

TEN TASKS FOR FUTURE BANGLADESH

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Bangladesh's acute vulnerability to the impacts of climate change—including sea level rise; salinity intrusion; exacerbation of seasonal variation in precipitation and river flow; increased frequency and scope of extreme weather events, such as cyclones; and greater threat of water-borne diseases—all portend looming dangers. The previous government took the initiative to prepare a long-term plan to confront the consequences of climate change. The document, titled Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100 and prepared with Dutch financial and technical assistance, did not live up to expectations. The Dutch have a long history of involvement in Bangladesh's 'water development' efforts. In fact, Dutch experts played a leading role in formulating the early water development projects taken up in the 1950s. In doing so, they imposed on Bangladesh the 'Polder approach,' which is an extreme variant of the Cordon approach. Under the latter, floodplains are insulated from river channels through the construction of embankments. When embankments are constructed all around a floodplain tract, it is called a polder. The Dutch

originally resorted to the construction of polders in order to extract peat coal from the adjoining North Sea bed. Once the coal was exhausted, they used the polders for habitation. That is why about one-fifth of the Netherlands now lies in these below-sea level polders, where about one-fourth of the population lives. The Dutch situation is completely different from that of Bangladesh. The annual river flow to the Dutch Delta amounts to only about 75 cubic km, as compared with about 1,032 cubic km in Bangladesh. Moreover, this flow does not have any seasonality and contains very little sediment (3 million tons as compared to 1,150 million tons in Bangladesh). Thus, the Netherlands does not have a problem of river overflow and does not face the task of sediment management. By contrast, these are the main challenges of Bangladesh. Bangladesh, therefore, needed the Open approach, under which floodplains are kept open to river channels, so that summer overflows can spread over them, deposit sediment, and recharge the waterbodies. At the same time, less sediment falls on the riverbeds, which therefore remain healthy.

Yet, the Dutch experts imposed on Bangladesh the Polder approach, which is totally inappropriate and harmful for Bangladesh. This approach was reinforced later by the Master Plan, prepared by the San Francisco-based International Engineering Company (IECO) in 1964. Thus, Bangladesh followed the wrong-headed Cordon approach for about seven decades, and this has resulted in the decay and destruction of the country's river system. Unilateral withdrawal by India of water from shared rivers aggravated the disaster.

In preparing the Delta Plan 2100, the Dutch consultants vacillated between the Cordon and Open approaches, could not decide between the two, did not conduct any original research, refrained from an independent review of the past water development experience, and ended up with a confused philosophy and no original project proposal. Instead, they recycled the project proposals that the water-related implementation agencies

already had and presented them as the 'investment portfolio' of their Delta Plan. A more spectacular denouement of an intellectual enterprise can hardly be found! (For a more detailed analysis, see my book A Review of Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, Eastern Academic, 2022.)

Going forward, much attention will have to be given to the protection of rivers, which form the backbone of the country's environment. Bangladesh indeed needs a long-term plan for the delta. However, this plan has to be based on the Open approach to rivers.

A similar fundamental change of direction will be needed regarding other dimensions of the environment, such as energy and power, industries to be promoted, transportation and communication, spatial planning and urbanisation, construction, agriculture, forests, waste generation and disposal, etc. Population planning efforts need to be revived. Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA) and Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN) have well-developed policy proposals in each of the above areas, and future governments can benefit from them.

5. Setting up of village councils

The local government structure needs to be extended to the grass-roots level by forming Village Councils. As of now, it ends with Union Parishads. Apart from performing appropriate administrative functions, the village councils can play a crucial role in facilitating collective endeavours, necessary for the optimal utilisation of land, water, and labour resources of villages. Climate change is making such collective endeavours more imperative. Countries such as China and India are making efficient use of village governments. Bangladesh too had a long tradition of Gram Panchayet. However, British colonial rule led to its decay. After independence, almost all major governments made attempts to rebuild village-level government, but could not complete the task for various reasons. Now is the time to do so.

6. Decentralisation of development and reduction of regional disparity

Development needs to be decentralised, and regional disparity has to be

eliminated. Currently, of the 10 million extreme poor, more than half are concentrated in only 16 (out of 64) districts. The bottom 50 districts contribute only 17 per cent of the industrial output. Dhaka City alone accounts for about 35 per cent of the total urban population and is now suffering from the negative effects of agglomeration. Differences in endowments are certainly a cause of the above. However, policies are needed to ameliorate the effects of endowment differences, instead of aggravating them. The "hub-and-spoke" model of in-situ urbanisation should be adopted, with the 64 district towns as the hubs and aligned with the proposed economic zones.

7. Strengthening social cohesion

Social cohesion needs to be strengthened. The rise in income inequality has aggravated social divisions. Both the education and the health systems have trifurcated. This is harmful for both social cohesion and the overall state of education and health of the nation. Similarly, divisions along religious lines are reignited. The plainland Bangalee people have been counter-posed to the hilly people. Vigorous efforts are needed to counter these trends. Education and health systems have to be unified while allowing roles for both public and private sectors in them, as we find in Japan or the USA. Mixing politics with religion should be avoided, and ethnic amity should be re-established through fair protection of the rights of the hilly people and other minorities.

8. Special attention to the needs of women, children, youth, and the elderly

The special needs of women have to be met to ensure realisation of their full potential. Children have to be treated as the future resource of the country. The country has so far allowed the Demographic Dividend to go by without making good use of it. Unfortunately, it is going to end soon. Urgent policies directed at the youth are needed to rectify this failure. Policies are needed both to take care of the elderly and to make the best utilisation of their potential.

9. Introduction of compulsory military education for the youth

Compulsory military education for the youth should be gradually introduced. This will help to improve the physical and mental constitution of our youth, converting them into high-quality human capital. It will also increase social cohesion, strengthen patriotism, increase discipline in the population at large, create a very productive role for the military in the nation's life, improve the bond between the military and the civilian population, and increase the country's defence capability. The duration of the training may be nine months (as was the Liberation War) and start at the age of eighteen, after students complete their higher secondary education. Based on the current population size, about seven lakh youth will be eligible each year. On average, each of the current thirty cantonments will have to accommodate about 23,333 young men. Additional infrastructure has to be built inside them for this purpose. Some initial capital costs will be required. The recurrent cost of the programme will comprise about 1.5 per cent of the budget, which is modest. This will be the best investment that the nation can make. Until full capacity is achieved, the number of trainees can be limited through a lottery system. Also, initially the programme can start with males only, and a customised and voluntary programme for females can be initiated later.

10. Protection of national resources and pursuit of independent foreign policy

The country has to pursue an independent foreign policy, avoid dependence on any particular country, and aim at the rapid development of the country through the best utilisation of the nation's resources by optimal participation in the international division of labour.

I have discussed these ten tasks in great detail in my recent book Agami Bangladesher Dosh Koroniao [Ten Tasks for Future Bangladesh] (Dharmtree 2025). Interested readers can consult it for more information on each of the tasks.

KEY POINTS

1. Reducing income inequality is essential to escape the inequality trap through fair wages, progressive taxation, and effective social transfers.
2. Achieving good governance requires ending corruption, reforming political leadership, and dismantling the leakage-based growth model.
3. Proportional representation, shorter government terms, and stronger local institutions are vital for democratic accountability.
4. Environmental protection must guide development, prioritising river restoration, climate resilience, and population planning.
5. Inclusive development demands decentralisation, social cohesion, youth investment, gender equity, and an independent foreign policy.



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