



Maize cultivation has expanded in the Rangpur char region, but high production costs and low market prices have shrunk farmers' profit margins. The photo was taken near a maize field in the Kalmati area of Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila on Friday. PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

When numbers dilute progress

AHMED HUMAYUN MURSHED

Population alone does not determine a nation's future, but unchecked growth quietly intensifies almost every existing challenge. In countries such as Bangladesh, rising population pressure is closely linked to job scarcity, persistent inflation, shortages in healthcare, declining education standards, strain on law and order, weak infrastructure and environmental degradation. The population will continue to grow. The real challenge is ensuring living standards alongside it. Sustainable progress does not come from expansion alone, but from balancing population growth with opportunity, resources and quality of life.

Every nation is growing, though at different speeds. Nigeria and Pakistan expand by about 2 percent and 1.6 percent respectively. India has moderated to below 1 percent, while China has entered decline. Bangladesh may not top global growth charts, but it carries around 20 crore people within around 1.48 lakh square kilometres. Even moderate increases are visible. Population density amplifies every policy weakness.

Controlling population growth directly eases job scarcity by aligning workforce entry with employment creation. It reduces demand driven inflation, making essentials more affordable. Healthcare systems face fewer shortages when patient loads stabilise. Classrooms become manageable. Law and order institutions gain capacity when social pressure declines. Infrastructure lasts longer under balanced demand, and the environment recovers as land, air and water face less strain.

A controlled demographic curve allows these areas to improve rather than constantly chase expansion.

Employment is where Bangladesh's future will be decided, given its population size. The Third and Fourth Industrial Revolutions are already reducing many low-skilled roles while increasing demand for technical capability, automation and cyber-physical systems. If population growth slows, investment per child can rise, allowing easier absorption into a technology driven economy.

Quality replaces quantity.

The equation needs balance. Recognising the problem solves half of it. The other half rests on three ideas working together.

The first is widening the tax net. Only a small fraction of citizens file income tax, constraining public investment.

Expanding the base, even modestly, would generate billions in additional revenue. That capital can fund job creation, curb

inflationary pressure, strengthen healthcare, raise education standards, improve law and order, build infrastructure and reduce pollution. A broader base also allows lower rates, reducing evasion and building trust. Bangladesh cannot rely on foreign loans indefinitely to keep the wheels turning.

The second is investing in skills at scale. If even one million young people each year receive structured vocational, digital or technical training, productivity rises quickly. Remittances, now around \$20-\$22 billion annually, could shift towards higher-value professions. Skilled migration and competitive domestic industries both depend on education aligned with global demand.

The third, and most important, is a sustained awareness campaign. Responsible parenthood should be framed not as a restriction but as empowerment. Community engagement, integration of family planning into primary healthcare and education of girls are proven tools. Bangladesh once demonstrated success in this area. A renewed effort, supported by the government, led by Tarique Rahman, and backed by local and international NGOs, religious leaders, administrators and even start-ups using digital platforms, can normalise informed decision-making. Sensitive conversations, handled respectfully, produce gradual but lasting change.

Extreme ideas are sometimes floated, such as linking family size to income or education status. These are neither practical nor equitable. Real change comes from awareness, access to information and economic alignment. Behaviour shifts organically when families understand that raising two children well may secure more opportunities than raising more children without sufficient resources. Population control is not about shrinking ambition. It is about allowing ambition to breathe. Slower demographic expansion means higher per capita investment, stronger institutions, better environmental protection and a workforce prepared for a digital century.

Sustainable growth is controlled growth. Without balance, numbers dilute progress. With balance, even a nation of 20 crore people can move forward with stability and dignity.

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Low maize prices shrink profits for char farmers

S DILIP ROY and MOSTAFA SHABUI

In the once-barren northern chars of Rangpur, maize has become a lucrative cash crop. But low market prices this year have left farmers disappointed despite expanded cultivation.

Maize growers in the Rangpur char region said rising costs of seeds, fertiliser, diesel, and labour increased production expenses by Tk 2,000 to Tk 2,500 per bigha, while lower-than-expected prices brought down profit margins.

According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), projected nationwide maize acreage and production for the current fiscal year are lower than last year's. In contrast, cultivation has expanded in the Rangpur region.

A DAE official agreed that higher production costs have discouraged farmers. While many maize growers reported that nor'westers and hailstorms damaged their crops, the official added that the overall impact of the disasters was not severe.

Meanwhile, maize traders have said prices may go up if the demand at feed mills rises, advising farmers to store their harvest for now.

HIGH HOPES DASHED

DAE data show maize has been cultivated on 666,000 hectares nationwide this fiscal year, with a production target of 7.079 million tonnes. In the previous fiscal year, maize was grown on 678,000 hectares, producing 7.399 million tonnes.

In the five districts of Rangpur region — Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Rangpur, Nilphamari, and Gaibandha — maize has been cultivated on 127,230 hectares this year, with a production target of 1.329

million tonnes.

Farmer Shamsul Alam, 65, from Char Goddimari on the Teesta River in Hatibandha upazila of Lalmonirhat, cultivated maize on 22 bighas this year, up from 20 bighas last year.

"Other crops do not generate enough profit, but maize makes up for those losses. However, because of lower market

prices this year, profits have dropped significantly," he said.

According to Alam, the cost of cultivating maize on one bigha rose to Tk 20,000 this year from Tk 17,500 last year due to higher fertiliser, diesel, and labour costs.

He had hoped to sell maize at Tk 31 to Tk 32 per kilogramme, but current prices have fallen well below expectations.

Farmer Sekendar Ali, 65, from Char Karai Barishal on the Brahmaputra River in Chilmari upazila of Kurigram, said he

was forced to sell 5,000 kilogrammes of maize at Tk 27 per kilogramme.

"I still have more than 18,000 kilogrammes stored at home. I am holding onto them in the hope that market prices will rise," he said.

Farmer Ruhul Amin, 60, from Rasulpur Char in Fulchhari upazila of Gaibandha, said yields also declined this year.

"Last year, yields were 35 to 40 maunds per bigha, but this year they did not exceed 30 maunds," he said.

Untimely hailstorms, diesel shortages, and high fertiliser prices affected production, he added.

PRICE RECOVERY EXPECTED
Maize traders said prices have declined because of higher supply in the market, although they expect rates to improve in the coming weeks.

Nazrul Islam, a maize trader in Chilmari upazila, said warehouses are still holding

unsold stocks from last year, while feed mills are purchasing less aggressively than before.

"So, we are purchasing maize from farmers at Tk 27 to Tk 28 per kilogramme," he said.

"Although market demand is somewhat down now, prices may increase soon. If demand rises at feed mills, farmers will also get better prices."

Nibarun Chandra Sen, a maize trader from Baura in Lalmonirhat, said farmers are still making profits, though margins have narrowed considerably.

Delwar Hossain, manager of a maize procurement centre in the same area, said farmers who are not in urgent need of cash may benefit by storing maize for some time.

Abdullah Al Mamun, deputy director of the Kurigram DAE, said maize cultivation began in the Teesta char areas around 30 years ago and has expanded rapidly in the Brahmaputra chars over the past five years.

"Maize has now become the most important crop in the agricultural economy of the char regions," he said.

He acknowledged that higher production costs and lower market prices have disappointed farmers, though storm-related damage was not severe overall.

Sirajul Islam, additional director of the Rangpur Regional Agricultural Extension Department, said around 90 percent of maize in the Rangpur region is grown in char areas along 26 rivers, helping improve local livelihoods.

Besides grain sales, farmers also earn Tk 3,000 to Tk 4,000 per bigha from selling maize cobs, he added, expressing hope that prices would improve if demand rises in the coming days.



China, India broadcast standoff dashes FIFA World Cup revenue hopes

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Gianni Infantino, head of soccer's global governing body, has called this year's men's World Cup the "most inclusive" in history. Try telling that to fans in China and India, who at this rate might not even be able to watch. TV rights stand-offs risk shutting nearly 3 billion potential viewers out, undermining Infantino's welcoming rhetoric. It's a wrinkle in the sport's emerging market growth hopes.

FIFA is expecting a blockbuster \$8.9 billion in revenue this year, as superstars like France's Kylian Mbappé and England's Harry Kane descend on North America. The biggest chunk, at \$3.9 billion, is supposed to come from selling the broadcasting rights. That would be one-third higher than in the 2022 Qatar World Cup. The increase might seem puzzling: global viewership, as a percentage of the population, didn't materially grow between 2014 and 2022, based on the number of people who watched at least 20 minutes on linear TV.

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The tournament will expand to 48 teams from the traditional 32, as FIFA banks on more countries and matches to lift revenue. Yet China still didn't manage to qualify for the expanded competition. India, which has never played at a World Cup, missed the cut as usual.

Worse, FIFA appears to have misjudged broadcasters' demand in the world's two most populous countries. Beijing Daily reported that the soccer body initially wanted up to \$300 million for the Chinese rights, which state broadcaster CCTV balked at; state-run news portal Sixtthone reported on May 8 that Infantino's team has since lowered the asking price by half. Many matches will kick off deep into the night in the People's Republic.

There's also a deadlock in India, where a Reliance-Disney joint venture has offered \$20 million for the local rights. According to Reuters, which cited two sources, that price was not acceptable to FIFA. Tycoon Mukesh Ambani's Reliance may feel emboldened to make such a lowball offer given the limited competition following its deal with Disney, struck in 2024.

The stand-off will worry Chinese sponsors, including dairy giant

Mengniu and TV maker Hisense, that have poured a combined \$500 million into the tournament, based on figures reported by Global Times. Global brands like Adidas and Coca-Cola, meanwhile, risk missing the

chance to reach two giant markets. China and India ranked first and ninth globally for linear TV World Cup reach in 2022, with 510 million and 84 million viewers, respectively, according to FIFA figures.

The good news is that sports can be a diplomatic icebreaker. Think of China's rapprochement with the NBA after years of tension, followed by Donald Trump's meeting with Xi Jinping last year. With the US

president visiting his opposite number in Beijing this week, a deal is still possible.

Still, the episode contains a broader lesson for Western soccer businesses, like \$3.3 billion publicly listed Manchester United. Sports CEOs tend to assume that populous Asian countries will fuel revenue growth in the future, as TV rights deals in the Western markets stagnate. Yet if even the World Cup struggles to attract much demand among broadcasters, lesser competitions may be in for a shock.

FIFA has concluded agreements with broadcasters in over 175 territories globally to show World Cup matches, but there has been no announcement for China and India. The finals are due to start on June 11. "Discussions in China and India regarding the sale of media rights for the FIFA World Cup 2026 are ongoing and must remain confidential at this stage," FIFA said in a statement, Reuters reported on May 4.

China accounted for 17.7 percent and India 2.9 percent of the global linear TV reach of the 2022 tournament. The two countries together accounted for 22.6 percent of total global digital streaming reach for that World Cup, Reuters reported on May 4.



An aerial view of Seattle Stadium in Seattle, which will host six matches during the 2026 FIFA World Cup. PHOTO: AFP