



Poor yields of summer onions have left growers frustrated, with many blaming low-quality seeds supplied under a government subsidy scheme. The photo was taken recently from Char Mahipur area of Gangachara upazila in Rangpur.

PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Summer onion project wilts as seeds cannot withstand heat

Farmers welcome project but say they need heat-tolerant seeds

S DILIP ROY and SUKANTA HALDER

Over the last two years, the government has spent nearly Tk 37 crore in farmer incentives to grow summer onions and narrow the gap between annual demand and local output.

The project, though launched with good faith, is faltering with farmers reporting that the seeds - Nasik N-53 - supplied under the project sprout, then wither and die because of its low tolerance to summer heat.

District agriculture officers say the variety can tolerate temperatures only up to 25 degrees Celsius. In northern districts, the mercury climbs to around 40 degrees during peak summer, and the seedlings collapse in the heat. Officials in the north say they have been sending regular field reports to the agriculture ministry. But top officials at the agricultural extension department, which is responsible for facilitating agricultural growth and development, say they are yet to receive any formal complaint regarding the onion seeds.

Meanwhile, an agricultural economist said the entire seed supply chain from the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) to the Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) and the Department of

Agricultural Extension (DAE) must shoulder full responsibility.

Official data show that Bangladesh consumes an estimated 28 lakh tonnes of red onions each year. Local cultivation accounts for about 80 percent of this, with the rest met through imports.

Farmers usually plant onions in winter. After years of price spikes that pushed retail rates to as high as Tk 200 a kilogramme, the government explored ways to increase output and narrow the gap between annual demand and supply.

GOOD PROJECT, BAD SEED

The project was supposed to help achieve those goals. However, interviews with 40 farmers - 20 from Rangpur, 10 from Kurigram and 10 from Lalmonirhat - revealed that its potential was nipped in the bud.

"The seeds sprout after sowing, but the seedlings wither and die before growing big. The same thing happened in the last two years. I won't take these seeds again," said Akbar Ali, a farmer from Char Korai Barishal area in Chilmari of Kurigram.

He added, "During summer, the temperature in our area is very high, and the seeds cannot tolerate this heat."

Aminul Islam, a farmer from Harati village in Lalmonirhat, said, "We were happy to receive the incentive for onion

cultivation, but the seeds were ruined within a few days. We made no profit; instead, we suffered losses."

He added that farmers would benefit if heat-tolerant varieties were supplied instead.

Nader Ali, a farmer from Char Mohipur in Gangachara, said, "The project is very necessary. But without improving seed quality, it is of no use. For two years, I did not get any yield."

District officers are frustrated as well. Kurigram DAE Deputy Director Abdullah Al Mamun said, "Nasik N-53 is not a summer variety. We regularly report field outcomes to the ministry. If heat-tolerant seeds are supplied, the project will see better success."

Sirajul Islam, additional director of Rangpur Regional DAE, said, "A different seed variety must be supplied for summer cultivation. We have already informed the ministry in writing about changing the variety. Discussions on this issue are ongoing in review workshops on summer onion cultivation."

However, SM Sohrab Uddin, director general of the DAE, told The Daily Star that he is yet to receive any written complaint on the matter.

"If a complaint is filed and an investigation confirms the allegations, appropriate action will be taken against all those involved," he added.

According to the DAE, in 2024 a total of Tk 19.85 crore was provided as incentives to 60,518 farmers for cultivating summer onions on the same amount of land across 28 districts. For each bigha, Tk 3,280 was given to farmers for seeds, fertiliser, pesticides and other inputs. In the Rangpur Division's eight districts, 6,160 farmers received this incentive.

In 2025, a total of 50,000 farmers in 20 districts received Tk 17 crore in incentives. Each farmer received Tk 3,400. In the Rangpur division, 8,500 farmers received the incentive.

Meanwhile, blaming the agencies responsible for supplying the seeds, agricultural economist Jahangir Alam Khan, said the BADC is accountable for the varieties it multiplies and delivers to farmers, and the DAE must verify whether the seed is properly tested and truthfully labeled.

He noted that when farmers receive poor-quality seed, they suffer financial losses and have every right to seek compensation. "If private companies can be penalised for supplying bad seed, the same standards must apply to government institutions as well."

Since the government spends public money to produce and subsidise these seeds, collecting low-quality seed is unacceptable, he said.

Cash transactions hold back economic growth

AF NESARUDDIN

In principle, there is nothing wrong with cash financial transactions. The problem arises when they are used to evade tax, launder money, facilitate illegal deals or pay bribes. In such cases, the transactions become questionable.

A clear definition of cash transactions is essential. Issuing cash cheques and moving funds outside banking channels are common examples. The government has tried through various regulations to reduce reliance on cash, yet the impact has been limited.

As a result, financial statements are drifting away from reality, and personal finances are being pushed into the informal economy. These practices have fuelled large-scale tax evasion and corruption. The use of illegal funds for criminal activities adds another layer of concern that cannot be ignored.

Cash transactions are widespread in property deals, where a large portion of the payment takes place in cash outside the official deed value. Similarly, cash sales are often not deposited into company bank accounts and remain outside the books. Cash payments to suppliers are another area where tax evasion is a key motivation.

Recently, some bank officials have begun questioning ordinary clients about withdrawals exceeding Taka five hundred thousand. Yet it is striking that, within this environment, billions have been siphoned out of banks, apparently without similar scrutiny.

The government has introduced various measures to bring untaxed black money into the formal economy, but these have shown little success.

With the introduction of document verification, ICAB has ended the practice of maintaining multiple sets of financial statements.

If cash transactions can be reduced or controlled, the quality of financial reporting will improve, and government revenue will be better protected, which in turn will help support economic growth.

There is also an irrational rule in the country. Any individual, regardless of income, tax history, social standing or



financial position, is entitled to the same foreign currency quota, including international credit card limits. Money exchange houses operate largely on a cash basis, and the extent to which these are effectively monitored is unclear. Only account holders under the export retention quota receive some flexibility, and students are allowed to remit funds for overseas education. These narrow opportunities encourage further cash transactions.

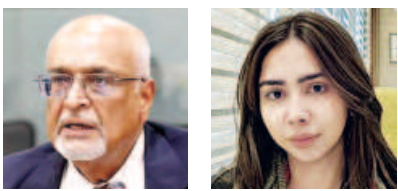
Foreign currency quotas for overseas travel should vary according to income, frequency of foreign trips and annual personal tax contribution. In many countries, cash payments beyond petty purchases in small shops or street markets are rare. Some argue that cash cannot be avoided in retail trade. Yet daily sales can be deposited by evening or the next working morning. Bank branches are now widespread across the country.

Many companies, particularly foreign ones, already follow such practices. Salaries and wages can be paid through banks, as can student allowances, overtime and local travel costs, which is standard in all CA firms under ICAB requirements. No supplier should receive cash payments in any corporate entity. Auditors can attach a certificate to cash transactions with tax returns to ensure transparency. In property acquisitions, all payments, whether within or beyond deed value, should be subject to tax and penalties where evasion is detected.

Ultimately, digitalisation is a crucial tool for correcting these irregularities. Like many developing countries, Bangladesh must reduce cash transactions to remove a significant barrier to economic growth, and the sooner the better.

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Why we need to revisit the LDC paradigm



DEBAPRIYA BHATTACHARYA and MAMTAJUL JANNAT

It has been more than five decades since the UN established the Least Developed Countries (LDC) category, in 1971, identifying these countries as facing the most severe roadblocks to sustainable development.

LDC status unlocks international support measures (ISMs) including trade preferences, concessional finance, technical assistance, and prioritisation in aid allocation. Buffering against shocks and creating openings for investment, trade, and institutional strengthening, these measures are a lifeline for countries facing vulnerabilities due to geography, climate exposure, fragility, or conflict. The ultimate goal is "graduation" from LDC status, which triggers a transition period during which countries prepare to phase out ISMs.

This framework was designed to help countries move out of extreme structural disadvantage. But has it worked? The picture is mixed: today, some LDCs have advanced toward graduation, but many remain stuck. LDCs host about 12 percent of the world's population, including 27 percent of its refugees, but generate less than 2 percent of global GDP and 1 percent of world trade.

These imbalances reveal the limits of the current graduation model,

which overlooks the structural realities keeping many trapped in underdevelopment. To be truly fit for purpose, the LDC paradigm must be updated to better reflect these vulnerabilities, recognise diverse trajectories, and align support with today's challenges.

THE UNEVEN PATH OF GRADUATION PROGRESS

To determine whether countries should retain LDC status or be considered for graduation, the UN Committee for Development Policy (CDP) reviews the list of LDCs every three years, using three criteria: income level, measured by gross national income per capita; human assets, assessed through health, nutrition, and education indicators; and environmental and economic vulnerability, captured through the Environmental Vulnerability Index (EVI). Countries qualify for graduation after meeting thresholds in two of the three categories in two consecutive reviews. As of late 2025, only eight countries have managed to exit the group of LDCs; 44 remain.

Six countries, Bangladesh, Lao PDR, Nepal, Solomon Islands, Cambodia and Senegal, have confirmed exit years and are preparing transition plans.

Comoros, Myanmar, Djibouti, Kiribati and Tuvalu have met the graduation criteria but deferred their exit due to political or structural challenges. Kiribati and Tuvalu, both Small Island Developing States (SIDS), have remained in the graduation pipeline for nearly two decades, reflecting the compound effects of remoteness, small size and exposure to climate risks.

Despite meeting thresholds in

all three categories since 2018, Myanmar's graduation has been held back by protracted political instability. The graduations of Comoros and Djibouti, which became eligible in 2024, were deferred due to political uncertainty and weak institutions.

Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania

are the newest additions to the graduation pipeline, having met the thresholds for the first time in 2024. Thirty LDCs (the "holdover" LDCs) have never qualified for graduation. Of these, 26 are in Africa. The remaining four, Afghanistan, Timor-Leste, Yemen and Haiti, face instability and isolation. About 40 percent of holdover LDCs are landlocked, limiting opportunities for connectivity and integration into

global markets. Around 60 percent are conflict-affected or institutionally weak; nearly 93 percent fail to meet the EVI threshold. They are also home to 17 percent of the world's refugees. These pressures deepen fiscal strain and weaken state capacity, making progress toward graduation even more challenging.

TOWARD A NEW LDC FRAMEWORK

Graduation must reflect a country's capacity to absorb shocks, recover and sustain progress despite conflict, climate exposure or geographic disadvantage. Here are some elements that policymakers at national, regional and global levels should prioritise to create a more responsive and equitable framework.

Modernise how vulnerability is measured. A more comprehensive risk and resilience index would better identify structural weaknesses and guide targeted ISMs that strengthen long-term preparedness and adaptive capacity. The UN-CDP along with UNCTAD should revisit how the EVI captures risk, ensuring that conflict, fragility, climate exposure and refugee inflows are adequately reflected.

Promote a cross-pillar approach to resilience. The LDC agenda must move beyond economic metrics to integrate climate action, governance, peace and security, and social inclusion as equal pillars of progress. This would better capture the links between economic performance, environmental stability and institutional strength, aligning international support with the ambitions of the 2030 Agenda.

Strengthen international support measures and link them to resilience-building. ISMs must go beyond trade preferences and concessional finance to address structurally weak and conflict-ridden economies. Climate funds, debt relief, governance support and peacebuilding should be strategically linked.

Domestic reforms such as stronger institutions, fiscal discipline and diversification are also vital to ensure lasting gains.

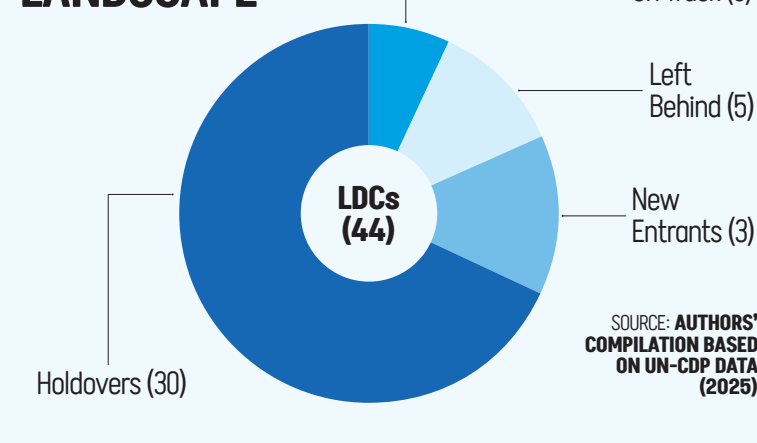
This reimagined framework cannot be one-size-fits-all: the experience of many LDCs makes clear that the graduation trajectories of landlocked developing countries, SIDS, conflict-affected or climate-vulnerable economies must be considered separately.

There are some positive signs that support for this approach is growing. The UN-CDP has introduced supplementary graduation indicators (SGIs) to allow greater flexibility in evaluating country progress. The Doha Programme of Action (2022, 2031) recognises the diversity of LDCs and calls for tailored support that reflects distinct vulnerabilities.

These are welcome steps, but more work is needed to ensure that global frameworks evolve to match the complex realities of the countries left behind. It is time to rethink the LDC paradigm, aligning measures of progress and support with today's structural, climate, governance and peace-security challenges.

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THE CURRENT LDC LANDSCAPE



THE LIMITS OF THE LDC PARADIGM

The slow pace of graduation is not a function of inadequate effort on the part of LDCs. Rather, it reflects the weaknesses of the model itself.

Specifically, the graduation criteria reward relatively short-term gains in economic and social indicators and downplay the impact of conflict exposure, remoteness, climate and peace and security risk