



Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh

এসডিজি বাস্তবায়নে নাগরিক প্ল্যাটফর্ম, বাংলাদেশ

CITIZEN'S AGENDA 2023

TOWARDS A DIFFERENT BANGLADESH

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Towards a Different Bangladesh



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Preface

Bangladesh's official development narrative has long been defined by success. However, much of the population remains deprived of development benefits and excluded from decision-making. The present publication, "Citizen's Agenda 2023: Towards a Different Bangladesh", highlights this parallel reality. The volume features eleven policy briefs prepared by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, with the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) as its secretariat. These briefs stem from a two-year (2022–2023) effort involving grassroots consultations across twenty-five districts, including regional dialogues, town hall meetings, perception surveys and a Public Hearing in Dhaka.

The eventful journey leading to the drafting of Citizen's Agenda and involved identification and prioritisation of issues that matter most to disadvantaged communities and to convert these into actionable policy proposals. Eleven such priority areas were selected and organised under three thematic clusters viz. Economic, Social and Governance. Each brief was developed by a dedicated team of experts, all of whom contributed voluntarily. The process was steered by Chairs and Penholder-Experts, and supported by a wider pool of professionals, civic actors and members of the Platform's secretariat.

The policy briefs capture ground realities, sharpened by thematic analysis and evidence, and conclude with specific recommendations. They not only speak to current gaps in policy and implementation but also reflect aspirations for a more inclusive and just Bangladesh. The exercise bears testimony to the potential of collective civic engagement in shaping the country's development pathway.

This publication comes at a moment of heightened urgency in the wake of the student-people uprising in July-August 2025, with brightening prospect of reforms. This volume is more than a repository of knowledge. It is no longer just a collection of ideas—it now stands as a testament in its own right, meant for feeding into a possible Citizen's Manifesto in view of the upcoming national elections.

On this occasion, I would like to extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Mustafizur Rahman for guiding the exercise and undertaking painstaking editorial efforts. Special thanks to Mr Towfiqul Islam Khan, Ms Tarannum Jinan and Mr Rifat Bin Aowlad for their dedicated support and coordination. I am grateful to all the Chairs, Penholder-Experts, team members of the policy briefs, the Core Group and Advisory Committee of the Platform, and the local partner organisations for their valuable contributions.

It is my hope that this collective effort will contribute to strengthening participatory policymaking in Bangladesh and inspire sustained commitment to achieving the promise of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by leaving no one behind.



Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya
Convenor, Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh
and
Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

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Introduction

Background and Context

The Policy Brief exercise of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh brings together four streams of activities which have informed the Platform's manifold initiatives since its foundation in 2016: building SDG-centric partnerships; undertaking civic activism with participation of marginalised communities to give voice to the left behind people and empowering them; generating evidence-based knowledge on issues of concern and interests to the disadvantaged groups by bringing on board academics, experts, civic activists, development practitioners and opinion builders; preparing documents for advocacy work based on views originating from grassroots consultations and articulated through inputs from involved stakeholders; and interacting with relevant people's representatives and policymakers for purposes of raising awareness, policy influencing and policy uptake of the recommended measures to advance the cause of the LNOB communities in an impactful manner. The Policy Brief initiative thus embodies the reason why the Platform has been established in the first place and its core objective of pursuing the concerns of left behind people in the country by bringing together advocacy, knowledge and implementing actors.

This unique initiative of the Platform was implemented with support of the CPD which serves as the Secretariat of the Platform and Platform's partners from across the country under the stewardship of the Core Group and the overall guidance of the Advisory Committee of the Platform.

The argument that informed the Policy Brief initiative was that there is a growing disjuncture between the mainstream narrative as regards Bangladesh's socio-economic development, which by any measure, is impressive, and the distribution of the benefits among the various groups of the population. The objective was thus to ensure that this gap is narrowed and distributive justice is ensured through more equitable share in the country's development. The initiative was intended to give voice, highlight concerns, articulate demands and trigger actions favouring the marginalised and disadvantaged communities who were left behind in the process of Bangladesh's development.

As would be expected, the challenges being faced by the disadvantaged groups are manifold, depending on economic situation, social status, gender dimension, physical and mental challenges being faced, geographical locations and other forms of vulnerabilities. Based on wide-ranging consultations with representatives of grassroots organisations, 11 themes were prioritized where policy interventions and concrete actions were envisaged to generate the most benefits for the marginalised groups. As would be expected, each of the concerned themes had several dimensions. For example, in the area of health many issues were involved including availability of physical infrastructure, price of diagnosis and drugs, financing of health-related costs, building of the needed human resources for the health sector, and others. Through consultations, an attempt was made to identify a particular issue within

the broad theme which, if properly addressed, would lead to most impactful outcomes for the disadvantaged communities. Consultations with disadvantaged communities around the country revealed that reducing out of pocket expenditure will have the most positive impact for the LNOB communities. Thus, one issue in each of the 11 thematic areas was identified through the process of consultations which was then taken up for preparing a dedicated Policy Brief on each of the issues.

These eleven prioritised issues were clustered into three board groups: Economic, Social and Governance. The Economic Cluster included the following issues: Transforming the agriculture sector for an inclusive and diversified economy; Decent employment opportunities for the country's youth; Provision of public utilities and services in the backdrop of unplanned urbanisation; and Ensuring affordable and clean energy for all. The Social Cluster included the followings: Triggers to ensuring quality of primary education; Reducing out of pocket expenditure to improve universal access to quality health care; Promoting universal social protection system; and Dealing with the manifestation of localised vulnerabilities of climate change. The Governance Cluster included the followings: Effective implementations of laws and judicial process for eradicating gender-based violence and discrimination; Access and justice for ethic and religious minorities; and Giving voice to the silent and establishing democratic accountability.

The Process of Preparing the Briefs

Preparation of the Policy Briefs has built on a wide range of activities undertaken by the Platform over a period of two years (2022-2023). Citizen's Platform's various initiatives in this connection included stakeholder dialogues, town hall type meetings, focus group discussions, perception surveys and consultation with the media.

Representatives of grassroots groups from 25 districts participated in the various discussions held in seven different locations across the country. Participants included local activists, members of civil society groups and NGOs, local media as also officials from local government bodies and public service delivery institutions. Local partners of Citizen's Platform played an important role in organising these discussions. They also played an active part in mobilising participants who attended the *People's Hearing* in Dhaka. About 500 representatives of grassroots and non-state and civil society organisations attended this Hearing. Issues prioritised at the local level consultations were presented before high level policymakers, members of Parliament and leading intellectuals, private sector leaders, cultural personalities and opinion-builders. This was also a moment of empowerment for the disadvantaged communities.

It emerged from this exercise that average numbers concealed a large part of the real situation on the ground, and that a significantly large number of citizens and specific communities have continued to remain vulnerable to different risks, which relegated them to the "left

behind” communities in the revealed process of Bangladesh’s economic development. On the other hand, as is known, the *Leave No One Behind* spirit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) requires that economic development be inclusive, and that in attaining the SDGs all citizens should have an equitable share. Consequently, targeted actions are called for in order to address the concerns and advance the interests of the country’s vulnerable citizens and disadvantaged communities. Policy Brief exercise of the Platform was an endeavour in this direction.

11 Policy Briefs were prepared each with a set of concrete recommendations concerning the identified issue, highlighting specific contexts, and articulating concrete actions that were required to address the attendant challenges.

Each of the Policy Briefs was prepared by dedicated team of some of the country’s best experts in the particular area. The Policy Brief Team had an eminent personality as the Chair who led the process of preparing the Brief. A recognised professional served as the Penholder-Expert who prepared the draft with inputs from the members of the team. Each team got together several times, reviewed the background notes from the sub-national discussions and the FGDs, and consulted relevant resource materials. The draft prepared by the designated Pen-holder Expert was revised following further comments and inputs offered by the Chair and Members of the teams and detailed comments by the Platform’s Core Group members. The draft was also shared with Policy Brief Advisory Committee for inputs and suggestions.

Each of the Policy Briefs followed similar structure: background and the context of the concerned issue, a set of proposals which included concrete actions, policy initiatives, and institutional measures to be taken including amendments to laws and regulations, and brief concluding remarks.

One of the distinctive features of the policy brief exercise was that all the involved personalities, numbering about 140, worked on a voluntary basis and generously shared their time, expertise and knowledge which went into the preparation of the Briefs. Thus the exercise itself was a manifestation of civic activism and dedication to the cause of LNOB communities. Their active participation demonstrated that they viewed the SDGs and the interests of the disadvantaged people as important for the country in going forward towards an economically developed, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable future. The *Bangladesh vision 2041* also speak of these aspirations. A rough estimate indicates that, if monetised, the combined time and effort value of all the members of expert teams would be worth a few hundred thousand USD!

Organisation and Implementation of the Policy Brief Exercise

The Policy Brief initiative was led by *Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya*, Convenor of the Platform and *Professor Mustafizur Rahman*, member of the Platform’s Core Group. CPD,

as the Secretariat of the Citizen's Platform, provided all necessary support for the smooth implementation of the initiative. The draft prepared by the designated Penholder Expert was revised following comments and inputs offered by the Chair and Members of the group and Core Committee members. The drafts were also shared with Advisory Committee of the exercise for review and suggestions. The Core Group of the Platform and Advisory Committee of the exercise, with Professor Rehman Sobhan as the Chair, provided overall guidance to the initiative.

Involvement of Local Partner Organisations

Platforms Partners were involved throughout this exercise and in a number of ways: by taking the lead in organising local level consultations providing inputs to the Policy Brief exercise and through participation in the Public Hearing. Partner organisations will help take the initiative forward through advocacy activities around the recommendations articulated in the Policy Briefs.

Dissemination of the Briefs

A number of follow-up activities were planned by the Platform Secretariat. The Policy Briefs were presented at three separate cluster-specific media Briefings. Members of the Platform's Core Group, Chairs of concerned Policy Briefs, and several members of expert teams were present at these briefings. Print and electronic media gave wide coverage to these events which enabled the Platform to take the message and recommendations of the Policy Briefs to a wider audience. This helped raise awareness about issues of interests to the disadvantaged groups whose voice often tend to remain unheard, and their concerns unaddressed, in the process of development.

Once the Briefs were finalised, these were sent to the important groups of stakeholders. Prior to the national elections held on January 7, 2024, these were shared with political parties as inputs to their respective election manifestos. Indeed, the original idea was for representatives of the Platform's Core Group members and Policy Brief teams, led by the Convenor, to meet with leaders of the various political parties and brief them about the recommendations. However, regrettably, due to the emergent situation in the run up to the elections, this was not possible. However, a number of the recommendations put forward in the various Policy Briefs did get reflected in the election manifesto of the ruling party. Once the national elections were over, the Policy Briefs were shared with members of the newly elected government, with a covering letter from the Convenor urging consideration of the Policy Brief proposals for policy uptake.

The Platform Convenor wrote to relevant Ministers seeking appointment to brief them about the Policy Brief initiative and have a discussion about the proposals offered in the Briefs. It is encouraging to note that several Ministers wrote back, appreciating the initiative

undertaken by the Platform. A number of Ministers invited platform representatives to their office to have a discussion. The Convenor and several members of the Core Group and Expert Committees have already met a number of Ministers including the Minister for Housing and Public Works and the State Minister for Commerce. High level officials of the concerned Ministries were also present at these meetings. This is also an opportunity to put on record our sincere appreciation to all of them for their interest, time and for the discussions they had with the Platform members. This consultation is indeed an ongoing process; several other meetings are scheduled to be held over the next weeks. The Platform plans to also meet relevant Chairs and Members of the Parliamentary Standing Committees as part of its programme of advocacy around the Policy Briefs. The idea is to sensitise people's representatives and high-level policymakers about the concerns of the left behind groups. The plan is also to mobilise public opinion around the recommendations where partners of the Platform are expected to take the lead.

The Policy Briefs were also presented before representatives of business organisations and leading entrepreneurs with a view to both raise awareness of the private sector about the issues, and make it interested to invest in areas that address specific challenges that disadvantaged groups are confronted with. A dedicated session was held also with the representatives of development partners to brief them about the exercise and to urge them to align their country programmes with the actions recommended in the Policy Briefs. A number of Ambassadors and heads of development agencies attended this event.

The Platform plans to take up and pursue other follow-up actions to raise awareness about issues and concerns of the LNOB groups, and promote actions recommended in the Policy Briefs.

Going Forward

Policy Brief is not a stand alone initiative of the Citizen's Platform, but a part of a coordinated and integrated effort in pursuit of securing the interests of Bangladesh's disadvantaged communities- making them visible, empowering them, raising awareness about their concerns and ensuring Policy uptake in this backdrop. The Platform plans to continue its efforts in future in alignment with these envisaged tasks where the Policy Briefs will play an important role.

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**Transforming Agriculture for an
Inclusive and
Diversified Economy**

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Background and Context

The spirit of ‘Leave no one behind’, which informs the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), stipulates that issues of concern and interest to the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in society ought to be prioritised in view of attaining the global as well as national goals. The idea is to ensure that no segment of society is excluded from the development process and its positive outcomes. In no sector is this as important and relevant as the agriculture sector. Attainment of many SDGs, not to speak of SDG 2 (zero hunger) and SDG 1 (zero poverty), crucially hinges on the performance of this sector. In the context of developing countries, there is a rich literature that shows that one of the most effective ways to improve the lives of the left behind and marginalised people and those living below the poverty line is to support the growth of the agriculture sector in a way that keeps the concerns and interests of the people engaged in agriculture and living in rural areas at the centre of agricultural transformation.

The agriculture sector broadly includes crops, animal farming, forests and fishing activities in the Bangladesh context. According to de Janvry & Sadoulet (2020), “current wisdom on how to use agriculture for development is that it requires asset building for smallholder farmers, productivity growth in staple foods, an agricultural transformation (diversification of farming systems toward high-value crops) and a rural transformation (value addition through rural non-farm activities linked to agriculture)”.¹ To note, in Bangladesh, about 90 per cent of the farms are small holdings, with land size ranging from 0.5 to 2.5 hectares; more than 50 per cent have at most one acre of land (Agricultural Census, 2022). In view of this, the Policy Brief focuses on issues of interest, particularly to marginal and small farmers and the challenges they face in accessing inputs, production and marketing, and in view of the transition that will need to take place in agriculture for its modernisation and transformation becoming of an upper middle income developing country beyond 2030. It is argued in the Policy Brief that a small-farmer focused agricultural transformation is desirable not only from the perspectives of fairness but also from the vantage point of inclusivity and socio-economic development of Bangladesh going forward. The key objective of the Policy Brief is to identify the underlying factors driving the current state of the agriculture sector in Bangladesh and identify the gaps in policies in view of what is required for agricultural transformation and modernisation, with a view to offer suggestions and recommendations towards developing Bangladesh’s agriculture sector through higher productivity, diversity, resilience, and sustainability. The Policy Brief has kept its focus limited only to the crop sector mainly because of space limitations without denying the fact that non-crop agriculture is no less important from the viewpoint of as the non-crop agriculture has characteristics which are quite unique from the crop sub-sector. This is not to deny the fact that non-crop sub-sectors are equally important and may be more

¹The authors report a strategy referred to as “the agriculture for development sequence” that includes five steps such as asset building, green revolution, agricultural transformation, rural transformation, and structural transformation of using agriculture for development. This strategy is developed based on work done for the IFAD Rural Development Report led by Binswanger (2016), for China by Huang (2016), by BRAC on graduating the ultra-poor out of poverty (Banerjee et al., 2015), for the Gates Foundation by Boettiger et al. (2017), and for the ATAI project (ATAI, 2018).

important in some respects, such as nutrition. The recommendations cover a wide array of policy areas, including fiscal-financial-regulatory initiatives to stimulate investment and entrepreneurship, development of infrastructure, harnessing skills and human resources, incentivising R&D and promoting trade facilitation, standardisation and certification.

Challenges of transforming agriculture for an inclusive and diversified economy

The agricultural sector of Bangladesh has made notable progress over the past years. This is captured in areas of food production, cropping intensity, commercialisation and diversification of the agriculture sector. For example, food grains production tripled to 38.7 million tons in 2020-2021 from 9.8 million tons in 1972 (BBS, 2022). Since 2000, one of the most influential drivers of poverty reduction in Bangladesh has been the agriculture sector, which contributed to reducing poverty by about 90 per cent between 2005 and 2010 (World Bank, 2016). According to the Labour Force Survey 2022, about 45 per cent of the total population is involved in the agricultural sector, indicating that the sector continues to remain the major source of employment generation in the country.

However, this also indicates that productivity of labour in agriculture has been lower compared to the other sectors of the economy. The contribution of agriculture to the country's GDP over the last decade has come down to 11.2 per cent in FY2022-23 from 18.4 per cent in FY2009-10 (Bangladesh Economic Review, 2023; BBS, 2020). The share of households that only do farming has come down to 30.3 per cent in 2013 from 46.5 per cent in 2000, while the share of mixed (farm and non-farm) households has increased to 33.7 per cent from 14.8 per cent during the corresponding period (Sen et al., 2021). The country's population is projected to cross the 190 million mark by 2030, indicating that the importance of agriculture will remain over the foreseeable future. This will create demand for an additional 25 per cent of food grains (Sayed & Haruyama, 2016). Development of the agriculture sector will continue to remain critically important from the perspective of Bangladesh's food security.

To strengthen the agricultural sector, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has taken a number of initiatives that include installing solar-powered irrigation pumps, establishing agriculture information centres, distributing agriculture assistance cards, providing subsidies, imparting training, extending loan facilities, and improving food storage capacities and others.

However, in spite of the aforementioned various initiatives, the agricultural sector has remained mostly undiversified, with the dominance of monocropping (rice). The small and marginal farmers are finding it increasingly difficult to sustain their livelihoods based on prevailing cropping practices, marketing channels and value chains. Going forward, strong backward and forward linkage of agriculture with industry, in a way that secures and safeguards the interests of medium and small farmers, will not only ensure sustainable development of agriculture but also help attain this in an inclusive way. This is not an easy task though. The following sections present some of the key attendant challenges in view of this.

Lack of diversity

Migration and labour shortage: The present trend of rural youth to migrate, permanently or on a seasonal basis, to cities or other regions in search of other and better opportunities has led to a situation where agriculture is gradually being deprived of the human resources they need for modernisation and transformation. This is undermining the sector's potential in areas of technology upgradation, better cropping practices, productivity growth, innovation, and diversification. Large-scale migration of rural youth for overseas job markets also impacts the prospects of agricultural growth. For example, Murakami et al. (2021) report that if a household sends a migrant worker and/or receives remittances, the employment rate of the left-behind members declines.

Awareness and Promotion: Lack of awareness among consumers about the benefits of diversified agri-products militates against entrepreneurs coming up with innovative practices and products and investing in agricultural diversification.

Land fragmentation: Division and sub-division of land holdings, taking place over generations, has resulted in small and unviable land parcels in Bangladesh agriculture. This often limits opportunities for scaling up production, commercialisation and diversification.

Absentee landowners: Absentee land ownership adversely affects the dynamics of the agriculture sector development in two ways: these landowners tend not to take interest in investing in agriculture; they don't have a stake in agricultural-rural development and tend to be against land-use planning, zoning etc.

Lack of innovative technology and knowledge

Access to resources: Limited access to resources such as agricultural credit and finance, climate-resilient quality seeds, fertiliser, and modern agricultural machineries have adverse impact on both agricultural diversification and productivity. Small-scale farmers are particularly impacted. A large proportion of farmers still rely on traditional, low-productivity farming methods and tools. These are mostly small and medium-scale farmers.

Climate change and environmental degradation: Bangladesh has demonstrated commendable success in disaster preparedness by undertaking various initiatives (articulated in the National Adaptation Plan, 2022). However, the changing climate impact scenario and related risks, such as extreme weather events and environmental degradation, result in disruption of cropping practices, reduce production and productivity, reduce viability of commercial crops, and discourage adoption of new varieties and new crops. As is well-known, agriculture is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, such as drought, erratic weather patterns, and floods. Besides, environmental degradation, soil erosion and salinity also affect agricultural productivity and long-term sustainability. This makes the practice of agriculture a challenging enterprise in the Bangladesh context.

Security and safety issues during drought and flash flood: Drought and flash floods occur with little warning, making it difficult both for local farmers and concerned authorities to prepare adequately and respond in time. Lack of adequate security and safety during these periods, both for people and cropping practices, has significant ramifications, which are manifested in crop damage and economic losses, loss of life, damage to homestead and critical infrastructure, health risks, and food and water scarcity, etc.

Weak research-extension linkage: A strong research-extension linkage is necessary to bring the benefits of up-to-date knowledge and modern technology to the doorsteps of farmers. This can stimulate productivity and adoption of best practices and promote the dissemination of knowledge about appropriate technologies and cropping patterns. This is lacking in Bangladesh at present. Corrective actions must be taken to address the situation.

Lack of required skill

Skilled labour: Lack of skilled and appropriately trained workers particularly affects small and medium farmers and undermines efforts to adopt diversified farming practices. Inadequate technical and supervisory support does not allow farmers to go for better agricultural practices, adopt innovative technologies, and have access to needed market information.

Knowledge about harvesting and post-harvesting techniques: Poor post-harvest handling and limited storage facilities lead to significant losses of agricultural products in Bangladesh. Farmers in general, and small farmers in particular, suffer losses in the form of income and food security.

Lack of inclusivity

Market access and information: Market access challenges and lack of real-time information regarding market prices result in a situation whereby the middlemen and intermediaries get the upper hand. More particularly, the small and medium farmers are deprived of their due profit as a result of this. Lack of timely and reliable information about outbursts of diseases and pests also leads to significant crop losses and adds to uncertainties about production and yield.

Gender Inequality: Women, who make up a significant share of the agricultural workforce, often face unequal access to resources, land, credit, and decision-making power. This limits the scope of their potential contribution to agricultural development and the role that they could have played in establishing linkages with markets and industries.

Weak water management: Water scarcity and an inefficient irrigation system have emerged as significant concerns in Bangladesh. Water levels are going down, and surface water retention is relatively low. These are having adverse impacts on agricultural productivity, particularly in regions dependent on rain-fed agriculture.

Lack of appropriate government policy

Policy and institutional barriers: Lack of appropriate policies and institutional framework hinder the growth of an inclusive and diversified agriculture in Bangladesh. For example, there is hardly any support to help farmers maintain food safety and quality standards for processed foods, which is necessary to enter the globally competitive market. Trade barriers and policies that support certain crops and not others militate against the commercialisation and diversification of agriculture and limit access to international markets.

Limited research and development: Investment in agricultural research and development has remained very low in Bangladesh. Consequently, this has adverse implications for innovative practices and for the adoption of appropriate technologies. This has discouraged the introduction of new technologies, crop varieties and sustainable practices.

Risks and uncertainties: As is widely recognised, agriculture is inherently risky, with factors such as environmental changes, natural disasters, droughts and floods, pests and diseases and price volatility affecting farmers' output and undermining their livelihood opportunities. Absence of crop insurance and risk management tools discourages farmers from investing in agricultural diversifications where both risks and rewards tend to be high.

Insecure land tenure: A large part of land holding in Bangladesh is cultivated under the tenurial system. The prevailing land tenure system in Bangladesh, with its embedded different terms of vulnerabilities and uncertainties, discourages long-term investment in agriculture and limits willingness of tenant farmers to experiment with diversified cropping systems.

Inadequate rural infrastructure: Inadequate rural infrastructure, including roads, irrigation systems, cold storage, packing machines, air cargo, and cold chain transportation facilities, impede efficient movement of agricultural produce and add to post-harvest losses. Lack of proper processing facilities and value-addition opportunities undermines the prospect of introducing new agri-products, limits the availability of diversified agri-products in the market, and adversely impacts the functioning of the overall value chain.

Procurement and pricing policy: Absence of predictable and well-designed procurement policies including procurement process has adverse implications for farmers in terms of income insecurity, and also discourages investment. The interests of not only farmers but also consumers, as also the overall interest of the agricultural sector, are negatively affected by this.

Land distribution policy: Bangladesh did not go through any meaningful land and tenurial reforms to speak of. Fragmentation of land ultimately results in landlessness which has emerged as a common and continuing feature in the Bangladesh agriculture. Marginalised farmers are impacted the most and are compelled to join the ranks of agri-workers as a result. This accentuates poverty and food insecurity and leads to loss and lack of livelihood opportunities.

The challenges mentioned above which undermine the development of Bangladesh's agricultural sector are interconnected and often tend to reinforce each other. To note, one study suggests that by addressing the key agriculture sector constraints, India could potentially increase agricultural contribution to the country's GDP by USD 175 billion and also increase farmers' incomes by about 85 per cent by 2025 (Goyal et al., 2017). This is an indication of the potential gains that Bangladesh could also have if the attendant challenges which were mentioned above could be appropriately addressed.

The next section offers a number of recommendations, for policy uptake and implementation, towards a diversified agriculture in Bangladesh, with a strong linkage with industries.

Recommendations

Transformation and modernisation of Bangladesh's agriculture sector will bring wide ranging benefits to the farmers as also for the country. These will reduce labour time, give higher yield, ensure efficient use of resources (land, labour, capital), create job opportunities, increase income, reduce poverty and vulnerability, increase food safety, and bring down malnutrition. Modernisation of agriculture will help propel the economy en route to the upper middle-income journey (Boettiger et al., 2017).² Such a transformation will call for effective collaboration among all involved partners: farmers, government, private sector, NGOs and other non-state actors, research community, and data producers. Adequate investment will need to be made in support of the cause of modernisation and diversification of agriculture. In view of the challenges identified above, a set of recommendations has been presented below, which are grouped under three broad categories: diversification, inclusiveness, and governance. The idea is to attain the goal of a commercialised, productive, and industry-linked agriculture sector development in Bangladesh which will be both modern and inclusive.

Diversification

Emphasis will need to be put on productivity-driven diversification. This will call for interventions in areas of agro-practices, skills, technology and innovation. By addressing the concerns in these areas, farmers, more specifically, small farmers, will be able to generate more and sustainable income, meet consumer demand and improve market access.

Skills development

Undertake skill-needs assessment and take measures for capacity development: Conduct a comprehensive skill-needs assessment to identify the knowledge sets required for different segments along the agricultural value chain. Such an assessment will help design targeted training programmes in view of the needs of the agriculture sector. Capacity of farmers

²The same study reports that many countries, e.g., Brazil, China, and Vietnam, have been able to double the value addition of their respective agriculture sectors in about two decades of initiating their policies towards agriculture sector transformation. Many other countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America have initiated this transformative journey only more recently.

will need to be built through training programmes, workshops and knowledge-sharing initiatives to encourage them to adopt modern agricultural practices. Farmers will need to be informed about best farming practices, crop management and post-harvest handling to maximise yields and preservation of quality. Geographical specificities ought to be considered in the delivery of services to farmers. Improve the capacity of the agencies' staff under the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) through proper training to enable them to provide necessary extension and advisory services to farmers. This should be done on a regular basis. Such training programmes should be informed by scientific knowledge and a deeper understanding as regards the effects of policies on intended recipients. Inter-ministerial coordination and collaboration must be strengthened.

Adoption and Adaptation of Modern Methods and Technology

Help adopt climate-smart agriculture practices: To reduce climate change risks and vulnerabilities, the NAP 2022 has set six goals, the second of which is to develop climate-resilient agriculture for food, nutrition, and livelihood security.³ Considering this, there is a need to promote climate-smart agricultural practices, e.g., efficient water management, sustainable farming techniques, climate-resilient agricultural practices and technologies to build resilience against the impacts of climate change. Initiatives are required to avert, avoid and arrest environmental degradation. Traditional knowledge should be seen as an important resource in this connection.

Small-scale technological solutions: Promote small-scale technical solutions to guide the ongoing mechanisation of Bangladesh agriculture. In this backdrop, consider the local context, e.g., use of large, combined harvesters which are not only very expensive but also technologically not feasible in most parts of the country. Appropriate technologies must be promoted through policies, targeted subsidies (if necessary) and government support. Government should put in place measures and incentives to promote group purchases and cooperatives, leasing and rental arrangements, markets for used equipment, and partnerships between NGOs and agricultural organisations. Local manufacturing and assembly plants should be encouraged to produce small-scale and cost-effective technology.

Support the adoption of modern methods: Adoption and adaptation of appropriate, modern technologies should be incentivised. Initiatives will need to be taken to encourage the uptake of high-yielding crop varieties and drought and flood-tolerant seed varieties. Adopt integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices to manage pests and diseases in a sustainable and environmentally friendly manner.

Take initiatives in support of local production of agricultural machineries: Small-scale manufacturing and assembling of agro-machineries and equipments will stimulate rural economy and strengthen agriculture-industry linkages. This will also help in terms of

³ Goal 2 includes (i) promoting extension of climate-smart agriculture, (ii) developing climate-resilient fisheries, aquaculture and livestock, (iii) managing sustainable agro-inputs and transformative value chains, and (iv) strengthening extension services for agriculture, fisheries and livestock.

import substitution; help reduce import costs and make agri-equipments more affordable to farmers.

Innovation

Promote agricultural innovation: The government should create platforms to promote networking and interactive learning with the participation of farmers, input suppliers, manufacturers, traders, researchers, extension officers, government officials, NGOs and civil society organisations. Ensure that the needed extension services, technical support, and training are provided to farmers who undertake contract farming. Take advantage of digital technology: send SMS to raise awareness about improved agricultural practices, innovative technologies, and market information. Introduce water control methods to help cultivate land during the dry season. Motivate farmers to use natural/organic fertilisers. Help small and medium farmers adopt better storage and transportation facilities to reduce post-harvest losses and conserve product quality.

Introduce diversified and multiple cropping systems: Provide incentives in the form of subsidies and financial support to farmers for adopting diversified cropping systems. Promote commercial cultivation of cash crops such as sugarcane, jute and other crops for export to foreign markets. Invest in the marketing of agricultural products to strengthen competitiveness in the global market. Promote multiple cropping. Introduce short-duration rice varieties to free land for cultivation for additional crops, particularly high-value items such as potatoes and onions, between rainy season and dry season rice crops. Promote awareness among farmers about the benefits of going for crop diversification, taking into cognisance the advantages of the local agro-ecological-geographical systems.

Ensure that small farmers have access to finance and incentives

Ensure that farmers, especially smallholders, have easy access to credit and financial services to raise their capacity to invest in modern inputs, equipment and infrastructure. Arrange short-, medium- and long-term loans, as required, for farmers to be able to address risks. Introduce insurance schemes to protect farmers against crop failures, natural disasters, and other risks which could result in financial losses. Provide incentives and recognise the success of small-scale farmers who perform well and, maintain high-quality of products and comply with good standards on a consistent basis. Undertake an awareness raising campaign to sensitise farmers and general public about the consequences loss of agricultural land and the long-term value of retaining agricultural land.

Ensure coordination in the value chain: Take measures to strengthen vertical coordination by promoting collaboration between different actors in the value chain (from primary producers to consumers). For example, link farmers to supermarkets directly. Introduce the 'Gucchogram' concept through union parishads. Focus on vertical expansion (backward and forward linkages) and strengthen horizontal coordination (between actors at the same level).

Discourage rural-urban migration: Design a medium-term strategy to reduce youth migration from rural to urban areas by creating job opportunities in the rural non-agricultural sector. Create jobs in agro-based rural services.

Raise awareness about climate-related risks: Educate farmers about climate-induced risks. Raise awareness about the impacts of extreme weather events, including droughts, erratic weather patterns, floods, etc. Disseminate knowledge about safe cultivation methods that reduce risk. Take measures to strengthen local institutions and promote community and group-based approaches to promote location-specific cropping culture and crop varieties in climate stress-prone areas (Khanam, 2021).

Inclusivity

Inclusivity is geared toward reducing income disparities between small farmers and large farmers. For this, targeted measures are needed to enable small-scale farmers and low-income rural households to access essential services and improve their standard of living. Recommendations for inclusion of small farmers for an inclusive and diversified economy are the followings:

Ensure access to information and resources

Ensure access to quality seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, and other agricultural inputs for small farmers. Ensure that farmers have easy access to government-provided information related to incentives, weather forecasts, best agricultural practices, and appropriate technology, among others. Develop and strengthen market information systems to provide farmers with real-time data on demand and price trends. Ensure accuracy and accessibility of the weather forecasts to farmers through the weather department. Provide farmers with information about consumer preferences, global market and price trends, and help them align their production processes and cycles with market needs. Take advantage of digital technology for this.

Ensure gender inclusivity

In extending support to farmers, keep the needs of women farmers at the center of focus to ensure that they have equal access to resources, information, and training.

Take measures to guarantee an appropriate level of income for marginal farmers

The government may take the following steps in view of this: (i) Establish minimum support price for various agricultural commodities to ensure that farmers receive minimum guaranteed price for their products; (ii) Maintain buffer stocks of essential agricultural commodities to stabilise prices and forestall sharp price fluctuations. Government should release foodgrains from stocks during times of scarcity to minimise price volatility; (iii) Calibrate procurement targets based on production partners. Enhance procurement to stabilise prices during bumper crop years. Establish systems to disseminate reliable and timely price information to farmers as regards when and where to sell their produce, and (iv) Encourage the formation of Farmer/Producer Organisations and Cooperatives to empower

small and marginal farmers to collectively negotiate better prices for their produce and access government support programmes.

Ensure market access and establish linkages

Facilitate access to markets by farmers and buyers, including agro-processing companies, exporters, and retailers, through improved market infrastructure and information systems. Promote linkages with agribusinesses and retailers for both large and small farmers. Help farmers' associations establish strong market linkages to reduce dependence on intermediaries and ensure better prices for their produce. Develop a sustainable supply-demand chain to ensure fair prices to growers and consumers. Develop local and niche markets for unique and special agricultural products. For this, help establish collaboration between the private sector and agricultural organisations. Government's tariff policies and fiscal interventions must be guided by concerns about sustainability of agriculture, food security, climate impact mitigation and agricultural modernisation.

Governance and Policy

Policy reforms

Review and update agricultural policies and regulations to create an enabling environment for the development of the agriculture sector in a way that strengthens its backward and forward linkages with industries. Learn from past experience and mistakes (some of the learnings from the past have been noted in the proceeding sections). Towards this (a) make rental services affordable to small farmers; a dedicated service provider may be identified for this whose operations will be regulated in a way that the provider is not able to charge unjustifiably high price for the services; (b) foster collaboration between the government and private sector to drive agricultural development and investment in modern farming technologies; (c) initiate appropriate policies and support for representatives of small farmers to participate in agro-related decision-making processes and ensure their inclusion in value chains decision; (d) take measures in support of technological and institutional innovations e.g., recognition of quality via third-party certification which would ensure higher prices for good quality products; (e) put in place proper incentives for farmers to adopt quality-enhancing technology; (f) implement land reform policies to improve land tenure security, reduce land fragmentation, and encourage cultivation in economic efficiency-wise viable plots; and (g) promote small farmer-friendly contract farming policies as against farming that serves the interests of large corporations. Regulations and policies should be put in place as regards land use, tenancy rights, and taxation to address the absentee landownership issues. Measures should be taken to encourage absentee landowners to become more engaged in land management and with the affairs of the local communities.

Support food safety and quality standard compliance

Assist farmers to meet food safety and quality standards so that they are able to access higher-value markets and consumers. Promote adherence to international quality standard and certification to ensure that Bangladesh's agricultural products meet global market

requirements and standards. Raise farmers' awareness about sanitary and phytosanitary requirements, technical barriers, and standards and certification.

Review public procurement policy

Review public procurement policies so that a diverse range of agricultural products is included in institutional food procurement programmes. Sustainable Public Procurement (SPP) policy of Bangladesh provides practical information on how to adopt sustainable public procurement and select the most sustainable procurement decision. The policy should be implemented with due priority.

Invest in research and innovation

Invest in agricultural research and development for the introduction of new technologies, crop varieties, and sustainable practices. Raise the amount of investment in research and development concerning high-value crops and products with export potential, with a view to diversifying agricultural production and stimulating export earnings. Give more attention to agricultural research on the production of high-quality seed, particularly as regards the development of climate-resilient cropping methods and technology.

Put in place effective communication

To mitigate adverse implications of drought and flash floods, the government should do the followings: (i) inform farmers about the associated risks and educate them on how to respond to various types of natural disasters such as flash flood; (ii) take proactive measures including putting in place early warning systems, community preparedness, robust emergency response plans, and sustainable land and water management practices; and (iii) to reduce potential damage to crops during natural disasters, have systems put in place to issue timely alerts and warnings through various channels, including emergency alerts on mobile devices, radio, television and social media.

Concluding Observations

The importance of the agriculture system for the Bangladesh economy cannot be overemphasised. Livelihoods of a large share of the population critically hinge on the sector despite the sector's falling share in the GDP. Bangladesh's agriculture sector is at present facing many challenges, but it also has a lot of opportunities. To ensure its continued contribution to the economy, it is crucial to address the challenges the sector is currently facing and reap the opportunities. In this backdrop, the Policy Brief has suggested a number of concrete measures going forward, keeping in perspective the concerns and interests of particularly the marginal farmers.

As the Policy Brief has pointed out, some of the key concerns were related to fragmentation of land, mono-cropping and lack of agri-diversification, lack of skills and training, adoption of appropriate technology, price volatility and uncertainty, and lack of awareness among many farmers about modern cropping practices and inputs, market opportunities, both

domestic and global, and weak backward and forward linkages with industry. Small farmers are particularly vulnerable because of their low capacity to deal with climate change impacts, natural disasters, lack of knowledge about risk-mitigating tools and tenurial uncertainties.

Addressing all these challenges will require a comprehensive approach, including undertaking policy reforms, higher investment in research and technology, effective knowledge dissemination, and capacity building of farmers and agri-entrepreneurs to mitigate risks and adopt innovative practices. In this regard, a concerted effort will be needed on the part of institutional agents such as governments, international and bilateral development partners, NGOs and the private sector. Cooperative actions will need to be incentivised to reduce the role of intermediaries towards direct marketing by farmers. Modernisation and commercialisation will need to be incentivised through training and awareness-raising programmes, agri-extension services, the introduction of cropping insurance and by helping farmers to link with the market. Tenurial reform and procurement policies ought to keep the interests of small-scale farmers so that agriculture transformation is both productive and inclusive.

This Policy Brief, under three broad categories (i.e., diversification, inclusiveness, and governance), has come up with recommendations to overcome these challenges and transform agriculture into an inclusive and diversified segment of the economy. It is hoped that by implementing the recommendations, tailored to particular contexts and localities, farm productivity can be improved, sustainability enhanced, food security ensured, employment and livelihoods opportunities expanded, and global markets accessed. In all these, the interests of small farmers must inform the policies and initiatives of both governments and all concerned stakeholders. Higher productivity will also release land resources for non-crop agriculture practices in agriculture such as livestock, poultry and fisheries. These activities will also create opportunities for employment of rural youth and the unemployed and landless. *An inclusive and diversified agriculture has the potential to be a key driver of Bangladesh's long-term sustainable economic growth and help Bangladesh meet its SDG aspirations, by leaving no one behind.*

2

Providing Decent Employment for Youth in view of Domestic and Overseas Markets

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Background and Context

Bangladesh's demographic landscape is characterised by a large young population, which offers both significant opportunities and confronts the country with formidable challenges. As is widely recognised, the country's performance in terms of many socio-economic indicators has been quite impressive. However, cross-country experience shows that economic growth does not necessarily translate into more and better jobs, particularly for the poor, the disadvantaged, and those in danger of falling behind. This is what has been observed in the case of Bangladesh as well. Despite the country's strong economic performance, concerns such as lack of enough job opportunities, particularly among the youth, access to limited number of decent jobs, and lack of skilled human resources have continued to remain persistent.

The above underpins the crucial need for focused initiatives to address the country's emergent labour market challenges. The tasks are twofold: the economy must produce jobs for the increasing number of young people, and it has to ensure that labour market participants have the required skill sets that meet the demands of the workplace. In view of this, the Policy Brief draws attention to some of the critical attendant challenges and offers a number of concrete suggestions to address those. The areas cover high youth unemployment and underemployment, the nature of overseas employment, the presence of the dominant informal sector with a lack of decent jobs, low female labour force participation, widespread vulnerable employment, skills mismatch, and the challenges originating from the evolving landscape of the future of work. The Brief comes up with a number of concrete recommendations, keeping in perspective the needs of the young people belonging to the marginalised and disadvantaged communities. In dealing with the challenges, the Brief has drawn lessons from successful strategies and policies pursued by other countries. The recommendations encompass a holistic and actionable approach to reshaping Bangladesh's labour market landscape, covering a wide range of areas: aligning education with labour market demands, embedding formal sector attributes to the informal sector, addressing overseas migration challenges, ensuring decent working conditions for labour market participants and attracting foreign direct investments (FDIs) and promoting entrepreneurship. The Brief recognises that needs of disadvantaged youth call for special attention, particularly if SDG-8, Decent Jobs, is to be attained by leaving no one behind. This Policy Brief can serve as a call to action, urging stakeholders to collaborate and align their efforts towards fostering a dynamic labour market capable of harnessing the demographic dividend that Bangladesh's young population promises.

In order to deal with Bangladesh's labour market challenges and address the requirements of providing decent work, with inclusivity and in a comprehensive manner, actions will need to be taken to deal with a number of areas of concern:

- High Youth Unemployment and Underemployment
- High Proportion of Youth 'Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET)'
- Challenges facing Overseas Employment

- Dominant Informal Sector and Lack of Decent Jobs
- Low Female Labor Force Participation
- Prevalence of Vulnerable Employment
- Skills Mismatch and Behavioural Bias
- The Future of Work and Attendant Challenges

High Youth Unemployment and Underemployment

Bangladesh has one of the world's highest numbers of people in the age cohort of 18-29 years. This demographic composition presents formidable challenges as also many opportunities. Indeed, the labour market is where the battle for the country's development will be won or lost. Approximately 105 million people, or about 62 per cent of the total population of Bangladesh, are aged between 15 and 59 years, the working-age population. About 47.4 million young adults belong to the age group between 15 and 29 years. This age group accounts for approximately 46 per cent of the total labour force. It is important to note that seven million young people have entered the country's labour force in the past as many years alone. Creating employment opportunities for these young women and men poses enormous challenges for the country; it is also indicative of the prospective demographic dividend that the country could reap and the significant contribution to the country's economic development that the young people could make.

In 2022, the unemployment rate among youth in Bangladesh was 10.2 per cent, significantly higher than the national average rate of 3.6 per cent. This speaks of the nature of the Bangladesh labour market, where young people's difficulties in finding jobs are disproportionately higher. There is also the problem of underemployment. This is identified as a condition in which individuals either work fewer hours than they would like to or are employed in jobs and positions that do not fully use their skills and qualifications.

High Share of Youth who are 'Not in Employment, Education, or Training (NEET)'

Approximately 37.1 million people in the country belong to the NEET category. About 27.0 per cent of the country's total youth population belongs to the NEET group. There is also a stark gender disparity in this backdrop- nearly ninety per cent of these young people are female. This significant gender gap is another reason for concern.

Overseas Employment Challenges

In the context of Bangladesh, overseas employment is an important area of youth employment, particularly for young people with low skills and from disadvantaged groups. At present, about 7.5 million Bangladeshi migrants are working in many countries of the world. The majority of these are young people, predominantly male, but also an increasing number of females in recent times. Over the last three years alone more than two and a half million people went overseas for jobs. These mostly low-skilled workers face many

difficulties, and their earnings are also way lower than those of their peers from some of the other developing countries.

Cost of Migration: The substantial cost associated with migration is a significant barrier for migrant workers. However, they have no other way than to bear the burden. The expenses include recruitment fees, visa fees, medical examination fees, travel expenses, and very high commissions charged by the recruiting agencies.

Fraudulent Practices: Fraudulent activities associated with migration are common and widespread in Bangladesh. This is a major source of worry for prospective migrants. Unscrupulous recruiting agencies often employ deceptive methods, deceiving job-seekers with false promises about employment opportunities, working conditions and salaries. The victims are often financially ruined; they are harassed and jailed, and they remain helpless in foreign countries. Sometimes, they are compelled to engage in illegal and hazardous work.

Contract Substitution: Contract substitution is quite prevalent, whereby the terms, conditions and circumstances of work are changed once the worker arrives in the destination country. Both recruiting agents and prospective employers are involved in this. Workers often find that there is a significant difference between what was promised and what they end up with in terms of the nature of jobs, the wages they are given, and the hours they have to work.

Living and Working Conditions: For many Bangladeshi migrant workers, living and working conditions in destination countries are very harsh. These workers often have to endure shabby living conditions with poor sanitation, and their access to healthcare tends to be highly limited. These young people are having to spend the best years of their lives in depressing and deplorable conditions.

Very Large Informal Sector and Lack of Decent Jobs

The 7th Fifth Year Plan projected that about 12.9 million additional jobs would be created over the FY 2016-20 period, including about 2 million job opportunities abroad. However, the actual number turned out to be far less. Many of the employment opportunities that were created were not decent jobs. The COVID-19 pandemic of the recent past made the situation even worse. There is a significant gap between the demographic dynamics and the availability of suitable employment opportunities. Also, research findings suggest that employment elasticity of GDP growth has slowed down in recent years.

As of 2022, according to the BBS figures, the informal economy employed about 85 per cent of the labour force. Non-agriculture sectors employed nearly three-fifths of the informal workers. More than 90 per cent of young people work in the informal sector, many of whom are self-employed or are involved in unpaid family work. While the informal economy does provide some livelihood opportunities, these tend to be mostly in low-paid jobs and without any old-age benefits. These workers lack social safety net support, employment stability and legal recognition. Some have to work in hazardous and dangerous conditions; many of whom are children and women.

Low Female Labor Force Participation

When it comes to employment, a large number of women face additional difficulties and challenges. These include, but are not limited to, the followings: a lack of infrastructure to facilitate and support women's employment, e.g., daycare facilities near women's workplaces for working mothers; absence of safe and women-friendly transportation; workplace violence against women; discrimination in terms of wages for the same jobs; lack of upward mobility. Despite the recent rise in female labour force participation rate in Bangladesh, it continues to remain at low levels and significantly below the global average.

More than 90 per cent of female youth in the labour market worked in the informal sector; this was about 10 per cent higher than their male cohort. The female unemployment rate is more than double than that of men. Support to raise female labour force participation is therefore critically important for reducing gender disparity in the labour market and for inclusive labour force participation aligned with the LNOB spirit.

Prevalence of Labour Market Vulnerabilities

Many Bangladeshi youths are forced into vulnerable and precarious employment. Workers in informal sector often lack job security, labour rights, social safety, and decent salaries and wages (ILO, 2020). The widespread prevalence of vulnerable employment impedes social and economic mobility of the youth, often resulting in lack of inter-generational mobility. Inadequate labour rights protection, lack of job security measures and an absence of job satisfaction exacerbate the difficulties faced by many in the workforce. Workers in the informal sector, in particular, are vulnerable to exploitative practices due to lack of enforcement, absence of legal safeguards and lack of formal job contracts in the labour market.

Skill Mismatch and Behavioural Differences

Skill mismatch in Bangladesh's labour market is widespread and growing. There is a large a gap between knowledge and skills attained through education and those that are actively sought after in the labour market. University graduates are more likely to pursue professional careers, *but only in certain jobs*. Many graduates from top institutions prefer not to work in the manufacturing sector. The difficulty of finding workers with the necessary skills locally often forces firms to recruit workers from abroad. This is particularly seen in export-oriented sectors where many businesses hire foreign workers because of acute shortages of professionals with required skills. This not only raises their production costs but also costs the economy valuable foreign exchange, not speak of lost job opportunities for local youth. The mismatch between skills of young job seekers and the needs of the labour market is emerging as a major reason for rising youth unemployment, particularly among the educated youth. Young people do not have access to appropriate and marketable skills by the prevailing education system, which causes a mismatch between supply and demand for jobs. A large number of educated youth are busy preparing and applying for government jobs, but the number of such jobs is somewhat limited. Many educated youths are found to be unwilling to work in the sales and services sector, where entry-level jobs are relatively

more available. There is an urgent need to address this gap, with initiatives to be taken by both the government and the private sector.

The Future of Work

The workplace and the nature of future employment are changing dramatically around the world. Various forces are reshaping it, ranging from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market, technological advancement and the rise of artificial intelligence to the impact of climate change on economies and jobs. These have given rise to an increasing demand for new hard and soft skills. Proficiencies in such areas as computer literacy, IOT, troubleshooting in IT-related areas, critical thinking, and language skills are becoming increasingly sought-after in the job market. While these have implications for all, young job seekers are particularly affected. Many young people were adversely affected by the pandemic. Their employment, education, and training were interrupted by the pandemic.

Since the youth will make up the majority of Bangladesh's future workforce, it is important that they have the competencies to be able to meet the demands of the future of work. The emerging needs will have to be catered to through skills development, encouraging lifelong learning, upskilling, and reskilling. Young people will need support to be able to prepare for the longer-term transformative trends such as the digital revolution and green transition. Bangladesh's economy will be resilient and its development sustainable only if the youth capacities are properly harnessed and developed.

Recommendations

Align Education System with Labour Market Needs

To address the labour market needs, a number of initiatives were taken by the government till date. The National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) was established as a significant player to cater to the skills development needs of the youth. Besides, the Skills for Employment Investment Program (SEIP), also focuses on enhancing employability of the youth. The government is also set to launch the Economic Acceleration and Resilience for NEETs (EARN) initiative, with WB funding, to reduce the youth NEET rate to 15 per cent by FY2025 and below 5 per cent by FY2031. However, alignment of the education system with the labour market needs in Bangladesh requires a comprehensive approach that considers the current and future demands of the job market.

- Implement regular skills gap assessment, collaborate with industries to identify emerging job market requirements, and align the relevant curricula accordingly.
- Encourage universities to introduce flexible, industry-relevant courses and incentivise the establishment of strong ties between academia and industries and businesses in the form of regular exchanges, internships and job placement programmes.
- Universities may consider adopting the COOP model, in place in many countries, with a view to blend classroom-based education with practical work experience.

- Concerned authorities should explore how the current TVET system could learn from and be remodelled after the Dual Education System of Germany, which blends vocational education with on-the-job training. The German system helps prepare a skilled workforce which is able to meet the shifting demands of the industrial sector.
- Put in place a dedicated support programme for NEET youths who lack pre-qualification requirements for TVET institutions because of dropping out of school. Take advantage of the aforementioned World Bank-supported EARN programme to address the attendant challenges.
- Provide scholarships and financial incentives to students from marginalised background to ensure equitable access to quality education and vocational training.
- Create an ecosystem approach to skills-to-employment transition. Incentivise prospective employers to provide apprenticeship opportunities to job-seekers with the help of fiscal-financial support measures.

Address Challenges Associated with Overseas Migration

The Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) provides short pre-departure training programmes for prospective migrant workers. Wages Earners' Welfare Fund was created to extend support to migrant workers. However, the quality of training and skills-upgradation of migrant workers and the support they receive leave much scope for improvement.

- Enact and strictly enforce stringent regulations to oversee the work of recruitment agencies to protect the rights of migrant workers.
- Negotiate bilateral agreements with destination countries to ensure fair treatment, standardised contracts and access to legal recourse for the migrant workers.
- BMET needs to plan, design and implement skills development and training programmes for potential migrants in line with emerging demands in major destination countries. For this, a thorough and comprehensive overseas jobs demand survey should be undertaken with the help of experts and labour market specialists.
- Either redesign the Wage Earners' Welfare Fund or develop a migrant workers' welfare trust fund so that it has the capacity to provide effective support to migrant workers, financial assistance, legal assistance, and healthcare benefits for Bangladeshi workers abroad. The mandate could be similar to the Philippines' Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA).
- Establish a “Migration Resource Center” in major labour-sending regions for legal counselling, remittance services and others, similar to Sri Lanka's Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE).

- Put in place a system of reskilling and upskilling of long-term migrant workers during their home-country visits and between different overseas jobs.

Address Informal Sector Challenges

While some parts of the informal sector could be brought under a formal structure, it has to be kept in mind that a large part of the informal sector will continue to remain informal over the foreseeable future. To formalise online/digital informal businesses, the government has introduced the Digital Business Identification (DBI) Number and has set up a digital registration portal and app where online informal businesses can apply for a DBI. This has created an opportunity to monitor activities in this particular segment of the labour market and ensure that the interests of concerned entities are safeguarded.

The task at hand is to raise the quality of work and create a decent work environment in the informal sector. No doubt, transitioning from the informal sector to the formal economy will enhance job security and provide social protection to job market participants. This will involve the offer of incentives and benefits to promote formalisation. At the same time, measures will need to be put in place to secure and safeguard the interests of informal market participants.

- Similar to the DBI, provide unique business identification number to informal businesses, which will help businesses gain access to formal banking services, promote financial inclusion and also help the government with fiscal mobilisation. At the same time, this will help monitor and ensure accountability with respect to labour market practices in the informal sector.
- Launch public awareness campaigns highlighting the advantages of obtaining a DBI and business registration. In this regard, emphasise the ease of doing business, access to credit, and legal recognition that come with formalisation.
- Incentivise formalisation and ensure that labour market participants are able to enjoy the benefits of formal sector gradually.

Promote Entrepreneurship

The government has launched the “Startup Bangladesh” initiative to support and fund startups, drawing inspiration from the Indian government’s “Startup India” initiative. This initiative has the potential to expand opportunities for youth employment by promoting youth entrepreneurship and start-ups. However, the remit of its activities needs to be expanded to provide more comprehensive support and facilitate access to mentors and investors.

- Establish a National Entrepreneurship Fund to provide direct grants and, encourage equity investment, and support mentorship for startups. This may be modelled after Singapore’s “Startup SG Equity” programme.
- Encourage public-private partnerships to create innovation hubs. This may be modelled after successful entrepreneurial ecosystems such as the ones in Silicon Valley and Bengaluru in India.

Promote ICT and High-Tech Sectors

Fostering innovation, investing funds in the required infrastructure and imparting training to the workforce are all part of promoting ICT and High-Tech sectors. Indeed, these are the sectors where a large part of the future jobs will be created. Initiatives under the “Digital Bangladesh” programme aim to advance the interests of information and communication technology (ICT) and provide digital services. While some progress has been made in attaining the objectives, these fall far short of the expected goals.

- Encourage effective collaboration between government, academia and private sector to advance the interests of the ICT and High-Tech sectors. Make targeted investments in Research and Development (R&D) to promote and foster the growth of the country’s high-tech industry.
- Incorporate coding and digital literacy into early childhood education to build the workforce of the future.
- Design a comprehensive plan to develop the needed human resources equipped with necessary skills and innovative capacities, which will be aligned with the demands of the 4IR and the 5IR.

Agricultural Modernisation

Modern agro-processing and agribusiness ventures and investments to raise agricultural productivity can lead to significant employment opportunities in farming, agro-processing marketing, and distribution. In recent years, a number of initiatives have been taken, such as the “Krishi Digital Platform”, which is geared to provide digital services to farmers. Low-cost credit financing facilities for the agro-processing industry are being provided by the Bangladesh Bank.

Although about two-fifths of Bangladesh’s labour force is employed in agriculture, labour productivity remains low. On the other hand, there are significant opportunities to create employment through modernising agriculture, strengthening agro-industry linkage, promoting efficient marketing systems and by supporting various rural services. There is a need for concerted efforts and greater investment to realise the potential opportunities of modernisation and commercialisation of agriculture. In fine, initiatives are needed to make agriculture a profitable enterprise for entrepreneurs, farmers and investors so that more decent jobs are created in the sector.

- Invest in rural infrastructure building, including those that support the establishment of backward and forward industries.
- Establish storage facilities to reduce post-harvest losses.
- Expand access to credit for agribusiness entrepreneurs and put in place insurance programmes for small-scale farmers.

- Adopt precision farming technologies using the Internet of Things (IoT) to promote the marketing of agricultural and aquaculture products similar to the 'e-Choupal' of India.

Address Gender Disparity in Labor Force Participation

- Addressing cultural and social barriers is crucial to eliminating gender disparity in labour force participation. To break social taboos, the government, in collaboration with the media and NGOs, should launch awareness campaigns and community engagement programmes to change perceptions about the participation of women in the workforce.
- Implement family-friendly policies such as flexible working hours and daycare facilities to enable women to balance work and family life.
- Invest in women's education and vocational training, more particularly in fields traditionally dominated by men, to empower them with in-demand skills. For example, India's "Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter" campaign aims to improve the education and skills of girls, thereby enhancing their employability. Bangladesh can think of something along similar lines.
- Ensure that security and rights of migrant female workers are secured. Negotiate and sign agreements with appropriate authorities in destination countries to address their concerns and safeguard interests and safety.
- Scholarships and residential facilities should be extended to young women so that they are able to go for vocational training and other training programmes to enhance their employability and upgrade their competencies.
- Implement and enforce strong legislative measures and safeguard against workplace discrimination and harassment of women.

Ensure Decent Working Conditions

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) is in charge of labour and safety inspection. However, DIFE suffers from significant shortage of human and financial resources which do not allow it to work efficiently and effectively to secure safe working environment for workers.

- Create an independent labour ombudsman's office to investigate and resolve labour rights abuses and disputes.
- Build DIFE's capacity to enable it to perform its mandated responsibilities adequately.
- Ensure that workers are able to exercise their trade union rights. Towards this, take the initiative to strengthen the capacity of labour courts for speedy resolution of labour disputes.

- Involve labour unions and promote signing of collective bargaining agreements to safeguard workers' interests and as a tool for resolving labour-related disputes in a participatory manner.

Prepare the Youth for FDI-driven Jobs

To create opportunities for the young workforce, it is important for the economy to create decent jobs in the manufacturing sector. The manufacturing sector will need to expand at an annual rate of 12-15 per cent over the coming years to accommodate the growing labour force. Export and supply-side diversification will play an important role in this backdrop. Attracting FDI, particularly in the planned hundred Special Economic Zones, is expected to play an important role in this regard. The success of the twin strategies of attracting FDI and manufacturing-production diversification will hinge on the availability of a skilled and employable workforce with needed competencies. It is from this vantage point that a youth-centric job market strategy has assumed such heightened importance in the current context.

Bangladesh has made tangible progress in addressing some of the binding constraints relating to investment. These concerns increased availability of electricity, improved infrastructure and better access to finance. However, lack of access to reliable and quality energy, bureaucratic delays, lax enforcement of labour laws, corruption, bureaucratic red tape and high cost of doing business continue to discourage foreign investment flows to Bangladesh. Skills gap, as noted earlier, has also emerged as a major barrier in this context.

The 7th FYP had put an ambitious goal: increasing FDI flow to the country from \$1.57 billion to \$9.6 billion by the end of the plan period (FY 2020). FDI was \$3.48 billion in 2022. Efforts of investment promoting agencies such as the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (BEZA) and others are not giving the expected result. The provisions of the One Stop Service (OSS) Act of 2018 are yet to be implemented in full.

- Pursue two interlinked strategies: Develop a comprehensive strategy to attract FDI and prepare the youth to meet the labour market demands originating from expected FDI flow.
- Develop a digital platform for FDI promotion, offering investors real-time information, e-services, and personalised investment roadmaps inspired by Singapore's "Invest Singapore" platform.
- Establish a dedicated "Investor Concierge Service" to assist foreign investors with regulatory approvals, site selection, and post-investment support, similar to the "Invest Japan" initiative in Japan.
- Develop an FDI promotion strategy centered on key sectors, including manufacturing, technology, and renewable energy, that highlights Bangladesh's potentials as an investment destination and competitive advantages. Vietnam's proactive approach to attracting FDIs by offering preferential tax rates, streamlined

approvals, effective institutional support and targeted incentives may serve as a model for Bangladesh.

- Establish specialised “Manufacturing Parks” that cater to industries such as electronics and information technology, taking inspiration from Malaysia’s successful initiatives such as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and Bio-Xcell Biotechnology Park.
- Undertake a comprehensive review of the type of investment that foreign investors are keen on, through a review of MoUs, and prepare a skills development plan in view of this.

Concluding Observations

To address the complex and pressing concerns as regards youth employment and labour market dynamics in Bangladesh, a well-defined and comprehensive strategy needs to be designed. Bangladesh’s demographic dividend provides a unique opportunity to capitalise on the potentials of its young people. It needs to be noted that the window of opportunity is gradually becoming narrow.

In order to address labour market challenges and realise the possibilities, an effective public-private partnership will be required. The Policy Brief has proposed a number of concrete steps to help ready Bangladesh’s youth of today for job markets of tomorrow: attracting FDIs to promote expansion and diversification in the manufacturing sector, changing overseas employment scenario, aligning education with the labour market demands; encouraging entrepreneurship, particularly in modern manufacturing sector; securing worker’s rights in the informal sector and embedding elements of formal sector to reduce vulnerabilities faced by informal labour market participants; eliminating gender disparity in labour market; ensuring decent working conditions through various initiatives. Bangladesh must do the needful to attain SDG-8, by leaving no one behind. An inclusive labour market, with an employable and well-trained labour force, must be seen as a precondition for this. Bangladesh’s policymakers must see attaining SDG-8 and reaping the potential benefits of Bangladesh’s demographic dividends as closely entwined development objectives.

3

Providing Public Utilities and Services in the Backdrop of Unplanned Urbanisation

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Background and Context

Over the recent past years, the pace of urbanisation in Bangladesh has been growing at a very fast pace. This is manifested in the increasing number of urban settlements, both large and small, and the growing number of people residing in urban areas. At present, besides 12 city corporations and 327 municipalities, there are 570 urban centres in Bangladesh. This unprecedented growth tends to be driven by four broad factors: (i) high natural growth of population in urban areas; (ii) territorial expansion of urban settlements; (iii) rural-to-urban migration; and (iv) newly emerging urban settlements. Regrettably, this growth in urbanisation has not been matched by provisioning of basic urban services.

As would be expected, growing urbanisation has given rise to new challenges, including in areas of delivery of public services in urban areas. Dhaka exemplifies the attendant challenges in a most visible manner. According to the World Bank data, the city covers only 1% of Bangladesh's total area but is home to 13% of the country's total population and accounts for almost 21% of its GDP. However, Dhaka also features regularly among the least liveable cities in the world according to the Economic Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index –indeed, it was ranked as the 7th least liveable city in EIU's 2023 report. This ranking is reflected in the sorry state of affairs with respect to provisioning of public services such as urban transport, housing, social services including health and education, and as per an array of other basic urban services (water, electricity and gas supply, sanitation, sewerage, drainage, garbage disposal, and solid waste management). Environment in urban areas (air, sound and water pollution) has also emerged as a significant concern in recent times. Within this general context, a large gap exists in the availability of services between the advantaged and the disadvantaged groups of citizens in urban areas. This scenario is not unique to Dhaka; indeed, this represents the general picture in other urban and peri-urban areas. Evidence suggests that the overall process of urbanisation in Bangladesh has also been afflicted by spatial and demographic factors.

All these have resulted in a growing number of problems facing urban governance in Bangladesh. Consequently, urban centres are being confronted with rising pressure as regards access to utilities and services including, amenities, transport, living environment, public health and education and other areas. As a result, over the recent past years, there has been a secular decline in almost all the Quality of Life (QoL) indicators in the urban areas. Also, with continuing rural transformation, many new secondary cities are coming up, which have their own specific needs and demands.

'Slumisation' due to push factors and 'urbanisation of rural life' due to economic development are becoming common features of urbanisation in Bangladesh. When policies and practices fail to take these newly emerging realities into consideration, it is the disadvantaged urban groups who suffer the most because they are disproportionately more dependent on delivery of basic public services. Such a scenario hardly corresponds with Bangladesh's aspiration of transitioning to an upper Middle-Income Country by 2031 and a High-Income Country by 2041. In this backdrop, the demands of public service delivery in the context of urbanisation need to be seen from economic as also social lens, and from the perspective of inclusivity.

Urbanisation in Bangladesh is often characterised as 'haphazard', 'disorganised and 'unplanned'. It is evident that an unbalanced distribution of population is creating immense pressure on a few major cities, particularly in the capital city, Dhaka. Unplanned and unbalanced urbanisation is adversely affecting the quality of life of the urban population, particularly the quality of life of low-income groups. The left behind groups are trapped in the 'vicious urban life cycle' where they have to pay more for public services that are of poor quality, if at all available. For example, in Dhaka city, only about 11-16% of the low-income households are covered by institutionalised water supply (from Dhaka WASA). The majority of the rest of the households with informal access to various services are having to pay 7 to 14 times more than households with formal access. Households in informal settlements suffer from low quality of essential services: about 94% of such households reported suffering from bad odour from water bodies; nearly half of the urban population have no access to improved sanitation facilities. The space for parks, public amenities and children's playgrounds are shrinking. Often, these are taken over by vested groups with the tacit support of elected representatives and city officials. Solid waste management remains a challenging task in urban areas. On average, 55 per cent of solid waste remains uncollected. Only 14 per cent of medical waste is properly managed. E-waste is growing at 20 per cent annually. With a three-fold increase over the past 15 years and the recycle rate of only at 31%, managing plastic waste has emerged as a key problem in urban areas. Indeed, plastic pollution has become a major health hazard, polluting cities, clogging drains and causing flooding in urban areas.

Although several initiatives towards planned urbanisation were put in place over recent years, the desired outcomes in terms of delivery of quality services have remained unattained. The political economy of urban governance becomes apparent from the fact that the disadvantaged groups of the urban population, who are in need of urban public services more than others, suffer the most in this situation. Scarcity and inadequacy of public services and utilities and lack of proper service management have now reached a crisis point, with low-income and disadvantaged segments of society being impacted most adversely.

Against this backdrop, the objective of this Policy Brief is to prepare a set of recommendations towards better delivery of urban public services and utilities, keeping in perspective the particular interests and needs of the disadvantaged groups of the urban population. These include slum dwellers, people with disabilities, women and elderly population who tend to remain neglected in the context of provisioning of urban services. The recommendations are geared to ensure inclusive and sustainable urbanisation and effective urban governance in Bangladesh in a way that is aligned with the SDG spirit of Leave No One Behind (LNOB).

Recommendations

This section presents a set of recommendations to address some of the key concerns as regards making quality public services available to disadvantaged and vulnerable urban populations towards sustainable urbanisation in Bangladesh.

Strengthen Local Government Institutions

To bridge coordination gaps and strengthen public service delivery in urban areas, Local Government Institutions (LGI) should be empowered with the mandate and capacity to manage public utilities and services in respective urban jurisdictions efficiently. The LGIs at present face many challenges, particularly with respect to finance and human resources. These institutions are overburdened with many responsibilities and do not have the required capacities to address the growing needs of the urban population, more specifically, the needs of the urban disadvantaged groups such as the slum population, low-income groups and persons with special needs. Urban local governments need to be strengthened with appropriate power, financial and human resources and technical capabilities so that they are adequately equipped to prepare plans and implement deliverables in the areas of providing urban public services and utilities.

- Empower local government institutions with appropriate mandates to deliver good quality public services and ensure better coordination among various concerned service providers. Addressing the needs of disadvantaged groups must be at the centre of this mandate.
- Undertake capacity-building measures and provide adequate resources to enhance ability of urban LGIs to manage public utilities and services efficiently, more specifically, by taking into cognisance the needs of the marginalised communities.

Revise and Amend Policies and Laws, and Reform Concerned Institutions

It is important to address gaps and inconsistencies in existing laws and policies relating to urban governance. Regulatory frameworks should be revised to cater to newly emerging needs. Responsibility for coordination should be vested in appropriate authorities to avoid duplication in implementing policies and plans. Accountability should be ensured through transparency in decision making and good governance in implementation.

- Prepare, amend and update policies and laws, as required, to eliminate ambiguities and inconsistencies as regards the responsibilities of urban public service delivery institutions.
- Allocate primary responsibility to a relevant single authority to avoid duplication and ensure coherence in the design of policies and implementation of programmes as regards the delivery of urban services.

Ensure Decentralisation and Devolution of Power

Urban local bodies in Bangladesh are subject to strong control from the central government, particularly in the context of planning, implementation, and finance. Different levels of urban local government institutions tend to exercise similar powers in the same urban area. This creates gaps in coordination, accountability, efficiency, and effectiveness in delivery of urban services. Local governments should be strengthened to enhance their capacity to mobilise more local resources and adopt innovative investment strategies according to their comparative advantages.

- Following the directives of the Government's Perspective Plan for 2021-2041, urban LGIs should be empowered by establishing autonomous city governments that are accountable to citizens residing within respective jurisdictions.
- Decision making and implementation processes need to reflect institutional restructuring recommended by the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of the RAJUK.
- A performance-based budget allocation approach needs to be put in practice for optimum use of resources to promote balanced urban development.

Set Up Local Monitoring Groups

The cause of planned urbanisation suffers significantly because vested groups work against its core elements. These groups undermine implementation of policies and violate rules in place which accentuates the challenges facing planned urbanisation in Bangladesh. Co-producing urban planning with participation of citizens should be seen as the preferred way to ensure accountability in delivery of urban services. For example, given the difficulties in monitoring the public services with the help of a limited number of city officials, formation of ward-level informal/ semi-formal monitoring groups should be encouraged and incentivised. To note, this is a common practice in all well-governed cities of the world. These groups could play an effective role in enhancing accountability and efficiency in delivery of urban public services. In overpopulated urban centres such as Dhaka, the number of wards and elected representatives should be increased to keep the task of providing public services manageable. Encouraging community engagement is also crucial for replication of good practices. Changing mindsets and promoting a sense of responsibility and belonging among urban citizens will contribute to sustainable urban development.

- Create ward-level informal/semi-formal monitoring groups, following successful examples of other cities, to improve accountability and service efficiency.
- Put in place mechanisms for reporting concerns and addressing grievances as regards access, affordability and quality of public services.
- Conduct awareness raising campaigns to change mindset and encourage community involvement to promote the cause of sustainable urban development that ensures effective public services, allows for adequate urban space for children, amenities for recreation of urban population and caters to the demands of low-income groups.
- Establish community-level forums to promote regular dialogues and feedback between citizens, policymakers, and service providers towards better public service delivery in urban centres.

Promote Stakeholder Engagement in Urban Policy Design.

Design and implementation of urban policies, programmes and projects should prioritise inclusivity and participation. In this regard, stakeholder consultations should be seen as one of the key and mandatory measures for designing any public sector project aimed at

providing utilities and services to the urban population. However, to ensure that the inputs from the community/citizens are actually incorporated in plans and their concerns are appropriately addressed, holding Public Hearings of the draft plan/ design should be seen as a must. Thus, for example, in solving street vendors or traffic congestion related problems in urban centres, policies and programmes should be designed through a consultative process and by taking cues from the best practices of other global cities.

- Encourage community participation and feedback mechanisms to effectively address inclusivity issues in urban planning.
- Implement best practices from other cities. For example, designate specific areas and time slots for street vendors, considering the needs of low-income groups and lower-end consumers.

Ensure Equitable Service Provision.

The government must take the responsibility to provide city services and utilities for all segments of urban population. When private sector is involved in delivery of public services (such as transport, housing, education, health and utilities), due regulatory mechanisms and monitoring systems will need to be put in place by concerned entities to ensure quality control and equitable access to services by citizens. Pricing of public utilities and services needs to be made in a way that ensures equitable and affordable access. This is particularly required in providing services to people living in low-income areas, slum dwellers, pavement dwellers and underprivileged communities such as elderly poor, dalit, transgender people, persons with disabilities, gypsies etc. Pursuant to the spirit of the LNOB, the demands of persons with disabilities, women, children and elderly people must be considered in designing urban service provisions. For example, public transportation must be planned to address these people's needs to ensure easy access and comfortable mobility. Public provision of such services as primary health care, daycare services and entertainment facilities must cater to the needs of marginalised groups in the urban centres. Housing needs must be met in a way that addresses concerns of overcrowding, living conditions, health and hygiene needs and affordability. Residential zoning in urban areas must be sensitive to the needs of marginalised groups and slum dwellers. The urban marginalised population tends to be deprived of the required social safety net support that is available in rural areas. This needs to be corrected.

- Ensure that all city services and utilities provided by both public sector and private entrepreneurs and businesses ensure equitable access for all citizens at affordable prices. Urban planning must be sensitive to these demands.
- Implement robust monitoring mechanisms to ensure that service delivery is consistent in terms of quality, access and affordability.
- Ensure that urban marginalised groups, including slum and pavement dwellers, are able to do birth registration and have NIDs to facilitate their access to public services.

- Formulate and implement adequate social safety net programmes for urban population as in case of the rural.
- Provide daycare service for the children of working parents in urban low-income communities.
- Strengthen primary health care and nutrition services to reduce out-of-pocket expenditure of the urban poor and extreme poor people.

Align Urban Development with SDG Targets and other Global as also National Goals

Integrating the SDGs in the planning and implementation of public utilities and services is required in order to embed inclusivity in the delivery of services. Monitoring and assessment of progress of SDG implementation should also cover whether and to what extent needs of vulnerable groups for public service delivery are being met. In the same vein, all development projects in the urban areas must be aligned with the Paris Agreement on access to climate financing and ensure long-term financial viability of projects.

- Integrate the SDGs in urban planning to ensure inclusivity and quality of public utilities and services, particularly for low income and left behind people.
- Establish clear check and balance mechanisms to monitor progress and prioritise the needs of vulnerable groups with respect to public service delivery and delivery of utilities. Engage citizens in monitoring access and quality of public service delivery.

Put Special Emphasis on Waste Management and Limiting Single Use Plastic

Bangladesh took commendable initiative to curb plastic pollution by being the world's first country to ban single use plastic shopping bags back in 2002. However, due to lack of proper enforcement and monitoring, plastic pollution and related problems have emerged as a major problem in Bangladesh's urban areas. A pragmatic and radical action plan is needed to reduce plastic pollution. So is the case with solid wastes management. These ought to be seen as an integral component of promoting green growth in urban centres.

- Implement the National Action Plan for Sustainable Plastic Management which has set the target of recycling 50% of plastics by 2025, phasing out single-use plastic by 90% by 2026 and reducing plastic waste generation by 30% by 2030 (with the 2020/21 baseline as the reference point).
- Pursue multi-stakeholder and multisectoral approach which is aligned with needs of circular economy, by identifying needed policy and regulatory reforms and highlighting manufacturers' responsibility, and by deploying economic instruments and appropriate technology. Towards this, there is a need to put in place the required infrastructure. Undertaking awareness raising activities for informed pesticide usage, promoting behavioural change and strengthening capacity building in concerned areas are also important steps in this connection.

- Bring producers of fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) under extended producer's responsibility (EPR), particularly concerning plastic packaging and reducing plastic waste. The Ministry of Environment must take the required steps for this plan to be put into action.

Address Data Availability

The availability of disaggregated, high-quality data is critically important for effective policymaking and decision-making in the context of planned urbanisation. Efforts should be made to bridge existing data gaps and ensure access to reliable information for evidence-based planning with respect to providing public services in urban areas, especially for urban disadvantaged groups. For instance, urban LGIs often do not have adequate data to make informed policies for urban development. Qualified planners do not feature in the organogram of the development framework of divisional, district and municipality entities. Lack of awareness of political leaders and top level implementors in public administration as regards the emergent demands in this connection remains an endemic challenge. This needs to be addressed.

- Invest in strengthening data collection systems to ensure the availability of disaggregated and high-quality data for evidence-based urban policymaking and planning. Foster collaboration between concerned government agencies and research institutions think tanks and civil society organisations to bridge the data gaps.
- Undertake surveys to collect detailed and disaggregated data, particularly regarding small and remote urban centres, to assess the demand for public services in those areas and take appropriate actions.

Formulate and Implement Long-Term Planning

To ensure equality and inclusivity in public service delivery, it is important to integrate sustainability and quality-of-life targets in Bangladesh's long-term city planning and urban governance. However, though a significant number of the paurashavas and city corporations in Bangladesh have Master Plans, actual implementation of the plans has been rather limited because of financial and human resource limitations. Also, a number of Master plans were prepared quite some time back. These are not aligned with the needs of climate change impact, disaster management, SDG timeline, needs of housing, waste management, traffic management, and conservation of natural resources and are not in line with current national policies. Moreover, in many cases, the quality of these plans is also questionable. These need to be updated on a regular basis in view of the emerging realities and shifting needs of old and new urban centres. The focus of implementation must be prioritised accordingly. Legal provisions and administrative procedures to execute the Master plans, Building Codes, etc., must be designed keeping in view the needs of the disadvantaged groups. The Master Plans need to be revised by incorporating short- and long-term considerations. This will help avoid expensive ad hoc measures, which often tends to be the case. The needs of gender, older adults, children, and persons with disabilities must be considered to ensure that urban

planning is sensitive to the LNOB spirit of the SDGs. Properly designed programmes and projects and allocation of resources based on identified action plans are required for sustainable and efficient city development.

- Include long-term issues in city master plans, including resilience to climate impact, sustainable housing, waste management, traffic management and conservation of natural resources. Identify concrete actions to address these emerging needs. Avoid expensive ad hoc solutions.
- Take into cognisance the opinion of relevant non-state stakeholders and experts in designing plans for sustainable urban growth, keeping in perspective the current and future needs of disadvantaged groups.

Engage Local Philanthropic Organisations

The capacity and strength of local philanthropic organisations should be recognised and activated to facilitate effective public-private collaboration in the provisioning of public services in urban centres. Urban centres lack availability and access to welfare measures in areas of nutrition, schooling, health, and housing, especially those that concern the interest of socio-economically challenged groups. Setting up of day-care centres for working mothers may be mentioned in this connection. Often, lack of financial resources is the key reason driving the non-availability of these services. In this backdrop, collaboration with non-state actors and philanthropic organisations should be promoted and incentivised to generate additional funds. Such partnerships could also help broad-based decision-making process in respect of urban planning.

- Recognise and activate the role of local philanthropic organisations to strengthen public-private collaboration and partnerships in the delivery of public utilities and services.
- Leverage capacity and expertise of non-state actors and organisations to address specific community level needs in urban areas. This will strengthen inclusive decision making as regards design of urban plans and urban service delivery.

Regulate Informal Practices

Appropriate policies should be formulated with respect to regulating and supporting informal economic activities pursued by disadvantaged segments of urban population such as street vendors, rickshaw pullers and various other service providers. Informality needs to be addressed through proper urban planning. Livelihood concerns of disadvantaged groups must not be neglected in urban planning. This will help avoid unintended and adverse political economy consequences in managing urban development and ensure security of livelihoods of urban low-income people.

- Formulate and implement appropriate policies to regulate informal activities pursued by disadvantaged groups in such a way that these are sensitive to the needs and livelihood concerns of the disadvantaged urban groups.

- In designing urban plans, take lessons from past mistakes to avoid repetition.
- Ensure that delivery of urban public services maintains a balance between planned urbanisation and livelihood concerns of urban disadvantaged communities.

Address Skills Gap Issues in Delivery of Urban Services

Provisioning and quality of public utilities and services in urban areas often suffer from lack of skilled service providers. With expanding urban population in Bangladesh, there is an emerging pressing need to bridge the skills gap so that essential urban services could be delivered with efficiency. There is a need to significantly raise public sector investment in developing trained human resources capable of providing quality services in urban areas.

- Develop and implement comprehensive vocational training programmes with a special focus on young women and adolescent girls from underprivileged communities so that they are equipped and technically skilled to provide urban public utilities and services.
- Undertake targeted programmes to rehabilitate and create opportunities for meaningful engagement of socially excluded and disadvantaged communities such as beggars, dalits, transgenders and gypsies. Take measures to ensure their mainstreaming in urban economic life.
- Establish specialised Urban Service Academies that offer targeted courses in urban planning, management and administration.
- Establish a culture of continuous learning and professional development for urban service providers. These activities should focus on skills upgradation through training, workshops, seminars and online courses. Sensitivity to the needs of urban disadvantaged groups should be an integral part of these activities.

Concluding Observations

In view of rapid urbanisation, the legacy of unplanned urbanisation in old urban cities and rapidly rising new urban centres, issues of urban governance and quality delivery of public services in urban areas have assumed heightened importance and urgency in Bangladesh. Indeed, the cause of planned urbanisation in Bangladesh is at present at a crossroads. Without realising the full potentials of old and new urban centres, Bangladesh's dream to be a developed country by 2041 will be difficult to realise. Addressing the challenges of providing adequate public utilities and services in the backdrop of unplanned urbanisation in Bangladesh calls for a comprehensive and pragmatic approach to urban planning. Delivery of adequate public services in general, and for disadvantaged urban population groups in particular, must be central to this.

Sustainable urbanisation and urban planning must meet the future needs of the urban population, be sensitive to the requirements of disadvantaged groups, and be aligned with

the needs of climate change impact and environmental sustainability. Implementation of this type of plan will call for innovative approaches, modern skill sets, new types of multi-stakeholder initiatives and partnerships at local levels. Bangladesh can have a more equitable and sustainable urban development by strengthening local government institutions, regulating informal practices, aligning with measures to attain the SDG targets, addressing data gaps, prioritising inclusivity, and fostering community involvement. Partnerships with non-state actors and collaboration with civil society think tanks, experts, and philanthropic organisations will ensure that urbanisation in Bangladesh is sensitive to the needs of disadvantaged urban groups. Inclusive city planning will ensure that urban public services are delivered with efficiency, equity and sensitivity. A well-governed urban management will ensure that past mistakes are not repeated, and urbanisation in Bangladesh is sustainable.

4

Ensuring Affordable and Clean Energy for All

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Background and Context

As Bangladesh moves forward, issues of energy transition are expected to assume heightened importance. Energy has emerged as a key factor for productivity enhancement, increasing competitive strength and raising quality of life and well-being of citizens. Ensuring affordable and clean energy for all has thus emerged as both a demand of the present times and a key challenge in going forward. Against this backdrop, developing a sound strategic framework for energy transition and ensuring energy security and long-term sustainability of growth have emerged as a major tasks confronting Bangladesh's policymakers and concerned stakeholders.

Historically, Bangladesh has faced formidable challenges in providing adequate electricity to its population and meeting its developmental demands. The country experienced two major difficulties in view of this. First, till 2009, electricity demand has been higher than the installed capacity. Second, the overwhelming dependence on natural gas, accounting for more than 80 per cent of the country's electricity generation, turned out to be unsustainable in the end. The growing demand and supply gap, in the backdrop of lack of attention to exploration of new gas fields, culminated in the emergence of the energy crisis experienced by Bangladesh in the early 2000s. This led Bangladesh to increasingly rely on liquid fuels to generate electricity.

To address the attendant challenges and the emerging gaps, Bangladesh initiated a number of reforms and put in place several measures. Core reform initiatives included sectoral restructuring of public utilities, encouraging private investment in the generation sector and establishment of an independent regulatory commission for the energy sector. Many of these date back to the 1990s. Significant investment in energy was made both in the public and private sectors to expand electricity supply capacities. Investment in electricity generation helped Bangladesh close the gap between the demand for and supply of electricity. Over the last decade, the number of power plants has increased significantly. Grid connectivity was also increased, which led to greater access to electricity for the broader population.

On the other hand, almost no initiative was taken to strengthen BAPEX and invest in offshore and onshore exploration of gas. Grid reliability has remained a concern. Concerns also remained in areas of quality and affordability of electricity and the emergent energy mix. As was noted above, exploration of domestic energy resources was neglected and share of renewable energy in primary and secondary energy mix was low. The cause of energy justice suffered because of the failure of the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC) to take due cognisance of consumers' welfare. These concerns have been persistently overlooked over the past years. Not surprisingly, successive Energy Master Plans and the embedded inconsistencies came under severe criticism from energy experts and energy activists. Questions have been raised regarding the strategy and stance that inform the government's plans in areas of energy security and energy transition over the medium to long term.

According to the World Bank, till 2014, Bangladesh's per capita energy consumption continued to remain low compared to the South Asian averages. Energy experts in

Bangladesh argued in favour of ensuring a threshold level of per capita energy consumption that corresponded to the demands of the accelerated economic development as also the needs of high levels of human development. They have been warning against the danger of falling into an *energy poverty trap* that could result in paying high penalties in the form of arrested socio-economic development and undermining of citizen's well-being. They urged the policymakers to pursue the goal of energy security through the route of low carbon development.

In recent times, a number of factors have accentuated the challenges in undertaking the needed measures to ensure energy security, including the COVID pandemic, which necessitated a diversion of resources from energy-centric activities to rolling out stimulus packages and the hike in energy prices brought about by the ongoing geo-political contested environment. To note, compared to 2021, crude oil prices rose by 42 per cent in 2022. The price of LNG increased from 18.6 USD/MMBtu, on average, in 2021 to 33 USD/MMBtu in 2022 (rising to as high as 54.17 USD/MMBtu in August 2022). The average coal price in 2022 was 345 USD/MT (reaching 431 USD/MMBtu in September 2022), which was 117 USD/MT in 2021. The high primary energy prices have fuelled inflation, raised production costs and contributed to the depletion of Bangladesh's forex reserves and the ongoing balance of payments difficulties.

Against this backdrop, there is a need to critically analyse the state of Bangladesh's prevailing energy sector scenario and review the current policies for ensuring energy security through the lens of the goal of ensuring energy for all and transition to clean energy.

SDG 7, the implementation of which Bangladesh is committed to as part of its commitment to the SDGs, talk of ensuring affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all. As is known, access to affordable clean energy lies at the heart of SDG7. SDG 7.2 mentions about substantially increasing the share of renewable energy in the energy mix, and SDG 7.3 sets the target of doubling global rate of improvement in terms of energy efficiency. And in attaining the SDG 7, it is also crucial to ensure that energy is available at affordable price, and that no one is left behind in this regard.

Key Issues and Concerns

Bangladesh has initiated various reform initiatives at different times since its independence with a view to strengthening its energy sector. However, there are a number of concerns and controversies which have informed this journey. Some of these are discussed below.

Natural gas depletion and use of LNG as an alternative solution

Bangladesh made natural gas the front-line energy source, particularly for electricity generation and industrial consumption, since the early 1970s. Though in more recent times, the fuel mix has changed with the country's increasing use of liquid fuels, the share of natural gas is still significant compared to the global average. However, the fast pace of depletion of natural gas has emerged as a significant concern in recent times.

To note, production from the country's two major natural gas fields, Bibiyana and Titas, has considerably come down over the recent past years. Bibiyana, with the original reserve of 5,755 billion cubic feet (Bcf), is left with only 250 Bcf. 70.0 per cent of the extractable natural gas has already been taken out from the Titas gas field. It is indeed highly disquieting that natural gas production from the remaining fields will likely decline from the current 2,100 mmcfd to 1,300 mmcfd by 2030 and to 580 mmcfd by 2040. At the same time system loss remains a persistent concern in the natural gas sector: according to official figures, this is to the tune of 10.0 per cent in Bangladesh whereas the global average is only about 2.0 per cent.

Instead of putting emphasis on natural gas exploration, the government in recent years (more precisely in late 2018) has given higher priority to the import of LNG and LNG-based electricity generation with a view to closing the demand and supply gap concerning primary fuel. As is known, the price of LNG in the global market is quite volatile, as also the prices of other primary fuels. This has added many new concerns, not to speak of putting the country on to the path of a vicious cycle of subsidy regime. Given the recent geo-political scenario and the ongoing domestic natural gas shortage, the LNG import bill is likely to increase sharply in the coming years, resulting in a rising and unsustainable fiscal burden. Distribution is also becoming an issue, given that the existing pipelines are too narrow for LNG distribution. No visible actions were taken by the government to develop the gas grid or other infrastructures. Consequently, efficiency concerns also persist.

Slow Progress as Regards Renewable Energy Development

In spite of plans to raise the share of renewable energy, the share remains low at only about 3.0 per cent of the total. As a matter of fact, its share in the electricity generation mix has declined sharply since 2001. Between 2016 and 2019, the average share of renewable energy in the electricity generation mix remained at 2.6 per cent, which was 1.6 per cent between 2009 and 2016. A review of relevant documents indicates several reasons driving the slow progress in renewable energy adoption. These include: lack of proper policy framework, low levels of allocation for renewable energy sector in the ADP, lack of investment in related infrastructure, and technical, institutional and socio-economic barriers. Adequate attention was not given to building and strengthening the national human resource capacity in view of the emergent needs of the sector. No time-bound road map was designed towards a renewable energy transition that took care of energy security, affordability and quality.

The first National Renewable Energy Policy (NREP) was adopted in 2008; regrettably, no new renewable energy strategy has been framed since. The earlier policy was not even adjusted in view of new developments. The successive Power System Master Plans (PSMPs) provided guidance for the development of renewable energy sources. However, the PSMPs lacked specificity of purpose and plan in this connection. Despite considerable scepticism regarding the viability of the propositions placed in the PSMPs, these went mostly unheeded. Also to note, the most recent Integrated Energy and Power Master Plan (IEPMP) does not include a strategy for the expansion of renewable energy sources.

According to the Ministry of Finance data, from 2015 to 2020, the average share of allocations for renewable energy in the ADP was only 5.8 per cent, while the bulk share (94.2 per cent) went to the development of fossil energy. Additionally, the government has failed to capitalise on private sector investment in the development of the renewable energy. Inappropriate policy design and regulations, lack of policy continuity and ineffective incentives were significant reasons driving this.

The Sustainable and Renewable Energy Development Authority (SREDA) has recently initiated work on revising the NREP 2008. The idea is to modernise the renewable energy strategy and integrate renewable energy-related policies in the overall energy strategy. However, the draft version of this policy raises a number of questions which need to be appropriately addressed. For instance, unlike the NREP of 2008, the draft NREP does not mention about the ideal renewable energy mix by analysing diversification possibilities in this regard. Furthermore, there is no discussion on the investment framework, financial risk reduction strategy, import duty issues and pricing mechanism including FiT (Feed in Tariff) schemes, - CAPEX and OPEX models, etc. All these are considered to have important implications for the growth of the country's renewable energy sources.

Technical factors contribute to reducing the speed of uptake of renewable energy significantly, particularly given grid-based electricity. Although the adoption of renewable energy is getting more affordable, storage system remains a major concern. For instance, solar-based electricity is not feasible for meeting the night peak demand without a good storage system. Storage system development, however, requires a large amount of investment. Recent projections indicate, however, that storage costs are expected to come down significantly by 2025. This, in turn, should reduce the cost of solar-based electricity with storage systems. The current grid infrastructure will also need to be upgraded to meet the needs of the emerging energy mix.

Apart from the above, there are also concerns as regards the adoption of off-grid renewable electricity. It is worth mentioning here that Bangladesh has achieved notable success in the dissemination of Solar Home Systems (SHS), providing access to solar-powered electricity to more than 25 million people in rural areas. Evidence suggests that the country may have averted a long-term energy poverty penalty as a result of the SHS programme's success. The programme also promoted the cause of inclusive growth and positively impacted the welfare of people in remote and difficult-to-access localities. It is plausible that the expansion of grid-based electricity has reduced the demand for SHS devices. Nonetheless, the programme's core values remain valid since the grid reliability in many rural areas remain highly wanting and questionable. Also, these areas are subject to long hours of load-shedding.

Institutional and socio-economic factors (lack of credit schemes, high prices, after-sales issues, absence of public-private collaboration, etc.), as also technical factors (low-quality materials, inefficient use of storage batteries, low technical knowledge etc.), contribute to suboptimal levels of output of the aforesaid programmes.

The debate around overcapacity and various charges

Over the last few years, surplus electricity capacity in Bangladesh has tended to be around 40 per cent. To note, the accepted global level is about 20 per cent. One of the key reasons behind the emergence of the problem of overcapacity is the mismatch between the demand-supply prediction and the weak forecasting methods used in the PSMPs. The overcapacity of electricity generation is related to the issue of *capacity charge*. According to a special act, the government is committed to paying a significant amount of money as a capacity charge even as Independent Power Producers (IPPs), Quick Rental (QR), and rental power plants (RPPs) lie idle to cover their losses.

To note, the capacity charge has kept increasing since 2014. Over the last 14 years, the government has paid over 90 thousand crore Taka as capacity charges to various involved players. Over the first nine months of FY 2022, the government has paid 16,785 crore Taka as capacity charges. The growing capacity charge payments are strongly associated with the upward pressure on the cost of electricity at retail levels. Needless to say, the rising price of electricity affects consumers' welfare adversely, especially the ones with low-income people belonging to disadvantaged groups. The government has raised charges for different related public utilities, adding about 8-9 Taka profit per cubic metre for gas sellers. Recently, an additional charge of 10 cents was introduced on the consumption of Titas gas by the households. All these violate what is stipulated in regulatory laws and result in an injustice in energy.

Policy inconsistency and lack of integration with national policies

Over the past years, Bangladesh has adopted several policies to deal with the energy sector and energy crisis. Nevertheless, analysis carried out by energy experts reveals that policymakers have failed to focus on planning at disaggregated levels, e.g., energy planning at divisional and district levels, to raise energy efficiency and to safeguard the interests of the marginalised population. The energy sector master plans are skewed largely towards import-based energy security. This has increased the degree of vulnerability from external shocks, as has been manifested in recent times. There is a lack of proper strategy that would provide guidance as to how the national energy transition will be initiated and sustained over the future. Also, data provided by various involved entities contradict and are at odds with each other. This is indicative of a serious lack of coordination and collaboration across the various concerned government entities.

Recommendations

In light of the discussion above and the emergent concerns, the following policy recommendations are proposed towards Bangladesh's energy security and renewable energy transition, keeping in the purview the objectives of access affordability and quality.

Prioritise Development of Domestic Natural Gas

Put emphasis on Natural Gas Exploration: The government should undertake renewed efforts at the exploration of gas on an urgent basis and put emphasis on the development of the natural gas sector to reverse the depleting stock of the country's natural gas. According to

the 8th Five Year Plan (FYP) data, there is a large number of unexplored gas blocks (17 onshore and 22 offshore) from which a considerable amount of natural gas can be extracted for purposes of generating electricity and use in other priority sectors. Wide-ranging inefficiencies in areas of natural gas exploration, policy implementation and administrative activities associated with gas sector governance will need to be reduced systematically. Accordingly, the government should prioritise investing in strengthening the human and technical capacities of BAPEX so that it can meet the long-term needs of the country in the areas of gas and mineral exploration. Where BAPEX has in-house exploration capacities, costly contracts with foreign companies must be avoided. The government should develop a 'model central' (e.g., ownership-planning-initiative) which would guide Petrobangla/ BAPEX in offering contracts to eligible companies for offshore drilling in view of lack of capacities to undertake such works as present. *Mobilise Funds for Future Energy Investment:* The government should develop a framework to set up a dedicated fund for development and investment in the energy sector. Exploration royalties, particularly in the case of natural gas and other minerals, could be a potential source for this fund, along with appropriate budgetary contributions.

Develop the Needed Human Resources: Priority must be given to developing the required human resources for the country's energy sector. The needs of several areas will have to be kept in mind in this connection: exploration of new onshore and offshore wells; workover of abandoned and old wells; step-out wells in known reserves; production from fields previously considered to be expensive; development of expertise in renewal energy; management and planning of energy resources. Indeed, there should be a clear understanding that without developing human resources and raising the institutional capacity of BAPEX, it will not be possible to develop the energy sector in a sustainable way.

Take Steps to Reduce System Loss: As was noted, the system loss in the energy and gas sector continues to remain very high in Bangladesh. There are several aspects of system loss: at the distribution level, and the transmission level. At the distribution level, the loss is well within limits, whereas in case of transmission, it is evidently higher due to weak infrastructure. This needs to be addressed through the replacement of old infrastructure and technological upgradation (to reduce leakage in gas distribution). State of governance and management quality must be improved to enhance efficiency in the energy sector and reduce corruption. Steps will need to be taken to disconnect lines of defaulters/illegal connectors and recover unpaid bills. Indeed, estimates show that removal of illegal connections and identification of leakages could save about 200-300 million cubic feet of natural gas annually.

Strengthen Renewable Energy Development Initiatives

Undertake Mandatory Regular Revision of Policy Frameworks: The government must put a system in place to revise the energy policies on a regular basis. A specifically designated entity may be set up for this purpose. The mandate of the concerned authority will include the following: periodic review of renewable energy plans and policies, pricing, fiscal incentives and taxation policy, identification of gaps between policies and emerging demands and how to address those; coming up with human resource needs, suggesting ways to integrate

renewable energy policy into the overall national energy development strategy. To note, import taxes on renewable equipment remain very high in Bangladesh. Solar inverters and solar panels are currently subject to import duties of 37 per cent and 26 per cent, respectively. The National Board of Revenue (NBR) and SREDA need to work together to rationalise the import tariffs, keeping in perspective the demands of developing the renewable energy sector of the country, incentivising investment and enhancing consumer welfare. An integrated demand projection will need to be undertaken to finalise the country's renewable energy mix plan.

Promote Local Renewable Energy Equipment Manufacturing: Manufacturing of renewable energy equipment in Bangladesh is almost non-existent at present. Government should promote local entrepreneurs by implementing appropriate policies and fiscal and financial incentives with proper institutional support. There is also a role for FDI here:

Enhance Budgetary Support: Government's emphasis on low-carbon growth path needs to be reflected in budgetary allocations. Fiscal-budgetary policies will need to be appropriately calibrated in view of this. Additionally, new and creative green financing schemes need to be promoted. To note, these are by now common features in the financial landscape of emerging and Asian developing countries. The present SHS assistance programmes must also be strengthened through the efforts of specialised organisations such as IDCOL, Investment Financing Facility for the Private Sector (IFFP) and other similar entities. The government should extend support for attracting innovative financing schemes, e.g., grant funding and low-interest financing, for interventions targeted to make the country's current grid infrastructure smarter. In this context, innovations in decentralised storage technologies for more grid flexibility may be mentioned. Least-cost technology for bridging the gap between on-grid and off-grid renewable energy projects ought to be promoted. Along with local funding, Bangladesh should also energetically explore additional funding sources similar to the Southeast Asian countries, which are taking advantage of international funding opportunities and various partnerships.

Revive Rooftop Solar Programme: Although the previous attempts to maximise the use of solar rooftops were not fully effective, government should identify and rectify the attendant weaknesses and take renewed efforts to expand rooftop solar augmentation in government offices, commercial buildings, educational institutions, industrial buildings and places of worship and other facilitates. Consumers should be encouraged to reduce dependence on grid electricity. This also allows consumers to benefit from net metering facilities provided by the government. The government may provide fiscal incentives to facilitate fast expansion of solar energy ecosystem. One possible option in this connection could be in the form of subsidies for rooftop solar systems similar to the ones enjoyed by the IPPs.

Take steps to improve management of biomass energy: A vast majority of the rural population depends on the use of biomass for fuel. However, this is very poorly managed. There is a need to take steps to improve biomass technology, i.e., biomass to biogas. China could serve as a good example here. This is important from the perspective of energy equity and energy security of disadvantaged communities, particularly in the rural areas of Bangladesh.

Explore Wind Power Potentials: As part of the fuel diversification plan, the government should consider the potential of offshore wind power for generating electricity. Some projections indicate that offshore wind power alone has the potential to generate up to 20 GW of electricity. The government needs to undertake a comprehensive study to assess feasibility, investment required, resource availability and financing options in setting up wind energy projects.

Grid Infrastructure Development for Renewable Source-based Electricity: In order to transmit solar-based electricity on a wide scale, smart grid and smart metering technologies must be put in place. This will also enhance overall grid reliability. Off-grid electricity, when grid electricity cannot be provided, may significantly reduce risks of blackouts and load shedding. The GoB should introduce innovative financing schemes for accessing grant funding and low-interest financing in support of interventions targeted at making the country's current grid infrastructure smarter. Smart grid technology will strengthen market competitiveness, raise energy efficiency, and provide energy security. This will ensure that electricity is produced, transmitted and distributed in the near-term future by using cutting-edge technology to address the manifold problems afflicting the existing power grid systems.

Continue Exploring Opportunities of Cross-Border Electricity Trading (CEBT): Bangladesh is currently importing electricity from India. Potentials of cross-border electricity trading should be further explored through bilateral and multilateral initiatives, with a view to strengthening energy security of the country. Harmonised policy framework and regional energy cooperation will help the government to explore the possibility of getting access to the hydropower generated in Nepal and Bhutan by channelling the flow through India. Joint venture opportunities should be actively explored for hydroelectricity generation in Nepal and Bhutan. However, due caution must be exercised to secure Bangladesh's national interests in undertaking cross-border trading and power projects. Over dependence on a single country for import can be strategically risky venture. All such deals must be made in a transparent manner.

Make Use of Abandoned Power Plants for Renewable Electricity Generation: The government should actively consider retrofitting decommissioned coal power plants (such as in Moheshkhali) into solar-powered electricity production sites. Redeveloping these plants into new green renewable energy projects will help make productive use of valuable property which may otherwise remain unused. Such coal-to-solar projects will benefit local communities and businesses.

Put Emphasis on Improving Biomass Technology: The majority of Bangladesh's rural population relies on biomass energy; however, the management of biomass remains poor. Installing household digesters on a large scale in rural areas, similar to the ones in China, will improve the energy status of particularly the rural marginalised population in Bangladesh. The digesters will not only provide clean cooking gas but will also generate significant benefits by improving the sanitary and health conditions of rural communities through the treatment of agricultural and household wastes.

Reduce Fiscal Burden

Design Exit Strategies for QR and Rental Power Plants on An Urgent Basis: Although QRs and other rental power plants were seen to be a promising solution to the then prevailing energy crisis, time has come to seriously think about their phase-out. These power plants are still in operation and enjoying capacity charge payments, creating significant fiscal-financial strain on the economy. The government must start decommissioning these power plants, and this should be completed over the next two years. Winding up of these power plants will also help reduce the share of liquid fuel in the electricity generation mix, which in turn will help reduce subsidies in the energy sector. This is also important from the perspective of subsidy diversification across the economy. The government should take initiatives to make adjustments to the current contracts and licenses with a view to significantly lower the fiscal burden. In case complete decommissioning at the earliest is not feasible, owing to various factors including institutional and contractual constraints, a time-bound exit plan must be put in place. In this regard, lessons should be learned from successful rental models around the world.

Ensure Energy Justice: The government must ensure energy justice for consumers by enacting legislation prohibiting all types of unsolicited and uncompetitive investment in the energy sector, limiting political appointment of directors of energy utilities, repealing recent BERC-related amendments, and doing away with additional charges associated with provision of services and sale of energy utilities. Energy justice is critically important for attaining SDG 7, which talks of equity and affordability in view of energy security. Decision making concerning the country's energy sector must be carried out in an inclusive manner, with participation of all key stakeholder groups.

Reduce Reliance on Foreign Companies: The government must not approve energy sector master plans which rely heavily on foreign consultants, foreign borrowings and foreign companies, imported coal, nuclear energy and LNG. Since reliance on foreign exploration companies carries with it the risks of overproduction, overpricing and pressure to export, the government must design an energy sector strategic plan that prioritises national capacity building and exploration of national energy resources by deploying primarily national capacities. Involvement of foreign companies may be considered only when national capacities are not yet ready to take on the task.

Formulate Well Defined and Transparently Designed Policies That Meet the Demands of National Interest

Design Transparent and Accountable Policies: National Energy Security Needs, National energy masterplans, policies and legislative initiatives in place must be reviewed, amended and updated in line with the long-term national interests and interests of country's energy security. All concerned decisions must be made through wide consultations, in a transparent manner. All relevant documents should be accessible to all stakeholders. By inviting scrutiny and engaging stakeholders in discussions and dialogues, policy flaws can be identified early on and addressed properly. Efficient supply-side management (production and distribution) and reliable demand side forecasting should be an integral component of energy planning.

Expertise and experience of energy experts from the region may be sought to learn from best practices in managing the energy sector.

Formulate Guidelines for Private Sector Investment in Energy: As is known, investment in energy infrastructure is highly capital intensive. Public investment alone can hardly meet the requirements of financing needs of energy infrastructure. As is known, the private sector has played an essential role in the development of the energy industry in Bangladesh. While encouraging the private sector to come forward, the government must ensure that this is done following guidelines that secure the broader interests of the country and its people. The government will need to come up with proper guidelines to regulate the involvement of private business, investors and entrepreneurs in the energy sector from this perspective.

Ensure Efficient Energy Data Management and Reporting: Reliable and timely energy-related data is critically important for formulating sound energy plans, making precise projections about demand, investment and financing needs, and for taking proper decisions. However, availability of reliable data for the energy sector has remained a major concern in Bangladesh. Government should make the necessary investments to create a national energy sector data bank in a way that ensures transparency and accountability in data collection, dissemination and use. The support of modern, smart technology will be helpful in this regard. Automated software-based data management system should be put in place in this regard. The government should also consider establishing an energy data centre, which will help it formulate appropriate policies for the energy sector on the basis of reliable data and information.

Consider Enacting A Mineral Resource Export Ban Act: Bangladesh's gas resources (both onshore and offshore) are one of the principal non-renewable sources of energy for the country. These resources are limited. In view of this, domestic use of these resources must receive the highest priority. Their exploration must not be subject to export-permitting contracts. If appropriate policies are taken, these resources will enable Bangladesh to ensure energy security as well as economic security. The government should consider enacting a Mineral Resource Export Ban Act to ensure that the country's mineral resources are used to meet its own needs so that these remain in the hands of the people. Exploration should be designed and sequenced in a way that extracted gas resources can be deployed towards domestic energy needs for electricity generation, household consumption and industrial use so that the question of whether to export or not does not arise.

Introduce Energy Efficiency Programmes and Ensure Efficient Demand Side Management (DSM)

Promote Energy Efficiency: The government must promote energy efficiency initiatives which are important from the perspective of ensuring energy security. It needs to offer tax rebate incentives for energy-saving technologies and incentivise consumers to buy energy-efficient

appliances. Use of high-efficiency household appliances should be encouraged. Besides, awareness-raising programmes should be launched to induce behavioural changes in people as regards energy saving. Similarly, energy producers should be provided with fiscal, financial and regulatory incentives to manufacture energy-efficient products by adopting energy-saving technologies. Raising tariffs on inefficient energy-intensive products will induce consumers to adopt green alternatives. Peak demand can be reduced by deploying peak and off-peak tariff regimes.

Strengthening DSM Initiatives: Efficient DSM is required for improving energy sector performance. Sound load management allows energy producers and distributors to better utilise available energy, optimise load usage patterns to bridge the gap between energy supply and demand and reduce peak load demand. This contributes to higher energy efficiency. DSM benefits both the power utilities and the consumers. It helps power utilities improve power system quality, reliability, and operational efficiency. This benefits them financially; DSM allows for adequate utilisation of liquid oil-based plants during peak hours while maintaining the continuous operation of other plants, leading to a balanced energy supply. Consumers can benefit from energy savings through changes in energy consumption patterns and reductions in peak demand, which are reflected in improvements in system load profiles. However, benefits of DSM are not being fully realised due to lack of adequate adaptable load as also lack of public awareness. Categorising loads into base, intermediate and peak components to optimise power plant production will also be worth considering.

Undertake Regional and Sector-Specific Demand Projections: There are differences in demand patterns for electricity, including peak demand, depending on economic, geographic, and demographic trends across different areas of Bangladesh. There is a need for undertaking region-wise forecasts for the electricity market and demand. This will help rationalise expenditure and also reduce environmental risks. This approach can be applicable also for the special economic zones, a number of which are being established at present. It can also help reduce the costs by optimising transportation demand by ensuring proper energy distribution. The government must project reliable 5-year energy demand by considering spatial dimensions of energy demand to avoid over and under-production. Reliable demand projection will help do away with reliance on population-based estimates, resulting in a more accurate energy demand forecast. Appropriate projection of household and industrial demand is necessary for determining the level of installed capacity, energy generation and composition of different types of fuel and energy mix.

Strengthen BERC's Capabilities and Establish an Independent Energy Commission

The capacity of the BERC to undertake its mandated tasks in areas of determining cost and tariffs will need to be strengthened. Its work must be carried out in a transparent manner. A system should be developed to ensure that public hearings are regularly held, the consumer's voice is given due importance and the consumer's rights are secured. BERC's authority in the area of setting energy prices must be restored. The government should also consider establishing a dedicated independent energy commission comprising of energy experts, economists, professionals, private sector representatives, financial analysts, legal

experts, and representatives of civil society and consumer groups. The committee will foster multistakeholder dialogues and promote collaboration in areas of formulating energy strategy, policies and prices. The independent commission can also provide guidance as regards methods (formula) for setting energy prices and measuring the performance of the energy utilities.

Strengthen Cyber Security Measures

Experience of other countries show that energy industry is highly susceptible to cyber-attacks. Protecting energy systems from cyber-attacks will become increasingly important as the risks grow. This is needed not just for the benefit of the energy sector itself but also for the purposes of economic and national security. There is a need to pay urgent attention to ensuring cyber security and enhancing cyber resilience. These issues should be given due importance in the course of energy planning and at the early phase of implementation of energy-related projects. The government must collaborate with various concerned entities along the energy sector supply chain to strengthen cyber resilience at every stage and stay ahead of the threat actors.

Ensure Quality and Continuity of Electricity Supply

Maintaining a steady supply of electricity should be given the highest priority by the government. The government should also be committed to ensuring steady voltage levels to support seamless technology adoption and avoid disruptions. Utilisation of surplus electricity should come under the purview of energy planning.

Strengthen Transmission and Distribution Systems

Due attention should be given to the installation of high-power transmission lines to meet growing demand and to evacuate the additional electricity produced by the new power plants. To deliver dependable and reliable energy to consumers, the government should prioritise the task of putting in place an efficient distribution system. Government should explore avenues of large-scale investment, both local and foreign, by putting in place the needed infrastructure towards efficient transmission and distribution of power in view of the future demand of the energy sector.

LNG as an Alternative Transitional Fuel

Since natural gas exploration takes time to be implemented, and has a limited success ratio, it will take time before it becomes somewhat clear what the country's long-term energy-mix is likely to be. In the backdrop of depleting national gas sources, government's lack of past initiatives as regards investment in gas exploration is a key reason in this, the government has decided to attach high priority to LNG-based power generation to bridge the demand and supply gap. Bangladesh now has two Floating Storage and Regasification Units (FSRUs), with a total capacity of 7.5 million tonnes a year. The country is also developing a land-based terminal which can handle 7.5 million tonnes per annum (MTPA) of LNG; this is expected to be in place in 5 years.

However, the existing pipeline network is considered too narrow to accommodate future natural gas delivery. Additionally, the price of imported LNG tends to be high and volatile. The operating cost of FSRUs is high also due to the high charter rates of the ships that transport LNG to Bangladesh. All these may cause market distortions, resulting in continuing high prices and an untenable subsidy requirement in future. The government should also recognise the risks of overcapacity, capacity charge issues, and expected price distortions associated with LNG. It is also worth noting that the costs of exploration and development of untapped gas resources are likely to be lower than the costs of LNG import.

In view of the above, the higher dependency on LNG as an alternative fuel option remains questionable in the medium to long term. The government should revisit the LNG expansion plan and study its fiscal-financial and macro-economic implications before allowing for large-scale investment in electricity generation based on imported LNG. The envisaged power sector master plan must take cognisance of this before finalising the energy mix strategy for the future. The plan must focus on domestic offshore and onshore exploration, as was noted earlier, as the critical strategy in designing medium to long-term energy sector development strategy.

Promote Research and Development (R&D) in the Energy Sector

Because energy technology and fuel choices are significant determinants of prosperity and well-being of the people, environment quality and national economic security, the overarching importance of evidence-based energy sector policymaking cannot be overemphasised. Adequate investment in the energy sector's R&D must be seen as a key precondition for sound policymaking. Relevant institutions must receive the financial and technical support that they need. For example, the government may think of establishing an Energy Storage Lab to explore technologies and solutions to make energy storage systems competitive and marketable. Increased R&D investment will help attract more investment in wind, solar, bioenergy and geothermal energy sectors, playing an important role in ensuring energy security through a diversified energy mix.

Formulate an Integrated Power Plan to Drive the Energy Transition Process

While Bangladesh has increased its electricity generation capacity over the past few decades, the country is facing many challenges going forward. A number of these have been noted earlier. Bangladesh must go for energy transition favouring the renewable energy sources, by extending all out support towards renewable energy transition process. Bangladesh's SDG commitment and stance in various global fora should inform its strategy in this connection. Such a strategy will also enable Bangladesh to attain the aspiration of transitioning to an economically developed, socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable country by 2041. The government must prepare a roadmap for implementing an integrated plan encompassing generation, transmission and distribution activities in preparation for the envisaged green and renewable energy transition.

Reduce Dependence on Coal and Nuclear Based Power Generation

The government must recognise the environmental risks and risks to people associated with coal and nuclear power generation. The focus must be on sustainable and clean energy alternatives, and not the high-cost and environmentally harmful power generation. The government's policy must be guided by the fact of the formidable environmental and social costs that come with fossil and nuclear fuel.

Concluding Observations

Energy plays a critically important role in the developmental journey of any country. Bangladesh is no exception. In recent times, Bangladesh has taken several steps towards increasing the energy supply to meet the growing demands of the economy. However, the country at present is facing many challenges in attaining energy security. The discussions in the preceding sections have highlighted some of the key concerns in this backdrop. An overhaul of the energy plan and policies has become a necessity in going forward. The Policy Brief has highlighted a number of tasks in connection with the renewable energy transition, access to clean energy at affordable prices, investment in the exploration of the domestic mineral resource, moving away from LNG-centric import dependence and fossil and nuclear fuel-based electricity production, domestic capacity building in gas exploration, raising efficiency in energy sector management and evidence-based time-variant policy making. Attention was drawn to Bangladesh's SDG commitment and stance in relevant global fora. The challenge of attaining the aspiration of an environmentally friendly, economically developed and socially inclusive Bangladesh will largely hinge on whether Bangladesh is able to do the needful in view of the needs of energy security and energy transition that meets the demands of its economy and aspirations of its people.

5

Triggers to Ensuring Quality Primary Education

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Background and Context

Bangladesh can claim remarkable success in terms of a number of important socio-economic indicators, which gives its post-independence journey an important distinction. Several factors have shaped and contributed to this, with both state and non-state actors playing important roles. As is known, Bangladesh is committed to attaining the SDGs by 2030, where access to quality education is an important marker. Bangladesh was ranked 101st according to the Sustainable Development Report 2023, with an overall score of 65.9 out of 100. The country achieved or was on track to achieve 30.9 per cent of the SDG targets. In the case of 41.2 per cent targets, however, it has registered limited progress, and in the case of 27.9 per cent targets, the situation has indeed worsened. As may be noted in this backdrop, Quality education (SDG 4) is one of the two goals (the other being Responsible consumption and production - SDG 12) with respect to which Bangladesh's progress was assessed as 'on track'.

While Bangladesh's middle-income graduation in 2015 and its upcoming graduation from the group of least developed countries in 2026 signify notable socio-economic progress, the dual graduation also poses formidable challenges for the country going forward. Nowhere are these challenges so prominently manifested as in the area of delivering quality education. Indeed, a major overhauling of the education system will be required if the country is to be geared towards sustainable dual graduation by addressing the formidable attendant challenges and if it is to reap the potential opportunities. Also, Bangladesh has set an ambitious goal to achieve upper middle-income country status by 2031 and the vision to become a developed country by 2041. These transitions will call for an education system that is fit for purpose and is able to meet the demands of the country's developmental aspirations.

Higher productivity and strengthened competitiveness will need to be the key drivers of Bangladesh's future journey. In this backdrop, the role of quality education cannot be overemphasised, particularly since it lays the foundation of a competitive and modern economy. The need to give priority attention to quality issues in education has gained heightened importance and traction also in view of the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic of the recent past on the education sector of Bangladesh in general and primary education in particular.

The education sector of Bangladesh is of formidable size, comprised of some 150 thousand institutions, 40 million students and more than one million teachers. Approximately 19 million students are at the primary education level, and 12 million are at the secondary level (including students of government-recognised madrasahs). Development of the country's basic education is guided by the Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990, EFA National Plan of Action (NPA) I and II, National Non-Formal Education Policy 2006, National Education Policy 2010, National Skills Development Policy 2011 and various Five Years Plans and other documents. To strengthen basic education, several programmes have been implemented over the years; Primary Education Development Programme – PEDP1, PEDP2 and PEDP3. PEDP4 is being implemented at present. Indeed, a major objective

of Bangladesh's education sector programmes is to achieve Goal 4 targets of the SDGs by 2030.

Over the past decade, impressive success has been achieved in Bangladesh's education in terms of enrolment and attainment of gender parity. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) was 110.5 per cent and the Net Enrolment Rate (NER) was 97.6 per cent. However, the dropout rate is high, at about 14.0 per cent at the primary education level (Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022). Recognising the importance of early childhood education, pre-primary education was made compulsory in 2015 for one year prior to entry into primary school. A two-year pre-primary education was introduced in over three thousand primary schools from January 2023.

There can be no disagreement that while access to education is a right of citizens and an obligation on the part of the state, quality of the imparted education continues to remain an enduring concern in Bangladesh. What takes place in classrooms and other learning environments is critically important for the well-being of the children, their prospects as adults and their future employability. In this sense, primary level education plays a key role in laying the foundation of the future life of the child. A host of factors are important in this context, including access to and delivery of quality education, appropriate infrastructure, presence of qualified teachers, availability of up-to-date teaching materials, proper nutrition and health of children and a conducive learning environment for children's overall development.

The present Policy Brief focuses particularly on the issue of delivery of quality education in Bangladesh at the primary stage since, as was noted, education at this particular level builds the foundation for education at subsequent levels. If children are deprived of quality education at this level, they can not be expected to overcome the challenges they face at the subsequent levels. Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to say that primary education makes or mars the promise, potential and prospects of the child as an adult. This is more so for the children from the left behind and disadvantaged groups because only education can give them the opportunity for a better and more fulfilling life and social upward mobility.

Realising the aspiration of quality education for all is a challenge that will need to be addressed through targeted actions and interventions. The leave no one behind spirit of the SDGs implies that no children ought to be left behind and left outside as far as the delivery of quality primary education is concerned.

Regrettably, growing income and asset inequalities have emerged as major barriers to achieving universally acknowledged standard of primary education in present day Bangladesh context. Evidence suggests that children belonging to the marginalised groups and living in remote and geographically disadvantaged areas are falling behind in educational attainments compared to their peers. The background documents prepared for Bangladesh's 8th Five Year Plan recognise the challenges facing the disadvantaged groups: ethnic minority groups, tea garden workers, cleaners/sweepers (belonging to Dalit community), landless peasants,

transgender community, commercial sex workers, environmental refugees, traditional fisher folk, artisans, chronically ill poor people, rural poor, women, homeless and unemployed people and their families, persons with physical and mental disabilities and poor female-headed households in char, haor, coastal areas, hill tracts, tea garden areas and urban slums. There is no denying the fact that children from these groups are likely to face more difficulties compared to those belonging to more affluent and advantaged groups, as far as quality primary education is concerned.

Experience shows that inequality, vulnerability and educational exclusion are often closely linked. While the government has been trying to widen access to and improve the quality of education, there are many structural factors which undermine the efforts and perpetuate intergenerational disparities in educational opportunities. Hence, there is a need to address the particular difficulties faced by the children from LNOB groups in accessing quality primary education.

These will need to be addressed and redressed with appropriate interventions. Inclusive infrastructure, greater access to education and equal opportunity to quality education are not merely reflections of a progressive and equitable society; these are also drivers of such a society. Quality primary education triggers social inclusiveness and economic development, reduces inequalities, and ensures that every child is able to reach her/his full potential.

In the context of education, the left behind groups refer to individuals and communities who encounter significant and additional challenges in accessing quality education. These challenges originate from access to limited educational resources, infrastructure that is not education-friendly, presence of discrimination, and various socio-economic obstacles which hinder ability of education-seekers to engage with the education system fully and on equal footing. All these undermine the capacity of children to take advantage of even the available opportunities.

Left behind children in Bangladesh have a number of distinctive features:

Rural and Remote Communities: Children in rural and remote areas often have only limited access to quality education due to inadequate education infrastructure, distance from schools, lack of transportation and because of societal attitudes and norms.

Ethnic and Religious Minorities: Minority children face discrimination, cultural barriers as also linguistic barriers. Children are disadvantaged from very early on when their mother tongue is not Bangla, and the medium of teaching and textbooks are not in their own language.

Street Children and child workers: Children belonging to poor families in urban and peri-urban slums and children living on streets and working in unhealthy and hazardous jobs are often deprived of formal and informal education because of lack of a conducive environment, financial constraints, livelihood pressure and absence of family support.

Children with Disabilities: Children with disabilities face additional barriers in accessing education due to physical, cognitive, social and societal challenges and lack of needed special facilities. Mentally challenged children do not have access to specialised schools and trained educators.

Young and Adolescent Girls: Gender disparities still persist, particularly in rural areas of Bangladesh, where young and adolescent girls are sometimes given early marriage, have to take on household responsibilities, and have limited opportunities for education.

Climate-Affected Children: Bangladesh is prone to frequent natural disasters such as floods and cyclones. Children living in these areas often find their education disrupted by natural disasters.

Children from Low-Income Families: Children from economically disadvantaged families do not have the financial means to attend school and continue education, leading to high dropout rates and forced employment in the labour market.

Children in Institutional Care: Children living in orphanages and similar institutions often do not get the care and proper emotional support they need. As a result, they are deprived of proper education.

Covid's negative footprints: The challenges facing the children of Bangladesh were further accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic of the recent past. Many children from the LNOB groups have fallen behind due to the disruption in education during the pandemic period. When schools remained closed, they missed out on learning, particularly since Bangladesh had one of the longest school closures anywhere, for 18 months. Children from the left behind groups suffered disproportionately more because a large number of them did not have the opportunity to learn virtually. Many dropped out of the education system and joined the labour market. Girls were given in marriage. Gender violence increased at an alarming pace. When schools reopened after the covid and teaching activities were resumed, children struggled to catch up on their studies in the newly promoted classes. This led to an additional number of children dropping out of school. Indeed, it will be no exaggeration to say that COVID-19's negative footprints have left a lasting mark on the educational attainment of an entire generation of disadvantaged children.

According to a study by the NCTB, class-V students were the worst affected due to COVID-19. The average English learning rate for class-V students came down to 36 per cent after the closure, compared to about 49 per cent prior to it. There was a significant change in the average learning rate of students in the same class between 2019 (68.0 per cent) and 2022 (51.6 per cent) for such subjects as Bangladesh and Global Studies. The learning gap for class III students was similar to that in class V.

Education in mother tongue: Bangladesh has a diverse linguistic landscape. National Education Policy 2010 stipulates the right of all children to receive education in their

mother tongue. Since 2017, the government has been distributing books (primary level) in non-Bangla languages to the children of minority ethnic groups (Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo and Sadri). However, implementation of the Multilingual Education (MLE) Programme, introduced in 2017, has slowed down over the recent past period due to shortage of trained teachers.

Nutritional deprivation and education outcomes: Many children from the disadvantaged and the LNOB groups go to school on an empty stomach. This adversely affects how they grow, learn and play. It is hard for starving children to concentrate their attention during class time; their learning outcomes suffer as a result. Mid-day meals in schools are indeed a blessing for children from marginalised households. The government should be appreciated for taking initiatives to revive the school feeding programme beginning from 2023. The government has recently made a plan to reintroduce school feeding programme for students of all state-run primary schools in poverty-prone 150 upazilas with an aim to increase school attendance and reduce dropouts. The programme needs to be expanded to cover all children.

Financial assistance for education: The government has been implementing a Primary Education Stipend Programme for all students. The programme provides taka 150 per month per student to mothers (using mobile financial service), conditional on their child's 85 per cent school attendance. This amount has been increased from the previous 100 taka per month after 18 years. However, the stipend amount is quite small considering the rise in education-related expenses.

Recent high inflation has caught up with the price of education-related items. Increasing education expenses are putting a lot of pressure on low and fixed income earning families having children in school.

Education Watch Study 2022 showed children's high dependency on guidebooks. It was found that 79 per cent of primary-level students followed commercial guidebooks for their lessons and exams. During the first nine months of 2022, primary level students had spent, on average, about Tk. 669 on guidebooks. This, no doubt, has put an additional burden on poor and marginalised families, which are already facing inflation-induced pressure and erosion of purchasing power.

Bangladesh needs a twenty-first-century educational system to prepare and equip the country's children with the demands of the twenty-first century. Conventional education will no longer be very useful and relevant in view of the newly emerging job market requirements and in the context of the COVID-19-driven new normal. Blended education is the need of the hour to help children attain quality education and required skills, and from the perspective of human resource development. 13 ministries under the leadership of the Ministry of Education are at present working on the Blended Education and Skills Master Plan. As part of this, the government is providing digital content and e-learning resource materials to educational institutions. These include developing and using educational

videos, interactive multimedia content, and online courses. This is no doubt a welcome initiative. However, a lot more needs to be done in this context and without delay.

The recently developed new curricula aim to make the lesson cycle more effective and enjoyable for children by promoting experience-based learning. The idea is to enable students to acquire competencies in communication, listening and analytical and problem-solving skills. Education from primary to higher secondary level is expected to undergo a significant change thanks to the new initiative. According to the plan, the new curricula for classes I, II, VI, VII were introduced in 2023, and will eventually cover the rest of the secondary education level classes by 2026. It is true that the new curricula put more emphasis on classroom-based assessment compared to summative one, which is good. However, implementation of competency-based curricula requires skilled and well-trained teachers capable of conducting learner-centric teaching and undertaking realistic and logical assessments. While government sources stress that teachers have received adequate training to teach as per the new curricula, concerns remain about the quality of training of teachers. Indeed, the success of the new method will largely hinge on the availability of well-prepared and well-trained teaching staff.

In order to ensure quality education for all, by leaving no children behind, efforts need to be taken by taking into cognisance the level of learning across the entire range of students, quality of teaching-learning methods, educational content and resources and proper assessment of both teachers and students.

Teachers' professional competencies and moral and ethical standards will play a defining role in all these. The use of digital literacy, the quality and inclusivity of infrastructure, and, most importantly, adequate resource allocation will be important against this backdrop.

An issue that deserves priority attention is the extension of compulsory primary education from class V to class VIII. This was planned to be introduced by 2018, as was mentioned in the National Education Policy 2010. However, the policy is yet to be implemented.

It is rather disappointing to note the decreasing trend of budgetary allocation for education in Bangladesh. This is way lower than what is required. The education budget for FY 2023-24 was 11.6 per cent compared to 14.4 per cent in FY 2016-17. As percentage of the GDP (1.6 per cent) the FY 2023-24 allocation was the lowest in recent times, coming down from 2.5 per cent in FY 2016-17. The share is also one of the lowest among the LDCs and much lower than the UNESCO-recommended share (4 per cent -6 per cent of the GDP). Higher allocation for education is the need of the hour. At the same time, accountability, efficiency, and optimum utilisation of allocated resources will need to be ensured.

Based on the Education Watch Study and other secondary data from both government and non-state sources, the key challenges facing Bangladesh's education system are the followings:

Quality of Education: The quality of education in many schools and colleges in Bangladesh has emerged as a major concern. Outdated teaching methods, lack of qualified teachers, and inadequate infrastructure result in subpar learning experiences and unsatisfactory learning outcomes.

Access to Education: While there have been improvements in recent years, access to education, particularly in rural and remote areas, has remained a major challenge. Many children, more specifically girls, are still not able to attend school due to factors such as poverty, distance, and social and cultural norms. Children with disabilities, both physical and mental-psychological, are deprived of the special care they require in the school environment.

Overcrowded Classrooms: Overcrowded classrooms are common, particularly in urban areas. This undermines effective teaching and learning as it does not allow individual attention to students which is required for good learning outcomes.

Lack of Proper Curricula Implementation: There are concerns as regards teaching quality as per the demands of the curricula. Also, sometimes, contents of the curricula don't match the actual needs of the students, requirements of next level of education and the needs of students in rural settings.

Poor Teacher Quality and Training: Quality of teachers tends to vary widely. Many educators are not appropriately qualified and lack proper training. This has an adverse impact on the overall quality of education that students receive.

Exam-centric Assessment: An examination-centric education system places enormous pressure on students, parents and teachers. Rote learning and memorisation are often encouraged and emphasised to enable students to perform well in exams. This goes against developing students' critical thinking ability and practical application of the imparted knowledge.

Gender Disparities: While efforts are being made to improve gender parity in education, there is still significant gender disparity, particularly in rural areas. Girls sometimes experience limited access to education due to cultural and social norms. Girls in need of special care and attention are doubly handicapped.

Weak Technical and Vocational Education: Bangladesh education system has historically focused more on academic education rather than on hands-on technical and vocational education. Embedding an interest in practical/vocational work, from an early stage, has been missing in the country's education system.

Infrastructure and Inadequate Resources: Many schools in Bangladesh lacked proper infrastructure, including basic facilities such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity. Lack of educational resources, such as textbooks and teaching materials, remains a concern.

Lack of Conducive Environment: A conducive socio-political environment is necessary for the education system to function well. Sometimes, educational activities are disrupted and disturbed because of local factors and political and other reasons. These cause the students to miss out on valuable class time which undermines learning outcomes.

Rote Learning vs. Critical Thinking: The emphasis on rote learning and memorisation means that emphasis is not put on developing critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and creativity. These tend to leave life-time negative footprints on children.

Mismatch with the Job Market: Education system is not prepared to meet the needs of the job market and tomorrow's demands as regards skills sets. This undermines employability and creates a gap between the job-seeker's competencies and the employer's expectations.

Efforts to address the above challenges call for a comprehensive and whole of society approach. These include implementing policies and programmes that promote inclusive education, providing financial support to families in need, creating safe and accessible learning environments and raising awareness in the society about the importance of quality education for all children. Government agencies, educators, parents, local communities and other non-state actors, as also development partners, will need to work together to address the emerging challenges, particularly keeping in the focus educational opportunities of Bangladesh's marginalised children. Some initiatives have already been put in place in this regard, but many others are required. The efforts need to be continued on a sustainable basis.

Following are some recommendations and key action points for the policymakers to reflect on and act upon in order to meet national aspirations concerning education of children and attain SDG 4, by keeping the concerns and interests of the left behind and vulnerable children at the centre of attention.

Recommendations

Continue remedial efforts to reduce learning gaps.

- i. Conduct school-based assessment for proper identification of students with learning loss and measure the extent of loss.
- ii. Develop a school-based remedial plan based on findings of the assessment.
- iii. Provide school-based coaching to help cope with respective grade-level lessons for identified students who are not adequately prepared or are generally weak.
- iv. Provide psycho-social support for students' mental well-being.

Ensure quality of curricula, appropriate teaching methods and proper assessment tools.

- i. Ensure mother tongue-based education for all children, including those belonging to ethnic minority groups.

- ii. Take steps to promote active learning approaches such as project-based learning, collaborative activities, hands-on experiments and real-world problem-solving skills.
- iii. Incorporate appropriate technology in teaching methods towards enhanced engagement and learning experience, while ensuring that children learn to use technology properly.
- iv. Implement a variety of assessment techniques, including formative assessment (quiz, class discussion, peer assessment) and summative assessment (projects, presentations) for comprehensive assessment of students' learning progress.
- v. Implement extra-curricular activities in all schools in order to strengthen students' confidence, skills and team building. In doing so, ensure that this is done in an inclusive manner so that no children are left behind, particularly those belonging to the marginalised groups.

Ensure recruitment of qualified teachers and take steps for their professional development.

- i. Ensure recruitment of teachers on the basis of merit. Provide proper incentives to qualified graduates so that they take up the teaching profession. Provide appropriate monetary compensation to teachers. Establish a Teacher Recruitment Commission as per the Education Policy 2020 without delay.
- ii. Recruit teachers from ethnic communities for schools located in ethnic areas.
- iii. Include child development and psychology, interactive learning, social-emotional learning, assessment strategy, and blended education, along with subject-based topics, while designing curricula for teachers' training programmes.
- iv. Arrange psycho-social first-aider training programmes for teachers to equip them to deal with students' mental well-being and ensure a safe learning environment.
- v. Promote 'Shikkhok Batayon' so that teachers have a common platform for sharing of experience and learning.
- vi. Strengthen teacher training programmes to ensure that all students are taught by properly trained teachers. Teachers, including retired ones with proven track records, may be engaged as master trainers. Learnings from best-case methods need to be widely disseminated. Education officials should also be required to undergo basic teacher training.

Undertake actions to reduce inequalities arising from lack of access to education.

- i. Generate disaggregated data covering all marginalised communities, including ethnic minorities, towards proper monitoring of learning outcomes.
- ii. Increase the amount of stipend for all students so that their education-related expenses can be covered. At the initial stage, this amount should be at least 500 taka per month per student.

- iii. Establish schools with residential facilities in hard-to-reach areas, including char, haor, and hilly areas.
- iv. Introduce a special incentive programme for dropout students (e.g., victims of child marriage and child labour) to bring them back to school.
- v. Provide school-based coaching to weak students and slow-learners.
- vi. Prepare and implement a plan for universal and inclusive education which takes due care of the needs of children from ethnic groups and marginalised communities and children with disabilities and special needs.
- vii. Implement capacity-building training programmes for teachers on universal, inclusive education.
- viii. Accelerate implementation of the Multi-Lingual Education (MLE) programme in areas where curricula have been developed in languages of ethnic minorities.
- ix. Expand the mid-day meals programme as per the National Meal Policy 2019. While the government's initiative to reintroduce the mid-day meal programme is a welcome move, this needs to be expanded to cover all students in all primary schools, in a time-bound manner, taking into consideration students' nutritional needs. In reaching this target, prioritise underprivileged and poverty-prone areas and disadvantaged groups, including ethnic minorities and schools in char, haor and hill areas.

Integrate technology and blended approach in education.

- i. Accelerate the process of embedding Blended Education in education planning so that resources are effectively used. Traditional classroom teaching needs to be complemented by other modern tools, and students should have the option and opportunity of self-paced learning.
- ii. Ensure that students from disadvantaged and marginalised communities have access to digital devices to equip them for blended education. They should be provided with access to online learning platforms, virtual classrooms and webinars, e-books and digital libraries, mobile learning, etc.
- iii. Introduce innovative training programmes for capacity building of teachers and professional development in a way that equips them properly to use digital technology for teaching purposes.

Facilitate parental, community, and civil society engagement.

- i. Arrange periodic training programmes for members of the School Management Committees to raise awareness as regards respective roles and responsibilities.
- ii. Strengthen PTAs (Parent Teacher Associations) in all schools. Ensure that at least one member from each of the marginalised/ethnic groups (where feasible) is

included. More women/mothers should be represented. At least one member from a reputed local NGO should be included in the PTA.

- iii. Organise regular engagement events with participation of parents and representatives of local community members living in school catchment area.
- iv. Government bodies should develop collaborative space and partnerships with relevant national level civil society organisations/platforms in order to promote the cause of education from a whole of society approach.

Ensure adequate allocation in education and develop education law.

- i. Raise budgetary allocation for education to at least 15 per cent, and gradually to 20 per cent of the national budget by 2026 for full implementation of the National Education Policy 2010.
- ii. Allocate necessary budget for proper training of teachers to enable them to meet the requirements of the new curricula.
- iii. Increase salaries and other monetary benefits for teachers so that bright and talented graduates are attracted to the teaching profession.
- iv. Provide education scholarships/grants/financial aid programmes for students from disadvantaged and marginalised communities to help them underwrite their expenditures and to cover such items as costs of uniforms and other related educational expenses.
- v. Undertake initiatives to extend primary education from class V to class VIII and establish linkages with the pre-vocational education system.
- vi. Introduce a decentralised education system and strengthen accountability and monitoring mechanisms for efficient utilisation of the education budget and delivery of expected outcomes.
- vii. Prepare and enact a comprehensive education law as per National Education Policy 2010 and ensure adequate financing for its implementation.

Concluding Observations

Ensuring quality education at the primary level in Bangladesh has emerged as a task that calls for heightened and urgent attention on the part of policymakers and all concerned stakeholders. Bangladesh's sustainable dual graduation hinges on adequately equipped human resources. In this backdrop, quality primary education must be seen as the foundation of the country's aspiration to attain the SDGs by 2030 and transition to a high-income country by 2041. Delivery of quality education at the primary level must include all children, by leaving no children behind. The needs of children from marginalised communities and spatially disadvantaged groups must be given due priority in view of this.

This will demand comprehensive and targeted interventions from all stakeholders including the government, concerned educational institutions, local communities, and development partners.

The Policy Brief underscores the urgency of addressing the multifaceted challenges facing the country's primary education sector. The Brief offers a number of recommendations towards addressing the attendant challenges in the areas of design and content of curricula, quality of teachers, effectiveness of classroom teaching, improvement of nutritional scenario, required infrastructure, inclusivity aspects, proper tools of assessment, and adoption of digital tools to improve access and quality of teaching. The Brief has argued that to what extent today's children will be able to cater to the demands of tomorrow's job market will hinge on the foundation created through today's primary education system. The government must be committed to investing in the future of the children and this will need to be manifested in adequate budgetary allocation, efficacy of targeted interventions and efficient delivery of outcomes. Only today's children, well-endowed with the necessary skills and competencies, will be able to propel Bangladesh towards a sustainable and high pace of development by helping reap the potential benefits of the narrowing window of demographic dividend.

6

**Reducing Out-Of-Pocket
Expenditure to
Improve Universal Access to
Quality Health Care**

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Background and Context

Over the past five decades, Bangladesh has made significant progress in a number of important health sector areas. Maternal mortality rate has come down by almost two-thirds, and infant and child mortality rates were reduced by 44 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively; Bangladesh's total fertility rate is currently approaching replacement level and is the lowest in South Asia (except for Sri Lanka). A number of diseases have either been eradicated or brought under control, e.g., smallpox, malaria and diarrhoeal diseases; blindness prevention has been reduced by 35 per cent. With the mainstreaming of nutrition interventions in the public sector, growing agricultural self-sufficiency and supportive policies, wasting among children has been brought down by half, while stunting and underweight prevalence have also come down to some extent. Earlier, Bangladesh met many of the health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) targets including in areas of water and sanitation.

A number of factors have contributed to the aforesaid achievements: timely policies, low-cost solutions, large-scale and innovative public health interventions, engagement of NGOs as delivery agents, use of technology and active involvement of the private sector in health service delivery, to name only a few. However, presumably, the low-hanging fruits have already been reaped, and the country now faces the challenges of covering the 'last mile' and ensuring the quality of health-related service delivery.

The 'last mile' and quality assurance are, in all likelihood, going to be uphill tasks. Besides issues and challenges that are internal to the health sector, the ecosystem within which the sector operates has emerged as a key concern, plagued by a number of problems including lack of good governance, growing inequities and rising inequality, a poverty rate which still stands at about 18 per cent and stressed macro-economic environment following the Covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

Bangladesh has a pluralistic and fragmented structure in the delivery of health services where public and private facilities, formal and informal service providers, and rural and urban health systems exist simultaneously, without a formal interfacing and defined point of accountability. The current health structure and health system had evolved during a time when the country's population was predominantly rural, literacy rate was low, and financial affordability was rather limited. In this backdrop, a multi-tier rural based health infrastructure was put into place supported by an extensive doorstep delivery of services and information. However, times have changed, and it is now important to think about introducing universal health coverage (UHC) in line with the SDGs (Goal 3) and Bangladesh's aspiration to be a developed country by 2041.

The UHC envisages that all people have access to the full range of quality health services they need, when and where they need those, without being impeded by financial and other obstacles. Here there are many challenges though: rapid rural-to-urban migration, changing disease patterns, changing needs and expectations of patients/clients as a result of increased

economic capacity and lifestyle changes and needs, a burgeoning private sector primarily motivated by profit and a host of other social, economic, climatological and geographical factors. These are pressing challenges that stand in the way of achieving UHC through the prevailing health sector system. Achieving the ambitious goal of UHC by 2030 is indeed going to be a formidable challenge also in view of the limited time span to the target timeline, resource constraints and the complexity of the issues that will need to be addressed. Consequently, hard choices will have to be made. In this backdrop, programmes targeting the most vulnerable with the highest impact will need to be prioritised in sequencing the actions to be taken.

The Policy Brief has been developed on the basis of existing knowledge, literature review and expert opinion, and aims to review the relevant issues and identify the challenges and opportunities. The Brief puts forward a set of concrete proposals to attain UHC in Bangladesh in alignment with SDG 3.

Two critically important issues at present stand as major barriers to achieving UHC: the issue of out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditure and addressing the needs of the left behind communities.

The largest chunk of total health expenditure (THE) in Bangladesh is financed by OOP expenditure which rose from 55 per cent in 1997 to 67 per cent at present. According to the National Health Account Database of the WHO, OOP expenditure is defined as any direct outlay of households, including gratuities and in-kind payments, paid to health practitioners and suppliers of pharmaceuticals, therapeutic appliances and other goods and services, whose primary intent is to contribute to the restoration or enhancement of the health status of individuals or population groups. In practice, OOP is a part of private health expenditure. To put it in perspective, Bangladesh's high OOP expenditure compares quite unfavourably with the global average of 32 per cent and is highest in South Asia.

The largest share of OOP expenditure in Bangladesh is on medicine (64 per cent), followed by hospital services (14 per cent) and diagnostics (8 per cent). This significantly large amount creates financial stress and distress for about 9 per cent of households in Bangladesh; this is four times higher for the poorest households compared to the richest ones. Indeed, this scenario somewhat takes the shine off the country's poverty alleviation successes of the last three decades. If several other expenditures associated with accessing health services that are not captured by the survey are added, including money spent on, e.g., transportation, accommodation, communication, food etc. of the patient and caregiver(s), the actual financial burden would be much bigger. As a matter of fact, the 2016 household survey data reveal that 4.5 per cent of the population (8.61 million people) fell into poverty because of the high health related expenditures (Sayem Ahmed et al., *International Health*, Volume 14, Issue 1, January 2022, Pages 84–96).

As is well known, a core element of the SDG agenda is to 'leave no one behind'. This concept envisages "a world of universal respect for equality and non-discrimination" between and

within countries, including gender equality, by reaffirming the responsibilities of all States to “respect, protect and promote human rights, without distinction of any kind”. A core aspect of ensuring equality is concerned with ensuring access to quality health services for all, without exception. In this backdrop, the SDG agenda invokes the challenge of reaching the marginalised, vulnerable, and excluded groups and addressing the many facets of marginalisation, vulnerabilities exclusion. The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), in a 2017 study, identified thirteen facets of marginalisation: income, gender, geographic location, life cycle, civil identity, disability, education and skills, health, occupation, religion and ethnicity, sexual orientation and shock-induced vulnerability (Quest for Inclusive Transformation of Bangladesh- Who Not to Be Left Behind; Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh; Centre for Policy Dialogue; Dec 2017).

Taking the above into account, and in view of providing the necessary health care services, there is an urgent need to prioritise the needs of women and children, along with people living in hard-to-reach and climate-affected areas (haor, chars, coastal areas), indigenous communities (CHT residents, Santals, Garos, tea estate workers), slum dwellers, people living with disabilities including mental health disabilities, LGBTQ and religiously ostracised groups (e.g., Dalits). In addition to these groups, a growing number of workers also constitute vulnerable groups at the risk of exclusion due to their work environment and the labour market scenario in Bangladesh- men and women and young boys and girls belonging to the workforce in factories and establishments in the formal (e.g., garments) and informal sectors (e.g., households, restaurants, car garages, micro-enterprises) and in hazardous industries (e.g., ship breaking, lathe machines). Health-related needs of these groups also demand attention.

Issues impeding achievement of UHC

In order to address the important but complex issues of reducing OOP and leaving no one behind, several key health sector related challenges will need to be adequately addressed. These include the following:

Drug pricing and availability

Drugs account for 64 per cent of OOP expenditure. No doubt, the drug policy of 1982 had contributed in a significant way by instilling some discipline in the pharmaceutical market, through the introduction of essential medicines list, banning combination drugs and encouraging and incentivising local manufacturing activities, to name only a few. Regrettably, following the 2005 and 2016 revisions, the policy has become more subservient to the business and commercial interests. This is manifested in the scaling down of the number of essential drugs, withdrawal of restrictions on combination drugs which are sometimes even ten times more expensive, inclusion of pharmaceutical representatives in drug policy review and allowing pharmaceutical companies to fix ‘rational’ MRPs for drugs instead of the mark-up based formula adopted in view of the 1982 drug policy. In June 2022, DGDA hiked the prices of 53 essential drugs; the prices of two commonly used drugs- paracetamol and metronidazole-increased by almost 70 per cent. Although not as highly priced as in some of the developed countries, given the high share of OOP expenses

on drugs, the impact of such 'drug price rationalisation' was likely to have a significant adverse impact on the availability of affordable treatment in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh meets 97 per cent of its needs for drugs through domestic production. However, about 90 per cent of the active pharmaceutical ingredients (API) have to be imported, mainly from two countries, China and India. The dependence on the import of APIs increases production costs and makes the industry vulnerable to supply shocks, as happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. An industrial park for the production of active ingredients was set up a decade ago but is yet to be functional. A fully functional API park would allow local pharmaceutical companies to source at least half of their needs locally, bringing down the costs of drug production and, thereby, retail prices significantly. The earliest operationalisation of the API park demands priority attention on the part of policymakers.

While drugs are distributed free of cost from public health facilities, there are indirect costs to be paid, e.g., transport costs for coming to the centre, lost earnings etc. Also, while availability has increased in recent times, anecdotal information indicates that these facilities run out of supply after the first couple of weeks of the month. Powerful individuals exert influence and get drugs from these facilities by depriving others, particularly given the limited supply. Drugs not included in the essential medicines list have to be purchased from private facilities. Private pharmacies are doing a brisk business selling over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription drugs. The nexus between doctors, pharmaceutical companies and private diagnostic facilities, often through aggressive marketing practices including payment of commissions, is widely known.

Health needs of vulnerable groups

Bangladesh has quite a sophisticated and elaborate multi-tier health infrastructure in rural areas. In contrast, the urban scenario is rather disorganised. A modest network of primary health care centres run by NGOs through a project administered by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives Ministry, along with a few dispensaries of the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, are the main public sector facilities in urban areas. A thriving private sector which includes pharmacies, private clinics, diagnostic centres, hospitals and private practitioners fills the gap, providing services of varying quality at relatively high cost. Informal providers with dubious training and experience are also part of this provider system. However, oversight, accountability and control over their prescribing practices are rather weak.

Barring those living in hard-to-reach and climate-affected areas or the indigenous population groups, a large part of the vulnerable groups mentioned earlier reside in cities, for the most part in slums, which constitute 35 per cent of the population of the cities. Due to a host of reasons, these people are not able to access affordable health-related services. In the hard-to-reach and climate-affected regions and among indigenous and marginalised groups such as the dalits, tea garden workers and gypsies (bedes) who are scattered across the country, accessing services from health centres remains a challenge. Geographical factors matter as

well as social standing and the stigma they often experience in receiving services from health facilities. Those with physical and mental challenges face additional difficulties. Health facilities are often not disability friendly.

Lack of regulation, accountability and governance

Due to lack of resources and leadership, institutions vested with the responsibility of enforcing and overseeing health-related regulations have failed so far to play their due role. The adverse results of this can often be seen in the way private health sector functions: patients and their families are exploited financially, wrong treatment is meted out without accountability, medicines are over-prescribed, and unnecessary investigations are advised. In the public sector as well, where government doctors often cross over to the private sector for private practice, clients are referred to private practice and private institutions, increasing costs and creating inconvenience. The licensing of private sector facilities is fractured, with DGHS hamstrung by a lack of adequate human resources and efficient systems to carry out the mandated tasks. The Medical Practice and Private Clinics and Laboratories Ordinance, promulgated in 1982, has not been reviewed since; many provisions have become obsolete in the backdrop of significant changes in the way health services are currently provided. Half-hearted instructions by various government agencies at different times have had little or no effect in raising efficacy and performance of the health sector. Many of these facilities tend to cut corners to drive profit and compromise quality. Several high court orders with directives to set prices for specific services and the constitution of committees to draft various regulations are yet to be complied with.

Culture of nexus and kickbacks

Breaking the unholy alliance between the doctors, on the one hand, and diagnostic facilities, pharmaceutical companies and hospitals, on the other, would have a highly significant positive impact on the price patients pay for drugs and diagnostic tests. Commissions doctors receive for referring pathological tests are estimated to be as high as 40 per cent of total prescription costs. If this commission did not have to be paid, the prices of diagnostic tests would have come down significantly. The same is the case for medicines and hospital referrals.

Sub-optimal efficiency and lack of quality of care in facilities

Very few public health centres work at full capacity. Health facilities are not able to deliver the expected services because of a lack of trained and skilled providers. Often this is because vacancies are not filled, and doctors and health staff are absent. These problems are further accentuated by the absence of appropriate facilities and equipment, lack of adequate and smooth supply of drugs and dismissive and disrespectful attitude towards patients. Other problems include lack of hygienic conditions and long waiting times. Health service seekers from marginalised communities suffer the most. Consequently, people are discouraged from going to public health facilities.

Health centres sometimes refuse to take in and treat serious patients, apprehensive of the risk of reprisal from relatives and the local community if something goes wrong. Victims of

road traffic accidents, for example, or delivery patients arriving with signs of eclampsia or haemorrhage, are often referred away, sometimes even without stabilising the patient. This sometimes proves fatal, increasing costs and creating serious inconvenience for the patient.

In this backdrop, getting the public sector hospitals to work at full capacity and render the full range of mandated services has emerged as an urgent task. This is necessary to help more people get treatment in public health facilities near where they live, and this will also reduce OOP expenses.

Lack of local-level accountability

In the public sector, the lines of accountability are clearly laid out within the tiered health structure; linkages of this structure with the administrative wings of the government, including local government representatives are also spelled out clearly. While the institutional and routine aspects of accountability structure works to some extent (e.g. holding of various coordination meetings, reporting, flow of logistics, etc.), the effectiveness of the present system in terms of protecting patients' interest, tackling absenteeism, maintenance of facilities at community clinics and upkeep of equipment etc. tends to fall through the crack. Absenteeism remains a particularly difficult issue and a cause for concern. It can be traced to structural issues in the health system, the mismatch between working conditions and aspirations and career goals of health professionals and their socio-political networks. Those having influence, power and access to higher authorities can afford to be absent for long periods, overburdening and de-motivating their colleagues who lack connection and thus have to remain present at the clinics and facilities (Naher N et al., 2022). Absenteeism among doctors in the Bangladesh health system: What are the structural drivers? Qualitative Research in Health. 2. 100089. 10.1016/j.ssmqr.2022.100089).

Community Support Groups for the Community Clinics and Hospital Management Committees at the upazila and district levels headed by the MP could have played an important oversight role to ensure that public health facilities work effectively. However, sadly enough, these are either totally inactive or do not take their responsibilities with due seriousness. As regards the private sector, regulations to ensure accountability to patients and clients are very weak.

Recommendations

In the backdrop of the above discussion, the following recommendations are proposed to reduce OOP expenses and address the healthcare needs of particularly the vulnerable groups:

Make quality drugs affordable for all, especially for the poor and vulnerable.

Review and expand the essential drugs list. The 1980 National Drug Policy listed 150 drugs as essential. However, in 1995, the government issued a special communique listing only 117 drugs as essential. The 2016 revision of the National Drug Policy listed 285 essential

drugs. The list is considered inadequate as it includes only 37 out of 309 drugs required for the treatment of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). The list ought to be updated on a regular basis through review and revision every two years, as suggested by the WHO. The range of essential drugs whose prices can be actively controlled by the government should be enhanced.

Reduce prices of other drug. Since drugs constitute 64 per cent of OOP expenses, there is a need to reduce and control the price of drugs by revisiting the drug pricing policy and by enforcing strict monitoring of price.

Accelerate the production of active ingredients in-country. This is essential to reduce reliance on imports and to help bring down prices of locally produced medicines. This will also help avoid supply system disruptions.

Put in place a modern drug stock management system on an urgent basis. A national IT-based centralised drug-stock management system will ensure that health facilities get the required amount of drug supply in time, and these could be distributed smoothly by maintaining the required quality of drugs. This will help monitor the availability of drugs and other health commodities, forestall drug shortages and stock-outs, improve drug storage, track inventory, and strengthen stock management.

Take special measures to address the healthcare needs of vulnerable groups.

Undertake specific interventions for marginalised communities and those living in hard-to-reach areas. The government needs to team up with NGOs/CSOs to make services accessible to these groups by addressing the barriers mentioned in the previous section. Towards this, there is a need to deploy innovative methods to bring health services closer to these communities (e.g., through telemedicine, satellite/mobile clinics). The travel of needy people to service-providing centers ought to be facilitated (e.g., by providing transport services such as water ambulance). There are a number of interventions that have been successfully introduced by the country's NGO sector from which the government can learn. Resources should be deployed for their replication in public health service delivery.

In phases, make all service facilities disability-friendly. Despite repeated commitments by the government, most public facilities remain without proper disability access; such access is even more limited in private sector health facilities. The government must make it a priority to install at least the minimum facilities such as ramps, disability-friendly receptions and toilets in all public health facilities. This should be made a mandatory requirement for issuing licenses and renewal of licenses for private facilities.

Introduce prepaid cards for households below the national poverty line. In view of this, experience can be borrowed from the two types of prepaid cards under the Ayushman Bharat - Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PMJAY) and ABHA schemes introduced by the Indian government which allow low-income people to access services from empaneled facilities. Having a frontloaded card, with a reasonable amount of money, for all those

included in, e.g., the VGF or other social protection/safety net schemes, will help address emergency situations when people belonging to disadvantaged communities face emergency health issues or experience chronic illnesses.

Right to Health Law. Although the Bangladesh Constitution pledges right to life and protection of health, there are no specific laws to enforce these pledges. Lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the surface the urgent need for this. While there may be issues with enforcement of such a law, its enactment itself will provide the disadvantaged people at least the legal means to claim their rights (similar to the case with the Right to Information Act 2009).

Introduce a minimum benefit package for all on the condition that they first seek health services from the Upazila Health Complex. This will act as a referral system for further and more advanced treatment.

Undertake a thorough review of 'Shasthyo Shurokhsha Karmasuchi (SSK)' to examine the feasibility of its phase-wise expansion following necessary changes.

Improve regulation, accountability and governance by strengthening institutions.

Review, modernise and implement the 1982 Private Practice and Private Clinics and Laboratories Regulation Ordinance. The 1982 Ordinance has become redundant given that it was promulgated more than four decades ago. No doubt, the healthcare sector has undergone a phenomenal transformation over the past few years. The government needs to review and revise this Ordinance to develop an appropriate framework for which the private health sector can function effectively and be held accountable. Steps must be taken to ensure proper enforcement of the provisions of the revised Ordinance.

Strengthen jurisdiction and capacity of regulatory bodies. Government regulatory bodies, e.g., DGHS, DGFP, BMDC and DGDA, need to be strengthened in terms of staff capacity, automation and digitisation, financial resources, adequate logistical support and introduction of new ways of doing business. These are required to strengthen the capacity of these institutions to successfully perform the full range of activities they are mandated to carry out.

Create National Health Authority to oversee the quality of health care. A high-level committee at the MOHFW level, with jurisdiction to work inter-ministerially, needs to be established to ensure standard quality of health care across public and private sectors. Various tools may be deployed towards this including accreditation, monitoring visits and regulation of technical as well as ethical aspects to improve the quality of care giving. The committee will work progressively to implement the 'Right to Health'.

Break the culture of nexus and kickbacks by strengthening governance.

Prepare specific guidelines for ethical promotion of drugs and diagnostics. A set of strict guidelines is needed either as a corollary to the 2016 National Drug Policy or as a standalone

government directive to regulate the marketing of drugs and promotional benefits and kickbacks given to prescribers and service providers by pharmaceutical companies and diagnostic laboratories. A monitoring system supported by the GRS system of the DGHS should be put in place to collect information and investigate patient complaints as regards overcharging. Improving overall governance of the health sector has emerged as a priority that needs to be addressed.

Maximise efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery in public health facilities.

Take steps so that all public health facilities work at full capacity. Filling up all vacant positions and adequate provision of drug supplies and medical equipment are crucial to making a wide range of health care available to a larger number of people at their doorsteps. This, in turn, will bring down OOP expenses for the patients and reduce the harassment and hassles of going to distant places for treatment.

Manage waiting time. Long waiting time (long queues at various public health facilities) is a major deterrent that discourages people from accessing services from public health facilities. To reduce this, the demand for the various services must be reliably estimated, and adequate human resources and system of support, including logistics and supplies, must be ensured.

Address behavioural issues. More respectful behaviour by health service providers will lead to patients being empowered to seek and get the services they need. This involves a significant cultural change, the foundation of which needs to be established during the education and training of various categories of health service providers. Behavioural aspects must be monitored, assessed and overseen during the working life of all health workers.

Build model pharmacies. The government should take initiatives to establish more model pharmacies across the country to ensure consistent supply and required quality of drugs. Gradually, all pharmacies and drug stores should be brought under the DGDA enlistment. Model pharmacies should have trained graduate pharmacists in attendance.

Establish local level accountability of health service delivery.

Activate all local level communities without delay. Community Clinic Groups, Community Clinic Support Groups, Union Family Planning Committees and MP-headed Upazila Health Management Committees are well positioned to support health service delivery at respective local levels. These can also hold the service providers accountable to the local communities. As it happens, these committees currently remain either non-functional or only occasionally functional. These committees must be activated without delay through proper government directives by putting in place standard operating procedures. These bodies must provide oversight of the work of health facilities at local level and address locally solvable problems. Their work needs to be supported.

At present, there is no system in place to capture client feedback. CSOs/NGOs should set up platforms for service users which would give voice to the service receivers. Such

platforms could help bridge the attendant gaps in communication. Some allocations on the part of the government can help establish and promote such local platforms.

Concluding Observations

Although ensuring UHC by 2030 appears to be an uphill task for a country with such formidable challenges facing its health sector, specific steps, as outlined above, could bring in significant positive changes. Three issues are important in this backdrop: political will to bring about the expected changes; adequate budgetary provisions to underwrite expenses; and government's willingness to collaborate with non-state actors in the delivery of quality health services to the needy. GO-non-state sector partnerships could also be an effective tool to break the unholy nexus involving bureaucracy, private clinics, diagnostic centres and health service providers. No doubt, it is difficult to generate political will without a strong commitment from the leadership of political parties. Commitments made by political parties in their respective election manifestos will help to generate the required political will, and hopefully drive concrete actions when the party is in power. Political commitment is also necessary to overcome the entrenched interests of health professionals and vested groups in the health sector who are also important vote banks and tend to wield substantial power and influence through their respective associations.

Implementation of the recommendations presented here will no doubt entail significant investment in the health sector. With the increasing GDP and resources available to the government, Bangladesh can certainly afford to invest more in quality health service delivery. The government's current budget allocation for health, at just 5.4 per cent of total public spending, is far below the WHO recommended level of 15 per cent. Even out of this limited amount of allocation, typically about 20–30 per cent remains unutilised. In the immediate term, the government can deliver more by implementing the budget in full and by avoiding duplicative allocations. At the same time, the government must gradually increase budgetary allocations for the health sector, preferably by the equivalent of 1 per cent of the national budget each year, over the next several years, to reach the WHO-recommended target.

Of the total health expenditure of Bangladesh, 25 per cent goes to primary health care, 39 per cent to secondary and 36 per cent to tertiary health care. On the other hand, it has been found that the largest share of the country's healthcare seekers is in want of primary healthcare. The structure of resource allocation must be rethought in view of this, and allocation for primary health care needs to be increased to 35-40 per cent of the total by the end of the Eighth FYP (Unnayan Shamannay, September 2022. Analysis of health budget allocation and expenditure in Bangladesh- a study commissioned by Bangladesh Health Watch). Bangladesh will eventually need to transition from its current supply-side financing model towards demand-side financing. Bolder and more extensive plans are needed for this based on the current experience of SSK.

Regrettably, over the last decade or so, there has been a gradual distancing between government and civil society in the health sector. A stronger role by the civil society, which is fragmented and without bold leadership at the moment, along with more openness on the part of policymakers to listen to the voice of the civil society and their recommendations, could lead to the emergence of strong win-win public-non-state actor partnerships in health service delivery. At the same time, a more open-minded bureaucratic leadership is required to break the barriers of bureaucratic control and traditional thinking, overcome vested interests and introduce new ways of doing things by involving a whole-of-society approach.

Without a healthy and productive workforce, the country cannot realise its development potentials and meet the demands of her journey in the twenty-first century. Achieving the objectives of UHC within a reasonable time frame must be seen as a critically important milestone in Bangladesh's mid-term journey. This work needs to start without delay and in a collaborative manner involving all relevant stakeholders both within and outside of the health sector. A strong time-bound political commitment is a must if the UHC is to become a reality in Bangladesh in the foreseeable future.

**Promoting Universal Social
Protection System and the Need
for Targeting Disadvantaged
Groups**

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Background and Context

Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in terms of socio-economic advancement indicators, sustaining an average yearly GDP growth of close to 6 per cent since the early 1990s, accelerating the pace in recent times, and markedly reducing poverty incidence from nearly 60 per cent to about 18.7 per cent in 2022. However, significant challenges remain in tackling poverty and addressing the manifold vulnerabilities that inform the growth narrative. To recall, only 28 per cent of the country's population is covered by at least one social safety net programme. In urban areas, social protection coverage is even lower, at only about 10 per cent according to the Household Income Expenditure Survey data of 2016. Additionally, the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic of the recent past has exposed major weaknesses in the prevailing social protection system in Bangladesh. Extensive job cuts triggered by the pandemic revealed significant shortcomings in the system as it failed to offer proper assistance to individuals who became suddenly jobless.

People belonging to the marginalised groups suffered the most in this backdrop. Whilst the pandemic is now behind, this time it is the rising inflation which is affecting the lives and livelihoods of particularly the low-income households and vulnerable groups. They are struggling to keep up with the increasing cost of daily commodities; many have to stand in long lines for government food support programmes. In addition to the above, Bangladesh remains prone to climate-induced challenges that have significant adverse implications for climate-stressed regions, with the difficulties no doubt being more pronounced for marginalised groups.

In the above backdrop, more specifically in view of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which has the “Leave No One Behind” (LNOB) spirit at the centre of focus, the case for establishing a Universal Social Protection system (USP) in Bangladesh has emerged as a key deliverable that demands urgent attention and action on the part of policymakers. Indeed, Bangladesh's commitment to social protection is enshrined in the country's constitution. Article 15 of the constitution stipulates that securing the right to social protection is a fundamental state responsibility.

As Bangladesh aims to become a developed country by 2041, establishing a USP system ought to be seen as a key component of its development agendas. To note, in developed countries such as Finland, Canada, Japan, and the UK, more than 90 per cent of the population is covered under social protection support system.

The introduction of the USP system will allow Bangladesh to strengthen social protection across four broad aspects: universal coverage, comprehensive protection in terms of risks covered, adequacy of protection across the life cycle, and sustainability of the social protection system.

While Bangladesh has a long history of providing social protection support through dedicated schemes, the adoption of the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015

ought to be seen as an important milestone in re-energising the country's social protection system. The NSSS lays out several reform priorities towards a USP system in Bangladesh. It is important to note that the concept of "universal" social protection goes hand in hand with the aspiration of building an inclusive society in Bangladesh, which is at the centre of the NSSS.

Having a clear understanding about the core elements of USP, in line with the NSSS, is a necessary first step to ensure that no one is left behind. The core ideas informing USP, in line with the concept of a welfare state, need to be appropriately understood. It is pertinent to examine each element of what defines a "universal" social protection system:

- USP refers to a system of policies and programmes which provide equitable access to social protection to all citizens and support them throughout their lifespan to deal with deprivations and risks to their livelihood and well-being.
- A universal system should ensure 100 per cent coverage, i.e., everyone will be entitled to social protection in consideration of their particular level of vulnerability.
- The next element is comprehensive protection in terms of risks covered, which implies that a USP system should be cognisant of the various risks that may affect the lives and livelihoods of citizens from the pre-natal period to old age. This expands upon the traditional view of social protection (as defined in the constitution) and includes addressing a wider range of issues such as climate risk, socio-economic marginalisation, and overall well-being.
- The USP system refers to "adequacy", which means that the protection provided should be adequate to address the specific challenges which originate from specific vulnerabilities.
- The USP system needs to be sustainable, meaning that they do not exacerbate resource constraints, but rather ensures a financing structure aligned with the government's fiscal and macroeconomic objectives and geared towards sustainability.
- USP entails ensuring that every individual is adequately safeguarded against various risks across their entire lifespan. However, it is important to note that this does not necessarily imply that everyone should receive benefits on a continuous basis, as is the case with the Universal Basic Income (UBI). The idea is also to help the target population graduate out of the scheme by creating opportunities for a decent income.

It is important to note that countries have chosen a diverse range of ways to achieve USP. A number of countries provide universal social protection for children through either a single universal child grant or a blend of multiple programmes. For instance, in Argentina, over 80 percent of children benefit from a combination of different programmes, which include the followings:

- **Social Assistance:** Financial aid and support provided to individuals or families facing economic hardships and vulnerabilities, typically funded by the government and/or charitable organisations.
- **Social Insurance:** A system in which individuals and employers make regular contributions to a pooled fund, and in return, individuals are entitled to benefits such as healthcare and pension, when specific life events such as illness or retirement occur.

It is thus worth noting that there is no one size fit all approach to establishing a USP scheme. Bangladesh's socio-economic context and specific vulnerabilities will need to be considered while rolling out the USP system. To this end, the spirit of the SDGs, "Leave No One Behind (LNOB)", should serve as one of the key guiding principles that inform the USP framework. The LNOB concept will also help identify the most vulnerable communities, and hence the most in need, in view of social protection. There are many disadvantaged groups in the country, such as the persons with disabilities, ethnic communities, sex workers, transgender community, etc., who suffer from specific vulnerabilities. It has been observed that these groups tend to be left far behind due to a combination of social, economic, political and cultural factors which expose them to accentuated risks. Designing a USP scheme with an LNOB lens will allow the government to ensure that social protection reaches everyone who needs it and to the extent they need it.

In light of these, this Policy Brief puts forward several actionable recommendations, expected to pave the way for launching a comprehensive USP scheme in Bangladesh that will enable vulnerable citizens to address various shocks they are likely to face across lifecycle phases.

Recommendations

Conduct a comprehensive needs assessment by keeping vulnerable groups in the focus, with help of community-based and participatory approach.

As was noted, Bangladesh has a range of vulnerable groups, each struggling with unique challenges in terms of vulnerabilities. However, the current social safety net programmes (SSNPs) have proved to be inadequate to tackle the situation. For example, the per capita benefits under cash transfer programmes are inadequate and arbitrarily determined. Also, it is important to note that the proliferation of fragmented programmes, as is the case now, is not good value for the money spent. There is a need for a holistic approach. A pragmatic approach over the short term would be to enhance and expand existing programmes to accommodate the needs of the disadvantaged groups. This could lay the foundation of the USP scheme over the medium term. For designing an appropriate USP scheme for Bangladesh, there is a need to carry out a thorough needs assessment for each vulnerable community at a disaggregated (e.g., district) level. Such assessment must take into cognisance inputs offered by community leaders and members through participatory social dialogues and consultations, both at national and grassroots levels. This will help design a more inclusive and responsive social protection system that considers the specific needs of

a diverse range of vulnerable communities and a broad range of vulnerabilities. The results of the needs assessment should inform the policy decision to scale up and expand existing social protection programmes and innovate new ones.

It is also important to note that such an exercise will help enhance social protection floors, i.e., the basic set of social protection guarantees provided to citizens according to international best practices. Effective social protection floors, in general, are found to ensure four guarantees:

- Essential healthcare services
- Income security for children
- Income security for the unemployed, underemployed, persons with disabilities, sick and the poor
- Income security for the elderly

Adopt and implement a pragmatic action plan by taking advantage of the needs assessment findings and engaging stakeholders through social dialogues.

A well-running USP scheme would entail rolling out an action plan. This will need to be designed by engaging with a range of stakeholders and by making critical policy decisions to be implemented across multiple years. In order to ensure that the programmes meet their intended purpose and are truly inclusive, social dialogues with key stakeholder groups, particularly with vulnerable and disadvantaged groups and communities, will be crucially important. Appropriately implemented, such social dialogues can form a fundamental building block for an LNOB-centred USP scheme.

With the help of such an inclusive and participatory approach policymakers will be able to identify and prioritise adaptation tools, legal frameworks, financing modalities, monitoring and evaluation methods and data requirements for introducing a comprehensive USP in Bangladesh. This will also help them to undertake sustainable and responsive initiatives. Informed by this, specific programmes may be designed and subsequently integrated with relevant national policies, plans and strategies.

Key stakeholders who will need to be involved in the process of consultations include, but are not limited to:

- Direct beneficiaries of the programmes.
- High-level policymakers, representatives of political parties and Members of Parliament.
- Local-level government functionaries such as Deputy Commissioners and local-level elected representatives such as Zila, Upazila and Union Parishad Members.

- Implementation facilitators include Ministry officials and other actors such as enlisted distributors of the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh's Open Market Sales programme.
- Civil Society Organisations and Rights Groups, particularly those advocating for the rights of vulnerable groups and communities.

Formulate appropriate and sustainable financing mechanisms for the USP scheme.

Once the fundamental principles of social protection are established in line with the constitution and national strategies and agendas, a clearly articulated mechanism for financing of the scheme will need to be framed. While many social protection schemes were implemented over the years, the reality of fiscal space has constrained the ability of the government to scale them up and raise entitlements. In this backdrop, it is critically important that a well-thought-out roadmap for financing the USP scheme is prepared which is able to operate on a sustainable basis.

According to an estimate carried out by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, an international organisation, Bangladesh will need to invest an additional 3.5 per cent of GDP in social protection to help close the existing income and health gaps. While this may not be a precise estimate, it does provide some indication about the range of resources required for implementing the proposed USP scheme.

Bangladesh's social protection system is, for the most part, tax-financed. The amount spent is equivalent to about 2.52 per cent of the GDP. The previous government had set a target of raising the tax-GDP ratio to 19.6 per cent by FY 2031 and 21.9 per cent by 2041, compared to 9.99 per cent targeted for FY 2024. If these targets were indeed achieved enough fiscal space would have been created to underwrite the growing needs of the economy and to pay for programmes such as the USP. That these were just lofty aspirations, without concrete follow-up measures, is borne out by the fact that tax-GDP ratio in FY 2024 actually turned out to be less than 8.5 per cent. Thus, it is important that the government gives the highest priority to domestic resource mobilization to create the required fiscal space. The government can set annual targets for social protection allocation, as per cent of GDP, for each fiscal year. This can be done through a gradual increase in allocation, as a percentage of the budget and the GDP, in line with the targeted rise in revenue collection.

It should also be noted that, ideally, a USP system should aim to strike a balance between tax-financed and contributory programmes, with contributory schemes going beyond unemployment and healthcare insurance and addressing such vulnerabilities as crop failure and climate risks. A clear framework for deciding which programme should be tax-financed and which should be contributory needs to be decided. International experience may be studied to this end. A research study suggests that a “risk-layering approach” to financing may be a good way to proceed in this connection. The risk layering approach stipulates that risks that have a high impact on economic and social outcomes (i.e., severity of shocks and risks) but a low frequency (perhaps only a few times throughout an individual's lifetime),

such as healthcare insurance for fatal diseases, should be contributory. On the other hand, risks that occur with high frequency but with lower severity, such as minor health issues, can be tax-financed. In addition to designing a framework for deciding which programmes should be contributory and which should be tax-financed, the government should also assess the viability of involving the private sector through contributions from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds to underwrite specific elements of the USP scheme.

Establish and mobilise district job centres to connect left-behind groups to productive jobs.

Connecting marginalised populations to job opportunities is expected to have a transformative impact by helping to lift such groups out of poverty and deprivation through income-generating activities on a sustainable basis. Although Bangladesh is implementing various public works programmes, the per capita benefit is rather low, and the skills acquired can hardly be used for integration into the mainstream workforce. In addition, issues such as youth unemployment, skills mismatches, and a significant informal workforce remain key challenges in view of the country's labour market dynamics.

Establishing district job centres could play an important role in incentivising productive employment. This could lay the foundation for a USP system through active labour market policies. The aforesaid centres can offer three different types of support: labour-market responsive training, job placement counselling, and start-up/entrepreneurship support. Support of development partners can be leveraged to establish these job centres. The centres can also engage with the local private sector and enterprises to provide in-demand and labour-market responsive training and placement support. Such centres can also help generate the necessary labour market data and help build a comprehensive data bank on labour market information, catering to both the demand and supply side. Such an approach will help harness the productive capacity of the workforce and generate employment opportunities to help the marginalised groups graduate out of vulnerabilities. Such an approach is also in line with the SDG localisation approach, which takes into account spatial dimensions of vulnerabilities and job market needs.

Put the needed legal frameworks in place for introducing the USP scheme.

To provide universal social protection on a sustainable basis, it is important to put in place effective legal frameworks. This could be in the form of a comprehensive Social Security Act or through separate acts for social security, social insurance, and others. Legal frameworks in place in other countries may be studied in this connection. Legal frameworks play an important role by delineating the responsibilities of various stakeholders and providing a sound legal foundation to secure the rights of citizens and their entitlements. Legal frameworks also provide predictability in this backdrop.

A well-designed and legally framed USP will bring several advantages to the table. This would ensure clarity, equity, legality and stability by defining explicit rules and guidelines for entitlements, and for implementation of the USP scheme. It will guard against discrimination, ensure sustainable financing, and promote transparency and accountability. A sound legal structure will safeguard the rights of beneficiaries, facilitate coordination

involving programme implementors, and allow for the necessary adaptation of programmatic interventions to address evolving societal and economic needs.

Address data limitations towards better USP implementation.

The NSSS has rightly identified the need for a comprehensive and sound database to implement social protection programmes. However, the database is yet to be established. To note, at present, there is no integrated Management Information System (MIS) for the 113 social protection programmes in place. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) has taken an initiative to establish a National Household Database (NHD) by digitising household-level data to feed into the social protection targeting system. However, this has yet to materialise. Lack of an integrated MIS means that programmes have to rely on traditional means of targeting, such as Proxy Means Tests (PMTs) or community-based selection with the help of local government agencies. The latter, in particular, exposes the existing social protection system to leakages and mistargeting, thus undermining its effectiveness. Lack of reliable and up-to-date data creates opportunities for relatively better-off individuals to receive benefits earmarked for the disadvantaged. These issues can be mitigated through the implementation of a sound MIS. A dynamic MIS will need to incorporate changes in household status on a regular basis. If this can be done, targeting and selection of social protection programmes will be more accurate, and leakages and wastages will be significantly reduced. Such a database will be a good foundation on which to build an inclusive, universal and comprehensive USP scheme in Bangladesh.

Strengthen and scale up the USP in alignment with the lifecycle framework proposed in the NSSS.

The NSSS envisages consolidation of the social safety net programmes in alignment with life cycle demands. The goal is to minimise leakages and enhance efficiency by streamlining and merging the disparate programmes and the various initiatives undertaken by the line ministries and agencies. This is important since, as was noted earlier, social protection system in Bangladesh includes a significantly large number of programmes that are scattered across various implementing entities. This has led to a structure that is spread too thin and over too many programmes. The adverse implications of this uncoordinated system are manifold: efficiency of social protection programmes is adversely impacted because of duplication, widespread leakages, selection and targeting bias, and, in general, makes the system difficult for the beneficiaries to access and take advantage of. Efforts towards consolidation of the various programmes have, till now, been mostly ad hoc. However, to note, although this is an exception, the Child Benefit programme is being implemented at present by merging the Maternity Allowance programme and Lactating Mother's Allowance programme (renamed as the Mother and Child Benefit programme). Key areas identified for consolidation include the merging of small schemes and special programmes, priority schemes to protect against lifecycle risks, and consolidation of the various food transfer programmes under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief.

Introduce an effective grievance redressal system.

It is high time to put in place a transparent grievance redressal system for effective execution of social protection programmes. A dedicated and widely advertised toll-free helpline should be introduced to enable citizens, particularly the marginalised LNOB groups, to report any

irregularities and register complaints to relevant authorities directly, as regards concerns about implementation of social protection programmes. Past experience with respect to dedicated hotlines using the number 333 during the COVID-19 pandemic and cyclone disasters has been highly positive. The redressal system must articulate clear timelines for addressing grievances and ensure that these are dealt with effectively and promptly. Periodic audits should be undertaken to establish accountability and ensure responsibility.

Establish a monitoring and evaluation system to assess the efficacy of the USP scheme.

Along with the implementation of the USP schemes, a rigorous monitoring and evaluation (M and E) system should be put in place. Regrettably, rigorous post-roll out impact assessment of projects by government agencies is largely absent. As a result, it is difficult to know if the programmes being implemented are achieving their objectives. This also limits the scope for ex-post cost-benefit analysis of programmes, meaning that it is difficult to judge whether social protection programmes are making use of the public money effectively. It also exposes the programmes to risks when attempts are made to scale-up; embedded weaknesses of programmes create new bottlenecks when this is attempted. A sound M and E system will help identify weaknesses, adapt interventions, undertake mid-course corrections and ensure accountability. M and E exercise should cover activities at all levels, from the ministries to the local-level functionaries involved with implementation of the USP scheme and cover all aspects of implementation. Not only is this crucial to raising efficacy of interventions but this will also ensure inclusivity if citizens and beneficiary groups are involved in the M and E exercise.

Deploy technology to improve efficacy of USP implementation.

Cross-country experiences of implementing social protection programmes bear out that smart technologies are being used in an increasing manner to enhance efficiency and reduce leakages in social protection schemes. Bangladesh should draw appropriate lessons from this experience and should take advantage of the advanced technologies and put in place similar systems. Indeed, deployment of technology should be embedded in the USP design to make the scheme more effective. For example, use of advanced smart technology can help identify, in real time, communities and individuals who are at risk in view of shocks such as natural disasters. Geographic Information System (GIS) could help the providers to adapt and modify social protection schemes speedily in view of changing needs of the affected groups. Technology can also be used to predict shocks and their severity. This would allow the government to effectively assess coverage, range and depth of support to be provided. Indeed, technology can be integrated along the entire delivery chain of the USP—identification of target groups, registration and enrolment, delivery of services, M and E and grievance redressal. The introduction of a modern USP scheme in Bangladesh will need to be founded on the advantages of modern technology.

Concluding Observations

As has been noted, promoting the cause of the USP scheme in Bangladesh is highly commensurate with Bangladesh's aspiration of transitioning to a developed and socially inclusive country by 2041. The country's commitment to social protection is outlined in

its constitution which puts emphasis on provisioning of basic necessities, right to work and right to social security.

To strengthen social protection system in Bangladesh, establishment of a USP system should be seen as the next important step for Bangladesh in going forward. However, this will need to be done by not reaping the mistakes of the past. The task can begin with conducting a thorough and evidence-based demand assessment of various marginalised groups as part of reforming the existing schemes. Existing programmes should undergo a thorough impact assessment to ensure effectiveness, minimise leakages and establish a transparent accountability system. Available benefits should be increased gradually through a sustainable and robust financing mechanism. Gradually, a well-designed USP scheme can be put in place through a blending of tax-financed and contributory programmes. Allocations must be increased by following a transparent and well-planned timeline. Potentials of private sector contribution, through Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds, should be adequately assessed. Establishing district job centres could help tackle various labour market challenges and provide employment support to different marginalised groups, enabling them to graduate out of social protection schemes. Creation of decent job opportunities for the disadvantaged groups must be seen as a key anchor for providing universal social protection in Bangladesh.

A reliable database, with real-time information for proper targeting and appropriate selection, is critically important for USP implementation. Advanced technological tools will need to be taken advantage at each stage of implementation of the USP scheme. In order to advance the cause of the USP, it is important to put in place the necessary legal framework. This would entail the formulation of a comprehensive social security act to provide legal coverage to a sustainable system which is based on the notion of rights and entitlement of citizens. By implementing the USP scheme, Bangladesh can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society by leaving no one behind. A USP scheme should be seen as a key deliverable from the perspective of attaining Bangladesh's aspiration of transitioning to a socially inclusive developed country by 2041.

8

Dealing with the Manifestation of Localised Vulnerabilities of Climate Change

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Background and Context

Geographical location at the approach of the Bay of Bengal, land structure involving low-lying terrains, great rivers, and the socioeconomic dynamics of coastal, riverine, and remote communities, have all combined to make Bangladesh the 7th most climate-vulnerable country in the world. The impacts are being manifested in various forms. Frequent changes in climate parameters have meant that the days are becoming increasingly hotter in summer compared to the historical average. Also, the number of warmer days is on the rise. The late onset of a shortened rainy season is, at present, a common phenomenon. Frequency of storm surges and wind pressure have also increased. Such erratic variations of climatological parameters are causing more frequent and more intense natural disasters, i.e., flash floods, regular floods and riverbank erosion in the northern districts; flash floods and thunderstorms in the north-eastern Haor districts; drought in the north-western districts; waterlogging in the south-west coast; cyclones and storms in the south-east coast; and salinity intrusion in the southern belt of Bangladesh.

While the abovementioned rapid-onset (flood, riverbank erosion, cyclones, etc.) and slow-onset (sea level rise, salinity intrusion) climate change events are adversely affecting local communities in a variety of ways, in all such cases, it is the marginalised groups within the affected population who tend to be impacted the most. More particularly, this includes the women, children, young people, river-dependent communities and coastal farmers. Among these left-behind people, persons with disabilities and transgender identities, ethnic minorities, Dalits and Harijans suffer relatively more because of their specific difficulties and low coping capacities. The adverse consequences are exacerbated because of insufficient resources, weak support measures and limited funds available to address adaptation challenges for mitigation of negative impacts.

The persistence of slow-onset events such as sea level rise and salinity intrusion is forcing farmers in southern districts of Bangladesh to change cropping patterns from more profitable but somewhat risky cropping practices to subsistence ones. Indeed, this is causing significant changes in agricultural practices in these regions that involve hard choices and difficult trade-offs. For instance, farmers could go for adopting crop varieties that are more saline-tolerant, but these tend to have lower yields. A number of marginal farmers in the coastal belt in the south have been compelled to sell their croplands to commercial farmers, with themselves ending up as workers in shrimp farms. People living in southern districts, close to the Sundarbans and its surroundings, lack access to saline-free, safe drinking water. The rights and sexual and reproductive health of women, girls and young women are adversely impacted because of high salinity.

Over the past two decades, communities near Bangladesh's south-east and south-west coastlines have experienced an increase in the frequency of powerful cyclones and storms. People inhabiting south-east and south-west coastal areas have experienced the loss of family members and relatives, as well as homes and farmlands, due to natural calamities such as Aila, Sidr and Amphan. Among these people, many still live in hardship and stuck in a long-term debt trap. Having lost homes and homesteads, these people had to take refuge

in various chars and surrounding forest lands. This made these communities even more susceptible and exposed to subsequent climate calamities and natural disasters. Communities in the interior coastal districts of south-west Bangladesh have been suffering because of considerable damage to infrastructure and other structures, including homesteads. Other manifestations of climate impact can be seen in decreased plant growth, production losses during crop harvesting and chronic health (skin-related) diseases as a result of the rising waterlogging and salinity.

In a similar vein, people living in Haor areas of the north-eastern districts of Bangladesh have, in recent times, experienced the onslaught of more frequent and intense flash floods. These have caused them to not only lose harvest, income and business earnings but have also compelled many of them to go for distress selling of their livestock and other assets to cope with income erosion. Safe drinking water sources in coastal areas is largely contaminated, often leading to outbreaks of water-borne diseases, particularly among children and women. In these regions, students suffer from loss of educational hours. The river-dependent communities in Bangladesh's northern regions have suffered similar consequences due to flooding. People in northern Bangladesh incur significant economic losses in the form of shrinkage of croplands, damage to, and loss of, dwellings, and loss incurred to businesses, shops and properties as the direct result of river erosion. This commonly happens following monsoon floods. Communities dependent on transboundary rivers for agricultural practices and navigational purposes, for example, living in the catchment areas of Teesta and its tributaries, suffer significantly as a result of the irregular flow of water. In summer, these communities are faced with a shortage of water, while during the monsoon, an abundance of water frequently causes flash floods.

In contrast, farming communities in Bangladesh's northwestern districts of Barind region often experience severe drought. They face significantly high costs for purposes of irrigation and in dealing with pest attacks. Inadequate access to safe drinking water is another issue for those living in at-risk neighbourhoods in north-west Bangladesh. Intense heat in summer leads to dehydration; indeed, heat-related deaths have been on the rise in recent times. Overall, the strain of losing access to water, watching crops die, losing livelihood opportunities and seeing family members suffer from diseases results in stress within households and communities and sometimes causes violence and conflicts. The relatively disadvantaged people suffer the most, as they don't have the means to mitigate adverse consequences, are not able to migrate to cities or other places and have to live and deal with the attendant challenges on an ongoing basis.

Persistence of slow-onset events such as the sea level rise and salinity intrusion is threatening the lives and livelihoods of over 13 million coastal people in Bangladesh. Many are being compelled to migrate to cities and peri-urban areas or encroach on nearby forest lands. This results in congestion in cities and leads to growth of unplanned urbanisation. The rate of urban poverty and malnutrition rises.

The above could potentially trigger disruptions in social cohesion and lead to conflicts involving marginalised communities in urban slums and the newly-migrated climate

refugees. Studies show that climate migrants also frequently experience widespread human trafficking.

On the other hand, rising instances of encroachment on forest lands for human settlement is further exacerbating the ecological balance. This is more of a problem for Bangladesh where only 10.7 per cent of the country's area is at present under forest. Although Bangladesh only contributes to less than 0.48 per cent of global emissions, it is one of the most impacted by climate change. For instance, over the 2015-2020 period, Bangladesh's annual economic loss and damage due to natural disasters was equivalent to 1.32 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Despite being a minor source of global emissions, Bangladesh has made commitments unconditionally reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 6.73 per cent below the business-as-usual level in the energy, industrial, agriculture, forestry, and waste sectors, and conditionally by 15.12 per cent below business-as-usual levels by 2030 under the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC). In view of these, investment in renewable energy has emerged as a critically important issue in the Bangladesh context, in terms of meeting its NDC commitments as also from the perspective of attaining a number of targets under the SDGs.

To meet the NDC commitments, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) needs to pursue a bottom-up approach. This is particularly so as there is a significant lack of indepth knowledge about the attendant local level vulnerabilities and needs of concerned communities, and more so, the needs of the marginalised communities. Indeed, weak integration of policies and programmes has been identified as a key challenge in view of both climate change adaptation and mitigation in the Bangladesh context. On the other hand, as may be recalled, in view of addressing climate change-induced vulnerabilities, the locally led adaptation (LLA) approach, based on eight principles, has gained traction in relevant global discourse. Localised climate governance, aligned with LLA, offers a new opportunity to identify and deal with the localised vulnerabilities of climate change in a collaborative and participatory manner. On a welcome note, the government of Bangladesh has recognised the importance of LLA; indeed, this gets mentioned throughout the 'National Adaptation Plan (NAP) 2023-50', in connection with the various interventions from the perspective of ensuring meaningful social inclusion.

In view of the aforesaid emergent challenges and the urgency of addressing those, the objective of the present Policy Brief is to put forward a set of recommendations to effectively deal with the manifestations of localised climate change vulnerabilities impacting Bangladesh, keeping the concerns of disadvantaged groups at the centre of attention.

Recommendations

Implement all interventions mentioned in the National Adaptation Plan (2023–50) and ensure that national Five-Year Development Plans are aligned with those.

In dealing with climate change adaptation, the NAP is to serve as Bangladesh's primary planning and investment framework for the next 28 years (2023-2050). NAP aims to achieve six specific goals: i) ensure protection against climate change variability and climate-

induced natural disasters; ii) develop climate-resilient agriculture for food, nutrition, and livelihood security; iii) develop climate-smart cities for improved urban environment and well-being; iv) promote nature-based solutions for conservation of forestry, biodiversity, and well-being of communities; v) impart good governance through integration of adaptation into the planning process; and vi) ensure transformative capacity building and innovation for CCA. The NAP has identified 113 interventions to be implemented in 11 climate-stressed regions across Bangladesh. About BDT 20 trillion (or equivalent to over USD 200 billion) will be required to implement these interventions; approximately 75 per cent of this amount is expected to be needed by 2040.

Identify community-led adaptation techniques, based on local knowledge, to assess whether these could potentially be scaled up to address the challenges posed by global warming.

A number of community-led adaptation methods are found in different parts of rural Bangladesh. For instance, communities in northern Bangladesh frequently construct 'Bandals', an indigenous bamboo structure, to lower river erosion in small river basins and to reclaim agricultural fields. 'Baira' or floating agriculture is a traditional agricultural method where floating beds are prepared with water hyacinth and other plant components. This provides opportunities for income generation and helps people in southern Bangladesh to strengthen their resilience against water logging. In an effort to identify a feasible bandalling structure which will maintain physical characteristics of the river, the Bangladesh River Research Institute (RRI) is at present conducting three pilot projects. One of these projects is in the Brahmaputra basin. On the other hand, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has recognised floating agriculture as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS). It is important to deploy a developmental approach that takes into cognisance regional variations in climate impacts and draws on locally driven small-scale adaptation solutions based on indigenous knowledge and home-grown techniques.

Introduce a special social safety net transfer programme in support of marginalised groups living in Haor areas.

The Haor ecosystem is diverse, and its nature changes significantly with seasonal variations. In the dry season, people in the water retention area cultivate the land, whereas in the wet season, this land remains submerged and becomes a spawning ground for fish. In majority of the haor areas of Bangladesh commercial leasing for fishing is allowed under a legal framework. As a result, communities within the retention area are not able to go for fishing during certain times of the year. This has severe negative consequences for their livelihoods. In view of this, the government should introduce a special social safety net transfer programme during the lean period in support of the marginalised groups living in Haor areas.

Develop more water retention grounds/systems to ensure access to clean and safe drinking water for people living in saline and drought prone areas.

68.3 million people in Bangladesh (41 per cent of the total population) lack access to properly managed drinking water, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) - UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) report. Due to climate change-induced

salinity intrusion and increased shrimp aquaculture along the coast, freshwater supplies are becoming increasingly scarce. Additionally, in many areas, the groundwater table has gone further down, drying up shallow and deep tube wells; this leaves only rainfall and pond water as viable alternatives as sources of water. Local solutions such as rainwater harvesting and seawater reverse osmosis systems to filter saltwater, at the community and household levels, are examples of technologies that could address this issue. However, this needs to be done at policy and regulatory levels through strictly imposed specific laws and guidelines concerning management of natural resources. The actions should be targeted to address deforestation and extraction of resources such as sand and rocks from and near water bodies. These measures should guide Bangladesh's agricultural policies as well.

Initiate an impact assessment study to understand the effectiveness and sustainability of projects led by the Climate Change Trust Fund which, going forward, should help policymakers to take evidence-based decisions in designing projects. There is a need to showcase the lessons learned in view of the experience gained.

Since the Bangladesh Climate Change Trust Fund (BCCTF) was set up in 2009, a total of Tk 3,955 crore has been allocated from this fund till December 2022. Of this, Tk. 1,447 crore was retained as a reserve, while Tk. 2,507 crore was allocated for implementing 851 projects as of December 2022. Among the thematic areas, infrastructure development received the most funding, receiving 59 per cent of the total budget. This was followed by mitigation and low-carbon development (23 per cent), food security, social protection, and health (13 per cent), research, capacity building, and institutional development (6 per cent), and comprehensive disaster management (1 per cent). In spite of the fund being operational for over a decade, no comprehensive assessment has been carried out which delves into such issues as efficacy of funds used, sustainability of the projects undertaken and state of accountability in fund use. It is high time to make a comprehensive assessment of the projects implemented under BCCTF and their outcomes. These should be measured against the concrete objectives set out for the projects. The impact on the lives and livelihoods of disadvantaged communities should be at the heart of such an exercise.

Initiate a comprehensive study on 'Valuation of Forest Ecosystem', by types of forests, to better prepare for global negotiations on carbon sequestration, as also to assess socio-economic benefits originating from the forest resources.

In recent years, Bangladesh's forest coverage has declined to as low as 10.7 per cent, despite the fact that 17.5 per cent of the country's land was designated as forest land (which also includes land under social afforestation). Forest-based ecosystem services play a crucial role in contributing to livelihoods, generating employment and ensuring the well-being of many marginalised groups dependent on forest resources. As is known, forests serve as invaluable natural resources, at the same time providing protection from the impact of natural disasters and carbon sequestration. All of these have economic implications that need to be calculated and factored into the policies. Preservation of the invaluable and rich biodiversity and maintenance of delicate ecological balance should also be considered in this exercise. Economic valuation of forest ecosystem services can inform policymakers

about the ecological and socio-economic benefits of conserving forests, thereby incentivising appropriate policymaking to secure a sustainable future for the next generations.

Initiate a study to determine national “loss and damage” consequent to climate change.

Compensation for loss and damage has attracted renewed interest and attention in recent climate negotiations. The UNFCCC eventually took the decision, in November 2022, at the 27th annual UN Climate Change Conference (COP27), to create and operationalise a new fund to support developing countries which are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. The fund is geared to respond to climate change impacts and recover from climate-induced damages. The terms of payment and modality of operation of this fund are yet to be chalked out, though. A 24-member transitional committee has recommended to operationalise the Loss and Damage fund at the COP28. COP28 has principally agreed to materialise the fund. More concrete decisions and details are expected to be agreed in the upcoming COP29. In this backdrop, the GoB should initiate a comprehensive study to estimate the value of national ‘loss and damage’ due to climate change so that Bangladesh has the information to successfully negotiate for compensation based on data and evidence on the ground.

Initiate, prepare and enact a Watershed Strategy Plan.

An integrated use of land, vegetation and water in a geographically distinct drainage area for the benefit of people inhabiting the area is known as watershed management (WM). This is particularly vital for communities living in Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracks and coastal regions. Perhaps because the country is a predominantly deltaic plain, Bangladesh doesn't have a watershed policy, strategy, or plan which is appropriate for the upland regions of the CHT. Currently, communities which rely on these watersheds for their livelihoods and access to water remain highly vulnerable as a result of continued degradation of watersheds. In this backdrop, with a view to prioritising community-based watershed management, the GoB should initiate, prepare, and enact a Watershed Strategy Plan on an urgent basis. This is critically important, more specifically for the disadvantaged groups.

Maintain, review and improve data collection quality as regards hydro-meteorological variables.

There is a growing concern in Bangladesh as regards the quality of data relating to various hydro-meteorological variables. On the other hand, this is of heightened importance from the perspective of making informed policy decisions and addressing the anticipated climate change-related challenges. Collecting and monitoring of surface water and groundwater quality and salinity data, on a continuing basis, have now become essential for undertaking interventions to reduce the economic and health-related vulnerabilities of local communities. In this context, the GoB should take advantage of artificial intelligence in identifying climate change solutions when and where applicable. This particularly concerns data generation, analysis, and data integration in policymaking.

Encourage public private partnership (PPP) projects in renewable energy and energy transmission, housing, transport and climate-smart agriculture solutions.

Public-private partnership opportunities could be highly effective in view of green transition, including energy generation from renewable sources. Such a transition should create more green jobs, especially for young people. Thus, the government and private sector should undertake joint initiatives towards green transition and develop the necessary skills. To attain the national commitment of generating 40 per cent of electricity from renewable sources by 2041, about USD 19.2 to USD 37.2 billion investment will be needed only to develop the required installed capacity. Greater private sector involvement will be needed to mobilise both domestic and foreign investment. Such collaboration is also necessary to initiate and implement the required reforms, encourage innovation and promote efficiency in view of sector-specific climate-smart solutions.

Declare renewable energy-based projects under SREDA as fast track projects.

The energy industry in Bangladesh is highly reliant on sources that use fossil fuels. Only 3.5 per cent of the 26 GW installed capacity originates from renewable sources. The GoB has set an optimistic goal of producing 40 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2041. This, however, comes in the backdrop of the past failure to achieve 10 per cent of electricity generation from renewable sources by 2021. To avoid repeating the past experience, it is critically important to categorise the ongoing solar park and wind projects under SREDA as fast-track projects. This will revitalise the renewable energy-based power sector and help address a number of climate change mitigation challenges facing the country. In addition, the launching of 'Net meter' based projects should receive high policy priority, which will call for the availability of the required technical and financial support to scale up operations and strengthen human resource capacities. GoB needs to be mindful that all renewable energy projects should have proper waste disposal and management plans and systems in place, particularly for dealing with hazardous waste.

Illegal sand mining must be immediately stopped. Legal permits for sand mining sites may be allowed only after conducting an appropriate feasibility study and environmental assessment.

Given the 8 per cent growth in the construction sector and a similar pace of growth in the real estate industry, the demand for sand in Bangladesh is expected to continue to rise in future. In this backdrop, the issue of river erosion may, over time, become more acute in view of the ongoing illegal sand mining activities. The adverse environmental implications and negative impact on the livelihood of such practices are becoming increasingly visible. Hence, illegal sand mining should be banned without delay through appropriate legal measures. The government should issue legal permits for sand mining only after proper feasibility study and environmental assessment. The revenue the government expects to make from such legal permits should be deployed to undertake adaptation and mitigation measures in favour of the local riverine communities.

Introduce 'Polluters-pay' principle for pollution management in Bangladesh.

For the first time in history, Bangladesh has decided to impose a carbon tax in the National Budget for FY2023-24. Even though the tax structure, provisions and specifications remain somewhat ambiguous, limited, and even contradictory in scope, it is encouraging to see that the GoB is serious about penalising the polluters. To note, the country's air and water pollution level has increased considerably in recent years. Consequently, the adoption of stringent measures to implement the "Polluter Pays" principle, in view of the country's pollution management, has emerged as an urgency. This will help Bangladesh to protect its environment from air and water pollution. While imposing the penalty tax for pollution, it should be seen that the payment should cover the cost of environmental harm as well. Improving the quality of air and water will no doubt benefit the health of all citizens, but most notably that of children, women and the elderly.

Provide highest priority to transboundary water sharing agreements with neighbouring countries to address complex climate change consequences.

Bangladesh shares three transboundary rivers with Myanmar and 54 transboundary rivers with India. With the exception of the three largest rivers, the country as a whole—especially the southwest region—experiences significant water shortages during the dry season. The problems are most acute in the case of agricultural cultivation and for smooth navigation of the concerned transboundary rivers. Additionally, salt intrusion and environmental degradation are worsening because of reduced stream flow, which also reduces the productivity of natural aquifers. In this backdrop, the GoB should give highest priority to signing transboundary water sharing agreements with India. Delays in negotiations will further worsen and accentuate pre-existing vulnerabilities of communities whose livelihoods depend on these rivers. Many people will likely experience forced displacement from their lands. Their struggle against different forms of climate adversity may be further exacerbated if the issue is not given the importance it deserves.

Establish a specialised department within the Economic Relations Division to prepare documents, develop proposals and design project profiles in order to avail of climate change funds created under global initiatives.

There is a widespread concern that developed countries, which are mostly responsible for global warming, could attempt to substitute official development assistance (ODA) for meeting their pledge towards the Global Climate Fund. Bangladesh should take the lead in mobilising global opinion for decoupling climate components from development projects. In the past, Bangladesh was not able to access various climate funds, notably the Global Climate Fund (CGF), on numerous occasions, mostly because it lacked the ability to prepare project proposals by meeting the stringent requirements attached to availing these funds. To avert this in the future, the government should establish a dedicated department within the Economic Relations Division that will be entrusted with preparing documents, developing proposals, and designing project profiles to help access climate change-related funds. Such an outfit will also be able to facilitate climate-related negotiations. For better inter-Ministerial coordination, an official with at least the

rank of Joint Secretary status should be designated as the climate change focal person in every Ministry.

Allow non-state actors to effectively participate in climate change-related policymaking process to help address the needs of marginalised communities and likely climate migrants.

Globally, non-state actors play a significant role in climate advocacy in favour of marginalised communities. The GoB should acknowledge the important role that the country's civil society, non-government organisations and other non-state actors could play in promoting and implementing an inclusive climate policy. The government must allow these actors to participate, act, and support the GOB in climate change-related policymaking and advocacy. This is particularly necessary to address the needs of the marginalised communities and potential climate migrants. By building partnerships with the participation of government agencies, development partners and non-state actors, it is possible to advance the cause of environmental sustainability in global platforms and mobilise funds towards climate action in Bangladesh. This is important for strategising and allocating resources in a planned manner to combat the challenges of climate change in a way that is sensitive to the needs of the left-behind groups.

Concluding Observations

In order to implement the concrete recommendations presented above, the government should support locally led adaptation practices and promote private sector investment in innovation. The government should create platforms where vulnerable women and young people can highlight local contexts, raise concerns about adverse climate impacts and challenges, and voice suggestions to tackle those. Climate change related challenges are very diverse and are specific to different vulnerable communities and localities— flash floods, regular floods and riverbank erosion in the northern districts; flash floods and thunderstorms in the north-eastern Haor districts; drought in the north-western districts; waterlogging in the south-west coast; cyclones and storms in the south-east coast; and salinity intrusion in the southern belt of Bangladesh. Local solutions will need to be found to address local challenges. There is a need to allocate necessary funds to undertake pre-, during and post-disaster relief and rehabilitation programmes. To make it resilient to climate change, a transition in the Bangladesh agriculture is a must. So is the generation of energy from renewable sources to attain the sustainable development goals. Transformative adaptation will be crucial for the inclusion of marginalised and excluded people in resilience-building efforts. Contextualised and localised skills development programmes will be needed to address local environmental challenges and encourage climate-friendly entrepreneurship. This approach will also help meet the commitment of leaving no one behind (LNOB) in view of the sustainable development of Bangladesh. Localised climate governance should be seen as a new window of opportunity to deal with the emerging spatial vulnerabilities originating from the impact of climate change.

**Effective Implementation of
Laws and Judicial Process for
Eradicating Gender-Based
Violence and Discrimination**

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Background and Context

In the World Economic Forum's 2021 Global Gender Gap Report, Bangladesh's score was 0.719, making it one of the top countries in the region in terms of success in closing the gender gap. The country was also ranked number seven in view of the political empowerment sub-component of the index. Indeed, Bangladesh holds the distinction of being the only country where more women have held the position of head of government than men, considering the past 50 years.

However, the exercise of the rights of women has continued to remain an area of concern in Bangladesh. Civil society organisations in Bangladesh and civic movements for women's rights and the rights of persons with disabilities have been trying to secure the interests of these disadvantaged groups in various ways. They are fighting for rights issues by raising voice in support of socially and sexually marginalised women in respective communities and by highlighting secure the interests of persons with disabilities. Of particular concern is the prevailing gender discrimination, manifested in various forms, including domestic violence, sexual harassment on the streets and workplaces, rape, marital rape, and wage discrimination in the informal sectors where women are paid less than men for the same work. When they are required to go through the judiciary process and act as witnesses, women and girls with disabilities need additional support and facilities in the form of sign language interpreters, family assistance and audio and braille support. However, these are currently not available in Bangladesh's courts. Women are also being discriminated against through various legal loopholes. They are not able to access justice due to economic, social and cultural barriers as well as because of delayed execution of laws. Inequality and power imbalance between women and men are at the root of gender-based violence (GBV) in Bangladesh. In the absence of progressive and comprehensive laws and safeguards, discrimination and violence against women continue to persist; this is particularly so for women belonging to the vulnerable groups. Most discriminated against in this backdrop are women belonging to disadvantaged segments of the population, including low-income groups, religious minorities, indigenous people, the Dalit community, hijra and transgender people, and people with disabilities.

Legal Environment

Bangladesh's Constitution guarantees women's equal rights to participate in all spheres of activities through Article 10, Article 19 (1) and (3). Article 27 specifies that all citizens are equal before the law. Article 28 (1) states that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Article 28 (2) directly and categorically stipulates that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and public life. Article 28 (4) allows affirmative actions in favour of women. In line with the spirit of the constitution, the government of Bangladesh has enacted a number of special laws, prohibiting certain forms of violence against women. These include Penal Code 1860, Dowry Prohibition Act 2018, Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012, Acid Offence Control Act 2002, and Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000. To give protection to women in view of violence at home, the Domestic Violence

(Prevention and Protection) Act 2010 was enacted. The GoB has also endorsed/enacted the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961 and the Family Courts Ordinance of 1985. In 2009, the High Court Division (HCD) of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh issued a landmark judgment⁴ acknowledging the need for a legal framework to address sexual harassment and provide guidelines to be followed in all educational institutions and workplaces. Several policies and plans have also been adopted to protect women from violence. In this context, mention may be made of the National Women Development Policy 2011, National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Children 2013-2025,⁵ National Plan of Action for Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking 2018-2022, and National Action Plan for Implementation of the National Women Development Policy in 2013.

The National Action Plan on Violence against Women was formulated for the period of 2013-2025 and is an important roadmap in the context of violence against women. The plan aims to attain the stipulated goals by coordinating, prioritising and strategising the most effective forms of short, medium, and long-term actions. The plan also mentions assessing the progress being made in this connection. To recall, Bangladesh ratified CEDAW on November 6, 1984, although it had registered reservations as regards Articles 2, 13.1[a], 16.1[c], and [f] on the grounds of conflicts with the Sharia law of Islam. Reservations as regards Article 13(a) relating to 'the right to family benefits' and 16.1(f) relating to 'equal guardianship' were, however, subsequently withdrawn in 1997. Also, as may be noted, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action flagged 12 key areas where urgent action was needed to ensure greater equality and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys. To note, achieving gender equality is one of the key goals and deliverables of the SDGs. The LNOB spirit as the SDGs in this context would imply that in implementing the goals and targets of the SDGs, special care will need to be taken to secure the safety of women and girls belonging to disadvantaged groups and communities.

The Challenges from Legal Perspective

There is considerable scope to improve the legislative framework in place in Bangladesh and the implementation modalities in view of the existing legal frameworks and policies relating to gender rights. Key concerns and limitations as regard the current laws and legislations are the followings:

⁴Supreme Court of Bangladesh, High Court Division, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) vs. Government of Bangladesh and Others, 29 BLD 415, 2009.

⁵https://mowca.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/mowca.portal.gov.bd/page/bcf75e01_95e3_48ba_bfe4_3d88ea5f593c/English-National-Action-Plan-to-Prevent-Violence-Against-Women-and-Children-2013-20251.pdf

Sl. No.	The Law/Act	Challenges
1.	Women and Child Repression Prevention Act 2000 (amended first in 2003 and for the second time in October 2020) and the Penal Code 1860	<p>Concerns are as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Definition of rape has not been clarified. Male rape, rape of hijras and marital rape have not been recognised. • The draft prepared by the Law Commission 14 years ago does not mention putting in place a survivor and witness protection system. • Defense lawyers are not barred from raising questions in court about the characters of the survivors. • Does not allow judges to exercise sentencing discretion as regards rape. This could go against the proportionality of punishment. • Does not grant rape survivors the right to seek compensation from the court. Does not talk of setting up a government-sponsored compensation fund. • Provision of interest is Section 375, 377 of the Penal Code 1860, with the following concerns: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Penetration is sufficient to constitute sexual intercourse in case of rape offence. ○ “Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under thirteen years of age, is not rape.” ○ From the above provision, it can be said that the age of sexual consent is 14 in Bangladesh, but according to section 9 of the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act 2000, the age of sexual consent is 16 years. This is inconsistent. ○ Definition of rape only covers females and mentions only vaginal penetration. There is no clear definition of rape against men and boys. ○ Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 has raised the age of marriage to 18 for women. Again, the legal age of marriage is different from the age of sexual consent. ○ Section 377 penalises consensual sexual relationship between men and does not differentiate between the former and rape where there is absence of consent. • According to the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000, court-imposed fine for convicted rapists is to be a minimum amount of Tk 100,000 for rape leading to murder and gang rape (as per section 9(2) and 9(3) of the 2000 Act). The court has never imposed a fine above this which indicates that this amount is a ceiling rather than a baseline. On the other hand, the fine being converted to compensation to the victim or victim's families or survivors is found in case of only 6.8 per cent of cases.⁶ • Women and girls with disabilities are deprived of their rights and due access to justice because the Act does not mention anything about concerns of persons with disabilities.

⁶<https://blast.org.bd/content/pressrelease/08-03-2021-Press-Release-Court-Awarded-Compensation-in-only-6.8%25-rape-cases.pdf>

Sl. No.	The Law/Act	Challenges
2.	Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The act does not criminalise domestic violence itself. Rather, it only defines domestic violence, reiterating the traditional avenues open to victims of abuse. Operational responsibilities are with the police, enforcement officers and service providers who live in a society where many among the general public tend to accept domestic violence. Without proper training, counselling and gender sensitisation, it is difficult for the act to generate the expected benefits. Government and service providers are not taking proper initiative to disseminate the act. This is in spite of the fact that more than 66 per cent of women in Bangladesh are victims of domestic violence, and 72 per cent of survivors of domestic violence never disclose this to anyone.⁷
3.	Personal Laws in Bangladesh	<p>Personal Law governs an individual concerning various matters such as marriage, divorce, maintenance, adoption, inheritance, guardianship, succession, etc. The challenges here are the followings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, as well as a number of ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh, follow religious-cultural practices in their personal lives. The constitution of Bangladesh guarantees freedom of religion to all citizens and allows each religious community the freedom to live according to separate personal laws. However, this contradicts Article 28(2) of the constitution, which states that women and men shall enjoy equal treatment in State and Public life; however, it does not mention personal or private life. Muslim and Hindu marriages in Bangladesh take place based on the 'Shariat and Shastriya' religious provisions. A Hindu woman in Bangladesh cannot claim divorce in Family court, but a Muslim woman can, thanks to the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act 1939. Under the Christian personal law in Bangladesh, a petition for divorce by both men and women needs to be filed in the District Court or the High Court Division of the Supreme Court. Even if the District Court permits, it requires confirmation from the High Court, but not before six months. Registration of Muslim marriage in Bangladesh is mandatory according to the Muslim Marriages and Divorces (Registration) Act 1974. In 2012, the Hindu Marriage Registration Act was enacted. However, the requirement for registration is optional. Under personal religious laws, child marriage is not prohibited, but it is punishable by statutory law of the land.

⁷<https://www.thedailystar.net/law-our-rights/news/implementation-challenges-the-domestic-violence-law-1853959>

Sl. No.	The Law/Act	Challenges
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> According to the Guardianship and Wards Act 1890, only a male can adopt a child, while a woman does not. A woman has the right to adopt only with the consent of her husband. Intercaste marriage and adoption under Hindu Law is prohibited. This is a clear violation of Article 28(2) of the constitution. According to Muslim Inheritance Law, the adopted child cannot inherit from the legal guardian since formal adoption is not recognised under Islamic Law. Under Hindu Inheritance Law, the adopted son can inherit from the adopting parents.
4.	Dowry Prohibition Act 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Socially, dowry is justified in our society in the guise of a gift from the bride's family or in some other form. Dowry is often justified on the grounds that a woman is considered to be a burden on the family.
5.	Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act (PSHTA) 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complicity in human trafficking and trafficking-related corruption and impunity for traffickers remain a serious concern in Bangladesh. Enforcement of the law in dealing with these crimes remains weak. Selection of cases to be prosecuted tends to be biased because of political and financial considerations.
6.	Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Marriage of children under 18 is harmful and discriminatory. This is universally recognised. However, the new law, which replaced the 1929 law, has kept special provisions for underage marriage in case of unavoidable circumstances and with the consent of parents and permission of the Court.
7.	Arbitration Act 2001, and regulation through the Code of Civil Procedure 1908	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasis is being given at present to the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms to settle business disputes and land-related conflicts because the country's judicial system is complex and tends to be time-consuming. Because of the absence of skilled and certified mediators and arbitrators, women remain disadvantaged in the arbitration process. Use of ADR for criminal cases is not common because the country's legal system does not practice this. Use of ADR often gives the upper hand to the accused rather than the victims. The law recognises ADR in family matters under the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961 and the Family Courts Ordinance 1985. ADR is not legal when it comes to certain criminal offences against women, such as rape or murder. However, it is sometimes dealt with through arbitration.

Sl. No.	The Law/Act	Challenges
8.	Family Courts Ordinance 1985	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant Judges are stipulated by law to be the judges of family courts. However, the majority of the Family Courts have no separate courtrooms and separate judges. Consequently, family cases take many years to end. The court operates based on the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961, which leaves out some issues which are very important, e.g., inheritance, repression of women, domestic violation, etc. Due to the absence of mandated power, Family courts often fail to provide a remedy by applying discretionary power informed by considerations of equity, justice, and good conscience. The Ordinance does not clearly state whether people of all religions exercise this law. Only Muslim families can take advantage of the law.
9.	High Court Division's directives on sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government is yet to reflect the definition of 'Sexual Harassment' in the Women and Children Repression and Prevention Act. Anti-Sexual Harassment guidelines of the High Court concerning workplaces and educational institutes are not being properly implemented even at the Garments Factory level, though this is one of the key compliance areas. The guidelines do not provide legal definition of the term 'Sexual Harassment'. Provisions for the formation of committees, sanctions, and investigations are also not clearly spelt out.
10.	Proposed Anti-Discrimination Bill 2022	<p><i>The Law Minister placed the Bill before the parliament on April 5, 2022. The Bill is currently with the relevant Parliamentary Standing Committee for further examination. The concerns here are the following:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The law does not clearly stipulate whether discrimination is a criminal offence. The law creates several tiers which an aggrieved person has to go through (such as district, divisional and national forums) in order to obtain any remedy. There is a lack of clarity as to which court should be approached and what the penalty ought to be if the order or verdict is not complied with by someone. It is not clear why a separate monitoring committee needs to be constituted instead of strengthening the National Human Rights Commission. The law will hardly be effective in providing proper remedies to those who face discrimination. The law repeatedly refers to a formulation of rules to facilitate the implementation of the law. It is apprehended that the rules will be formulated by the concerned Ministries without consulting relevant stakeholders.

Sl. No.	The Law/Act	Challenges
11.	Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This Act was passed in 2013; the rules were designed in 2015, and the National Action Plan was formulated in 2019. Regrettably, many government officials are not aware of the Act and are not sensitive about the rights of persons with disabilities. Often, expressions such as differently abled, persons with special needs physically challenged etc. are used to refer to persons with disabilities. Much more needs to be done also to sensitise the media and other stakeholders. For example, a media outlet in one of its dramas had a dialogue which mentioned that a person with a disability was the consequence of father's fault. While a number of cases were filed in protest, there has still been no result. People with disabilities, particularly women and girls, suffer because the lack of accessibility is widespread. They do not have freedom of movement; their social interactions remain highly limited, and they are forced to live a life which is of lower quality compared to others.

Social Norms and Practices Impacting on Gender-Based Violence

- Social and cultural myths, values, norms and practices* impact on social outlook and often tend to have harmful implications for GBV. These relate to concerns over women's sexual purity, protection of family honour getting more importance than women's safety, men's authority to discipline women and children and control women's mobility, and an acceptance of child marriage, etc. Norms and values justify male dominance, and this attitude contributes to intimate partner rape (marital rape) and other forms of abuse.
- Hilla marriage* has been outlawed by Section 7(6) of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961. The High Court Division in Writ Petition No. 5897 of 2000 held that execution of a fatwa related to Hilla marriage is a punishable offence under sections 494, 508, and 509 of the Penal Code 1860 and under section 7 of the 1961 Ordinance. In a patriarchal society, Hilla marriage tends to be used as a weapon to exploit women. This practice is particularly prevalent in rural areas in Bangladesh.
- Religious and social 'Fatwa' against women* is used to control women's mobility, freedom and choice. As one of the petitions argued, the government is not responding proactively to the directive of the High Court Division of the Supreme Court to take appropriate measures to stop illegal punishment such as whipping, lashing and public humiliation.
- Child marriage and domestic violence* are major barriers to the development of a girl child as a citizen enjoying equal rights. Regrettably, the incidences of VAW have been on the rise in Bangladesh. About 62.8 per cent of all women in the 15-49 age cohort were married before 18 (MICS 2012-13). During COVID-19, the rate

of child marriage and incidences of domestic violence have increased alarmingly.⁸

- *Lack of gender empowerment and inequality* often prevents survivors from speaking out against violence and discrimination due to fear of retaliation and economic dependency.
- *Inadequate support system* results in lack of accessible and responsive support services for survivors of abuse. The absence of proper support services such as counselling, shelters and medical and caring services discourages reporting and prevents from seeking help when abused.
- *Role of law enforcers and courts in ending VAW and discrimination* is critically important. Prosecutors, police officials and judges play an important part in eradicating VAW by executing the relevant laws properly and in due time. The following challenges could be cited in this connection:
 - Investigation and submission of charge sheets and final reports in due time are crucial in the trial process of the justice system. Fear of courts, unregulated fees charged by lawyers and long procedures are some of the other obstacles. Up to June 30, 2023, a total of 43,114 cases related to repression of for more than five years women were pending in the women and children repression prevention tribunals.
 - Medical examination is an additional obstacle in accessing justice.
 - Discriminatory personal laws related to marriage, divorce, separation, succession, adoption and inheritance are forcing women to live in abusive marriages and in poverty.
 - The amendment of Legal Aid Services Regulation 2001 is supposed to enhance the access of victims and survivors of VAW to the justice system. However, enforcement is the key here.
- *Lack of availability of required data in the public domain* undermines efforts to address violence and discrimination faced by women due to social and cultural norms and legal systems.
- *Limited resources*, both financial and human, often undermine the capacity of law enforcement agencies, legal institutions, and support organisations to address cases of GBV effectively.
- *Weak legal frameworks* are reflected in laws which lack clarity and comprehensiveness

⁸http://www.manusherjonne.org/latest_stories/amid-lockdown-4249-women-and-456-children-became-victims-of-domestic-violence-in-april-mjf/

and undermine the cause of effective enforcement. Legal loopholes and inconsistencies often work against efforts to hold the perpetrators accountable.

- *Lack of adequate training* results in law enforcement officers, legal professionals and service providers not having the specialised knowledge to deal with GBV cases with sensitivity and effectiveness.
- *Slow judicial process* is often the result of an overburdened court system and leads to lengthy and costly legal processes. This often discourages survivors from pursuing legal actions. Delays can also lead to secondary trauma for survivors.
- *Lack of coordination* involving different government agencies, NGOs and service providers results in fragmented responses to GBV cases.
- *Lack of geographical accessibility* creates difficulties for women in getting access to legal services, courts and support organisations. This problem is most acute for women living in rural and remote areas.

Recommendations

To eradicate violence and discrimination against women and girls, interventions in three areas are important: (i) carrying out necessary amendments to existing legal framework, which will help put in place appropriate laws and policies which, if properly enforced, will help to deal with GBV in an effective and efficient manner; (ii) taking social and cultural aspects into consideration while executing laws and implementing policies and pursuing a victim-centric approach; (iii) ensuring that GBV-related justice is easily and readily accessible by all women.

In view of the above, the following recommendations are put forward to address GBV:

Reform concerned laws and policies

Carry out a thorough review of existing laws and policies with a view to integrate progressive, reformative and preventive aspects in GBV-related areas rather than focus on punishment. Address the areas of concerns articulated in Section 1.

- i. Review personal laws and remove discriminatory features, particularly with respect to polygamy, equal access of divorced women to justice and removal of barriers to the security and livelihoods of women. Ensure women's equal right to inherit a share of property. Ensure that in case of divorce, a woman is entitled to an equal share in marital property acquired during marriage. Give equal guardianship rights to women. Ensure gender equality through a unified family code; to recall, this is also a CEDAW commitment of Bangladesh.
- ii. Amend the civil law and strengthen and enhance the capacity of the 'Family Court' to ensure that women are able to receive "Den Mohor" money following initiation of divorce proceedings.

- iii. As per the Penal Code 1860 rule 493-495, the victim is not allowed to appoint a Lawyer; this requires permission of a higher authority. There is a need to review the relevant provision to address this issue. A progressive approach should inform the initiative in this context.
- iv. The provision in the Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 allowing child marriages under special circumstances needs to be dropped without delay since this happens to be frequently misused.
- v. Conviction rate under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 of Bangladesh is only about 3.0 percent. Speedy trial must be introduced to remedy the situation.
- vi. Review and redefine the definition of 'Rape' in Penal Code 1860. Clarify sexual harassment issues related to 'Marital rape', 'Rape against boys and men' and 'individuals with diverse gender identities'.
- vii. Establish OCC and DNA Laboratory, at least at the Division/District levels. Test should be mandatory for both victims and perpetrators.
- viii. Introduce special investigation teams of police, with highly specialised training, to ensure speedy gender-sensitive investigation regarding cases filed under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000. Ensure the presence of women police officers at women's desks in every police station, as was promised quite some time back.
- ix. Ensure accessibility and logistics support for persons with disability during court process in line with the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013.
- x. Enforce the provision in the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance 1961, which requires parties to submit formal notice to the concerned local government authority as well as the spouse in divorce-related cases.
- xi. Introduce a unified inheritance law that allows women to claim their rightful share of property from their parents, regardless of their religious background.
- xii. As per the guidelines of the High Court Division, the government should, without delay, include a new section in the 'Women and Children Repression Prevention Act' by giving a proper definition of the offence of 'sexual harassment'. Online sexual harassment and cyber harassment also need to be appropriately defined and included in the Act.
- xiii. The head office and district level offices of the National Legal Aid Service should be properly equipped with necessary logistics capacities and required human resources for monitoring and coordinating the work carried out across the country. Union and Upazila Legal Aid Services Committees need to be activated with due urgency.

- xiv. Accommodate all migrant-related issues under one umbrella for better coordination and more effective handling of migrant workers' concerns. Special efforts must be made to ensure protection and safeguard the interests of female migrant workers and resolve wage disparities and disputes.
- xv. Local-based illegal arbitration system needs to be banned. The punishment imposed by this system should be declared as ineligible under the law and recognised as a punishable offence.
- xvi. Pass the Anti-Discrimination Bill 2022 by considering the identified challenges and addressing the CEDAW's requirements, including withdrawal of the existing reservations.

Organise training and workshops for Police, Judges and Prosecutors on judicial education to enable them to deal with social, cultural and gender stereotypes.

People involved in investigation and judiciary process need to have a better understanding about the impact of gender stereotypes and the context of victimisation. Here, targeted training could play an important role.

Strengthen accountability mechanisms at the national level.

A number of relevant laws and policies have been enacted in Bangladesh, and several international treaties and strategies have been ratified or agreed upon by the Bangladesh government to ensure violence-free life for women and girls. The Law Ministry should share updated fact sheets as regards progress being made in respect of these on a regular basis and should make it public through the national media.

Increase the number of 'Shelter Homes' and 'OCC'.

Till now, 36 shelters homes for women have been established in the country. However, the majority of these are located in metropolitan areas. It is difficult for rural women to get access to the One Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs) that are there. It is necessary to increase the number of shelter homes, particularly outside of metropolitan areas. These should be able to provide a minimum standard of care and should work under an independent monitoring mechanism.

Increase investment and financing for gender equality.

The government and concerned entities should increase investment to ensure and enhance gender equity and empowerment of women and girls. Government budget and allocations for women's rights organisations should be increased to strengthen their capacity to address social, cultural and legal issues.

Focus on the SDGs.

Each Ministry should develop a plan to address gender justice and gender equity issues effectively and to ensure accountability in this process. The government should prepare

SDG implementation report in consultation with civil society organisations so that the ground realities as regards gender situation is reflected in a reliable way.

Ensure 'Access to Justice'.

Access to justice is defined as an enabling environment where individuals can seek and obtain remedy through formal or informal institutions of delivery of justice and get grievances resolved, as per the law of the land and global human rights standards. Access to justice will be ensured if the following concerns are addressed:

- i. Relevant authorities need to identify legal and systemic barriers to access to justice and address these by amending laws and with the support of adequate resources and strengthened capacities.
- ii. Police, medico-legal, and judicial entities should recognise that enhanced access to justice also depends on the perception of general people regarding the judicial and legal system.
- iii. Take measures to strengthen civil society's in promoting access to justice. The government needs to undertake legal awareness-raising activities and take measures to ensure easy access to legal aid services.
- iv. Muslim Family Law allows remarrying the same women or men. As per the Family Law, forcing people to Hilla Marriage is punishable. These provisions need to be enforced.

Build women's movement and launch campaign to make government accountable.

Ending Violence against Women (EVAW) should be everyone's business. Violence against women and gender discrimination can be significantly reduced through strong and coordinated efforts and with support of women's solidarity movement, feminist activism and launching of targeted campaigns. GO-Non-state actor partnerships will help boost the cause of accountability in this backdrop.

Ensure speedy judicial processes.

Speedy judicial processes ensure that individuals have access to justice within a reasonable timeframe. It can act as a deterrent against potential wrongdoers as they will be more likely to face immediate consequences for their actions. This can help prevent future offences and reduce crime rates.

Ensure access to justice irrespective of geographical factors.

Geographical accessibility plays a significant role in effective implementation of laws and judicial processes aimed at eradicating GBV and discrimination. Oftentimes, people living in rural areas face difficulties in accessing justice. In view of this, ensure that legal services, support systems and judicial processes are accessible to all individuals, regardless of their geographical location. This is essential for achieving the objectives of justice and equality.

Ensure selective recourse to camera trial.

Keep the provision of camera trials in sensitive cases, such as rape, by taking into cognisance of its potential benefits and drawbacks. The focus should be on securing the rights, dignity and well-being of all parties involved while maintaining the integrity of the judicial process. In this connection, ensure the implementation of the seven-point guidelines of the High Court with respect to the trial of rape cases.

Ensure child rights.

Provide free legal aid to each and every child as per the constitution so that their rights are secured and safeguarded.

Concluding Observations

Gender equality and gender justice are key enablers to accelerate the process of eradicating all forms of GBV and discrimination against women and girls. This Policy Brief has presented a number of concrete initiatives and actions to secure women's rights and to deal with GBV. It is hoped that policymakers and political parties will pay due attention to attendant concerns and take appropriate actions in view of these.

As has been mentioned, the GoB has enacted a number of laws and formulated several policies in connection with the above. Bangladesh is also a signatory to the international protocol to eradicate violence against women and girls and eliminate patriarchal practices. It is crucially important to challenge gender stereotypes and social norms that limit women's mobility and justify the incidences of VAWG at the societal level.

Bangladesh has been recognised as one of the top-ranking countries in terms of reducing gender gaps and promoting women's labour market participation. Despite these achievements, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) data shows that the prevailing rate of domestic violence, discrimination against women and girls, and rate of child marriage in Bangladesh is not only comparatively high but also rising at an alarming pace. Targeted and concrete actions will need to be taken to reverse this unacceptable trend. Bangladesh's developmental aspirations cannot be realised unless all its citizens have equal access to justice. Since women in our societies face additional difficulties, their issues of concern and interest must receive special attention and care. Women's rights must be ensured by providing legal support and strengthening institutional capacities to address their concerns through solidarity movements and awareness raising campaigns. A social norm of zero-tolerance as regards VAWG must be promoted and supported to safeguard and secure women's rights. All concerned institutions and stakeholders have a duty to make this happen.

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**Access and Justice for Ethnic
and Religious Minorities**

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Background and Context

Bangladesh is home to a large number of ethnic and religious minority groups. They add to the country's cultural richness and tapestry, making significant contributions to the country's socio-economic development. However, these communities are facing persistent economic and social deprivations, resulting in their further marginalisation. Their access to justice and public services is also limited.

To note, religious minorities account for around 11 per cent of Bangladesh's population. They include Hindus, Christians and Buddhists. Among these, the Hindu population has the largest share, accounting for more than 90.0 per cent of the minority population. Among the Hindus, there is a sub-group belonging to the lower caste, identified as Dalits, who constitute about 3 per cent of the population and are particularly discriminated against. Also, among the Muslim population, there is a small number of Shia Muslims as well as a minority Islamic sect, the Ahmadiyya Muslims. There are more than 54 ethnic minorities living in the plainlands and the hill tracts areas of Bangladesh. These diverse groups have a rich heritage and add to the country's tradition and culture mosaic. The ethnic people speak in at least 35 languages, other than Bangla, and pursue their own traditional ways of living.

Throughout the history of Bangladesh, both religious and ethnic minority communities have played an important role in shaping the nation's identity, contributing to socio-economic progress of the country. Despite this, the minority communities in Bangladesh have been facing a continuing stream of discrimination, leading to multidimensional disparities and constrained access to basic entitlement provisions.

The Adverse Footprints of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities in Bangladesh, disproportionately affecting particularly the socio-economically vulnerable sections among the ethnic and religious minority communities. The most adversely affected people are the dalits, plainland ethnic minorities and the ethnic minorities living in remote and hard-to-reach areas in the Chattogram hill tracts. These people have experienced heightened health risks, acute economic vulnerabilities, and significant disruptions to their livelihoods consequent to the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve sustainable recovery from the worst impacts of COVID-19, it is necessary to address the specific needs of these minority groups against this backdrop.

Attaining the SDGs by Leaving No One Behind

Leave No One Behind (LNOB) is the transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda. It needs to be recognised that achievement of the SDGs depends, to a large extent, on empowering the left-behind groups and addressing the specific needs and vulnerabilities of ethnic and religious minorities. SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) can be realised entirely only when these minorities have equal access to employment, land and food security. SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 4 (Quality Education) can be advanced by leaving no one behind only by investing in infrastructure and services that

specifically target minority groups, e.g., investing in schools and healthcare facilities that are geared to improving the well-being of these people. Attaining SDG 5 (Gender Equality) is closely linked to the empowerment of minority women. It needs to be kept in mind that women from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds often face intersecting forms of discrimination and are thus doubly discriminated. Addressing gender-based violence, promoting women's rights to inheritance and expanding educational opportunities for girls from these communities are concrete steps that will need to be taken towards achieving gender equality and promoting social and economic participation of minority communities.

Dual Graduation

Bangladesh graduated from lower-income to lower middle-income country status in 2015 and is on track to graduate from the LDC status by 2026. The dual graduation marks a significant achievement in the country's development trajectory. This will bring many new challenges for Bangladesh, as also will open up many new opportunities. As a middle-income (non-LDC) developing country, Bangladesh must be able to ensure that all citizens have equal opportunity to contribute to its development and make graduation sustainable. From this vantage point, specific needs and rights of ethnic and religious minorities of the country must be given highest priority. Promoting access to justice and equal representation at all levels for the ethnic and religious minority groups are key to upholding the rule of law in Bangladesh. The state must ensure that their rights as citizens are protected. Accordingly, a fair and just treatment of minorities, as also all other citizens, is crucially important for Bangladesh's sustainable transition and attainment of developmental aspirations.

Recent Cases of Violation of Religious Minority Rights

In 2021, Bangladesh witnessed a number of violent incidents during the Durga Puja (the main religious festival of the Hindu community). Violence against religious minorities not only marred the festive spirit of religious celebrations but also resulted in deaths and property damages. These incidents reinforce the concerns religious minorities have about their security. This once again underpins the urgency of taking appropriate measures to bring the perpetrators to justice and the importance of maintaining interfaith harmony in the country.

In 2023, another distressing event unfolded, with the Ahmadiyya Muslim community being targeted in a coordinated attack in Panchagarh. Members of this community faced violence and persecution. These events highlighted an ongoing challenge which religious minorities in Bangladesh have been facing for quite some time now. Such occurrences underpin the need to foster an environment of tolerance, respect and co-existence in the country. Thus, the importance of promoting religious tolerance and pluralism and protecting minority rights in Bangladesh cannot be overemphasised in the current context. Addressing the attendant concerns will require a comprehensive approach involving government measures, community engagements and public awareness campaigns. These must be geared to promote greater understanding among various communities and inculcate respect for faith and customs of followers of all faiths.

Commitment of the Political Parties

Election manifestos of major political parties in Bangladesh and their allies talk of their commitment to safeguard the rights of the religious and ethnic minorities in the country. The election manifestos reiterate the commitment of political parties to uphold the principles of secularism and ensure equal rights for all religious and ethnic groups. They underscore that the political parties will work to create an enabling environment for all religious and ethnic communities to live in peace and prosper. The promise of addressing the grievances of indigenous communities and ensuring their rights, maintaining communal harmony, protecting and promoting their languages and cultural heritages, and enhancing their access to education, healthcare and economic opportunities are mentioned in the manifestos of all mainstream political parties. What is now required is to walk the talk and live up to the commitment.

Legal and Policy Framework for Religious and Ethnic Minorities

Bangladesh has adopted a number of core human rights treaties which obligate the country to safeguard the interests of minority groups and communities. Some of these include - the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Indeed, a large part of the country's legal and policy frameworks draw these international obligations.

The Constitution of Bangladesh embraces secularism as one of its founding values, along with democracy, nationalism and socialism. However, contrary to its constitutional founding pillar of secularism, Islam was promulgated as the state religion through constitutional amendment. The Constitution guarantees equal protection of the law to all citizens and prohibits discrimination on account of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. The Constitution guarantees equal opportunities in public employment and education and ensures religious freedom. The constitution also specifically provides for the *backward sections* to be free from exploitation, and as such, issues of concern to ethnic and religious minorities are to receive special attention from the state. However, many concerns remain.

Despite constitutional guarantees as regards the right to own property, legislative measures pertaining to the appropriation of *enemy property* by the state had continued to persist in independent Bangladesh for a long period. However, on a welcome move, this was eventually abolished in 2001. To recall, the Vested Property Act 1974 and subsequent legislations provided sweeping powers to the Bangladesh state to appropriate property from anyone deemed to be an enemy of the state. The state was the custodian of the power to own or dispose of such property. In practice, the law lent itself to abuse as state power was used by vested quarters to appropriate land from minority groups such as Hindus, Christians, Buddhists and other minorities. It has also been used for purposes of land grabbing, which disproportionately impacts minority communities. As was mentioned, in 2001, legislative initiative was taken to return the vested properties to the original owners or their rightful heirs. However, this process has been mired in inconsistencies in the law and has also been subject to bureaucratic delays.

Article 23A was inserted by the 15th Amendment to the Constitution, which now reads, "The State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities." However, no clear definition of these terms has been provided. The Ethnic Minorities Cultural Institution Act, 2010 legally recognises only 50 ethnic minority communities from the plain lands and the hill tracts.

The State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 (SATA) imposes restrictions on the transfer of land to any person from the 22 ethnic minority communities living in the plain lands. According to the law, if any person belonging to these 22 communities wishes to transfer their land to someone outside the communities, they must seek prior permission from the respective district revenue officer. However, there are no specific rules and regulations in place which outline the process for obtaining this permission. Furthermore, the Act only recognises 22 plain lands ethnic minority communities, as was noted above, in contrast to the Ethnic Minorities Cultural Institution Act 2010 which recognises 50 plain lands ethnic minority communities.

The Land Crime Prevention and Suppression Act 2021 (Draft) lays out 22 offences which relate to the illegal occupation of land belonging to public, private, autonomous or statutory bodies. Mobile Courts were granted authority to terminate such possessions if deemed necessary. However, this provision raises concerns for many plain lands ethnic minority people who are living on wastelands, assigned properties, or even living on their own land, which is claimed by others. Additionally, the customary ownership and land use patterns of the ethnic minority groups are not recognised in the National Land Use Policy 2001. Also, the issue of land rights of ethnic minorities living on Khas land has not been mentioned. The problem of land rights of forest-dependent people from ethnic minority groups who have traditionally lived in those areas for generations has also not been addressed either.

The 8th Five-Year Plan of Bangladesh includes a number of promises about catering to the needs of the country's Dalits and ethnic minorities. The document emphasises the government's commitment to ensuring socio-economic and political rights, fundamental rights, and social security of these communities while at the same time preserving their social, cultural, and traditional identities. The document also talks of setting up a separate land commission for ethnic minorities in the plain land, similar to the CHT Land Dispute Resolution Commission, to address land-related issues of concern and interest to them.

Also, to recall, the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) identifies various socially excluded groups, which include 45 ethnic minority groups living in the plain lands and the CHT. While the NSSS proposes various social security programmes, it does not expressly refer to any particular programme for plain lands ethnic minorities.

The Education Policy, 2010 reiterates that the primary education of ethnic minority children shall be in their own languages, and they were to be taught by their respective community teachers. However, there is no quota provision to deliver on this in the Government Primary School Teacher Appointment Rules, 2019; neither is it there in the Non-Government

Teachers Examination, Registration and Certification Rules, 2006 (Amended 2015). The National Health Policy 2011 acknowledges the challenges of providing equal health care to the indigenous communities. The Policy suggests 39 strategies to mitigate the challenges to accessing health care services. However, none of these addresses the issue of providing equal and quality health services, particularly to ethnic minority communities.

To ensure the early level education of the ethnic children, since 2017, the government has been distributing textbooks in Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Sadri and Garo languages. This ought to be appreciated. However, while the majority of the teachers from these communities do speak their respective mother tongue, in most cases, they do not know how to read and write in those languages. Consequently, it is difficult for them to plan and give lessons based on the textbooks. Moreover, it is somewhat alarming to note that, at least 28 of the 41 ethnic languages in Bangladesh are at the risk of extinction. If any of these languages become extinct, it will be a great loss for the country. Bangladesh will lose a part of its rich cultural diversity; the world will lose a part of its linguistic and cultural heritage.

As may be recalled, Bangladesh has ratified the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). These documents are geared toward safeguarding the rights of minorities. However, Bangladesh has yet to ratify the ILO Convention 107, which focuses on the rights of the Indigenous and Tribal Population.

CHT Accord

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Accord, signed in 1997, marked a significant milestone in addressing the longstanding socio-political issues and disputes which had continued to persist in the hill tracts region of Bangladesh for a long time. As is known, the CHT region is inhabited predominantly by the indigenous groups who had to face decades of displacement, suffered from human rights violations and experienced cultural marginalisation. The accord aimed to establish peace, secure land rights, and ensure socio-economic development of the indigenous communities.

One of the central aspects of the CHT accord was the recognition of the rights of the indigenous people to their ancestral land. The Land Commission, which was constituted as per the accord, was mandated to address land disputes and ensure the restitution of land to its rightful owners. The accord was geared to addressing the historical grievances of the CHT people. Moreover, the accord aimed to demilitarise the region through reduction of presence of military personnel and by ensuring a more secure environment for the local communities.

Ongoing Government Programmes for Ethnic and Religious Communities

The government of Bangladesh has been implementing various programs aimed at addressing the concerns and promoting the welfare of ethnic and religious communities in the country. While concerns remain as regards efficacy of many of the government initiatives, below are

some of the current government programmes in place at present which focus on issues of interest to ethnic and religious communities in Bangladesh.

Indigenous Development and Welfare Programs

The Ministry of Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs is responsible for implementing various CHT development and welfare programs, including education, healthcare and infrastructure development. The idea is to help improve indigenous peoples' living standards and living conditions. One of the key programs is the Special Development Package for Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). This initiative aims to address the indigenous communities' socio-economic disparities and promote sustainable development in the region.

Religious Harmony and Social Cohesion

The Ministry of Religious Affairs organises interfaith dialogues, seminars and workshops to foster greater understanding and inculcate tolerance among the various religious and ethnic groups living in the hill tracts. Additionally, the government organises religious festivals and events involving the various communities belonging to different religions, with a view to celebrating diversity and strengthening inter-community harmony and unity.

Social Safety Net Programmes

To ensure social protection for the vulnerable groups, including ethnic and religious minorities, the government runs a diverse range of social safety net programs. These programs include extending financial support, providing food assistance and delivering healthcare services to the disadvantaged communities, including those adversely impacted by poverty, natural disasters and social exclusion.

Inclusive Education Initiatives

The government has been taking steps to ensure inclusive education for children from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds. Special educational supports are provided to cater to the needs of these communities, including scholarships and stipends for students from marginalised backgrounds.

Economic Empowerment Programmes

The government promotes the cause of economic empowerment of ethnic and religious minorities through various skills development and entrepreneurship programs. These initiatives aim to provide training, access to credit and market opportunities to help minority communities become self-reliant and financially independent.

Cultural Preservation and Promotion

A number of initiatives have been put in place to protect, preserve and promote the unique cultural heritage of different ethnic and religious communities of the country. The government extends support for cultural events, festivals and traditional art forms to celebrate the diversity of the nation's cultural tapestry.

With support of efforts mentioned above, the government aims to promote inclusivity and social cohesion and strengthen economic empowerment of these communities. However, the objectives of many of the aforementioned programmes remain unattained because of lack of adequate resources and weak institutional support. Indeed, there is still a long way to go in attaining the desired goal of creating a more equitable and more harmonious society for all in Bangladesh.

Recommendations

The recommendations presented below cover a number of critically important areas that have been put under several broad thematic areas, including education, healthcare, the right to justice, and the universal coverage of government services. While budgetary allocations and attention to the needs of all citizens are essential for the quality delivery of public services, here, attention has been particularly focused on the needs of the various religious, caste, ethnic and other minority groups.

Institutional interventions

- i. Include detailed questions as regards ethnicity, caste and religion in the next census questionnaire and ensure that Dalit communities are appropriately accounted for in the census. Consult concerned stakeholders, including policy organisations and NGOs, as to how best to organise the data in a meaningful way and how individuals belonging to these groups can be identified in the right way. The advantages of modern ICT tools must be deployed towards this.
- ii. Allocate disaggregated budget (with separate earmarkings for different minorities) for undertaking programmes for the advancement of the minority communities. Engagement with ethnic and religious minority communities in the formulation of the budget. Universal social protection and pension schemes must be designed in a way that takes care of the needs of ethno-religious minority groups. Adopt a common but differentiated approach for the most vulnerable within these communities, ensuring that 'no one is left behind.'
- iii. Undertake concrete steps to protect the property rights of dalits. Ensure their right to adequate housing and protection from eviction. Streamline the process of claiming vested properties so that cases are resolved in a speedy manner.
- iv. Review textbooks of national curriculum and Madrasah education boards, from elementary to the highest level, to eliminate any content that either breeds intolerance towards a different religion, belief or race or educates about the superiority of a particular religion over others. Include contents that promote tolerance, freedom of religion and belief and the strengths of a pluralistic society. The government should opt for building strong partnerships with non-state actors and NGOs in this regard.

- v. Introduce policies and legislations to stop all types of intimidation and harassment against ethnic and religious minorities. The judiciary should be assisted in serving justice to anyone found guilty following due process.
- vi. Take appropriate actions for speedy exoneration from false charges filed against indigenous peoples and land rights activists, especially in the plains. These are generally filed by the Forest Department and influential and politically backed land grabbers against those who fight for rights of plainland activists.
- vii. Establish a high-powered Land Commission or Taskforce to help reclaim any land which was transferred without prior compliance with section 97 of the SAT Act.
- viii. Allocate adequate resources to strengthen the capacity of the Hill District Council and the Regional Council in the CHT. These Councils should be consulted before any policy is changed that concerns indigenous communities residing in the CHT.
- ix. Take appropriate measures to put an end to systematic and forcible displacement of minorities from their traditional settlements. This includes displacement in the name of land redistribution and development projects. In an absolutely unavoidable situation, the concerned authorities must prepare and present a report that justifies the proposed measures. Approval of the Human Rights Commission and Land Commission must be sought in this connection. In absolutely exceptional circumstances, when some land is to be acquired by the state or by any relevant state organ, due procedures as prescribed in land acquisition legislation must be followed. Where any land of indigenous communities and people is concerned, the state should obtain the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of the concerned individuals and communities as per the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Raising institutional efficiency

- i. Ensure required coordination involving all local government institutions and administration to protect the rights of indigenous peoples as regards land, property, natural resources, customary land rights, representation at different tiers of decision making and securing language, education and cultural rights.
- ii. Ensure accountability of local representatives, administrative officials and law enforcement agencies with regard to actions they take in view of communal attacks. Ensure that the judiciary is able to operate freely and maintains standards that are aligned with international best practices.
- iii. Set up and operationalise the 'Minority Rights and Protection Commission' to safeguard the rights of plains and CHT indigenous communities and work for their advancement.
- iv. Allocate adequate resources for the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC). Enable the Commission to operate independently to address issues of rights of

ethnic and religious minorities. This should include a review of cases associated with the violation of minority rights over the past 10-year period. Systematically follow up the recommendations of the NHRC.

Public-private partnership

- i. Undertake advocacy programmes and engage in meaningful dialogue with rights groups and CSOs as regards the introduction of affirmative action policies for religious minorities, marginalised groups and indigenous peoples, with a particular focus on women and children.
- ii. Create an enabling environment for NGOs to operate independently, without interference from various branches of the executive. This also relates to various activities of NGOs, including beneficiary selection and fund allocation. There should not be any unwarranted surveillance and intimidation by state agencies. Ensure that no unwarranted government restrictions and regulations are imposed on NGOs that undermine their activities and smooth operation.

Role of non-state actors and NGOs

Build awareness among people as regards the need for tolerance and freedom of religion and belief. Raise a voice about the strength of a pluralistic society through an educational policy that aims to attain a truly secular state, as enshrined in the Bangladesh constitution. This should be done by launching awareness and promotional campaigns, particularly before religious festivities of the minority communities such as Jalsha, Durga Puja, etc.

Implementation of current policies with greater efficacy

- i. Remove provision of Article 2A of the Constitution, which provides ascendancy of one particular religion on all others, in the spirit of secularism, which is one of the four founding pillars of the Bangladesh constitution.
- ii. Provide constitutional recognition to the indigenous peoples and take special measures and affirmative actions for their economic, social and cultural protection and development. This should include, but not be limited to, re-enacting quota reservation in government employment in favour of the particularly vulnerable communities and allocating at least one reserve seat in the parliament for indigenous women from the plains. Reserve adequate seats in the local government councils for the indigenous women.
- iii. Amend the Government Primary School Teacher Appointment Rules, 2019 and Non-Government Teachers Examination, Registration and Certification Rules, 2006 by introducing special reservations as per the needs of multi-linguistic primary education for children belonging to ethnic minorities. This could be done by facilitating recruitment of teachers from minority communities in line with the National Education Policy, 2010.

- iv. Take immediate actions and declare a time frame for a road map to fully implement all the provisions of the CHT Accord of 1997. Formulate and implement Rules for the Land Commission in accordance with recommendations of the CHT Regional Council, ensuring its operationalisation without any further delay.
- v. Review and amend the proposed Anti-Discrimination Bill based on suggestions of civil society groups and human rights experts so that an inclusive and comprehensive law may be enacted which will eliminate all types of discrimination, with immediate effect. The law should be able to address discrimination faced by marginalised and excluded groups, minorities, Dalits and disadvantaged groups, and should have adequate legal power to protect their economic, social and cultural rights.
- vi. Review relevant policies and strategies to ensure that concerns of plain land indigenous communities are appropriately addressed.
- vii. Amend Section 97 of the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950 to include all plain lands ethnic minorities recognised by the Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institution Act, 2010. This should be done in a manner that the Act is able to protect the land of all ethnic minority communities in the plains.
- viii. Issue a circular (or directive) to all revenue offices of all plain land districts as regards applying Section 97(8) of the SAT Act (restoration of land transferred without permission as provisioned in this Section). Ministry of Land should adopt a specific Rule under section 97 of the SAT Act to frame due process and procedures to be followed, for seeking permission for land transfer by any indigenous person to a non-indigenous person.
- ix. Review the Cyber Security Act (CSA), especially Article 31, which directly concerns minority communities. The Act stipulates disruption of communal harmony as a criminal offence with up to 7 years of jail, similar to its predecessor, the DSA. Clarify its definition and scope further, take measures against its misuse and categorise this as a civil offence, making it compatible with international standards.

Design of new policies

- i. Ensure meaningful and effective engagement of ethnic and religious minorities in formulating, amending and repealing of any law and policy that concerns their rights and wellbeing.
- ii. Identify geographical areas with sizable minority populations where medical, educational and other facilities are by and large absent (e.g., remote areas in the CHT, Sundarbans). For such areas, formulate appropriate strategies to address the attendant concerns and needs. Ensure that the work of various relevant ministries is well-coordinated so that policies are implemented with effectiveness and urgency.
- iii. Establish a workable redressal system to deal with discrimination by enacting an anti-discrimination law, specifically addressing the concerns of the ethnic minority communities.

- iv. Establish a separate Land Commission for indigenous peoples living in the plains for restoration of their dispossessed land.
- v. Introduce and/or reenact affirmative action initiatives such as quotas for admission to educational institutions, government jobs and social protection schemes for disadvantaged and indigenous peoples.
- vi. Formulate a Tourism Policy for the indigenous communities specifically residing in the CHT and near tourist zones in the plains. Additional incentives can be provided to them, for example, in the form of easier requirements in the case of loan disbursements. Steps in the form of reserving commercial activities may be taken to incentivise entrepreneurship and ownership of businesses by ethnic minorities. Ethnic minorities must have a greater role in running the local economy, and the tourism sector. Such an approach can also be helpful from the point of view of environmental conservation since locally owned businesses tend to provide a more authentic experience to tourists while also taking greater care of the environment and the local ecosystem.

Concluding Observations

The recommendations presented in the preceding section set out a roadmap for creating a more inclusive and equitable society in Bangladesh. The suggested steps reflect the urgent need for targeted policies and initiatives to address the challenges faced by various ethno-religious and other marginalised communities in Bangladesh and to empower them to participate in a meaningful way in the nation's building and the country's development process. By implementing these measures, the government can make significant strides towards reducing disparities and promoting social cohesion in Bangladesh. This is also aligned with the SDG spirit of LNOB and is in line with attaining the national aspiration of transitioning to an inclusive, developed country by 2041.

**Giving Voice to the ‘Silent’ and
Establishing Democratic
Accountability**

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Background and Context

Whilst Bangladesh has achieved commendable success in terms of various socio-economic indicators, there are many challenges the country is having to face in moving forward in the twenty-first century. It needs to be noted and appreciated that non-state actors have played a critically important role in the impressive journey that Bangladesh has undertaken over the post-independence period. Civil society groups, non-government organisations, as also the media of the country, have contributed in various ways in this journey: by raising awareness about issues of concern and development interests to the country, helping with poverty alleviation and improvements in health and nutritional status, offering low-cost health and education solutions, and by helping to identify areas and issues that needed priority attention and actions on the part of the policymakers. Bangladesh's development track record bears out that when all key stakeholders work jointly in areas of economic development, social empowerment and good governance, and in securing civic rights, both Bangladesh's economy and the citizens stand to gain from this. As may also be recalled, the SDGs, the implementation of which Bangladesh is committed, talk of a whole-of-society approach. Thus, the state should provide space to non-state actors, encourage constructive criticism, and promote proactive engagement with civic groups.

However, regrettably, in recent times, there has been a backsliding in view of the above. Concerns, as regards the state of democracy, accountability, political rights, and civil liberties, and shrinking political space for civil society organisations (CSOs) and other civil society actors (e.g., lawyers, academics, journalists, and other professional groups), have been on the rise in recent years. The shrinking political space is making it difficult for different groups and individuals to raise their voices in view of the policies and actions pursued by the government. Voices of dissent have also become equally marginalised.

While these concerns have negative implications for all citizens, these are more adverse and alarming particularly for marginalised groups and the left behind and pushed behind people of the country. In other words, even though the gradual democratic backsliding is affecting various aspects and spheres of public life, in a diverse range of manifestations, it is members of marginalised communities who have to bear disproportionate and adverse consequences. These groups include religious and ethnic minorities in both plain lands and the hills, linguistic minorities, the Dalit community, as well as persons with disabilities, among others. Women belonging to these groups are subjected to intersectional discrimination on the grounds of their gender. Members of the Hijra community and transgender persons are particularly vulnerable and discriminated against.

Against this backdrop, the Policy Brief focuses on key areas of concern in view of the above and comes up with a set of concrete recommendations as to how the democratic accountability system can be strengthened so that 'silent' disadvantaged communities can make their voices heard and their issues addressed. A search for actionable initiatives in this backdrop must become part of the mainstream discourse and needs to be attended to with due urgency.

Giving Voice to the 'Silent' and Establishing Democratic Accountability: A Review of the Current Situation

The Government of Bangladesh has shown a strong commitment to achieving the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, where a key focus is “to leave no one behind”. Successive national planning documents, such as the 7th and 8th Five-Year Plans, talk of aligning government policies with the SDGs. Moreover, the government's Perspective Plan (2021-2041) and the National Governance Assessment Framework (NGAF) also reflect its strong commitment to making the growth process inclusive by addressing the concerns of marginalised groups. Over the years, successive Governments have taken a number of initiatives to address the concerns of marginalised groups. Some of these include the following: setting up the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), responsible for investigating and addressing issues and cases related to human rights violations in the country, across the range of civil and political to economic and social rights; enacting a number of laws to safeguard and secure the interests of different vulnerable and marginalised groups; preparing the draft Anti-Discrimination Bill; establishing various institutions of accountability such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), and the Right to Information Commission, and introducing digital interfaces for accessing various government services. However, in spite of these initiatives, accountability, transparency and good governance remain largely elusive, and the exercise of civil and political rights continues to be restricted. It is particularly the left-behind people whose interests are undermined because of this state of affairs. To understand the reasons contributing to this emergent scenario, it is important to go deeper into the political evolution that the country has gone through over the past years.

The aforesaid civil, political and social rights draw on, and are embedded in, the Bangladesh constitution framed in 1972 which is widely recognised as a most progressive document. Besides, Bangladesh's commitment to implementing the SDGs and its signing of many international laws, covenants, and conventions oblige the country to ensure that civil, human, economic, and political rights are secured and protected.

However, since its birth, Bangladesh has had a complicated relationship with democracy and democratic principles. Governance and democracy went through a difficult period in the years immediately after independence. A decade and half long military and quasi-military rule ensued following the assassination of the Father of the Nation in 1975. Following this, the country made a transition towards democracy in the early 1990s. Since then, the country had four generally free and fair elections, which were by and large accepted by all [in 1991, June 1996, 2001, and 2008]. These elections led to democratically elected governments being in charge, with the two major political parties alternating in forming the government. Regrettably, successive governments have, by and large, failed to take the needed measures to consolidate democracy in the country. According to many national commentators and international observers, Bangladesh lost its status as an electoral democracy following the elections of 2014. The country has gone through two consecutive controversial elections in 2014 and 2018. The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) report, published annually by the Sweden-based V-Dem project, identifies Bangladesh as an “electoral autocracy”. A number of other organisations have also come up with the same conclusion. Freedom House

considers Bangladesh as a ‘partly free’ country, and Polity V considers the country as “an autocracy”.

The question that begs response in view of the above is the following: how has democratic backsliding affected the country’s overall accountability system and to what extent has the weakened accountability system made it difficult for marginalised populations to realise or even demand their rights? Democratic backsliding has resulted in over-centralisation of power, which has allowed the executive to dominate the other branches of the state. According to the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) report, Bangladesh’s score in the horizontal accountability index has fallen significantly over the years. The indications are that the power of different institutions of good governance, including the parliament, the judiciary, the ACC and the NHRC, to oversee functions of the government by demanding information, questioning officials and punishing violations of law and regulations have experienced a secular decline over the recent past years. Incidents of extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances have given rise to concerns. However, neither the parliament nor the institutions of accountability took any concrete measures to address the emergent situation.

The dominance of the executive has affected marginalised groups in two different ways. First, it has effectively narrowed political and civic space by making it difficult for the left-behind groups to raise their voices in support of their demands and engage effectively with organs of state. Secondly, at the field level, the consolidation of the power of the bureaucracy has led to a situation where service delivery is suffering because of excessive and unfettered discretion and weak democratic accountability. Consequently, disadvantaged citizens are often deprived of the necessary public services to which they are entitled. While the government has instituted a Grievance Redress System (GRS), access has remained limited because of the attendant difficulties.

Another critically important issue associated with executive dominance and democratic backsliding relates to the newly emerging challenges being faced by rights-based organisations. CSOs which are involved with rights issues or promotion of democracy, or simply democratic participation and inclusion are finding it increasingly difficult to function. Concerned government agencies are not only reluctant to listen to them but are putting up various obstacles in their path. According to V-Dem, CSOs working in Bangladesh to promote democracy are now facing moderate levels of repression: “...the government engages in minor legal harassment (detentions, short-term incarceration) to dissuade CSOs from acting or expressing themselves. The government may also restrict the scope of their actions through measures that restrict the association of civil society organisations with each other, bar civil society organisations from taking certain actions, or block international contacts.” All these are disquieting.

In the context of Bangladesh, various acts such as the Digital Security Act of 2018, and now its successor, the Cyber Safety Act 2023, the Foreign Donation (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act of 2016, the Circular issued by the NGOAB on November 25, 2021, as

regards project approval and fund clearance by NGOs, etc. create significant barriers for rights-based organisations to carry out their work. These are manifested in several ways: First, the government is discouraging CSOs from playing an active role in improving the human rights situation in the country as a consequence their critical voice and views are being ignored. The draft Anti-Discrimination Bill can serve as an example in this backdrop. While various suggestions put forward by the CSOs over the past years did encourage the government to design this Bill, CSO activists have pointed out that lack of consultation in the process of formulating the Bill has eventually resulted in a draft that does not address key concerns as regards discrimination and equity in economy, society and politics.

Secondly, by discouraging rights based CSOs from raising their demands, the government is depriving itself of credible voices, which could have played an important role in empowering citizens to claim rights and support the government in implementing various laws and measures in place to secure citizens' rights. This is creating a situation where proper recourse for victims of rights violations is severely limited.

Thirdly, in the context of Bangladesh, several organisations have emerged from within the marginalised communities that are actively projecting the demands of these disadvantaged groups. However, these organisations need allies and alliances in support of their rights and to ensure proper delivery of services. By repressing or restricting the operations of CSOs which work with marginalised communities and organisations, the government is undermining delivery of public services to these groups and they are not being able to exercise their rights.

The above discussion indicates that the gradual democratic recession experienced in Bangladesh has impacted the left-behind groups of Bangladesh in three different but interconnected domains:

- They are failing to exercise their legal, civil and democratic rights, and their voices remain unheard.
- They are failing to get access to quality public services.

Based on some of the key concerns identified above, the next section offers a number of recommendations to address the attendant concerns and barriers in areas of legal and civil rights, voice, accountability and good governance. The idea is to secure the interests of particularly the left-behind groups in Bangladesh in areas of voice and rights by bringing their concerns to the attention of political parties and policymakers.

Recommendations

Issue 1: Empower Marginalised Populations to Secure their Legal Protection of their Rights

Recommendation 1: Enact the Anti-Discrimination Act with Modifications.

As mentioned above, the Anti-Discrimination Act can prove to be a powerful tool in establishing the rights of left and pushed-behind groups. While this Bill is a welcome move on the part of the government and the result of citizens' activism over several years, the draft Bill has several limitations. These need to be appropriately addressed. The proposed recommendations are as follows:

- i. Incorporate provisions which address gender discrimination and its intersections with discrimination based on caste, religion, ethnicity, or occupation.
- ii. Incorporate provisions to criminalise discrimination, subject to meeting fair trial and due process concerns.
- iii. Ensure adequate support and protection for victims of discrimination, namely those who seek redress, including against possible reprisals.
- iv. Clearly define and identify victims of discrimination who are eligible to seek redress under the Act.
- v. Support collaborative engagements on the part of CSOs and NGOs to implement the various measures envisaged under the Act and take wide-ranging initiatives to raise the awareness of duty bearers as well as the public about the Act.
- vi. Establish an independent commission to implement the provisions mentioned in the Act.

A firm commitment on the part of all political parties and the government to implement the various initiatives envisaged under the Act will be necessary. This is more so since, as several studies have pointed out⁹, policies, acts, rules and regulations which are already in place are not being implemented properly. In this connection, mention may be made of the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, 2010, The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, The Labour Act and Labour Rules, 2015 (which have addressed certain rights of tea workers), The Acid Victim Treatment, Legal Aid and Rehabilitation Rules, 2008, Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act, 2000 and Electoral Rolls Act, 2009, among others. One could also add the Voter List

⁹Faruque, J. A., & Islam, M. R. (2023). Human Rights in Bangladesh: Success and Challenges. DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.112233; Alam, J., & Mashraf, A. (2023). Fifty Years of Human Rights Enforcement in Legal and Political Systems in Bangladesh: Past Controversies and Future Challenges. *Human rights review*, 24(1), 121-142. Titir, A. (2019). From Recognition to Realising Rights: Legal Protection of Gender Identity in Bangladesh Law. Dhaka: Blast; NGDO, NCDW & BLAST (2015). Current Status of Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh: Legal and Grassroots Perspectives. Dhaka: Blast.

Rules, 2012 (amended in 2019), which gave the *hijra community* the right to get the NID and cast their vote in the national elections. Proactive actions must be undertaken for their implementation. These policies need to be revisited and amended if necessary. (A detailed analysis of these laws and regulations is beyond the purview of this Policy Brief. Also, some of the other Policy Briefs have dealt with a number of concerns as regards these laws and relevant provisions and regulations.

Recommendation 2: Keep the Commitment to Strengthen the Capacity of the National Legal Aid Services Organisation (NLASO) to Deliver Legal Services to Those in Need.

To this end, the government needs to allocate adequate financial and human resources so that information about the rights of citizens is properly disseminated and appropriate support is provided to low-income people, women and marginalised groups. In this context, the National Legal Aid Services Organisation (NLASO) should focus on developing strategies which would allow it to collaborate with other relevant government agencies, as also with non-state actors with a track record on the issue, to ensure access to justice to disadvantaged groups and provide legal aid through partnerships. The government may also think of supporting and financing NGOs which provide legal aid and services instead of itself directly engaging in legal service delivery, and in particular for paralegal programmes in partnership with CSOs.

Recommendation 3: Eliminate Administrative and Legal Barriers that are Currently Affecting the Functioning of the Rights-based CSOs.

To support CSOs in upholding the rights of disadvantaged groups, political parties should commit to creating an enabling environment for these organisations to function effectively and without any hindrance. This can be done in two ways: by repealing and/or amending some of the current Acts that undermine the rights of citizens, such as the Cyber Security Act and the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Contributions) Act, and by incorporating suggestions provided by the CSOs while designing policies for their governance. Secondly, complicated and often unnecessary administrative burdens and procedural delays that CSOs have to face in undertaking their activities ought to be simplified. The NGO Affairs Bureau, currently under the PMO, must ensure that NGO/CSO projects and programmes are fast-tracked for approval when these meet stipulated requirements and be more transparent and accountable in their functioning.

Recommendation 4: Ensure Representation of the Marginalised Groups in the Electoral Process.

In order to empower marginalised groups and to enable them to exercise their rights properly, their participation in the political process is critically important. To this end, political parties should commit to nominating candidates from marginalised groups as their representatives in national and local elections, particularly in areas where ethnic or religious minorities and other disadvantaged groups (e.g., Dalit Community, tea-garden workers) constitute a sizable share of the electorate. Political parties also need to take actions to institutionalise internal democratic practices within their parties. Formation of various party committees should reflect representation of disadvantaged groups. Efforts

should be taken to ensure that marginalised groups can exercise their voting rights freely and without any harassment or hindrance, and with accommodations being made as necessary, for example, for people with disabilities to access voting booths and polling centres. The government should ensure that their lives and properties are protected during pre- and post-election periods. The Election Commission will need to play a proactive role in this.

Issue 2: Ensure that Left and Pushed Behind Groups Can Exercise Their Democratic Rights and Make Their Voices Heard

Recommendation 5: Create a Comprehensive Database Covering the Marginalised Groups which would Provide Information as regards their location, economic status and the particular challenges they face.

Such a database will help monitor the status and well-being of disadvantaged groups. Making the data publicly available will help both the government and the NGOs to design effective interventions. The government should work with NGOs in developing such a comprehensive database and updating it on a regular basis.

Recommendation 6: Introduce Initiatives which would Politically Empower the Marginalised Groups while Allowing them to Bargain Collectively for their Rights.

In almost all cases, marginalised population groups in Bangladesh often fail to overcome the collective action problem and, consequently, are deprived of the benefits that come from organising themselves. To address this challenge and to allow them to exercise their collective voice, efforts should be taken not only to raise their awareness about their political and democratic rights and rights as citizens but also to support their efforts to come together and mobilise on different issues. They should be able to voice their demand and collectively bargain for the services they are entitled to. CSOs should undertake initiatives to support disadvantaged groups to develop leadership capacity so that they can claim rights, protest structural impediments and mobilise for change.

Recommendation 7: Strengthen Existing Social Accountability Tools and Mechanisms and Ensure their Sustainability.

In the local government system of Bangladesh, a number of social accountability tools have been introduced over the past years. These include, but are not limited to, Ward Meetings, Open Budget Forums and Social Auditing. At the same time, standing committees have been set up at both the Union and Upazila levels in rural areas as well as in the Pouroshobha and city corporations of urban areas (13 in the case of Union Parishad, and 17 in the case of Upazila Parishad) to support vulnerable groups in exercising their rights. However, these social accountability tools and methods have either remained ineffective or are afflicted by elite-capture. To address this, political parties need to make a strong commitment to encourage and take all necessary steps to ensure the promotion and sustainability of these social accountability tools. One possible way of doing this is to ensure that Annual Performance Agreements (APAs) signed by various ministries and government agencies

include the organisation of regular interactions with citizens and feedback sessions from citizens as a requirement of performance assessment.

Recommendation 8: Ensure that Members of Parliament (MPs), Mayors and Commissioners of Municipalities and City Corporations, UP Chairs and Members and UPZ Chairs and Vice-Chairs Organise Public Hearings on a Regular Basis.

Public hearings, if participation is ensured, provide a very good opportunity for citizens to directly interact with their elected representatives and hold them accountable for their actions and inactions. To ensure democratic accountability, it is important that elected representatives hold such public hearings at regular intervals. Political parties should commit that they will not only hold such events in collaboration with civil society actors but also allocate resources in support of these activities and put in place a system of response and accountability given this.

Issue 3: Ensure Access to Quality Public Services

Recommendation 9: Ensure that the Performance of the Bureaucracy is assessed not on the Basis of Partisan Preference but Professional Competence.

To deliver services in an effective and efficient manner, Bangladesh needs a public service that is competent and professional, whose members can perform as in-house policy experts, and who are encouraged to speak truth to power. Such a public service can not be created if the bureaucracy is not allowed to maintain its neutrality and function as a 'neutral arbiter'. The bureaucracy needs to be completely free from politicisation. Merit and competence must be given priority at every step of the career of a civil servant, from recruitment and promotion to subsequent career progression.

Recommendation 10: Strengthen the Existing Grievance Redress System (GRS).

While the government has introduced a GRS in a number of organisations, this is not being effectively taken advantage of by citizens, especially by marginalised groups. In this backdrop, the GRS needs to be further strengthened and knowledge about it disseminated widely. Concerned government organisations should regularly measure and report on the level of satisfaction derived by citizens as regards the GRS.

Recommendation 11: Ensure Accountability of Law Enforcement Agencies.

With limited exceptions, law enforcement agencies in Bangladesh enjoy virtual impunity with respect to their acts and omissions. This has serious implications for marginalised communities and disadvantaged groups. A system of indicator-based reward and punishment in view of their performance must be put in place to ensure that law enforcing agencies operate with professionalism, integrity and without any bias, in the spirit that they are in service of citizens on behalf of the state. At the same time, it must be ensured that prompt, impartial and effective investigations are held concerning any allegations of rights violations and that appropriate punishment is meted out to members of law enforcement agencies if they are found responsible for any violation of the law or their code of conduct.

Recommendation 12: To Make the Parliamentary Standing Committees Effective, Ensure that Key Committees are Headed by Members of Opposition Parties.

All political parties should make a commitment that if they come to power, they will allow the members of opposition parties to head key Parliamentary Standing Committees, including the Public Accounts Committee (PAC), Committee on Estimates, and Standing Committees on the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs. At the same time, initiatives should be taken to create a special Parliamentary Committee on the human rights situation in the country. This Committee should hold regular public hearings including with civil society members and disadvantaged groups. The proceedings of the Committee should be made public. The Committee should be headed by a member of the opposition party.

Recommendation 13: Ensure that the Supreme Court Enjoys Absolute Authority and Independence in Controlling and Supervising Subordinate Courts.

To ensure that justice is being carried out without any influence exerted by the executive, it is necessary to ensure independence of the judiciary. It is necessary to bring the subordinate courts fully under the control of the Supreme Court. At the same time, efforts should be taken to equip subordinate courts with adequate human resources, infrastructure, logistics and modern technology for efficacious dispensation of justice. Periodic needs- assessment of subordinate courts should be carried out for purposes of proper budgeting and appropriate allocations. Proactive disclosure of court activities must be ensured. Putting on display citizens' charters and setting up of information centres at the court premises will be helpful in this backdrop. To ensure legal protection and access to justice of marginalised communities, holding annual conferences and publication of data regarding cases involving these groups should be considered. If disaggregated case-related data tracking geographic location, gender identity, religious and ethnic identities, etc., is available, this would allow the broader public to know about actual progress being made over time with respect to the exercise of the rights to legal protection of the disadvantaged people.

Recommendation 14: Ensure that the Institutions of Accountability, such as the ACC, IC, and NHRC, Can Perform Their Vested Responsibilities While Remaining Free from Executive Control.

To this end, several steps can be taken. A major concern is that the appointment procedure of the Chairs of various institutions of Accountability continues to remain highly politicised. This not only undermines the independence of these institutions but also allows the executive to use these institutions as opportunities to favour particular people in lieu of future benefits. This is sometimes also used to harass dissenting voices. The appointment procedure must be revised so that these institutions have people appointed on the basis of merit and in a transparent manner. These institutions should be able to work with complete freedom.

In order to make these institutions effective, the following actions can be taken:

- i. The law regulating the NHRC needs to be amended. The existing law contains provisions that essentially limit the independence of the Commission's power to investigate human rights violations, including, for example, by members of the disciplined forces. While the term 'disciplined force' is customarily used to denote the military, technically, the police force is also deemed to fall into this category. Consequently, any allegation of a human rights violation by the police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) cannot, by law, be investigated independently by the Commission; the case is to be the subject of a government inquiry. The NHRC must be allowed the flexibility to investigate violations of human rights irrespective of the perpetrator. Further, the NHRC is only a recommending entity as per its mandate and does not have any executive authority. This severely limits its power.
- ii. The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) can play an important role in making the service delivery system transparent, accountable and efficient. To this end, it is essential that the ACC is given full freedom to investigate any allegations of corruption and to prosecute perpetrators. Allegations of corruption and breach of the code of conduct by public servants and politicians must be dealt with swiftly, and the punishments given must be made public. This will enhance the trust of marginalised communities in government institutions and service delivery systems.
- iii. The Information Commission should ensure that various ministries, particularly those that enjoy a high level of government-citizen interface, as also corporate entities follow a proactive disclosure policy. This is still not the case. Although some positive changes may be observed in recent times in terms of access to information, organisations should be required to provide publicly available and up-to-date information. RTI could be a very useful tool in this regard. It can be a particularly powerful tool in the service of marginalised groups, helping them exercise their rights as citizens. Notably, RTI has been found to be a very effective tool in a number of South Asian countries. However, to instrumentalise the RTI, the capacities of marginalised communities need to be significantly enhanced so that they are able to file RTI requests and are aware of what to do if the required information is not provided. CSOs can play a facilitating role in this connection.

Concluding Observations

This Policy Brief has made an attempt to explain and explore how, over the years, the gradual recession of democracy has made the executive in Bangladesh increasingly dominant and powerful. This has severely weakened the process of democratic accountability in Bangladesh. While the emergent system has negative implications for people from all spheres of life, it is the members of vulnerable and marginalised groups who suffer the most from such a state of affairs. Discrimination against disadvantaged groups and the culture of lack of voice and rights are promoted and perpetuated by the increasingly weakened democratic accountability system. Consequently, the civil rights of marginalised population groups are

ignored. These groups lack effective redress when their rights are violated; they lack access to political and other channels to express their views and raise their voice. Their right to access quality public services is denied. In this backdrop, the Policy Brief has outlined a set of concrete recommendations towards empowering the vulnerable populations across the country. The Brief identifies ways to strengthen horizontal accountability so that the state can respond properly to the demands and grievances of disadvantaged groups. The Brief aspires to promote accountability, transparency and good governance in the exercise of power in Bangladesh so that marginalised groups are able to claim their rights as full-fledged citizens of the country.

“Citizen’s Agenda 2023: Towards a Different Bangladesh” offers a counter-narrative to Bangladesh’s conventional development discourse, one that is grounded in the experiences of marginalised and left behind communities of the country. Prepared by the Citizen’s Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, with the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) as its secretariat, the volume presents eleven policy briefs developed through a two-year nationwide consultation process involving key stakeholder groups.

Prepared on the basis of inputs derived from regional dialogues, town hall meetings, surveys and a public hearing held in Dhaka, the briefs reflect citizen’s perspectives and priorities across a range of economic, social and governance issues that concern the interests of particularly the weaker sections of the Bangladesh society. The publication offers practical policy recommendations with a view to ensure that development policies are inclusive, development praxis is accountable and service the demands of the most needy.

Whilst the exercise informing the volume was mostly carried out before the student-people uprising of July–August 2025, its publication comes at a time when there is a growing demand for reforms on the part of citizens of the country, and reform agendas are dominating public discourse and debates. This volume is not a mere collection of proposals and recommendations; it is a step towards the preparation of a Citizens’ Manifesto ahead of the upcoming national elections in Bangladesh.

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