How long can farmers keep producing as costs keep rising?



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■ MOSTAFA SHABUJ

High input costs, low market prices for agricultural produce, fertiliser shortages or distribution problems, fuel price hikesthere seems to be little relief for farmers in Bangladesh. The latest blow, the government's decision to hike fuel prices across the board by Tk 20—the second such increase in just five months—has hit small and marginal farmers particularly hard, leading many to wonder whether they should reduce production, stop farming, or seek alternative livelihoods.

Data on fuel consumption by the farming community explains the situation better. More than 12 lakh irrigation pumps and 3.8 lakh power tillers in Bangladesh run on diesel. Meanwhile, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) estimates that roughly 12.55 lakh tonnes of diesel are consumed by farm machinery annually, and the agricultural sector alone accounts for over 15 percent of the country's annual fuel consumption.

Besides, most small farmers do not have electric irrigation pumps. They rely on diesel pumps. With the fuel price hike, not only has irrigating fields become costly for them, but so has transporting produce to the markets. This situation is forcing many growers to question the worth of the effort that goes into farming. But halting production or quitting farming remains impossible for most, as agriculture is the only livelihood known to the lakhs of farmers of this fertile delta. Most of them would rather continue working with full dedication, driven by the hope that market conditions will improve in upcoming seasons, than leave a profession inherited from their ancestors.

Bangladesh's potato growers exemplify this persistence: consecutive years of nationwide overproduction led to recurring financial losses for growers even after they paid for off-season cold storage. Farmers incurred losses in 9 out of the last 15 seasons, and although potato exports increased in the last fiscal year, local farm gate prices did not. And yet, farmers continue to grow potatoes, hoping for better days.

Meanwhile, in Naogaon this year, a key Aush paddy hub, farmers cultivated over 58,000 hectares of land, incurring a cost of Tk 14,000-15,000 per bigha and yielding 15-16 maunds per bigha. But plunging market prices of Tk 700-800 per maund resulted in losses of Tk 5,000-6,000 per bigha.

Recent natural disasters, including flash floods, extreme rainfall, and storms in several districts, further compounded farmers' struggles, yet government aid remained grossly insufficient. Although the BNP government distributed farmer cards to a limited number of farmers shortly after assuming power; waived debts up to Tk 10,000, including interest, for about 12 lakh small and marginal farmers; and provided cash assistance to affected farmers in the haor region, these measures fall far short of properly addressing the on-ground reality.

Under the farmer card programme, each farmer receives agricultural inputs worth a meagre Tk 2,500 per year, a trivial sum under current economic conditions. For a farmer who has lost Tk 2 lakh worth of potatoes or paddy in extreme rainfall, a modest cash transfer or a Tk 10,000 loan waiver offers negligible relief.

Over the past decade, my conversations with flood-affected and debt-burdened farmers across the northern region reveal a consistent sentiment among them: they do not seek government handouts or relief. What they demand instead is cost stability for key inputs such as diesel, gas, electricity, seeds, and fertiliser, alongside fair prices for their produce. They expect the government to ensure timely and uninterrupted supply of fertilisers and other inputs at reasonable prices. Unfortunately, the ground reality today remains starkly at odds with these basic expectations.

Moreover, decade-long persistent price disparities trap growers in generational, high-interest debt cycles with moneylenders and NGOs. Even if produce prices rise during harvests, escalating input costs guarantee growing, not diminishing, debt burdens. Yet, two decades ago, rural farming families were more self-reliant and could protect themselves from market forces as they saved seeds, used organic fertilisers, family labour, and draft animals at minimal expense.

Today, this landscape has drastically shifted. While commercial transport operators, retailers, and businesses easily pass rising costs onto consumers, farmers lack collective bargaining power, organised representation, or institutional avenues to adjust crop prices or negotiate with state agencies. Government paddy pricing primarily benefits commercial traders, while local syndicates dictate rates for other crops.

Moreover, marginal farmers lack independent resources unlike in the past: around 93 percent of seeds are now imported, while machinery, irrigation, chemical fertilisers, pesticides, and transport are commercially controlled. Amid these challenges, a fuel price hike adds costs to every production phase without boosting returns. And farmers' dependency deepens.

This year has been particularly difficult for farmers. Input distribution challenges have disrupted farming operations in many districts across the country. Growers paid Tk 400 to Tk 500 above official rates per bag of fertiliser. In Kurigram, recent fertiliser shortages and distribution anomalies sparked farmer unrest, altercations, and warehouse break-ins. Following legal actions and arrests, including a case filed over allegedly assaulting an agriculture officer, many Bhurungamari farmers fled their homes in fear of arrest and could not return to their villages. While the frustrated farmers' actions cannot be legally justified, it does raise the question: how ethical is it to punish them for the government distribution channels' failure to supply fertilisers at official rates?

Because the state serves as the primary support system for the agricultural community, abruptly hiking fuel prices without addressing underlying vulnerabilities severely impact rural livelihoods. To mitigate these pressures, the government should review and reduce fuel rates. Authorities should assess whether it is possible to reduce the price of diesel for the agricultural community to prevent further increases in production costs. Diesel purchases can be tied to the farmer's card, which the government must distribute nationwide urgently. Besides, establishing a dedicated agricultural commission would help the government evaluate farming profitability, identify systemic failure points, and formulate debt-relief mechanisms. Additionally, given the growing threat of climate crises, introducing comprehensive crop insurance schemes and direct cash assistance is essential.

More than 17 crore people in this country rely on farmers who toil in the fields, come rain or shine, to feed the nation. Protecting their interests cannot be an afterthought. The impact of policy-level decisions on farmers and marginal producers must be evaluated with caution and compassion before implementation.



FILE PHOTO: **MOSTAFA SHABUJ**

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Rare wildlife found in Inani puts our conservation efforts to the test

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Cox's Bazar's 7,085-hectare Inani National Park is home to Asian elephants, western hoolock gibbons, and clouded leopards, three of Bangladesh's most threatened mammals. A study conducted by Bipul Krishna Das between 2022 and 2023, and published in August 2026, recorded 23 mammal species including three listed as "critically endangered" on Bangladesh's national Red List—the Asian elephant, western hoolock gibbon, and clouded leopard—as well as four species listed as "endangered" including the northern red muntjac, northern pig-tailed macaque, capped langur, and Bengal slow loris. That is reassuring news, but it is also a warning. Finding these animals inside a protected area tells us what Inani still has; it should also force us to ask whether Bangladesh has the capacity to protect what it has found. If we cannot properly secure wildlife even inside protected areas, we should think carefully about how much sensitive location information we make public before stronger safeguards are in place.

The study did more than list species. It found that shrubland, more than half the park, held the most mammals, and it proposes mapping gibbon and carnivore records so patrols can be aimed there. In a protector's hands, such records are a conservation tool; in the wrong hands, a guide for poachers. The paper doesn't seem to publish exact coordinates, and it says the data are available on request. Still, Bangladesh has no clear, public rule on what location details for sensitive species should be shared, with whom, and under what safeguards. Nothing shows that publicity has led to poaching at Inani, and this article doesn't claim it has.

Writing in Science in 2017, David Lindenmayer and Ben Scheele warned that revealing rare species' locations can invite poaching, advising coarse locations over precise coordinates where the risk is moderate, and telling the authorities beforehand. Sceptics point out that poachers often know these spots before researchers do, so watchfulness on the ground matters as much as confidentiality. Both can be true. But recent trafficking cases suggest caution makes sense in Bangladesh, where traffickers are already collecting rare animals and moving them through organised networks.

On March 23, 2025, three lemurs were stolen from Gazipur Safari Park with help from an outsourced worker, and investigators say two were smuggled into India. Without microchips or preserved DNA profiles, even proving their identity is now hard. In June, wildlife trafficker Hadis Rahman was arrested, and 42 animals were recovered from a Mirpur warehouse he had rented for a year and a half as a supposed pigeon farm, reportedly the country's largest wildlife haul. An earlier case against him ended in a fine of Tk 10,000, and the wildlife crime control unit's own inspector says it has no protection system of its own.

The risk to Inani's species is just as real. Forest Department figures show 114 elephants dead in Chattogram, the Hill Tracts, and Cox's Bazar over nine years, 33 of them shot or electrocuted, yet only 19 cases reached the forest courts. None of this proves that publicity invites poaching, or that Inani is being targeted. But it shows trafficking networks are organised and often ahead of enforcement, while our defences stay weak. The problem is not simply poaching either. Even conservation projects can put pressure on protected habitats: Forest Department officials are currently opposing a planned elephant rescue centre inside Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary because they fear its enclosure would obstruct wild elephants' movement and shrink their habitat.

Parliament passed the Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act, 2026 in April, replacing the 2012 Act. Section 10 bans keeping, selling, or moving wildlife without a licence, with up to a year in prison or a fine of up to Tk 1 lakh, or both. Section 41(1) punishes hunting a tiger or elephant listed in Schedule 1(a) with two to seven years in prison and Tk 1 to 10 lakh in fine, and the crime is cognisable and non-bailable. Section 19 bars hunting and unauthorised entry in national parks, and new factories or brick kilns within two kilometres of their boundaries. Section 24 lets the government declare core zones, buffer zones, and corridors.

Yet there are gaps. Under Section 46(2), the Section 10 offence is non-cognisable, bailable, and compoundable through a fine, which raises real doubts about deterring organised smugglers such as those behind Hadis Rahman's warehouse. The law also appears to contain no provision governing disclosure of location data for sensitive species. The problem, then, is less a missing law than whether the institutions enforcing it have the people, intelligence, and accountability to make it matter.

First, we need a clear disclosure policy. Exact locations of especially vulnerable species shouldn't be made public without a risk assessment and consultation with the relevant conservation authorities. And before any findings are broadcast, Inani needs stronger patrols, camera traps, and local surveillance, with core and buffer zones and elephant corridors formally declared. General findings and habitat needs can still be shared.

Second, a dedicated intelligence arm: a Wildlife Intelligence and Investigation Bureau under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, with legal backing, a forensic laboratory, digital and financial investigation units, and protection for its staff, aimed not at couriers but at the kingpins and financiers behind them. Third, we need serious prosecution: specialised public prosecutors, open case tracking, microchips, and DNA profiles for every animal in safari parks and rescue centres, and vetting of outsourced staff.

India shows how a visible failure can force reform. After tigers vanished from Sariska, a 2006 amendment created the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, operational from 2007, gathering intelligence on organised wildlife crime. Nepal shows that success needs constant renewal. A coordination committee led by the forest minister and a crime control bureau with 16 district cells helped deliver its first zero-poaching year for rhinos in 2011, yet trap pits and electrocution have resurfaced in Chitwan, so surveillance can never lapse.

Kenya shows what a weak law costs. Before reform, only four percent of those convicted between 2008 and 2013 went to prison; the 2013 act then set a minimum fine of 20 million shillings or life imprisonment, or both, for killing threatened species, and a dedicated prosecution division and forensic laboratory followed, though wildlife prosecutors stayed too few.

Inani has given Bangladesh something worth celebrating. The answer is not to keep its wildlife secret, but to protect it before sensitive information spreads. The next test is simple: can we protect what we have found?



FILE PHOTO: **STAR**

To ensure a safe habitat for the wildlife, it is crucial to have legal, social, and practical safeguards in place.