

BANGLADESH'S

DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVE

AND

PARALLEL

REALITIES

**Perspectives of
Left Behind Communities**



Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

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Preface

Bangladesh is currently facing dual but interrelated transitional challenges. The first concerns economic development, and the second relates to the implementation of civic rights and democratisation.

First, let's talk about the economic dimension. Bangladesh has achieved significant progress in socio-economic development in the last decade and a half. Achievements in economic growth, per capita income, agricultural production, export earnings and remittances, development of physical infrastructure, expansion of education, health, and social security, etc., are quite visible. Moreover, Bangladesh has progressed to a lower middle-income country in 2015. In 2026, Bangladesh will leave the list of least-developed countries. Efforts are underway to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The desire to become a developed country by 2041 has been expressed.

However, it is also true that Bangladesh's vulnerable and disadvantaged communities could not participate equally in this development journey. Income-consumption-wealth disparities have increased. Income and wealth concentration have become ubiquitous. This picture of inequality is also mirrored in education and health. Poor and disadvantaged families need to catch up with the national potential. The share of these marginalised people could not be ensured in various social security schemes. Moreover, unemployment is rampant among the youth of these families, and a sense of alienation is emerging among them.

Therefore, Bangladesh's successful transition to the next development phase depends fundamentally on how effectively we address this 'development divide'. Indeed, developmental progress cannot be sustained if a society lives in vast and growing inequality.

In this context, the second transitional challenge, concerning civic rights and democratisation, emerges. Discussions at the grassroots level have made it clear that public service delivery institutions are not effectively serving the poor due to a lack of democratic accountability. Lack of accountability can also be observed in the work of local government institutions. The middle class, the primary bearers of core political and cultural values of national independence, are also hesitant to play the desired social role in this regard. Accordingly, due to a lack of overall democratic accountability and the weakness of relevant public and social institutions, vulnerable and endangered communities are unable to claim their rightful share in the country's development outcomes.

A pervasive 'culture of fear' is increasingly growing in the country. This is especially true for hill and plainland adivasis and religious minorities, vulnerable groups including women-children-

youth-elderly, transgender people, slum dwellers, informal sector workers, returnee migrant workers and those living in hostile climatic environments. Regrettably, these communities cannot find a way to express their perspectives on the prevailing socio-economic disparity they are experiencing. Further, the impact of high inflation has made their lives miserable. The media is also failing to play its proper role in this regard. It has, therefore, become imperative to revive the core concepts of civic rights to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

At the same time, it has become essential to raise the voices of these disadvantaged communities regarding the disparity and injustice afflicting the economy and society. The country's legislative, judicial, and administrative settings cannot be prepared for Bangladesh's next phase of development without addressing the fundamental concerns. Hence, a democratic transition has emerged as a prerequisite for balanced and sustainable economic development.

These two basic but interrelated lessons were obtained by talking to people of various professions in different areas across the country throughout 2022. These consultations were held in Rangpur (4 June 2022), Khulna (2 July 2022), Tangail (31 July 2022), Sylhet (13 August 2022), Thakurgaon (24 September 2022), Rangamati (1 October 2022) and Chittagong (2 October 2022). Additionally, views were exchanged separately with underrepresented disadvantaged groups as well as with local journalists. The experience and lessons acquired through these consultations are elaborated in this publication.

Professor Rehman Sobhan's guidance has provided strength in advancing our efforts. I thank Dr Fahmida Khatun, Executive Director, Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), and all the colleagues at CPD. CPD colleagues associated with the Citizen's Platform deserve great appreciation for their dedicated support. Special thanks also go to the Core members of the Core Group and Advisory Board of the Citizen Platform. We are also grateful to all our Partner Organisations, especially those who have been engaged in supporting the print initiative.

We hope this humble effort of ours, captured by this publication, will contribute to the development and delivery of a balanced and fair development policy for Bangladesh in the future as a document.



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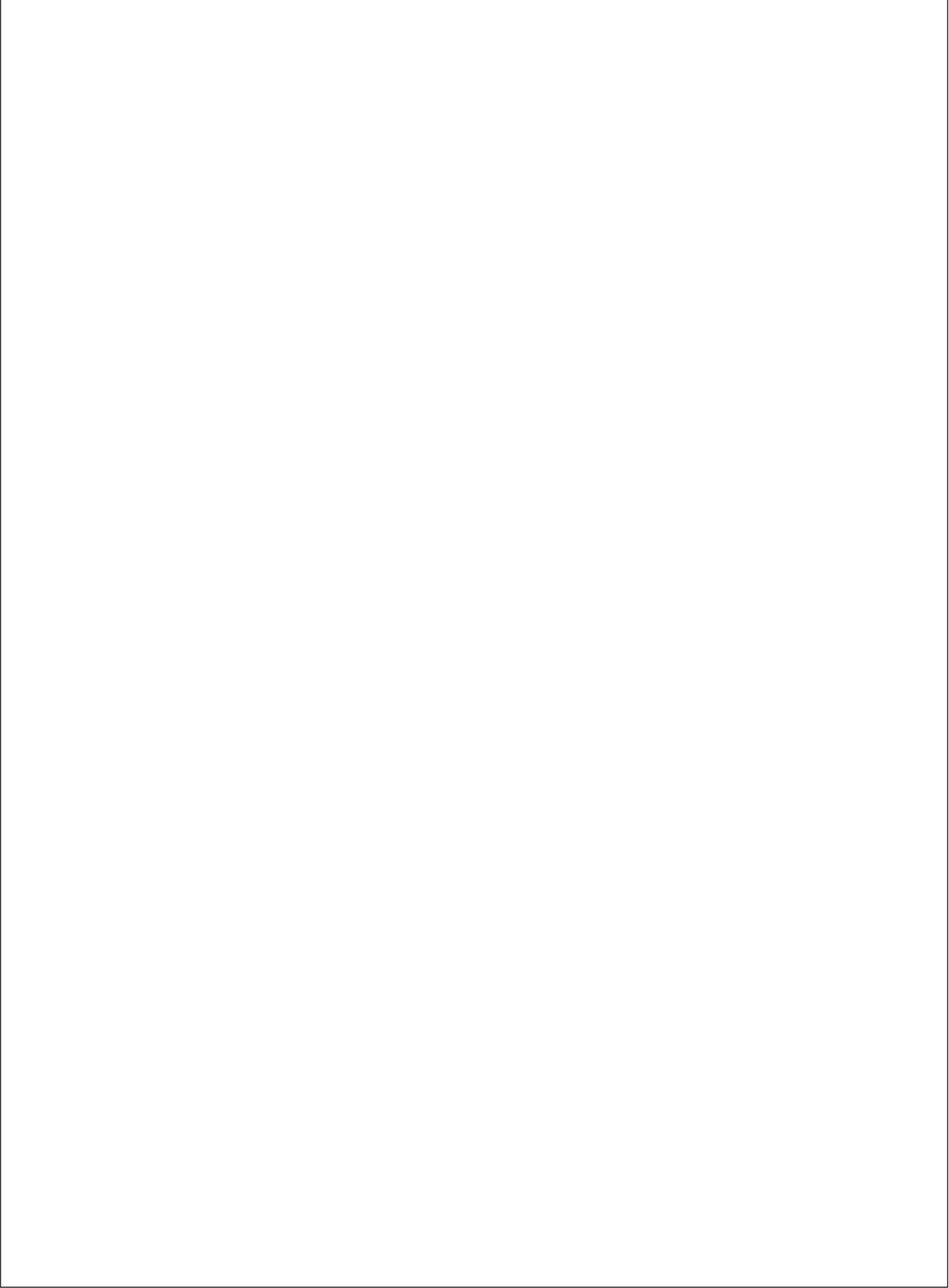
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Executive Summary

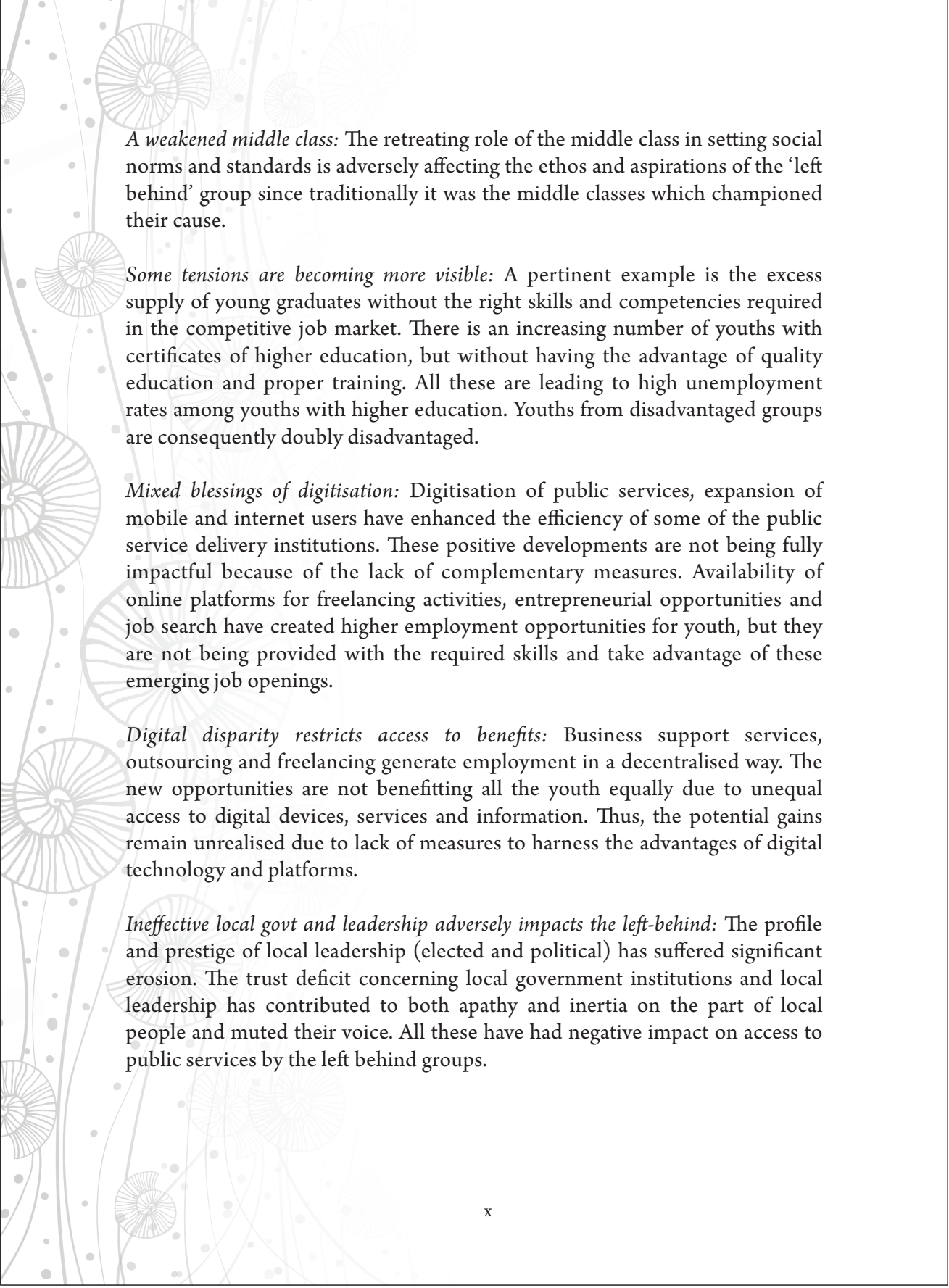
National development narrative versus local realities: There is a stark gap between the two which is driven by an uneven distribution of the development gains due to discrimination, lack of voice of the disadvantaged, unequal participation, weak delivery of public service institutions and limited access to resources by the left behind.

Impact of inflation: The impact of ongoing inflationary pressure has fallen disproportionately on the marginalised groups and people with low income leading to erosion of savings, weak coping capacity and low resilience in view of various shocks and growing multidimensional vulnerabilities.

Information gap: Citizens are not fully aware of various government support measures and affirmative policies. Often, they are not equipped to avail of those services resulting in underutilisation of available services and the intended benefit remain unrealised.

Weakened civil voices leave the left behind further behind: Left behind groups are being left further behind due to the weakening role of civil society, non-government organisations and citizen's voices. This leads to a disconnect between the left behind groups and the national policy making sphere. Consequently, traditional structure of voice, participation and impact remain unchanged.

Children of left behind groups not able to reach national averages: An increasing proportion of children from left behind communities are unable to complete secondary education due to financial hardships; Lack of government support, including limited education stipends; Lack of access to employment support and skills development training leads to lower participation in the job market. Social protection for these people are not adequate. Quotas for these groups in educational institutions and government offices cannot be met because of lack of others supports to adequately equip them to fill the quotas.



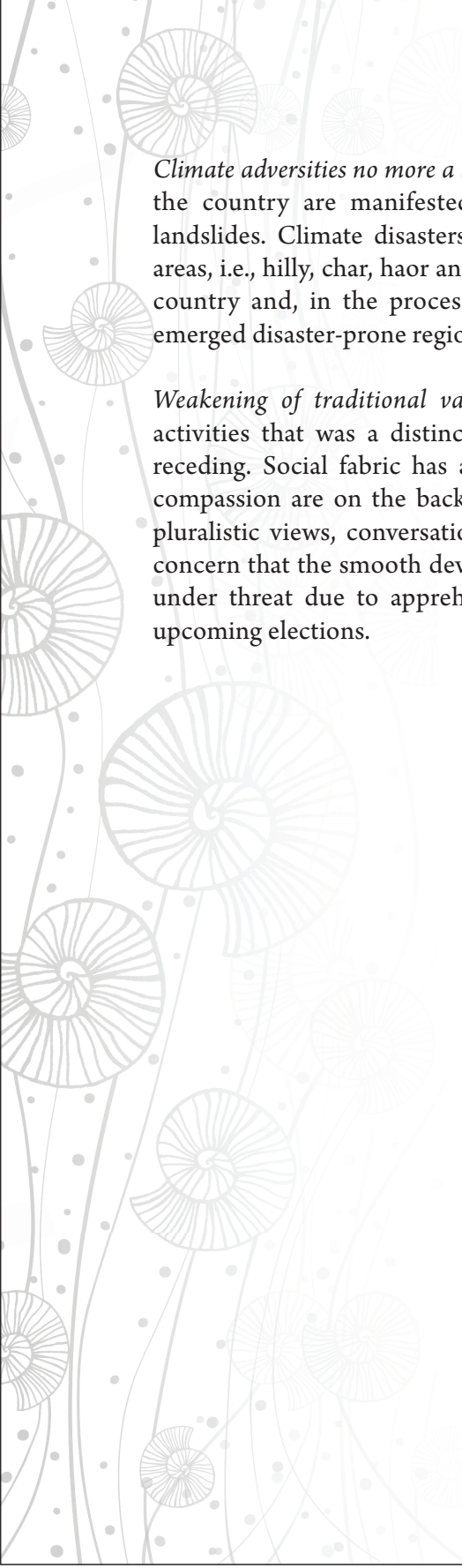
A weakened middle class: The retreating role of the middle class in setting social norms and standards is adversely affecting the ethos and aspirations of the 'left behind' group since traditionally it was the middle classes which championed their cause.

Some tensions are becoming more visible: A pertinent example is the excess supply of young graduates without the right skills and competencies required in the competitive job market. There is an increasing number of youths with certificates of higher education, but without having the advantage of quality education and proper training. All these are leading to high unemployment rates among youths with higher education. Youths from disadvantaged groups are consequently doubly disadvantaged.

Mixed blessings of digitisation: Digitisation of public services, expansion of mobile and internet users have enhanced the efficiency of some of the public service delivery institutions. These positive developments are not being fully impactful because of the lack of complementary measures. Availability of online platforms for freelancing activities, entrepreneurial opportunities and job search have created higher employment opportunities for youth, but they are not being provided with the required skills and take advantage of these emerging job openings.

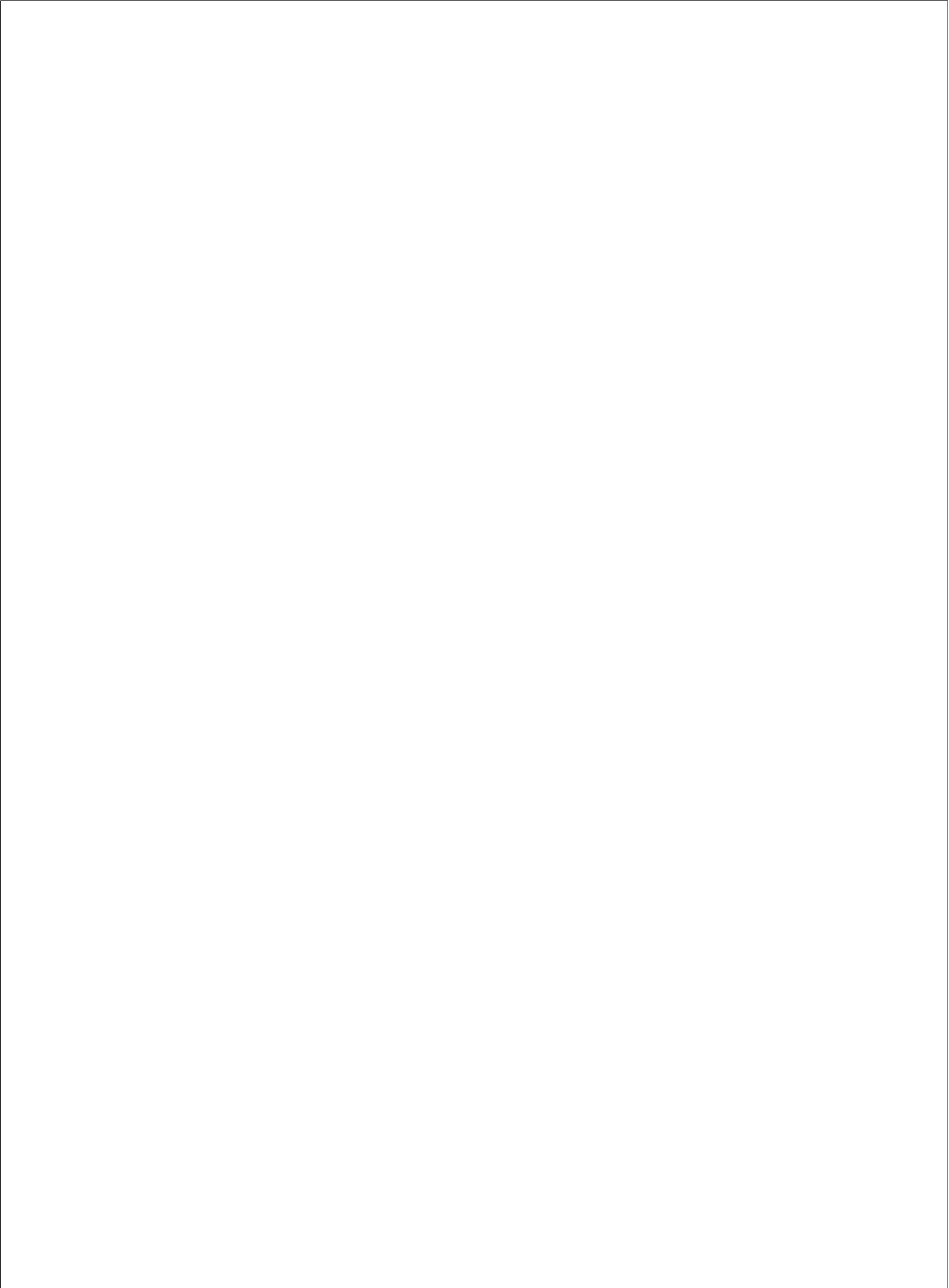
Digital disparity restricts access to benefits: Business support services, outsourcing and freelancing generate employment in a decentralised way. The new opportunities are not benefitting all the youth equally due to unequal access to digital devices, services and information. Thus, the potential gains remain unrealised due to lack of measures to harness the advantages of digital technology and platforms.

Ineffective local govt and leadership adversely impacts the left-behind: The profile and prestige of local leadership (elected and political) has suffered significant erosion. The trust deficit concerning local government institutions and local leadership has contributed to both apathy and inertia on the part of local people and muted their voice. All these have had negative impact on access to public services by the left behind groups.



Climate adversities no more a local issue: The effects of climate change felt across the country are manifested in erratic rainfall, flash floods, drought and landslides. Climate disasters are no more limited to ecologically vulnerable areas, i.e., hilly, char, haor and coastal areas. The effects are creeping across the country and, in the process, are increasing the vulnerability of the newly emerged disaster-prone regions.

Weakening of traditional values and norms: The rich tradition of cultural activities that was a distinctive feature of Bangladesh's society is gradually receding. Social fabric has also weakened as values of tolerance, trust, and compassion are on the back foot. To compound this, the political space for pluralistic views, conversation and engagement is narrowing. There is rising concern that the smooth developmental progression of Bangladesh may come under threat due to apprehensions about political violence in view of the upcoming elections.



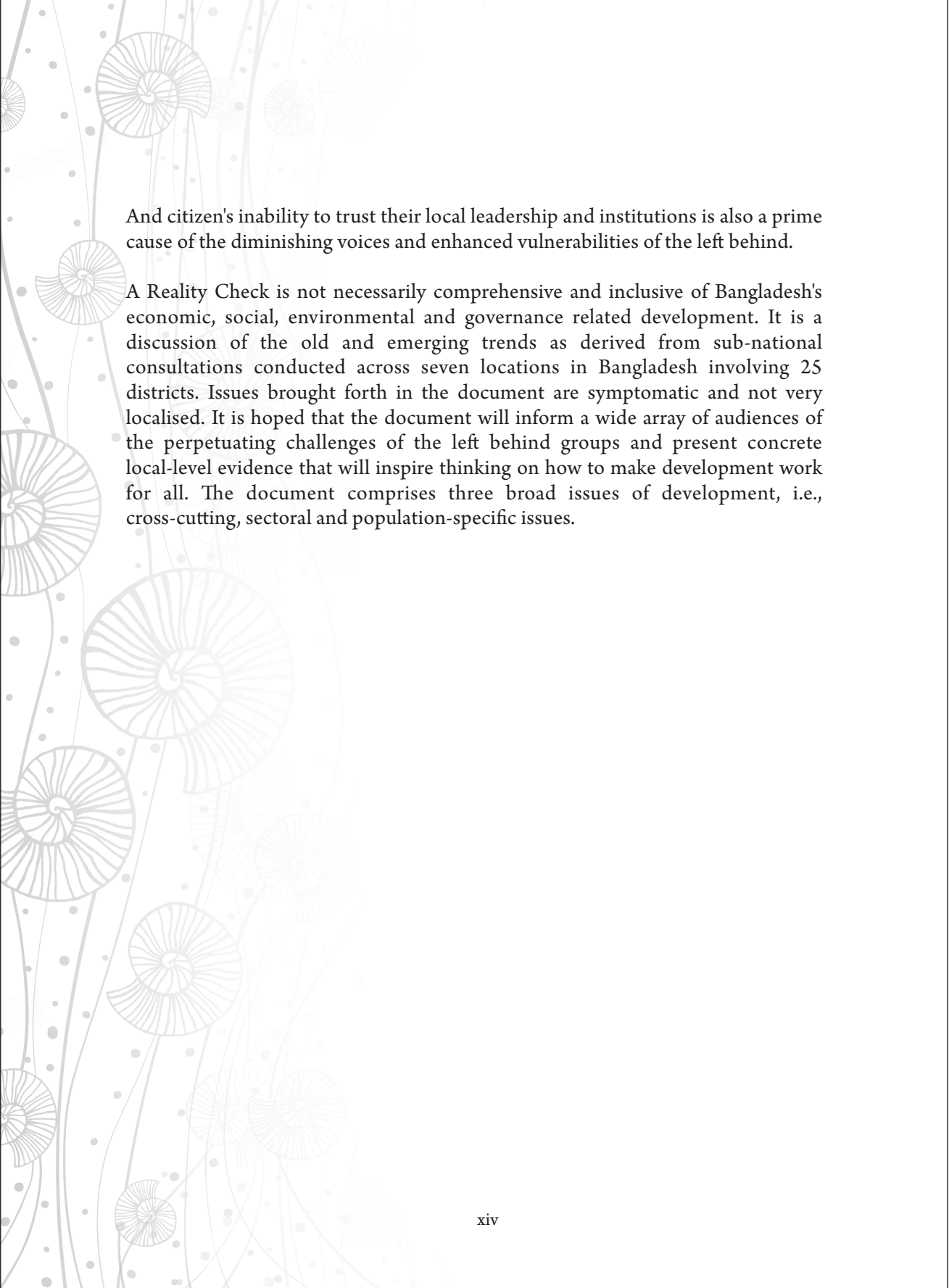
Why This Document

Bangladesh has established itself as an exemplary case for development, the trajectory of which has garnered praise from the global community. Over the last five decades its economy has grown at an incremental rate and experienced structural transformation, giving hope of a better future to every citizen. Bangladesh is at the crossroads of multiple development milestones—graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) group by 2026, delivery of the SDGs by 2030 and aspiring to achieve high-income status by 2041.

Despite the achievements, the fruits of economic growth has not been fairly shared and had been underpinned by widening socio-economic inequalities and shrinking civic space. As the country prepares for the upcoming development transitions, it is critical for policies to consider the contextual realities of local communities. Also, as the pre-election mood sets in, a review of the experiences and perspectives of ‘left behind’ communities regarding the national development narrative will allow for the voices of left behind groups to be part of the national development discourse leading to a fresh policy ecosystem.

In this connection, A Reality Check unpacks the national development narrative from the perspectives of the left behind communities. As the title suggests, the document is a reality check of the development narrative at a granular level based on a participatory and consultative process. A total of seven subnational consultations were conducted with 500 leading and engaged local personalities. Consultation with local LNOB (Leave No One Behind) groups helped to determine grassroots challenges and the distributional implications of the development for contextualised policy prioritisation. Insights were also gathered from focus group discussions and district-level social meetings with media professionals. The outcomes of the consultations were presented at a National Public Hearing organised by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, in Dhaka on December 3, 2023, where more than 400 participants from 25 districts presented their challenges and demands to an esteemed citizen's panel and media.

The key outcome emerging from this process is the perpetual broadening of the gaps between national development and local realities. The three drivers of this outcome are discriminatory design of policies, weak delivery of policies and limited access to resources. Policy design and implementation remain insensitive to the demands and perspectives of left behind communities as the roles of civil society and NGOs have narrowed. As the function of the middle class in setting social norms weakens, the aspirations of the left behind groups are overlooked.



And citizen's inability to trust their local leadership and institutions is also a prime cause of the diminishing voices and enhanced vulnerabilities of the left behind.

A Reality Check is not necessarily comprehensive and inclusive of Bangladesh's economic, social, environmental and governance related development. It is a discussion of the old and emerging trends as derived from sub-national consultations conducted across seven locations in Bangladesh involving 25 districts. Issues brought forth in the document are symptomatic and not very localised. It is hoped that the document will inform a wide array of audiences of the perpetuating challenges of the left behind groups and present concrete local-level evidence that will inspire thinking on how to make development work for all. The document comprises three broad issues of development, i.e., cross-cutting, sectoral and population-specific issues.

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Introduction

Bangladesh has come a long way since its independence in 1971. In this five decades of journey, the country has moved on from being a war-ravaged state riddled by famine, floods and military coups to purportedly become a role model for economic development and socioeconomic transformation. The Bangladesh development narrative highlights robust economic growth, rising per capita income, significant poverty alleviation, notable structural changes, increased global connectivity and impressive social & human development of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The country has also been recognised for its prudent. However, the important question to ask is whether the averages conceal another story line beneath the impressive track record. The growing income, consumption and asset inequalities in Bangladesh are manifested by government data and ground level evidence. Only when the discrepancies in the development narrative can be pinpointed and the realities and challenges faced by the disadvantaged groups at the grassroots identified, can there be a contextualised policy prioritisation favouring the left behind people. This can then lead to policies and actions that listen to, the voice and advance the interests of the left-behind communities and ensure their equal participation in the development process.

This document has emerged from an initiative by the Citizen's Platform to give an opportunity to the left behind groups to ventilate their experiences, express the difficulty they face and voice their suggestions to address those challenges. Being able to voice their thoughts gave them a sense of relief, empowerment as well as a feeling of solidarity and bonding. This can be considered a unique case in light of the prevailing culture of fear, apprehension and acceptance of the status-quo.

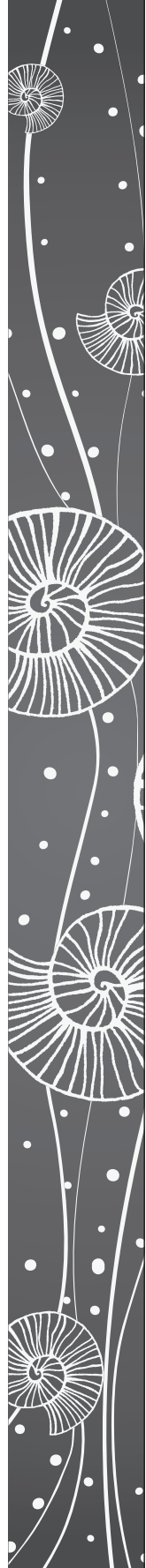
One of the attending Ministers conceded that many problems continue to persist. 'We cannot say that we have been able to establish a corruption-free and good governance-based system', he said. However, he maintained that through persistent efforts we have been able to come out of the group of least developed countries.

The Narrative

In the last decade, Bangladesh recorded one of the highest global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growths in the world, and real per capita growth reached a milestone of 8.0 per cent in FY2018–19. Per capita Gross National Income (GNI) stood at USD 2824 in FY2021–22, a rise of 9 per cent compared to the previous year. However, in dollar terms it has come down to USD in FY2022–23. grew by 9 per cent between FY2020–21 (USD 2,043) and FY2021–22 (USD 2,824). Sustained high GDP growth, rising income, government support, and activities of the private sector and non-governmental organisations had a multiplier impact on poverty alleviation, halving the rate of people under the national poverty line from about 50.0 per cent in 2000 to less than 19.0 per cent in 2022. Rapid growth resulted in considerable structural changes in the economy. From FY2014–15 to FY2018–19, the share of agriculture in GDP decreased from 15.4 per cent to 13.6 per cent. The shares of industry and services rose from 29.2 per cent to 34.6 per cent and 55.5 per cent to 51.8 per cent, respectively. Economic growth was also driven by strong export performance, robust remittance flow and significant aid inflow. Bangladesh also made impressive strides in human development manifested in an increase in life expectancy at birth by 3.6 years and mean years of schooling by 2.2 years between 2011 and 2021. Building on these achievements, Bangladesh made the transition to a lower middle-income country in 2015 and is set to graduate from the LDC group in 2026. The country is committed to achieving the SDGs by 2030 and aspires to attain High Income Country status by 2041.

Does this impressive national development narrative as projected by data and as propagated by the government reflect the local realities on ground and the perceptions of the disadvantaged? This document, Bangladesh's Development Narrative and Parallel Realities: Perspectives of Left Behind Communities, audits this narrative from a LNOB lens as exposed at the sub-national consultations and national public hearing organised by the

A female garment worker said, "Does development mean building Padma Bridge, culvert and other constructions only?" Despite all developments, garment workers still have to protest for a minimum wage. There is no law on the side of the workers. Laws are being made in favour of business owners who sit in the AC rooms and in the parliament. The percentage of women workers in garment factories need to be 80 percent at one time; How it has come down to 65 percent.



Citizen's Platform. The focus is on the distributive aspects of the national development gains, highlighting the sectional and local concerns.

The Reality

The current development process can be characterised as non-inclusive, underpinned by socio-economic disparities, diminishing voices of citizens and non-state actors and further exacerbated by the ongoing macroeconomic instability. An unequal distribution of development gains has significant economic, social, environmental and governance-related implications, more so for the left behind communities, enhancing their vulnerabilities.

So, despite the successes, the distribution of the development gains has been inequitable. When adjusted for equity and sustainability, Bangladesh's Human Development Index (HDI) for 2021–2022 declined by 23.9 per cent of the original value. Across the country, the development achievements have also been grossly unequal. Kurigram had the highest incidence of poverty in 2016, at least 46.7 percentage points above the national average estimated for population living below the upper poverty line. The survey shows that rural poverty reduction rate is 3.7 times higher than that of urban. There was large difference in poverty incidence between Barisal division (26.4 per cent), Rangpur Division (24.8 per cent) on the one hand and Khulna Division (14.8 per cent) on the other. Although the 2022 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' (BBS) Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) data shows poverty reduction to be more broadened than before, regional differences still persist. Data for early marriages reveal significant higher prevalence in Narail, with the rate being 11.6 percentage points higher than the national estimate of 2019. Accessibility to safe drinking water and sanitation services in 2019 was the lowest in Habiganj, 17.6 percentage points lower than the comparable national figure.

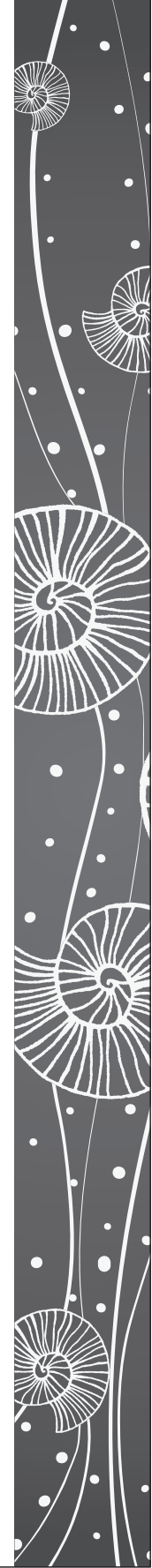
A Member of the National Parliament from a reserved-women seat stated, 'When politics is healthy, the country, nation, and people tend to remain healthy. If politics is unhealthy, nothing in the country can remain good. At present, extensive discussions take place on development. However, the definition of development has been narrowed down to infrastructure projects which are being built at exorbitantly high cost. Because in building large infrastructure we will have to come out of this politics of devouring everything as embezzlement occurs. We need to move away from this politics of eating everything.'

Local realities are not reflected in policy design and implementation, and there are no explicit feedback mechanisms for policies to accommodate the ground-level realities and vulnerabilities experienced by the left behind communities on a day-to-day basis. Traditionally, voices of the left behind groups have been at the margin of national development dialogue, rendering the policy processes ineffective in upholding the rights, interests and concerns of these communities and in addressing specific problems at local levels. The lack of real time data further causes the voices of the left behind groups to remain a marginalised from the development and policy priorities.

Looking ahead and righting the wrongs

Bangladesh at present is seeking to achieve the development milestones it has set before itself. It is trying to recover and build forward better from the worsening impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also endeavouring to overcome the adverse impacts of the Russia-Ukraine war and current macro-economic challenges it is facing. It is important for the new policy ecosystem to ensure structural transition of the economy, taking into cognizance the contextual realities of local communities and address granular-level challenges. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to which the government is committed, emphasise enhanced accountability, transparency and advancement of equity in the development process by promoting the concerns of the left behind groups. Localisation is key to implementing the SDGs. A local development agenda derived through a participatory and consultative process could contribute to the inclusion of the perspectives of left behind communities in the successive development ambitions. Thus, it is important to have the national narrative of development from the perspective of the left-behind groups, to firmly ensure that sustainable development, that actually makes a difference in the lives and livelihood of the disadvantaged people, is in place.

One of the former Advisors to the Caretaker Government said that the absence of accountability lies at the root of all development deficits. This is true that is stifling development at all levels: economic, regional, social and political.



Cross-cutting issues of development

The growth process of Bangladesh, on the flip side of the projected positives, is characterised by deepening inequality, perpetuating marginalisation and ineffective public institutions and weakening civic voices. These issues of concern are reflected in lack of decent employment implementation, gaps in gender rights implementation, deficits in climate change management, absence of competent public institutions, erosion of cultural values as well as weak state of democratic accountability and voice.

a. Challenges facing decent jobs creation

The acute shortage of decent employment opportunities, particularly for the *youth, women, Persons With Disabilities (PWD), cleaners and indigenous people*, has intensified. Inadequate economic opportunities, corruption—nepotism and bribery, for example - and inadequate access to relevant information are key barriers.

Institutional failure and problems associated with employment in government jobs (corruption, nepotism and bribery): Corruption, nepotism and bribery are prevalent in determining possibilities of securing government jobs. Applicants with strong political connections and the ability to bribe officials manipulate the selection process, reducing opportunities for the competent, especially those from among eligible youth & women and job applicants' from the indigenous groups. For instance, the appointment of cleaners (who primarily belong to the Dalit community) in public schools often requires large bribes. The rise in salaries of public employees did not lower the frequency and quantity of bribes demanded for jobs in the public sector, and those appearing for interviews are exposed to caste-based discrimination when they face the interview boards.

Gaping hole in information management: Citizens are not informed of the available government support for public or private sector jobs and self-employment, leading to underutilisation of the

An indigenous youth informed that many people in his community are heading to Dhaka in search of jobs. However, some are also compelled to take the return journey because what is on offer as salary is not enough to pay for daily substance. He has a master's degree in English literature but he is still to find a job. The reservation system also poses further challenges for indigenous people to secure employment. Withdrawal of quota for Adivasis has also made getting jobs even more difficult.

available facilities on the part of the intended beneficiaries. The potentials of agriculture-driven industrial development have remained untapped. Entrepreneurs are unaware of the investment opportunity and regional incentives provided by the government towards more equitable development. Members of disadvantaged groups are particularly prone to lack of access to information, which perpetuates their disadvantage and push them further behind.

Limited opportunities for the disadvantaged to join and benefit from government training programmes: Social protection benefits and allowances cannot be the only form of government support for the disadvantaged groups. Availability of a diverse range of upskilling and training programmes is important for helping these people move out of poverty on a sustainable basis. Government training programmes currently in place are not creating enough job opportunities and, in many cases, are not demand-driven as far as market dynamics was concerned. For example, technical trainings for PWD provided by the government have not resulted in sizeable job opportunities for them.

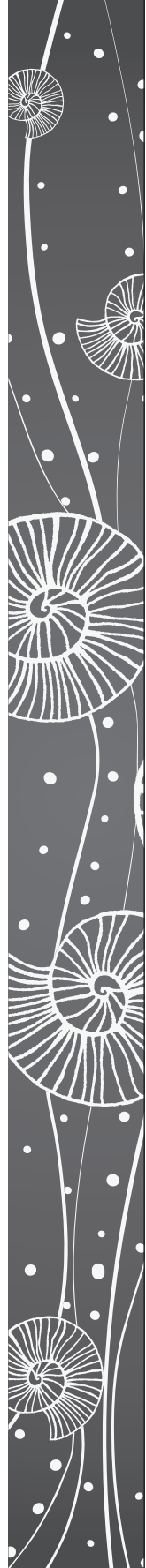
Self-employment: Given the lack of job opportunities for the youth, the marginalised, and members of other left behind groups, self-employment is being promoted by government and various non-government quarters. There have been some positive achievements, albeit only on a limited scale.

- i. New income sources for farmers in Rangpur have emerged from the cultivation of sunflowers and tea. Farmer's profits have increased due to rise in production of sunflower oil.
- ii. Cotton cultivation has expanded in the area.

Research into diverse areas of possible self-employment is needed along with the required support, financial and otherwise.

Local opportunities: Industrialisation needs to be decentralised, and diversified, to create local level employment opportunities rather than the desperate rural to urban migration which all too often proves a futile fight against poverty.

A woman entrepreneur informed the audience that she runs a handicraft business and is engaged in boutique business. She has participated in various trade fairs in Nepal, where there is a demand for Bangladeshi products. However, she needs to come to Dhaka first. If the decision to provide transit facilities through India to the third country actually materialises, many entrepreneurs will be able to export goods to Nepal at a competitive prices.



- i. As the global demand for jute has increased in recent times, Faridpur, for example, could be an appropriate location for the establishment of jute industry with modern machineries. Its proximity to Dhaka and Mongla ports could be an added advantage.
- ii. Khulna could be an appropriate location for establishment of vegetable and food processing industries in the backdrop of the recent environmental situation of the adverse climate change impacts in the region. This will also help increase exports from the region.
- iii. Advantage is not being taken of local opportunities of industrialisation. Agricultural-based industrialisation and export potential of Thakurgaon have remained untapped due to lack of infrastructure and availability of gas. Investment opportunities are limited in the region due to a dysfunctional airport, youth's constraints in accessing bank loans, weak accountability of political authorities and lack of proper attention as regards the region's potentials at the national level. As the land ports are not functioning properly, women entrepreneurs cannot export their hand-crafted products that are in high demand in Nepal. Oftentimes, infrastructures in these parts are not women friendly. Women are sometimes also not given visa to participate in fairs to promote and sell their products. Many sugar mills of Thakurgaon have shut down as sugarcane is no longer cultivated as its cultivation was no longer profitable.

b. Differences in delivery of infrastructure projects

Infrastructural development in Bangladesh has been mostly urban-centric and the gains of improved connectivity have not reached all regions in equal measure. For example, currently, the government has no specific projects or plans for implementation of megaprojects in Rangpur district. The stark contrast between the developed cities and the relatively neglected areas such as Rangpur as also the chars (shoals or river islands) is reflected in the disparity in the standard of living and income status of the people living in the two areas.

Exacerbation of pre-existing employment challenges by COVID-19 pandemic: Unemployment, particularly among the youths and women, is becoming more visible in recent times. This is particularly so far the educated members of these groups. While COVID-19 had worsened the state of unemployment and pushed many below the poverty line, post-COVID times have not seen the desired reversal of the earlier scenario.

Positive developments: IT, connectivity and integration are areas where positive developments are noted. Connectivity and transportation infrastructure have seen notable advancement. For example, Gangachara Sheikh Hasina Bridge, Sheikh Hasina Dharla Bridge and others have benefited the disadvantaged people in terms of ease of transportation, marketing of their products etc.

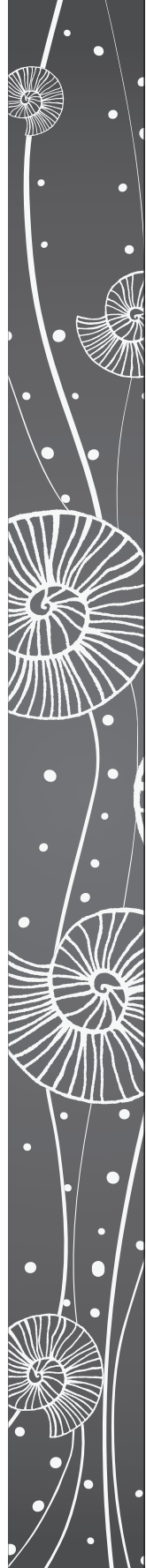
However, while mega projects such as the Padma Bridge and metro rail are touted as mega developments, how far these make a dent on poverty and benefit the left-behind population, remains a question. So, positive achievements should not lead to complacency that turns a blind eye to the reality faced by the disadvantaged people.

c. Gender rights and violence

Despite increasing participation of women in economic activities, the violation of gender rights is becoming more pervasive. The success of women empowerment in Bangladesh is confined to the achievements in terms of reduced fertility, gender parity in education, labour force participation and entrepreneurship. Specific challenges facing the disadvantaged groups are not given due attention despite the extent and intensity obstructing the socioeconomic advancement of girls and women. Child marriage is a focal issue here, along with violence against women.

Underage marriage: Child marriage is one of the pressing challenges heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which remain largely unaddressed by the government. Factors driving the rise in child marriage include financial hardship, social norms and ineffective public administration. Effects of poverty on child marriage are channelled through the high costs of education, ongoing inflation and adverse climatic events in disaster-prone areas such as river erosion. Social norms include religious perceptions, patriarchal hegemony and safety risks restricting the free social mobility and participation of girls and women in social and economic activities. Inadequate political and local oversight of the concerned issues is manifested in the form of ineffective administration which fail to halt

A speaker recalled an incident about a child marriage where a poor tea stall owner was compelled to marry off her teenage daughter against her will to the son of a Minister's sister. She was forced to have a child after her marriage. In such situations, many women are reluctant to pursue legal action because of political pressure. It is the lack of proper enforcement of laws that allows such incidents to happen.



incidences of underage marriage. Fraudulent birth certificates is another cause. Weak transportation system resulting impeding connectivity and economic underdevelopment in hard-to-reach regions increased the frequency of child marriages.

Increased insecurity of women: Alongside perceived women's empowerment, there are increasing security concerns for women. Violence against women shot up during the COVID-19 outbreak and has continued. Other than facing abuse and harassment at home and in the workplace, media reports and various sources indicate a clear rise in the incidence of sexual abuse on public transport. The violence sometimes goes to the extent of rape and even ends in death. Increasing trends in such violence against women and girls are a deterrent to women's empowerment. Application of the existing laws is a must. Mindsets that stigmatise the victims rather than the perpetrators ought to be changed.

Legal rights of women: Legal rights of women remain a key area of neglect. Local representatives are not taking necessary steps to correct the problems at the local level. Legal aid and awareness are essential inputs required to ensure the rights of women.

Violation of gender rights: Weak implementation of law and governance lead to violation of gender rights. For gender-based violence, there are incidences when courts have encouraged compromised settlement of cases on behalf of the accused. Rural arbitration or 'shalish' does not always uphold legal gender rights due to outdated values accepted as the norm, whereby the victim is forced to compromise with the perpetrator. The victim is more often than not subject to 'gaslighting'.

Inadequate action against VAW by political leadership: Improvements in traditional and social values about the rights and roles of women over the last 12 years are not being properly reflected in political leadership. While civil society organisations are demanding justice in dealing with cases of violence against women, local government authorities often fail to take legal measures as stipulated by the law. Conscious efforts are required for awareness building and sensitisation.

d. Climate adversity spreads

Adverse climate impact is no longer a localised phenomenon; it is now being felt across the country in different forms. Climate adversity in the form of floods, droughts, etc, is exacerbated by lack of monitoring, rehabilitation, appropriate policy and other shortcomings.

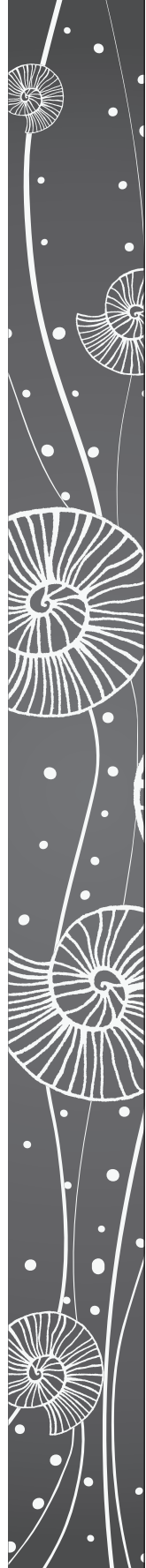
Forms of climate adversities and causes: The most common forms of natural disasters across the country are severe droughts, erratic rainfall, increased salinity, landslides and riverbank erosion. A large part of environmental damages originate from environmental pollution, long-term stone extraction for construction projects across Bangladesh and widespread deforestation.

Absence of government monitoring and prevention: Absence of government monitoring and preventive measures escalate the severity of climate adversities and worsen air quality, indicating a shortage of adaptation efforts and political commitment towards relevant policies such as the 2021 Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).

There has been scant policy attention, notably featured in the Rangamati consultations. Tree felling is a prime concern in the Common Reserve Forests in Rangamati. No security is arranged for monitoring and prevention, and the Village Common Forest Land is not officially acknowledged in public documents. Government data collection errors undermine efficacy of NGOs' activities, anticipatory actions in view of landslides since rainfall estimates of NGOs exceed that of the public data. In general, NGOs working on climate change in the hilly regions are turning inactive because of shrinking funds and weakening networks and capacity.

Inadequacy of rehabilitation measures: Rehabilitation support provided by the government to those affected by river erosion (residents of climate vulnerable areas) is not adequate when compared to the growing demand.

An educationist noted, "Development is taking place in the country but it is highly unequal. Over the past 50 years, alongside development, inequality has also grown. A social revolution is necessary to change the situation. We will need to establish real democracy. Election is just a process in this. Even if elections take place in the current system, this will not establish a true democracy. There is a lack of social equality, decentralisation of power, and competent leadership at all levels. And at present there is almost no nurturing culture.



Impact of dams on agricultural production: Construction of the Farakka dam, for example, has led to the drying up of several rivers and lowered agricultural production. At the local level, embankments (river and coastal) have led to floods, particularly as these embankments are mostly damaged and in a state of disrepair. Salinity is also a resulting problem in certain areas. This too had an adverse impact on agriculture.

Government policies which can reduce the economic and social consequences of climate change: Support for land recovery, financial assistance and rehabilitation are essential to reduce the economic and social impact of climate change. Underutilisation of funds, misallocation and misuse of funds must be dealt with to ensure that adverse climate change impacts are addressed appropriately.

e. Efficacy of public institutions

The efficacy of public institutions is negatively impacted particularly by lack of information, discrimination in allocations and other shortcomings which in the end deprive disadvantaged groups.

Problems of information dissemination and biased allocations: The challenges of information dissemination in hard-to-reach regions have left several government-provided benefits and incentives to remain under-utilised by the intended beneficiaries. In many cases, government support measures are directed to particular communities or politically connected people with the intention of 'buying' votes before elections. Because of mismanagement of funds and earmarked government's various supports by local chairperson, distribution of benefits remains in favour of the relatively well-off and the powerful.

Constrained access to public services by disadvantaged groups: Disadvantaged people have limited access to public services. Access to public services is bounded by three major factors—narrow coverage of beneficiaries, unscrupulous practices and inferior quality of infrastructure projects. A major reason for the inadequacy of services is low budget allocation. The allocation deficits give rise to a vicious cycle whereby concerned authorities cannot be held responsible because they can get away by saying they do not have the required funds. Drawing from the citizen's consultation in Rangamati, budget shortages to construct houses under the government 'Asrayan' scheme resulted in spillover effects of deforestation and environmental degradation. Government officials received free of cost from the

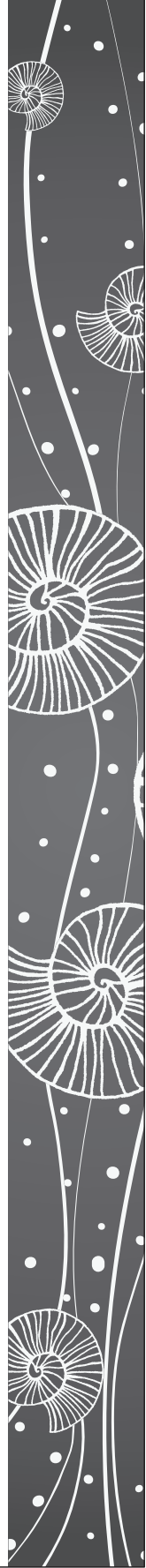
brickfields to build houses and they could not enforce laws against their brickfield owners who were responsible for environmental degradation.

A family member involved in armed conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) mentioned that those who had sought refuge in India before the Peace Accord and were once engaged in armed conflict have returned to the country after the Peace Accord. The peace agreement mentioned the resettlement of a total of 1.4 lakh people, including returnees and local rebels, from India. Nevertheless, no initiatives have been taken for their reestablishment. Those advocating for the full implementation of the peace agreement face various forms of harassment, including filing cases against them.

Inefficiency and coordination failure among government agencies: There are numerous drawbacks caused by inefficiency, lack of coordination among government agencies as well as corruption. Drawbacks included unavailability of fire service and safety stations in hill tract areas and motor vehicle workers not being given any appointment letter depriving them of the welfare trust of the government. Plus, inadequate allocations continue to restrict the scope and availability of social protection schemes at the grassroots. Disadvantaged groups are often victim of unethical practices such as having to pay for the delivery of various public services which ought to be free of charge. Payments had to be paid for information on birth certification, for example. Public resources are also exploited by those with political power.

Also, economic and social gains from infrastructure projects are not sustainable, as infrastructure planning and design are often not based on national standards and local requirements. Contractors often do not have the required qualification unqualified to implement projects resulting in sub-contracting, high costs and delays in implementation. Lags in implementation are not only confined to infrastructure alone. This is also the case involving implementation of political commitments such as the CHT Peace Accord. The absence of civil administration, lack of awareness of political

One participant informed that they must pay BDT 200 for a birth certificate at the Union Parishad. If they need the certificate in English, say after six months, they have to pay again. Online land revenue receipts cost BDT 10, but they are charged BDT 100. If they protest, the payment goes up. Then they are told that the income from this land is higher.



authorities about local tensions and conflicting interests and coordination failure among the Peace Accord Commission, Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs, Regional Parishad and Zilla Parishad are some of the major factors for the delay.

Conditions relating to allocations for Jhum cultivation in CHT are devoid of the reality: Farmers engaged in Jhum cultivation in the CHT are deprived of the government benefits specifically allocated for them. As ordained by the DC office, benefits may be accessed only if there is an equal proportion of indigenous and Bengali population in the region. This is not a practical proposition since the Bengalis are not engaged in Jhum cultivation. During the lean months of April to July, they cannot conduct any harvesting activities and there is a dire need for aid and food support during this period. However, there is no programme to address this.

Public expenditure

- i. *Infrastructural Developments:* Connectivity between urban and peri-urban areas is hindered due to inadequate road and highway infrastructure. Absence of adequate number of bridges in these areas can pose significant challenges in emergency situations. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, absence of brick-making facilities makes it difficult to construct roads. Additionally, many parts of the region lack access to electricity, causing inconvenience for local residents. Tangail faces a shortage of basic sanitation facilities and public restrooms, causing difficulties for its inhabitants. It is necessary to establish schools for the PWDs in every district and arrange upazilla-based medical centres.
- ii. *Negligence from the authorities:*
 - The river Karnaphuli requires proper cleaning to mitigate the effects of waterlogging, however, the responsible committee has been neglecting this crucial task.
 - There are no government community clinics in Bhatara police station.

A former member of the National Human Rights Commission stated that the people of small ethnic communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts continue to be caught in the vicious cycle of identity crisis. Are they indigenous people or they belong to small ethnic groups? Are they Bangladeshis or Bangalis? Some even go to the extent of labelling them as separatists.

- There's a scarcity of cremation grounds for the indigenous communities.
- Since independence, an estimated one lakh crore taka has been allocated towards resolving the water problem in Chattogram. Despite this investment, the issue remains unresolved, with the Chittagong Development Authority and City Corporation blaming each other for flooding and waterlogging. The two organisations have implemented similar projects without coordination, leading to a lack of effective action at resolving the problem of waterlogging. The rivalry between the two institutions has resulted in a failure to address the issue effectively, leading to the persistent problem of waterlogging.

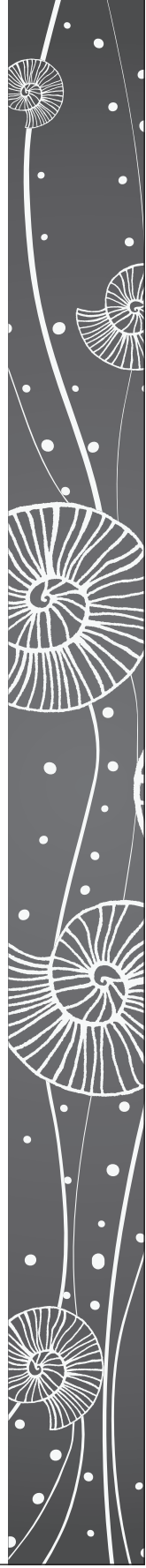
f. Cultural values and traditions

When it comes to cultural values and traditions, in indigenous communities and other minority communities of the country are glaringly overlooked and neglected.

While culture and tradition are an integral part of civilisation, identity and indeed an intangible part of sustainable development, there has been erosion in this area which calls for immediate remedial measures. This is particularly visible in case of the indigenous communities and other minority communities across the country.

Undervaluation of indigenous culture: Undervaluation of indigenous culture leads to an erosion of social cohesion between the Bengali and indigenous communities. The widening social divide is apparent in regions which were once known as the 'cities of cultural heritage' (e.g., Tangail) and are now losing the traditional status they had enjoyed for long. More specifically, loss of historical and cultural traditions of indigenous groups is a direct consequence of the receding social bands, engagement and cohesion between the Bengali and minority communities. Preservation of the traditions will be helped if cultural academies are established with participation of all communities such including many steps and initiatives will forge closer. would aid in forging community relationships and help resolve many of the existing tensions.

There has been a palpable weakening of inclusive and pluralistic social and cultural values, vanishing cultural heritage of minority groups, and deepening social divide. Civil administration in the hill tracts has weakened palpably; the



non-civilian administration is often not sensitive to interests of hill people. Indeed, communities are perceived as suspicious. The administration in the hill tracts should be sensitive about the geographical, culture and attitudinal differences among the communities and try to build an environment of trust, understanding and harmony among different group of people.

Negligence of art and traditional practices of cultural cities: Negligence of the art and traditional practices of cultural cities has led to erosion of folklore and legacies. This implies that social dimensions have been overlooked in the process of growth and development.

Role of the middle class: Traditionally, it is the middle class which has been the promoter of cultural values in Bangladesh. They have led the movements for democracy and social progress in the country and had set values and standards in the society. However, at present, this role has narrowed down and diminished, and a large part has shifted their focus from culture to economic activities. Government institutions such as Shilpakala Academy have also become very much government programmes oriented and become partisan.

g. Democratic accountability and voice

There is a steadily shrinking space for the voice of civil society, youth, disadvantaged communities and others, indicating a lack of democratic accountability.

Narrowing space for CSO and NGO activities: This is one of the major challenges that undermines achievement of sustainable and inclusive growth. Sustainability of small NGOs is currently at risk because financial support from international sources is on the decline. Funding constraints are especially acute for NGOs which do not have microcredit operations.

In view of these challenges, NGO operations and activities can be sustained, to a large extent, only by building and straightening thier capacities and reducing reliance on foreign finance. Government support for the NGOs could be strengthened through dedicated and targeted support in Annual Development Programme (ADP). Proper utilisation of such funds will be crucial. Sustainable development is possible through meaningful collaboration between the

government and the NGOs which could be facilitated by transparency and mutual accountability.

NGOs at the local level are often viewed with suspicion and they do not get the support they need from local administration. This mindset needs to change.

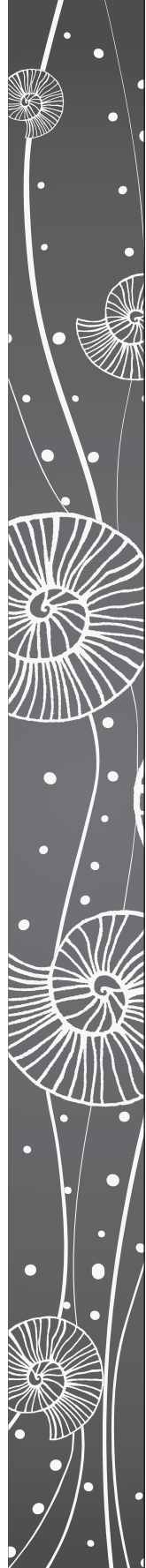
Youth movements face resistance: Youths are discouraged to participate in civic engagements and movements. A culture of self-censorship and fear prevails in universities and teaching institutions. The moral authority of teachers of academic institutions has been severely undermined by unethical practices of a few. Social values and good practices are on the retreat. Young people, the change makers, face many difficulties in their work because of these societal changes.

Collective action of sub-indigenous groups on the decline: Communal bonds and collective efforts to accomplish societal prosperity on the decline, particularly among the sub-indigenous groups. Only groups with solid community networks can smoothly access public and communal resources by taking advantages of their numbers and influence. However, other small communities are being pushed further behind.

Corruption has emerged as a major barrier to development and equitable distribution: Lack of transparency, accountability and implementation of law are some of the major barriers that exacerbate inequality and discrimination. For instance, due to lack of accountability and weak legal enforcement, politically influential people have illegally occupied 22 canals for undertaking fish farming in Khulna. This has disrupted the normal flow of the rivers and has led to problems of waterlogging during heavy rainfall.

Corruption has been on the rise and is being manifested in various new forms. During the COVID-19 pandemic, majorities of women were deprived of microcredit support extended by the government. Procedures were complex and cumbersome. In many cases, eligible

An eminent artist stated that country's power has been taken over by black money holders. All laws and regulations are in favour of black money holders and business people. Because they are the majority in the parliament. Nothing gets done without money. The country belongs to money, black money. Government is offering all opportunities to owners of black money. Getting nominations for elections is also a business. One needs money even to get nomination for Union Parishad membership. That money is extracted from general public over the next five years.



beneficiaries (landless and homeless) have not benefitted from the government's Ashrayan Project.

Electoral process has been significantly undermined by lack of transparency of the nomination and selection process of candidates, pressure enforced by ruling political party, partisan administration and play of money and corruption.

An eminent artist stated that black money holders are exercising power in Bangladesh. Money has become one of the significant indicators of success in many sectors. Unfortunately, these black money holders are getting support from the government.

Political influence affecting the distribution of national resources: At the local level, political influence over distribution of natural resources has become more common and widespread. Unplanned land filling in natural reservoirs by the politically influential individuals has depleted fish stock and has put livelihoods of fishermen at risk. The problem has intensified especially after the government has granted lease of different water reservoirs to rich, politically connected and powerful people.

Sectoral issues

The major sectoral issues include education, health, water and sanitation, social protection, and transport and communication.

a. Education

Concerns over quality education persist: Over the last 10 years, infrastructure of the education sector has been significantly developed. But confidence in public educational institutions has been on the decline. The education system has become heavily reliant on coaching centres and use of guidebooks.

New discrimination in school admissions: Students from low-income or marginalised sections of the society are admitted to government

The Head Teacher of a private secondary school said that discrimination among the teachers as regards salary and other benefits needs to be reduced. If teachers can't afford their basic needs, they won't be able to provide quality education. There is a significant difference in the quality of life between government and private school teachers. Government school teachers receive a full bonus during the two Eids, while private school teachers only receive 20 per cent of that.

primary schools. But proportion of students from government primary schools who can successfully complete higher education is significantly low. To ensure that students from all sections of society can access the same public services, a policy that children from one particular area are eligible to take admission in the primary school of that particular area can be effective. An area-wise mapping will be required for this.

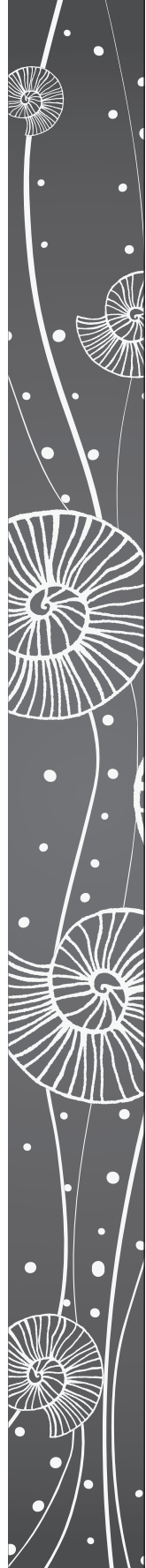
Weak transportation infrastructure and journey time: Unequal access to education and training, especially by left behind communities in remote regions, remains endemic driven by a lack of proper, all-weather infrastructure. There are no public schools in several remote regions. Also, public schools remain unattended in some areas due to acute transportation barriers.

Lack of monitoring mechanisms: Admissions in public and private schools have turned into profitable businesses, with teachers and members of management committee of the schools largely involved in the admission trade. Committees are formed with officials with limited knowledge on education systems and management. Membership in school committees is often based on political connections. Members of the committees have been unable to monitor quality of education or engage students in extra-curricular activities like debates, sports and cultural activities which are essential for the development of students as good citizens and also to harness their technical and soft skills.

Malpractices of educational institutions: Unethical practices followed by many institutions have further compromised learning quality which is manifested in three area of institutional failure. First, the management committee's singular interest in overmarking in examinations is lowering the marketable value of the academic grades including GPA-5. Second, following teachers' guidance, students must study guidebooks which have been banned by law.. Third, learning resources and teaching directions are often not aligned with the syllabus of the class for which these are delivered.

A female student shared that pursuing education with the government scholarship money is becoming increasingly challenging. She receives a scholarship of BDT 1200 every six months.

However, her monthly rent is BDT 2000. She can't afford private education. Many students give up on their dreams solely due to financial constraints. During the pandemic, she couldn't engage in remote learning due to not affording a smartphone.



Corruption in distribution of stipend: The distribution process is not transparent and lack of accountability of authorities has resulted in corruption in stipend allocation process.

Unequal access to education and training by left-behind groups: Poverty and lack of schools in nearby locations are two of the major constraints here. Absence of schools in neighbouring areas is one of the most critical reasons driving early marriages among the indigenous communities. Schools have been built by some local communities, but many such institutions were not given authorisation by the government.

Dropout rates are higher among female students: While the stipend programme for female students is a good initiative, the amount of stipend, which could be as less as BDT 1,200 every six months, is rather low. The stipend is not attractive enough to retain female children from low-income families, leading to high percentage of dropouts. Additional school uniform costs, study materials, meals, and private coaching increase monthly expenditure. As there are no public schools in many remote regions and free public schools remain unattended due to acute transportation problems, dropouts and early marriages have increased, particularly since 2015. This scenario has become more widespread as education development projects in remote regions have been discontinued by NGOs due to scarcity of funds.

Inequality in the salary structure of teachers: There is a substantial gap in the salary structure of teachers across different educational institutions. Although the number of teachers appointed in schools has increased, they are not paid their salaries in due time. There is an evident gap in the salaries and living standards of public and non-government school teachers. Teachers of public schools are paid full bonuses on two Eid festivals whereas teachers in non-government schools get less than 50 per cent of their basic salary as festival bonus. There is no transparency in the selection process of teachers in the private institutions. Also, teachers have to pay bribes for getting a job in government primary and secondary schools.

Learning loss and digital divide due to the COVID-19 widens inequality in education: In the post-COVID period, the government established no mechanisms to track the number of dropouts and assess the effect of COVID-19 on education quality. This impeded the design of policies to incentivise return to education. The impact

is relatively more severe for marginalised groups especially due to digital divide which is widening inequality. As stipends provided to students during or after the COVID period were inadequate, many were unable to cope with the new normal. Financial burden of purchasing a smartphone resulted in learning loss as online classes were missed. Primary school dropout rates have skyrocketed post-Covid. But no specific initiative is being taken by the government in this regard.

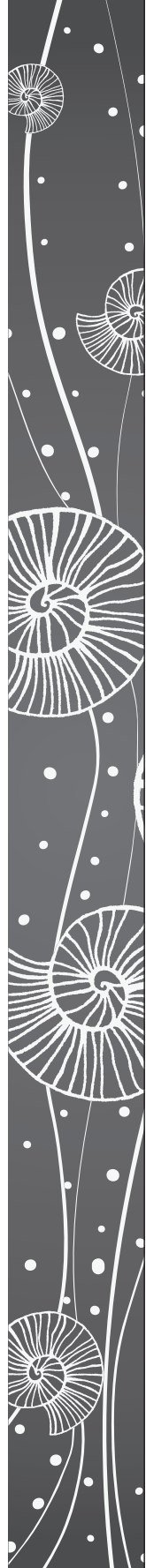
b. Health

Marginalised groups still have limited access to public health services. Community clinics at the grassroots are inadequately equipped and staffed.

Expansion of public health services did not reduce accessibility gaps: Expansion of public health services has not minimised the accessibility gap led by shortages in health clinics, medical professionals and specialised services. Despite considerable expansion of public health service institutions and the successful tackling of the COVID pandemic, structural problems in health service delivery, including the quality of public health care facilities, continue to undermine adequate access by marginalised groups. The growth in Bangladesh's public health care infrastructure is disproportional to the rise in population.

Community clinics did not lower the flow of patients to the larger public hospitals and private clinics in the cities: Community clinics in rural and remote regions could not lessen the flow of patients to the larger public hospitals or private clinics in the cities, led by the low quality of health care and patients' distrust of the services. The free services cannot be availed properly since service-related information is not readily available to the general public. Community health clinics and upazila health centres are not equipped with trained medical professionals and modern equipment. The clinics are not adequately equipped to provide

Ayouth representative stated that question papers get leaked even before admission test and job exam. There have been incidences of question paper leaks even at the University of Dhaka. In the case of job recruitment, question leaks are happening the night before the exam. When culprits are apprehended, they are getting speedy bails from the courts.



adolescent health care services, especially quality reproductive health care.

Lack of access aggravated by weak road infrastructure: The underdeveloped road and transportation infrastructure in hard-to-reach or remote regions is a major challenge to accessing health care. Direct road connectivity between upazilas and major cities of different divisions and districts is much lower than what is required, particularly in remote areas and areas suffering from river erosion. Incidences of patient's death en route to hospitals in the cities is still common.

The citizen's consultations stressed the need for higher allocation as also for change in the composition of the budget to upazila health centres. Development and deployment of human resources and technical facilities at the Upazilla health complexes. Also, assurance of quality health care for indigenous communities and residents of remote regions critically hinges on implementing the Tribal Health Plan of the 4th Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Programme of Bangladesh.

c. Water and sanitation

Shortage of clean water and sanitation is an acute problem, even more so for the marginalised population.

Uneven access to water and sanitation: The problem of accessing clean water and sanitation remains acute both in urban and rural areas, due to both political and economic factors, as also because of the adverse impact of climate change. This is resulting in the spread of diseases and sickness.

Scarcity of water and sanitation facilities: In many districts, availability of fresh drinking water and sanitation facilities is a critically important development challenge. Although urban sanitation facilities have improved, quality is a concern and shortage of drinking water continues to remain an issue. Several

A Freedom Fighter noted that there is rampant corruption in schools and madrassas. Corruption is prevalent even in recruitment for positions such as M.L.S.S (Office Assistants) and Ayas.

villages in Bangladesh struggle with the issue of open defecation. Several public and private schools cannot provide the required menstrual hygiene facilities to the students. However, social accountability equally matters to achieve distributive justice.. Public waste management has considerably improved over the years. Still, the management has been ineffectual owing to widespread open waste disposal as there is absence of social accountability and citizens lack information about public waste services.

Political economy of water and sanitation services: The paucity of water and sanitation services could largely be explained by the biased distribution of public water and sanitation facilities as the resources are mostly allocated among the politically affiliated, their families and other connections.

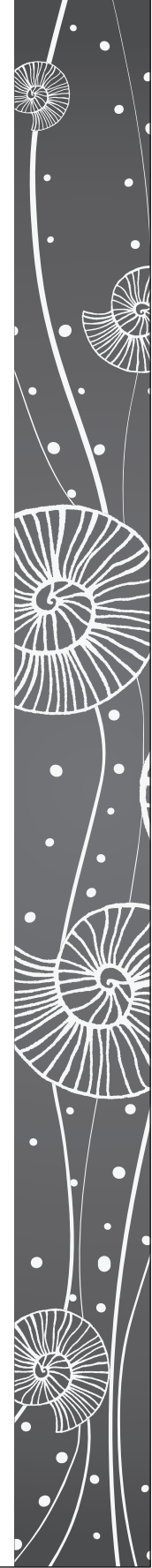
Deforestation and stone extraction from water bodies lead to drinking water shortage in the hill tract region: During the dry season, water has to be fetched from far-away in hard-to-reach areas of CHT; Sometimes water also has to be purchased from the market. This development need has been left unresolved despite of protests and widespread media coverage. Climate change is emerging as a major factor. Deforestation and excessive stone extraction from water bodies are accentuating the problems.

d. Social protection

The existing social security interventions of the government are discriminatory and inefficient. Deserving beneficiaries are often deprived.

Gaps in implementing government social security programmes: Eligible beneficiaries are not listed for the benefits. These are often given to those not in need of the support, such as pre-selected people belonging to government parties. Distribution of the allowances is undermined by corruption and inefficiency. Also the allowances do not support basic standard of living.

Inefficiencies in implementing the social security programmes: The programmes are not aligned with the specific demands and needs of the beneficiaries. Plus, benefits are not disbursed when this is most necessary and should be done through the right mechanisms.



The Political economy of social protection distribution: Due to weak political stance, income inequality is widening, and marginalised groups are further pushed behind due to limited coverage and inadequate allocations for social protection systems. Residents of a particular area of Dumuria upazila in Khulna, for instance, were deprived of different government allowances arising from political differences.

e. Transport and communication

Transportation system and building of road infrastructure suffer from widespread corruption and inefficiencies. The onus falls on the marginalised and disadvantaged group who are adversely affected by lack of easy transport facilities and high costs.

Fragile condition of roads and highways and lack of proper maintenance: Despite visible progress in building transport networks, road safety and traffic management remain areas of concern. Poor quality of roads and infrastructure, overloaded vehicles, absence of load control stations and use of low-grade bitumen are reasons for early damage of infrastructure. The unrepaired, unmaintained roads have evolved into death traps, raising safety concerns for pedestrians and small vehicle passengers. Road accidents impose high and unquantifiable costs on marginalised people in the form of death, injury and financial losses.

Corruption in fund utilisation: Lack of maintenance and bad condition of roads and highways perpetuate the marginalisation of residents of remote regions. This arise from due to corruption and fraudulent practices in managing the allocated funds for road construction.

Population group specific issues

Population specific development challenges in Bangladesh can be categorised under three clusters—broad identity groups, specific identity groups, and employment-specific groups. Identification of the ground-level challenges helps to reveal traditional as also the new causes of inequalities, and why the situation is worsening. This

According to an Economist, the majority of population are not getting their fair share of development. A certain group is siphoning off billions of dollars through government patronage. This development is a burden on the people. As progress is being made, forests are being destroyed. There is a culture of denial which is embedded in government narrative. Prices of essential commodities are rising uncontrollably, but the government claims that everything is fine. Anyone who dares to protest injustice faces legal action. A simple Facebook post can result in legal proceedings and arrest under the Digital Security Act, while at the same time those responsible for acts of violence go unpunished.

explains why certain groups are being left behind and are exposed to greater and increasing vulnerabilities while the country marches forward in terms of overall economically and social development.

a. Broad identity groups

Women, youth, senior citizens are considered here as three broad identity groups.

Women

Enhancing the mobility of women is a prerequisite for empowering women, both economically and socially. Women's freedom of movement is positively associated with women's empowerment and labour market participation. But the lack of safety for women on roads and in public transport restricts this freedom. Tourism in the hill tracts is also a safety hazard for local women. Indigenous women are often harassed by tourists in different forms ranging from posing for photographs without consent to sexual assaults. Police and local representatives are unresponsive to the complaints and legal justice received by victims is rare. NGOs are trying to readdress this concern through awareness-raising campaigns and self-protection trainings for indigenous women. The fundamental rights and freedom of women and young girls are also breached at home as family perceptions and values relating to females remain unchanged. This is evident in the prioritisation of male children in the completion of higher education and suppression of women's financial independence and decision-making, regardless of their engagement in income generation.

Youth

Scarcity of employment opportunities and incentives for self-employment result in their low participation in income-generating activities. Although stated in the National Youth Policy, the provision of accessible banking facilities for the youths is not followed. The obstacles are even greater for those seeking employment in government offices. With high application fees and other collateral costs they can hardly afford to apply for government jobs.

Lack of adequate opportunities to involve the youth in meaningful ways is the leading cause of youth disengagement. This gives rise to social hazards of drug abuse, suicide, extremism and social media addiction. These challenges are



especially prevalent among youths close to international border areas. These areas are prone to human trafficking, drug trade, smuggling and other anti-social and criminal activities in which either youth are victims; they are often misled and lured into join these illegal businesses.

Collective action by the community, civil society and youth groups, can prove to be practical solutions to rising youth disengagement. Parents should also play a more proactive role in encouraging within constructive activities. Indoor stadiums and fitness centres should be established in upazilas to actively engage youths.

Senior citizens

Issues related to senior citizens are not only confined to the limited economic security of savings and pension schemes but also include the dearth of old-age homes, advocacy about parental care and community engagement to support the aged. Along with health care and pension plans for senior citizens, there is need for recreational and leisure facilities geared to their needs. The consultations suggested creating common places for youths and citizens that will enhance social inclusion of senior citizens and allow the young to benefit from the seniors' wisdom and values, reducing their disengagement and mental distress.

b. Specific identity groups

Indigenous communities

- *Conflicts over the land of indigenous communities remain unresolved:* The CHT Land Commission was designed to grant land rights to people living in the hill areas under the 1997 Peace Accord. Although the basic clauses are inactive, the government claims to have fulfilled at least 70 of the Act's various clauses. A few factors contributing to the endurance of the issue include land grabbing from the indigenous communities for tourism as indigenous owners do not have legal documents to claim ownership, an ineffectual task force owing to insufficient fund allocation and infrequent task force meetings and low-grade resettlement facilities provided by the government. As such, the government initiatives for free housing for the poor is availed at BDT 1,500 charged at the local level. While eligible beneficiaries are often deprived of the facilities as houses are constructed only in areas visited by the monitoring authorities, those selected

for free housing have to bear the costs of financing since the budget for construction is not revised according to the rise in materials costs. Building a house in hilly settlement of land disputes essential for the recognition of the land and resettlement rights of the indigenous community.

- *Inadequate access to government support measures:* The indigenous communities are not equal beneficiaries of government support, with lower access than the Bengali communities of the area. The communities are excluded from higher education as costly coaching and preparatory processes reduce their competitiveness in admission examinations. Government trainings, social safety nets, support for entrepreneurs and COVID-19 support packages are not known by indigenous groups leading to underutilisation. Apart from the essential public services, fair market prices are not received for the agricultural commodities grown in the hill tracts because of the weak transportation infrastructure.
- *Inadequate representation of tribal population:* Members of the Parliament elected from the three hill districts are drawn from the tribal population. However, they are unable to effectively represent the interests of their constituents due to the constraints imposed by Article 70 of the Constitution. This article obliges Members of Parliament to toe the line of respective political party and prevents them from creating floor. This also prevents them from speaking out about the needs of the tribal people in the Parliament which could be perceived by the ruling party as going against their interests. As a result, the voices and needs of the tribal population are not adequately represented in the national legislative discourse.
- *Failure of state-sponsored institutions in preserving tribal language and culture:* While various state-sponsored institutions exist in the hills with the aim of preserving local language and culture, these institutions are failing to play an effective role. In 2017, the government published books in the mother tongue of the tribal communities with the objective of promoting their language and culture. This was in line with SDG targets. However, there is a lack of oversight to ensure that these books are being used in the classroom, there is also a lack of trained teachers. As a result, the efforts of the government to protect and promote the language and culture of the tribal communities are not producing the desired results.
- *Self-identity of the indigenous communities denied:* The government has issued instructions that makes it illegal to use the term 'Adivasi' in referring to the tribal and other communities residing in the hills and plains. As a result, citizens of



these communities cannot obtain citizenship certificates that identify them as 'Adivasi'. This directive has been met with resistance from the concerned communities who feel that it constitutes an attack on their self-identity.

- *Absence of equal participation of indigenous population in development programmes in the hill tracts:* Although more than ten tribal groups live in the hills, only three groups are dominant in various government activities. This is also true for projects supported by development partners. Programmes operated by the government and UN agencies in the hill tracts are primarily benefitting only a few of the indigenous population groups. This results in distribution bias from which other groups suffer.
- *Absence of political representation of the indigenous community:* For the last 12 years, the indigenous and Dalit communities have been the subjects of unequal development, especially when it came to representation. Even though the mindset of citizens and government officials have undergone some changes in this regard, these concerns remain valid and is also reflected in political leadership.

Dalit Communities

- *Lack of proper housing and widespread discrimination against Dalits speak of persistent social and economic challenges:* Lack of adequate housing is a major issue faced by the Harijans in the regions. Eviction of Dalits and the shortage of proper housing have led to their widespread displacement and marginalisation. They are often excluded from various events and social gatherings, further perpetuating their marginalisation, and reinforcing societal biases and prejudices. The need for housing for them has been a major concern for many years, however, despite the government allocation, only employed Harijans can avail of housing benefits.
- *Lack of access to higher education:* The quota for Dalit students for university admission is often left unfilled due to the limited educational opportunities and lack of resources available for the Dalit community. This creates a vicious cycle. This situation highlights the persistent obstacles faced by Dalits in accessing higher education and the need for greater investment to bridge these disparities.
- *Lack of political representation:* The Dalit-Harijan Gazette 2012–2013 stated that there should be at least one Dalit representation in all government institutions. However, this directive is not being upheld, and the Dalit community continues to face discrimination and exclusion. The lack of political participation results in

their interests not being prioritised such as the Harijans who have been working as cleaning staffs under City Corporation did not get a pay raise for many years now. They are often excluded from various events and social gatherings, further perpetuating their marginalization and reinforcing societal biases and prejudices.

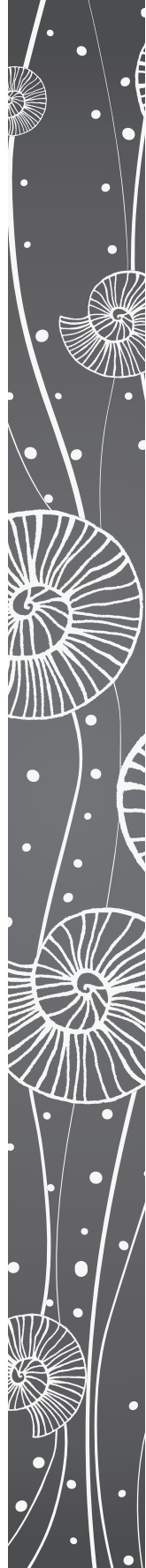
Inhabitants of climate vulnerable areas

- *Unresolved internal connectivity is limiting the potential of economic, education and health care developments in char and haor regions:* Inadequate development of the char and haor regions is rooted in weak transportation and underdeveloped infrastructure. This has resulted in lower level of economic development. Markets for agricultural foods is shallow, education and healthcare facilities have remained limited. Most primary schools remain dysfunctional since teachers as also students have to travel to schools for long hours by boats.

Persons with disabilities

- *Persons with disabilities (PWD) continue to face multiple problems:* Persons with disabilities continue to struggle to finance their monthly expenses since government allowances are way below the money required to sustain monthly expenditures. In many districts, the number of government-provided wheelchairs are below the number of eligible beneficiaries. Additionally, tax incentives given to companies which provide employment opportunities to PWD have proved to be ineffective. PWD communities primarily rely on NGO assistance for housing, education, health care, sanitation, and employment. Though the Bangladesh government has signed the Marrakesh Treaty for ease of access of 'specially adapted books' in 2022, education facilities are not conducive for persons with the different forms of disabilities, and PWD beneficiaries are not fully covered as far as access to educational materials was concerned. To align the spirit of SDG 17 (Partnerships of achieve the goal) with realisation of the SDGs at the local level, the treaty should be made effective through by removing the existing barriers to the copyright

An educationist mentioned that the Ministry of Social Welfare supports the education of people with disabilities through handouts. Why wouldn't the Ministry of Education look at the challenges they face. A directive from the High Court has been issued to close down. But the education law has not seen the light of day.



of Braille, talking books and other educational materials for PWD; equity in access will also need to be encouraged. According to the FY2022–23 report of the Ministry of Finance relating to Social Security Programmes, the government has allocated cash transfers for nearly 2.3 million financially insolvent PWDs. However, in many PWDs are not enlisted in the public census, so many PWDs continue to remain outside of such support. It is also necessary to include the PSDs in the plans that are adopted at the Union Council level.

Transgender community

- *Stigmatised transgender community:* Social stigma still persists as far as the transgender community was concerned. They are deprived of their traditional livelihood sources. All these exacerbate the vulnerabilities they suffer from and give rise to new socio-economic insecurities. The traditional livelihood practices of the transgender community, i.e., obtaining money on the streets by extortion has emerged as a concern on the part of other citizens and this often results in their harassment by the general public. Along with social security assistance, urgent rehabilitation provisions for the transgender community is required to prevent their marginalisation.

c. Employment-specific groups

Farmers, fishermen, tea workers and migrant workers are particularly vulnerable among the diverse employment groups in Bangladesh. The main source of their marginalisation can be traced to the overarching issues of increasing marginalisation in workplace and labour market, for various reasons. There is a lack of employment and skill development schemes for them, public expenditure for them is very low; They suffer from violation of their legitimate rights. The shrinking civic space is accentuating their vulnerabilities since they can hardly raise their voice and demand that their problems are addressed with due urgency.

Farmers: Sizeable economic losses and borrowing constraints have resulted in many farmers being close to quitting farming (e.g., farmers harvesting different varieties of crops and fish in Khulna are finding that agriculture does not give them the returns that can keep them affluent). This is owed to the failure of government planning and livelihood development programmes for farmers not being able to address their particular concerns of pricing, marketing and

productivity. Knowledge enhancement, capacity development, and limited access to high quality seeds markets for selling products at a fair price are limited. Farmers cannot embark on profit-making ventures as loans from the Bangladesh Krishi Bank can only be availed with legal land documents which many disadvantaged people do not have.

Fishermen: The expansion of fishing bans from three to four months without any extra allocations of food and monetary benefits has forced households to go for dissaving and incurring debt. They do not have any other earning opportunities to survive through these loan months. This creates a vicious cycle of poverty for these fishery communities. The fishermen have no capital for investment in business, neither can they invest in their children's development. During the period of legal restrictions on fishing, a meagre ration of 20kg of rice is allocated for the families and no other food items such as spices, lentils and other ingredients to go with this are provided.

Tea workers: Wage and livelihood constraints, coupled with the lack of education and health care services have generated a cycle of inter-generational marginalisation of tea workers. These communities have hardly gained from the overall economic development of the country. There is hardly any scope for social mobility. Wages are very low, and they do not have rights on the land they live in. Schools at distance, health facilities are scarce. These communities have hardly gained from the overall economic development of the country. Plus, high inflation has made it difficult for tea workers to meet basic nutritional needs of their families. With their meagre income they cannot meet the expenses of basic treatment and children's education.

Internal and external migrants: Reverse migration of internal migrants and reintegration challenges of returnee migrants have aggravated the situation of the marginalised groups in recent times. These difficulties they face relate to lack of job creation as well as more people are migrating to urban areas than jobs being created in the informal sector. Job retention in urban areas and skills adjustment of returnee migrants are not supported by targeted programmes; Reverse migration from Dhaka to rural areas is induced by low income, high living costs and lack of savings; Many workers suffer from lack of workplace safety in the industries.



High inflationary pressure means that the disadvantaged people are having to live hand to mouth. They do not have any savings to deal with emergencies and shocks. Even though particular individuals or groups have experienced some increase in their income, the lives of vast majority of the marginalised people remain the same because of continuous struggle and deprivations. This speaks glaringly about the unequal impact of economic development on different segments of Bangladesh's society. The emergent scenario underscores the need for targeted measures to address economic disparities and improve the standard of living of those who are the most vulnerable in the society.

Conclusion

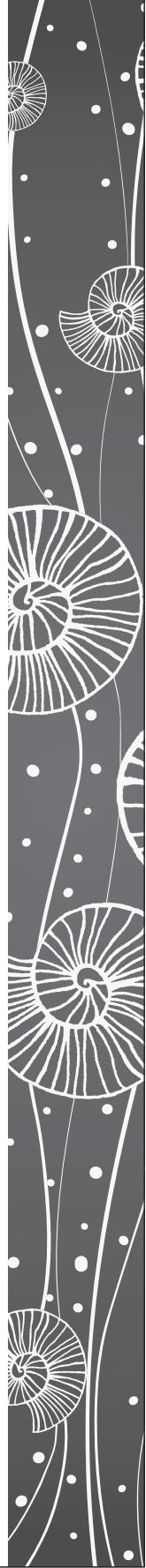
Bangladesh celebrated its 50 years of independence in 2021 and is looking ahead to graduate from LDC group in 2026 and becoming an HMIC by 2041. The prevailing and dominant development success narrative tends to showcase income growth, poverty alleviation, robust export and remittance earnings and improvements in the human development indicators as the main engines of growth and development. However, high growth has been accompanied by increasing multidimensional inequality. Non-inclusivity of the growth process is a consequence of the negligence of the concerns of left behind groups in policy design and implementation, which leads further marginalisation and vulnerabilities for these groups. This creates a vicious cycle. While trend and determinants of inequality in Bangladesh have been widely analysed, how the left behind people who are victims of such trends perceive this has remained a less trodden study area. Extensive sub-national consultations involving left behind groups and marginalised communities' stakeholders which informed this exercise of the Citizen's Platform helped to have a deeper understanding about both the process of marginalisation and how this impacts the disadvantaged groups. Recognition of these groups realities and concrete actions to address the attendance challenges can reserve the current scenario. Only then the prevailing Bangladesh's narrative will be a truly representative one and help translate the development narrative into reality.

The development agenda implemented by the government has not benefitted all citizens equally. The completion of higher education is uneven as disadvantaged households lack the financial means to continue their children's education.

Education stipends are also inadequate to reduce the financial burden of education particularly during these times of rising inflation. Shortages of employment support and social protection, uneven access to quality healthcare and water and sanitation and limited poverty alleviating implications of infrastructure are few of the indicators of the unequal distribution of the gains from the revealed development.

Inefficacy of public institutions affecting the access and quality of public services has also led to this unequal distribution and marginalisation. Quality of public service delivery does not match the increasing amount of public expenditure. Lack of transparency, accountability, corrupt practices and weak implementation of laws are major factors that drive the alternative narrative.

The interests and concerns of left behind groups are not effectively embedded in the delivery of policies as democratic practices are on the decline. Citizen's voices, role of non-state actors and the middle class, civic activism of students and collective community engagement involving the indigenous groups are suppressed by a 'culture of fear' Adding to it is the loss of confidence in local political leadership and institutions which could have upheld the rights and concerns of the left behind.



Bangladesh, in the recent past, has been able to achieve remarkable success in many fields. However, the country's development narrative has been foreshadowed by a number of fault lines that concern an absence of distributive justice in the areas of income and assets, unequal access to public services, and lack of participation in representative institutions. These concerns remain particularly relevant for citizens belonging to the marginalised communities, economically deprived groups, and ethnic, religious and other minorities. Bangladesh, as a signatory of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is committed to 'leaving no one behind' in the country. Thus, addressing the concerns of these communities and citizens is of heightened importance to make development more inclusive and equitable.

To this end, there is a growing need to reexamine and revisit the mainstream Bangladesh development narrative from the perspectives of the disadvantaged groups.

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, between June and October 2022, organised seven subnational level consultations, followed by a national level public hearing where views regarding local level challenges were highlighted, and gaps between political promises and actual delivery by various government agencies were pointed out. Participants at these events came up with concrete suggestions about possible solutions. Issues related to citizens' rights and voices, accountability, and transparency were at the centre of this exercise.

To complement these discussions, several focus group discussions were also held with local media professionals and other stakeholders.

Thus, this exposé of 'Parallel Realities' goes down from the macro narrative to the micro granular experience, capturing the major messages emanating from the people's narratives. This document will hopefully contribute to empowering common citizens and giving their voice national resonance, which will help attain the aspiration of an inclusive Bangladesh with empowered citizenship.

Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

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