

WORLD ENVIRONMENT DAY

Time to address the unequal burden of environmental change

How BNP can make its 25 crore tree plantation project work



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Every year, Bangladesh observes World Environment Day with the same familiar rituals: tree plantation drives, school rallies, and repeated promises to address pollution and climate change. However, between one Environment Day and the next, rivers still turn black with untreated waste, wetlands shrink under encroachment, urban air remains toxic, and flooding and waterlogging continue to disrupt day-to-day life. These recurring cycles raise a deeper question: are we really addressing the environmental crisis?

These challenges stem from an oft-ignored reality: environmental change, shaped by social roles, access to resources, and power, is not experienced equally. In Bangladesh, especially in rural areas, women are frequently at the frontline of environmental stress, but they remain largely invisible in environmental governance. When freshwater sources become contaminated or distant, it is often women and girls who spend additional hours collecting water. When floods damage sanitation systems, women are forced to manage hygiene and care work under difficult and often unsafe conditions. When fuel becomes scarce or expensive, women have to adjust cooking practices and absorb the additional workload. In urban areas, informal settlements are where environmental degradation is usually most severe.

There, poor waste management, unsafe water, and air pollution translate directly into increased unpaid care work—caring for sick children, managing household cleanliness, and coping with disrupted routines. Although these burdens are daily and cumulative, they rarely appear in environmental planning or budgeting.

This unequal experience reflects a deeper institutional problem. Environmental governance in Bangladesh is still largely blind to social differences in impact. Policies focus on technical solutions without asking who is most affected. As a result, environmental problems are usually treated as purely physical or technical issues, not as social and justice concerns as well.

Environmental justice shifts this perspective. It requires us to look beyond aggregate indicators and ask more difficult questions, such as whose time is being consumed by environmental failure, whose health is most affected, and whose voices are least heard in decisions about

environmental resources and services.

An overlooked consequence of environmental degradation is its impact on unpaid care work. When environmental systems fail, households must compensate through additional labour. This invisible economy of care is largely carried by women. But it remains absent from environmental cost calculations and policy priorities. Because this work is not measured, it is not adequately addressed, hence it is not resourced.

In Bangladesh, women's participation in consultations and community forums rarely translates into influence over decisions on budgets, infrastructure, enforcement, or resource allocation. This gap between participation and power highlights the need to move beyond consultation and ensure meaningful involvement in environmental decision-making.

Local governments offer an important but underutilised opportunity for advancing environmental justice. Since environmental problems are experienced locally, union parishads and upazila administrations are often the first to respond. Their capacity,

however, remains limited as training, workshops, and policy discussions are mostly concentrated at the district level. Without adequate resources, technical capacity, and inclusive planning approaches, local institutions will continue to lack the capacity to overcome the existing inequalities. A just environmental governance system must ensure that local governments are properly equipped, mandated, and held accountable to deliver inclusive outcomes regarding proper environmental management.

Environmental justice requires a shift in how we understand environmental problems in Bangladesh. They are not only about pollution levels, forest cover, or climate targets, but also about unequal burdens, invisible labour, and unequal power. The central question is, therefore, not just how to protect the environment but also how to ensure that the costs and benefits of environmental change are shared fairly. Without environmental justice, environmental governance remains incomplete. A more sustainable future depends on fairer systems where those carrying the greatest environmental burdens are visible, valued, and empowered.

There should be no debate about the importance of environmental justice, even when immediate attention focuses on technical solutions. Environmental solutions that ignore inequality may deliver visible short-term results, but they rarely last. Without addressing who bears the burden of environmental failure and who is excluded from decision-making, sustainability remains incomplete.



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On March 4, 2026, the Bangladeshi premier formalised his government's plan to plant 25 crore trees during its current tenure, thus keeping the BNP's election promise. The project called "National Green Mission" may seem an enormous target, given that 50 percent of the country is wetland; it's indeed achievable.

However, the goal can easily be tarnished by mismanagement, corruption, irregularities, exaggeration, and narrow vision. Local communities' and Indigenous Peoples' cultural, land and ecological rights could be violated by over-enthusiastic groups, especially as the government aims at involving a wide range of organisations in the plantation programme.

We therefore need to think it through and remind ourselves the amazing role large-scale plantations can play in creating short- and long-term green jobs (in nurseries, transportation, planting, aftercare, and monitoring); conserving soil, water and biodiversity; reducing air and dust pollution; removing carbon

from the atmosphere; protecting us from natural calamities; and in sustaining the economy of a village, a region, and a country through supplying raw natural resources.

Besides, mega-plantations can also support rebranding Bangladesh's global persona and fulfil its environmental obligations. In 2024, Bangladesh promised under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) to restore at least 15 percent of its degraded terrestrial, freshwater, coastal and marine ecosystems by 2030. Massive tree plantations can help the country to keep this promise. Similarly, Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plan (NAP), 2023-2050, and the third Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) report, 2026-2035, clearly outline afforestation as a crucial intervention to fight climate change. But biodiversity conservation and climate action require a lot of money. Over the past few years, climate finance, green finance, and sustainable finance have been widely talked about for channelling money from various domestic and international sources. If planned and implemented well, Bangladesh's large-scale plantations can create opportunities for the country to sell carbon credits on the carbon market to earn additional funds.

But how can our 25 crore tree-planting effort move forward, considering all these immediate and long-term activities and concerns? How can we measure the impact of such a huge undertaking on different dimensions and claim its full credit?

One way to do this is by using a comprehensive, well-designed guiding tool. The IUCN's Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions (NbS) could be such a useful instrument. At its core, NbS involve harnessing nature—such as through tree planting—to tackle societal challenges like deforestation, climate change, and joblessness. Developed first in 2020 through consultations in 100 countries and improved in response to users' experience, the NbS standard is a good tool for Bangladesh's mega-plantations. But we need to contextualise it.

First, to ensure people's participation, a key aspect of NbS, from nursery raising to plantation

monitoring, we need to build on our experience of coastal afforestation since the early 1960s, of social forestry since the early 1980s, and of co-management of natural resources since the mid-1990s. We need to consider provisions in our Forest Act, 1927, Biodiversity Act, 2017, Wildlife Act, 2026, Forest and Tree Conservation Act, 2026, Protected Area Management Rules, 2017 and Environmentally Critical Areas Management Rules, 2016. We should also ensure transparency, accountability and local people's agreement over a new plantation: who will benefit from this, are we depriving the families who relied upon the land before the plantation, and if yes, have we created any alternative livelihoods for them to sustain themselves.

Second, an NbS must bring positive changes in biodiversity. So, any plantation programme must include many locally appropriate tree species. We must not rely on just one or two due to popular demand or the vested interest of certain groups. We can learn from the mangrove enrichment plantation done by UNDP and the Forest Department under the Integrating Community-based Adaptation into Afforestation and Reforestation project (2015-2021), where 12 mangrove species were used to save the degraded coastal green belt, which was once created with only two species: keora (80-85 percent) and baen (15-20 percent). China also showed us how choosing the wrong species can destroy a plantation programme. In the 1980s and 1990s, Ningxia province had to cut down eight crore infested fast-growing poplar trees to control Asian Longhorned Beetle attack, causing significant environmental and economic damage.

Third, turning a plantation site into a vibrant ecosystem takes time; hence, post-plantation follow-up is vital. This should accompany adaptive management of the plantation based on the evidence gathered and lessons learnt regularly—an important aspect of NbS to ensure sustainability. As a part of adaptive management, information on all plantation sites (i.e., area, geographical location, number of saplings planted, and agencies responsible for plantation, aftercare, and monitoring) should be openly available online for public scrutiny. Such a vigilant system is critical to halt falsification and manipulation of plantation data.

The government has already formed an 11-member national cell to coordinate and guide the planting of 25 crore trees. It remains to be seen whether the national cell will formulate a strategic framework for fully leveraging this unprecedented NbS venture.



The planet we leave for our children should be one free of pollution, where biodiversity thrives and 'green' replaces garbage.
PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Thrifting can help fix fashion's environmental problem



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Every year, World Environment Day is observed around the world to remind us that environmental protection is a necessity, not an option. This year's theme for the day, "Inspired by Nature. For Climate. For Our Future," highlights an urgent truth: that solving climate challenges requires changing how and what we produce, consume, and live. One area where this change is becoming increasingly visible is fashion. Fashion reflects identity, culture, and creativity, but behind stylish clothing lies environmental damage that consumers often ignore. The fast fashion industry drives waste, resource depletion and emissions, and while no single fix exists, buying secondhand offers a promising path to sustainability.

Thrifting denotes buying pre-owned clothing rather than purchasing newly

manufactured items. It includes shopping at thrift stores, vintage shops, online resale sites, local secondhand businesses, and clothing exchanges. Importantly, thrifting represents a shift from the traditional "take-make-dispose" model to a circular economy, where products are reused, repaired, and recycled to remain in use longer.

The rise of thrifting is not accidental. Around the world, particularly among younger generations, secondhand fashion has moved from necessity to lifestyle. Social media decluttering groups have turned thrift culture into a trend linked to creativity, affordability, and environmental responsibility.

Economic realities also contribute to this shift. Rising living costs encourage consumers to search for affordable alternatives without sacrificing quality or individuality.

Secondhand clothing often provides access to better-quality garments at lower prices. At the same time, environmental awareness has prompted many people to question whether buying newly produced clothing is sustainable in a world already facing climate-related stress.

These concerns are justified. The global fashion and textile industry carries a significant environmental footprint. The textile industry contributes approximately two to eight percent of global greenhouse gas (GHGs) emissions, consumes a significant amount of water and chemicals during production, and causes extensive pollution. The waste dimension is equally alarming with around 92 tonnes of textile waste being generated globally every year. Clothing production doubled between 2000 and 2015, while the duration of garment use fell significantly by at least 36 percent. In simple terms, we are producing more clothing while wearing it less, and the result is growing waste accumulation, overflowing landfills, and additional environmental pressure.

Fast fashion intensifies this problem. Its business model encourages consumers to purchase frequently and replace garments rapidly. According to a 2023 UNEP estimate, the fashion industry contributes to roughly 10 percent of global carbon emissions, more than the emissions from international flights and maritime shipping combined. Synthetic

textiles further contribute to microplastic pollution that enters rivers and oceans, creating long-term ecological risks.

This is where thrifting becomes important. When consumers purchase used-but-wearable clothing, they extend the lifespan of existing garments and potentially reduce GHG emissions by 44 percent. Reusing clothing delays disposal, reduces landfill, and lowers demand for raw materials like cotton, water, energy, and dyes. And by aiming to keep clothing materials in productive use for as long as possible, thrifting also strengthens the circular economy in fashion.

However, portraying thrifting as the ultimate solution risks oversimplifying reality. Secondhand fashion has its challenges too. Many tend to overindulge in thrifted clothes as they are comparatively cheap, hence aiding overconsumption. And as thrifting is commercialised and part of the mainstream fashion scene, profit-driven resale markets continue expanding. Increased demand often drives prices upwards, potentially reducing affordability for lower income communities who traditionally rely on secondhand clothing. An even more complex discussion emerges when considering countries heavily dependent on garment manufacturing sectors, including Bangladesh. Critics may worry that secondhand markets might reduce

demand for new clothes, affecting profitability of the RMG sector.

Resisting sustainability shifts could pose bigger risks as global markets prioritise environmental and ethical standards. Future competitiveness may depend on sustainability, not just production volume. The RMG sector could lead by collaborating with secondhand markets, viewing thrifting not as a threat but as a sign of changing fashion systems. Building a sustainable apparel sector may require greater investment in textile recycling, circular manufacturing systems, waste-reduction technologies, eco-certification, and resource-efficient production models.

Nature teaches us an important lesson: nothing valuable is wasted unnecessarily. Natural ecosystems function through cycles of renewal, regeneration, and reuse. Sustainability efforts become stronger when human systems learn from these principles. So, on this World Environment Day, we may benefit from remembering that climate action is not only about large-scale policies, visible climatic and environmental conditions, or technological breakthroughs. It is also about everyday choices. And we can all play our part by choosing durability over disposability, mindful consumption over excess, and choosing systems that value reuse instead of waste.