

Is health reform not a priority?

Govt must expedite health sector overhaul

We share the frustration expressed by public health experts over the lack of visible action in introducing much-needed reforms in the health sector. At a recent policy dialogue on health reform, speakers highlighted the fact that it took the health ministry about three months to take the first step towards implementing the Health Sector Reform Commission's recommendations. This unexplained delay is not only dismaying, but also raises questions about whether the interim administration is as committed to health reform as it is to reform in other key sectors.

The commission, formed on November 18, 2024, submitted its report on May 5, proposing a wide range of recommendations, including making primary healthcare a constitutional obligation and forming an independent commission to oversee the health sector. It also recommended the formation of a powerful inter-ministerial committee to carry out the proposed reforms. Upon receiving the report, the chief adviser then instructed the relevant authorities to immediately act on the "actionable recommendations."

What disappoints us is that, despite this directive, the authorities concerned sat on the report for three months without taking any visible steps to implement the recommendations. The inter-ministerial committee has yet to be formed. This inaction even frustrated a member of the commission, who questioned the point of going through the entire exercise if health sector reform was not going to receive the attention it deserves. Considering the painstaking effort put in by commission members to identify the problems plaguing the health sector and to propose solutions, one can hardly blame them for feeling disheartened.

Speakers at the policy dialogue also expressed concern about the all-too-familiar cycle of policy recommendations being shelved—a concern we share as well. As no mechanism has yet been developed to translate the reform proposals into action, experts suggested forming a high-powered task force to help with the implementation process. They also suggested setting up a civil society platform to help "sharpen reform priorities" and engage major political parties to solidify their commitment to improving our healthcare system.

However, all these efforts will be in vain if the government does not make health reform a genuine priority. The health ministry has scheduled the first meeting on August 6, at which the commission's report will be reviewed and critically analysed, followed by the formulation of a short-term action plan to begin implementation. We expect to see some concrete decisions from this meeting that can kickstart the long-overdue revamping of this sector. Ordinary patients have suffered for far too long due to the lack of access to proper healthcare, the shortage of trained health workers, exorbitantly high out-of-pocket expenses, and widespread corruption and mismanagement. It is high time this sector was straightened out.

Make level crossings safe, curb accidents

Ctg-Cox's Bazar crossings need gates, gatemen

We are alarmed by the recurring accidents and fatalities at the level crossings along the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail line. As per data from the Railway Police, 30 people have lost their lives on this route over the past 20 months—17 last year, and 13 so far this year. The latest tragedy occurred on August 2 in the Rashidnagar area of Ramu, Cox's Bazar, when a train collided with a CNG-run auto-rickshaw, killing four people, including three from the same family. These repeated tragedies expose the authorities' utter disregard for public safety. In October last year, an elephant was also killed after being struck by a train.

Partly explaining this cycle of tragedies is the fact that, out of the 72 level crossings on this newly constructed railway, 56 have no gatemen or gates. It is no surprise, then, that accidents continue to claim lives at these points. The level crossing where the latest accident occurred was also unprotected and had no gatekeeper. While local authorities have long been demanding the installation of gates and gatekeepers at these risky crossings, allegedly no action has been taken by the higher authorities. We must ask: why is it taking so long to build gates or barriers and appoint gatemen, which are crucial to curbing such accidents?

Reportedly, in many of these crossings, railway authorities have fulfilled their duty merely by putting up signboards—signs that are often barely noticed or heeded by drivers or commuters. Their disregard for public safety is also evident in the absence of gates or gatekeepers at a level crossing near a school in Lohagara, used daily by students and thousands of other commuters. Some crossings are not even visible from a distance due to sharp bends and dense vegetation, making them especially hazardous.

We urge the authorities to investigate the frequent accidents on the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail line and take immediate steps to prevent further loss of life. Gates or barriers must be installed at all crossings without exception, while gatemen must be appointed at those with high traffic flow. Special safety measures must be implemented at crossings located near bends, where approaching trains are difficult to detect until dangerously close. Moreover, people should be made aware of the risks of crossing railway tracks haphazardly and encouraged to use the underpasses, where available, built for pedestrian movement. It is the responsibility of the railway authorities to ensure that rail crossings are safe for all users.

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EDITORIAL

Economic reform yet to pick up



MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KATUN

Bangladesh inherited a fragile economy when the mass uprising ousted the previous regime on August 5, 2024. Economic growth was decelerating, inflation was high, revenue mobilisation was low, and foreign exchange reserves were depleted, which strained the external sector along with low remittance flow. Meanwhile, domestic and foreign investment stagnated, and the banking sector was fragile. When the interim government took office on August 8, 2024, the common citizen had high expectations of the restoration of democratic governance, reform of state institutions, economic stabilisation, and most importantly, holding credible national elections so that people can exercise their voting rights freely.

A year on, while some economic indicators have improved slightly, most remain weak. The economy benefited from macro-financial management measures. Interest rate controls were eased to tighten money supply in the face of high inflation. The government also intervened administratively to curtail inflation. It removed import duties on essential goods, eliminated the requirements for letter of credit (LC) for daily commodities, and lifted borrowing caps for importers of food and fertiliser, to ease supply bottlenecks and prevent inflation from spiralling further.

Inflation started to ease after staying around double digits for over two years. In July 2024, point to point inflation was as high as 11.66 percent which came down to 8.48 percent in June 2025. Growth of GDP for FY2025 has been projected to be 3.97 percent by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). In FY2024, the GDP growth was 4.22 percent. The underperformance of growth is due to deep-rooted structural problems such as low investment, political uncertainty, supply-side constraints, reduced demand and the absence of fiscal stimulus.

Institutional reform agenda

The interim government's main selling point was initiating reforms in various sectors. Several reform commissions were formed. Though there were no reform commissions on economic issues, a task force was formed to strengthen the BBS to promote data-driven decision making, and the planning adviser formed a task force on "Re-strategising the Economy and Mobilising Resources for Equitable and Sustainable Development." The latter made actionable recommendations for economic growth, social development and environmental sustainability in the short, medium and long terms. The planning adviser handed over the task force report to the chief adviser, expecting that all relevant ministries would implement at least a few of the immediately implementable

reform measures. Unfortunately, the government has not shown any interest in that yet.

However, the central bank has formed three task forces to carry out reform measures in the banking sector to improve its ailing condition. The specific objectives of the task forces are to conduct a comprehensive asset quality review of banks, strengthen the capacity and efficiency of Bangladesh Bank (BB) and recover stolen assets and manage non-performing assets of banks. The interim government has approved the Bank Resolution

Ordinance 2025, which lays out BB's power to take measures to improve the health of commercial banks. However, the cleaning up of the banking sector will hinge upon the willingness of the future political government to continue the reform measures.

A much-talked-about reform of the National Board of Revenue (NBR) is yet to be implemented. The interim government announced the Revenue Policy and Revenue Management Ordinance, 2025 on May 12, 2025, to restructure and split the revenue authority into two separate entities—the Revenue Policy Division and the Revenue Administration Division. This is a requirement by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as part of its \$4.7 billion loan programme. Also, experts and the private sector have long suggested this to improve tax system efficiency and governance. However, the implementation of the ordinance is currently on hold, pending amendments from the Ministry of Finance.

Agenda for the coming months

With the national elections coming up in February, it is unlikely that the interim government will pursue new reforms. However, in the months leading up to national elections, the interim administration should consolidate what it has gained so far and address the underlying fragility of the economy. Some of these are briefly presented here.

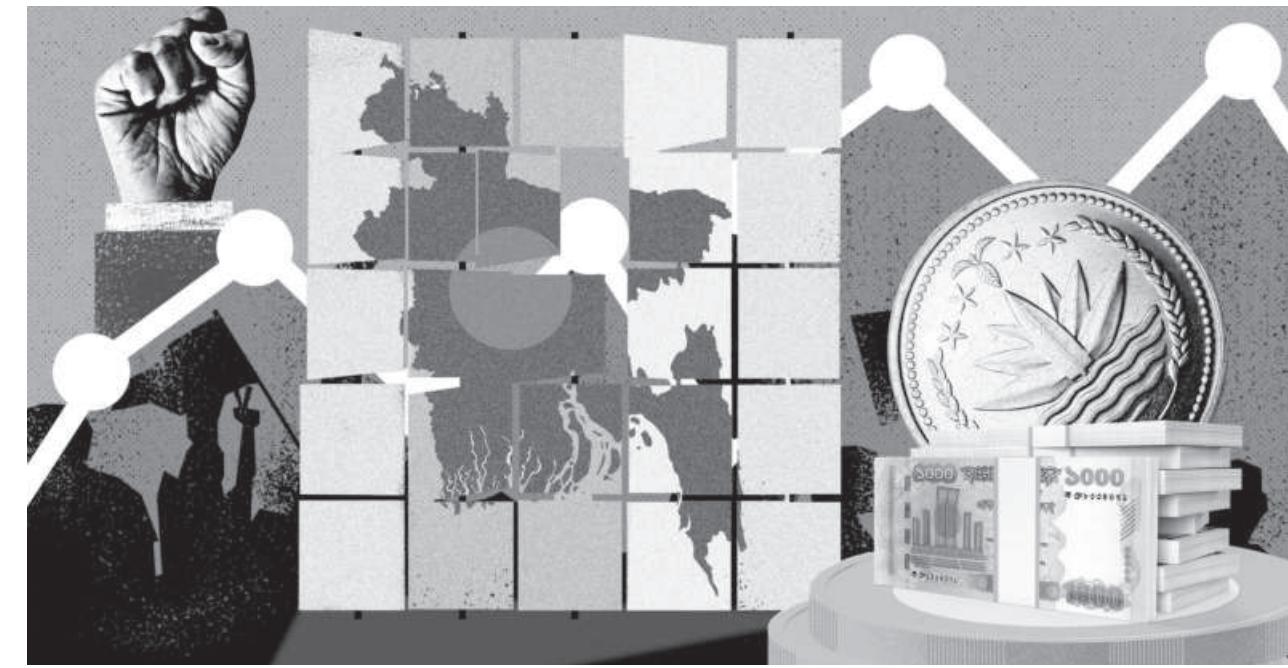
Macroeconomic stability must be restored and maintained. Interim policymakers should continue a prudent interest-rate policy to tame inflation, but the productive sectors should not suffer from a lack of credit. Exchange rate stability will be crucial for higher export income, remittances and investment.

Boosting private investment is critically important for economic growth and employment generation. Unfortunately, investors' confidence has been low during the interim government's tenure because of the weak law and order situation.

cash transfers and food subsidies—to support the vulnerable population. Open market sales of essential commodities should be expanded to include more people.

Export vulnerabilities should be mitigated through strategic actions. Diversification of export items and destinations has become more important than ever before in the context of high US tariffs and the expected graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category in November 2026. The government should provide policy support to exporters and improve the business environment to boost their competitiveness in the global market.

The resilience of the financial sector should be strengthened. The ongoing banking reform measures to address non-performing loans, improve the health of distressed banks through mergers and adopt strong governance and transparency initiatives should be expedited and continued. Independent oversight and audit capabilities should be strengthened to restore credibility



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

and unlock lending space for the private sector.

The government should prepare for the post-election transition. The independent status of key economic institutions—central bank, NBR, finance ministry—should be retained. Legal protections against undue politicisation should be embedded and a seamless transition to a democratically elected government should be enabled with intact reform momentum.

Despite the interim government's success in several areas, economic and institutional weaknesses prevail, and poor governance overshadows the early euphoria among common people. The government struggled to translate ideas into credible practice, and its capability waned in the public eye as the inner weaknesses became clearer over time. Between now and the next elections, the interim government has both an opportunity and an obligation to pivot by delivering measurable institutional and economic progress and reclaiming moral authority.

A case for critical thinking in curriculum



MIND THE GAP

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If Bangladesh's national curriculum were a recipe, it would go something like this: take a bright, curious child, add 12 years of rote memorisation, sprinkle in fear of GPA disasters, mix well with coaching centre propaganda, and bake under pressure until all signs of individuality are thoroughly extinguished. Serve cold, preferably with a side of exam-induced anxiety that manifests as vehement vomiting or diarrhoea.

But what if I told you that, after all this academic seasoning, the finished product barely qualifies as half-baked on the global scale? According to the World Bank, Bangladesh's Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) is now functionally equivalent to Grade 7 internationally. Yes, after 12 years of schooling, our students are emerging five years behind the global standard. That's not a learning gap, it's a canyon and not the grand kind.

Despite noble intentions and plenty of committees with acronyms longer than novels, our national curriculum still operates on one central principle: education is less about learning and more about surviving a system designed to test memory rather than meaning. The National Curriculum Framework 2021 promised to revolutionise education through "competency-based learning," "integrated assessments," and "lifelong learning skills." Lovely. But the intentions are only there—just not the follow-through.

The truth is that the curriculum continues to reward regurgitation over reflection. Want proof? Open any board exam script. You'll find students rewarded for copying textbook paragraphs verbatim.

Science, meanwhile, is less about discovering the world and more about memorising definitions like a corporate compliance manual. Religion is taught as moral absolutes with minimal room for interpretation. And civic education remains stuck in the glorious past of the Liberation War, with little engagement on democratic values, constitutional rights or climate justice.

And speaking of values: where is the conversation around consent, gender equity or mental health? We have an entire generation going through puberty with the emotional intelligence of a brick because the word "sex" still

sends policymakers into a shameful panic. There is no comprehensive sex education, no guidance on bodily autonomy, and no meaningful engagement with the reality of gender-based violence.

If we are to believe the curriculum is designed to prepare children for the 21st century, then can someone please explain why financial literacy, digital safety, media misinformation, and climate adaptation are still missing from the syllabus?

To be fair, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has tried to modernise. The new curriculum for classes 1-5, launched in 2023, ditched final exams and introduces continuous assessment. It also encourages thematic learning across disciplines. But implementation has been chaotic.

Teachers remain undertrained, class sizes balloon, and textbooks are riddled with errors. According to the 2022 BRAC Education Watch report, only 23 percent of primary school teachers had received in-depth training in competency-based instruction.

And let's not forget the elephant in the classroom: inequality. Students in elite urban schools get smart classrooms, extracurriculars, and debate clubs. Meanwhile, rural schools still lack toilets, let alone trained teachers for integrated learning.

The English version of the national curriculum is marginally better resourced, but it still suffers from the same outdated pedagogy, just in awkwardly translated English. The truth is, we need an education

system that doesn't just manufacture employees or engineers, but nurtures citizens to become curious, compassionate, and capable of questioning the status quo without fearing that a red pen will ruin their future. This means reimagining the entire philosophy of the curriculum. Ditch rote learning entirely. Reward analysis over memorisation. Infuse classrooms with real-life context.

Teachers are the backbone of this transformation, and they must be treated as such. This means proper pay, professional development, and pedagogical freedom—not just strict instructions to finish the syllabus like a robot with a whistle. It also means democratising the curriculum design process. Right now, it's a top-down exercise dominated by bureaucrats, where educators, psychologists, parents, and—dare we suggest—students have minimal input. The 2024 textbook controversy, where glaring errors and politically sanitised omissions made headlines, should be a wake-up call for genuine transparency and public review.

We also need to audit the relevance of the curriculum. Why are children still learning about out-of-date agricultural production figures instead of sustainable farming practices? Why are their moral lessons framed around obedience, but not empathy or ethics in the digital age? These questions must be addressed seriously, otherwise we would have to keep handing out Grade 12 certificates for a Grade 7 education.

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