

We must do more to address inequalities

Findings of SDG Report 2025 paint a worrying picture

The findings of the recently unveiled National SDG Report 2025 highlight, once again, the deeply unequal nature of whatever progress Bangladesh has achieved over the years. According to a report based on the study, prepared by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs in collaboration with the government and the UNDP, a whopping 87.5 percent of the population—or 15 crore people—do not have access to all eight basic services, namely clean drinking water, basic education, sanitation facilities, hygiene facilities, clean fuel and technology, basic information services, basic mobility in rural and urban contexts, and basic waste collection services. This means that a vast majority of the citizens are facing persistent risks and hardships due to inadequate infrastructure and policy failures.

There are many other aspects related to these struggles. For instance, per the study, more than 26 percent of the population remains food insecure. Maternal and infant mortality rates remain high in a number of districts, while entrenched disparities persist between rural and urban areas, with the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and other poorer regions bearing the brunt. The picture is even grimmer for the most vulnerable segments of the population. Dalit and Adibashi communities, for instance, remain trapped in traditional, caste-determined occupations due to stigma and limited access to education and skills development. Approximately 8.9 percent of children are also engaged in economic work, with a third of them performing hazardous labour.

The report also highlights our fragile gains in poverty reduction, the persistent gender gap, and the disparities in education in terms of both access and quality. These findings are consistent with that of other recent studies and surveys that together paint a worrying picture of the ground realities facing poor and marginalised communities. It confirms that our development policies are not working as well as they should; instead, they are helping sustain inequalities year after year.

We must reverse this trend. First of all, our approach to governance must change. The authorities must prioritise inclusive development, rather than focusing on GDP figures that mask deeper inequalities. At the same time, political parties must play a greater role by integrating measurable SDG commitments in their manifestos and supporting programmes geared to that goal. We need tangible action for tangible outputs—proper data collection to list all vulnerable households, targeted policy interventions to address disparities, and increased investment in social infrastructure to increase access to essential services. Governance reforms are also crucial as corruption and inefficiency in public service delivery are directly linked to exacerbating inequalities. We must address all these interconnected issues for sustainable progress.

Exercise foresight in legal reforms

Quick fixes to laws on violence against women will achieve little

We agree with experts and rights activists that when it comes to legal reforms concerning sexual violence, the government should not yield to populist pressure. Quick fixes have little chances of success in preventing crimes against women and children. Even the introduction of the death penalty for rape in 2020 did not lead to a higher conviction rate; rather, it often delayed trials, according to experts. The Awami League government implemented the change when thousands took to the streets demanding justice for the gang rape of a woman in southern Bangladesh. In criminal cases, guilt must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. But when death penalty is the maximum sentence, the burden of proof becomes heavier, which in turn stalls the legal process.

What brings up this conversation is the fact that the interim government, in response to protests demanding justice for the rape and murder of an eight-year-old, recently set a 15-day deadline for rape investigations and a 90-day limit for trials. What made the government think that merely shortening the timeframe would yield better results when cases remain unresolved even within the current 180-day limit? As experts pointed out at an event on Wednesday, numerous other urgent reforms are needed in the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000. These include expanding the definition of rape to include all genders, an important change given recent incidents involving young boys and men. Then there is the issue of sexual consent and setting a specific age threshold for it. This is important for a country like ours where 51 percent of girls are married before their 18th birthday.

Experts have also called for broadening the legal interpretation of "penetration," determining fines based on the severity of a sexual offence, and establishing state-run compensation funds for victims. Ensuring victim and witness protection is another crucial area requiring government attention. So, instead of merely shortening the timeframe for investigations and trials, the government should focus on establishing proper facilities and recruiting trained personnel to improve the legal process. We hope the law adviser will consider expert recommendations and prioritise sound legal reforms over populist measures.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY



Arab League formed

On this day in 1945, representatives from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Yemen met in Cairo to establish the Arab League, a regional organisation of Arab states.

WORLD WATER DAY

New leadership, old rivers, and the long road to clean water



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Of the 200 crore people around the world who lack access to safe drinking water, seven crore live in Bangladesh. That's 3.5 percent of the global population. In real terms, it means two out of every five people in this country rely on contaminated water.

Sanitation doesn't look any better. Forty-one percent of the population still doesn't have access to improved or basic sanitation. That's around seven crore people deprived of a basic human need, and constantly exposed to diseases, because they either don't know better or simply don't have access to anything better.

So, when we look at SDG 6—access to clean water and sanitation for all—it's no surprise that Bangladesh is way off track. With just five years left before 2030, Bangladesh's SDG tracker shows that, out of eight targets and 11 indicators, we're only likely to meet one: Indicator 6.1.1, "Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services". That's under Target 6.1, which aims for universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all. Reality? Very different.

And I say "it's no surprise" because Bangladesh officially pledged to achieve the SDGs in 2015, when the UN member-states adopted the agenda. On paper, things looked okay. Rivers were declared as "living entities" (like in five other countries), monitoring bodies like the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) were set up to track river health, a cluster of regulatory bodies were formed, and even the former prime minister herself was put in charge of the National Water Resource Council. This council was supposed to meet annually, review reports, and coordinate action. Guess how many times they met? Zero.

As of 2022, if you went to the Ministry of Water Resources or the NRCC, you wouldn't find updated databases or credible reporting on river conditions. Even in 2025, we still don't know how many rivers are intact.

What we do know is that Sheikh Hasina's government turned the whole system into a playground for syndicates. I spent two years reporting on rivers, and I can tell you most of the big stories weren't about solutions.

They were about river dredging cartels selling sand to buyers with no names and no faces, pollution that no one was being held accountable for, floods, neglected communities, no awareness, no manpower, no drive to engage the people most affected—basically, the lack of everything.

Here's what surprised me, though. Usually, it's the people at the top eating the biggest slices of the cake. But when it came to looting public resources, the rot started from the bottom. Union parishad members, chairmen, and local muscle (many too dangerous to



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The cleanup efforts of rivers like the Buriganga need community involvement and innovative approaches. The photo was taken in March 2025.

name) were cashing in. During the dry season, they'd create land out of embankments, blocking river flow, messing with navigation, and flooding low-lying areas.

When I asked an NRCC official how often the ministries sit for meetings, he said, "Barely, but they do sit." I asked why the minutes weren't uploaded to the website, he pointed to a lack of manpower. Then he paused and asked if what he was saying would be published. After I assured him it wouldn't, he sighed in relief, "Because we can't disclose how things operate. Especially in light of recent events." That "recent event" was the sudden

removal of Dr Manjur Ahmed Chowdhury from his post as NRCC chairman. His termination came barely three weeks after he publicly criticised "a female minister from Chandpur." It was an unceremonious end to what was a brief but fierce tenure—one where, for once, someone dared to challenge powerful people for their alleged role in environmental damage. A rare exception in a long line of otherwise pliant former bureaucrats who usually lead these bodies.

The Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) official I spoke to carried the same weight of caution, careful with every word he said. But one thing stood out. The government only owned 15 dredgers, despite the ministry getting an annual budget in crores. Suddenly, it made sense why private companies get these dredging contracts, and then dredge wherever, however deep, for however long they please. No oversight. No accountability. No concern for

I'm personally excited for.

Back in September, she pledged to clean up eight rivers in eight districts. But on February 11, she announced that the government had initiated a working plan to clean four major rivers surrounding the capital: Buriganga, Turag, Balu, and Shitalakkhya. Just days earlier, on February 2, in a step towards restoring Dhaka's waterways, three advisers of the interim government inaugurated excavation work in six canals. The project aims to improve water flow, combat pollution, and reclaim the canals from decades of neglect. These are essential moves, both environmentally and urbanly.

Besides this, the initial work of the long-awaited Teesta River project has finally resumed, bringing renewed hope to the communities living along its banks. If implemented well, the project will curb bank erosion, reclaim land, and store floodwater for use during the dry season.

If one takes a closer look, they'll notice how each of these moves directly addresses the indicators of SDG 6. If given five more years, at this rate, the environment adviser might meet her original goal—maybe not just eight rivers, but more. Only time will tell.

The only qualm I have with the current efforts, and one that could perhaps accelerate river cleanups even further, is the lack of community involvement and innovative approaches. Recently, Bangladesh sought US assistance for the restoration of the Buriganga River. But what would help more is collaboration with independent organisations. For example, River Cleanup, a Belgium-based international non-profit, structures its work around the theory of change and actively involves local communities while building awareness of plastic pollution. Or take the Seabin, an innovation by an Australian start-up that helps collect garbage before it enters the ocean. These are short-term solutions, but effective. If innovation is truly sought, it will be found. And if help is asked for, it should be specific and directed at organisations that can help solve our river problems in tangible ways.

This is not to say that we are not moving in the right direction; we are. This is just to say that the movement can grow louder—from a cautious step to a collective roar, one where communities care for rivers again and become part of the change. If anything, I'm just glad that we've gone from having no meetings to finding meeting minutes available on ministry websites.

The times, they are a-changin'. Thank goodness.

Taming inflation in Bangladesh

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Spiralling prices not only dampen economic growth but also have deleterious effects on the consumption of low-income households. As prices increase, they must spend a larger proportion of their income and even cut down spending on day-to-day necessities. Persistent inflation can push more people into poverty and make those who are already poor even more vulnerable.

More than 18 percent of Bangladesh's population is below the national poverty line. According to the global rate for lower-middle-income countries, around 30 percent can be classified as poor. Many can find themselves crossing into poverty given a single shock. Inflation is such a shock, forcing poor people to cut their expenditures, including on food, health, and education.

Bangladesh has experienced high inflation since 2022. After hovering around 5.5 percent between 2016 and 2021, the inflation rate started rising sharply due to global supply shocks exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine and the surge in demand following the winding down of the COVID-related public health measures.

Bangladesh was not alone in seeing a price upsurge in 2022. Inflation spiked globally in both developed and developing countries. In developing countries, it rose from 7.2 percent (2021) to 9.8 percent (2022), while in high-income countries, inflation doubled

from 3.1 percent to 6.2 percent. While many countries were able to reverse this trend quickly, the upward pressure on prices continued in Bangladesh, peaking at 10.8 percent in December 2024.

The good news is that, lately, price hikes are slowing down. The inflation rate in February 2025 was 9.3 percent, lower than the December 2024 peak but still quite high. The battle, therefore, needs to continue and should be fought on multiple fronts to avoid a resurgence of double-digit inflation.

A multi-pronged response that addresses supply constraints alongside monetary and fiscal policy adjustments is needed to tame persistent inflation. Relying too much on monetary contraction will not suffice to combat escalating prices, driven partly by supply-related issues such as import tariffs, poor logistics, and market distortion. Several related factors can feed inflation. An increase in input costs can lead to higher prices of finished goods and services. Similarly, if the supply is constrained, prices tend to go up. Moreover, if an economy is growing fast, the so-called overheating can act as a pull factor for prices. A weaker national currency can also lead to inflation, especially when the country relies a lot on imports. Uncompetitive markets and poor logistics also can drive up prices.

To reduce the money supply, the Bangladesh Bank applied monetary

brakes more aggressively between October and December 2024 with a 1.5 percent increase in the policy rate. Before that, the policy rate was below the inflation rate. However, a restrictive monetary policy can discourage borrowing and investments. The business community in Bangladesh has already raised concerns about high interest rates.

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There is also the question of the transmission effect of money supply, which can, among others, depend on the size and depth of the financial sector. In many developing countries, the relationship between interest rates and inflation is less conspicuous. Besides supply-side inflation, a large informal economy, and a relatively smaller financial sector can limit the transmission of monetary policy.

As a recent UNDP paper on inflation shows, an expansionary monetary