Reimagining sustainability from the ground up

BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is vice-chancellor at the University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Recently, my university came together to celebrate a day that could have been just another checkbox for ranking metrics or media optics. Instead of confining Earth Day to a calendar event, we did something remarkable: we pulled together all our resources to see what we could do for a day dedicated to the planet that we inhabit. Quite fittingly, the last act was an *alpona* made with dried leaves.

My colleague Moniruzzaman Shipu's artwork made me think of the fleeting nature of all our efforts. This year, we consciously avoided overuse of the paint-based *alpona*, the quintessential Bangalee folk motif. These designs, tinged with toxic lead-heavy street paints and synthetic glues, are a terrible beauty. While they adorn our festive seasons, *alpona* designs quickly turn into unsightly scars under traffic, lasting in their true forms only a day or two. What remains is difficult to remove and harmful for breathing. Instead, Shipu's art was crunchy, organic and temporary. It was a protest against our obsession with permanence and a reminder that sustainability is not simply a product that you buy, but a mindset and a lifestyle that you adhere to.

As I looked at those leafy designs, I couldn't help but reflect on the performative "greenness" we often import from the West. This year's Earth Day motto—"Our Power, Our Planet"—shares a similar irony. As a small, soon-to-be developing country, we don't have the power to attack and secure an oil source before blockading the supply chain of fuel for others. Our powerlessness is evident in the long queue as our fuel reserves start depleting in response to a clash of the titans in a faraway land.

When the "moral North" (a phrase borrowed from Lord Byron's critique of England) uses its compass to export environmental concerns as a compliance issue before purchasing our products, I can't help but reflect on the cycle of double standards. A foreign guest, for instance, came wearing a "Fair Trade" dress. For most of us in a country like Bangladesh, those "sustainable" shops are luxury labels that we can't afford. We don't always build sleek and expensive formulas for ourselves. In the North, recycling is a conscious, often trendy, choice. For a country like ours, recycling is not a trend; it is the default survival mechanism for the poor. Think of our sarees becoming quilts, quilts becoming baby wrappers or dusters, and eventually fuel for kitchen ovens.

This brings us to a challenging question: what does Earth Day really mean for us? Is it just another date to make word salad? Is it about capturing the moment with environmentally friendly optics?

Take the glass carafes at high-level meetings, for instance. The water is transported and circulated in plastic bottles, only to be decanted into glass bottles to signal "eco-consciousness." Could we explore the possibility of implementing a proper recycling alternative? Changing the system is challenging. It requires a significant amount of investment. Therefore, we stick to easy eco-aesthetics. The same thing happened when we tried to avoid PVC banners. We found ourselves trapped in a niche market of "green products" that are far too expensive for average citizens. The issue was discussed at a panel participated by industry experts; the verdict was we need policy-level interventions. Subsidies and soft loans for green products and tariffs on non-sustainable products—we need the carrot and the stick to go green. We need occasions to excite our imagination to tackle the climate crisis.

Earth Day 2026 celebration at ULAB. PHOTO: COURTESY

Our CSE students, thus, participated in a hackathon to come up with some green-solutions-based apps. Our business students did surveys on consumption to measure carbon footprints. Our sustainable club ran a workshop on making nature-based soap using aloe vera, neem or turmeric. Our media students did installation art on recycled materials, showed films and documentaries they made, and made interactive graffiti to create awareness. Our literature students shared examples from literary texts.

Earth Day at ULAB was a week of radical imagination. Instead of a "celebration," students were engaged in a week-long immersion involving 38 distinct programmes organised by various schools, departments, and clubs. We embraced Earth Day not as a distant concept but as the opportunity to stocktake our resources and ideas. The campus became a laboratory for what Amitav Ghosh calls the "crisis of imagination." For Ghosh, at its root, the climate crisis is a failure of our stories and our art. We first need to imagine a world that doesn't rely on the destructive habits of the last century. Then, we must share that imagination through storytelling.

Accordingly, our students and faculty participated in a wide array of interventions. There were letters to nature, where students articulated their grief and hope for a changing climate, and poetry slams that gave voice to the ecological anxieties of the Gen Z. There were discussions on eco-texts by teachers and students of the Bangla and English departments. A "Trashion Show" was held, transforming discarded materials into a spectacle of accountability.

The GED department organised a talk on the Buriganga River, and our students went to the nearby Turag River and took a solemn pledge to protect rivers. Our environmental science department held a talk on deforestation. They also made a GI-based (geographical indication) map of the campus for tree plantation that puts the right roots in the right soil for planned foliage and blooming.

We had representatives from China and Sweden, among others, to see what other nations are doing to make Earth a sustainable place. The EEE department discussed renewable energy. We talked about two major components of the climate crisis response: mitigation and adaptation. Throughout the week, we aligned ourselves to the global SDGs while practising how to live.

Some might look at these 38 programmes—the talks, the walks, and the workshops—and see them as fleeting, like the leaf *alpona*. Then again, they were designed with care, with a hope that the ideas would be blown away by the breeze to germinate in other places. Through the GI-based plantation or the discussion on green governance, we have started training a generation of leaders who should not be fooled by "greenwashing." We want them to know that a glass bottle filled with water that arrived in plastic is a lie. We want them to know that green labels used as a bargaining chip by the West are a lie. The real sustainability comes from our own culture, our own memory, our own heritage. These products may resemble a soap bar made from plants or artwork created by an artist using dried leaves. We have started nurturing the imagination needed to tackle the planetary crisis. We have started a green convo to know our planet and our power, the motto of this year's Earth Day.

The silent exclusion built into Bangladesh's ID system

Barrister Priya Ahsan Chowdhury
is advocate at the Supreme Court of Bangladesh and associate at Dr Kamal Hossain and Associates.

PRIYA AHSAN CHOWDHURY

When Haya (not real name) applied for an e-passport recently, the form allowed her to provide either her parents' names or those of a legal guardian. She listed her guardian. But during biometric enrolment, officials demanded the names of her biological parents. Weeks turned into months, and she found herself trapped in bureaucratic limbo as her opportunity to study abroad was slipping away.

Her story is far from unique. Across Bangladesh, obtaining a birth certificate, National Identity Card (NID) or passport, the trifecta of documents essential for daily life and travel, is often a puzzle where the pieces don't fit.

The Citizenship Act, 1951 provides that a person born in Bangladesh is a citizen of the country. As a corollary, every citizen is entitled to obtain key identity documents: a passport under the Bangladesh Passport Rules, 1974, framed pursuant to the Bangladesh Passport Order, 1973; a birth certificate under the Birth and Death Registration Act, 2004; and, if eligible to vote, an NID under the National Identity Registration Act, 2010. While the law does not always require both parents' names, administrative forms, government circulars and digital systems frequently insist on them. The result is frustration, delay, and exclusion for many citizens.

The problem becomes clearer when each document is examined individually. For e-passports, adults can apply using a guardian's name instead of parental details. In practice, however, applications are often halted during biometric enrolment if the biological parents' names are missing, as in Haya's case. Applicants using guardians' names must also obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the home ministry, an additional hurdle not imposed on those able to provide parental information.

For NIDs, there is no option to include a guardian's name in the application form, nor is there space for it on the card itself. As a result, some individuals who are not raised by their parents have had "*jana nei*" (not known) recorded in place of parental names.

Birth certificates present similar challenges. Application forms and the certificate don't accommodate legal guardians' names. Although the law allows limited flexibility when parental details are unavailable, in practice, this often leads to inconsistent and improvised entries. These documents don't operate in isolation. To obtain an adult passport, personal information must typically match the NID; a child's passport must align with the birth certificate, and NID applications generally rely on birth registration data. A single discrepancy, especially in parental information, can cascade across systems, blocking access to multiple services. For individuals without known parents, this creates overwhelming barriers.

The impact is deeply unequal. Children raised by single mothers, individuals with other guardians than parents, orphans, abandoned children, and those born as a result of sexual violence are disproportionately affected. For them, this is more than an administrative inconvenience. Without a birth certificate, children may be unable to enrol in school. Without an NID, adults face barriers to opening bank accounts, accessing employment, paying taxes, or voting. Without a passport, opportunities for travel and education abroad are effectively closed.

In March 2024, rights organisations Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, and Naripokkho filed a writ petition challenging these barriers. They contended that recognition of citizenship should not depend on naming parents, and that mandatory parental disclosure violates fundamental rights guaranteed under the constitution, including equality before the law, equal protection of law, non-discrimination, the right to life (encompassing education, healthcare, and work), and freedom of movement. The petition also argued that such requirements are inconsistent with Bangladesh's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which prohibits discrimination based on sex and marital status, and adversely affect children unable to identify their biological parents, contrary to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

On March 10, 2024, the High Court issued a *rule nisi* asking the government to explain why it should not amend relevant forms and circulars to allow the inclusion of a guardian's name as an alternative to that of a father or mother. The court also questioned the continued use of derogatory terms such as "*jana nei*" and directed the government to report on steps taken to harmonise all three identity systems, while enabling correction of existing records. Yet, more than two years later, there has been no meaningful progress, leaving applicants like Haya stuck in bureaucratic uncertainty.

The principle is not new. In 2023, the High Court allowed students to use the name of a father, mother, or legal guardian on SSC and HSC examination forms. Extending this approach to identity documents is both logical and necessary. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of NID correction applications remain pending, many regarding errors in parental information. Delays stretch for months or even years, costing people jobs, educational opportunities, and access to essential services.

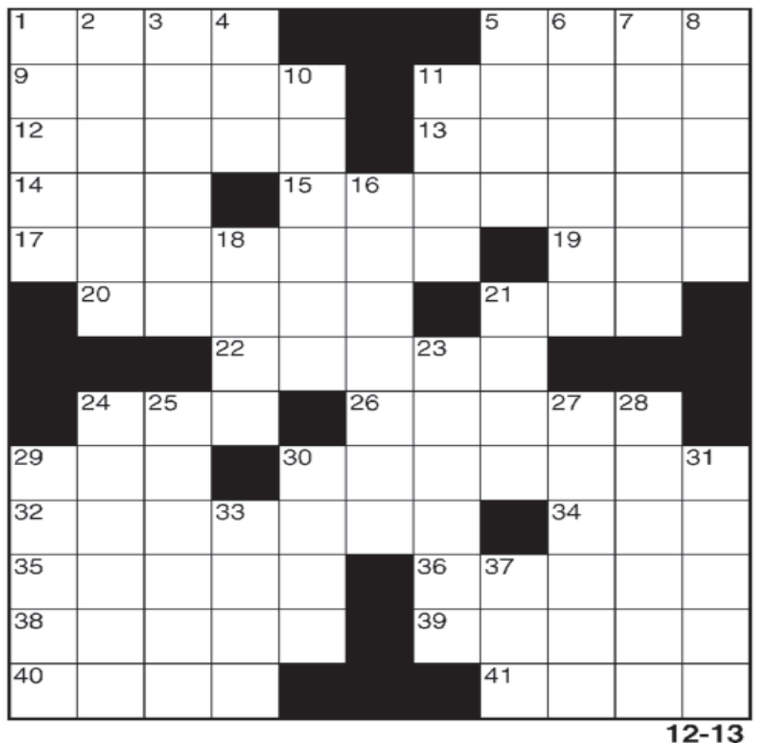
While proposals by the interim government for a unified civil registration commission could streamline administration, without removing exclusionary requirements of biological parents' details or placing extra hurdles for those naming legal guardians, such reforms will do little to resolve the problem. The solution is straightforward: shift from a lineage-based to a citizenship-based identity system. At the same time, processes and databases across agencies must be harmonised to ensure consistency and accessibility.

Haya eventually obtained her passport after months of struggle. But her NID still does not recognise her legal guardian. Many others remain blocked by rigid administrative practices that go beyond what the law requires. Recognition of citizenship should not hinge on naming a parent. Until Bangladesh's identity systems reflect that principle, some Bangladeshis will continue to ask whether they are truly equal before the law.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Pivot
5 Lose freshness
9 Our home
11 Lover of drama
12 Aerie builder
13 City-based
14 Second person
15 Purpose of certain machines
17 Undecided
19 Arthur of TV
20 Not moving
21 That lady
22 Digression
24 Animation frame
26 Singer Frankie
29 Buddy
30 Watching over
32 Bank business
34 Butter unit
35 Korean or Thai
36 Tony-winning musical of 1980
38 Halloween haul
39 Circle spokes
40 Amorous archer
41 Seasonal song

DOWN
1 Chimney cleaner
2 Bread buys
3 Memo stamp
4 Wing
5 Dictionary entry
6 Drink
7 Horseshoes score
8 Polynesian nation
10 New Jersey team
11 Ladder step
16 Put some zest into
18 Old radio feature
21 Occupied
23 Hazard
24 Forum VIP
25 Weather-influencing current
27 Lusty urges
28 How some games end
29 Site
30 Wee
31 Arthurian quest
33 June honorees
37 Big truck



12-13

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

D	A	N	I	E	L	■	F	A	S	T
O	R	A	N	G	E	■	O	P	E	N
E	M	P	T	Y	T	H	R	E	A	T
■	■	■	E	P	S	O	M	■	■	■
■	C	A	R	T	■	M	A	R	K	■
C	O	R	N	■	R	E	T	I	N	A
O	R	E	■	C	A	R	■	G	A	Y
W	A	N	T	O	N	■	M	O	V	E
■	L	A	I	D	■	H	A	R	E	■
■	■	■	L	A	B	O	R	■	■	■
F	U	L	L	S	E	R	V	I	C	E
I	S	E	E	■	E	D	I	T	O	R
B	E	E	R	■	S	E	N	S	O	R

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO
dsopinion@gmail.com.