

Secure the future of our farmers

Agricultural Price Commission could ensure fair prices

In spite of their immense contribution to the economy over the decades, farmers and agricultural workers in Bangladesh remain among the most neglected groups in the country. Very little has been done over the years, particularly by the government, to address their concerns and to help them overcome the challenges they face. In this context, we fully support the call to establish the Agricultural Price Commission, as proposed by agricultural experts and policymakers. Many countries have such commissions to regulate or influence agricultural prices. These bodies not only play a crucial role in ensuring fair prices for farmers, but also help maintain market stability and safeguard consumer interests, all of which Bangladesh badly needs.

Despite contributing significantly to food security and employment, Bangladesh's agriculture sector remains highly vulnerable to price shocks, unpredictable weather, and unchecked profits by middlemen. Unfortunately, there is currently no institutional mechanism in place to regulate or influence farmgate pricing, highlighting just how little attention policymakers have paid to this issue over the years.

Bangladesh ranks among the top 10 global producers of 22 agricultural products, including third in rice and vegetable production, seventh in potato, first in jute, and fifth in aquaculture. Worryingly, however, the agriculture sector has experienced a marked slowdown in growth, prompting renewed concerns about food security, rural incomes, and overall economic recovery. For instance, in FY2024-25, the sector recorded growth of only 1.79 percent, which is the lowest in over a decade. Although it remains one of the largest employment sectors, the agricultural workforce has declined sharply—from 62 percent in 2000 to 35.27 percent in 2025—posing a serious challenge to retaining farmers without ensuring reasonable profits.

Notably, between 2000 and 2016, male participation in agriculture declined while female participation increased. However, from 2016 to 2023, even female participation also fell. This may be due to agricultural work no longer providing the income required to maintain a decent standard of living, particularly when compared with other sectors. We have seen farmers leave the sector after suffering heavy losses, whether due to poor markups or the devastating effects of environmental disasters. With the impacts of climate change and other environmental hazards intensifying, farmers are increasingly vulnerable to events beyond their control. These growing risks must be mitigated, one way or another, if they are to continue farming.

Moreover, Bangladesh has one of the most severe middleman problems in the region, which results in farmers receiving the bare minimum for their labour, while middlemen and other influential actors pocket the lion's share of the profits. To reverse this situation—and to protect consumer interests—the government must introduce substantial reforms to this sector, starting with the establishment of the Agricultural Price Commission.

Fix footbridge escalators

Take expert advice and assess usability before building public structures

The irony of footbridges in Bangladesh becomes evident when pedestrians are seen jaywalking right beneath them. Many cite the difficulty of climbing stairs as a reason for not using these structures. Although escalators have been installed on four footbridges in the capital city to ease this burden, the use of footbridges still remains low as most of the escalators are currently out of service.

According to a report by this daily, some escalators stopped functioning within weeks of installation, while others operate only at specific times. A Dhaka North City Corporation official admitted that contractors failed to maintain them as they had not been fully paid. This situation raises critical questions: why were contractors not paid in full, who is responsible for these payments, and why isn't there a system to ensure that public facilities, built using taxpayers' money, are properly repaired and maintained?

Unfortunately, this reflects a broader pattern in Bangladesh. Wasting public funds through poorly planned structures like bridges, culverts, and footbridges is not unusual. Too often, these projects have served business interests and benefited corrupt officials and public representatives, rather than addressing real public needs. Flawed designs are common: bridges without connecting roads or footbridges with non-functioning escalators. Accountability remains elusive. Even though scores of taxpayers' taka are spent to build these structures, no one is held responsible for their failure. In fact, during the last Awami League regime, the approval of impractical projects, including massive ones that invited large-scale corruption, became the norm.

When it comes to footbridges, experts note that most countries no longer build them, since zebra crossings and crosswalks have been found to be more useful. Experts emphasise the implementation of a proper traffic signalling system, low-gradient footbridges, or other maintenance-friendly designs for road crossings. While we hope the authorities will listen to these expert suggestions and halt unnecessary footbridge construction, maintaining the existing ones remains crucial. Contractors must be held accountable for delayed repairs or early breakdowns. Simultaneously, city corporation teams should be tasked with keeping footbridges clear of rubbish and illegal hawkers, ensuring these structures actually serve pedestrians as intended.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Summer Olympics opens in Moscow

On this day in 1980, the Summer Olympics opened in Moscow, though some 60 countries refused to attend because of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; it was the largest boycott in the history of the Olympic movement.

EDITORIAL

Who will own up to the SSC debacle?

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND



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In the 1980s, I remember writing an argumentative essay titled "Floods: A Boon or a Bane?" for our school examinations. The key argument lay in the benefits of alluvial silt brought in by floodwater, resulting in better crops after the natural calamity. The disaster in this year's Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and equivalent examinations made me reflect on the debate. There are two ways we can analyse the failure of more than six lakh students and the decline in the number of GPA 5 achievers. We can view the decline in the general board pass rate to 68.04 percent from the 80-90 percent in the previous 16 years as a bane. Then again, the decrease is a boon, as it is a reported consequence of a long-overdue return to academic integrity, moving away from the culture of inflated data and auto-passes that reduced our public examination system to a farce.

The planned avoidance of cosmetic excellence at the expense of raw reality, however, has jolted many students and their institutions. The list of schools with 100 percent unsuccessful candidates is long. Witnessing guardians beating up headmasters was not a pretty sight. The shocking results are a wake-up call for a system that is demanding meritocracy. And while we are aware of the situation, we need to ask a deeper and uncomfortable question: who has failed these students—a tough exam, an inconsistent, fragile, and underfunded system, or a climate of political and social unrest? Someone has to take the responsibility for the failure. Otherwise, the corrective reform measures will be a display of apathy.

The authorities have made no secret of their renewed commitment to rigorous assessment. They have even withdrawn the provision for grace marks for marginal cases. The highest number of students have failed in mathematics. The cleansing flood has become a personal disaster for the students, especially those from

rural and marginalised backgrounds, who have little or no resources to compete in an academic atmosphere that relies heavily on the internet and gadgets. One thing is clear: many of these students failed because, as a state, we failed to prepare them for the school terminal exam. Their underperformance is a symptom of

tests were ineffective. I don't know whether there was any institutional counselling or monitoring for learning losses at the board level. Teachers reportedly anticipated the issues with the results. Despite the red flags, students were allowed to participate in the high-stakes exams unprepared. While people harp on the success of merit-based reform, they will have to bear the scars of failure. These six lakh students are more than numbers on an Excel sheet; they are young people with dreams and potential actors of our demographic dividends. The challenge now is to bring them back to school and equip them with knowledge and skills to join the career ladder.

Prothom Alo identifies three



FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The overall pass rate in this year's SSC and equivalent examinations dropped to a 16-year low, reflecting the ground reality.

systemic neglect.

Let's identify the avoidable missteps that have led these students to experience this harsh reality. After the recent change in government, there was a sudden decision to return to the 2012 model of examination. The competency-based curriculum was rejected midstream. The compromise was a shortened syllabus with barely three months for the teachers and students to adjust.

The curriculum switch required mass-scale teacher orientation and training for both teaching and testing. Teachers, like students, were left to scramble. The number of students who failed indicates that the screening mechanisms used in tests and pre-

key factors behind this year's underperformance in the SSC exams. Political unrest further exacerbated the severe learning loss that had occurred in the post-pandemic period. The exceptionally challenging mathematics question paper was also a significant factor. Consequently, 23 percent of students in the 11 boards failed in mathematics. Imposition of stricter assessment standards and clear instructions against liberal marking also played a role.

The number of failures in humanities (around 46 percent) and business studies (around 34 percent) has a cumulative effect on the overall pass mark. Despite the negative news, our female students continue to excel

in all fields. Girls opened up a gender gap of over five percentage points (about 71 percent of girls passed, compared to around 65 percent of boys) and also outperformed their peers in GPA scores. Such achievement is a testimony of their focused and disciplined commitment to move up in society. Their resilience and motivation should not be hindered by any obstacles. It is the duty of the state actors to ensure the fair passage for our top performers.

The other challenge is to remove the disparity between urban and rural schools. Is it fair to employ the same standard questions when not all institutions have the same access to quality teachers and secondary resource support bases? Is it fair for rural schools lacking electricity or internet connections to compete against schools with loaded learning environments? How about the learning gap induced by these infrastructural deficiencies?

While we all agree that false academic laurels that claim "I am GPA 5" are detrimental to education, we also need to acknowledge the failures of our younger generation. We need educational and psychological counselling for both teachers and students. The reform came as a sudden top-down administrative flash flood, which washed away over six lakh students. We need reforms in phases. We need administrative support to make adjustments to the planned changes. Otherwise, educational reform will turn out to be educational recklessness.

Do we not owe our young ones better? The answer is unequivocally affirmative. To achieve this, we need to rebuild our foundational literacy and numeracy starting from the primary level. We need to strengthen our learning diagnostics in classes 5 and 8 to identify gaps early. There should be regular alignment between teacher training and curriculum transitions. Textbooks must be made available before academic sessions. We need to place serious emphasis on school-level pre-tests to prepare students realistically for the public examinations. Finally, we need to provide psychosocial support to prevent trauma-induced dropout. We cannot afford to play with the fate of another generation in the name of reform. It's time we acted responsibly and assessed fairly. And above all, we must own up to our role not only in success but also in failure.

Scaling up nature-based solutions requires policy commitment



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The first comprehensive compilation of Bangladesh's nature-based solutions (NbS) experiences is a review article published in the *Frontiers in Environmental Science* journal in 2021. Six researchers from the University of Oxford, Independent University, Bangladesh, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh, and University of Quebec in Montreal showed significant benefits that many NbS can provide in numerous natural and modified ecosystems. This freely accessible article also highlights urban NbS as a part of the research implications and the way forward. In March 2025, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Bangladesh and the Global Center on Adaptation (GCA) published a compendium on urban NbS of Bangladesh. This book describes in detail 20 NbS from 12 districts. It, however, doesn't refer to the first compilation of NbS for Bangladesh, although it is relevant. This shows that, despite being openly available, important latest scientific knowledge on Bangladeshi NbS may not reach Bangladeshi experts working on NbS.

IUCN, the world's largest and oldest environmental network, became a pioneer in 2020 by developing the Global Standard for NbS, which has eight criteria and 28 indicators

to assess real NbS. The urban NbS compendium used the IUCN standard to conduct a "subjective assessment" of each Bangladeshi NbS against the eight criteria. By reviewing all 20 assessments, I found that 15 NbS scored one or less in at least one criterion. Since the compendium used its own "1 to 5 scale", it means that these 15 NbS scored 20 percent or less. But, as per the original IUCN Global Standard, if it scores less than 25 percent in one criterion, it cannot be called an NbS. It means 15 of those that IUCN Bangladesh and the GCA described as NbS are not NbS. Moreover, how these subjective assessments were done and based on which data sources is also not mentioned. Thus, the remaining five also can't be called NbS with confidence. Further, the compendium stated that the "biodiversity gains from these initiatives are not well documented," and only indications of biodiversity improvement were there. But the biodiversity criterion, on average, scored quite high (3.65 out of 5) across all 20 NbS. This shows that in creating new NbS knowledge, even the knowledge-based reputed organisations, which are experts on the topic, can struggle.

But creating knowledge means nothing unless it is used. That brings us to my second point. During

2014-2022, Bangladesh's Local Government Engineering Department implemented the Coastal Towns Environmental Infrastructure Project in 11 coastal municipalities, with funding from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). But, when a follow-up phase was agreed on (Coastal Towns Climate Resilience Project, 2023-2029), the agencies adopted NbS to build resilience in 22 coastal municipalities. The British Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office has been implementing a 120 million pound Bangladesh Climate and Environment Programme (BCEP, 2022-2030). Under this initiative, CARE is leading a large NGO consortium to implement the Nature-Based Adaptation towards Prosperous and Adept Lives and Livelihoods in Bangladesh (NABAPALLAB) project, where NbS is a key component. (Interestingly, the urban NbS compendium mentioned above was also supported by the BCEP). Recently, WaterAid organised a competition to design restoration projects to improve the dire condition of the Institute of Public Health (IPH) pond in Mohakhali, Dhaka. As a jury member, I was amazed to see the extent and depth of science based creativity our young minds put into designing NbS projects for this urban pond. This commendable initiative was only possible when WaterAid and the Swedish government showed flexibility to adopt a biodiversity-focused approach. Further, the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society has recently launched a new project in collaboration with the British Red Cross. The Nature Pulse programme will implement NbS in ecosystem restoration, sustainable livelihoods, health, water, sanitation and

hygiene, and disaster risk reduction. This is indeed encouraging that humanitarian agencies are fighting climate change and building community resilience by adopting NbS, which will, in turn, improve local biodiversity and ecosystem services.

My final point: how can these recent developments be scaled up through policy interventions? The answer is quite simple: we need to implement the 21 NbS-related actions Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plan (NAP, 2023-2050) has already identified. This will need a total of Tk 51,500 crore over three decades, but it is only 2.6 percent of the total value of the NAP implementation. Bangladesh is already a step ahead in such fund allocation. In 2022, the government adopted "Guidelines for Green and Climate Resilience (GCR) in Public Investment Projects", which strongly suggests incorporating NbS in the projects of agriculture, local government and rural development; environment, climate change and water resources; and housing and community amenity sectors. The government is currently updating the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan, preparing the third edition of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC), and, with ADB's facilitation, at last activating the Bangladesh Climate and Development Platform's (BCDP) four working groups. These policy interventions should contextualise, adopt, and operationalise the "IUCN Global Standard for NbS" for effective mainstreaming of NbS on a wider scale. To do that, the interim government should establish an NbS working group, so that the limitations the new urban NbS compendium shows are overcome.