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The Daily Star
CELEBRATING
35
YEARS of
JOURNALISM WITHOUT FEAR OR FAVOUR

ANNIVERSARY SUPPLEMENTS 2026
SEGMENT 1
DHAKA WEDNESDAY JANUARY 14, 2026, POUSH 30, 1432 BS

PEOPLE AND RIVERS *will shape our tomorrow*

We are proud to present the first instalment of our five-part special supplement series, marking *The Daily Star*'s 35th anniversary. This segment delves into two forces that have defined Bangladesh's past and will shape its future: people and rivers.

Few countries are as deeply shaped by these two resources as Bangladesh. Both are extraordinary assets, and both pose profound challenges. Our rivers, wetlands and coastlines sustain agriculture, trade and life itself, even as floods, salinity, pollution and mismanagement threaten livelihoods. Our people—young, resilient and inventive—are the country's greatest strength, yet population pressure, inequality and uneven access to opportunity continue to strain resources.

This special supplement examines these twin realities with care and urgency. It explores rivers as lifelines that sustain food systems, climate resilience, and economic activity, while also exposing communities to floods and erosion. It looks at people not merely as numbers, but as agents of change whose knowledge, labour and creativity can drive sustainable futures.

Across these pages, we present both possibilities and problems: policy gaps and local solutions, risks and resilience, neglect and hope. Shaping tomorrow requires recognising that people and rivers are deeply intertwined—and that with thoughtful planning, inclusive governance and responsible use, Bangladesh can transform these enduring challenges into lasting strengths.

In this issue, experts from diverse fields have shared their insights. We extend our deepest gratitude to them for their thoughtful analyses. We also sincerely thank our readers and patrons who, over the past 35 years, have continued to inspire us to uphold our motto: *Your Right to Know.*

Mahfuz Anam
Editor & Publisher

The Padma and its banks.

PHOTO: **ANSAR UDDIN KHAN PATHAN**

Why we must rethink our water management practices

AINUN NISHAT

Professor Emeritus at the Centre for Climate Change and Environmental Research, BRAC University.

KEY POINTS

1. Shift national policy from water development to integrated, climate-resilient water management.
2. Enforce existing water laws, prioritising wetlands, rivers, and ecological flows.
3. Reduce groundwater dependence by investing in surface water storage and seasonal planning.
4. Reform institutions to ensure coordination, authority, and accountability in water governance.
5. Elevate transboundary water negotiations to the highest political level.

I am writing this article to convey a very strong message. Water is a natural resource. It is essential for life. It is essential for economic development. It is essential for ensuring food security. It is essential for human health. I can give more parameters to explain why water is an element of life.

On an annual basis, we have enough water to meet our demand. But on a seasonal basis, the distribution is highly unfavourable to satisfy the demands and requirements of various competing sectors. I shall try to compare availability, demand, opportunities for development, and constraints to show why water is both a bane and a boon. Very briefly, I shall try to establish that we are fast approaching a crisis in managing this vital natural resource, which is finite in supply.

The popular notion has been that we have surplus water. But Bangladesh presents a paradoxical situation; at one part of the year, we have more water than we need—many people consider it to be surplus—but without considering the needs of the environment and ecology, this view must be adjusted. On the other hand, at other times of the year, the supply dwindles and becomes inadequate to meet all sectoral demands—and there are situations of serious shortfall. Very soon, this shortfall or shortage will become a major element in our life and livelihood management.

We have many laws and policy documents for the sustainable management of water resources, but we do not follow them, and thus we are on the road to a major crisis. Our Constitution demands that we protect our nature and wetlands. The time has come to evaluate various aspects and issues related to the effective management of this important natural resource and to apply policy statements and laws prudently and effectively.

Bangladesh is at a crossroads in the domain of water management. Bangladesh pushes for 'water development' at the expense of huge funds, but completed projects soon become ineffective due to the absence of 'water management' practices. The question now is—shall we continue to pursue the path that we are following? Or shall we make radical changes in our approach? Will it be possible to make changes in our management style? Do we have a proper understanding of the constraints? Do we have a proper understanding of where we are making mistakes? Do we have proper plans and capacity, including human capital, to shift our course in the right direction?

In short, my answer to the aforesaid questions is a loud no. Unless we correct our course towards water resources management, we are in for difficult days; future generations will blame us for not taking the right decisions, even now. Let us examine the issues.

According to a WHO–UNICEF report (2021), 68.3 million people in Bangladesh do not have access to safely managed drinking water. PHOTO: AFP

The first point I would like to make is that water availability comprises surface water, groundwater, and rainwater. It is seasonal variability that causes the problem. In the monsoon months, availability from all three sources is very high, often far exceeding demand. In the dry and winter months, the quantity of rainfall is almost negligible, the level of groundwater drops significantly, and surface supply becomes very low.

This situation is further aggravated as surface water coming from upstream regions diminishes, and most of the small rivers almost dry up. In the absence of any agreement with the upper riparian country, this situation may become even more acute in the coming years. The solution to this concern is largely dependent on political relationships. In the dry season, we are almost totally dependent on groundwater.

The three major river systems of the country—namely, the Ganges, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna—carry some flow, but we do not use it for crop production. Some water from these three major rivers is pumped to nearby major cities for drinking purposes. Over-dependence on groundwater and lack of rainfall are major obstacles to the smooth management of water resources during the dry season.

My point here is that insufficient consideration of seasonal variability in our planning and water utilisation processes has been made, and this needs to be rectified.

In planning and management, the looming threat of climate change and the increasing impact of global warming will make water availability more unpredictable as well as more unmanageable. Rainfall patterns are going to change during the peak period of the monsoon (June, July, and August). Rainfall may be lower compared to average conditions. Rainfall may also be higher during the pre-monsoon period (April and May) as well as in the post-monsoon period (August and September). This will create unfavourable conditions at different times of the year and in different locations across the country. North-Western Bangladesh—that is, the Rangpur, Bogra, and Dinajpur areas—as well as the Rajshahi region, may experience long periods of very low rainfall. This could create drought-like situations that hamper the monsoon crop, *Aman*.

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The incidence of both floods and droughts will create additional complexity. Early flash floods in the north-eastern and northern areas—mainly in the Sylhet and Mymensingh districts—as well as in central and eastern areas, namely Comilla, may occur more frequently. To protect the dry season rice *(Boro crop)* in these areas, the use of submersible dikes has been considered the correct approach. This is a 100-year-old technique that has been practised since the creation of Bangladesh in the 1970s. However, this system to protect crops has failed, as has happened several times over the last four to five decades. These failures are the result of improper water management practices.

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The timing, intensity, frequency, and duration of monsoon floods are also changing. With an increasing population, people have settled in locations such as riverbanks and coastal shores, and in low-lying floodplains, etc. These areas are regularly submerged. These vulnerable areas often have ineffective protection, making the level of misery faced by affected people more acute compared to a situation with no protection at all. As rainfall intensity is set to increase, as is happening elsewhere in the world, the problem of drainage congestion will rise. Cities and towns are becoming more vulnerable in the coming days. Cities like Dhaka are going to face serious drainage congestion very soon.

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In professional life, we observe an almost total absence of coordination among agencies and organisations responsible for managing water. Controlled water availability is an important aspect of crop production, especially for paddy. If we take a broad and simplified approach to evaluating the major factors that control rice productivity, then we can identify three such factors. Again, I am overgeneralising and speaking in broad terms. These factors are: i) the quality of seeds, ii) other essential inputs such as fertilisers and insecticides, and iii) control over water availability. I am assuming that the quality and productivity of land resources are non-variable issues. At this stage, I am considering that the first two parameters guide productivity levels, and that the third element—control over water supply—is essential to regulate overall production. Too much water (that is, flooding) and too little water (that is, drought-like conditions) are the major challenges here.

We used to grow different varieties of rice. In the pre-Bangladesh period, submergence-tolerant deep-water varieties were grown, but the yield of these varieties was less than one tonne per hectare. By switching to varieties that must be grown in flood-free conditions and that require adequate irrigation—varieties that are high-yielding—we now produce 4–7 tonnes per hectare. Of course, the use of quality seeds and other inputs are the drivers of our success in the agriculture sector. But the management of water is an unavoidable condition.

Aman, grown during the monsoon period, was once the main food grain of the country, and national attention was directed towards flood management to protect the monsoon crop in the pre-independence era. Since the 1970s, the introduction of the high-yielding Boro variety has overtaken Aman production. For this crop, winter irrigation is sine qua non. This crop may also suffer from early flash floods. For managing low rainfall or drought-like conditions, particularly during dry periods, we are over-dependent on groundwater—surface water is not available in the regional rivers.

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So far, my focus has centred on rice production. But what about the demand for human consumption? There is a statement by Benjamin Franklin that "a wandering traveller in a desert understands the value of drinking water when he finds the well dry." All over the world, it is recognised that the availability of safe drinking water at an affordable price is a basic human right. Is our water safe to drink? Being uncertain, we have shifted towards costly commercially available bottled water. Drinking water is mostly managed by women in rural areas. They often need to walk 5–6 kilometres to collect just a pitcher of drinking water for the family. This problem is particularly acute in the coastal belt.

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The problem stated in the aforesaid paragraph is becoming more critical and acute in the coastal belt, where water is becoming saline. This is driven by global warming, which leads to sea-level rise and pushes salinity levels further inland. It appears that in 50 years' time, the southern one-third of Bangladesh will become as salty as seawater. Drinking water is already a major social and economic problem in the south-western districts of Khulna, Satkhira, Bagerhat, and Barguna. Production of rice has also become a problematic issue in these areas. I am told that even the production of shrimp varieties grown in these areas is facing problems.

It is urgent that agricultural practices, including the types of crops to be grown, are evaluated. While sunflowers (for oil), watermelon, and beetroot have already been introduced in these areas, the question is whether we are ready to explore the possibility of sugar production based on beetroot. Returning to the topic of the previous paragraph, access to an adequate water supply for the purposes of sanitation and hygiene remains critically low in many regions of the country. Water for drinking purposes, sanitation, and health (WASH) is mostly managed by local communities, while people in townships and cities receive support from the state. I shall also add hygiene to water supply, sanitation, and health (WASH) for future considerations.

SEE PAGE 6

The drying up of the Teesta River is endangering ecosystem and livelihoods alike, leaving thousands of farmers in northern Bangladesh increasingly vulnerable. PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Bangladesh's 'miracle' running out of time?

Why population, cities, schools and households are colliding

FILE VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

Executive Chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and a former Adviser to the Caretaker Government.

For nearly 50 years, Bangladesh has been one of the world's favourite outliers. Born in the trauma of 1971 with a shattered economy and a population of 75 million, the country was summarily dismissed as a "basket case." Yet, through a mix of resilience and grassroots innovations, the country proved pessimists wrong. We defeated cholera with saline, lowered birth rates with an army of door-to-door social workers, fuelled growth with the labour of our daughters in garment factories, and kept food insecurity at bay through technological adaptation in smallholder agriculture and the building of value chains.

However, as we cross the quarter-century mark in 2025, a sobering confrontation with reality has become inescapable. The "business as usual" model, built on frugal innovation and cheap labour, has hit a structural ceiling. We are no longer fighting the survival battles of the 1970s. We are confronting four colliding shifts—in our population, our cities, our economy, and our schools—that are far more complex, costly, and politically contentious than the challenges of the past.

Data from recent PPRC research pose a hard question: while policymakers, development partners, and the cognoscenti invoked the rosy language of the "demographic dividend," did the ground beneath us quietly shift? The central challenge of Bangladesh today is no longer how many people it has, but how little margin each household has left to survive. When families operate this close to the edge, progress is no longer automatic. The evidence suggests that the gains of the past are now being tested in ways we have not faced before. We appear to be approaching a tipping point, where policy drift and household insolvency together threaten to undermine a generation of achievement.

The demographic drift: Losing the signals

Bangladesh's early success in stabilising population growth was the result of a calibrated strategy. In the 1970s and 1980s, the country deployed a door-to-door family planning model that bypassed husbands and conservative elders who often blocked women's choices. Mass media and religious leaders were mobilised to shift social norms, embedding family planning into everyday life.

Between 2010 and 2020, however, the strategic signal began to fade. Population increasingly came to be treated uncritically as a "resource" rather than as a challenge to be actively managed. The door-to-door system was allowed to weaken in favour of fixed community clinics, overlooking a basic reality: for poor households, even a short trip to a clinic can be logistically or financially challenging.

The latest fertility data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey signal that fertility decline has stalled at around 2.3 children per woman. More troubling still, Bangladesh now records an adolescent pregnancy rate of 113 per 1,000—one of the highest outside Sub-Saharan Africa. This is not merely a health statistic; it represents a structural economic trap.

Consider the financial reality of the average household. The PPRC State of the Real Economy Survey of 2025 puts monthly income at roughly 32,685 takas, while monthly expenditure is about 32,615 taka. The 70-taka surplus tells us that families are barely breaking even.

A stalled demographic transition magnifies household fragility. Many families are already engaged in what can only be described as caloric triage, cutting beef, milk, and chicken from their diets simply to cover rent and utilities. Solvency becomes a daily gamble: a choice between paying the landlord or buying milk, between a daughter's school fees or a father's insulin. For millions of households, these are not metaphors but nightly calculations, made at the kitchen table with a shrinking wallet and no margin for error.

In such conditions, an unplanned pregnancy, an early marriage, or a health shock can tip a household from precarious balance into deep poverty. Child marriage, often explained as culture, is in many cases an economic coping strategy. By pushing young girls out of school and into dependency before any human capital can form, child marriage converts short-term survival into long-term economic loss, locking the next generation into asset depletion.

Bangladesh has moved from villages to cities, but in a lopsided way centred overwhelmingly on Dhaka. FILE PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The urban trap: A lopsided nation

The second collision is spatial. Bangladesh has moved from villages to cities, but in a lopsided way, centred overwhelmingly on Dhaka. Urbanisation was long assumed to be an automatic engine of wealth accumulation. Our data are now telling us otherwise.

Bangladesh is facing an urban trap. While city incomes appear higher on paper, at around 40,000 taka per month, the high cost of living erases much of that advantage. Housing alone consumes about 9 percent of the urban household budget, compared with just 1 percent in rural areas. For many families, higher wages are swallowed whole by rent.

Dhaka is buckling under its own weight. Functional second-tier cities were never adequately built; even Chattogram struggles with liveability and governance. Instead of reaping the benefits of density, Bangladesh is witnessing the rise of a new urban poor: families who appear solvent but remain one crisis away from ruin.

KEY POINTS

1. Restore proactive family planning to protect household margins and women's choices.
2. Rebuild education around skills, employability, and technical training, not certificates.
3. Decentralise growth by empowering secondary cities beyond Dhaka.
4. Cut urban living costs through housing, transport, and service reforms.
5. Establish universal pensions and health coverage to secure life-cycle protection.

The skills crisis: The glass screen generation

Perhaps the most consequential failure lies in the handling of youth. We talked endlessly about a demographic dividend but invested little in the mechanisms needed to empower it.

Policy focused on quantity: buildings, enrolment numbers, and certificates. Quality, relevance, and competence became afterthoughts. The result is a system that produces hundreds of thousands of graduates in disciplines poorly aligned with an economy that urgently needs technicians, skilled operators, and mid-level managers.

This mismatch has produced a full-blown skills crisis. Bangladesh now has a Glass Screen generation: around 75 percent of households own a smartphone, yet fewer than 5 percent own a computer. Young people are equipped to consume content and aspirations, but not to produce high-value work.

For over a decade, the celebrated "demographic dividend" and the promise of prosperity with every university degree have failed to materialise. By 2024, the figures were stark. Youth unemployment among those aged 15 to 24 stood at 11.46 percent. The rate for university graduates was even higher, at 13.11 percent. Estimates suggested that one in three graduates remained jobless for up to two years.

Additionally, nearly 40 percent of Bangladeshi youth fell into the "not in education, employment, or training" category, with significantly higher rates for females. Education has thus become a symbol of exclusion. It has created a paradox in which the more educated a person is, the more likely they are to be unemployed than illiterate labourers.

This systemic grievance was fuelled by a labour market in which degrees have lost currency and skills training lacks respect. The frustration was visibly expressed in the uprising of July 2024.

The grey wave: Ageing without a safety net

While public attention remains fixated on youth, a quieter crisis looms. Bangladesh is ageing rapidly. By 2050, the country will have an estimated 44 million elderly citizens.

Unlike wealthier countries, Bangladesh faces the prospect of ageing before achieving broad prosperity. The traditional family safety net, in which children cared for ageing parents, is fraying as households shrink and migration pulls younger members away.

The burden of this transition falls disproportionately on women. In zero-margin households, women already manage starvation budgets. The addition of elder care, especially for chronic conditions such as diabetes or heart disease, threatens to dissolve household stability altogether. Medical expenses are already the leading cause of financial insolvency. Without pensions or state-supported care, the Grey Wave risks deepening fragility across the working class.

To do or not to do

Bangladesh is not an exception here; it is an early warning of what happens when growth outpaces protection in the Global South. The momentum of inevitable progress appears to be fading. Markets alone cannot resolve the tensions of stalling fertility decline, chaotic urbanisation, frustrated youth, and a soon-to-be ageing population. What is required is serious recalibration—a new arrangement that moves beyond the project-based models of the past.

This begins with a redefinition of human capital. The bureaucratisation of education needs to be reversed through a rigorous overhaul of the National University system and a decisive effort to de-stigmatise vocational and technical training. The goal must shift from enrolment to employability, turning students into producers rather than credential holders.

Such a shift in skills must be matched by spatial rebalancing. Dhaka cannot remain the country's sole economic engine. Real political decentralisation requires granting fiscal and administrative power to secondary cities if they are to function as independent growth centres. Urban planning must go beyond contracts and concrete and move towards reducing the cost of living for the poor.

Crucially, universal social protection must underpin these structural changes. Bangladesh needs to move from temporary relief to permanent, life-cycle security through pensions and health coverage. A nation cannot be resilient when 74 percent of healthcare is paid out of pocket, forcing families to choose between medicine and food.

What Bangladesh is facing is not a crisis of numbers, but a crisis of margins. Our demographic window is narrowing, but the true danger is not an explosion. It is quiet calcification. The path the country is on will not collapse dramatically; it is hardening in slow motion. If drift continues, inequality will become structural—a permanent state of friction in which an underemployed youth population coexists with a destitute elderly class, neither able to lift the other. Avoiding this outcome will require acting with foresight, clarity, and resolve. Solutions are not unknown. However, the fatal danger lies in postponing them.

As a new year begins and the political calendar stands to open onto a new chapter, can we transcend declarative optimism and find the renewal of purpose and collective action that can drive the turning point the nation needs and deserves? We can, and we must.

Why we must rethink our water management practices

Bangladesh withdraws about 32 cubic kilometres of groundwater annually, 90 per cent of which is used for irrigation.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

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In establishing the various uses of water, we categorise them into consumptive and non-consumptive uses. So far, I have discussed consumptive use, but we must also think about non-consumptive uses. Do fish drink water? No, but they need a watery environment for their growth as a basic condition of living. Wetlands demand a major ecological approach and natural resource management consideration.

We are drying up our wetlands to convert them into agricultural land and to expand our villages and urban areas. We convert wetlands into dry land, possibly based on a very wrong understanding that wetlands are wastelands. In our Constitution, Article 18A states that the protection of nature, forests, wetlands, and biodiversity is the responsibility of the state. Unfortunately, while this clause was being adopted, the term "river" was dropped by honourable members of Parliament. We need to re-evaluate our understanding of the non-consumptive uses of water.

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Now, we turn to another very important non-consumptive use: navigation. Over the last 100 years, we have focused on the development of road networks and railways. Not an iota of consideration has been given to the development of navigation facilities. Our neighbours have been pushing the development of Ashuganj as a gateway for the northern states. On the other hand, we have ignored and allowed major navigation routes in parts of Chilmari, Balashighat, Aricha, Bhairab Bazar, and Narayanganj to fall into oblivion.

For the movement of bulk non-perishable goods, navigation offers the cheapest mode for the nation. The cost of transportation using navigational facilities is one-sixth of that using roads in a riverine country with an existing intricate network of rivers across the country. However, the opportunity for navigation is limited by the seasonal operational levels of river routes. In the southern part of Bangladesh, where rivers are tidal, opportunities still exist. The steamer service in Khulna is dead. I feel bad about it.

Only strong government incentives, including fiscal support and regulatory pressure on road transport, can shift bulk cargo towards inland navigation. Let me repeat that I am advocating for the movement of bulk quantities of non-perishable goods.

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I would now like to discuss the marine areas of Bangladesh. Broadly categorised, we have tidal and non-tidal rivers. Then, within the tidal area, the land and water zones can be divided into four categories. The first is the coastal belt; the second is the territorial waters extending 12 kilometres from the coastline; the third is the exclusive economic zone, extending 250 kilometres offshore; and the fourth is the open water beyond the economic zone.

Management of coastal and marine water—whichever ministry is responsible is irrelevant—should extend from the high mountains to the deep coastal belt. The global slogan is to link Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) with Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM). We have ports, namely Mongla, Payra, Chittagong, Matarbari, and Cox's Bazar. Only Matarbari is a deep seaport. In the current global context, the capacity of the other ports is inadequate. We need to re-evaluate our current planning and development processes for ports.

I do not understand why Bangladesh spends huge funds on Mongla and Payra ports. Mongla is located in a shallow-water area; by relocating it just a few kilometres south, either to Banishanta or Harbaria, it could be transformed into a deep-water port. However, for Payra Port, I see no future. The Payra River naturally develops a shallow sand bed extending up to 50 kilometres into the bay at its mouth, and it will continue to deposit such sandbars even if we spend thousands of takas on dredging. The southern part will remain shallow despite repeated dredging. Payra Port may function as an inland port.

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At this point, I would like to talk about our understanding of the rivers of our country. Let me boldly remind everyone that a river does not carry water alone. It also carries sediment. Water discharge must be balanced with the quantity of sediment it carries, and sediment is transported mostly as bedload. Sediment may consist of large boulders, small boulders, pebbles, small stones, coarse sand, medium sand, fine sand, silt, and clay particles. We need to develop a sound understanding of the nature of sediment at different locations along rivers, as well as the quantity of sediment involved. We do not collect data on sediment. This is a matter of national importance.

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Water has many users, and many government agencies are responsible for developing and managing it. We must shift our thinking from development to management. Disasters have a strong correlation with water-related issues. Besides floods and droughts, we must also think about clogged sedimentation routes. At the same time, we need to consider river erosion and the destruction of valuable land. One of the major causes of landslides is heavy rainfall.

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Short-duration heavy rainfall is a major challenge for urban areas. This creates drainage congestion problems. Are cities and towns prepared for this? Is Dhaka ready for 300–400 mm of rainfall in a single day? My answer is no. I fear that we may face such a situation, as this is already happening in parts of the Middle East.

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At this stage, let me turn to the institutional aspects. Who manages water? My answer is nobody. No one is mandated to do so with appropriate authority. Flood management is carried out by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB). The Board focuses on development rather than management. The name of the organisation and its Terms of Reference or mandate may need to be changed from water development to water management. The current BWDB provides support to the agriculture sector, but there is little appreciation for the good work it has done so far. This is largely due to poor management practices.

Who is responsible for drainage congestion—the municipalities and city corporations? Do they have appropriate technical mandates? Who is responsible for water quality-related issues—the Department of Environment (DoE)? Yet the DoE cannot cope with the unabated levels of water pollution. The Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADC) provides support to irrigation projects, but farmers themselves are responsible for irrigation using shallow and deep tubewells. There is a conflict between groundwater use for drinking purposes and irrigation for agriculture. Inland water is supposed to be managed by the Inland Water Transport Authority (IWTA) and the Ministry of Shipping. However, I could not find any organisation that supports the management of water for nature.

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Another important consideration for water management in Bangladesh is transboundary water. In my view, more than 100 transboundary rivers flow from India into Bangladesh. Other than this, only two or three very small rivers flow in the opposite direction. Effective management requires action at the highest political level. It cannot be negotiated by Water Ministry officials alone. To me, the current institutional arrangement is ineffective and unproductive. By 2027, we will reach a stage when the issue of transboundary water must be handled by political leadership rather than by bureaucrats or technocrats.

Let me conclude by saying that it is high time we took a completely fresh look at overall water management practices in the country. Water development can be both a bane and a boon. The beneficial part is reaching saturation very soon; therefore, we must bring the future into our planning process and, if possible, fundamentally recast our institutions.

Why we fail to save our rivers

TUHIN WADUD

Director of Riverine People and a Professor in the Department of Bengali at Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur.

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh still lacks a clear, unified definition of a river, making protection and counting impossible.
2. Conflicting surveys and records enable large-scale, untracked river encroachment.
3. Rivers are illegally reclassified and registered as private property despite constitutional safeguards.
4. Administrative neglect and political backing protect river grabbers.
5. Public silence and weak institutions accelerate the destruction of rivers.

Our country is a riverine land. Rivers are deeply intertwined with the very formation of this land. Yet, even today, the definition of a river has not been finalised in Bangladesh. Without a settled definition, it is impossible to determine the actual number of rivers. In 2023, the National River Conservation Commission proposed a definition of a river. However, it does not appear that all government agencies have accepted this definition. Had it been accepted, the same definition would have been followed in determining the number of rivers.

Does only what was marked as a river in the British-era CS (Cadastral Survey) maps qualify as a river? Are flows that local people have, for generations, called rivers not rivers at all? Unless it is clearly defined which flow can be called a river, it will never be possible to calculate their number. And without knowing the number of rivers, it is also impossible to say how much river area has fallen into the hands of illegal grabbers.

To our knowledge, during the British cadastral surveys there were no clear guidelines on which flow would be considered a river. Many wide and long flows were recorded as khals (canals), while comparatively narrow and short flows were recorded as rivers. It appears that surveyors simply recorded flows according to the names used locally: what people called a khal was recorded as a khal; what they called a dara was recorded as a dara; similarly khari, dohor, or chhara were recorded as such. As a result, many sections within rivers, canals, daras, chharas, dohors, and kharis were recorded as wetlands or waterbodies.

Officially prepared lists of rivers in Bangladesh have changed year after year. Many of us who have worked on river issues for a long time believe that Bangladesh has more than two thousand rivers. In 2005, the Bangladesh Water Development Board spoke of 230 rivers. In 2011, the same institution reported 405 rivers. In 2024, the National River Conservation Commission stated that there are 1,008 rivers. In 2025, the Ministry of Water Resources of the interim government published a list identifying 1,415 rivers. This list was prepared within a very short period of time by the interim government.

Across the country, we are witnessing countless rivers being encroached upon. The scale of this encroachment is not publicly available. To my knowledge, the government has still not undertaken work on encroached river land using CS maps. The main reason for this is a lack of political will. Without identifying encroachment, it is impossible to free rivers from illegal occupation. A few years ago, when Dr Mujibur Rahman Howlader was Chairman of the National River Conservation Commission, we learned of more than fifty thousand encroachers across the country. The government procrastinated in evicting them, and as a result, the illegal occupations remained.

Many rivers have even been recorded in the names of private individuals. I would like to mention one or two such examples. In Nageshwari upazila of Kurigram district, there is a river called Girai. It is recorded as a river in the CS records. However, in the RS records, the river has been registered in the name of a private individual. Some rivers have been completely occupied; others are gasping for breath under encroachment;

A stretch of the Harihar River at Swaranpur village in Jashore's Manirampur upazila was occupied and divided into at least 50 small ponds by local influentials, who built dams for fish farming. PHOTO: STAR

and in many rivers, encroachment has only just begun. Apart from the rivers of the Sundarbans and the hill tracts, it is doubtful whether a single river in this country remains entirely free from illegal occupation.

Neglect by those responsible for river protection, combined with public indifference, is allowing our rivers to be illegally occupied. No action is taken against river grabbers, or against those who unlawfully register rivers in private names or facilitate such occupation. There is virtually no accountability for officials responsible for rivers.

The primary responsibility for river protection lies with Deputy Commissioners (DCs), Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs), and Assistant Commissioners (Land). However, DCs and UNOs do not treat rivers as a priority issue within their jurisdictions. Moreover, since society at large does not strongly protest river encroachment, many officials choose to ignore the issue and complete their tenure without confronting it. Because politically powerful figures often support river grabbers, DCs are reluctant to take action against them.

River land is often registered in private names, land revenue (khajna) is assessed and collected, and official records are prepared. At the root of every such process lies the illegal reclassification of river land. Legally, there is no scope to change the classification of river land. Constitutionally and legally, rivers are public property. As rivers are public property, the government has no authority to allocate them for private use.

Since river property cannot legally be reclassified, any arrangement to sell it is entirely unlawful. Once the classification of river land is illegally altered, the path is cleared for encroachers. Illegal occupiers then register river land in their own names under other land categories. When the issue of land revenue arises, government officials, often in collusion, accept khajna.

If a river is registered in a private name, it is unquestionably illegal. Yet even when such illegality becomes public, people do not protest. This protest, however, is crucial. When someone fills a river with earth or creates ponds within a river, local residents must be the first to raise their voices. While working directly on river issues, I have seen countless structures inside river channels. It is obvious to the naked eye that these structures lie within the river. In some cases, roads have even been built by blocking the natural flow of rivers. Yet local people have not objected. This lack of resistance accelerates river encroachment.

Often, river encroachment begins in the name of religious institutions or public welfare clubs. Later, private encroachment spreads around these structures. In many cases, bridges are constructed narrower than the river's actual width. Over time, the width of the bridge is treated as the river's width, and encroachment continues accordingly.

There are also difficulties associated with river protection movements. Those who advocate for river conservation are often labelled as anti-government. Through this, local administrations are positioned against activists. We had hoped that realities would change after the July uprising, but that expectation now seems naïve. Instead, encroachers have become even more powerful. If future elected governments do not give special attention to river protection, it will be extremely difficult to save our rivers.

If the government truly wishes, every river in this country can be freed from illegal occupation. Rivers can be protected within the existing administrative framework. However, for long-term protection, the National River Conservation Commission must be strengthened. The Commission should have regional offices in every division, along with special powers to evict illegal occupiers. Accountability of Commission officials must also be ensured.

Public awareness is essential. Exemplary punishment must be ensured for river encroachers and everyone involved in the encroachment process. Only through a combined effort of legal enforcement and public awareness can the rivers of our country survive. There is no alternative to freeing our rivers from encroachment for the greater interest of future generations.

The article has been translated into English by **Samia Huda**.

No river, no dream

A conversation between Kongjian Yu and Kazi Khaleed Ashraf on rivers and the future of our cities.

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

Prominent architectural and urban thinker and the editor of the book The Great Padma: The Epic River that Made the Bengal Delta.

KONGJIAN YU

One of the world's leading landscape architects and ecological thinkers, who developed the radical idea of a "sponge city." He died in a tragic plane accident in the Amazon last year.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf (KKA): River-realm or river-sphere, or, in a technical sense, river ecology, has been a recurring topic in our many conversations. River ecology is the domain of professionals and planners, but when we say river-realm, it invokes the social life—the people's way of looking at rivers and experiencing them. There may be four ways in which rivers evoke our imagination. One, recreating the natural process with the river as the generator. By that, I mean the river has water, it has a flow, and an important thing—it has sediment.

Two, rivers are now technologically mediated. By that, I mean how human installations such as dams, dykes, embankments, and channelisations, constructed for one reason or the other, with good or bad consequences, define development.

Three, rivers are part of the public realm and shared imagination. People go from the interior of the land to the edge of the river and experience something phenomenal—you can't minimise that. In Bangladesh, there are so many poems on that experience; I am sure in China as well, about being present at the magical edge of the river.

And four, how rivers, from a natural system, become a part of a constructed system. I think conflicts arise there, in the kind of constructed landscape we are pursuing. In Bangladesh, the village is a constructed landscape in which rivers play a significant role. But the way rivers are in villages is quite different from the way rivers have become in cities. It seems that in cities we have lost the spirit of the river. What has happened from the villages to the cities? In cities, rivers have basically become drainage channels—an ecological disaster—polluted and abused, controlled by technocratic processes.

As an architect, I am interested in the ethos of rivers. Although I am trained in the techniques and technology of making buildings, I have increasingly developed an interest in rivers. In Bangladesh—perhaps in China and Vietnam, in all the deltaic places—an architect should first be trained in understanding rivers before handling buildings. Because the river in deltaic places is the basis of the "ground" condition. And without understanding the ground condition, how can you proceed? In Bangladesh, sometimes there is no ground condition—the water comes in and the land vanishes, and when the water goes away, land is recreated in a different way. There is no site without water in Bangladesh—it's all about water.

Kongjian Yu (KY): Bangladesh and China, particularly East Asia, Malaysia, and Indonesia—what we call South to South-East Asia—have a monsoon climate. Most of the countries in the monsoon regions are underdeveloped or developing. Now the whole world is talking about climate change, but we are always in a climate change. Climate change is nothing new for China, for Bangladesh, for India, for Malaysia. For the past 100 years, these underdeveloped countries have been colonised by what we call industrial civilisations. Those civilisations developed in European countries where the climate is quite stable or mild, I would say. When you look at the rain pattern in Europe, it is very mild and evenly distributed. When we—I mean countries that are in a similar monsoon climate zone—try to adopt that industrial civilisation, we will fail. That's why all Chinese cities in the monsoon region in coastal areas— in fact, two-thirds of Chinese cities—suffer from urban flooding. And certainly, most of the cities in India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan are suffering from issues like flooding because we simply don't have our own climate-adaptive infrastructure. We used to have it once, as you mentioned, in the villages. Unfortunately, we don't have an urban modernism adapted to the river and the monsoon climate.

A proposed new urban form for Dhaka, by Bengal Institute.

KEY POINTS

1. Stop fighting rivers; plan cities that adapt to water, flow, and sediment.
2. Replace grey infrastructure with nature-based, sponge-city solutions.
3. Treat rivers as public, cultural, and ecological commons—not drains.
4. Learn from village-scale, monsoon-adaptive landscapes and practices.
5. Reform education and policy to prioritise river-centred urbanism.

In 4,000 years of agriculture in China, we learned to adapt to the monsoon and river system. We have hundreds of cities along the Yellow River basin that follow strong adaptive patterns. I wrote a paper in 2008 on this adaptive landscape. A typical Chinese city has two layers of walls surrounding it. There is an inner wall, which is a square wall to protect the city during war. Then there is a bigger circular wall, which is 2 metres or 1 metre high, that adapts to the river. In the villages, we build houses on higher ground. We build terraces and raise them to 2 metres or 3 metres high. That's enough to adapt to the river. The most important thing is that we never fight the river. There are a thousand years of agricultural practices in which villages, by opting for minimum intervention, use adaptive landscapes and demonstrate adaptive skills that include cut and fill to create dykes and ponds, and high ground for settlement. So, we had villages that worked with the river, lived with the river, but now we have cities that change the river. But we will ultimately fail because of the power of the river. The river is a force of nature; it is the most forceful of natural entities because of the monsoon climate.

I think it is important to understand why rivers in this region are different from rivers in European countries, where they are often predictable, stable, and controllable. When you think of the Thames, the Rhine, or the Seine—those rivers were fine until European countries also began experiencing dramatic change due to climate change. Now, it is monsoon-like there. That's why European countries will come back to Asian civilisation to learn how we adapt to the monsoon type of climate.

Today, because we have powerful concrete and steel industries, as in China, all the rivers have been channelised, all the way from the Himalayas to the Yangtze River to the ocean. The whole river is being constructed because of the power of industrial civilisation. I believe this kind of civilisation will fail. That's why, in my letter to the mayors of China about the big river, I said we are going to have another civilisation. How to free the river. Instead of constructing rivers, we make our cities spongy, adapting them to rivers.

KKA: I am very glad you mentioned the monsoon sphere; that's what distinguishes this part of Asia from other parts. The region is a child of the monsoon. The monsoon is really a water phenomenon, and the river is a part of that.

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When you say the river is a force of nature, and the monsoon is part of that, we have a dynamic, volatile, changing phenomenon, and everything that follows. For centuries, we have adapted to that dynamic condition. But as you said, with our engagement with Western cultures, one of the things we have adapted is a belief that technology can solve everything. Some people call it a technological utopia. I would say technological arrogance. Of course, we rely on technology. But if we assume that it will solve, control, and manage everything, including the dynamic condition of the monsoon, that's not happening.

Liupanshui Minghu Wetland Park, Guizhou, by Turenscape.

You mentioned dykes. Dykes could also be small in scale. In Bengal, farmers make dykes to control and manage the flow of water and its containment on a small scale. But that's very different from technologically scaled-up embankments. There, you want to control nature. Farmers didn't want to control nature; they wanted to manage only certain sections of the flow of water. Regarding the word Bengal or Bangala, Emperor Akbar's chronicler Abul Fazl mentioned that the 'al' in the word Bang-al is derived from the small dykes farmers make. So, perhaps the name of the nation, a national bearing, refers to the ethos of agriculture.

You mentioned how rivers and water systems are more or less stable in the European context, whether naturally or processed. But things are changing now. The monsoon is arriving in Europe also. They are now considering different rhetorics—let the water flow, let the rivers flow. They contained the river before; now it's about flow, overflow, and the dynamics of water. So they are changing their policies, while in our context we are still beholden to their old technologies.

KY: Yes, I think that's the tragedy of human society. We keep on making mistakes. We forget our heritage. The difference with other regions is in the scale of the technology; ours is much smaller, localised, it's sponge-like. It's not a big dyke; it's not a dam. That makes a big difference. Now it is linked to a massive industrial scale. The old practice is family-based, individual-based, and village-based. That creates a very resilient system. From what I saw in Dhaka, you have a big potential for urbanism. But what is going to be the form of the city? That's very challenging.

It is possible to create a new type of water-adaptive, resilient city. That will be a new revolution. The tragedy is that the policymakers don't have this kind of knowledge, and that's why I think it's important for a new leadership to transform the decision-makers. That's why, for the past 25 years, I keep talking, letting the decision-makers know that if they fail, a crisis will develop. Look at what happened in 2012 in China. In Beijing, the capital was flooded, and so many people drowned. They have begun to realise that we need a spongy city and different nature-based solutions, not an industrial solution. But the so-called advanced industrial civilisation is still in control. We have to revise so many things, including university textbooks and the ways we educate our people. The entrenched system doesn't believe that a spongy city will work. But I think that's the future. We need a new school.

KKA: In China, you have worked with 300 cities. In Bangladesh, every town has a river. I haven't come across any town without a river. The river may be active, may be a little dead, a little sad, but there is a river. There is still a deep historical relationship with rivers—the deep structure you talk about. But increasingly we have forgotten that because of this utopia of technology, and perhaps the lure of capitalism. So what's going to be the form of the city in an adaptive process—that's the key question.

KY: We should not just follow whatever the Western part of the world is doing. We should invent a new type of urbanism. That's the only way we can transform from dystopia. You mentioned the utopia of technology—actually, it is a dystopia of technology. From dystopia, we should move towards our local, native utopia in order to build a new city based on adaptation to agricultural landscape practices. I think you need to do it: build a new city that has a completely different form, and then we can show the whole world what the new urbanism of the next century is—one that can adapt to climate change and other challenges.

KKA: If you look at the environment of Dhaka, it's surrounded by a combination of floodplains, agricultural land, and river basins. It is a fantastic landscape, increasingly being changed simply by landfilling—as if there can't be any other response other than landfill. The argument has been that we need to build, we need to put up buildings, we need it for the economy, and so on. I personally feel that ecology and economy need not be enemies. There are strong laws in Bangladesh about the conservation and retention of such a critical landscape, but the laws are not maintained because of the forces of the economy. I think there can be a third form, what you referred to as a new urban form, because the conventional pattern of building and the conventional mode of construction will always lead to a crisis, as it is based on a 'dry ideology.'

You have already mentioned two things—rivers as forces of nature and rivers as life. If we accept that, of course, the future of rivers is the same as the future of human civilisation.

KY: Yes, well, I will say: free the river—that's the future. The river is a vital living organism of the whole world, particularly of the monsoon region. When I was in Bangladesh, I was amazed at how productive your water system was, with the fish and agriculture. It was the same in China. Now we destroy the whole system. The river is key for the planet in providing an ecosystem. We try to build grey infrastructure to replace those services, and that becomes so expensive. That causes all the problems.

So, we have to think in terms of services—how much the river produces, how much abundance the river can provide: life's biomass, everything. You even mentioned silt. Silt is the base for productivity. Without silt, no production. Imagine how much fertiliser we use today, how many chemicals we produce, and meanwhile how much we risk. Sixty percent of chemicals run into the river. China consumes 30 per cent of global fertilisers. India, Bangladesh, plus America consume another third. Sixty per cent of all those chemicals run into the water. Water itself loses the capacity for cleaning and producing nutrients that farmers need.

The second is certainly what you mentioned at the beginning as cultural qualities. Rivers produce so much picturesque, poetic, and cultural spirit of humankind, whether in India or the USA or China. Talking about culture, the only American literature I read was about Huckleberry Finn travelling along the Mississippi River. So the same in Bangladesh. But when I travel today, I see a loss of the poetic content. I don't see any trees around the river, no villages along the river, no communal life, no fishermen—that's a huge loss. It's not spiritual life anymore.

The other thing is the power of regulation. The surface of the river is regulated; that's why it leads to so much climate change. In the dry season or in the wet season, you have the river basin system that regulates the river. Note that the Amazon River is still very primitive. So you can imagine what it used to be: an abundance of forests with water flowing underneath the canopy. You did not see the water; you did not see the river. Green and blue, everything together, sponge-like—that is what rivers should be. That's the global future.

I say all rivers should be covered with forests, that there's no hard boundary. We see the river as a productive ecosystem—the most biodiverse areas are within the river and around the river, including the wildlife system and everything. This is nature regulating itself, with the meanderings, the tributaries—it acts as a great regulator; it's a home for the soul. No river, no dream. Kids today don't even know how to draw the picture, as the river is now concrete. Freeing the river doesn't mean reverting to a primitive agricultural civilisation. We are upgraded. We now understand the science of the river. We are based on the modern science of the river. We now know how to adapt to it, not because of survival needs alone, but because we are sensitive. The move from unconsciousness to a conscious understanding of the river is the future of the planet, the future of humankind. So, the future of the river is the future of human civilisation.

This is a shorter version of a conversation between **Kongjian Yu** *and* **Kazi Khaleed Ashraf**, *held in 2022 for Jamini Art Journal.*

ILLUSTRATION: **ANWAR SOHEL**

Changing nature of work, just transition and gender

SHAHIDUR RAHMAN

Professor of Sociology in the Department of Economics and Social Sciences at BRAC University. His recent publication was an edited book titled "Social Transformation in Bangladesh: Pathways, Challenges, and the Way Forward," published by Routledge in 2025.

The labour market worldwide is going through major transformations driven by climate change. It is reshaped by the transition towards an environmentally friendly workplace. Poorly managed transitions could lead to hardships in industries, particularly those relying on fossil fuels. The idea of a "just transition" is therefore gaining prominence as a means to navigate the shift from fossil fuels to decarbonisation equitably, with a specific focus on workers' rights. This concept of a "Just Transition" originated in the 1970s when labour unions advocated for support for workers affected by environmental regulations.

Over the years, the 'Just Transition' concept has extended internationally as well, recognising the need to address the uneven distribution of the burdens and costs associated with the impact of climate change. The 'Just Transition' framework is also applicable to another crucial transformation driven by digital technology, such as automation. Whether labour rights are protected by the shift from basic to advanced technology is also a major concern. Both changes – climate and technology - carry opportunities and challenges for workers in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, the second largest exporter of garments in the world. Under these circumstances, the objective of this writing is to understand 'Just Transition' in the RMG industry by understanding the impact of climate change and automation on female garment workers who comprise the major workforce of this industry.

Women workers have experienced adverse effects from technological advances.

FILE PHOTO: **PALASH KHAN**

The RMG sector has emerged as a cornerstone of the Bangladeshi economy, generating around 4.2 million jobs and advancing women's empowerment and financial independence. With its substantial contribution of over 10% to GDP and its accounting for 84% of foreign earnings, it stands as a vital force for progress. Despite benefiting from this sector, it grapples with climate change vulnerabilities. The garment and textile sector in Bangladesh remains heavily resource-constrained and pollution-intensive. In fact, the RMG sector is the most significant contributor to CO2 emissions (at 15.4%) in Bangladesh (Green Climate Fund, 2020), which poses a huge risk to the health of its workers. However, health effects from toxic fumes or chemicals have thus far been addressed only sparingly in the global discourse. Current concerns regarding the impact of climate change on workers in the RMG sector mostly focus on heat stress and productivity. Not only does heat stress diminish labour performance, but it also curtails labour supply and productivity, with the potential of increased absenteeism during hotter periods (Letsch et al., 2023). Such productivity loss affects economic output and wages, impacting local economies and communities in the process (Kahn et al., 2021). In Dhaka's garment factories, temperatures can reach 38°C during peak production hours, posing significant risks to workers, as high indoor temperatures can cause suffocation.

Furthermore, from one of my research projects on stakeholder perceptions of environmental sustainability, conducted in collaboration with the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), it was noted that women are cited as bearing the brunt of the consequences of climate change. This is because they are more likely to be absent from work due to having disproportionate care duties within their domestic sphere. Losses in income due to reduced productivity can be particularly challenging for women, as they have limited access to resources and ownership and already earn lower wages. Additionally, as gender-based violence and harassment are already pervasive throughout the RMG sector and lower productivity is a driver of violence and harassment in the workplace, studies indicate that decreasing levels of productivity due to climate change may potentially result in heightened levels of harassment against female workers (ILO, 2019). Extreme weather conditions leading to heat stress, absenteeism etc. can thus exacerbate these cases of violence. From the theoretical framework of ecofeminism, there is a clear gap in the acknowledgement of women's health and their particular health vulnerabilities due to the environment, which furthers their economic and social inequities, such as job mobility and income. Many women are even shown to quit their jobs after a specific period due to a lack of proper health amenities, which are now even more necessary, due to the increasing weather turbulence and climate change. The difference in attitude between women-centric and male-dominated managerial bodies is extremely telling. While further investigation is required to properly assess gender differences within perceptions, where organisations with female management need to be compared and contrasted with male-dominated organisations, the significance of female voices within this battle for a green transition has been illuminated through the findings of this study.

KEY POINTS

1. The "Just Transition" aims to navigate the shift from fossil fuels to decarbonisation equitably, with a focus on workers' rights.
2. Automation improves productivity, safety, and comfort but has led to job losses, especially among women in helper roles.
3. Climate change in Bangladesh's RMG sector causes heat stress, health risks and reduced productivity, disproportionately affecting female workers.
4. Adequate resources must be mobilised to protect workers, especially female employees with limited labour market options, amid climate change and automation.
5. Training, upskilling, and awareness initiatives are essential to ensure women in RMG sector can adapt to technological changes and achieve a "Just Transition."

The "Just Transition" in the changing nature of work can also be analysed by evaluating the effects of automation on women workers, as evidenced by my research in collaboration with the Bangladesh Labour Federation (BLF). Automation in Bangladesh's RMG industry has drastically transformed the operational and social landscape, yielding numerous benefits for both factories and workers. While the transition to automated processes has not been without challenges, its positive outcomes underscore the potential of technology to drive productivity, quality, and improved working conditions. The advancement of technology in factories has brought notable improvements in workplace safety and comfort, particularly by reducing the physical strain of repetitive and labour-intensive tasks. Another benefit of modern machines is their ability to count production automatically. Previously, women workers spent four to five minutes manually counting the number of pieces they had completed. Still, advanced sewing machines now perform this task automatically, displaying the count on a screen. This feature saves time and has increased production rates. Automation has also enabled women workers to complete tasks more quickly, giving them more time to relax at work and spend time with their families. Tasks that previously required an additional hour on older machines now take an hour less on advanced machines. According to a worker, "With the older machines, cutting thread by hand wasted time, and we couldn't take breaks or even drink water without reducing our output. Now, with automated machines, we work more relaxedly."

However, women workers have experienced adverse effects from technological advances. My study indicates that fewer workers were required in the factory following automation. In the survey, the workers were asked which group was replaced more: males or females. 62% of the workers said more women were replaced. As evidenced by this study, the number of helpers (the majority were women) has decreased following the introduction of new machines. In this context, one of the workers stated, "Before the automatic machines came, a large number of women worked as helpers. Now that automated machines have been introduced, we no longer require many helpers. As a result, a lot of women lost their jobs."

In Bangladesh's RMG industry, gender inequality is starkly evident in senior production roles, such as CAD operations. While most garment workers are women, they remain concentrated in lower-level sewing roles, with men dominating digital jobs in CAD departments due to technical education or internal promotions. This disparity leaves women behind in a rapidly evolving industry. Stakeholders must prioritise providing women with access to CAD training, as their understanding of clothing construction offers a solid foundation for upskilling.

Physical demands also contribute to inequality. Women often avoid training for processes such as denim production, which require physical strength, and instead focus on sewing tasks. Machines with complex mechanisms, like Jacquard and Kansai, are predominantly operated by men, leading to higher salaries and additional benefits for male workers. Women, by contrast, earn less and receive fewer privileges, further widening the gender gap.

Social structures and cultural norms, including religious restrictions, also discourage women from pursuing advanced training. However, women who do attend these initiatives often adapt equally well as their male counterparts. Household responsibilities frequently prevent women from attending training sessions outside of their shifts. Additionally, lower educational attainment among women in Bangladesh makes adaptation to automation more difficult. As noted by a factory manager, some female workers still struggle with basic literacy tasks, such as signing their names, highlighting the need for better support and targeted training to help women adapt to the changing workplace.

The objective of this writing was to explore the "Just Transition" in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, given changes in the nature of work and their impact on women workers. From the context of climate change and automation, it was revealed that adequate resources need to be mobilised to protect workers—with a particular focus on female employees who have limited options available in the labour market. In this process, concrete research should be conducted to showcase more evidence on the relationship between climate change, automation, and their effects on women workers.

Social safety nets for this group of workers remain inadequate; therefore, the green transformation could make their lives more vulnerable. The government has already taken a significant contribution to the garment industry's development. However, the government can address the challenges of the changing nature of work by training workers to adapt with these changes. Awareness of career advancement is essential by educating women workers about the relationship between adaptation to technology and income. If the government, labour organisations, NGOs, and other development partners provide appropriate training and workshops, it will immensely benefit the apparel industry and ensure 'Just Transition.'

COASTAL WATER PROBLEMS

From siltation to toxic pollution

CAMELIA DEWAN

Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Oslo.

The rivers and canals of Bangladesh are being made to die. Bangladesh is a country of water, where land and water are entwined and ever shifting. Monsoon rains (borsha) were once described by colonial administrators as the "blessing of fertility" of Bengal. Yet since the 1960s, the construction of permanent flood-protection embankments (beribad)—initiated during Ayub Khan's rule with the technical assistance of Western development agencies—has fundamentally altered the hydro-ecology of the delta. These embankments have disrupted sediment flows, intensified siltation, and in many cases worsened flooding rather than preventing it. These transformations have been further exacerbated by transboundary interventions, including India's unilateral construction of the Farakka Barrage.

Despite this history, donors and successive governments have continued to frame coastal water problems as technical deficiencies: too much silt, too much salinity, too much erosion, too little infrastructure. In this framing, the delta appears unruly and resistant to management. Yet my research on the Bengal delta shows that the problem is not an unpredictable environment, but a persistent misreading of how water, land, labour, and governance are entangled. The delta is not failing; the political and economic priorities shaping interventions within it are.

As Bangladesh enters a new political cycle, coastal water governance must be treated not as a marginal environmental issue but as a central question of national development, employment, and justice. Eroding embankments, silted canals, polluted waters, and precarious coastal livelihoods are not separate problems. They are the outcomes of a development model that privileges short-term projects, underfunds maintenance, and externalises environmental and social costs onto rural and coastal communities.

Embankments and the work of keeping water alive

Embankments have long been positioned as symbols of protection and progress. They promise stability in a dynamic landscape. In practice, they often do the opposite. Poorly maintained and inconsistently funded embankments interrupt sediment flows, accelerate siltation in canals and rivers, and concentrate erosion pressure elsewhere. When embankments fail—as they repeatedly do—the damage is not only hydraulic but social: crops are destroyed, drinking water contaminated, and households pushed deeper into debt.

The core problem is not that embankments exist, but that they are treated as one-off capital investments rather than living infrastructures requiring continuous care. Funding arrives for construction, but not for long-term maintenance. Riverbank erosion, shifting river courses, and heavy monsoon rains then predictably lead to collapse. Since the 1990s, brackish-water shrimp cultivation has further weakened embankments through the widespread installation of illegal pipes and sluices to draw in saline water during the dry season.

What is needed is a shift in fiscal and political imagination. Coastal embankment management must be recognised as a permanent public obligation, not an emergency expense nor a short-term donor-funded project. This requires multi-decade funding commitments, transparent maintenance budgets, and accountability mechanisms that do not disappear once a project ribbon is cut.

One of the most effective yet undervalued responses to coastal water problems is also one of the oldest: excavating canals, ponds, and water bodies. Regular excavation reduces siltation, improves drainage, replenishes freshwater storage, and mitigates salinity intrusion. It also creates employment at scale. Yet excavation continues to be treated as ad hoc relief work rather than as core infrastructure maintenance.

This is a mistake. Canal and pond excavation should be institutionalised within annual, centrally funded rural employment schemes, rather than tied to disaster declarations or donor cycles. Crucially, this must be recognised as dignified work, not expendable labour. Workers engaged in excavation should receive healthcare insurance, pensions, and protections equivalent to other public works employees. This is not charity. It is an investment in ecological resilience and rural economies.

In a country facing climatic uncertainty and increasingly extreme weather events, employment that simultaneously restores water systems is precisely the kind of work the state should be creating. Framing excavation as job creation rather than environmental clean-up shifts the political calculus. It places water governance squarely within questions of livelihoods, citizenship, and social protection—where it belongs.

KEY POINTS

1. Coastal embankments disrupt sediment flows and often worsen flooding across the country.
2. Poor maintenance and short-term projects deepen rural vulnerability and debt.
3. Canal excavation and sustained care can restore freshwater resilience.
4. Industrial growth, shipbreaking pollution, and weak enforcement poison coastal environments.
5. Future stability demands funding, accountability, safe labour, and just governance.

Unregulated shipbreaking leaves lasting harm—injuring workers, polluting coastal waters, and degrading local ecosystems.

FILE PHOTO: **STAR**

Industrial growth, polluted waters, and the limits of enforcement

Nowhere is the entanglement of economic growth, water pollution, and expendable labour more visible than in Bangladesh's ship recycling industry. My research on shipbreaking demonstrates how development pursued without robust regulation and enforcement produces slow and cumulative forms of harm—damaging workers' bodies, contaminating coastal waters, and degrading local ecologies.

Ship recycling, like the ready-made garments sector, is often defended as a national economic success story. It is true that the industry contributes steel, employment, and foreign exchange. But growth alone is not an adequate measure of success. The costs—industrial pollution, hazardous waste, and serious injury and death—have been systematically displaced onto workers, surrounding communities, and coastal environments.

Pollution from shipbreaking does not remain confined within yard boundaries. It moves through tidal waters, sediments, and food chains, affecting fishers, farmers, and coastal ecologies already under strain. These harms are not accidental. They are the predictable outcome of regulatory gaps, weak enforcement, and a political tolerance for environmental sacrifice zones.

During my early fieldwork in 2019–20, workers often described government inspections as natok—theatre—a box-ticking exercise rather than meaningful oversight. Since then, many ship recycling yards have invested in upgrading facilities in order to comply with the Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships, as required under the 2018 Bangladesh Ship Recycling Act. In 2023, Bangladesh ratified the Convention, which entered into force in June 2025.

This entry into force shifts responsibility inward. Enforcement now rests squarely with national authorities. Without serious investment in regulatory capacity, the Convention risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative, undermining both serious operators and Bangladesh's international reputation. Effective enforcement requires money, expertise, and political will.

First, Bangladesh must establish a fully operational Treatment, Storage, and Disposal Facility (TSDF) for industrial hazardous waste. Without this infrastructure, compliance is structurally impossible. Hazardous materials cannot be managed safely if there is nowhere for them to go. Continued delays effectively subsidise pollution by allowing toxic waste to be absorbed by land and water.

Second, the state should fund independent third-party maritime experts to evaluate ship recycling facilities on a regular basis. These assessments must be transparent, technically rigorous, and insulated from industry pressure. Facilities that fail to meet standards should not be permitted to take in new ships. This is not anti-industry; it is pro-credibility. Allowing substandard yards to continue operating undermines compliant facilities and entrenches a race to the bottom.

Third, enforcement agencies themselves require urgent attention. Many face chronic understaffing and limited technical capacity. Ship recycling involves highly complex material assemblages that require specialised inspection expertise. Boosting enforcement budgets and training is not optional if standards are to be meaningful. Inspectors cannot enforce what they are not equipped to assess. At present, even basic asbestos sampling cannot be conducted domestically. Establishing accredited laboratory facilities would significantly strengthen Bangladesh's ability to meet its international obligations.

Labour protections are central to environmental outcomes. Unsafe work practices and environmental contamination often stem from the same root: cost-cutting at the expense of human and ecological well-being. Economic development that depends on disposable workers is neither ethical nor sustainable. Bangladesh must ensure full compliance with core ILO conventions on freedom of association, collective bargaining, minimum wages, and occupational safety and health. Workers must be able to organise, earn living wages, and refuse unsafe work without fear of retaliation. These are not obstacles to productivity; they are conditions of long-term viability.

Corporate responsibility must also extend beyond token gestures. These are foreign-owned ships, from which global companies have extracted decades of profit. Bangladesh should insist that ship owners take responsibility for the end-of-life impacts of their vessels. As part of wider global discussions on climate responsibility, it should be non-negotiable that ship owners make meaningful investments in local healthcare, water infrastructure, and environmental remediation for affected communities in ship recycling sites. Communities (such as Zele fishermen) living alongside industrial sites are stakeholders, not collateral damage.

Reframing priorities for tomorrow

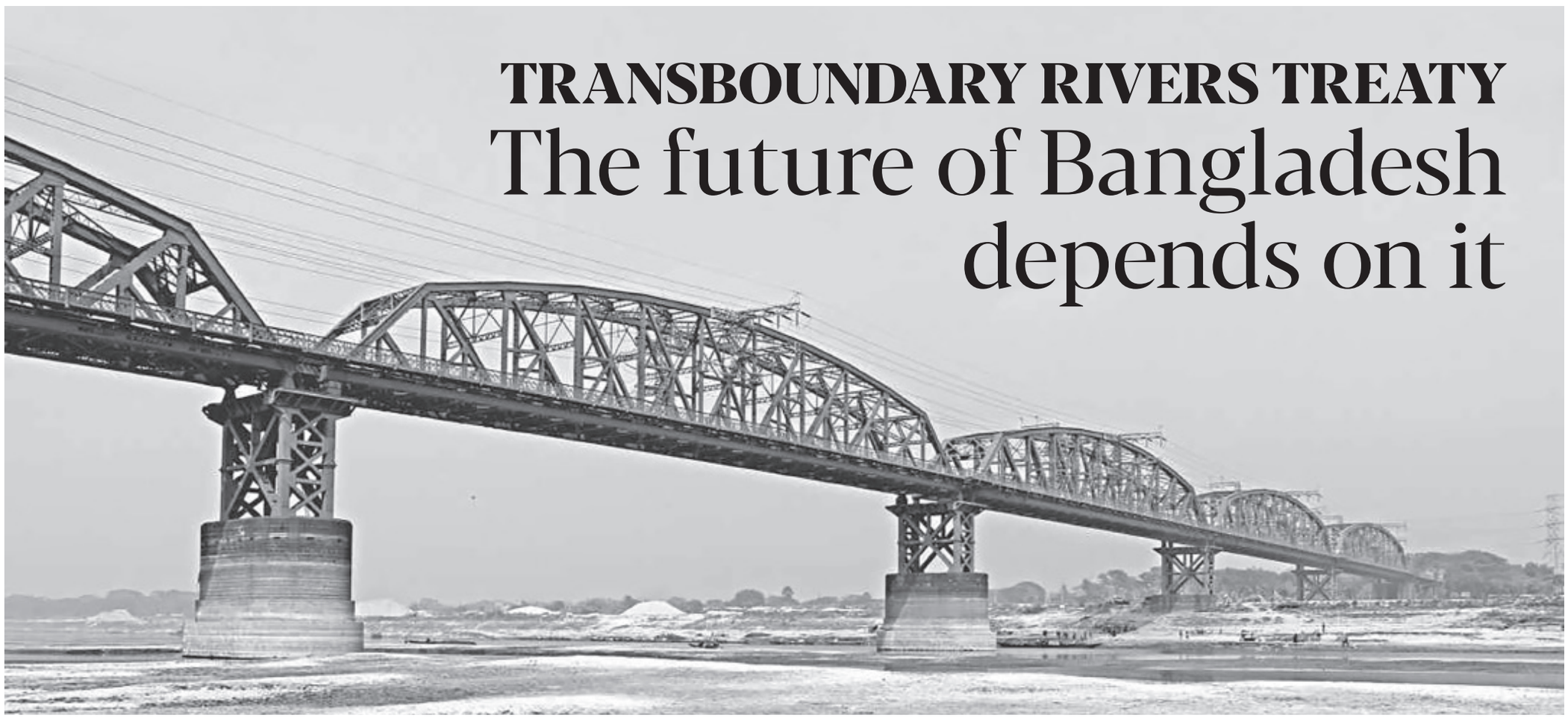
Coastal water problems, embankment failures, polluted shorelines, and unsafe industries are too often discussed in isolation. They should not be. They are linked through a political economy that undervalues maintenance, normalises environmental harm, and treats certain workers and environments as expendable.

Development without enforcement is not development—it is deferred crisis. Bangladesh's credibility, both domestically and internationally, now depends on whether commitments to environmental protection, worker safety, and water governance are matched by budgets, institutions, and sustained political will.

Investing in coastal waters is not a niche environmental concern. It is an investment in employment, public health, food security, and long-term economic stability. Treating these issues as marginal risks repeating the same mistakes under new slogans. Treating them as priorities offers a chance to read the delta on its own terms—and to build a future that is not only productive, but liveable.

Investing in coastal waters is not a niche environmental concern, rather an investment in employment, public health, food security, and long-term economic stability.

FILE PHOTO: **STAR**



TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS TREATY

The future of Bangladesh depends on it

India's withdrawal of water during the dry season leaves the riverbed near Hardinge Bridge almost dry.

FILE PHOTO: HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU

MD. KHALEQUZZAMAN

Professor of Geology at Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania, USA. He can be contacted at mkhalequ@commonwealthu.edu

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh's survival depends on fair, basin-wide management of transboundary rivers originating upstream.
2. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty is limited, inconsistently implemented, and expires in 2026.
3. Reduced dry-season flows have caused severe economic loss, salinity, ecological damage, and displacement.
4. Integrated basin-scale compacts, not narrow treaties, offer sustainable benefits for all co-riparian states.
5. Bangladesh must prioritise hydro-diplomacy and ratify international water law frameworks.

A pre-liberation time slogan, "*Tomar amar thikana – Padma-Meghna-Jamuna* (the Padma-Meghna-Jamuna is our address)," depicts the inherent connection of rivers to the very existence of Bangladesh as a country. The geographic territory of Bangladesh is created by river-borne sediments over a long period of geologic time. All major rivers that flow into Bangladesh originate outside the country's boundaries. In that sense, Bangladesh does not have any control over the river flow in transboundary rivers that are vital to her economy, ecosystems, and survival. Bangladesh is located at the most downstream part of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) basins, which span over parts of China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. Although only 8% of the basins belong to Bangladesh, 25% of the 600-million population in the GBM basins live here. Of the 54 transboundary rivers that are shared among the countries in the GBM basins, there exists only one 30-year treaty between India and Bangladesh on the sharing of Ganges water during lean months. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty will expire at the end of 2026. The Ganges basin spans India, Nepal, and Bangladesh; however, the treaty was signed between India and Bangladesh only. There exists a separate treaty between India and Nepal on the flow of the Gandak and Kosi Rivers, which are tributaries of the Ganges River.

It is widely accepted that river basins are single entities – despite flowing through different states or countries – and should be managed as such. All international laws, rules, and principles that deal with the management and planning of transboundary rivers promote the concept of integrated water resources management at the basin scale. For example, the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997) is a global treaty providing a framework for cooperation, management, and protection of shared river basins for uses like drinking, irrigation, and energy, emphasising principles of equitable and reasonable utilisation, not causing significant harm, and the obligation to cooperate. This law serves as a backbone for bilateral agreements on shared freshwater resources. Another example of integrated water resources management involving all stakeholders is the European Water Framework Directive (WFD), which considers the interconnections between surface water, groundwater, and related ecosystems in transboundary rivers.

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Transboundary rivers treaty

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Several successful water resources management treaties that are based on the WFD in Europe include the Central Commission on Navigation on the Rhine (CCNR), the International Commission on Protection of the Rhine (ICPR), and the Danube River Basin Monitoring Network (DRBMN). The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty of 1996 also recognised the need for basin-scale management of the Ganges and other transboundary rivers. The Ganges Treaty provided a good framework for collaboration between India and Bangladesh and paved the way to reach long-term agreements on other transboundary rivers. However, the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty is not a comprehensive plan to manage water, sediments, and energy generation potential in the basin involving all stakeholders. Besides, the treaty only deals with water sharing during the lean season – not throughout the year. The Ganges Treaty does not have a guarantee clause to ensure the discharge of the agreed-upon amount of water at Farakka Barrage to Bangladesh.

Unfortunately, the treaty fell short in fulfilling the obligations to discharge the agreed-upon amount of water at Farakka Barrage to Bangladesh. Several published studies that are based on data available from the Joint River Commission (JRC) for the period 1997–2016 reported that Bangladesh did not receive the agreed-upon amount of water 52% of the time. In addition, Bangladesh did not receive the agreed-upon amount of water 65% of the time during the three guaranteed periods between March 11 and May 10 during the same study period.

The water scarcity during the dry season in the Ganges leads to loss of navigation, groundwater depletion in the Ganges-dependent region in the southwestern part of Bangladesh, upstream salinity intrusion in freshwater rivers and crop fields, and changes in freshwater-fish species composition. Bangladesh does not have any control over the flow in the transboundary rivers during the monsoon, which results in untimely flooding and riverbank erosion. People in the Ganges-dependent region are losing their homes to riverbank erosion and flooding. For example, a study published in 2019 in the Journal of the American Water Resources Association (JAWRA) reported that the hydrologic characteristics of the Ganges-dependent region in Bangladesh were modified significantly between 2001 and 2014.

The reduction in freshwater flow increased the extent and intensity of salinity in 11 out of 14 measuring stations in Khulna, Jessore, and Satkhira districts. The amount of agricultural land in the area declined by 50%, rural settlement declined by 20%, and freshwater bodies declined by 38% during the study period between 2001 and 2014. The study also reported that the direct damage to Bangladesh's economy is about $3 billion. The Farakka Barrage has caused significant damage to the Indian economy as well. Waterlogging and recurrent flooding have increased upstream of the Farakka Barrage in parts of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. Navigability of the Kolkata Port remains unfulfilled, although that was the motivation for building the Farakka Barrage.

The reduction of lean-season flow at the Farakka Barrage is caused by other dams and diversionary structures built by India and Nepal at upstream locations. As per a report by the World Economic Forum published in 2019, the Ganges is being throttled by more than 300 dams and diversions, with many more blocking its tributaries, stopping the natural flow of the river. Since the Ganges Water Sharing Treaty is an agreement between upstream India and Bangladesh, it is the responsibility of India to abide by the agreement.

The newly elected government in Bangladesh will have to formulate a new treaty for sharing the water and sediments for all transboundary rivers in general and for the Ganges in particular. In new negotiations with India and potentially with other co-riparian countries in the GBM basins, the government of Bangladesh will have to document the hardships and crises that the country faces due to scarcity of flow in the Ganges and in other rivers in terms of economic losses, destruction to the ecosystems, and human health. The flow data need to be shared in the media so that the people and researchers can participate in the decision-making process.

A map showing the Ganga River's journey from the Himalayas through the plains to its delta, highlighting its route and surrounding landscapes.

Water scarcity should not be discussed only in light of the losses in navigation, agriculture, irrigation, industry, and fisheries. It needs to be viewed from a planetary health perspective, which should include recognition of the impact of climate change on ecosystems, environment, and public health.

Bangladesh should advocate for a basin-scale integrated water and sediment management compact involving India and Nepal in the discussion on renewal of the Ganges Treaty. Similarly, Bangladesh should work with China, India, Bhutan, and Nepal to reach a long-term compact on the Brahmaputra River basin management. A compact is an agreement among all stakeholders in a river basin for conservation, utilisation, development, and control of water and related resources under a holistic, multi-purpose plan to bring the greatest benefits and the most efficient service for all parties involved. A compact is a far more visionary management plan for transboundary watercourses than a mere water-sharing treaty. It can benefit both upstream and downstream stakeholders. Under a compact, a feasibility study can be carried out to identify multiple uses of water resources in the GBM basins, which can include water retention reservoirs built at upstream locations to store water for electricity generation, recreation and tourism purposes, and augmentation of lean-season flow at downstream locations. Under a compact, the cost-sharing agreement will have to be reached among co-riparian nations.

The new government in Bangladesh needs to approach transboundary water resources management with an open mind. It needs to work with India in dealing with China on the management of the Brahmaputra River basin. Bangladesh's new parliament should ratify the UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses (1997) as the first order of business. The GoB should encourage India and other co-riparian nations to use the UN Convention as the basis for negotiation to settle all transboundary river issues. If necessary, Bangladesh can propose holding a convention on transboundary river issues involving development partners, such as the World Bank, IMF, EU, JICA, DFID, USAID, and other pertinent parties.

Bangladesh should put hydro-diplomacy at the centre of all diplomatic dealings with countries in the GBM basins. In other words, Bangladesh should keep the issue of transboundary rivers in mind when deciding on other treaties, agreements, and business dealings with China, India, Nepal, and Bhutan. For example, Bangladesh could renegotiate transit and transshipment issues with India for a permanent settlement of the transboundary river issues on the basis of fairness and collaboration. The GBM region has a long history and tradition shared by people in all co-riparian countries, and we should use the natural flow of rivers as a thread to bind us rather than as a cause for concern.

Bangladesh's future in the shadow of gender violence

SAMINA LUTHFA

Professor of Sociology at the University of Dhaka.

VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

PHOTO: **COLLECTED**

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains prevalent and significant in Bangladesh, deeply rooted in our patriarchal norms, despite notable progress in overall economic and political participation over the decades since our liberation. Addressing this violence and achieving genuine gender equality are critical for the nation's future aspirations of inclusive, sustainable growth and development.

This brings us to the paradox: despite decades of women holding the top positions of political power in the country, why have we not been able to ensure basic security for women? The answer lies in two separate arenas of our society: the social and normative sector and governance. The first can be traced to the deeper cultural structures that shape our society. Women are still perceived through a patriarchal lens, either as second gender binaries, despite their long historical presence in our society, have, in recent decades, been cast out from citizenship rights. It is claimed that their very existence is 'Western'-influenced and anti-religion. They are relegated to the rank of a rightless marginalised group, and violence against such groups is even less likely to receive justice. This is why gender-based violence never seems to decrease. Therefore, it has a great deal to do with how our society constructs gender roles and rights.

A 2024 survey by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and UNFPA found that three out of four ever-married women (76%) aged 15 and older have experienced some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime. Nearly half (49%) experienced such violence in the past year.

Despite significant progress in economic and political empowerment—ranking 7th globally in political empowerment in 2016—the pervasive nature of discrimination and sexual and domestic violence continues to hinder the full potential of more than half of our population. The survey also shows that violence against women and girls is widespread in both public and private spheres, including physical, sexual, emotional, and economic abuse, as well as controlling behaviours. Technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV), such as cyber harassment and non-consensual image sharing, is also a significantly growing concern, especially among young women. Post-July, cyber harassment of politically active women has skyrocketed.

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Bangladesh's future in the shadow of gender violence

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July uprising of 2024, like other mass uprisings, we witnessed the en masse presence of women on the streets and in the organisation of the uprising. While women came down on the streets of Dhaka and other major cities, they also faced different kinds of violence from state forces as well as Awami League's political henchmen. While collecting data from more than nine thousand July women, we encountered women who consistently feared being sexually harassed by those aforementioned forces when they joined the movement. For them, therefore, joining the street protests always came with an additional burden: the fear of being sexually violated.

Post-July, what we witnessed was, first, a complete erasure of these women from all celebrations and jubilations marking the triumph against the authoritarian regime. These July fighters were first erased, then targeted and slut-shamed in cyberspace, and subsequently harassed physically on several occasions. Meanwhile, the perpetrators were eulogised with flower garlands by certain sections of men in the name of chastity and values. Three such perpetrators were rewarded with considerable grandeur. These actions helped to create a new culture of fear, marked by impunity for perpetrators and renewed humiliation for victims. Although some may attempt to brush off such incidents as disconnected or stray occurrences, even a few such incidents are sufficient to generate a culture of fear and to delimit women's mobility and freedom. Moreover, the overall lack of security caused by a deteriorating law-and-order situation under the interim government affects women with deeper vulnerabilities. When powerful actors within the state machinery encourage extra-judicial mob violence through pressure groups, the situation worsens for women and girls. Their mobility and security are the first to be curtailed, as misogyny is effectively celebrated through silence from state forces and agencies that are meant to ensure security for all citizens.

In the new year, we should aim to be a developed and inclusive nation, and its future aspirations rely heavily on eliminating gender violence and ensuring women's full participation in all spheres of life. We must ensure the following. First, economic empowerment, with a core aspiration of achieving women's economic independence in order to reduce dependency and vulnerability to abuse. Efforts should focus on improving women's access to education, formal employment, and other financial opportunities. Secondly, we need to strengthen and enforce laws such as the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act and the Child Marriage Restraint Act, and develop a national Sexual Harassment Prevention and Protection Law to safeguard the legal rights of women. In addition, an equal share of income and inheritance should fall under a uniform civil family law, a code for which the women's movement has long struggled. Thirdly, in the long term, we must shift the patriarchal mindset that perpetuates gender inequality. This requires community-driven initiatives, engaging men and boys as allies, and integrating gender-sensitive education into schools and public awareness campaigns. Last but not least, women's empowerment and development require sustained investment from the state to ensure affirmative action for more than 50 per cent of its populace that continues to lag behind. Borrowing from Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, we cannot think of advancing smoothly when one of our two wheels is broken. Future aspirations must focus on establishing coordinated, robust, and survivor-centred support services, including medical, legal, and psychosocial assistance, with particular emphasis on confidentiality and accessibility.

In essence, while gender violence presents a significant barrier, Bangladesh's future aspirations must involve a holistic approach that tackles both the symptoms and root causes of inequality in order to foster a safe, inclusive, and thriving society for all its citizens. This requires a substantial shift in socio-cultural norms, strict enforcement of laws, and the active engagement of men and boys in building a safer and more equitable society.

PHOTO COURTESY: **SABRINA MUNNI**

KEY POINTS

1. Enforce GBV laws strictly, ensuring accountability for perpetrators and protection for survivors.
2. Strengthen education for women and girls while implementing targeted programmes for men and boys.
3. Guarantee women's economic independence through education, formal employment, and inheritance rights.
4. Establish survivor-centred support systems with accessible medical, legal, and psychosocial services.
5. Integrate gender justice into governance, policing, and public institutions to end impunity.

A transition from 'Ageism' to 'Agevism'

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Other Social Security Programmes, such as the Allowance for Freedom Fighters and the Allowance for Widows and Husband Deserted Women, also support many older people. However, among rights scholars, many argue that mandatory retirement laws and policies are one of the active catalysts for deepening the 'Ageism' context. While many other countries have passed Anti-Age Discrimination Laws (i.e., Australia), Bangladesh has yet to do so. Besides this, there is still a lack of a specific elderly abuse prevention law in Bangladesh, despite having its distinctive nature, which requires special attention like women, children or the environment for the common good.

Furthermore, the government integrated ageing issues into other policies such as the Health Population & Nutrition Sector Development Plan (HPNSDP) (2011), Accelerating Growth and Reducing Poverty (2011), the Population Policy (2012), the Social Welfare Policy (2012), and the Sixth Five-Year Plan FY2011-FY2015, as well as the National Health Policy for Older Persons (2008), which prioritises developing the human and physical resources needed for the healthcare of the ageing population. Furthermore, the Bangladesh Family Care Program (2012) connects government agencies to provide holistic health and social support to the elderly and other vulnerable groups. However, sometimes having special attention for older people in different policies that tag themselves as physically less suitable and vulnerable compared to their other age groups can create a negative image of this age group. Sometimes, these can create confusion between physical and mental ability, and age-related inability, incidentally. However, policies could incorporate active ageing to promote sustainable well-being.

The UN Independent Expert on older persons observed that Bangladeshi elders often "feel invisible and burdensome," reflecting deep-rooted ageist attitudes (UN OHCHR, 2022). Older women are particularly disadvantaged due to gender inequality, limited assets, and poor pension coverage (HelpAge International, 2019). Health services also remain age-insensitive — few hospitals have geriatric units, and most rural health centres lack trained personnel. In addition, the social protection net (e.g., the Old-Age Allowance) covers less than half of eligible seniors, with benefits too low to meet living costs (World Bank, 2023).

In the existing context, where ageing has been seen as an essential component of a broader developmental goal, there is a possibility to move beyond traditional target-based approaches and re-ground ageing policy in the context of social progress, gender equity, human rights, and decreasing poverty. In light of this viewpoint, it becomes obvious that ageing is more than just a byproduct of developmental policy, and that, by using the ageing policy as a catalyst, a just and democratic society can be established.

Combating ageism: The policy projections

In harnessing long-rooted and practised 'Ageism', Bangladesh should integrate legal reform with cultural and institutional transformation. In line with legal action, it can enact a comprehensive Anti-Age Discrimination Act covering employment, healthcare, and public services, and strengthen enforcement of the Maintenance of Parents Act. Moreover, to signify the elderly issues, an elderly abuse prevention law integrating a dedicated, speedy justice forum is much needed. As part of institutional reform, it is urgent to establish a National Commission for Older Persons to coordinate policies and monitor the implementation of rights. Moreover, expanding social protection by broadening the Universal Pension Scheme and ensuring timely, adequate allowances for all elderly citizens would greatly facilitate efforts to combat ageism. With regard to health and community support, developing age-friendly hospitals, community-based care, and psychosocial support programmes can make a notable change in the condition of elderly people in Bangladesh. Additionally, cultural change, promoted through education, media, and local initiatives, to foster intergenerational solidarity and counter stereotypes, recognising elders as contributors, not burdens, will add value to the combating ageism movement in Bangladesh.

Regulating 'Ageism' in Bangladesh demands more than charity or welfare — it requires recognising older persons as rights-holders, a recognition that the recent elder-rights scholarship calls 'Agevism'. Like other rights subjects, the elderly group should be a focal point for policy and rights platforms as this group has already met the two vital statuses of political identity and political philosophy of elderly rights to create a novel 'ism'--'Agevism' like feminism or socialism in global scholarship. By aligning constitutional principles, legal safeguards, and social attitudes with international standards, Bangladesh can move towards a more inclusive, dignified society where ageing is valued rather than termed a socio-economic burden.

FILE PHOTO: **STAR**

An elderly woman sits in an old-age home, reading the day's newspaper. Cut off from direct contact with her children, she pours her heart into a letter each month, pinning it to the noticeboard behind her — a quiet, unspoken plea for connection.

Princess's journey and the promise of skilled migration

AHMED MUSHFIQ MOBARAK

Professor of Economics and Management at Yale University.

FILE VISUAL: STAR

KEY POINTS

1. Expand publicly supported, employer-financed skilled migration pathways.
2. Invest in language and vocational training for high-demand global sectors.
3. Use public-private partnerships to reduce risks for migrant workers.
4. Shift migration policy from low-skill labour to rights-protected careers.
5. Treat skilled migration as development strategy, not brain drain.

AHMED MUSHFIQ MOBARAK

When I first met Princess, she was sitting cross-legged on the floor of a tiny concrete room in Davao City on Mindanao island in southern Philippines, her notebook open to a page covered in neat rows of Japanese hiragana. The room was very crowded, with a third of the space taken up by a bunk bed with two single mattresses for her mother, stepfather, baby sister, and her to squeeze into. The one luxury was a small air-conditioner. Princess' mother explained that they prioritised the AC purchase to make the room cool and comfortable for Princess, so that she could focus on her Japanese studies. In fact, the neighbour's daughter was also drawn to this tiny comfort and on most days came in to study together with Princess. Like Princess, she too was enrolled in the Japanese language, culture, and vocational training program run by my partner Onodera User Run (OUR), a subsidiary of a large Japanese food service and restaurant conglomerate that has recently entered the migrant labour intermediary business in response to the strong demand for young workers in Japan. Both girls were preparing for their Japanese language proficiency exams, the final hurdle before they could qualify for a work visa that would take them to Japan for jobs in nursing homes and restaurants.

For Princess, now 20, that dream is nearly within reach. After six months of language and vocational training at a local academy, she passed her employer interview – conducted entirely in Japanese over Zoom – and received her visa. Reaching this stage required a significant amount of sacrifice from her entire family. Her mother had decided to leave the comforts of their more spacious home in rural Mindanao to come to this tiny apartment in Davao city so that her daughter could attend classes at the OUR Training Academy—a private training institute licensed in the Philippines to provide skills training, and licensed in Japan to connect young Filipinos to long-term, legally protected jobs in Japan. Princess' stepfather installs and fixes appliances, and his client base remains in their hometown in rural Mindanao. He was commuting back and forth to Davao to support her learning, because they believed what so many families across South and Southeast Asia believe: that access to the labour market in a high-income country, if earned safely and skillfully, can transform not just one life but an entire family's future. When I asked the step-father why he was willing to make such a big sacrifice, he explained that it was his dream to work in Japan when he was younger, but he never made it due to the strict language and visa barriers. Princess is now living out his dream, and if she continues working hard, one day the whole family might be able to move to Japan.

A mirror for Bangladesh

Princess' story is not unique, but it is instructive—especially for countries like Bangladesh. Across South and Southeast Asia, millions of young people face the same dilemma: they are willing to work, eager to learn, and yet locked out of decent employment opportunities at home. In Bangladesh, more than one in four young people remain unemployed despite years of education. The energy that fueled last year's July Uprising—a powerful demand by youth for dignity and opportunity—was born from this same frustration.

As Bangladesh approaches a change in government through a free and fair election that was born out of that movement, one question looms large: how can the country turn that collective energy into lasting, productive change? One promising answer lies in expanding skilled international migration—a strategy that can open new doors for youth while meeting the needs of ageing societies like Japan and South Korea.

The new geography of work

Japan's population is ageing faster than almost any other in the world. By 2040, it will need an additional 5 million foreign workers just to maintain modest economic growth. South Korea's labour shortage is similarly severe; it has already tripled its migrant worker quota to 150,000 for 2024. Across Asia's wealthier nations, employers are struggling to fill jobs in caregiving, hospitality, and food service—sectors that sustain both economies and communities.

These trends create an extraordinary opportunity for countries like Bangladesh, which already has a long history of migration. About 8–10 million Bangladeshis work abroad, primarily in the Gulf, sending home billions in remittances each year. Yet most of these jobs are low-wage, temporary, and precarious. The future lies not in expanding low-skill migration but in "moving up the value chain"—training youth for better-paying, rights-protected roles in countries like Japan and Korea.

The language barrier — and the market failure

If the opportunity is clear, why has skilled migration from Bangladesh remained so limited? The biggest barrier is language. Learning Japanese or Korean is far more demanding—and far less transferable—than learning English.

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Princess's journey and the promise of skilled migration

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A worker who invests months mastering Japanese grammar does so in hopes of passing a government-administered exam that unlocks a specific visa category. If that visa falls through, those skills have little value elsewhere.

Economists call this a market failure: the private incentive to invest in these skills is too low, even though the social benefits—future networks, remittances, and knowledge spillovers—are high. This is why families like Princess's make extraordinary sacrifices: they are betting against the odds, without insurance, in the hope that opportunity abroad will justify the risk. A model that works this is where public-private partnerships like *Onodera User Run (OUR)* come in. OUR's "Straight Through" model removes the financial risk from trainees by offering free Japanese language and vocational instruction. The company is reimbursed by their clients: employers in Japan who pay only after trainees pass the required exams and are successfully placed at their work site. The approach has proven both ethical and profitable: thousands of Filipino, Indonesian, and Myanmar youth have already secured stable jobs abroad through the programme.

Recognising this success, the Bangladesh government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with OUR in April 2025 to replicate the model domestically. This is a true public-private partnership: The Bureau of Manpower, Employment, and Training (BMET) maintains a network of training centres that OUR can use as their training facilities, and OUR will have to recruit proper Japanese language trainers, and bring in skilled staff who can provide vocational training. The partnership was championed by economists and policymakers who saw the potential to transform skilled migration into a sustainable pathway for youth employment. Under this arrangement, Japanese employers co-finance training, while Bangladesh provides regulatory support and facilitates worker protections.

COURTESY: **AUTHOR**

Classroom for nursing home training to prepare elderly care workers. Training conducted in Japanese.

Classroom for food service training to prepare restaurant workers. Training conducted in Japanese. COURTESY: **AUTHOR**

If implemented effectively, this model could do more than create jobs abroad—it could help professionalise Bangladesh's migration sector, curb exploitation, and align labour supply with the real demands of global markets.

Beyond "brain drain"

Skeptics often raise a familiar concern: if skilled workers leave, won't the home country suffer a "brain drain"? Decades of evidence suggest otherwise. Recent research I published in Science—co-authored with other leading migration economists from Cornell, The World Bank, UC San Diego, and others—shows that migration opportunities generate more "brain gain" than "brain drain." When migration pathways open, more people invest in education and skill-building, knowing that global mobility is possible. The result is a net increase in human capital, not a depletion.

Princess's story makes this theory human. Her younger sister, still in school, watches her study Japanese verbs each night and dreams of her own future. Migration, in this sense, is not abandonment—it is aspiration multiplied.

There is also an ethical question worth asking: why should it be Princess's duty to stay behind and "develop" her country? Why must individual youth bear the burden of systemic failures in job creation? Development should not be a test of endurance for the young—it should be a promise of opportunity. If nations truly want to retain talent, they must first make life at home livable, dignified, and full of potential.

Until then, helping young people move safely, skillfully, and voluntarily across borders is not a loss—it's an act of empowerment.

The stakes for both sides

For Japan, the stakes are equally high. Without foreign caregivers and service workers, the country's ageing population faces higher mortality rates in nursing homes and declining productivity in key industries. Restricting immigration may appear politically popular, but it comes at a profound social and economic cost. The truth is that migrants like Princess are not taking jobs from locals—they are filling essential roles that sustain entire systems of care and commerce.

A shared future

The sight of 900 trainees at the OUR academy in Davao city greeting me in unison with "Konnichiwa" and "Mabuhay" was both inspiring and sobering. Their energy filled the room — the sound of hope spoken in two languages. Soon, I hope to hear "Konnichiwa" from classrooms in Dhaka and Chittagong, too. It symbolised a bridge being built between two nations, but also the weight of hope resting on each young shoulder. These are not charity cases; they are pioneers of a new labour geography—ambassadors of skill, discipline, and ambition.

Princess will soon fly to Japan to begin her new life. Her story should inspire us to imagine a Bangladesh where every young person has a fair chance — whether at home or abroad — to use their talents fully. That is how we will truly honour the promise of our youth and the spirit of the July Uprising.

If Bangladesh and the Philippines can show that ethical, well-regulated migration benefits everyone involved—the workers, the families, the employers, and the states—then Princess' small study room in Davao may one day be remembered as part of a much larger story: the story of how South Asia's youth helped rebuild the ageing economies of Asia, while rewriting their own destinies in the process.

As the Barind Tract accounts for nearly 50% of total agricultural groundwater use in Bangladesh, the region faces a critical reckoning.

PHOTO COURTESY: **AUTHOR**

Can the Barind Tract survive its own agricultural success?

MAHFUZUR R KHAN

Associate Professor of Geology at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He can be contacted at m.khan@du.ac.bd.

KEN RUSHTON

Professor (Retired) at the University of Birmingham, UK. He can be contacted at kenrrushton@btinternet.com

Stand in the middle of the High Barind in late April, and you are standing on one of the most geologically distinct surfaces in Bangladesh. The soil here is not the soft, grey silt of the active delta; it is an oxidised, iron-rich red—hard as concrete when dry, sticky as glue when wet. The heat radiates off the ground, often pushing temperatures past 35°C, while the winters dip below 10°C.

For centuries, this elevated Pleistocene terrace—an 8,720 square kilometre inlier sitting like an island within the Bengal Basin's recent floodplains—was known for its harshness. It is crisscrossed by rivers, yet paradoxically remains one of the country's driest regions.

Today, however, a drive through Rajshahi, Naogaon, or Chapai Nawabganj reveals a different reality. The landscape is lush, verdant, and productive. It sustains two to three crops a year, contributing significantly to national food security. But this "green revolution" hides a disturbing secret beneath the red clay: the water that fuels it is running out.

As the Barind Tract accounts for nearly 50% of the total agricultural groundwater use in Bangladesh, the region faces a critical reckoning. The water tables are dropping, the aquifers are stressed, and the very model that turned the Barind green now threatens to turn it dry once again.

The geography of thirst

To understand the crisis, one must understand the land. Spanning most of the Rajshahi and western Rangpur divisions, the Barind is an ancient formation, older than the floodplains that surround it. Topographically, it is dissected and complex, which can be broadly classified into three distinct hydrological personalities, each reacting differently to the thirst of modern agriculture.

First, there is the Flooded Terrace, where the aquifer is buried beneath a relatively thin layer (3–12 metres) of fine surface material. Here, the monsoon floods—driven by rising rivers and runoff—provide a natural recharge mechanism.

Second is the Level Barind. These areas are nearly flat and undissected. While they occasionally flood during high-intensity rainfall, the precious groundwater here is locked beneath a thick "aquitard"—a 6 to 27-metre layer of clay that slows down water penetration.

Finally, there is the High Barind, the most visually striking and hydrologically vulnerable zone. Hilly and cut by narrow valleys known locally as bydes, this area sits high above the water table. The aquifer here is shielded by a massive 20 to 35-metre thick aquitard. Rainfall here doesn't just soak in; it runs off rapidly through the bydes, leaving the groundwater reserves isolated and difficult to replenish, yet it does get replenished to a limited extent.

Historically, this geology dictated a single-crop economy. Farmers waited for the rains (1,250 mm in the west to 2,000 mm in the north), planted their monsoon rice, and hoped for the best.

The miracle that defied the UN

In the early 1980s, the global development community looked at the Barind Tract and saw a hydrological dead end. A 1982 study by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) offered a grim verdict: the aquifer system in the northwest was too complex and limited. They concluded it was suitable only for domestic drinking water, not for intensive irrigation.

Bangladesh, however, decided to gamble against the odds. In the mid-1980s, the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) launched an ambitious campaign to tap into the deep aquifers. They ignored the conventional wisdom that said the red clay was impenetrable. They utilised innovative engineering, including the "Inverted Well" design invented by Dr. Asaduz Zaman, to pierce the thick clay layers and access the water trapped below. Unlike a conventional well, where the pump is located within the well casing near the surface, the inverted well places the pump near the bottom within the screen section.

The intervention was nothing short of transformative. It was an engineering triumph that rewrote the economic destiny of millions. Farmers who once lived hand-to-mouth on a single rain-fed harvest began producing two, sometimes three crops annually. The hungry, brown landscape turned emerald green. Livelihoods improved, poverty rates dropped, and the Barind became a powerhouse of rice production.

But in defying the geological limitations, the region began writing a cheque its aquifers couldn't cash.

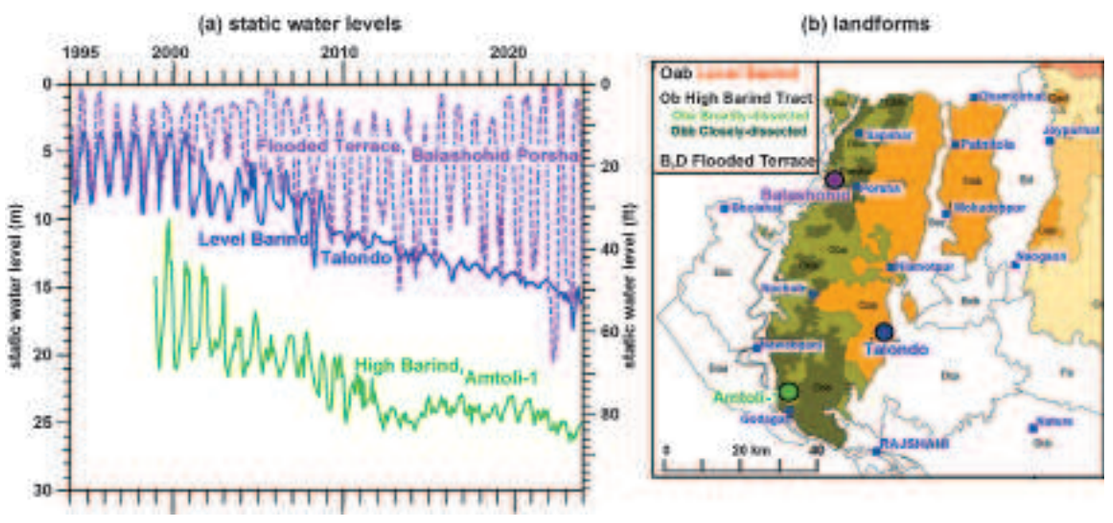

Figure 1. (a) Static water levels for four representative DTWs; (b) Distribution of landforms in Rajshahi Barind with separate colours for each landform. (Rushton et al. 2023)

KEY POINTS

1. Barind's agricultural success relies on intensive groundwater extraction from vulnerable deep aquifers.
2. Distinct Barind hydrogeological zones respond differently, with High Barind most stressed.
3. Inverted well irrigation transformed livelihoods but enabled unsustainable, irrigation-driven groundwater depletion.
4. Aquifer decline persists despite recharge through clay fissures and irrigation return flows.
5. Sustainability requires reducing abstraction thirty percent through crop diversification and governance.

The hydrogeological tipping point

Today, the bill is coming due. The Barind is suffering from "irrigation-driven depletion." While the inverted well design successfully unlocked the aquifers for irrigation, it also created the capacity to pump them dry, posing a severe threat to the long-term viability of the region's water reserves.

The crisis is not uniform. In the Flooded Barind areas, water levels have remained relatively stable over the long term, though they show increased seasonal fluctuations. The real emergency is unfolding in the High and Level Barind—the heart of the agricultural boom in Rajshahi, Naogaon, and Chapai Nawabganj.

The decline of the water table here tells a complex story of physics and geology. Initially, when the irrigation wells first began pumping, the water levels showed massive seasonal fluctuations, followed by a rapid, terrifying decline. This was the aquifer reacting under pressure.

However, in recent years, hydrographs show that the rate of decline has paradoxically slowed. To the untrained eye, this might look like stabilisation. It is not. It is a symptom of a fundamental shift in the aquifer's nature.

As the water level dropped below the confining layer of the Barind clay, the aquifer transitioned from a "confined" system to an "unconfined" one. In a confined system, pumping releases pressure, causing rapid level drops. In an unconfined system, the water is drawn from the physical pore spaces of the soil (specific yield). The decline slows because there is more volume to draw from, but the total reserve is being physically emptied.

For decades, geologists viewed the massive clay layer covering the aquifer as a watertight lid, sealing the groundwater off from the surface. This assumption led to the belief that the aquifer was a finite, fossil resource that could not be replenished. However, the misconception that the Barind Clay is entirely impermeable has been challenged by recent findings.

The conceptual illustration of physical processes paints a radically different picture. The clay is not a monolithic seal but is instead riddled with a network of ancient cracks, fissures, and root channels. These "macropores" act as vertical pipelines, facilitating a constant, year-round recharge to the aquifer. This creates a complex feedback loop. As farmers flood their paddy fields for Boro rice, a significant portion of that water permeates the bunds and beds of the fields. It travels down through the clay fissures, eventually dripping back into the aquifer—a phenomenon known as "irrigation return flow." In essence, the system is recycling its own water. While this process slows the decline of the water table, it does not stop it. The rate of extraction for water-hungry crops simply outpaces this combined natural and artificial trickle of recharge.

The way to sustainability

The question plaguing policymakers and hydrologists is simple: Is the damage irreversible? Are we witnessing the slow death of the Barind's agriculture?

Answering these questions requires a deep dive into the hydrogeological nature of the Barind—a task only possible after decades of pumping and careful observation. This critical understanding has been unlocked thanks to meticulous long-term monitoring of groundwater levels and abstraction by Dr. Asaduz Zaman and Mr. Mehedi Hasan of the Centre for Action Research-Barind (CARB). Their data enabled Dr. Rushton to model the groundwater system of the High and Level Barind with unprecedented accuracy.

This detailed modelling offers a glimmer of hope, provided we are willing to change our habits. The findings were clear: the current trajectory is unsustainable, but the situation is not hopeless. The study concluded that groundwater use in these critical zones could be stabilised.

The magic number is 70%.

The models suggest that if total groundwater abstraction is reduced to 70% of current volumes—a cut of 30%—the aquifers can recover and sustain themselves.

Achieving this does not mean abandoning agriculture; it means reimagining it. The current dominance of Boro rice, a thirsty crop that requires thousands of litres of water for a single kilogram of grain, is the primary driver of depletion. The path forward lies in crop diversification. Replacing the water-intensive winter rice with lower-water crops like wheat, maize, pulses, oilseeds, and spices could achieve the necessary 30% reduction without devastating the local economy. These crops are not only less thirsty; they often command higher market prices and improve soil health.

While Managed Aquifer Recharge (MAR)—artificial methods to force water back underground—is often touted as a silver bullet, the data suggests caution. Proponents point to systems like the one at the Amtoli-1 deep tubewell, where rainwater from a pump-house roof is fed directly into an inverted well. However, the volume of water directly recharged this way is negligible—less than 0.1% of the natural recharge occurring right now.

Paradoxically, the most effective recharge system is the agriculture itself. Massive volumes of water seep through the beds and bunds of rice fields during both the monsoon and Boro seasons. This water is slowly transmitted through the overlying clay into the underlying aquifer. This "accidental" recharge far outstrips any artificial MAR scheme proposed so far.

A race against time

The Barind Tract stands at a crossroads. One path continues the status quo: drilling more wells, pumping harder, and chasing the falling water table until the aquifer runs dry. This path leads back to the poverty and scarcity of the pre-1980s. The other path is one of adaptation. It requires the same boldness that defined the region's development in the 1980s. Back then, the challenge was to get the water out. Today, the challenge is to keep it in.

The "Inverted Well" was the technological innovation of the 20th century for the Barind. Crop diversification and strict water governance must be the innovations of the 21st century. The red soil of the Barind has proven it can feed the nation, but it can only do so if we stop treating its water as an infinite resource and start treating it as a precious, finite inheritance.

The transition will not be easy for farmers accustomed to the rhythm of rice. But the science suggests it is the only way to ensure the Barind remains green, rather than returning to the barren, thirsty terrace of the past.

Can Bangladesh turn its youth into its greatest economic strength?

SELIM JAHAN

Former Director of the Human Development Report Office under the United Nations Development Programme and lead author of the Human Development Report.

The greatest wealth of a nation is neither its geographical size, nor its natural resources, but its skilled young human resources. And, this is truer in a highly populated, natural resource-scarce country like Bangladesh. There are three distinctive ways in which young human resources of a country contribute to its economic development. First, the skills and capabilities of the youth can effectively and successfully use other means of production. In the absence of human resources, the mere presence of land, machinery, and raw materials is nothing but a collection of some innate things. Second, in the contemporary development process, appropriately skilled young human resources are needed to properly use the emerging technologies coming out of the digital revolution and artificial intelligence. Third, the inventive power, creativity, and innovation of the young people are critical for quantitative and qualitative economic transformations of a country.

Today, the youth labour force in Bangladesh is about 27 million, representing 36 per cent of the total labour force of the country. About 2 million young people are unemployed, accounting for 79 per cent of the total unemployed population. About 8 million young people are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) - a lost potential for the country. Joblessness among the university graduates is on the rise - from 0.25 million in 2013 to 0.90 million in 2023, a more than three-fold increase. In Bangladesh, about 9 lakh young people with university degrees are jobless. Furthermore, during the past 12 years, the number of unemployed university graduates in Bangladesh has inflated by more than 4 times - from 2 lakhs in 2013 to 9 lakhs now. As the total number of unemployed people in the country is about 27 lakhs, one in every three unemployed people is a university graduate.

The employability of Bangladeshi university graduates critically hinges on the discipline that they have pursued at the university level. For example, while the jobless rate among Political Science university graduates has been found to be 23 per cent, the comparable rate among the English graduates is only 0.17 per cent. In the Bangladesh economy, there is a delinking between higher education and the employment of young people. The higher education system of Bangladesh in 2022 has produced 7 lakh university graduates. But every year, the Bangladesh economy can absorb about 3 lakh university graduates. When supply is more than twice that of demand, unemployment is sure to occur. The incidence of high unemployment among the university graduates is also a reflection of the phenomenon of jobless growth in the Bangladesh economy. Over the past years, the economy has grown, but it has not produced sufficient jobs in the economy. For example, during the decade of 2013-2024, the industrial growth was 10 per cent, but 1.4 million jobs were lost during this period.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

The number of unemployed university graduates in Bangladesh has increased more than fourfold since 2013.

It must be kept in mind that the world of work, the nature of work and its modus operandi have been changing quite fast. One driving force for such changes is of course digital revolution, but the other is the structural changes in the global manufacturing and the services sectors. As a result, newer demands are being created for diverse professional knowledge and skills. Under such circumstance, people with skills and resources to use technology and create value can thrive. Globally, 133 million new high-skill jobs have emerged by 2024, but 75 million jobs might have been displaced by automation and new technologies. Among the new roles that are expected to experience increasing demand are data scientists and analysts, e-commerce and social media specialists, training and development experts, innovation managers, AI and machine learning specialists, big data specialists, information security analysts, and process automation experts. Undoubtedly, in the future world of work, new forms of human resources would be needed. Given that scenario, different countries have been remodelling their entire education system. They are refining their academic programme, syllabuses, teaching and learning methods - emphasising on science, technology, engineering and medicine-bases education (STEM). In China, 40 per cent of those who are graduating are STEM graduates. The relevant figure for India is 30 per cent. In the contemporary world, human resource development emphasises on five 'C's - cognitive skill, communication, connectivity, collaboration and coordination.

Under such circumstances, a critical question is: how would Bangladeshi youths compete in the world of the 21st century? In the context of the future world of world, this question is extremely important and relevant for Bangladesh. In global comparison, Bangladesh ranked 113th out of 141 countries in the Global Knowledge Index 2024. In the Global Innovation Index, it ranked 106th out of 133 countries. The top five skills rising in demand in Bangladesh are: teamwork and leadership skills (93 per cent), analytical skills (89 per cent), technological literacy (81 per cent), critical thinking and problem-solving skills (70 per cent), and creative thinking (63 per cent).

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Our higher educational structures and university systems have been lagging behind the demand for newer knowledge and skills. Given that in tomorrow's world, the Bangladeshi youths will have to compete not only with their peers inside the country, but also with the youths of the outside world, the following issues must be stressed. First, an assessment profile must be prepared as to what kind of skills are currently being developed in Bangladesh, with an identification of where there are opportunities and where deficits exist. In preparing such an assessment, the ongoing and upcoming human resource demand of domestic entrepreneurs must be kept in mind. A comprehensive list of future job opportunities that may be coming up in the outside world, needs to be prepared. In that context, the incidence of digital evolution must be kept in mind. Along with that, it should be identified as to what kinds of skills would be needed for those job opportunities. Taking all these factors into account, a human resource plan for the country should be formulated and aligned with the overall national plan.

Second, an evaluation must be done on the educational structure of the country - academic programmes, syllabuses, teaching and learning methods, physical and educational facilities and so on. The objective of this assessment would be to determine whether the current educational system of the country can meet its human resource demand as outlined in the human resource plan.

Third, in light of this background, the entire educational system must be overhauled, in which information technology as well as artificial intelligence should be included. In developing such an educational structure, on the one hand, the focus should be on the history, culture, and heritage of Bangladesh, but on the other, it should also draw on the experiences and achievements of other countries.

KEY POINTS

1. Map current and future skills demand, aligned with global digital shifts.
2. Reform education to match labour market needs and absorption capacity.
3. Integrate technology and AI while grounding learning in national context.
4. Invest in lifelong training for workers, teachers, and trainers.
5. Increase education and health spending to build competitive human capital.

To make human resource development effective, necessary training must be pursued continuously. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Fourth, in order to make human resource development effective, necessary training must be pursued continuously to ensure that the knowledge through education, and skills built so far are up to date, modern, timely and relevant. Such training is necessary not only for those who are in jobs, but also for teachers and trainers. In education, the academic programmes, educational means and equipment have been rapidly changing. Therefore, the knowledge and experiences of the outside world can also play an effective role in these areas.

Fifth, specific programmes may be undertaken to improve skills. These include strengthening industry-academic partnerships, developing on-the-job mentorship, organising affordable inhouse training, offering skill-based incentives and bonuses, offering language training programmes, utilising government skill development programmes, and partnering with local NGOs and training providers. Special attention must be paid to persons with disabilities.

Sixth, the above framework for human resource development requires regular monitoring, close assessments and objective evaluations. On the basis of the results obtained, the human resource development framework needs reviews from time to time. Such a review may lead to and result in changes, extensions and refinements of the framework.

Seventh, over the past 25 years, the education budget of Bangladesh has always been less than 2 per cent of GDP, and in 2025, it stands at 1.7 per cent of GDP. Similarly, during the same period, the health budget of the country has always been less than 1 per cent of GDP. In contrast, India spends 5 per cent of its GDP on education and 4 per cent of its GDP on health. In Vietnam, the education expenditure GDP ratio is 4 per cent and the health GDP ratio is 5 per cent. Bangladesh should spend 4 per cent to 6 per cent of its GDP on education and 5 per cent to 7 per cent of its GDP on health.

The world has been changing, and so are societies and humans. Changes have also been occurring in human aspirations and expectations. As a result, the demands for human resources and their supplies have also been changing. Bangladesh must be ready so that in those changed contexts, it can effectively use its one and the unique wealth - its young human resources. The country should seize that opportunity, as its young people hold the key to our future progress, achievements, and development.

As sea levels rise and weather patterns shift due to climate change, agriculture, water resources, and coastal communities in Bangladesh bear the brunt.

PHOTO: UNDP BANGLADESH ARCHIVE

Questioning national sovereignty in the climatic age

SAAD QUASEM

Lecturer in Anthropology and Climate Change at SOAS, University of London.

In the recent reform efforts initiated by the interim government, significant attention has been paid to elections, electoral politics, and fundamental rights, yet a critical question remains largely unaddressed: where does geography and the political challenges it produces fit within these reforms? If those tasked with reimagining the constitutional future of Bangladesh believe that geography can be dealt with later, this signals a deeper problem in the prevailing thought of the state. It reflects a worldview that externalises nature, relegating it to the imagined category of the "environment," something to be managed technically rather than lived politically. This way of thinking assumes that politics can exist independently of climate, as if life in the Bengal Delta allows for a separation between governance and geophysical reality. In the planetary age we inhabit, this assumption is not merely outdated; it is existentially dangerous. The persistent separation of climate from politics only deepens the crisis we face, foreclosing the possibility of a constitution capable of addressing the conditions under which life is lived.

The language through which climate change is addressed in policy and law today largely revolves around protection and adaptation – protecting the environment, protecting communities, protecting development from external shocks – and this language presumes a separation between nature and society, climate and politics, law and land. It treats climate as an external force that occasionally disrupts an otherwise stable social order. In a deltaic country like Bangladesh, this presumption is not only inaccurate; it is actively harmful. Such rhetoric allows climate to become a "tomorrow problem," something to be dealt with in the future, or an adversity that somehow bypasses the collective "we." The result is a form of political delay in which climate is always urgent but never foundational, always acknowledged but never decisive. This mismatch is visible not only in everyday speech but also in everyday laws, and in the constitutional imagination itself, which continues to push away ways of negotiating and living with geophysical reality. It is therefore surprising that climate-proofing the Constitution remains absent from reform discussions, not because climate is irrelevant, but because it is assumed to be external.

To move beyond this impasse requires a fundamental shift from protection to alignment, beginning with how the Constitution understands the country itself. Bangladesh is not a nation that exists on stable ground and is then affected by climate change; it is a nation continually made and unmade by climatic and riverine processes. Erosion, sedimentation, floods, salinity, and shifting channels are not exceptional disruptions but the conditions of life. The Brahmaputra–Ganges–Meghna system is not a threat acting upon society but the material infrastructure through which land, livelihoods, and political communities come into being. The idea of "Shonar Bangla" has often been romanticised as a stable ecological past – six seasons, predictable rivers, fertile land – and while this nostalgia is culturally powerful, it is politically paralysing. There is no return to a prior equilibrium. The climate that now shapes Bangladesh is more volatile, more uneven, and more unforgiving than before.

What gives Bangladesh its fertility, density, and cultural richness is not stability but the alluvial process itself: the continual arrival of silt, the constant rearrangement of land and water. A constitution that imagines permanence in such a landscape governs a fiction, and the cost of that fiction is borne through slow violence, displacement, and recurring catastrophe. Recognising this does not diminish national identity; it deepens it. "Shonar Bangla" is not golden because it resists change, but because it is continuously made through change. Constitutional language, especially in the Preamble, can acknowledge that the Republic is founded upon a living delta, where land, livelihoods, and political life are shaped by riverine and climatic processes.

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

In the past 17 years, 17 big cyclones have hit Bangladesh. So, climate change-induced losses and damages are real for our country.

Such recognition reorients governance away from emergency response and toward long-term alignment. Erosion becomes not a failure of development but a political condition requiring constitutional planning, while displacement ceases to be an anomaly and instead becomes a recurring reality that citizenship, representation, and rights must anticipate. At this level, climate-proofing protects the Constitution itself, for a constitutional order that ignores the delta eventually undermines its own authority.

This realignment also requires a rethinking of sovereignty, because, like most postcolonial constitutions, Bangladesh's Constitution inherits a classical nation-state model in which sovereignty is imagined as internally supreme and territorially contained. The State appears all-powerful within its borders, while external relations are framed as matters of diplomacy and choice. For a deltaic country, this model is deeply misleading. Bangladesh's geophysical existence depends on processes that unfold across the entire South Asian region. Rivers originate far beyond its borders; sediment loads are shaped by upstream dams, diversions, and land use; monsoons, glacial melt, and climate variability operate at continental and global scales. Bangladesh does not merely interact with the region; it is constituted by it.

Treating regional cooperation as merely economic, political, or diplomatic, without grounding it in the realities of life on the delta, is therefore profoundly problematic. It suggests that national policy alone can secure land, water, food, and climate resilience, when in reality many of the most consequential decisions affecting Bangladesh are made upstream or across borders. Climate-proofing the Constitution requires rescaling sovereignty, not abandoning it but reimagining it as relational capacity: the ability to secure national survival through engagement with basin-wide and regional systems. Acknowledging regional embeddedness does not weaken the State; it strengthens its claims by constitutionally grounding demands for shared responsibility, basin-scale governance, and transboundary accountability of rivers, forests, and ecosystems such as the Sundarbans. When regional cooperation is framed merely as foreign policy, failures of cooperation are treated as unfortunate realities; when framed constitutionally, they can be named as political and legal harms. This shift also guards against the false comfort of self-sufficiency, for a Constitution that pretends Bangladesh is geophysically autonomous sets the State up to fail its citizens, sustaining nationalist zeal in the short term while undermining long-term survival.

Finally, without electoral alignment, constitutional climate recognition risks becoming technocratic or judicialised, disconnected from democratic life, even as climate politics cannot remain trapped at the scale of the delta as a whole. The Bengal delta contains immense ecological diversity: coastal zones facing salinity and cyclones, floodplains shaped by seasonal inundation, char lands subject to erosion and accretion, drought-prone northwestern regions, and heat-stressed urban centres. These agroecological zones experience climate differently and therefore require different political responses. Uniform, national-level climate promises blur responsibility and allow contradictory electoral mandates to coexist, where upstream constituencies vote for water retention or extraction and downstream constituencies vote for flood mitigation or sediment flow, both democratically validated yet hydrologically incompatible. The State is then left to reconcile these contradictions administratively, while downstream harms are depoliticised.

Area-specific or zone-specific electoral manifestos offer a way out of this trap by reconnecting votes to material consequences without fragmenting the polity. Candidates would be required to articulate how resource use, water management, infrastructure, and adaptation strategies relate to the specific ecological conditions of their constituencies and how these fit within national and constitutional limits. This does not mean granting constituencies absolute rights over nature; rather, it clarifies that electoral authority over natural resources is conditional. A climate-proofed Constitution can establish that resources are held in trust by the State, to be allocated equitably and sustainably, and that no local mandate can justify disproportionate harm to others. Elections thus become mechanisms for negotiating shares rather than asserting absolutes, enabling voters to demand accountability for protection, adaptation funding, water access, and land security, while representatives are judged on outcomes rather than rhetoric. At a larger scale, political parties must also confront cross-border climate vulnerability and regional redistribution, recognising that climate governance is a distributive political question rather than a moral abstraction.

These three shifts signal the possibility of deltaic alignment, rescaled sovereignty, and climate-aware electoral accountability needing to form a coherent constitutional project. They do not seek to weaken the State, romanticise nature, or fragment democracy, but rather seek to make governance possible under conditions that already exist. Bangladesh has lost the luxury of treating climate as a future problem. The delta is already rearranging land, livelihoods, and political life. A Constitution that continues to imagine stability, autonomy, and uniformity will increasingly govern a country that no longer exists. Climate-proofing the Constitution is not an act of idealism. It is an admission of reality and the minimum condition for democratic survival in a volatile delta.

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh's Constitution dangerously separates politics from geography in a volatile delta.
2. Climate must be foundational to governance, not treated as external risk.
3. National identity and stability emerge from continual riverine and climatic change.
4. Sovereignty should be reimagined as regional, relational, and basin-dependent.
5. Climate-aware electoral accountability is essential for democratic survival in deltaic conditions.

Just transition must be central to Bangladesh's climate strategy.

VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

FROM LIFELINES TO LIABILITY

The growing threat in Bangladesh's rivers

MD SARWAR HOSSAIN,
MOHAMMED ALI NAUSE RUSSEL,
ALAMGIR KABIR

Md Sarwar Hossain is an Associate Professor, Director of the Postgraduate Programme, and Programme Director of the MSc in Environmental Risk Management at the School of Social & Environmental Sustainability, University of Glasgow, Dumfries, UK.

Mohammed Ali Nause Russel is a PhD researcher at the School of Social & Environmental Sustainability, University of Glasgow, Dumfries, UK.

Alamgir Kabir is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Environmental Science, University of Professionals, Bangladesh.

Globally, the boundary for biogeochemical flows of natural nutrient cycles, mainly nitrogen and phosphorus, through activities such as fertiliser use and sewage discharge from freshwater to the ocean has already passed a safe operating space for humanity. The concept of river pollution encompasses a broader definition than biogeochemical flows; it is driven by various waste products, including sewage, industrial effluents, nutrients, pesticides, plastics, and chemicals. Yet the boundaries for river pollution are unknown across the globe.

The growing threat of climate change and other sustainability challenges, such as population growth, urbanisation, and water scarcity, is increasing the risk of generating large-scale abrupt or irreversible social–ecological catastrophe. The impacts of river pollution can be drastic or immediate, no matter the drivers, but can severely risk the ecological and societal systems in which we live.

Bangladesh is known as the land of rivers and flooding. River pollution in Bangladesh is a myth to both local and global society. However, the transboundary context of rivers in Bangladesh and growing local drivers, such as industry, population, urbanisation, and degradation of wetlands, have polluted our rivers, where the impacts are experienced in both social and ecological systems. Bangladesh is among the top 20 countries contributing to plastic emissions from rivers to the ocean. Additionally, and alarmingly, India and China are at the top of the list, with which Bangladesh shares many transboundary rivers, including the mighty Ganges and Brahmaputra.

Although river pollution in Bangladesh was initially limited to urban areas, mainly around Dhaka city, the transboundary context of the rivers and growing local drivers are increasing pollutants in the rivers. The rivers surrounding Dhaka, including the Buriganga, Turag, and Shitalakkhya, are among the most polluted in Bangladesh. These rivers receive vast amounts of untreated waste from factories (at least ~3,000) that discharge industrial effluent directly into rivers without proper treatment. Forever chemicals, originating from tanneries, textiles, and chemical industries, have been detected in the rivers around Dhaka city. These substances impose a significant risk to the ecosystem and human health due to their unique, persistent nature of stability, accumulation in living organisms, and the challenge of removing these chemicals using conventional methods.

The Department of Environment (DoE) stated in the water quality report (2023) that rivers around Dhaka city do not meet national standards. Our recent analysis of water quality data from eight major rivers, spanning 2017 to 2023, reveals that the water quality is unsuitable for fisheries in the Meghna, Buriganga, Shitalakkhya, and Turag rivers. The decline in water quality is mainly driven by organic and inorganic pollutants originating from municipal sewage, domestic waste, and industrial wastewater (mostly textile and leather).

The presence of heavy metals (chromium, lead, arsenic, copper, and nickel) in major rivers, including rivers in Dhaka city, is alarmingly high. Heavy metal pollution has reached critical thresholds in major Bangladeshi rivers, most notably the Buriganga, Shitalakkhya, Padma, Karnaphuli, and Dhaleshwari. This environmental deterioration is the direct result of rapid urbanisation, agricultural runoff, and poorly managed industrialisation. The effluent profiles of the textile, pharmaceutical, and tannery industries remain the dominant sources of these hazardous metallic contaminants.

The agricultural runoff also plays a significant role in river pollution, which in turn negatively impacts irrigation and fish health, ultimately entering the food chain, severely posing health risks (including carcinogenic risks and neurological disorders) due to polluted river waters. With the growing economy and population of Bangladesh, microplastics in river waters are alarmingly increasing due to industrial production and the use of plastic materials, which also significantly spread during the monsoon season due to rainfall and flooding across the rivers in Bangladesh. Though the safety standard for microplastics remains unclear, globally, there is a call to understand the effects of these pollutants and to minimise the production, design, and disposal of plastics more responsibly.

The coastal rivers are highly saline due to sea-level rise, and the reduction of freshwater from upstream imposes risks to the ecosystem, health, and human wellbeing. The daily struggles for safe drinking water and the damage to agriculture, fisheries, and mangrove forests due to high salinity

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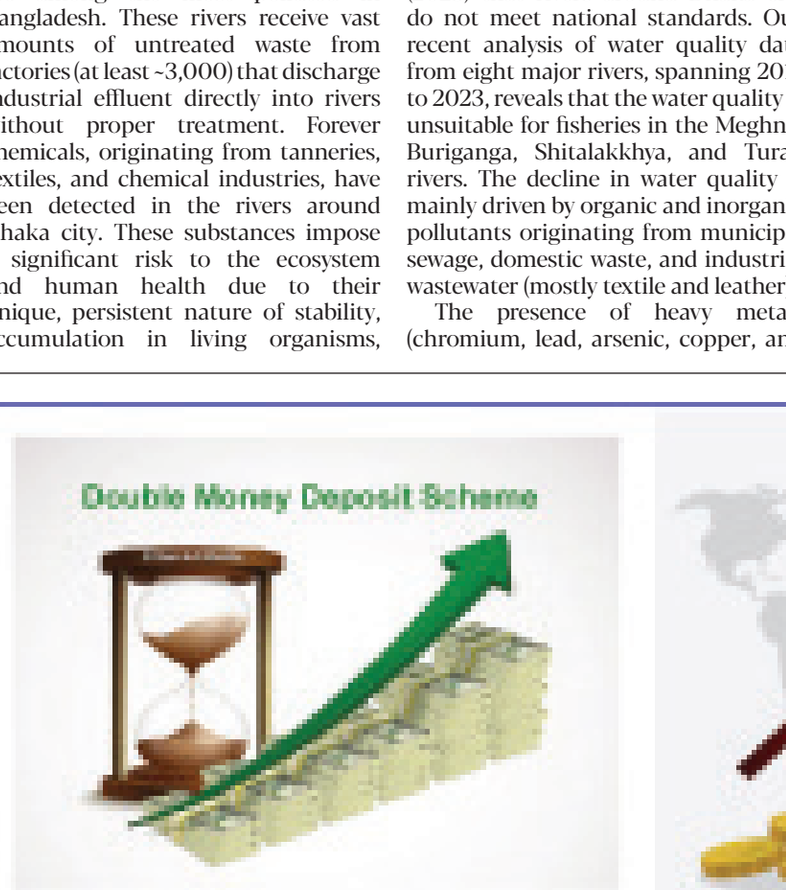

FILE PHOTO: MOHAMMAD PONIR HOSSAIN/REUTERS

Water, which has been coloured by textile dye and will eventually flow through the Labandha, Turag and Buriganga rivers, is released near a paddy field in the Mawna Union area, north of Gazipur.

KEY POINTS

1. River pollution is escalating, threatening social-ecological stability.
2. Transboundary flows and local industries are intensifying toxins and plastic pollution.
3. Urban waste, agriculture, and heavy metals endanger both health and fisheries.
4. Weak enforcement, poor monitoring, and inequitable governance exacerbate these risks.
5. Urgent regional cooperation, regulation, and restoration are needed to avert catastrophe.

The growing threat in Bangladesh's rivers

Once a vital lifeline for trade and daily life, the Buriganga River now tells a tale of contrast—while boats still carry fresh produce across its surface, untreated industrial waste and sewage pour directly into its waters, turning it into a toxic channel threatening both livelihoods and ecosystems.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

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are not hidden from the national and global community. Transboundary rivers such as the Padma and the Brahmaputra have water quality that is close to an unsuitable level for fisheries. Our research findings coincide with the field-based observations and water quality testing results of research led by Dhaka University. In summary, several studies highlight the presence of microbiological (e.g., bacteria and coliforms) and chemical (e.g., chromium, lead, and arsenic) contaminants in the Padma River due to industrial effluent, untreated sewage, and agricultural runoff. This is highly alarming because the Ganges in India and rivers in China are among the most polluted rivers in the world, and many of these transboundary rivers flow through Bangladesh. The growing economy, industrialisation, and population are projected to increase significantly in India, Bangladesh, and China, where industrial waste, urban sewage, and agricultural runoff are poorly managed and often discharged into rivers without proper treatment.

There are many initiatives taken to reduce river pollution, mainly around Dhaka city. River water quality shows improvement, but not enough to avoid risks to the ecosystem and human health. If current trends continue, river pollution in Bangladesh will worsen. Though we do not plan to provide an exhaustive list to reduce river pollution, we underscore some of the key policy implications to avoid social–ecological catastrophes.

First, there are no alternatives to regular monitoring and assessment of water quality. There are several reports and media recommendations for zero tolerance of illegal discharge. Industrial and agricultural pollution data for rivers can be made public through a digital dashboard, where cutting-edge technology, such as machine learning, can provide real-time information on pollution and risks to health and the ecosystem. The government should consider a new rule for sustainability reporting (also known as ESG reporting). This would apply to all government offices, private organisations, and industries in Bangladesh. ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting is how a company shares information about its impact on the environment, society, and management (governance). For example, the European Union already uses a rule called the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD). This law requires large companies to be transparent about their environmental and social risks.

Second, the government should impose higher taxes on small plastic packaging, such as mini-packs for shampoo, toothpaste, and biscuits. While these mini-packs are cheap and popular, they cause significant harm to the environment. For example, a large bottle of shampoo is easier to recycle. In contrast, small 5-taka packs usually end up in landfills, drains, and rivers. These packs contain plastic, chemicals, and toxic dyes that pollute the environment. To protect nature, the government should either ban these mini-packs or tax them heavily. This will encourage people to use larger, more sustainable containers. In addition, the collection of household waste (category-wise) systems needs to be urgently addressed to prevent plastics and other waste from entering the water. An E-waste disposal policy is timely, considering the increase in usage of mobile phones, computers, and related electronic devices.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

An oil tanker collision near Gabtali on March 11, 2023, released a thick oil slick across a 7km stretch of the Turag River, seriously polluting the water.

Third, our garments and other industries are rapidly moving towards sustainability. However, governments need to build strong collaborations with all stakeholders to reduce river pollution. Utilising economic instruments such as water tariffs, enforcement incentives, and a cap-and-trade system can be instrumental in changing the behaviour of private polluters towards supporting river protection. The education system needs to be revisited and tailored to local and national needs while remaining globally excellent. There is an urgent need for collaboration between academia, industry, and other stakeholders to ensure that future leaders are equipped to combat river pollution.

Fourth, negotiation for transboundary waters to ensure the safe operating space of river water is a must. Transboundary water diplomacy needs to include transboundary pollution. This needs to be underscored urgently, as the rapidly growing economies of India and China will generate more waste, possibly without proper wastewater treatment infrastructure. Climate change will add an extra layer of risk to river pollution due to changes in rainfall, and an increase in drought can concentrate pollutants during the dry season and spread contaminants more widely during floods. Negotiating upstream flow agreements and joint monitoring of transboundary rivers are imperative to ensure rivers are safe for people and the ecosystem across South Asia.

Fifth, a systems approach is a must to ensure cost-effectiveness and to avoid the ripple effects of mitigation strategies. This can combine with a push towards a circular economy to ensure maximising the use and reuse of resources by eliminating waste and pollution, circulating products, and regenerating natural capital towards achieving net zero. Thus, systems-thinking-based circular economy is critical to prioritise with a proper, workable action plan in the 'National Industrial Policy 2022'. The National Industrial Policy 2022 must be effectively linked to relevant government institutions within the official policy framework. For instance, while the National Industrial Policy 2022 provides a detailed timeline of actions and identifies responsible government bodies, a significant implementation gap exists. Specifically, the Medium Term Budget Framework (MTBF) and the Annual Performance Agreement (APA) of these implementing institutions are seldom synchronised with the action plans outlined in the policy. Furthermore, there is a critical absence of a dedicated monitoring body to oversee and follow up on the progress of these inter-institutional actions.

Restoring wetlands and rivers can offer nature-based solutions to river pollution. A large part of the wetlands, canals, and rivers are degraded and lost due to the growing population, urbanisation, and industrialisation. Restoring these wetlands and rivers can help naturally mitigate the risk of pollution to avoid a social–ecological catastrophe.

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Why Bangladesh must act on its NEET generation now

FARHANA ALAM

Senior Communications Officer, Skills Programme, ILO Bangladesh.

When Rina finished secondary school in a small town near Khulna, she expected her education would open doors. It did not. Like many young people in Bangladesh, she realised that academic certificates alone no longer guarantee employment.

Determined to change her fate, she completed a skills training programme. The training offered opportunities, but not in ways she could afford. The jobs were in Dhaka, far from her family. Taking one meant paying for accommodation, leaving loved ones behind, and surviving on wages that barely allowed her to support her household.

Ultimately, the opportunity remained out of reach. Rina's story reflects a wider reality: education without employability, skills without accessible jobs and opportunities that exist only for those who can shoulder the cost of distance.

Today, Rina is part of Bangladesh's growing NEET population – young people who are Not in Education, Employment, or Training. Behind this technical term are real lives, quiet frustration, and untapped potential. It poses a critical question: what happens when a generation is ready to contribute, but the system is not ready for them?

A demographic opportunity at risk

Bangladesh is often celebrated for its young population. Nearly one-third of its citizens are between 15 and 34 years old. Yet this advantage is slipping away. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 30.9 percent of young people fall into the NEET category, and 12 percent of university graduates remain unemployed. Each year, nearly two million young people enter the labour market, many encountering limited opportunities, mismatched skills, or extended inactivity.

This is not only an economic concern but also a social one. Prolonged unemployment and disengagement erode confidence, deepen inequality and fuel frustration. If left unaddressed, the NEET phenomenon could turn a demographic dividend into a liability.

Skills alone are not enough

Bangladesh has invested in skills development, but training alone does not guarantee employment. Too often, young people finish courses only to find that the market does not need the skills they have learned.

What is needed is a demand-driven skills ecosystem that adapts to economic change. Job growth is concentrated in sectors such as information and communication technology, healthcare and caregiving, renewable energy, green technologies, logistics, transport, and supply chains. Demand is also rising in agro-processing, pharmaceuticals, construction, tourism and hospitality, and digital financial services.

Many young people are still being trained for jobs with limited prospects. Aligning skills development with these emerging sectors is critical to ensuring training leads to meaningful employment. Recognition of prior learning, flexible training pathways, and stronger employer partnerships can help youth move from learning to earning.

FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

Decent work is essential

Employment alone is not enough. Many young people face low wages, unsafe conditions, long hours, and little social protection, especially in informal or overseas work. This is why decent work must be central to youth employment strategies.

Decent work means fair pay, safe workplaces, social protection, and respect for rights. It also includes opportunities for growth and stability. Without these elements, employment nurtures vulnerability rather than security.

Why young women must be prioritised

Reducing the NEET rate requires supporting young women. Affordable childcare, safe transport, flexible training schedules and community awareness can make a transformative difference. When women enter the workforce, households earn more, children stay in school longer and communities grow stronger.

Investing in young women is not charity. It is one of the smartest economic strategies a country can pursue.

What young people can do

Youth also have a role. In a rapidly changing labour market, passivity is costly. Young people must seek information, understand which skills are in demand, and take ownership of their career paths. Self-awareness – knowing one's strengths, interests, and potential – is the first step. From there, adaptability, lifelong learning, and persistence are key.

Employers value not only technical skills but also communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and resilience. Combining these with curiosity and a willingness to learn ensures long-term employability.

A job should not just pay the bills. It should offer dignity, stability, and a chance to build a better life.

What educators and institutions can do

Despite training offered by more than 23 ministries, many seats remain unfilled, while graduates struggle to find work. This points to a mismatch between education and labour market demand.

Training institutions must go beyond classroom teaching. Career guidance, counselling, industry linkages, and job placement support should be standard. Educators must also work with parents and communities to highlight the value of technical and vocational pathways.

When education is aligned with market demand, it becomes a powerful engine of opportunity.

A moment of choice

Bangladesh has a critical opportunity. With the right policies, investments, and partnerships, the NEET generation can become a skilled, productive workforce.

This requires strong coordination between education institutions and industry, investment in demand-driven skills development, expansion of public employment services, a commitment to decent work and meaningful inclusion of youth voices in policymaking.

Bangladesh has talent and ambition. What it needs is a system that connects young people to opportunity fairly, effectively, and at scale.

If we act now, today's NEET generation can become tomorrow's drivers of growth.

If we delay, we risk losing a generation ready to contribute but still waiting to be included.

The choice is ours.

KEY POINTS

1. Align skills training with high-growth sectors through employer-led, demand-driven planning.
2. Prioritise decent work standards to ensure jobs provide security, dignity, and progression.
3. Expand targeted support for young women, including childcare, safety, and flexible training.
4. Strengthen career guidance, industry linkages, and job placement across education institutions.
5. Coordinate education, industry, and public employment services through a unified youth strategy.

From girl brides to a broken labour market

BISHAKHA DEVNATH

Business Editor of The Financial Express.

Loitering in the shadows of tin-roofed houses is Fatema's pastime. She avoids being at home—a single room in a low-income settlement shared by her eight-member family. At 16, her body and mind, going through the turbulence of adolescence, no longer feel safe in confinement.

Her mother notices stolen glances at Fatema from nearby houses, which fills her with unease. Fearful that something "unholy" might happen to the girl, she decides to marry the teenager off instead of helping her prepare for the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations.

Fatema gives her consent without much convincing, a fact that hurts even the family eager to send her away. To her, marriage would materialise her fantasies—clothes with flowers woven into them and a room of her own. Her mother, too, had fancied those things at that age, and that dream has since turned into the family life both of them are now living.

Fatema belongs to the group of NEET young women aged 15 to 24—those who are neither in education, nor in employment or training. In Bangladesh, one in four young women are NEET, compared to more than one in ten young men. These are not isolated groups divided by gender. In fact, they are interlinked: NEET women of one generation give rise to NEET men and women in the next, producing an overall inefficient labour force.

The high NEET rate is the outcome of the staggering proportion of girls—51%, according to United Nations estimates—who were married before turning 18 between 2006 and 2024. There are no disaggregated data on child marriage across social and economic classes. However, the World Bank's latest projection of a 21.2% national poverty rate makes it evident that child marriage is not confined to the poorest households; rather, it persists—more or less—across all classes.

Fatema and other girls like her give birth at a very early age, when they themselves are bewildered by sudden physical and emotional changes. They step into socially defined adulthood with their adolescence abruptly cut short. Crushed under the heavy burden of housework and childcare, they may somehow manage to meet the basic needs of family members, but they struggle almost daily to navigate complex relationships, economic and social subjugation, and impossibly high gendered expectations.

These mothers are expected to serve everyone in the household, while fathers make all major decisions. Children growing up in such families witness an imbalanced power dynamic. Mothers, who lack economic and social agency, are nonetheless responsible for nearly all aspects of their children's lives—education, health, food, sports, and even issues of psychological wellbeing related to friendships, anger, happiness, and a sense of purpose.

Children—both boys and girls—come to accept the inequalities they observe at home as social, cultural, or even religious norms. Girls may eventually become child brides themselves unless unusual self-determination or unforeseen social, economic, or familial shocks divert them from that path.

Most girl brides drop out of the formal education system after marriage and find themselves unprepared to care for the wellbeing of their in-laws, a role given without being asked. They have little opportunity to acquire skills of any kind, let alone those required for employment. What often goes unnoticed in this social structure is that these unskilled and undereducated women are relied upon to raise future generations of skilled workers.

There are no disaggregated data on child marriage across social and economic classes. PHOTO: COLLECTED

Boys begin to disregard their mothers once they recognise their superior social status over women. As a result, they are at higher risk of dropping out of school themselves, driven by factors such as drug abuse, the lure of illegal activities promising quick money, or an inability to keep up academically—because no one at home is able to address their learning gaps.

In such a social fabric, children spend much of their lives learning only from formal curricula, if they attend school at all, while the home environment contributes little to their intellectual growth or learning behaviour.

Although there are no disaggregated data on short- and long-term NEET status, it is evident that girl brides are far more likely to become permanently NEET. In some cases—such as the premature death of a male breadwinner—women may be forced to earn for subsistence. At that point, they typically enter informal, underpaid or low-paid, mostly invisible and unrecognised work.

Men who discontinue education early also acquire limited or no skills and are similarly destined for informal, low-paid jobs. Their stunted intellectual development often makes it difficult to acquire new skills on the job, leaving them professionally stagnant. In the worst cases, they hop from one job to another simply to survive.

In the era of automation, joblessness among the low-skilled and unskilled has already intensified. Artificial Intelligence (AI) is likely to aggravate the crisis further, rendering even some university graduates irrelevant in the labour market unless they possess creativity, innovation, and human skills that AI cannot replace.

Bangladesh's NEET rate is already high by global standards. Current socioeconomic conditions, combined with the gradual adoption of AI, will continue to limit young people's entry into the job market. Meanwhile, older generations—often inadequately skilled themselves—will hold on to positions of power.

This skill gap explains why employers frequently claim they have vacancies but cannot find suitable candidates. In the absence of a skilled workforce, the deployment of AI is likely to accelerate. Policymakers often emphasise the need to reform the education system to address labour-market challenges, but the deeper, household-level roots of the problem continue to intensify in silence.

To stem the tide of NEET, the government must prevent girls from dropping out of school through scholarships and incentives, ensure a gender-friendly learning environment, and mobilise social and community-level movements that promote learning regardless of age or gender.

Above all, rigorous research is needed to generate nuanced data on gender dynamics across social, cultural, and economic spectra. Such evidence is essential for policymakers to design effective interventions.

As a developing country, Bangladesh may have more time to prepare for AI-driven changes, but eventually all of us will need to become agile and committed learners for the collective prosperity of the nation. Learning and teaching, therefore, must focus on nurturing creativity and thinking beyond age-old frameworks.

KEY POINTS

1. Prevent child marriage through strict enforcement, incentives, and community monitoring.
2. Keep girls in school with scholarships, safety, and flexible learning pathways.
3. Support mothers' education and parenting skills to break intergenerational inequality.
4. Embed life skills, gender equality, and caregiving education from early childhood.
5. Invest in gender-disaggregated data and household-focused policy interventions.

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Key challenges to attaining the first demographic dividend in Bangladesh

FILE PHOTO: STAR

MOHAMMAD MAINUL ISLAM

Professor and Former Chair of the Department of Population Sciences at the University of Dhaka. He can be reached at mainul@du.ac.bd

KEY POINTS

1. Create diversified, decent jobs to absorb educated youth productively.
2. Align education and training with market and future skill demands.
3. Boost female labour participation by ending child marriage and barriers.
4. Increase investment in education, health, and human capital development.
5. Improve savings, investment climate, urban planning, and environmental resilience.

The demographic dividend is the accelerated economic growth resulting from declines in fertility and mortality and the subsequent change in the age structure of a country's population. It refers to accelerated economic growth that can occur when a country's working-age population (typically ages 15–64) is large relative to dependents (children ages 0–14 and elderly ages 65 and above). In the midst of the demographic transition, Bangladesh is currently experiencing changes in its age structure, with two-thirds of the population in the working-age group. This could provide a stimulus for the first demographic dividend, as the country's dependency ratio has significantly declined over recent decades, offering a key opportunity to accelerate economic growth — provided the workforce is productively employed and healthy.

To fully reap the benefits of this demographic opportunity, which should remain a top priority on the political agenda, it is essential to act within the timeframe to maximise the gains of the first demographic dividend by 2036, according to the National Transfer Accounts (NTA), while the dependency ratio is projected to reach its lowest point in 2045 (World Population Prospects 2024 Revision). This offers a unique economic opportunity, but realising it requires strategic, coordinated reforms in education, health, labour markets, economic and social policies, and good governance. Without such actions, the potential dividend may remain unrealised. To reap the benefits of the first demographic dividend, Bangladesh needs to address several key challenges that hinder it.

First, high youth unemployment and underemployment: In Bangladesh,youth unemployment remains significantly higher than the national average, and underemployment is also widespread — many young workers are in low-paying or informal labour markets that underuse their skills. Educated youth often struggle more to find jobs that match their qualifications, pointing to structural weaknesses in the economy's ability to create high-quality jobs. In addition, job creation is not keeping pace here. Economic growth has not consistently generated enough decent formal employment to absorb millions of new job seekers each year. Informal sector jobs often lack job security and productivity. A heavy reliance on traditional export sectors, such as ready-made garments (RMG), limits diversification into higher-value industries that could create more jobs and better wages. Here, high youth unemployment underutilises workforce potential and hinders successful employment growth.

Second, mismatch between education and market needs: Although enrolment and literacy rates have improved over the years, the quality of education remains weak. It often does not equip students with market-relevant skills, especially in technology, communication, and vocational fields. Limited emphasis on practical, creative, and high-value skills means that many graduates are

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Attaining the first demographic dividend in Bangladesh

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

Many young workers are in low-paying or informal labour markets that underuse their skills.

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unemployable in sectors driving future growth. Educational mismatch limits employability and innovation, thereby affecting the ability to ensure a high-quality human resource base.

Third, low female labour force participation: Women's labour force participation is notably low compared to men. Cultural norms, safety concerns, and limited access to training and good jobs restrict women's economic contribution—a critical untapped workforce. Low female participation reduces labour supply and productivity. High prevalence of child marriage adversely affects female education and formal labour force participation. Without ending child marriage, it is difficult to achieve the gender dividend. Several barriers such as inequality of opportunities at the household level (e.g., lack of nutrition, education, health care) as well as at the community level, absence of childcare facilities at the workplace, lack of women-friendly transportation facilities, violence against women both in the workplace and outside, social stigma still prevent many women from participating in the labour market.

Fourth, underinvestment in human capital: In Bangladesh, annual budgetary allocation is not conducive to a demographic dividend as it ignores education and health, the two most essential components of human capital. This is a time when the country needs to increase allocations to the education and health sectors to build human capital, yet allocations have been decreased. Besides, there is a gap between budget allocation and the government's policy documents. Bangladesh spends a relatively low share of GDP on education and health compared to international recommendations, limiting improvements in workforce quality and long-term productivity. Health system limitations, including shortages of skilled professionals and rising non-communicable diseases, reduce overall workforce productivity and well-being. Underinvestment in health and education weakens human capital. The return on investment in the health and education sectors is promising but the budget is not being allocated, as it should be. There needs to be investment in the financial sector to generate employment.

Fifth, low rates of savings and investment: Bangladesh is currently facing challenges with low domestic savings and investment rates, primarily driven by high inflation, low real interest rates, and a challenging business environment. The country should aim to accelerate Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) to compensate for low domestic savings and leverage its favourable investment climate. However, the country faces ongoing challenges with bureaucracy and infrastructure as current inflows are low, hindered by weak policy consistency, complex regulations (licensing, land), tax burdens, and infrastructure gaps, requiring significant reforms in governance, infrastructure, and investor facilitation to boost confidence.

Sixth, urban infrastructure and planning strains due to unregulated migration: Rapid rural-to-urban migration places immense pressure on cities like Dhaka, the only primate city in the country, leading many workers into informal settlements with limited services, worsening quality of life, and economic potential. Infrastructure deficits (e.g., in transport and energy) further constrain business growth and employment expansion. Here, infrastructure gaps constrain economic growth. Additionally, quality public institutions are required to provide effective, accountable, and equitable public services.

FILE PHOTO: STAR

Limited emphasis on practical, creative, and high-value skills means many graduates are unemployable in sectors driving future growth.

Seventh, environmental and resource pressures: Environmental pressures threaten sustainable livelihoods in Bangladesh. The country is one of the most densely populated territories, with limited land. Here, population pressures contribute to land degradation, wetland loss, and resource strains that affect agriculture and livelihoods, thereby impacting economic stability and food security.

If the above-mentioned structural challenges aren't urgently addressed, Bangladesh risks turning its working age population, including its youth population, from a potential advantage into a demographic burden with stagnant wages, youth unrest, and rising inequality undermining long-term development, and shrinking the demographic window of opportunity. Here, the key enablers of success may include expanding quality job creation beyond traditional sectors, reforming education to match industry demands, closing gender gaps in employment, investing more in education and health — strengthening health and social support systems, and building resilient urban and physical infrastructure.

Drawing on examples from other countries, such as East Asian countries, Bangladesh can learn lessons. Evidence suggests that the critical policy areas that made the difference included investment in youth development, expanding access to family planning, investment in infrastructure, public health, education, especially female education, and skill development. In addition, policy emphasis was on promoting both labour-intensive and skill-intensive jobs, savings, and openness to trade and foreign investment.

The Government of Bangladesh and other respective stakeholders should emphasise issues like a quality human resource base, successful employment growth rate, an increase in female participation in the labour force; economic reform and favourable investment, high rates of savings and investment, and quality public institutions, to reap the benefits of the first demographic dividend. At the same time, the country also needs to focus on achieving the second demographic dividend too, as the country is one of the fastest-growing ageing populations and will be transformed into a ageing and aged society in the future. Thus, improving education with technological skills in line with age structure will be necessary. There are also pieces of evidence from other country cases that the demographic dividend is driven by human capital.

Declining youth dependency ratios even have negative impacts on income growth when combined with low education levels. Based on a multidimensional understanding of demography that considers education alongside age, and with a view to the additional effects of education on health and overall resilience, the actual demographic dividend is a human capital dividend. The Government of Bangladesh policies should thus focus on strengthening the human resource base for sustainable development. Recognising that demographic dividends are also tied to labour quality (not just quantity), Bangladesh's official policy plans should emphasise on improving education, targeting technical and vocational education with skills, fostering innovation and highly skilled workers to reap the first and second demographic dividend. This aligns with broader economic strategies toward productivity and innovation. Demographic change should remain a top priority on the political agenda for the elected government. The challenge for Bangladesh will be to manage all these transitions together – demographic, democratic, and institutional.

Why Bangladesh must rethink rural–urban migration

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On their way to their workplaces, they are often stuck in traffic jams for long periods, or they have to walk through unsafe roads. These situations affect their productivity, health, and overall well-being. Urban transport reform often focuses on large-scale infrastructure; however, migrant workers need affordable, reliable, and safe options. To achieve this, coordinated planning is essential among ministries, city corporations, and transport agencies. Without addressing mobility challenges, urban centres will continue to absorb migrants without enabling them to thrive.

Employment is one of the most influential drivers of rural–urban migration. However, the job market is structurally unequal for most migrants, who enter informal work without legal security or long-term pathways. Garment workers face unpredictable shifts, construction workers endure insecure conditions, and domestic workers remain invisible in policy discussions. By implementing extended labour inspections and enforcing labour security policies, the upcoming government may encourage industries to establish more humane working environments. Migration should not mean accepting exploitation as the cost of survival.

The unpredictable effects of climate change will necessitate migration in the coming years. Salinity intrusion, cyclones, riverbank erosion, and irregular rainfall have already pushed coastal and riverine families towards cities. These climate migrants often move suddenly, without formal networks or stable income sources. Their needs differ from those of migrants driven primarily by economic reasons. The future government must develop forward-looking plans and invest in strengthening climate-resilient agriculture, improving rural employment diversification, and constructing safe housing settlements in vulnerable areas. Delaying these steps will only intensify chaotic urban growth.

Education plays a transformative role in migration decisions. Families often send one member to the cities so that children can continue their education. Yet crowding is evident in urban schools, and many migrant children work to support their families instead of attending school. This creates a long-term cycle of limited mobility. Expanding inclusive education can break this cycle, particularly in informal settlements. Policies should consider flexible schooling models, community learning centres, and financial incentives to keep children in school rather than pushing them into vulnerable labour sites.

Healthcare facilities in cities are often unequal. Clinics are usually distant and costly, and the lack of documents or permanent addresses often restricts migrants' access to services. Women face particular challenges in maternal care and reproductive health. For the upcoming government, improving primary healthcare in densely populated settlements is essential. Mobile clinics, community health workers, and affordable insurance models can address practical health challenges. Migration does not only change geography or location; it also alters patterns of disease, stress, and mental health, all of which require sustained policy attention.

The effects of rural–urban migration also have implications for the food system. In growing urban areas, the demand for food has increased with migration. However, this has also affected agricultural production in rural areas. This stress creates new vulnerabilities for migrants. Technological assistance, fair pricing systems, and accessible markets can reduce these stresses by strengthening the rural economy. At the same time, city authorities must prioritise improved distribution networks, price controls, and assistance to small-scale food distribution traders. A balanced food system can help stabilise the drivers of overall migration.

Digital technology has begun changing migrants' urban experiences. Mobile banking, online employment platforms, and social media connect migrants with their villages and the global economy. These arrangements reduce socio-economic isolation, but they also expose migrants to challenges including misinformation, economic deception, and various forms of exploitation. The upcoming government should focus on digital literacy, safe economic transactions, and transparent job-matching platforms. By providing security within the digital landscape, policymakers can strengthen migrants' overall resilience. Technology will provide the best safeguards if human vulnerabilities are understood comprehensively.

Migration also influences political participation. Migrants are usually registered in their own villages, but they reside in cities for years. This weakens their visibility in city governance and results in reduced representation in policy debates. Promoting updated voter registration, decentralised service delivery, and the participation of migrants can help change this imbalance. When those who build the city are able to participate, policies gain a more realistic foundation and become more attuned to marginal voices.

Migration is not an accident. It is a rational outcome of rural transformation and national development and must be addressed with prudence. It should be understood and reflected as a social process in urban governance, not treated as a temporary problem. The upcoming government should reform planning structures that recognise density, informality, and dynamism as features rather than flaws. Coordination between national and city authorities, the promotion of information-driven policy, and the incorporation of anthropological insights can help build an inclusive city.

Global experiences show that when rural–urban migration is supported by well-planned strategies and policies, it eventually contributes to overall growth while protecting migrants' rights. Countries with sustained rural investment, balanced urban growth, and social security systems manage migration more effectively. Bangladesh can learn from these experiences; however, policies must be adapted to the local cultural context. Policy-level decisions should align with the everyday realities of migrants: garment workers in Chattogram, construction workers in Gazipur, and female domestic workers in lesser-known households in Dhaka.

Bangladesh is now at a critical juncture. Migration will not slow down soon; with rapid climate change, employment shifts, and demographic transitions, it is likely to intensify further. The long-awaited upcoming elected government should approach this inevitable issue with empathy and intelligence, rather than attempting to suppress rural–urban migration by framing it solely as a challenge. To make migration more balanced, the underlying reasons that push people to migrate must be addressed. Facilities and amenities in rural areas must be improved. Alongside economic concerns, sociocultural issues also need careful consideration. In both rural and urban areas, policies must ensure people's participation, and interventions should reflect their voices and active engagement—not merely informed participation, but meaningful involvement throughout the entire process.

By prioritising housing, labour rights, transport, education, healthcare, rural development, and climate action, the government can reduce suffering and challenges while unlocking the country's humane potential. The future of urban Bangladesh depends on how concerned bodies, including the upcoming elected government, listen to migrants who seek secure shelter in cities in pursuit of a better life.

Every morning, thousands of workers travel from densely populated settlements to industrial zones, often enduring long traffic jams or walking through unsafe roads.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

RURAL LIVES ON THE MOVE

Why Bangladesh must rethink rural–urban migration

ALA UDDIN

Professor of Anthropology at the University of Chittagong. He can be contacted at ala.uddin@cu.ac.bd

Since independence, rural–urban migration has shaped the socioeconomic landscape of Bangladesh. Yet the ways in which it unfolds create tensions around development, opportunities, and survival. People move from villages not only for income, status, and education, but also in the hope of finding relief from uncertainty that shapes their decisions regarding migration. As the country prepares for a long-awaited elected government in early 2026, the longstanding demands arising from repeated waves of migration require comprehensive attention. Given global scenarios and prevailing migration trends, it should be considered a crucial phenomenon that affects economic growth, social solidarity, and the everyday struggles of millions in both rural and urban areas.

Aerial view of a Dhaka slum. FILE PHOTO: STAR

KEY POINTS

1. Invest in rural livelihoods, climate resilience, and services to reduce distress migration.
2. Plan cities for informality, density, and migrants' housing, transport, and healthcare needs.
3. Protect migrant workers through labour rights enforcement and humane working conditions.
4. Strengthen inclusive education, healthcare, and food systems in informal urban settlements.
5. Enable migrants' political participation through voter registration and decentralised governance.

Over the last few decades, lifeways in most rural areas have shifted in such a manner that, sooner or later, they motivate rural–urban movement. Currently, agriculture provides less stable income, land has become increasingly fragmented, and weather patterns have grown more unpredictable in most rural regions. Although rural people choose migration, multiple pressures shape this preference. Researchers have observed how people talk about migration using the rhetoric of necessity rather than adventure. It is often described as something one must do to protect one's family. This moral framing shows how migration aligns more with family expectations than with individual aspirations.

Dhaka, Chattogram, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Cumilla attract new migrants every month, which implies a lack of opportunities in migrants' rural areas. These cities are no longer capable of supporting their already overpopulated residents, let alone new arrivals. Migrants usually work in garment industries, construction sites, and the transport sector, while some find employment in formal sectors. They contribute significantly to strengthening the national economy, yet their living environments often lack fundamental living standards.

One of the major reasons for this situation is rapid and unplanned urbanisation without adequate consideration of migrants' living standards or the carrying capacity of cities. With about 36.6 million people, Dhaka has become the second-largest city in the world in terms of population, and the capital is incapable of adequately supporting its residents and the growing migrant population in areas such as employment, housing, security, and disaster management, creating an overall state of disorder. The second-largest city, Chattogram, also shares a similar fate for its residents.

Social researchers, including anthropologists, offer insights into how migration has shaped and introduced new patterns in family structure and mental life. When a man or a woman leaves a village for a city, the decision does not merely involve economic issues such as employment and income; it also encompasses kinship obligations, social networks, and responsibilities. Remittances sent from cities become lifelines for families left behind. Food for parents, school fees, and medical expenses often depend on these remittances. Over time, migrants' presence becomes social rather than merely physical, spreading through mobile phones and digital platforms. These bonds help rural families remain afloat, yet they also intensify emotional distance that receives little policy recognition.

Rural people often narrate migration as a form of loss. Elders speak of empty courtyards, abandoned homesteads, and fading heritage. At the same time, they acknowledge that migration sustains the family economy while they face land scarcity and worsening conditions caused by climate disruption. These dual perceptions—loss and survival—reveal why migration cannot be viewed solely through economic lenses. It touches upon identity, memory, and social continuity. If policy aims to engage with lived experiences rather than abstract data alone, the upcoming government must recognise this nuanced dimension.

On the urban side, migration from rural areas reshapes neighbourhoods and city culture. Informal settlements become hubs of new languages, foods, norms, customs, and forms of rural solidarity. Migrants recreate village-based networks within cities, often organised around their districts of origin. These networks provide social security, employment information, and psychological support. Urban planners rarely acknowledge these social landscapes, yet they are essential to migrants' survival. If the next elected government seeks to manage cities effectively, it must recognise these networks not as obstacles, but as strengths.

Housing has remained one of the most crucial problems connected with migration. Millions live in crowded settlements without basic amenities and secure tenure. Fires, evictions, poor sanitation, and flooding are regular threats in most settlements. Residents are aware of this uncertainty; they consider themselves as 'city guests'. However, they remain patient, even though their situation never becomes stable or permanent. If the upcoming political leadership intends to reduce urban vulnerabilities, then strengthening affordable housing, enhancing legal safeguards, and promoting community-led leadership upgradation should become priorities. Policies should shift from eviction-based solutions to long-term stability; migrants should not be considered a burden but should instead have their contributions recognised.

Transport is another sector where migration pressure is evident in major cities. Every morning, thousands of workers travel from densely populated and remote settlements to industrial areas.

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TEN TASKS FOR FUTURE BANGLADESH

NAZRUL ISLAM

Professor at the Asian Growth Research Institute and former Chief of Development Research at the United Nations.

Bangladesh has turned a page in its political history and a new phase of political governments is about to start. This may, therefore, be a good time to think about the future socio-economic tasks. In my view, these tasks may be grouped under the following ten heads.

1. Reducing inequality

The first task is to reduce economic inequality. This has been the main goal of the 2024 mass uprising. Income inequality in Bangladesh, as measured by the Gini Coefficient, increased from 0.388 to 0.570 during 1991–2022. Income inequality led to the capture of political institutions by the rich, resulting in a further increase in income inequality, and leading to the 'Inequality Trap.'

Policies are needed first to reduce inequality of 'primary income,' which includes wages, profits, capital gains, rent, etc., that people obtain by using their labour and capital in the market (hence also called 'market income'). Achieving this goal requires adequate wage growth and diffusion of capital income among common people through expansion of cooperative ownership of assets, enterprises, and sharing of profits with workers of private enterprises. Unfortunately, wages in Bangladesh grew by only 1.15 per cent per year during 2011–15 when per capita income rose by 4.9 per cent annually during roughly the same period.

Policies are also necessary to reduce inequality in 'disposable income,' which is what the people have after paying taxes on their primary income and receiving transfers. For this purpose, the tax schedule has to be progressive and honestly implemented. Transfers can take two forms: cash and non-cash. Examples of non-cash transfers include public provision of education and healthcare. If designed properly and implemented honestly, both cash and non-cash transfers can be effective. Non-cash transfers can also help to increase social cohesion and reap the benefits of positive externalities (for example, when one person gets educated, others benefit too).

FILE VISUAL: STAR

2. Achieving good governance

The second important task is achieving good governance. As per the six World Governance Indicators (WGI), Bangladesh ranks the lowest even among South Asian countries. There are two sides of governance: political leadership and bureaucracy. They influence each other, but the primacy in this interrelationship belongs to the political leadership. A major cause as well as consequence of Bangladesh's poor governance is the 'Leakage Model' of economic growth that the country followed in past years. Under this model, large sums of public money (from government budgets and the banking system) leak to the private sector through improper and illegal ways. This leads to capital flight, the Debt Trap, and ultimately to the Middle-Income Trap. This corruption within the government saps morality at all levels of society and ultimately makes society dysfunctional. An urgent task, therefore, is to move away from the Leakage Model through necessary political and administrative reforms, as discussed below.

3. Proportional election and shorter government term

A slew of political reforms was considered recently by the reform commission. However, as I showed in my recent book Unnayaner Jonno Shushasn [Good Governance for Development] (UPL 2025), the essentially necessary political reform is the switch from the current constituency-based election to proportional election. The 2024 mass uprising forced the option of proportional election onto the national agenda, and the upcoming referendum is to include the proposal of creating an upper house of the parliament based on the proportion of votes received. However, the party anticipating a simple majority among the voters did not agree to this proposal. Anticipating this problem, I suggested earlier making use of the "Veil of Ignorance" construct of John Rawls, the eminent philosopher, to overcome this hurdle. Under this construct, proportional election should have been proposed not for the 13th parliament but for future parliaments, beginning with the 14th. Chances for acceptance of this proposal would have been greater because it would be difficult for the parties to be sure about enjoying a simple majority of voters so far into the future. Another important political reform is the shortening of the government term. This proposal too faced dissent arising from the same anticipation of a simple majority. The "Veil of Ignorance" construct could be applied to this proposal as well. Going forward, popularising proportional election and shorter government term will therefore remain an important task.

4. Greater emphasis on protection of the environment

A crucial task for future Bangladesh is making economic growth compatible with the protection of the environment. Bangladesh's extremely high population density makes this task imperative. The country does not have any 'natural cushion' that can save it in the eventuality of an environmental collapse. The country is yet to rise up to the fact that the coast is sinking below sea level; the river system is collapsing; waterlogging is spreading; inappropriate transportation policy is aggravating traffic jams in Dhaka City and spreading them to other cities and towns; heaps of plastic waste are spreading like a cancer; and the fertility rate, after declining in past decades, is now on the rise, further aggravating the population situation. The country is almost sleepwalking towards an environmental disaster.

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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] (Dharitree 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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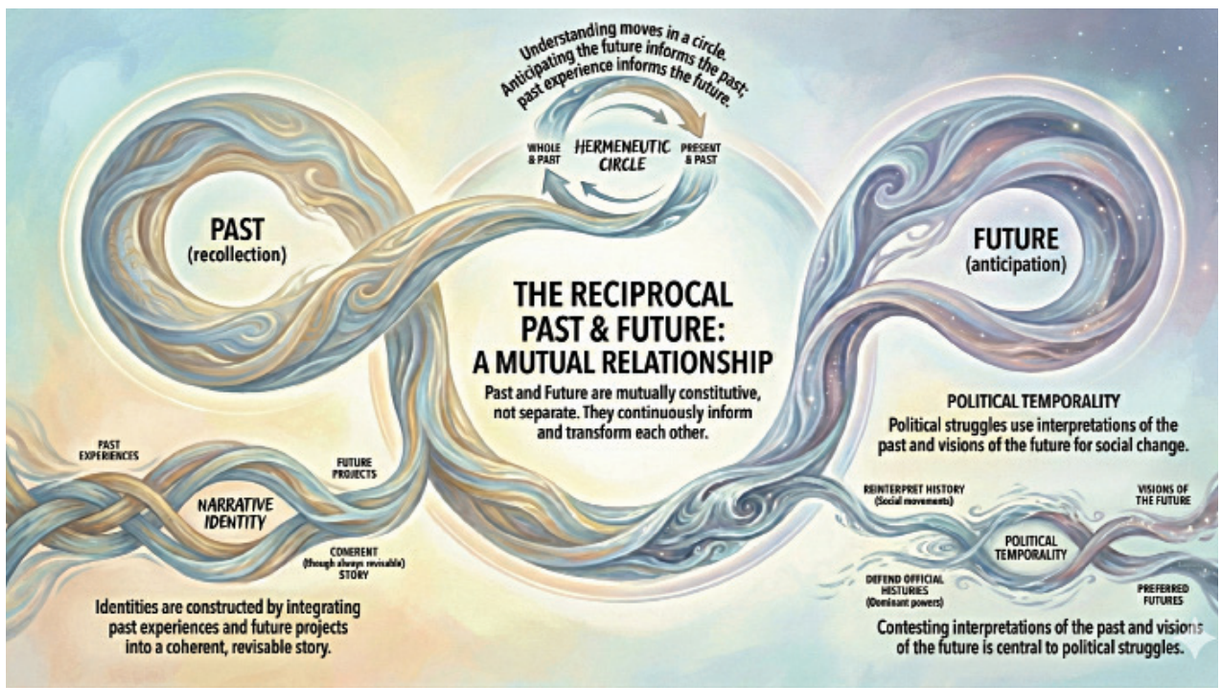
WHY WE SHOULD RETHINK how we think about the future

SWADHIN SEN

Professor in the Department of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University.

When we try to envision, conceive, and plan for our priorities for tomorrow, we inevitably, and often unwillingly, submit ourselves to the concept and implications of the dominant paradigm of temporality in our lives. Unfortunately, the complex and varied intertwinement of time and lived experiences is hardly addressed in discussions of public space and policymaking. The idea and practice of defining 'priorities for the future' are an essential aspect of the inherent normativity and psychopolitical repertoires of the neoliberal state. The past is, explicitly or implicitly, present in these desires, hopes, and dreams for a future. Often, the past is imagined as a homogeneous, linear, and uniform glorified existence of the human experience, which has continuously been lost, polluted, and derailed. I want to focus on this complex history of temporalities and the formation of the neoliberal unconscious urge for the future. In this assumption, the human species is the central actor with full control over the future. This anthropocentric perception of temporality is one of the key problems in perceiving a planetary-scale time and future for all human and non-human actors.



The entwinement of the past and the future, where time exists as a recurring flow.

KEY POINTS

1. Neoliberal futures in Bangladesh assume linear, controllable time and human dominance.
2. The past and future are mutually constitutive, shaping perceptions, narratives, priorities.
3. Anthropocentric planning ignores non-human and ecological temporalities of the Bengal Delta.
4. Violence, exploitation, and climate impacts reveal failures of current development and governance.
5. Ethical, empathic, multispecies recognition is essential for a dignified, sustainable future.

I am not claiming that human actors are not the most dominant species on the Earth, either as a planet or on a smaller scale, such as in the Bengal Delta, which serves as a cultural, political, and ecological territory. Rather, the idea that we can analyse, assume, and plan for the future is founded on the broader anthropocentric paradigm of modern neoliberal doctrines. Time here is linear, progressive, and its speed and direction can be controlled and manipulated in a certain way to ensure authoritarian and totalitarian superiority in ensuring prosperity, development, and stability. I find all the ideas and methods of anticipating a controlled, dominant, and prosperity-centric future very problematic. Essentially, cruelty, hatred, violence, narcissism, and genocidal fascist and totalitarian identity politics are entangled with the human assumption and desire to predict, refashion, and model according to their own worldview and intention.

On the one hand, a neoliberal psychopolitical dimension must be taken into account. Thinkers such as Byung-Chul Han have highlighted many of the conditions and effects of temporalities, as well as the practices in various institutions, including the nation-state and multinational corporations, and the political and psychological formations of our sensibilities and agencies, in his works. We have internalised and been consumed by the notion that nothing is impossible, and we are free to control our future and time. On the contrary, the growing digital ecosystem, neoliberal system of corporeal existence, and flexible forms of capitalist world have enslaved us with the delusion of freedom and autonomous agentive action of the human species. On the other hand, the homogenisation, uniformitarianism, and universalisation of linear time and calendars have rendered invisible the multiplicities of different temporalities, sensibilities, perceptions, and practices in various societies, cultures, and spaces. In many cases, time is not perceived as a continuum from the past to the future. What is recognised as future and past are not simply separate periods or phases of linear and abstract progressive time. Rather, the past and future mutually constitute each other. They are neither fixed nor do they exist in the tripartite scheme of past, present, and future. In many cultures and practices, human and non-human species are considered as aspects of deep, fluid, and uncertain temporalities, and human actions and desires to control and dominate time, future, and space (e.g., the Bengal Delta) are shaped and fashioned with regard to a fixed utopia of a prosperous, more profitable, and more human-controlled future. These perceptions and practices are futile and bring to the fore the current global paranoia about identity and the fear of the extinction of various entities on planet Earth.

Let us ask who counts as a legitimate member of a political community who has the right and capacity to interpret the present and determine what the desired, expected, and anticipated are as the `priorities for tomorrow'? What kind of present needs and future orientations are refashioned (and identified as illegitimate and invalid)? How are these legitimisation and illegitimisation of the priorities in the future reconfigured and normalised through ideas of the past, narratives, memory practices, and historical frameworks? What kind of narratives are generated and circulated (and what kind of narratives are cancelled and delegitimised) for producing meaningful living and its anticipation? How have these anticipations inherited structures, categories, and constraints from past experiences and collective memories? How have we dissociated the discourses and ethical sensitivities in Bangladesh for foreclosing or enabling possibilities for the future?

In these senses, even making sense of the possibilities in the future is intertwined with the ways in which memories, narratives, and practices are celebrated, accepted, or rejected at the present, and this is an ethical and political act. In the dominating cultural and political discourses in Bangladesh, we may identify the selective and cherry-picked events and narratives of the past that are used to memorialise and celebrate. We construct a sensibility of eternal and unchanging victimhood and heroism in validating the priorities of the future. The foundational causalities and contingencies of how the past and future mutually constitute each other are hardly discussed and debated.

At this moment of clashes of various identities and the production of hatred, cruelty, greed, torture, pain, and violence are validated in reference to both retropia and utopia. A sacred, primordial, original, and idealised past is anachronistically invoked for a sacralised, emancipatory, and hopeful future. The intense hatred and annihilating violence we are experiencing are different from the earlier contexts and casualties in various ways. The cruelty is not simply an act of vengeance and sacralisation aimed at removing the pollution. The torture, infliction of pain upon the other, and violent outbursts at the collective scale are formed by the chronic and accelerating information flow in the digital universe to consume, record, and circulate the visuals. This is a new condition. Through the circulation and acceleration of the information, the pathology of the controllable and anticipated future is validated, and the line between truth and falsehood is obliterated. This is a state of continuous and perpetual inhabitation within a world of erasing present inferiority and pollution, with the prioritisation of the original and primordial retrogression. Ethical living, which ensures justice and freedom, has led to the changing and inconsistent invocation, as well as the narratological acceptance and rejection. The actors who control the future through the actions of controlling the past are forgotten, trivialised, and rendered invisible.

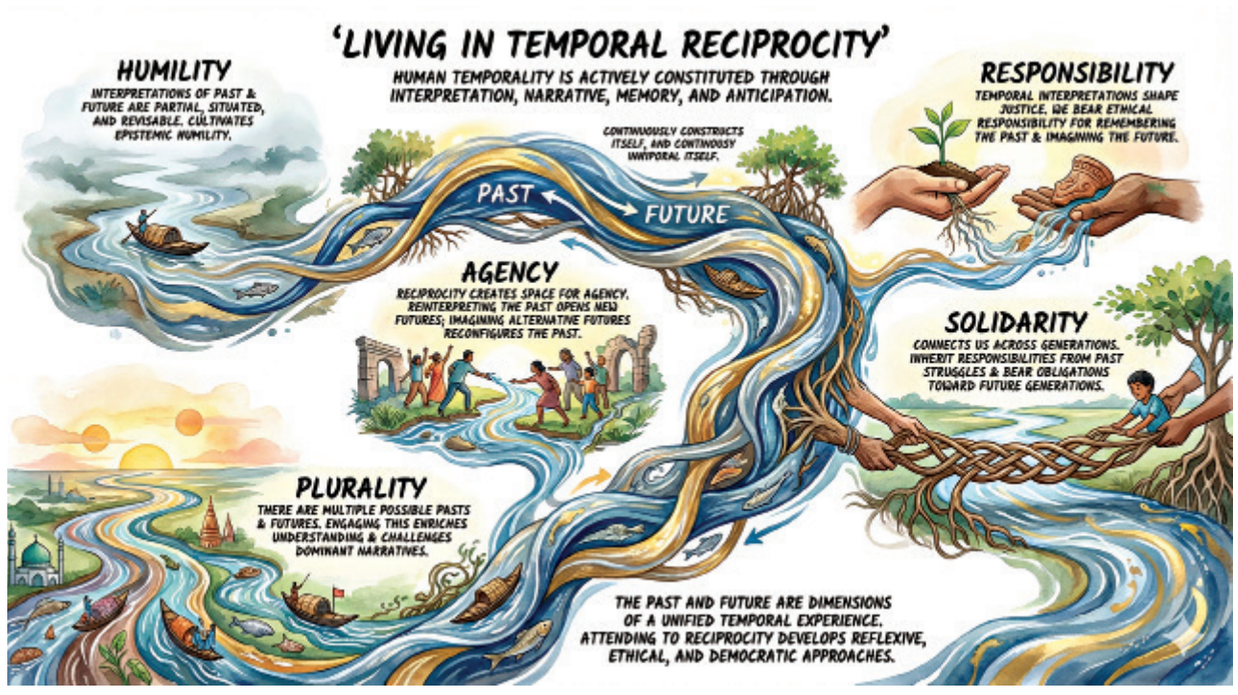
If we focus on the priorities for the future' regarding the varied, heterogeneous, and differential existence of all species and sentient beings in the Bengal Delta (and present-day Bangladesh), the bleak and dystopian future cannot be concealed by all the discursive imaginaries. Climate change and the global impacts of human exploitation and interventions on a planetary scale cannot simply be reduced to the local scale. Simultaneously, the local cannot always be extended and connected to the global. Global and local are mutually constitutive and connected. The invocation of any civilisational uniqueness' in terms of the retrospective thrust of a victimised past, as we can find in many popular discussions in the public space, is constructed to cancel the critical and conceptual engagement with the complexities and contingencies of the mutual connection of space and time.

Neither the programme to search and reenact selective appropriation of something indigenous' or originally of the soil', nor the pressure of connecting to the progressive flow' of the world, is going to help us out of the current helplessness and anticipated hopelessness or the state of the coming age of existential closure. Considering the intensity, number, and exponential rise of violence, suicide, murder, torture, and the erosion of tolerance and empathy in Bangladesh, all the discourses and realities of legitimisation and delegitimisation, all the practices of erasing the boundary between truth and post-truth must be subjected to intense epistemological, political, and sensitive examination, self-reflection, and introspection. The increasing identification of agency in terms of a singularised subject - I' - has to be replaced by a continuously dialogical and interactive subject - we'. This we' is not simply the privileged, elite, and powerful human agents and actors, but also the non-human entities of the delta: the rivers, water, rain, soil, vegetation, animals, forests, grasses, clouds, and oceans within the limit of the cartographic territory of our motherland, as well as the supra-territorial existence of all the living and non-living beings.

What we are noticing in the name of a sustainable future and sustainable development (instead of an inhabitable future), or in the plan for delta management, or environmental and biodiversity protection, has failed to recognise and accept this notion and identity of `we'. All these plans and actions (at least those on paper) have not paid adequate attention to the multiplicities of our being and becoming in heterogeneous pluriverse connections, nor the changing connections among temporalities, existence, inhabitability, and empathy. We are facing doom; people are not getting fresh drinking water in the expansive coastal regions; every year the frequency and intensity of flash floods is accelerating; the forest and hills are being consumed in the name of human living and development; wetlands and rivers are grabbed, embanked, controlled, or managed to promote a spectacle of sustainable developmentalism; groundwaters are depleting due to overexploitation for irrigation; hybrid species have colonised the entire ecosystem, and with the false propaganda of ensuring a better future and economic gains, the land and water interconnection is severed and destroyed;

Under these circumstances of ordinary living and experiences, the social media narratives of cancel culture and identity politics have normalised cruelty, infliction of pain, and violence as a normal and necessary evil. We have failed to explore the political psychology of everyday life in the blurred territorialities of the virtual and the real. A simple recognition of hatred and cruelty towards the non-human entities is absent in any discussions by the policymakers and intellectual activities in the urban elitist hubs. Before discussing the priorities of the future, we must therefore recognise the dignified living and survival of every entity in our country and in other parts of the world as well. We must unlearn and recognise our mistakes, failures, and inadequacies in engaging with the multiplicities and differences; we must reflect upon the past without any selection or bias, and agree to live our lives in intimate and empathic relations with others, both human and non-human.

The act of recognition and acceptance is the priority for me, the transformation from a selfish, narcissistic, and delusional I', from a future greedy, achievement-centric, and competitive subject - I' - to a multitemporal, trans-species, and empathic `us' inhabiting the fluid and mutually constitutive past-present-future is my hope to live with dignity, freedom, democratic, non-authoritarian conditions on the temporal flows.



The perils of thinking in terms of a predictable and anticipated future have isolated us from humility, responsibility, plurality, and solidarity by denying the reciprocal agency of human and non-human entities. The figure symbolically represents the entangled temporalities of the Bengal Delta, where past and future are mutually constituted.

The Tetulia River beside the ruins of the Dayamoyi Kali Temple at Sutabaria Village, Chiknikandi Union, Galachipa Upazila, Patuakhali.

A transition from 'Ageism' to 'Agevism'

A future policy tension for Bangladesh

RAFEA KHATUN

Research Fellow on Elderly Well-being, Regulation, and Social Business at the School of Law, University of New England, Australia, and an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Law at Jagannath University, Dhaka. She can be reached at rkhatun@myune.edu.au

KEY POINTS

1. Bangladesh is rapidly ageing, with older adults projected to form over one-fifth of the population by 2050.
2. Deep-rooted ageism marginalises the elderly socially, economically, and culturally.
3. Family-based care is weakening, increasing dependence on inadequate state support.
4. Existing laws protect elders partially but reinforce vulnerability rather than dignity.
5. A shift to "Agevism" demands rights-based, inclusive, and empowering ageing policies.

With a population (rising from 75 million in 1971 to 169.4 million in 2021) intensity of 1,119 people per square kilometre (BBS, 2023), Bangladesh is among the most densely populated countries in the world, ranking as the eighth-most populous nation globally. Over the same period, the total fertility rate declined sharply, dropping from 6.3 in 1971 to 2.3 in 2017–18 (NIPORT, ACPR, ICF, & Inc., 2020). As a result, the proportion and number of older adults are expected to rise steadily. The elderly population is projected to grow from 1.94 million in 1951 to 44 million by 2050, representing around 22% of the national population (Kabir, Khan, Kabir, & Rahman, 2013; Khan & Leeson, 2006; Rahman, 2020). At present, Bangladesh has approximately 15 million people aged 60 and above (BBS, 2023). Consequently, the increasing number of older individuals is anticipated to become a significant demographic challenge in the coming years.

Ageism in Bangladesh

The concept of Ageism is a global concern that is haunting both developed and developing countries. The terms refer to stereotyping and discrimination against people in various aspects of daily life, simply because of their age. In fact, age discrimination is a result of this Ageism. From the earliest stages of human existence, some people have survived into old age, suggesting deep roots in the ageing myth. The Antediluvian theme (refers to the longer life of ancient periods portrayed in the Bible), the Hyperborean theme (long life portrayed by distant cultures), and the Rejuvenation theme (searching for eternal youth) are all most common in ageing myths. Moreover, another common theme running through human history is 'Gerontophobia', which includes all types of fear of ageing and anti-ageing initiatives taken by human beings.

Like other countries in the Global North and the Global South, the concept of 'Ageism' persists in Bangladesh's socio-economic, cultural, and legal norms. In our country, 'Ageism' is observed severely due to low economic capacity, poverty, loss of work and authority, reduced physical mobility, rapid changes of social norms and values, the breakdown of ancient family patterns, preference of individualism, more women's outdoor economic engagement, inter-generational cultural transition and decaying morality, etc. Like other 'Isms'—Racism, Sexism— 'Ageism' is now an invisible and commonly accepted social virus in our country, hindering the true well-being initiatives both in national and local tiers.

An old-age home at Gazipur. FILE PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

From the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of ageism in Bangladesh, the elderly people are portrayed as a vulnerable and marginal group within the population. This vulnerability is facing new risks while the average household size in Bangladesh has decreased from 5.6 members in 1973 to 4.2 in 2022 (BBS, 2023). This shift has contributed to the rise of nuclear family structures, which in turn are reshaping social attitudes toward older adults. Although many elderly individuals still prefer living with family—particularly with married sons and grandchildren, with whom they can preserve emotional bonds—they increasingly face marginalisation within these changing family systems. Traditionally, older people supported their households through financial contributions and unpaid labour (Khan & Leeson, 2006). Yet research shows that this long-standing support system is weakening, leaving many older adults more vulnerable to neglect, reduced care, and negative stereotypes associated with ageing (Kabir, Rahman et al.). As the conventional family-based care model diminishes, older people are increasingly seeking government assistance for healthcare and financial security (Khan & Leeson, 2006; Khan, 2009). Given these demographic transitions and the growing risk of age-based discrimination, a thorough assessment of Bangladesh's ageing policies is essential—particularly in areas such as intergenerational equity, retirement and labour force participation, long-term care, social inclusion, welfare, and the protection of elderly rights.

On the other hand, the legal arrangements for elderly rights protection in Bangladesh are based on a mixed public-private and family services model. The constitution, focusing on non-discrimination principles, incorporates a few necessary human rights that can be directly applied to anti-ageism. However, the judicial unenforceability of necessities is a significant threat to the conditions for smooth elderly well-being. Additionally, the National Policy on Older Persons (2013) addressed crucial socio-economic issues affecting the well-being of older persons, such as poverty alleviation and social inclusion. However, it portrayed the elderly as vulnerable across all aspects, a prevailing perception in many countries. Moreover, the Universal Pension Scheme, 2023 and the Maintenance of Parents Act, 2013, were both addressed as positive legal mechanisms for the protection of elderly people's rights through legal tools. However, critics also noted that both initiatives shifted responsibility for the elderly's well-being from the state to the family and to individuals themselves. Even these legal approaches largely failed to reduce the prevailing 'Ageism', skipping the notion of empowering the elderly with dignity for their long-term contribution to the nation-building.

Across the national welfare and social support programmes, the Old Age Allowance (OAA) is a targeted, means-tested programme that provides a monthly stipend (as of the last proposal, 650 Taka per month) to financially vulnerable older adults. Adding more detail, the Pension Systems and Retirement Benefits includes government employee pensions and other retirement initiatives under the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS).

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