

EDUCATION IN FY2026 BUDGET

Action fails to match rhetoric again



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MANZOOR AHMED

A nominal increase over the revised FY2024-25 allocation in the education budget has been proposed for FY2025-26, but it is nearly at an all-time low as a ratio of GDP. The specific allocations has proposed a continuation of past policies, many of which have not worked or have faced implementation challenges. The rhetoric about prioritising education—as under the past political governments—does not match the actions in the interim government’s budget proposal.

The Tk 95,644 crore budget proposed in FY26 for the three major administratively divided parts of education—primary and mass education, madrasa and technical education, and secondary and higher education—marks an increase over the Tk 84,311 crore in the revised FY25 budget. The new allocation amounts to 1.72 percent of GDP and 12.1 percent of the national budget, compared to the recommended UNESCO benchmark of four to six percent of GDP and 20 percent of the national budget, depending on a country’s public expenditure structure.

Significantly, the new budget proposal shows a reduction in the allocation for primary and mass education compared to the original allocation for the current year—Tk 35,403 crore against Tk 38,819 crore originally allocated in the FY25 budget, later revised down to Tk 35,123 crore. A government-appointed consultation committee for primary and non-formal education reform expressed concern about the serious deficiency in the literacy and numeracy skills of the majority of children completing primary education. The committee submitted detailed recommendations for immediate and medium-term actions. The budget speech mentioned the reform initiative, and highlighted a school meal provision and continuation of stipends, but a concerted action plan to implement the reforms remained missing.

The Secondary and Higher Education Division is a beneficiary of the education



ILLUSTRATION: SUSHMITA S PREETHA

budget increase, with the proposed allocation of Tk 47,563 crore, which is an increase over the original current year allocation of Tk 44,108 crore and an even larger increase from the revised allocation of Tk 39,233 crore. The increase is well-deserved, but only if the expenditures deliver improved learning outcomes rather than merely keeping the system running by spending on physical infrastructure and paying salaries.

The Technical and Madrasah Education Division has also been given an increase, with the proposed allocation of Tk 12,678

primary-level students in 2024, almost 30 percent, or 6.2 million, were in primary-level madrasas.

The government has promoted the expansion of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) enrolment, the result of which can be seen in an increase to 19 percent of secondary-level students in 2024 from about 14 percent five years earlier. However, observers argue that most of this and earlier growth has been through opening vocational streams in secondary schools, which suffer from low quality of

instruction and a lack of qualified teachers and facilities.

Even in specialised technical-vocational institutions, such as polytechnics, technical schools and colleges, and vocational training centres, complaints are frequent about training equipment, the quality and number of instructors, and institutional management. Tracer studies of TVET have shown that half of the graduates were unemployed or not employed in their field of training. Analysis shows that the best predictor of success in TVET is strong learning outcomes of students in primary and general secondary schools. Deficiencies in basic foundational competencies of students remain a huge problem, as noted above. The grievances and anxieties of TVET students have often spilled out onto the streets in public protests.

The consequences of these troubling trends for the preparation of the next generation for life and work loom large as a critical issue.

Finance Adviser Dr Salehuddin Ahmed said in his budget speech, “There is no alternative to science, technology or technical education to build a strong economic structure.” He went on to claim that, “This year’s budget has given special priority to creating the environment for a science-based, technology-driven and employment-oriented education.”

His ambitious rhetoric has not been borne out by the proposed education budget in its content and characteristics. An annual budget by itself cannot solve the long-standing and inherent problems of the education system. The national budget can be a useful vehicle for change when a vision for change exists and the decision-makers are keen to fulfil that vision.

A clear sense of direction and strategy for the education system is lacking, as it has been under past political governments. The interim government has emphasised reforms in many areas of national concern by establishing high-level commissions for this purpose. But an education reform commission has been conspicuously absent.

Effective implementation of the budget, regardless of its pros and cons, has always been a challenge. An idea, though some political parties may find it heretical, is worth considering. The late Akbar Ali Khan, well-known for his research and writing on economic management and governance, long argued for a participatory budget process involving citizens through local government bodies (*Bangladeshe Budget: Orthoniti o Rajniti*, 2021).

While radical changes in the proposed budget are unlikely at this stage, could the interim government hold local government elections and involve the local bodies in implementing the budget? The local bodies could be particularly helpful in such areas as safety net spending, small and medium-sized business support, distributing various agricultural subsidies, and improving community healthcare. They can help make funds available to schools for better learning outcomes and greater educational equity through school-based activities with local NGO and community involvement.

In the absence of the MP rule and personal fiefdoms created under the past political governments, genuine people’s representatives may help ensure better use of public funds. And an early local government election need not detract the chief adviser from his timetable for a general election in the first half of April next year.

The silent plastic crisis in rural Bangladesh

Saief Manzoor Al Islam and Sabbir Rahman Khan are development practitioners

SAIEF MANZOOR-AL-ISLAM and SABBIR RAHMAN KHAN

Sumon runs a small tea stall. Every morning, he wades through ankle-deep plastic waste—a growing pile of discarded bottles, wrappers, and bags that clog the drains around his shop. “When it rains, the market floods because the drains are blocked with plastic,” he says. “Business drops, and so does our hope for a cleaner place.”

While cities like Dhaka and Chattogram often dominate discussions on plastic pollution, the rural and peri-urban areas of Bangladesh bear a silent but severe brunt. In rural Bangladesh, plastic waste infiltrates rivers, irrigation channels, and croplands, disrupting daily life and livelihoods. Yet, this reality rarely garners attention.

It is believed that Bangladesh produces approximately 87,000 tonnes of single-use plastic waste each year, and nearly 22 percent of this originates from rural areas. There is a notable lack of awareness regarding the environmental and health risks associated with plastic waste in rural areas. For instance,

only 5.5 percent of rural consumers are aware of the health risks posed by single-use plastics, compared to 18.4 percent in urban areas. These facts highlight that plastic pollution is not solely an urban issue.

Of the plastic waste generated in Bangladesh, only 36 percent is recycled, leaving the rest to accumulate in open dumps, water bodies, and agricultural lands, exacerbating waterlogging and soil degradation. In rural areas, plastic waste mixed with crop residues blocks irrigation channels, starving crops of vital water flow. Additionally, plastic debris gathers around sluice gates, worsening persistent waterlogging.

For local farmers and traders, these seemingly small disruptions add up, impacting both their income and the local ecosystem. The impacts are further compounded by the surge in single-use plastics. Despite a ban on plastic bags in 2002, single-use plastic consumption has increased by 200 percent over the last decade, with rural areas increasingly bearing the consequences.

The government’s National 3R Strategy was a step towards tackling the plastic menace through reducing, reusing, and recycling waste. However, its implementation at the grassroots level remains largely on paper. Local government institutions, particularly union parishads and municipalities, are

supposed to lead the charge in managing plastic waste. But resource constraints, limited technical capacity, and a lack of structured waste management plans hinder their effectiveness.

Despite these challenges, small-scale initiatives in Bangladesh are emerging as potential game changers. The informal sector collects around 1,000 tonnes of plastic waste daily, significantly contributing to recycling efforts. However, the lack of formal recognition and support limits their impact. We are seeing the private sector also stepping into this domain. In Dhaka, for instance, Standard Chartered Bank launched a plastic exchange programme, allowing community members to trade plastic waste for cash or essentials. Replicating this initiative in rural areas could motivate grassroots communities to engage in waste collection while creating local income opportunities. Encouragingly, a number of development platforms are working with the private sector. They are collaborating to establish and institutionalise market-centric collection hubs for plastic waste, incentivising traders to segregate and deposit waste for recycling. Such initiatives show how grassroots engagement can foster a culture of environmental responsibility, even in areas with limited waste management infrastructure.

But to effectively tackle the long-standing

plastic pollution situation in rural and peri-urban areas, a few good examples are not enough; we need collective efforts and mutually benefitting strategies. First, local governments need targeted support to incorporate plastic waste management into local development plans. Waste segregation at the source, coupled with community-based recycling hubs, can lay the groundwork for more structured waste management systems.

Second, engaging local entrepreneurs in waste recycling can transform plastic from a pollutant into a resource. With technical training and seed funding, they could establish small recycling units that create useful products like eco-bricks or compost bins. In Indonesia, fishing villages have turned to innovative solutions like eco-bricks—plastic bottles filled with non-biodegradable waste used as building materials to manage plastic waste effectively. These initiatives highlight the potential of local actions in combating plastic pollution.

Third, educational programmes in schools and community centres can instil sustainable habits from an early age, reinforcing the principles of Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. In Cox’s Bazar, school collection systems have already been set up to teach children about waste segregation and composting, showing how early intervention can cultivate lasting environmental responsibility. Covering two

climate hotspots—Naogaon and Satkhira—the WaterAid-Swisscontact consortium has engaged school-level students in clean-up campaigns, waste segregation activities, and educational programmes to instil sustainable waste practices.

Lastly, public-private partnerships must be leveraged to provide the necessary infrastructure and incentives for waste management. One example is Practical Action’s initiative in Faridpur, where a circular economy approach is employed to transform previously unprofitable waste into valuable commodities. In this initiative, low-grade plastics collected from the Padma River and local communities are processed using pyrolysis technology, converting them into high-grade oil and black carbon, thus creating employment opportunities and improving waste workers’ livelihoods.

We must keep in mind that the fight against plastic pollution extends far beyond urban centres. The crowded markets of a remote union in the south and the irrigation fields of the north are not just bearing the brunt of plastic pollution; they are also fertile grounds for solutions. With the right support, rural communities can transform from passive victims to active change-makers, driving localised recycling initiatives, championing waste reduction, and adopting sustainable practices.

CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 One of a bear trio

5 States

10 Bakery come-on

12 Pastel shade

13 Nursing concern

15 Memorable time

16 Carnival city

17 Signing need

18 Motley

20 Helper: Abbr.

21 Comb parts

22 Casino acts

23 Brawl

25 Right away, in the ER

28 Gold-loving king

31 Swindles

32 Singer Franklin

34 Gold, to Coronado

35 Lyricist

36 Gershwin

37 Off-peak travel cost

40 Minotaur’s home

41 “Adam Bede” author

42 Garden aids

43 Beattie and Blyth

DOWN

1 Origami need

2 Ark’s landing site

3 Thick soup

4 French friend

5 Choir voice

6 Singer Damone

7 Pass by

8 Least common

9 Fragrances

11 Give fizz to

14 Sleep disturber

19 Analyzes

20 Dwelling

24 Angry rant

25 Burn

26 Bullfight star

27 Battery ends

29 Get

30 Stone on screen

33 Aids illegally

35 Frozen desserts

38 Salt Lake City player

39 Ga. neighbor

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18				19			20		
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34				35			36		
37			38				39		
40						41			
42							43		

6-20

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