The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Reverse the fall in secondary enrolment

Govt must take effective measures to keep students in school

Our education sector is in a pretty bad shape, with declining education quality, teacher shortages, rising primary school dropout rates and students advancing to secondary school without acquiring grade-level competencies, among other problems. Amid this situation, Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) has come up with another concerning revelation: a sharp decline in secondary school enrolment. According to its latest data, the number of secondary-level students fell by more than four lakh in just one year, from over 90.6 lakh in 2024 to 86.4 lakh in 2025. This demands urgent government attention.

This decline is occurring despite an increase in the number of secondary educational institutions. According to BANBEIS, the number of government and private secondary schools, including junior schools, rose from 19,117 in 2024 to 19,211 in 2025. However, enrolment in these schools fell from around 78.5 lakh to 74.4 lakh. Meanwhile, enrolment in independent technical and vocational institutions declined from over 6.76 lakh to 6.5 lakh, despite the government's target of increasing the share of students in technical and vocational education to 30 percent by 2030. In contrast, enrolment in madrasas and English-medium schools has increased. The question is: what is driving students away from mainstream secondary education?

Educationists point to several possible factors, including learning losses caused by the Covid pandemic, child labour, child marriage, financial hardship and curriculum changes, behind the situation. Their concerns deserve urgent attention. Child marriage, in particular, continues to hinder girls' education. Dhaka Secondary and Higher Secondary Education Board's investigation into 1,350 candidates who did not sit for the Secondary School Certificate examinations last year found that nearly 41 percent had married. Of them, 97 percent were female students. Poverty also forces children to earn money rather than continue their studies. Students who fall behind academically may also struggle to remain in school without adequate support. To find out other reasons behind the situation, more research is needed.

We urge the government to conduct an in-depth study to determine why secondary school enrolment is falling and technical and vocational institutions are struggling to attract students. The study must find out whether the mainstream education system has adequately addressed pandemic-related learning losses and other barriers to completing secondary education.

We therefore urge the government to conduct an in-depth study to determine why secondary school enrolment is falling and technical and vocational institutions are struggling to attract students. The study must find out whether the mainstream education system has adequately addressed pandemic-related learning losses and other barriers to completing secondary education. It must also examine whether educational resources are allocated properly and institutional expansion is guided by actual needs. Based on the findings, the government must take targeted measures. Financial assistance, including adequate stipends and free or subsidised educational materials, must be provided to students from low-income families. Equally important is the effective enforcement of laws against child marriage and child labour.

Schools should also identify students at risk of dropping out and provide academic support. Moreover, the government must improve education quality and classroom teaching, while ensuring that technical and vocational programmes offer relevant skills and real employment opportunities.

Garment workers deserve a living wage

Protests over unpaid dues expose persistent exploitation in RMG industry

Bangladesh's readymade garments (RMG) success story is usually spoken of in terms of how much of our export basket it contributes to—more than 80 percent—or the fact that factories need to be "greener" in order to retain Western buyers. The issue which is more often skirted around in policy talks is the blatant exploitation that the industry's success hinges on. The low cost of production, which the country has touted for decades as what makes Bangladesh attractive for orders, has been possible due to the extremely low wages, poor working conditions, and lack of dignity suffered by RMG sector workers. The recent protest in Dhaka's Uttara is only the latest in a semi-regular occurrence.

Every few months, workers across the industry are forced to take to the streets to demand their due wages. Most often, they are inadvertently branded as being a nuisance, blamed for "causing suffering" to commuters. During most of these protests, we find that workers had been voicing their demands to factory owners and industry leaders for months, only to be ignored. Not only are workers' demands never fulfilled satisfactorily, but they are often met with violence. We especially condemn the police's use of batons and sound grenades on October 15 to disperse the gathering of protesters on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway. There must not be a repeat of the violence we witnessed during the 2023 protests, when at least four workers were killed by law enforcers.

For as long as the industry has operated, workers' wages have been far below what the cost of living requires. In a sector which rakes in massive amounts of revenue each year, it is unacceptable that there should be no space to accommodate a proper living wage for those who keep the machines running. Indeed, the international brands which place orders with local factories do so under deeply unfair terms, but there is still no justification for months of unpaid wages and workers being forced to work overtime to make up for low wages. We join the Garment Workers' Trade Union Center's call to review garment workers' wages to reflect the rising cost of living and urge that protesting workers' demands be fulfilled without delay. A Made-in-Bangladesh tag should be a source of pride, not a reminder of the exploitation that makes that tag global.

WORLD FOOD DAY

Who will feed the farmers who feed the nation?



Mostafa Shabuj is a journalist at The Daily Star.

■ **MOSTAFA SHABUJ**

Last month, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) classified Bangladesh's food security situation as being in crisis, meaning that many people are at risk of acute food insecurity and malnutrition. One group that remains invisible in such projections is the food growers themselves, who are tasked with feeding the entire nation. They are already facing severe threats to their food security.

Chronically low and unfair prices for their produce, frequent natural disasters damaging crops, exorbitant hikes in production inputs, spiralling costs of daily essential commodities, escalating healthcare expenses, dominance of corporate entities in agriculture, and widespread food adulteration have combined to leave the farming community more food-insecure than ever before.

Smallholders or marginal growers are at the greatest risk. More than half of the country's agricultural producers are small-scale, with an average annual income of Tk 33,639. This means a smallholder farmer or livestock producer earns a meagre Tk 2,804 per month. This raises the obvious question: in today's Bangladesh, where inflation has remained persistently high, how does a family survive on that earning?

A simple calculation offers a clear picture. Let's say the family has four members. If Tk 50 is spent per person for a single meal, one meal for the family costs Tk 200. Daily food expenditure amounts to Tk 600, totalling Tk 18,000 a month. Even for a two-member household, the monthly food bill stands at Tk 9,000. How, then, are half of the country's small producers staying alive?

While no official survey captures this reality, it becomes visible when one looks at the streets in every district town and city today. That cities and towns are congested with auto-rickshaws is not an accident; it is a reality for many farmers, who, having lost their capital in agriculture, migrated to urban centres for survival.

Over the past month and a half, I visited nine northern districts, including Rangpur, Bogura, Naogaon, Gaibandha, Joypurhat, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Kurigram, and Panchagarh, to speak directly with marginal food-growers, who shared that the steep hikes in gas, electricity, and fuel prices, coupled with low market prices for their harvests, have pushed farm households into food insecurity.

Small farmers who previously used LPG cylinders costing Tk 1,350 at home are now forced to purchase them at nearly double the rate. Consequently, many households are trying to cut living expenses by returning to traditional wood or dried tree branches for cooking in rural areas. While many small farmers would previously rear poultry, fish, and cattle to meet their household needs for milk, eggs, and meat, today most of these families are often forced to sell these farm products in the market to cover daily expenses, forgoing their consumption. Many others are simply eating less. Those who do not have farm animals are taking out high-interest loans from non-governmental organisations to keep their families running.

According to data cited in "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2026," published by several UN agencies, 4.54 crore people or 26 percent of Bangladesh's population experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in 2023–25. But how did Bangladesh's primary food producers fall into such a state?

For the past several years, farmers who grew surplus onions and potatoes faced severe financial losses instead of making profits. Rising production costs and persistent shortages of essential inputs like fertilisers and pesticides have stripped paddy cultivation of profitability as well. Besides, recurring natural disasters have devastated standing crops. Small dairy farmers have incurred heavy losses producing milk, and the ongoing fuel and power crises have pushed up operating costs, driving small and marginal poultry farmers into years of continuous losses, forcing many to shut down operations altogether.

After taking office earlier this year, the BNP government took several initiatives, from farmer cards to waiving agricultural loans, to support the agricultural sector. In July, the central bank created a Tk 3,000 crore fund aimed at establishing an agro-based economic hub in the country's northern region. Among the objectives of the fund are boosting agricultural production, developing export-oriented produce, building processing facilities and supply chains, and generating rural employment and income growth.

While these initiatives deserve recognition, solving the systemic crises facing farmers requires far more than financial allocations. As a recent World Bank report reveals, support in the sector often does not trickle down to the marginalised farmers. For example, subsidy expenditure in the agricultural sector has quadrupled in the last year, but half the fertiliser subsidies go to the biggest 20 percent landholders in Bangladesh, while the smallest 40 percent of landholders receive only 13 percent of the subsidies. This means there are some serious flaws in government programmes.

Therefore, it is crucial that the government rethink its programme, curb the dominance of middlemen in agricultural markets, and ensure direct procurement of paddy and rice from farmers. Furthermore, floor or market prices should be fixed not only for Boro and Aman paddy, but also for Aush paddy and key commercial crops such as onions and potatoes. Adequate cold storage and warehouse infrastructure must be established so that surplus yields do not go to waste, along with steps to expand export opportunities. Most importantly, input prices must be stabilised, adequate supplies ensured, and fair prices guaranteed for farmers' produce.

When rural households consume half the food they require, when they are forced to sell the food meant for their own families, when farmers cannot recover their cost of production, and when farming requires incurring a mountain of debt year after year, this group cannot be called food secure. Food security does not merely mean surviving on two poor-quality meals a day; it means having the economic capacity to easily access adequate nutritional food. If the very population responsible for producing our food cannot have their food security guaranteed, how can the government hope to ensure food security for the rest of the nation?

The theme for World Food Day this year is "Innovate today. Nourish tomorrow." Yet innovation and future nutrition remain unattainable unless the food security of our primary producers is first ensured. True innovation will only happen when growers possess good health and earn a profit from their yields.



PHOTO: **MOSTAFA SHABUJ**

Government support in the agricultural sector often does not trickle down to the marginalised farmers.

Innovation is key to a more resilient food future for Bangladesh

Jiaoqun Shi is a FAO representative.

Valantine Achancho is country director and representative at IFAD.

Coco Ushiyama is resident representative and country director at WFP.

■ **JIAOQUN SHI,**
■ **VALANTINE ACHANCHO,** *and*
■ **COCO USHIYAMA**

Behind every plate of rice, dal, vegetables, and fish in Bangladesh is the work of farmers, fishers, livestock keepers, and food workers. Their decisions, and ours as consumers, influence how we manage land and water, safeguard biodiversity, respond to climate change, and create livelihood opportunities for the next generation. This year's World Food Day theme, "Innovate today. Nourish tomorrow", calls on us to bring science, technology, and traditional knowledge together to secure a healthier, more sustainable food future. Innovation takes many forms: a farmer adopting a climate resilient crop variety, a producer receiving timely weather advice, or a woman accessing finance to grow her enterprise.

Over decades, farmers' ingenuity, supported by research, irrigation, improved varieties, mechanisation, and extension services, has transformed production despite growing pressure on natural resources and exposure to climate and economic shocks. Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) September 2026 Global Information and Early Warning System brief forecasts aggregate paddy production for 2026-27 at 61.9 million tonnes, about 5 percent over the last five-year average. But higher production alone cannot guarantee better nutrition or greater prosperity. Progress must also be measured by whether families can afford diverse, safe, and nutritious diets, whether producers earn decent incomes, and whether food systems withstand shocks. Only 39 percent of women meet minimum dietary diversity, a sign that many diets still lack variety.

Bangladesh must therefore connect agricultural productivity more firmly with nutrition, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability. That means protecting soil health, water, and biodiversity while increasing returns for farmers and rural entrepreneurs. It requires bringing science and data to the field faster, expanding access to climate-resilient and salt tolerant varieties, strengthening timely advisory services, and building producer organisations that help smallholders negotiate better prices. The ambition is to turn innovation into better diets, stronger livelihoods, and a more resilient future.

Bangladesh must connect agricultural productivity more firmly with nutrition, livelihoods, and environmental sustainability. That means protecting soil health, water, and biodiversity while increasing returns for farmers and rural entrepreneurs.

Working with the government, FAO, World Food Programme (WFP), and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) support access to agricultural information, finance, essential services, and market, helping farmers turn innovation into practical gains. In coastal, drought-prone, and char areas, farmers are growing nutritious vegetables year-round through solar-powered irrigation, improved seedling production, and off-season cultivation. Adoption of climate-resilient technologies has reached 86 percent among participating farmers, exceeding by 35 percent adoption among comparable farmers outside the initiatives.

Sensor-based fishpond monitoring, smart irrigation, solar drying, and blockchain-based traceability offer further opportunities to conserve resources, improve production, reduce losses, and access higher-value markets. Combined with finance, training, and nutrition education, these innovations can strengthen livelihoods, improve diets, and expand opportunities for women farmers.

Protecting these gains is equally urgent as floods, cyclones, salinity, drought, and river erosion can quickly undermine years of progress. About 18.1 million people in Bangladesh are projected to face high levels of acute food insecurity between September and December 2026. Preparedness must therefore be central to agrifood investment. Early warning and anticipatory action can deliver cash and advice before a flood strike, helping families protect their assets and livelihoods. Digital assistance platforms, early warning systems, vulnerability analysis, and nutrition-sensitive programmes can further strengthen the speed and targeting of support.

Strong public systems are essential to bring these benefits to scale. The government's Farmer Card and electronic voucher system provide a foundation for delivering support more transparently. By enabling eligible farmers to redeem subsidies for approved agricultural inputs, these tools can improve subsidy targeting and reduce leakage.

Three priorities should guide the next phase. First, connecting weather alerts, agricultural advice, market information, and input support through accessible digital services linked to the Farmer Card platform. Second, combining public, private, and development finance to scale innovations with demonstrated results. We know that there have been income gains of 64 percent where the private sector is engaged, four times those recorded where it is not, highlighting the importance of effective market partnerships. Third, making nutrition an explicit investment objective by supporting production that both nourishes families and generates reliable income.

Success will depend on whether these opportunities reach small producers, including women, young people, and those in remote or climate-vulnerable communities. A smartphone may help a farmer receive a weather alert, find a buyer, or secure working capital. Its real value, however, is the confidence and opportunity it gives a farmer to make better decisions and build a more secure future. For Bangladesh, nourishing tomorrow means producing better, wasting less and making healthy diets more affordable. The government, financial institutions, researchers, businesses, and development partners must work together to bring proven solutions within reach of every small producer.

On World Food Day, the task is to turn the innovation already taking root across Bangladesh into lasting progress. By connecting science with local knowledge, investment with inclusion, and productivity with nutrition, we can build stronger livelihoods, more resilient communities, and a healthier future for Bangladesh.

The Daily Star Reg. No. DA 781 | **EDITOR & PUBLISHER: Mahfuz Anam** Printed by him on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd at Transcraft Ltd, 229, Tejgaon Industrial Area, editor@thedailystar.net | **Registered & Head Offices:** The Daily Star Centre 64-65 Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka-1215 Phone: 09610222222 | **Newsroom:** Fax- 58156306 reporting@thedailystar.net | **Advertisement:** 01711623910 advertisement@thedailystar.net GPO Box: 3257 | **Subscription:** 01711623906 | thedailystar.net bangla.thedailystar.net/