this vital agency is still operating with minimal staff months after the interim government revoked its chairman's appointment. Further delays in making it functional will only worsen pollution and allow more rivers to fall to encroachers. Ultimately, saving our rivers is a collective responsibility. While the government must act decisively, citizens, too, must refrain from polluting activities. Our rivers are essential for our survival—we all must do the best we can to protect them.

Our development model is poisoning Dhaka

Anu Muhammad
is a former professor of economics from Jahangirnagar University.

ANU MUHAMMAD

After the fall of a deeply corrupt and irresponsible government through a mass uprising, we believed that many things would improve. But our hopes have been shattered. One of our most critical concerns is related to survival—our ability to simply breathe and live.

Dhaka's air pollution remains among the worst in the world. The city continues to hold the infamous record of having the most hazardous air globally. When the Air Quality Index (AQI) exceeds 300, the air is classified as "extremely dangerous." In some areas of Dhaka, AQI has surpassed 400, even approaching 500. Even on Sunday morning, Dhaka had the worst air in the world. At such levels, the concentration of harmful particulate matter in the air makes it dangerous for humans. The situation is dire, particularly for children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing health conditions. The rate at which cases of respiratory diseases, neurological disorders, fever, cough, and lung infections are rising is alarming.

Despite these circumstances, we have not seen the government take meaningful steps to address the crisis. The situation has deteriorated to the point where people are forced to organise movements simply to protect open, green spaces like Bahadur Shah Park, Tetultola playground, Panthakunja Park, and Khilgaon playground in Dhaka, as well as in other cities. The previous government showed complete negligence to these issues, and we had hoped that the new interim government would be more responsive. However, this has not been the case.

For instance, the Panthakunja Park, which used to be a small open space with some trees, has been taken over for the construction of a ramp of the Dhaka Elevated Expressway. To prevent this, some young activists have been protesting on site for more than 50 days, and concerned citizens have expressed solidarity with them, yet the government has not responded positively. Instead, officials claim that these projects cannot be cancelled or revised. However, the ramp being built in Panthakunja was not a part of the original plan. It was introduced later to benefit certain private companies seeking to maximise their profits. An article by Kallol Mustafa recently published in this daily has detailed how such projects are often linked to private interests rather than genuine public needs.

There have been numerous proposals and projects to protect Dhaka's environment, including efforts to clean up the Buriganga River and other nearby rivers, to clean up the city's air. Loans worth hundreds of crores of taka have been organised from the World Bank and other lenders in the name of the environment's improvement. Yet, there are no visible results. Where has this money gone? Many argue that protecting the environment requires significant financial investment, but this is incorrect. Environmental protection does not require excessive funds, rather it requires stopping disastrous spending. In fact, unnecessary investments and projects that serve private interests are actively destroying the environment.

People are being forced to organise movements to protect what's left of open, green spaces like Panthakunja Park. FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

One of the primary causes of environmental degradation in Dhaka is unregulated construction. Without proper planning or assessment of long-term consequences, construction activities are going on unchecked. The construction sector now accounts for around eight percent of Bangladesh's GDP (2021). To maintain this economic growth, open spaces are being filled in, parks are being encroached upon, and land is being leased for commercial purposes. Even historic places like Bahadur Shah Park are being leased out for commercial purposes.

The fundamental issue here is that no serious effort is being put into reducing air pollution in Dhaka. Many of the environmental projects funded by international funding agencies such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) have ironically contributed to its destruction instead. For example, under the guise of "social forestry" projects, natural forests in Bangladesh at various locations have been destroyed and replaced with commercial plantations of eucalyptus and acacia, which have had a devastating ecological impact. The destruction of the Chakaria Sundarbans is a prime example of that. In the name of energy development, Bangladesh has also built multiple coal-fired power plants, significantly increasing air pollution. While projects aimed at reducing pollution exist, the primary beneficiaries are consultants, bureaucrats who enjoy foreign trips, and individuals engaged in import-dependent activities.

Among other major causes for pollution are brick kilns, deforestation and river encroachments. Addressing these issues does not require massive financial investments; rather, it demands proper planning and decisive government action. Recently, the government attempted to ban polythene bags, but it was ineffective. One of the key reasons was the significant financial investment and employment tied to the polythene industry. Transitioning away from polythene to natural fibre-based alternatives requires a well-planned approach, including consultation with industry stakeholders and ensuring the availability of viable substitutes. But instead of implementing a structured transition plan, the government simply issued a top-down directive, which predictably failed.

Bangladesh has no shortage of natural fibres, and we could have developed a thriving industry around environment-friendly products to replace polythene. Unfortunately, there has been no development in the jute industry. Loans from the World Bank, rather than promoting jute-based alternatives, contributed to the industry's decline. Meanwhile, because of indiscriminate use of cheap polythene, Dhaka's drainage system remains clogged, leading to severe waterlogging and further river pollution.

Dhaka could have been a much healthier city. Surrounded by rivers, it had the potential to be an environmentally sustainable urban area. If its rivers had been preserved, its open spaces protected, and large-scale afforestation efforts undertaken, the city's air quality would have significantly improved. Adequate greenery—fruit-bearing trees, flowering plants, and natural forests—could have dramatically reduced disease rates and provided a much healthier living environment.

Instead, Dhaka is surrounded by countless brick kilns, despite repeated discussions about their harmful impact. Most of these kilns operate illegally. They must be shut down, and viable alternatives to bricks must be introduced.

If immediate steps are not taken, Dhaka will fully transform into a city of sick people. We are already witnessing a sharp increase in illnesses, and this will only worsen if urgent measures are not implemented. There are no playgrounds for children, no open spaces where people can breathe fresh air, and the water we drink is contaminated. Citizens cannot even enjoy a clean and peaceful time by the river.

This extreme deprivation stems from the current development model, which prioritises profit maximisation for a select group over public welfare. Projects are designed to benefit certain influential groups through lobbying, while the common people—who bear the consequences—are entirely excluded from the decision-making process.

The present government frequently talks about reforms, but what kind of reforms are they referring to? Reform is not an abstract concept; it requires concrete actions. True reform should involve policies that protect Dhaka's residents and their right to a liveable city.

Civil service 2.0: A prototype for reform

Rassiq Aziz Kabir
is research associate at the Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

RASSIQ AZIZ KABIR

Civil service, inarguably, is one of the most, if not the most, lucrative career options in Bangladesh. The July uprising, which ultimately led to the ouster of the former regime, was initially triggered by the overturning of a Supreme Court order—which reinstated the farcical enactment of a disproportionate quota system in the civil service as well as other government jobs.

Although a lot can be said about the civil service obsession of the people in general, it is one of the guaranteed pathways towards upward mobility in Bangladesh, a country where socioeconomic advancement is quite restricted. However, the civil service of Bangladesh is in dire need of overhauling, not only in order to catch up with the international best practices but also for more efficiency and transparency.

The Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) stands on the framework of the Imperial Civil Service (ICS), the colonial service in British India, which later succeeded into the Central Superior Services (CSP) in Pakistan. The BCS currently has 26 cadres, with 14 general and 12 technical cadres. The exam system ensues a preliminary exam of MCQs, followed by a written exam and a viva voce. A lot of questions might be raised regarding the current stature of the evaluation process; however, the greater problem lies in the organisational and operational framework within the civil service as well as the unequal power dynamics.

The Indian Civil Service—with the administrative and police services wielding perhaps a similar influence in the power structure when compared to the Administration and Police Cadre of Bangladesh—is quite different due to the fact that the civil service has rather a federal outlook compared to the more centralised nature of the BCS. The Indian Civil Service is trifurcated into All India Services, which include the administrative, police, and forest services; the central service, which includes departments such as foreign service, revenue service, and so on; and the state service, which includes the state police, state forest service, and so on. There is a state-level provision as well, which, given India's vastness, is quite rational.

For Bangladesh, adopting a federal structure in the governance structure might be quite cumbersome at the beginning, but a more federal stature in the civil service might be a pathway to that—as it would not only decentralise the administration but also reduce the Dhaka dependence when it comes to streamlining bureaucratic as well as regulatory obstacles. Dividing Bangladesh into a few regions and later adopting a regional as well as a central tier in civil service would remove a lot of administrative inefficiencies. However, adopting such a system would automatically translate to the remodelling of the current one, which might place a financial strain.

The British Civil Service, the one on which the BCS was customised, is quite decentralised as well, which only reinstates the case for a more federalist structure in our civil service, albeit taking into account the unique complexities and challenges. The British Civil Service also has a comprehensive performance appraisal system on a yearly basis, along with a policy for managing poor performance that encompasses multiple warnings followed by a dismissal decision if those warnings are not heeded. In Bangladesh, although in theory, there is a performance appraisal system, there is a lack of efficiency and implementation of the system.

For Bangladesh, adopting a federal structure in the governance structure might be quite cumbersome at the beginning, but a more federal stature in the civil service might be a pathway to that—as it would not only decentralise the administration but also reduce the Dhaka dependence when it comes to streamlining bureaucratic as well as regulatory obstacles.

Bangladesh's civil service is notoriously analogue and looking at some global examples of countries with some similarities in the socioeconomic fabric, such as Rwanda and Kenya, Bangladesh effectively has to digitise the civil service. Rwanda has an integrated electronic case management system, and Kenya has an eCitizen portal, and both these systems are instrumental in addressing the woes of the citizens, which would be difficult to confront.

For some highly technical positions that require specific operational skill sets, Bangladesh can appoint civil technocrats on a contractual basis, a practice that has been in vogue in many developed countries, such as Singapore and France. Although this practice has been adopted in some instances in Bangladesh, it has often been criticised for nepotism and politicisation, which invalidated the real purpose of the practice. Hence, the adoption of the practice in future instances should be subject to more scrutiny.

However, there is a lot of scope to be optimistic. Following the July uprising, as like many other fields, the Public Administration Reform Commission has proposed that promotions to positions of deputy secretary and above, alongside other cadres beyond the Administration cadre, be determined through examinations. This proposal, aiming to ensure that at least 50 percent of these positions are held by other cadres, despite some criticisms, can be a welcome move in order to curb the inter-cadre power imbalance.

Post August 5, there is a new rejuvenation regarding the idea of reform, of which the civil service is a big part. However, modernising the civil service by incorporating the context-specific good practices across the world is a dire necessity of this time.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | **EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam** Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | **Registered & Head Offices:** The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | **Newsroom:** Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | **Advertisement:** 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | **Subscription:** 01711623906 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/