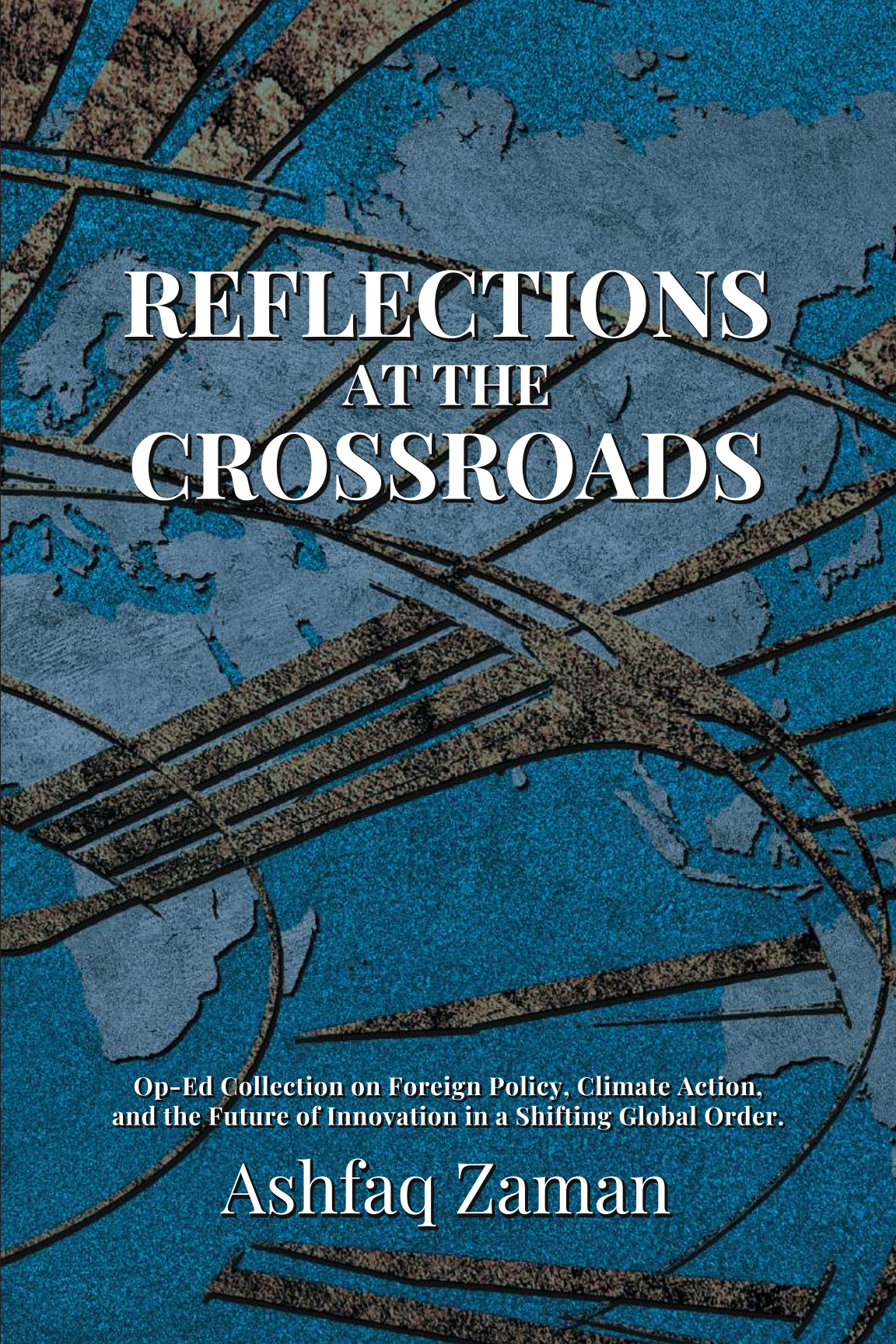

REFLECTIONS
AT THE
CROSSROADS
Op-Ed Collection on Foreign Policy, Climate Action,
and the Future of Innovation in a Shifting Global Order.
Ashfaq Zaman

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Ashfaq Zaman

Reflections At the Crossroads
Op-Ed Collection on Foreign Policy. Climate Action, and the Future of Innovation in a Shifting Global Order

First Edition
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Preface

In an era where global challenges intersect and amplify each other, understanding the complex interplay between technology, climate change, and the global South has never been more crucial. This collection of over 50 articles, published across prestigious international platforms during 2019-2025, offers a unique perspective on these interconnected themes through the lens of innovation, policy, and practical solutions.

The timing of these articles is particularly significant. Written during and after the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, they capture a pivotal moment when the world was forced to rapidly digitise, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities this presented, particularly for developing nations. From Bangladesh's pioneering e-governance initiatives to broader discussions about climate resilience and technological innovation, these pieces collectively tell a story of transformation and adaptation in the face of unprecedented global challenges.

The collection is thematically organised into three key areas: foreign policy focusing on the global South, climate change, and tech innovation for public good. This structure allows readers to trace how these themes intersect and influence each other. For instance, articles discussing Bangladesh's digital transformation demonstrate how technological solutions can address both immediate governance challenges and longer-term development goals. Similarly, pieces on climate change emphasise the critical role of technology in creating sustainable solutions, particularly in vulnerable regions of the global South. However, they also acknowledge that technology itself—whether through energy-intensive AI, industrial automation, or digital infrastructure—has contributed to environmental pressures. Even so, the same forces driving these challenges are also enabling solutions, from Al-powered climate forecasting to innovations in clean energy and sustainable transportation.

A particular strength of this compilation lies in its diverse authorial approaches. Ashfaq Zaman, drawing from his extensive experience as an e-governance strategic consultant and his role in various international organisations, brings a unique perspective on technological innovation and its implications for developing economies. His pieces in publications like The Telegraph and The Diplomat offer insights into how emerging economies can leverage technology for development while addressing climate challenges.
The articles also add depth to the discussion with their expertise in e-governance, digital transformation, and data policy. Some of them, featured in platforms like the TRT World, CGTN, South China Morning Post and Global Policy Journal, provide practical examples of how technology can be harnessed to create more inclusive and efficient governance systems.

What makes this collection particularly valuable is its focus on actionable solutions rather than merely highlighting problems. The articles consistently demonstrate how innovative approaches can address complex challenges in resource-constrained environments. This reflects a broader reality: while technology has played a role in shaping global challenges, it also holds the key to solving them. From sustainable urban planning to green tech startups, developing nations are proving that necessity drives innovation, often in ways that can serve as models for the rest of the world.

The articles collected here represent more than just a snapshot of a crucial period in global development. They offer a roadmap for understanding how technology, climate action, and development can work together to create more resilient and equitable societies. As we move forward, the insights and experiences documented in these pages become increasingly relevant for policymakers, practitioners, and anyone interested in the future of global development.

Spring 2025

Introduction

The period between July 2019 and April 2021 marked a unique moment in global history—a time when the world grappled simultaneously with a pandemic, accelerating climate change, and unprecedented technological transformation. This collection of articles, published across leading international platforms from 2019-2025, captures this pivotal period through the lens of innovation, resilience, and adaptation, with a particular focus on the global South's emerging role in shaping global solutions.

Global South: From recipient to pioneer

One of the most compelling narratives that emerges from this collection is the shifting role of the global South in the international arena. As Ashfaq Zaman argues in "South Asia Has a New Economic Leader. Will the World Take Note?" (The Diplomat October 2020), traditional power dynamics are being reshaped by technological innovation and economic transformation. The collection overall has a collective memo, which demonstrates how nations traditionally seen as development recipients are increasingly becoming sources of innovation and best practices.

The collection challenges conventional wisdom about development and technology adoption. In "No. 10 Can Learn Crucial Tech Lessons from the Developing World to Fix Testing" (The Telegraph, September 2020), Zaman makes the compelling case that even advanced economies can learn from the innovative solutions emerging from resource-constrained environments. This reverse flow of innovation is increasingly relevant in a world where agility and adaptability often matter more than raw resources.

Climate Change: Technology as a Catalyst for Action

The environmental articles in this collection, particularly Zaman's "2021 Will Be Defined by the More Long-Term Crisis Facing Humanity: Climate Change" (Modern Diplomacy EU, January 2021), position

climate action at the intersection of technology and development. The collection highlights how initiatives like Bangladesh's Flood Forecasting App represent a new approach to climate resilience—one that leverages technology to protect vulnerable communities while generating valuable data for global climate science. These examples underscore how digital transformation is not only an enabler of economic progress but also a critical tool in adapting to environmental challenges.

However, the relationship between technology and climate change is complex. While technology has fueled industrial growth and modernization, it has also contributed significantly to environmental degradation. Al-driven systems, large-scale data centers, and energy-intensive industries continue to place heavy demands on natural resources. Yet, even as technology exacerbates climate issues, it also holds immense potential as a solution. Innovations such as reusable rocket technology, electric vehicles, AI-powered climate modeling, and sustainable urban design demonstrate how advancements in science and engineering can be harnessed to mitigate climate impact.
These pieces collectively argue that effective climate action requires a synthesis of local knowledge and technological innovation. The articles show how countries in the Global South, rather than being passive victims of climate change, are emerging as pioneers of climate solutions that could benefit the entire world. Whether through advanced forecasting tools, climate-resilient infrastructure, or policy-driven digital initiatives, these regions are proving that the very technologies contributing to climate concerns can also be repurposed to drive sustainability and resilience.

Technology: Bridging Divides and Innovating for Public & Social Good

The technological transformation documented in these articles goes beyond simple digitization. It explores how digital innovation is reshaping governance, healthcare, education, and other crucial sectors. Zaman's "Social media without fact-checking Will destabilize the Global South" (The Hill, January 2025) and "Big Tech can save the planet and their reputations." (CGTN, November 2021) show how technology can

be a force multiplier in crisis response. The collection explores how initiatives like Union Digital Centres, Flood Forecasting App and Education TV represent a new model of public service delivery—one that is both more efficient and more inclusive.

Ashfaq Zaman's "The Digital Divide is growing. Here's how to fix it." (Global Policy Journal, October 2023) adds an important dimension to the technology discussion by addressing questions of data ownership and digital rights. This perspective is particularly relevant for developing nations as they build their digital infrastructure and establish regulatory frameworks.

While each section maintains its distinct focus, readers will notice significant overlap and interaction between themes—reflecting the interconnected nature of these challenges and their solutions.


THE DIPLOMAT

The Telegraph

THE TIMES

TRT WORLD

THE HILL

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Newsweek

COMMENT CENTRAL

THOMSON REUTERS

INDEPENDENT

CGTN

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Dhaka Tribune

THE i PAPER

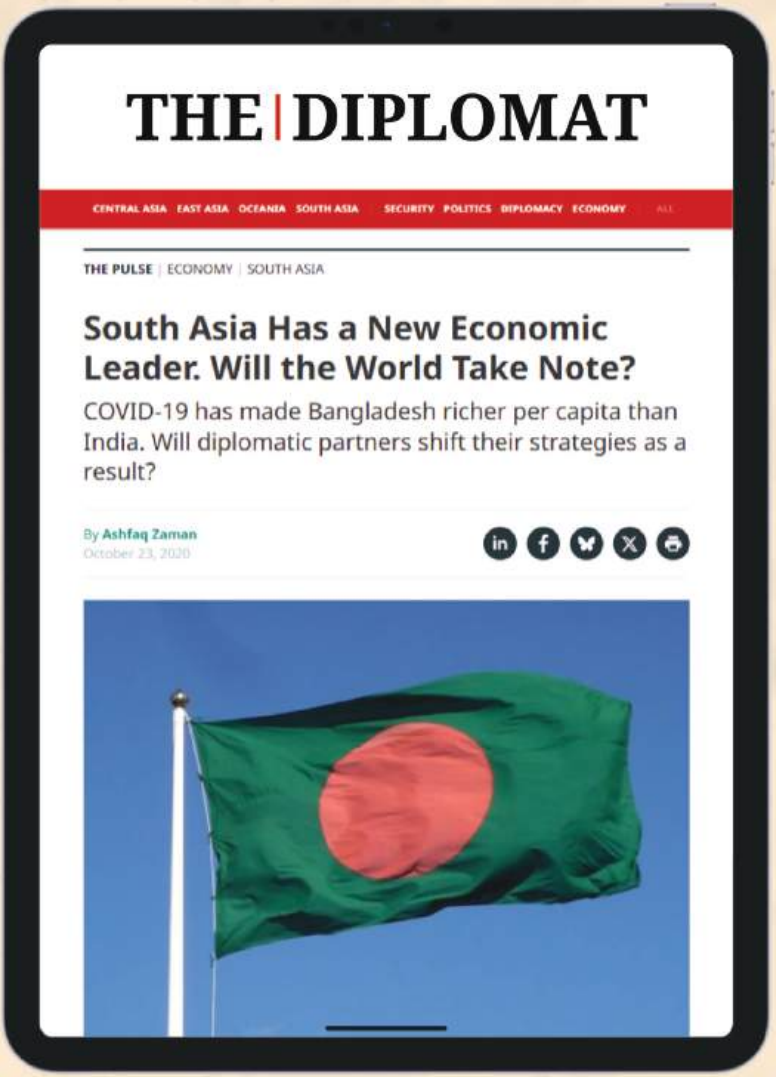
South China
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CENTRAL ASIA EAST ASIA OCEANIA SOUTH ASIA SECURITY POLITICS DIPLOMACY ECONOMY
THE PULSE | ECONOMY | SOUTH ASIA
South Asia Has a New Economic Leader. Will the World Take Note?
COVID-19 has made Bangladesh richer per capita than India. Will diplomatic partners shift their strategies as a result?
By Ashfaq Zaman
October 23, 2020

READ ONLINE

South Asia Has a New Economic Leader. Will the World Take Note?

COVID-19 has made Bangladesh richer per capita than India. Will diplomatic partners shift their strategies as a result?

The Diplomat
October 23, 2020

Bangladesh — the overcrowded, overpopulated flood-prone state that, founded in 1971, is barely older than the internet — is now one of the richest countries in South Asia. The region was rocked by this week's data that Bangladesh's GDP per capita will exceed India's this year, despite India having a 25 percent lead just five years ago.

There is no doubt about what has tipped the balance: COVID-19. While India has struggled to bring the virus under control, Bangladesh's data-led innovative public health approach and rapidly improving digital infrastructure has allowed the economy to continue growing. But will the world take note, and realize that there are newer (and more stable) South Asian partners beyond the traditional ones? Will the new "Global Britain" prioritize the Bengal Tiger for a trade deal? And will the U.S. president (whether that's Donald Trump or Joe Biden, come January 2021) consider Bangladesh a priority in South Asia, or stick with familiar partners?

Certainly this news will change the calculus by which an economy — and a nation state's — strength is judged. Rather than just looking at a country's currency, exports, and governance, its biosecurity capacity will now be seen as something as pivotal as national security — an area of policy that can make or break everything else.

It is not just Bangladesh's growth that has contributed to this result, but India's decline after severely mismanaging both the health and economic fallout of the pandemic.

China is the best example of how swift and effective pandemic management can support continued economic growth (consumer spending there has already returned to pre-pandemic levels and its GDP grew 5 percent in the last quarter).

But China is an extreme case — there will be many winners across the world. And there will inevitably be some who can learn a great deal from those winners, and avoid further blunders.

This change in South Asia's economic pecking order, combined with improving social indicators and rapid digitalization, could mean that many global powers will pivot more of their attention toward Dhaka.

The shift is overdue. Since India's independence, it has understandably been the focus of the region's economic and political activity. The region itself is often referred to as the Indian Subcontinent, perhaps a colonial hangover based on generations of Brits who interacted with an India that was essentially the only significant state in the region (not only modern day Pakistan and Bangladesh, but also Burmese territory was part of Colonial India).

But now things have changed, most notably in Bangladesh. Avoiding the tribal or sectarian divisions that have plagued Pakistan and increasingly blighted India, Dhaka has created a resilient economy and society, and maintained a diplomatic strategy that allows strategic partnerships with a range of competing world powers.

Economically, it would be unfair to describe its GDP per capita eclipsing India's as a pandemic-related fluke: Bangladesh has long been one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and has recently entered the ranks of middle income countries, with the aim of becoming a developed country by 2041.

Its society has developed almost as quickly as its economy. Gender equality and women's rights are on the march, with the death penalty recently being implemented for rapists, in a sign that the female-led country will not tolerate the violence against women that is so systemic in other parts of the region.

All this is underpinned by an ambitious digitization strategy led by a2i, a tech and digital transformation department founded by the Prime Minister's Office. As digital economic inclusion is rolled out across the country, expect to see more tech startups like ShopUp, which this week raised $22.5 million from leading Venture Capital firm Sequioa. Free Economic Zones, like the one set up in conjunction with Japan's government last month (Tokyo's biggest investment in South Asia), will speed up the process.

Beyond economic growth, the realignment of power across South Asia raises important diplomatic opportunities. As the United States attempts to maintain its role in the region, Bangladesh may be a crucial partner, particularly given Dhaka's strategic partnership with Beijing.

Similarly for the U.K., perhaps London will follow in Tokyo's footsteps and prioritize the relationship with Bangladesh. A U.K.-Bangladesh trade deal would be a strong start to Britain's post-EU strategy, with a significant portion of Bangladesh's garment sector being dependent on U.K. consumers.

It has become common for political leaders to claim that they will "build back better" after COVID-19, with the slogan appearing across the world and capturing many people's hopes. As we build back better, we should remember that the building blocks are not the same as they were before the pandemic. Nowhere is that truer than in South Asia.

euronews.

Euroviews. The legacy of colonialism could be a catalyst for new relationships with those it oppressed | View



By **Ashfaq Zaman**

Published on 17/09/2020 - 12:36 GMT+2 • Updated 12:38

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The legacy of the British Empire can be a source of awkwardness or embarrassment for Britain, but it could also prove to be a source of strength in the future.

The increasingly polarised debate about the removal of statues of historical personalities neglects the voices of most of those affected by their decisions. It also overlooks the opportunity for Britain and others to engage with those regions of the world, like South Asia, which figured most prominently in Britain's history - and maybe some of its most important partners in the future.

If not carefully managed and responded to, these protests may cause lasting damage; not only to Britain's

READ ONLINE

The legacy of colonialism could be a catalyst for new relationships with those it oppressed

Euro News
17 June, 2020

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If not carefully managed and responded to, these protests may cause lasting damage; not only to Britain's social fabric during what is already a difficult and divisive time but also to its relationships in the world. As it divorces the EU, the UK needs all the friends it can muster - and many of them will be in parts of the world affected by Britain's historical actions.

As a Briton, I want the UK to emerge from this tumultuous time with stronger relationships. And as a Bangladeshi, I want the very real historical difficulties faced by my countrymen to be recognised in a balanced, fair and constructive way, rather than being co-opted by activists who have very particular priorities.
Even those demanding that we address history seek to politicise it, zooming in on certain atrocities while airbrushing - or even completely cropping out - others.

Those priorities often do not include Bangladeshis, despite protesters using the Bengal famine as a calling card to escalate their culture war targets; from Edward Colston, who up until a few weeks ago very few

non-historians or non-Bristolians would have been familiar with, to Winston Churchill, who is one of the best-known and most-revered figures in modern history.

In Bangladesh, as in the UK, history is painful. In the 1971 Bangladesh genocide, up to 3 million were killed, some 400,000 women were raped, and almost half the country became internally displaced with 10 million Hindus fleeing to India.

Because the aggressors were of a similar skin tone and religion, and were at the time the victims' compatriots, it does not fit neatly into models of "white privilege" and colonialism through which many of the protesters view the world.

They have preferred to focus on the equally tragic Bengal famine of 1943, where up to 3 million Bengalis died of starvation and conditions aggravated by malnourishment. Winston Churchill's actions (or lack thereof) were, of course, linked to the famine, as were other factors like Japan's invasion of Bangladesh's neighbour, Myanmar.

Even those demanding that we address history seek to politicise it, zooming in on certain atrocities while airbrushing - or even completely cropping out - others.

Newsweek

The Myanmar Protests are Forgetting the Rohingya Muslims | Opinion

Published Apr 20, 2021 at 2:00 PM EDT

By Ashfaq Zaman
humanitarian and entrepreneur

Newsweek Is A Trust Project Member

Opinion | 0 Translate

The Rohingya, who have been the victims of what many have called genocide at the hands of Myanmar's military, are being forgotten in the pro-democracy protests sweeping the country. We should not seek to simply turn the clock back to January 31, before the military coup. We must turn the clock back to early 2015, before the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya began.

In the rivalry between the generals on the one hand and civilian National League for Democracy (NLD) Party leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi on the other, both sides seem comfortable with the crimes committed against the Rohingya Muslim minority.

If Suu Kyi's supporters really want democracy, they should demand a true democracy for all citizens of Myanmar—not a Buddhist-supremacist state where citizens are forced to live as refugees. The essence of a properly functioning democracy is not the law of the majority, but the protection of the minority.

While Suu Kyi is clearly perceived as a better option than the military, she has nevertheless been an enabler of the military's policies in recent years.

Suu Kyi spent more than 15 years under house arrest. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. International human rights groups in the past rallied in support of her and are now supportive of the protests her backers launched.

Suu Kyi repeatedly downplayed the Rohingya situation, on multiple occasions saying that there was fear "on both sides" drawing a false equivalence between the army's squads and unarmed Rohingya villagers. She also helped in the regime's denials, claiming that because "50% of the Muslim towns remain intact" there was no wrongdoing.

READ ONLINE

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Apr 20, 2021

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villagers. She also helped in the regime's denials, claiming that because "50% of the Muslim towns remain intact" there was no wrongdoing.

It would not be a sustainable solution if the military were replaced by a civilian "democratic" movement led by Suu Kyi which continues ethnic cleansing against their citizens. For sustainable democracy, she must evoke the same spirit as former U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt who said "no democracy can long survive which does not accept as fundamental to its very existence the recognition of the rights of the minorities."

Perhaps it is impossible, even for those fearless protesters, to imagine a Myanmar without mistreatment of the Rohingya—the recent wave of which goes back to the country's 1991 Operation Clean and Beautiful Nation.

I hope that now those protesters have seen some of the brutality of the regime first hand, they will sympathize with those who have suffered more harshly, and for longer, namely the Rohingya.

Despite her checkered past, even many Rohingya themselves expressed support for Suu Kyi, as an alternative to military rule. Let us hope that they will not be facilitating a friendly civilian face to the same brutality.

It would be wrong to define the aggression against the Rohingya as purely a military act by the army; civil society, including Buddhist monks, is a key part of it.

Tensions between the Burmese Buddhist population and the Rohingya people date back to World War II. The Rohingya Muslims were supportive of the British colonialists, while the Buddhists sided with the Japanese invaders.

Since this historic political disagreement, the Rohingya have been repeatedly forced out of the country, with the ruling elites claiming they are "illegal immigrants from Bangladesh." It is Bangladesh which

has hosted over a million displaced Rohingya as a result of Myanmar's mistreatment.

What Myanmar needs is a leader who can address the ghosts of the past and create an equitable future, with a democracy representing all ethnic groups who are native to the country, not just the ones listed in Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law.

Suu Kyi and other civilian leaders, from the NLD party and the grassroots movement, should be encouraged to admit their complicity or ignorance of past events and take this spirit of honesty and reconciliation across Burmese society.

Myanmar needs more than a shuffling of chairs in the corridors of power—it needs a full-blown truth and reconciliation movement like post-apartheid South Africa. Democracy cannot be achieved without addressing historical racial injustices, just as South Africa did in the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The international community must be prepared to stand with the wishes of all the people of Myanmar and stand against all human rights abuses in the country—not just those that the opposition leader chooses to recognize.

Only then will the country be able to proceed with the return and enfranchisement of the estimated 1 million Rohingya people who have been displaced—and who are in receipt of a repatriation agreement that theoretically allows them to return home, while not doing anything practical to ensure their safety.

It seems that many protesters in the country are living through the final line of Martin Niemoller's poem "First They Came": "Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me." Will they speak out for the Rohingya?

TRT WORLD

Rohingya Conference must focus on a permanent solution, not just funding

Repatriation or permanent settlements should take precedence over spending money to prolong the status quo for Rohingya refugees around the world.

ASHFAQ ZAMAN



GETTY IMAGES

A Rohingya refugee boy desperate for aid cries as he climbs on a truck distributing aid for a local NGO near the Balukali refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh.

Today international donors from the US, EU, UK and UN will meet to discuss humanitarian aid for more than one million Rohingya refugees, many of whose situation has worsened due to the pandemic.

But the premise of the conference is a misdirected one: the Rohingya I have met and worked closely with in [redacted] not want 'aid' - they want a

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TRT World
22 October, 2020

Today international donors from the US, EU, UK and UN will meet to discuss humanitarian aid for more than one million Rohingya refugees, many of whose situation has worsened due to the pandemic.

But the premise of the conference is a misdirected one: the Rohingya I have met and worked closely with in Bangladesh do not want 'aid' - they want a home, ideally their home in Myanmar.

Rather than endless humanitarian spending sprees, the international community must focus on pressuring Myanmar to ensure the safe return and the civil rights of one of the world's most vulnerable communities. Failing that, asylum should be granted in the US, EU or even rich Muslim-majority nations in an expression of Islamic solidarity.

The world cannot continue to lean on Bangladesh - itself a densely populated developing country - to shoulder the burden alone, however, willing Bangladeshis are to do whatever they can with limited resources.

Three years after the latest influx of Rohingya refugees - leading to the creation of the world's biggest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh - there is still no long-term plan for their settlement or support.

Thursday's conference is impressive in its guest list, but less so in its vision.

All the leading Western world powers have, in the midst of a pandemic and economic crises, acknowledged that the Rohingya cannot wait. This effort is being led by the US.

However, the limitations of the conference are betrayed by its title: 'Sustaining Support for the Rohingya Refugee Response'. It defines the international community's mission as merely 'sustaining support' (ie. continuing to write cheques) rather than creating sustainable solutions.

Those cheques are likely to be large: the conference is seeking 'multi-year' funding. But multi-year is not the same as long-term, sustainable, or permanent.

Having worked in both political circles (most recently in convening the Dhaka Forum which was dubbed 'the Davos of the Global South') and as a humanitarian worker, I understand both perspectives.

Politicians, particularly those not in refugee host countries, are keen to contain what they see as the refugee problem. The easiest way to do this is to frame the issue as one of funding and to then provide that funding. It is simply delegating a global challenge to particular countries in 'humanitarian outsourcing'.

But many humanitarian workers and NGOs see it differently. Of course, refugees need material support: I have seen first hand how Bangladeshi villagers shared their clothes, food and sometimes even their homes with Rohingya arrivals.

But more than that, refugees want a home. And a tent or Portakabin in a refugee camp, whilst living without settled status, is not it.

Ideally, this should be in their home country. There has been a repatriation agreement for Rohingya to return home to Myanmar since 2017. This continues to be the dream outcome for the Rohingya themselves, as well as host nations and donor countries.

For refugees, returning home is often impossible. Many refugees are fleeing complex, intractable conflicts with no end in sight, with the best-case scenario being a hostile post-conflict society that is almost as dangerous as the conflict itself.

But the Rohingya's situation is different because what they are fleeing is actually quite simple. One hostile actor - the Myanmar army - conducted what was euphemistically referred to as 'clearance operations' on their land.

These operations have now ceased, so what is needed are guarantees that they will not restart in future, particularly if Rohingya were to return home in large numbers.

The channels to do this are readily available. Myanmar maintains formal or informal diplomatic relations with all the key players at the conference. Trade relations are also extensive: Myanmar benefits from the EU's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) programme, which essentially gives it free trade access to the world's largest trading bloc.

These diplomatic channels combined with the threat of sanctions could facilitate the presence of international observers to ensure the safe return of the Rohingya home to a Myanmar where their religious, cultural and civil rights are respected.

Many Rohingya I have worked with feel they are second class refugees. While Europe congratulated itself for welcoming a million

mostly Syrian migrants, just months later it was content to all but ignore the Rohingya, and continue trading with their aggressor.

If Europe will not step up, perhaps Muslim-majority countries who have not traditionally been host nations for refugees can fill the gap. Many Gulf nations have observed the economic and cultural benefits to Turkey of becoming a humanitarian superpower and hosting the highest number of refugees in the world, per capita.

It would be politically savvy as well as humane if the leader of a wealthy Gulf nation were to replicate Merkel's stance and open their borders to the Rohingya in an expression of Islamic solidarity.

Any of the options above would be preferable to the status quo. Bangladesh has happily hosted the Rohingya and managed the biggest refugee camp in the world with the hope and expectation that there would be a real solution to their persecution - not that this persecution would be normalised and bankrolled by Brussels.

The Daily Star

Building a lasting defence against fascism



It's important to understand that, if we're not careful, fascism can emerge from the inside as well as from the outside. FILE PHOTO: STAR

People often understand democracy and its virtues, but when it comes to the practical side of fighting fascism, there's still much confusion. We might have challenged governments and confronted authoritarianism, but does this mean the problem has been solved? Or are these efforts just temporary fixes, like putting a band-aid on a wound that needs surgery? We may have seen the fall of one fascist regime, but have we truly eradicated fascism itself?

Think of fascism like cancer. Imagine you have a cancerous tumour—it's painful, causing the most immediate problems, and you might decide to have a bloody surgery to remove it. Removing the tumour is essential, but does it cure the cancer? Not necessarily. If the cancerous cells remain, there's always a risk that it could come back. It might not be the same tumour or in the same place—it could reappear in your brain, your lungs, or somewhere else in your body.

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READ ONLINE

Building a lasting defence against fascism

The Daily Star
Thu Nov 28, 2024

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Fascism is similar to a sickness in society. Fascist "germs" can still be found today, deeply ingrained in societal norms and myths. These stories continue to be told in many social circles, frequently with the backing of those who gain from them. Similar to cancer, fascism can be subtle. It silently spreads across society's shadowy nooks and crannies, feasting on greed and misinformation, fear, and power struggles.

What steps can we take to truly eradicate fascism? We need to focus on three key points. While these are not exhaustive, they can still serve as a foundation upon which to build.

The first step is achieving independence from any external interference in our political structure. Foreign policy and international relations will always have economic and diplomatic influences, that's a given. But the core of our political system—the building blocks of our democracy—must be free from external control. Influence is acceptable

in measured stances, but control is not. When external forces interfere, they often validate or create narratives that serve their interests, not ours.

This outside influence may pose a threat. Because it depends more on outside assistance than on the mandate of its own constituents, it might strengthen a political party or government that is exempt from public scrutiny. Because these regimes are more accountable to foreign forces than to their constituents, such situations frequently result in authoritarianism eventually turning to fascism. An example of this is our previous regime's democratic beginning in 2009, which became more authoritarian as the government's external support increased.

We might think of the nations that supported the Soviet Union vigorously during the Cold War. An authoritarian regime ultimately emerged in many of these countries as a result of foreign influence creating a dependency, whereby the local government lost interest in answering to the people.

Our cultural mindset is the subject of the second point. Many conquered nations throughout history have fostered a culture of deference to authority. Long after we gained our independence, this submissiveness persisted and permeated our national consciousness. Because individuals are more likely to accept authority than to question it, it impedes democratic progress.

"Instead of focusing on any one political party, we need to invest time and resources to find out the remaining germs of fascism. As the mechanism for fascism still persists, it won't take long for a different party or entity to replace the old one."

In many post-colonial societies, there is a tendency to respect and obey authority figures unquestioningly. This mindset is a hangover from the colonial era when people were taught to see themselves as subjects rather than citizens. Even today, in Bangladesh, when a senior official or politician enters a room, people stand up out of respect—a practice rooted in colonial traditions. In Bangladesh, every leader is looked at

through a lens of kingship. Whether they come to power through an election or in some other manner, it seems like an ascension. We all seem to forget that they are there to serve the people and the nation, not the other way around.

This is why we have corrupt institutions filled with corrupt individuals. It's due to the lack of accountability and the superior feeling that people in power gain, which allows them to normalise selfish and corrupt behaviour. When these sorts of individuals fill an institution or organisation, the whole entity becomes like a kingdom. You cannot question it. We are merely subjects of it. It doesn't belong to us but rather to the individuals who run it.

In contrast, in many democratic societies, there isn't the same level of deference to authority. People see themselves as equal participants in governance, not subjects. They speak to their leaders by name and aren't afraid to express their concerns, and an attitude of accountability prevails. Authoritarianism and fascism can flourish when people fail to see that they are the real owners of their nation and that the government should work for them, not the other way around.

The third argument, related to the first two, concerns Bangladesh's idea of nationalism. Our political discourse has been influenced by outmoded colonial-era ideas or outside forces for far too long. We need a narrative developed by our own people, for our own people—one that is rooted in our unique cultural, social, and political context.

Our current idea of nationalism needs a lot more work to reach the state where it can truly serve our people. For the moment, the nationalistic ideas or practices that we have all seem self-serving to a large extent. We are only observing national holidays that the ruling government of the time aligns with, declaring them unimportant when the government changes. This tradition has gone on too long. We are only appreciating our sports teams when they manage a win. We don't pay heed when the women's football team hasn't received their salary in months. We only try to get Geographical Indicators for products that draw interest from nations other than ours. We impose our own

conservative or liberal views with nationalism to get an edge on our arguments.

We can look at alternative examples like Japan. It simultaneously embraces its cultural heritage and history while regularly setting the stage for one of the most technologically advanced countries in the world. The preservation of their traditional practices, such as tea ceremonies and martial arts, doesn't hold them back from also having the reputation of precision manufacturing in the global arena.

On the other hand, the US has "The American Dream." The idea is that regardless of background, anyone can be successful through hard work. This narrative of independent identity, freedom, and economic prospects shapes the national idea of the US.

Bangladesh today, more than ever, needs a unified idea of Bangladeshi nationalism. For us, our national identity could potentially accommodate the love for language, as even today we remain the only nation to have shed blood fighting for it. Next could be our fight for democracy. In the 1971 Liberation War, the 90's anti-Ershad movement, and the 2024 July uprising, every time the countrymen came to the streets to fight the suppression of democracy in one way or another. Lastly, our moderate Muslim majority identity, similar to Indonesia and Malaysia, can also play a role.

What does all of this signify for our efforts to combat fascism? It implies that winning elections and overthrowing dictators are not the only goals of the struggle. It involves constructing robust institutions, altering people's perspectives, and promoting an accountable and democratic culture. It's important to understand that, if we're not careful, fascism can emerge from the inside as well as from the outside.

Instead of focusing on any one political party, we need to invest time and resources to find out the remaining germs of fascism. As the mechanism for fascism still persists, it won't take long for a different party or entity to replace the old one.

So, while we have made some progress, we need to remain vigilant, build stronger democratic institutions, foster a culture of accountability, and, most importantly, empower ourselves as citizens to take ownership of our country. Before that, we also have to figure out what we, as individuals, want to do for our country to create our own inception of Bangladeshi nationalism. Only then can we ensure that our victories against fascism are not just temporary, but permanent.

The Daily Star

The new Bangladesh needs a new education system



FILE ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKRABORTY

Focusing on education is essential to changing the trajectory of a nation, because, at the end of the day, a nation is built by its people—and those people are shaped by education.

Education is like a passport to the future for any nation. If we look at all the world's superpowers and ask why they became superpowers, yes, the economy plays a role, but education is just as important. The highest-ranking universities are in the most developed countries—whether in the UK, the US, Canada, or the Scandinavian nations. Education reflects a nation's prosperity because a sound and educated population produces ideas and innovations that drive the economy forward.

It's important to identify what worked in the past and what is needed for the future. Whether in Bangladesh or elsewhere, one of the best aspects of past education was its focus on morality, ethics, and character-building. These values were always a part of learning. The teachers also used to live morally and thus led by example. In society, they

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It's important to identify what worked in the past and what is needed for the future. Whether in Bangladesh or elsewhere, one of the best aspects of past education was its focus on morality, ethics, and character-building. These values were always a part of learning. The teachers also used to live morally and thus led by example. In society, they were treated respectfully for their wisdom and were consulted on many issues. Some villages in Bangladesh still have that.

In Korea, the suburbs of the UK, the US, and Australia, basic manners are still taught—not to litter, how to behave at home, how to take care of animals, to have compassion, to be respectful, and even how to hold a fork and knife properly.

We also lack pedagogy- or andragogy-based teaching, meaning that teachers aren't able to transfer the knowledge they have in their respective fields to the students. This is because, even though they

acquire education and degrees in certain subjects, they never really learn how to teach.

In Bangladesh, we are no longer doing that. There was a time when education focused on standards, on teaching morality and character. But in our attempt to modernise, we have not only failed to truly modernise but have also lost the essence of what was once there.

The second issue is preparing for the future. We have not done well in equipping our workforce with future-ready skills. According to the World Economic Forum, 65 percent of jobs will require some sort of reskilling. This means that the skills needed in the new world are very different.

Coding, for example, must become fundamental. It should be as important as maths, physics, or history—because that is the future. Students may not gain as much from history or literature in their professional lives, but they will undoubtedly need technology and an understanding of it. That is where our education system is falling behind. School education has still not integrated these skills, we lack resources, and the focus simply isn't there.

Outcome-based learning is also missing in our curriculum. The way our education is designed is quantity-based. There is a specific quantity of material that needs to be "finished" for one's education to be considered complete. The understanding of the implementation of the syllabus is absent.

There are three key areas we need to address:

The gap between industry and academia
Industries often say they are looking for top talent. It's not that jobs aren't available but rather that they aren't finding the right

candidates. The reason? The pace at which industries evolve is not matched by academia.

What was taught in the 1990s about marketing is still being taught today, yet marketing itself has changed dramatically. It's no longer just about placing ads in newspapers or on television. Now, it's about digital marketing, influencer strategies, and data-driven decisions. But are students being taught this? Probably not. Yet, in reality, this is what works.

Unlike places like Silicon Valley, we don't have strong collaborations between academia and industry. Most industries have little involvement with universities beyond occasional guest lectures or event sponsorships. They aren't actively shaping the curriculum, brainstorming solutions, or ensuring students graduate with relevant skills. This needs to change. Universities must work more closely with industries; update syllabuses based on real-world needs and involve professionals in teaching.

Lack of research and innovation

Bangladesh ranks very poorly in research. We don't have enough academic collaborations, and because of this, our critical thinking is weak. This has even bigger national consequences.

We are becoming a follower nation rather than an innovator or leader. Research gives us breakthroughs, new ideas, and critical thinking skills that allow us to challenge the status quo. Without research, we cannot develop new concepts, innovations, or industries.

The focus should not just be on increasing the number of academic publications but on ensuring that research is meaningful and impactful.

The need for a hybrid education model

The education system needs to shift towards a more flexible model—one that follows a "just-in-time" and "just-in-need" approach. Today, people learn more from YouTube, Google, and AI than from traditional education. If someone needs to learn something, they look it up instantly.

The much-talked-about Gen Z and Gen Alpha are no strangers to technology. In fact, many children belonging to Gen Alpha are exposed to smartphones and gadgets before they are exposed to books and pen-paper. Now, it is a matter of much debate how healthy this is for the development of young minds and what the future consequences of it are. But the fact remains that they are much more comfortable with technology than previous generations. The strength of this should be utilised by properly integrating technology into teaching in schools.

This means we need more specialist modules, more microlearning, and a system that adapts to the realities of how people learn today. Attention spans are shorter, and the demand for quick, relevant knowledge is higher. Education must evolve to match this.

We need to rethink our education system. We need to bring back moral and character-building lessons while also preparing students for the future. We need stronger ties between universities and industries, more research and innovation, and a system that embraces modern ways of learning.

Only then can we build a Bangladesh that is not just educated but ready to lead.

INDEPENDENT

Voices

While rich countries like the UK obsess over pubs, the global south is drowning under the weight of coronavirus cases



The pandemic has been tough for Britain, but in countries like Bangladesh, it could be disastrous. There's no reason our response to the virus shouldn't benefit nations that need help

Ashfaq Zaman • Monday 06 July 2020 11:13 BST

• Comments

Cases of Covid-19 are waning in much of the developed world, with life rapidly returning to normal in Europe and parts of North America. There, priorities have shifted away from death tolls to travel plans and in some cases, barbeques.

But in some of the poorest countries in the world, the pandemic is yet to peak – and health facilities are even more unprepared than they were in the world's richest countries. Places like the UK now have thousands of ventilators they don't need, stockpiles of drugs they won't use, and coronavirus-experienced doctors who now have limited opportunities to apply their treatment skills. Each of those resources would go a long way towards saving countless lives in the world's poorest places.

We are all facing this virus at different levels, with our countries positioned at various points on the curve (or curves, if there are multiple waves). Sometimes, we forget this, because much of the media coverage has been local rather than global. It has been difficult or impossible for some journalists to travel, and it is natural to focus on death and danger closer to home rather than on the other side of the world.

But that must now change, with Covid cases and deaths peaking this week in Bangladesh and other parts of the Global South.

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Independent
06 July 2020

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But that must now change, with Covid cases and deaths peaking this week in Bangladesh and other parts of the Global South.
Because there was less travel between Wuhan, where the virus originated, and places like Bangladesh, we started to climb the curve

later than Europe and North America. We are now where Britain was in mid-April – with much less of an ability to save lives and livelihoods.

My own family has various relatives infected with the virus, and we are not alone. There is not a single household I know of that doesn't have a coronavirus patient within it, or know someone who is infected.

And the measures that flattened the curve in the UK and Europe cannot be simply imported here. Social distancing worked in Britain but is often impossible when millions of Bangladeshis live in crowded housing or severely overcrowded slums. We are one of the most densely populated countries in the world, meaning we are at exponentially higher risk of virus spread.

Furloughing and government benefits provided many with a safety net in Europe, but in Bangladesh, we have 37 million people in abject poverty. Although we had a booming entrepreneurial economy prior to the pandemic, much of the emerging middle class has had no income for three months and is now slipping back under the poverty line just as they had climbed above it.

Bangladesh has one of the most rudimentary healthcare systems in the world. Even by regional standards, our health provision is struggling, with Bangladeshis regularly having to journey to neighbouring India or other south Asian countries for medical care.

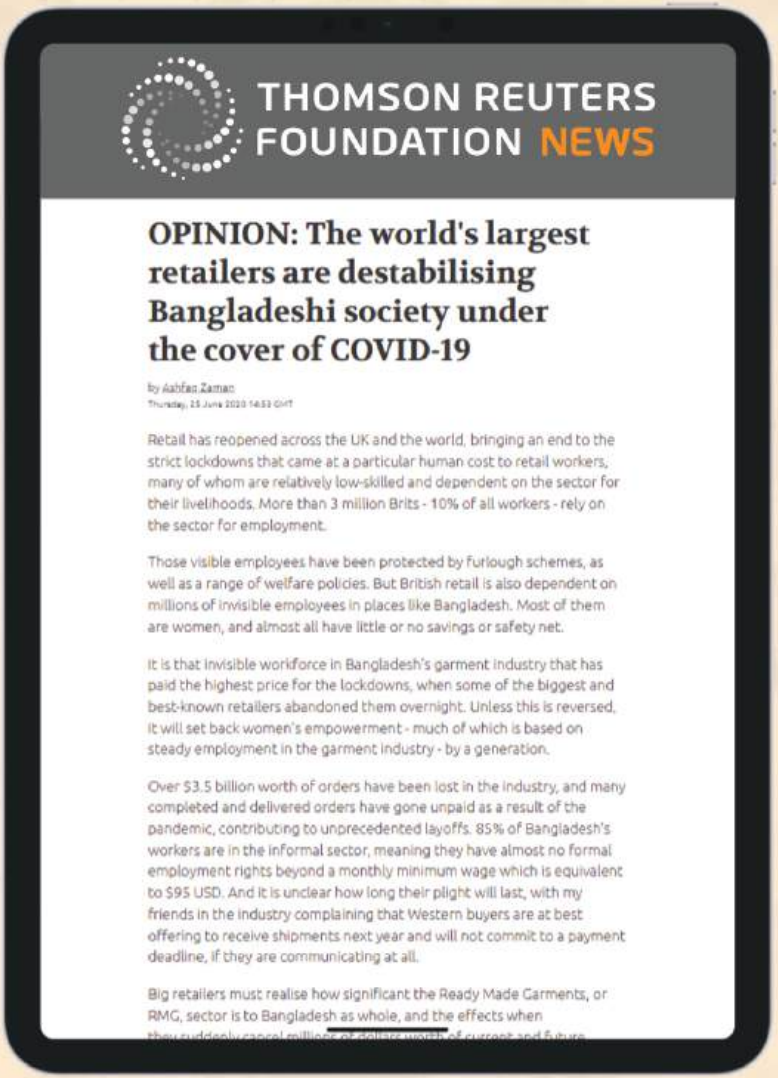
Intensive care beds are in short supply, with the wealthy or influential able to secure them – as well as their own at-home ventilators and high flow oxygen tanks – leaving the vast majority without the provisions they need. In the absence of a National Health Service, hospital care is being auctioned to those who can pay and inaccessible to those who cannot. These situations call for unique solutions, such as the sharing of vital medical equipment and ventilators from countries no longer in immediate need – the UK, for example.

The pandemic is creating panic. This cannot be the "new normal" for billions in the world's poorest nations. Overcrowding, fear of the virus, economic shutdown, and lack of healthcare in the face of death tolls reaching higher peaks is driving many to suicidal thoughts or worse.

Just as Britain built Nightingale hospitals within its own borders, the UK and others must do the same internationally. The NHS now has 22,000 ventilators, the vast majority of which are not currently needed. Bangladesh has fewer than 2,000 – most of which are in private hospitals and inaccessible to the vast majority of Bangladeshis. We have three doctors and four hospital beds for every 10,000 people – the UK has 44 doctors and 22 beds respectively.

If the pandemic has been tough for Britain, it could be disastrous for Bangladesh.

The only way to avert this is to accept that we really are all in this together, and to create a fluid movement of equipment and expertise that can go wherever in the world it is needed. Just as the virus does not respect borders, neither should our response to it.



THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION NEWS

OPINION: The world's largest retailers are destabilising Bangladeshi society under the cover of COVID-19

By Ashfaq Zaman
Thursday, 25 June 2020 14:53 GMT

Retail has reopened across the UK and the world, bringing an end to the strict lockdowns that came at a particular human cost to retail workers, many of whom are relatively low-skilled and dependent on the sector for their livelihoods. More than 3 million Brits - 10% of all workers - rely on the sector for employment.

Those visible employees have been protected by furlough schemes, as well as a range of welfare policies. But British retail is also dependent on millions of invisible employees in places like Bangladesh. Most of them are women, and almost all have little or no savings or safety net.

It is that invisible workforce in Bangladesh's garment industry that has paid the highest price for the lockdowns, when some of the biggest and best-known retailers abandoned them overnight. Unless this is reversed, it will set back women's empowerment - much of which is based on steady employment in the garment industry - by a generation.

Over $3.5 billion worth of orders have been lost in the industry, and many completed and delivered orders have gone unpaid as a result of the pandemic, contributing to unprecedented layoffs. 85% of Bangladesh's workers are in the informal sector, meaning they have almost no formal employment rights beyond a monthly minimum wage which is equivalent to $95 USD. And it is unclear how long their plight will last, with my friends in the industry complaining that Western buyers are at best offering to receive shipments next year and will not commit to a payment deadline, if they are communicating at all.

Big retailers must realise how significant the Ready Made Garments, or RMG, sector is to Bangladesh as whole, and the effects when

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Thomson Reuters Foundation
25 June 2020

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Big retailers must realise how significant the Ready Made Garments, or RMG, sector is to Bangladesh as whole, and the effects when they

suddenly cancel millions of dollars worth of current and future orders without warning.

If Bangladesh's economy and society was a human body, the garment sector would be a vital organ. Just as COVID-19 collapses a patient's lungs, cancelled orders are starving Bangladesh's economy of oxygen. Over 80% of the country's exports are in garments, and it employs over 4 million people, a significant slice of whom are now unemployed and destitute (no one knows exactly how many).

Big retail should realise that its decisions have a brutal and often inhumane effect on people on whom their businesses rely.

There seems to be a complacency, perhaps based on the assumption that those human stories will never be uncovered. Even high profile celebrities like Kylie Jenner have recently been criticised for not paying her workers in the country, leading to her being forced to delete and block critical comments on Instagram.

Some brands like Nike have in the past gone out of their way to act responsibly by partnering with well-respected NGOs like BRAC, but there is scepticism as to how sincere these efforts are if purchase orders can be cancelled and invoices ignored at the first sign of trouble. The commitment between Bangladesh and these brands should be two-way and respectful.
As brands continue to shout about the sustainability and ethics of their supply chains and materials, they should be equally concerned about the sustainability and ethics of their labour policies.

Those garment workers in factories in Bangladesh are every bit as essential to their business success as the retail workers on tills in London. They are employees in all but name - and should be given the same status, rights and respect as their colleagues.

Legally, there is almost nothing stopping a well-known retailer treating its workers abroad in a way that would be criminal in the UK. This needs to change. As long as the large fashion buyers are able to take

advantage of their suppliers, the labour conditions on the ground will not improve.

The factory boss in Bangladesh is in reality just middle management, often with a UK plc calling the shots. It is there that the decision-making power lies, and it is there that change must begin.

Just as anti-bribery laws hold Company Directors personally and criminally liable if bribes are paid on their behalf overseas, the same cross-border approach should be used to ensure labour rights.

Even if the fashion is disposable, the people who manufacture it shouldn't be.

THE i PAPER

As an aid worker I know the UK can still have an impact despite cutting foreign aid spending

Increasing skills, employability, and infrastructure are worthwhile investments



Rishi Sunak leaves 11 Downing Street before heading to the House of Commons to present his economic spending review (Photo: Ben Stansall/Getty)



Ashfaq Zaman

November 27, 2020 4:20 pm

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As a Bangladeshi aid worker and campaigner, I was initially disappointed by the news that Britain will reduce its aid budget by one third, from 0.7 percent of GDP to 0.5 per cent. I was not alone: The decision has been greeted with opposition from no fewer than five former UK Prime Ministers, ranging across both of the main parties.

But I hope the legitimate criticisms of some aid spending can be listened to, and we can enter a new era of 'smart' aid. Aid that is given in a targeted, sustainable way with a clear strategy for how those who receive it can eventually live

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But I hope the legitimate criticisms of some aid spending can be listened to, and we can enter a new era of 'smart' aid. Aid that is given in a targeted, sustainable way with a clear strategy for how those who receive it can eventually live without it.

We may have no other choice. It looks like aid spending is one of Covid's invisible casualties, which will in turn create millions of casualties around the world. As richer nations feel the squeeze of pandemic-induced recessions, more and more of them will see aid as a luxury they cannot afford, rather than a smart investment they would be wise to continue making

The root issue here is that many (policy makers and voters) simply don't believe that aid makes a difference long-term. As an aid worker active in Bangladesh (historically one of the top recipients of British aid) I know they are right – some of the time.
It certainly wouldn't be fair to generalise – I have seen firsthand lives being transformed, if not saved, by British taxpayers' money. For example, the now disbanded DfID supported projects providing people in flood-hit areas of Bangladesh with emergency shelter.

But as well as emergency measures, those people need help with flood defences and climate-proof livelihoods in areas like digital services. It's a cliche to say that we should be 'teaching a man to fish' not just handing him one, but that is true.

I have seen expensive celebrity-endorsed 'awareness campaigns' (paid for by the UK) encouraging Bangladeshis to use latrines and toilets in areas where almost nobody has access to one, as well as projects handing out nappies to Rohingya refugees. No one considered that in Myanmar nappies are not common, and most mothers were simply not familiar with them or their purpose.

Smart aid, as opposed to the type of aid above, can focus efforts where they can make a difference and enable countries to be self-sufficient and provide a path out of aid. That is ultimately what both donor and recipient countries want.

Ironically, it is this kind of progress that can increase opposition to aid. Some feel that they should only be providing aid to the very poorest countries and failed states. Bangladesh, as a middle income country with the fastest growing economy in South Asia, may not be everyone's idea of a worthy aid recipient.

But this progress is itself evidence that aid has worked in the past in building important capacities in the country, and that it should continue. When you're winning, don't stop playing at half time. Different countries will need different types of aid at different points, and aid is about much more than emergency relief or humanitarian catastrophes.

It is this kind of latter-stage 'smart aid' that can head off accusations of waste or ineffectiveness in the sector.

For example, doing more things like increasing skills, employability, and infrastructure are worthwhile investments, where donor countries can see not only the immediate benefit but the long-term plan for how a country can transform faster. Ideally this needs to be done at the

national level to avoid aid projects increasing domestic or inter-communal inequalities, as well as working with a 'whole of government' approach to have a far greater impact.

This can also be more cost-effective than simply delivering short-term aid such as food drops, and can be the focus of a leaner aid budget.
Even those who are set against aid in general should be able to see the benefits of 'smart' aid. With a smaller budget, it may be the only way to maintain Britain's aid footprint and continue to work towards a more equitable world.

TRT WORLD

Bangladesh risks becoming the next India without surplus vaccines

Vaccine supply in the developing world is a global issue, and countries with excess doses hold the key to the world's unlocking.

ASHFAQ ZAMAN



AA

With the shock of India's ongoing Covid-19 crisis, we should focus on ensuring that there isn't another similar case. That means that vaccination efforts must speed up, not slow down, particularly in developing and middle-income countries.

Worryingly, vaccination efforts have been disrupted by India's second wave.

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TRT World
11 Nov 2022

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Worryingly, vaccination efforts have been disrupted by India's second wave.

About 30 percent of exported vaccine doses are produced in India, but the world's largest democracy has now understandably banned vaccine exports. This means that Bangladesh will only be receiving a third of the vaccines it has ordered from India's Serum Institute, and the 1.6 million Bangladeshis who have taken the first dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine may now go without a second dose.

This can only be fixed in the short-term by countries with excess vaccines, such as the US and UK, sharing their vaccine stocks.

This was Bangladesh's plea recently, when the Minister of Foreign Affairs told ITV news "If the [UK] government tries, they can do it, because they have the capacity... I'm not asking for too much, I'm only asking for 1.6 million AstraZeneca doses".

The UK government response was negative, pointing out that the UK has already devoted £548 million ($775 million) to the COVAX programme, which has already provided vaccines to over 70 lower-income countries.

This sounds impressive, but it misses one crucial point: the COVAX programme is not working.

It is the COVAX programme that has been hit hard by the Indian export ban. COVAX was supposed to be the scheme that vaccinated the developing world. As it stands, 0.2 percent of the 700 million vaccine doses administered globally have been in low-income countries, compared with the 87 percent that have been administered in high or middle-income countries.

This is because COVAX is struggling financially, and would need $3.2 billion to meet its 2021 goals. It has also been affected by bumpy international supply chains, and faces the challenge of high-income countries circumventing the COVAX programme to secure vaccines for their own citizens.

Whilst Britain's contribution to the COVAX programme is commendable, it will not help Bangladesh because COVAX relies on the same broken supply chains that caused this vaccine shortage in the first place.

Theoretically, the virus may spread through Bangladesh in the same way it has spread through India. There are many similarities between the two countries and their populations: Bangladesh's economy, like India's, cannot be shut down. 89 percent of the total jobs in Bangladesh are informal.

Similarly, both countries have high population densities, especially in urban areas. Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, is the most densely populated city in the world.

The combination of densely populated cities with workers who cannot work from home and a new variant could be just as, if not more deadly, than it has been in India.

The final parallel in both countries' vulnerabilities is in healthcare infrastructure. India spends 1.28 percent of GDP on healthcare, and

Bangladesh ranks similarly low at 2.38 percent. The shortage of medical oxygen could be even more acute in Bangladesh given that it imports from India for a major portion of its oxygen supply.

What's more, Bangladesh is heading into monsoon season, where 80 percent of the year's rainfall occurs in approximately two months. This could result in a double-headed public health catastrophe in a country that is uniquely susceptible to natural disasters like floods.

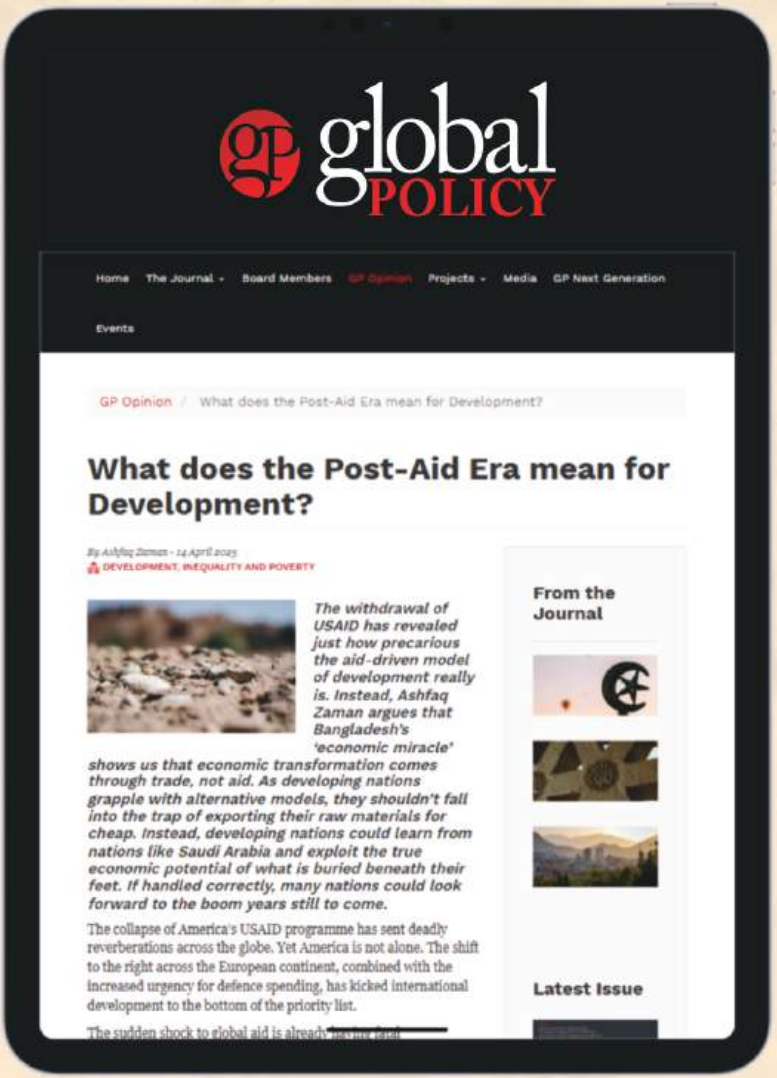
So far Bangladesh has fared well dealing with the Covid-19 crisis with a very rudimentary health infrastructure, supported by its massive digitisation and innovative interventions from government platforms such as the Access to Information Programme (a2i).

But the vaccination shortage is a problem that needs global support.

This is not just Bangladesh's problem, it's the world's problem, as we have learned repeatedly throughout the pandemic. Just as the Indian variant is threatening the prospects of re-opening the economy in the UK, a similarly deadly mutation could just as easily pop up in Bangladesh.

The UK and the US have vaccines to spare - and they should share them. According to current predictions, the US will be sitting on between 500 million and 1 billion surplus vaccines by September. The UK similarly is on track to have a surplus of 100 million vaccines, and has already vaccinated over 50 percent of its population. In order to distribute a second dose to those due one, Bangladesh needs only 1.6 million doses.

Bangladesh has a population of 163 million, meaning there are 163 million chances for the virus to mutate. If countries like the US and the UK do not channel surplus doses to those countries who need them, the global vaccination effort - and the world's unlocking - could be in jeopardy.


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What does the Post-Aid Era mean for Development?
By Ashfaq Zaman - 14 April 2025
DEVELOPMENT, INEQUALITY AND POVERTY
The withdrawal of USAID has revealed just how precarious the aid-driven model of development really is. Instead, Ashfaq Zaman argues that Bangladesh's 'economic miracle' shows us that economic transformation comes through trade, not aid. As developing nations grapple with alternative models, they shouldn't fall into the trap of exporting their raw materials for cheap. Instead, developing nations could learn from nations like Saudi Arabia and exploit the true economic potential of what is buried beneath their feet. If handled correctly, many nations could look forward to the boom years still to come.
The collapse of America's USAID programme has sent deadly reverberations across the globe. Yet America is not alone. The shift to the right across the European continent, combined with the increased urgency for defence spending, has kicked international development to the bottom of the priority list.
The sudden shock to global aid is already
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What does the Post-Aid Era mean for Development?

Global Policy Journal
14 April 2025

The withdrawal of USAID has revealed just how precarious the aid-driven model of development really is. Instead, Ashfaq Zaman argues that Bangladesh's 'economic miracle' shows us that economic transformation comes through trade, not aid. As developing nations grapple with alternative models, they shouldn't fall into the trap of exporting their raw materials for cheap. Instead, developing nations could learn from nations like Saudi Arabia and exploit the true economic potential of what is buried beneath their feet. If handled correctly, many nations could look forward to the boom years still to come.
The collapse of America's USAID programme has sent deadly reverberations across the globe. Yet America is not alone. The shift to the right across the European continent, combined with the increased urgency for defence spending, has kicked international development to the bottom of the priority list.

The sudden shock to global aid is already having fatal consequences. Yet as the world heads into an era that favours transactions over 'aid', countries in the Global South have the opportunity to chart a new course through various development stages.

However, the AI and electrification boom means that the global appetite for rare earth metals has exploded. For many developing nations, this presents a once-in-an-era opportunity, if handled correctly.

USAID's withdrawal is a testament to why the aid model was broken to begin with. In many instances, aid from abroad is somewhat a sticking plaster; it can create a dependency that distorts local economies and creates perverse political incentives. We have felt this first-hand in Bangladesh; as a result of the funding crunch, aid provisions for the 1,000,000 Rohingya population have been halved.

Yet Bangladesh is not alone at the sharp end of government spending cuts.

This aid withdrawal shows why aid is a rotten foundation upon which to build an economy. A prime example can be found in Malawi. For many years, 30-40% of Malawi's national budget came from foreign aid. This encouraged Malawi's government and economy to become dependent on external funds, arguably stunting efforts that could have led to longer-term development. Similarly, as Malawi saw, this can all too easily be withdrawn, as seen in the 2013 'Cashgate' scandal.

Over-reliance on aid can distort politics as much as it can economics. For example, look at Bolivia in the 1990s. In order to qualify for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries Initiative in 1996, Bolivia followed a path of austerity in order to receive the debt-relief. Yet this austerity led to significant social costs like unemployment, without delivering the growth that was forecasted from the offices of Washington.

The retreat from the traditional aid model may turn out to be a boon for true sovereignty; a necessary ingredient for true development.

Of course, in particular circumstances, aid is essential. When natural disasters strike, countries should go beyond the geopolitical jargon of 'soft power' and think in humanitarian terms. Temporary aid is commendable. Aid, when used as a means of exerting power, always comes with a heavy small print.

These days, Western nations are not the only players in the 'assisted development' game. China has adopted a different model, albeit with similar objectives.

Under the Belt and Road Initiative, China invests in a variety of infrastructure projects across the globe, often for the cost of cheap debt, and in return for uncontrolled mining rights to raw materials. Beyond the 'soft power' advantages, this is how, for example, China has been able to grant itself access to the vast reserves of critical minerals found in the Democratic of Congo.

This should be instructive. Many correctly assume that China may fill the vacuum of influence left behind by USAID's departure. Yet we shouldn't hold our breath, considering China's recent Belt and Road slowdown, triggered by a wider economic downturn.

To chart a course of real, long-term development, nations should opt for a strategy of trade over aid. In recent years, the opportunities to do this have become plenty.

As illustrated, the race is on for the rare earth metals required for AI, renewable energy and electrification. China was early to this party, hence why today they refine 85 to 90% of the world's rare earths.

However, there are plenty of rare earth metals still in the ground. Countries like Burundi, Madagascar, Tanzania, Tanzania, Myanmar and Afghanistan are reported to have trillions worth of untapped critical minerals.

With the newfound global urgency for these minerals, there is an opportunity for real long-term wealth generation. For a lesson on how to capitalise on newfound raw materials with minimal start-up capital, one may look to Saudi Arabia. Upon discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia attracted foreign investment into their oil reserves. However, gradually they nationalized their oil assets under the company Aramco. This is a lesson; for long-term development, developing nations should resist the temptation to grant uncontrolled mining operations. Instead, they should implement policy that increases government equity in mining ventures, while still benefiting from foreign expertise.

Equally, any investment capital available should be invested into rare earth processing capacity. Instead of exporting raw critical minerals and rare earth metals at low costs, developing nations should place investment into their own refining capacity as a top priority. Not only would this increase revenue and create jobs, it would reduce reliance on foreign refining. On top of this, a sovereign wealth fund created

from critical mineral extraction could then be used to invest into longer term development projects.

Of course, this strategy only works for nations endowed with rare earth minerals. My home nation of Bangladesh is often considered a development success story. Famously described by Henry Kissinger as a 'basket case nation', Bangladesh was able to become one of the fastest growing economies in the global south. This success story holds some clues to pathways to development without reliance on raw material reserves (or foreign temperaments).

First, we focused on textiles and garments, and leveraged low labor costs to attract foreign investment. This was thanks in part to the EU's generalised Scheme of Preferences, which gave Bangladesh a duty-free and quota-free access to the EU market, providing an example of the strength of the trade over the aid model.

The growing garment sector was the bedrock of the wider Bangladeshi transformation. Bangladesh also embraced export-led growth, establishing special economic zones (SEZs) and free trade policies to attract businesses. This was a prime example of how the private and public sector can work symbiotically in development.

To future-proof our economy, we then diversified into IT, freelancing, and digital services. This is crucial for those developing nations looking to expand beyond raw materials. Lastly, strong government-business collaboration helped implement effective policies, ensuring sustainable growth.

Bangladesh provides another example of what organic, self-dependent growth could look like. Of course, no two nations' development stories are the same. Yet themes emerge; whether that's through the smart commercialisation of raw materials, or focussed investment in targeted sectors.

While Bangladesh can provide a positive model of development, it also serves as a warning. Bangladesh's recent revolution has undoubtedly

hindered the wider development programme. The revolution started with localised student protests about government job quotas. This metastasised into a wider spread, national rejection of the slow creep of corruption.

The previous ruling 'Awami League' had explicitly followed a policy of 'development over democracy.' There are lessons to be learnt. Development only works if it takes the wishes of the majority into account. Bangladesh's revolution tells us what happens if we don't.

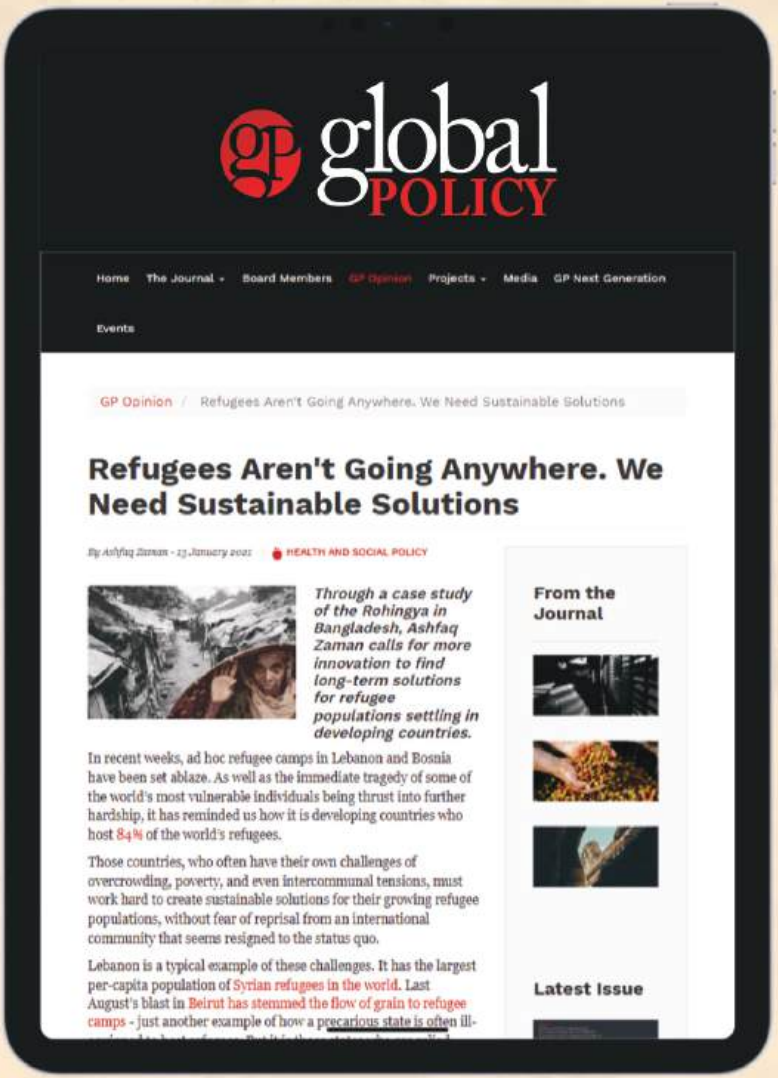
This might beg the question; how was China able to develop so effectively without democracy? It is true that since the late 1970s, China has been able to lift millions out of poverty through a mixture of state-governed capitalism and heavy integration into the global market.

The benefits are seductive; five-year plans can be executed without the wild oscillations that are common in democracies. Long-term infrastructure projects can be executed in a fraction of the time; cities and highways can be built in months, not years.

Yet remaining deaf to wishes and corrections of public opinion can be fatal. One must only look at the failed centralized autocratic projects found in Cuba, Zimbabwe, Turkmenistan or North Korea to understand why ignoring the state may not always know best.

Developing countries must ask themselves why they want to develop; political inclusion and individual freedoms are fundamental to many. One need only look at the Arab Spring to understand these fundamental human impulses. I would therefore argue that reliable, stable, long-term development is driven by people; it doesn't drag them.

As the world takes a step back from the broken aid model, many countries will be forced to develop in their own way and on their own terms. In a world of shifting appetites and industries, many developing nations may well have their 'boom' years ahead of them.


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GP Opinion / Refugees Aren't Going Anywhere. We Need Sustainable Solutions
Refugees Aren't Going Anywhere. We Need Sustainable Solutions
By Ashfaq Zaman - 23 January 2021
HEALTH AND SOCIAL POLICY
Through a case study of the Rohingya in Bangladesh, Ashfaq Zaman calls for more innovation to find long-term solutions for refugee populations settling in developing countries.
In recent weeks, ad hoc refugee camps in Lebanon and Bosnia have been set ablaze. As well as the immediate tragedy of some of the world's most vulnerable individuals being thrust into further hardship, it has reminded us how it is developing countries who host 84% of the world's refugees.
Those countries, who often have their own challenges of overcrowding, poverty, and even intercommunal tensions, must work hard to create sustainable solutions for their growing refugee populations, without fear of reprisal from an international community that seems resigned to the status quo.
Lebanon is a typical example of these challenges. It has the largest per-capita population of Syrian refugees in the world. Last August's blast in Beirut has stemmed the flow of grain to refugee camps - just another example of how a precarious state is often ill-
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Refugees Aren't Going Anywhere. We Need Sustainable Solutions

Global Policy Journal
13 January 2021

In recent weeks, ad hoc refugee camps in Lebanon and Bosnia have been set ablaze. As well as the immediate tragedy of some of the world's most vulnerable individuals being thrust into further hardship, it has reminded us how it is developing countries who host 84% of the world's refugees.

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Lebanon is a typical example of these challenges. It has the largest per-capita population of Syrian refugees in the world. Last August's blast in Beirut has stemmed the flow of grain to refugee camps - just another example of how a precarious state is often ill-equipped to host refugees. But it is those states who are relied upon to act as geographic buffers for Europe and other richer regions that refugees would prefer to be hosted in.

This creates impossible choices for host nations. They can either close their borders at the first sign of trouble in a neighbouring country, forcing them to witness at close quarters the slaughter of victim populations who often share an ethnicity, faith or language with their own people. This is to say nothing of the humanitarian obligation to provide sanctuary where possible.

Another option is to accept refugees for a short period of time, but force repatriation to their country of origin at the first opportunity.

Since many refugees are fleeing intractable conflicts, this would be almost as unconscionable as keeping borders closed in the first place.

An ideal solution would be for the global humanitarian burden to be carried by those with the broadest shoulders, and for more refugees to be hosted in the world's richest nations. After Chancellor Merkel welcomed a million migrants and refugees to Germany, there was a brief period of time when this appeared possible. Merkel, however, was swiftly punished for this at the polls.

The world's leading refugee host nations will continue to be countries like Lebanon, Uganda, Turkey and Bangladesh - not Germany, Canada, or Sweden. For those countries in the global south this is a challenge, but also an opportunity.

By investing in the infrastructure that refugee populations need, they can face the reality that their presence is most likely long-term (despite the initial reassurances of the international community for quicker solutions).

Doing this sustainably means providing the essential services they need whilst carefully managing disruptions to host populations who, as Merkel and others have learned in recent years, have a limit to their generosity.

I have seen these challenges first-hand as a humanitarian worker in Bangladesh. When the Rohingya people of Myanmar's Rakhine state were subject to genocide in 2017, approximately 800,000 Rohingya citizens of Myanmar fled the country, and arrived in Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh. This swiftly became the world's largest refugee settlement.

Although this camp was supposed to be temporary (and was built as such), there is still no end in sight, and recent policies from NGOs seem to accept that.

The conditions in Cox's Bazar were bad even before the pandemic, with half of the camp's 800,000 population lacking access to clean water and social distancing virtually impossible.

The Bangladesh government is in the process of providing a safe, sustainable space for the Rohingya, initially for 100,000 refugees, in the Southern Island of Bhasan Char, situated in the Bay of Bengal.

The infrastructure on the island is vastly superior to that found in Cox's Bazar, in line with international humanitarian standards. The Bangladesh government has invested a total of $350 million in the project, creating 14,000 solid cluster homes, as well as administrative buildings, schools, hospitals, and road and drainage networks.

Facilities for agriculture have also been implemented on the island, providing the inhabitants with a path to become economically active and somewhat independent from aid.

These agricultural employment options mirror the tech job creation for refugees that has been provided by the government's a2i (Aspire to Innovate) project, allowing Rohingya to start micro businesses in the tech space and join Bangladesh's flourishing freelancer community.

Some voices in the international aid industry seem to prefer the status quo, raising concerns about the nature of the relocation, as well as the island's flood risk. However, cyclones and flooding are a threat throughout Bangladesh - and this area's flood defences are robust, making it much safer than Cox's Bazar and allowing it to be flood proof amidst the recent cyclones in the region.

There is now increased demand from Rohingya to move there, resulting in a second wave of resettlement this week, after the first wave at the beginning of December.

The Rohingya themselves know what we all know in Bangladesh: As long as developing nations are the front line in protecting the world's most vulnerable people, governments will be driven to create novel, sustainable solutions so they can provide long-term life chances, and not just short-term fixes.

The Daily Star

Myanmar's new realities demand a new Rohingya strategy



Rohingya refugees wait at the World Food Programme distribution centre to purchase grocery items, at the refugee camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, March 15, 2025. PHOTO: REUTERS

The idea of opening a humanitarian channel into Myanmar's Rakhine State to deliver aid directly to the Rohingya certainly carries a moral appeal. With Bangladesh having sheltered nearly one million Rohingya refugees for over six years—most of them crammed into overcrowded camps in Cox's Bazar—it's understandable that many are looking for ways to ease this burden. Aid from the international community has started to decrease, and security concerns both inside the camps and along the border are becoming more serious. But good intentions are not always enough, especially in a region so complex and fragile. Sometimes, if you rush into something that seems noble, you might unintentionally open the door to even greater instability.

A humanitarian channel sounds simple, but history tells us it rarely is. The world has seen many such aid channels/corridors in the past, and most of them haven't ended well. In the 1990s, when the Balkans were torn apart by war, the UN declared places like Srebrenica

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The Daily Star
Jun 21, 2025

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A humanitarian channel sounds simple, but history tells us it rarely is. The world has seen many such aid channels/corridors in the past, and most of them haven't ended well. In the 1990s, when the Balkans were torn apart by war, the UN declared places like Srebrenica and Gorazde as "safe areas." Despite international presence, those areas became sites of horror—especially Srebrenica, where thousands of people were massacred. In Syria, corridors in Aleppo and Ghouta were frequently manipulated. Instead of delivering safety, they became tools of war used by both government and opposition forces to control populations and divert aid. Even in Ethiopia's Tigray region, where the UN tried to create access routes for aid, efforts were blocked or undermined by the warring parties, and the result was famine.

These experiences tell us that aid routes can go wrong—and they often do. They are vulnerable to being misused, especially in places

where there is no clear control, where there are multiple armed actors, and where international trust is already thin. In such settings, what starts as a route for food and medicine can quickly turn into a passageway for weapons, fighters, or influence. In the end, the very people the aid is meant to help end up in even more danger.

When we look at the current situation in Myanmar, it's important to understand how complicated things have become. This is not a simple case of a government suppressing a minority population. Over the last few years, new players have emerged on the ground. One of the most powerful among them is the Arakan Army (AA), an ethnic armed group that now controls large stretches of northern Rakhine, especially the areas close to the Bangladesh border. Ironically, while Bangladesh and most ASEAN countries maintain diplomatic relations with Myanmar's junta—the military regime that technically runs the country—it's the AA that holds power in the region where the aid channel would likely pass through.

If aid flows through an area controlled by the AA, it may end up strengthening them, even unintentionally. In any war, supply is as powerful as any weapon. If aid turns into a way to boost the logistics and reach of an armed group, then the humanitarian effort risks becoming a political or military act. These risks are compounded by the presence of an uncontrolled border zone, arms trafficking, insurgency, and extremist movements. These threats already exist, and a poorly managed channel could make them worse.

It's a bit like going in for major surgery. You don't go under the knife without knowing exactly what's being done and what the risks are. However, if—after assessing all pros and cons—the surgery is deemed necessary, it's better to pursue it with full prior diagnosis and evaluation. Similarly, before setting up any humanitarian channel into Rakhine, we need to slow down and ask

some hard questions. Who controls the ground? Who guarantees the safety of aid workers? Who ensures that the aid isn't misused? And perhaps most importantly, who takes responsibility if something goes wrong?

Rather than rushing into a high-risk initiative, Bangladesh could propose something more comprehensive and stable. Of course, repatriation won't happen overnight, and it won't be easy. But this could be the real beginning of a serious, well-planned first step towards resolving a crisis that has dragged on for too long.

For something like this to work, though, all the key players would have to be involved. China, which has deep ties with Myanmar and major investments in the region—especially through the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor—needs to be part of the conversation. The US, already one of the largest donors to Rohingya aid, can lend global credibility to any comprehensive plan. It also helps that organisations such as Human Rights Watch, International Rescue Committee, and Refugee Council USA, all based in the US, can help monitor any irregularities and create transparency.

Reports by such organisations have credibility in the international community. India, which shares borders and strategic interests, must also be tactically engaged. And Bangladesh, which has carried the weight of this crisis with resilience and dignity, should take the lead in shaping a solution that is humane, realistic, and diplomatically sound.

Inside Bangladesh, the decision should include political parties, international relations experts, academics, and defence and security intelligence experts. As this will have long-term implications, this critical decision shouldn't be made in the essence and narrative of an executive order. We have to keep in mind that certain neighbouring forces may always try to sabotage the initiatives as part of their own interest to create instability.

If establishing something more comprehensive proves too difficult, there is still the option of a multilateral humanitarian corridor—one overseen not by a single country, but jointly by the UN, the ICRC, and ASEAN. That way, the risks can be managed more carefully, and there would be international checks and balances in place to prevent misuse. The longer-term strategies should culminate in a stable Rakhine region where power struggles are settled and accepted by the multilateral community. Otherwise, it leaves a possibility for future power struggles and endangers the people residing there.

Whatever direction is taken, one thing is clear: Bangladesh cannot afford to act impulsively. The country is in a sensitive position, surrounded by powerful neighbours with competing interests. China and India have very different approaches to Myanmar. The US currently says it views the Rohingya crisis through a human rights lens. And all three powers are watching the region closely. Bangladesh must navigate this carefully, without getting caught in anyone's camp while also avoiding potential sabotage.

The visit of UN Secretary-General António Guterres in July 2023 was a reminder that the world is still paying attention. But attention is not enough. What's needed now is leadership. Bangladesh has shown remarkable patience and generosity over the years. Now it must lead with clarity and confidence. A humanitarian channel might bring temporary relief, but unless it's part of a larger, more strategic plan, it could do more harm than good.

This isn't just about sending aid across a border. It's about shaping the future of an entire population and protecting the stability of an entire region. That requires more than good intentions. It requires wisdom, courage, and above all, inclusive leadership. We must be careful that this humanitarian action doesn't forget the human angle. Security and the betterment of the people in the region must

be the first priority in this mission. Let us move not with haste, but with purpose.

The Daily Star

How we should build Brand Bangladesh



Despite corruption and the erosion of ideals over the past 40 years, Bangladesh possesses remarkable positives amid the negatives.
VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHABIYAR

If we think about what defines a country, it can feel challenging to articulate. However, the identity of a country is not unlike the identity of a person—it thrives when rooted in authenticity. Often, the strongest elements emerge when we remain true to our inner selves, and this authenticity is the most genuine manifestation of who we are.

This principle is why good schools encourage students to harness their unique creativity and inherent talents. For instance, someone excelling in sports is not necessarily pushed towards medicine, where they may struggle to shine. Instead of mimicking or copying others, individuals are guided to identify and nurture their innate strengths. Similarly, as a nation, we must identify and amplify our unique qualities rather than emulate others.

Good schools and effective leaders analyse individual and collective traits to chart a path forward. In the same way, as a nation, we must evaluate our distinct strengths. Despite corruption and the erosion of ideals over the past 40 years, Bangladesh possesses remarkable positives amid the negatives, and one of our greatest assets is our language.

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The Daily Star
Sat Feb 8, 2025

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Good schools and effective leaders analyse individual and collective traits to chart a path forward. In the same way, as a nation, we must evaluate our distinct strengths. Despite corruption and the erosion of ideals over the past 40 years, Bangladesh possesses remarkable positives amid the negatives, and one of our greatest assets is our language. We are a culturally and literarily rich nation. Few nations have their own language, and even fewer have a language that serves as both a spoken and literary medium. Civilisations that created languages often produced significant literature, and we are no exception. Bengali, primarily spoken in this region, symbolises the creativity of our civilisation and its rich literary tradition. Language reflects cultural depth. Consider French, renowned for its poetry and influence in fashion, or Italian and German, which have left lasting marks on art and music. English, with luminaries like Shakespeare, also exemplifies this connection. Similarly, our cultural legacy includes figures like Rabindranath Tagore and Lalon Shah. These icons remind us that we are a nation steeped in poetry, music, and literature. This

cultural richness, expressed through our language and literature, is something we should cherish and take immense pride in.

Resilience is another defining characteristic of Bangladesh. Regardless of the challenges, the nation perseveres. Amid global instability, whether environmental or socio-economic, the resilience of our nation is particularly striking. On the political front, the people of this region have shown strength in the 1952 Language Movement, the 1969 Mass Uprising, the 1971 Liberation War, the 1990's anti-dictator movement, and now again with the 2024 mass uprising. During the Covid pandemic, despite dire predictions, Bangladesh managed the crisis effectively. From being labelled a "bottomless basket" to becoming a consistently performing nation, this resilience permeates every sector of society. This quality fosters trust, signalling stability at both the macro and micro levels.

Our identity as a moderate Muslim nation is another cornerstone of our character. Historically, Bangladesh has exemplified moderation and integration. Despite external narratives, particularly from neighbouring countries like India, attempting to portray us as intolerant, we remain a well-integrated society exemplifying harmony and unity. This identity of moderation and cultural richness serves as another pillar of our national stability and strength.

Over the years, we have focused on branding ourselves as an emerging tiger, a growing economy. However, these traits are not unique to us. Many other nations have shared similar trajectories, and some are no longer classified as growing economies. For example, Vietnam has developed a robust RMG sector and gained significant global recognition.

How, then, should Bangladesh present itself and build its brand? The primary focus should be on its language—the heart of its identity. The very name "Bangladesh" derives from "Bangla." This integral aspect of national identity remains underleveraged.

Historically, regions or cultures that originated languages have been leaders, representing advanced civilisations. Literature signifies an intellectually rich society, and Bengali is no exception. The 1952 Language Movement, where the people of this land shed blood to preserve their mother tongue, remains a rare and unparalleled example in history. Bengali is also the fourth most spoken language globally, a significant element of our identity, and we must emphasise it and take immense pride in it.

Another key aspect of Brand Bangladesh lies in its ability to hold a moderate Muslim identity without excluding other groups. Unlike some nations plagued by communal strife, Bangladesh enjoys harmony. There is no preferential treatment or segregation; all citizens live in unity, celebrating religious festivals together. This aspect needs particular care now due to the increasingly frequent disinformation and propaganda by some groups with malevolent intentions.

Finally, Bangladesh has repeatedly proven to be a nation of resilience. From the Bengal famine to the Language Movement, from being labelled a "bottomless basket" to enduring countless national calamities—the people of this region are built to overcome adversity. We do not give up.

The world is increasingly looking for stories that inspire and resonate on a human level. This resilience is why Bangladesh is a reliable partner. Brand Bangladesh is not just about telling our story; it's about living it. By valuing our language, celebrating our resilience, and upholding our unity, we can project a vision of Bangladesh that fosters pride and possibility—for ourselves and for generations to come.

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An expert's point of view on a current event.

The Developing World Could Come Out of the Pandemic Ahead

Thanks to favorable demographics, digitization efforts, and quicker health responses, many countries of the global south are faring better than their wealthy counterparts.

By Ashfaq Zaman



A street vendor wearing a face mask sells cigarettes on a street in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on March 12. MUNIR UZ ZAMAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

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The developing world could come out of the pandemic ahead

Foreign Policy
September 2, 2020

The coronavirus could be the great global leveler for this generation.

Although the virus has spread through the entire world, its effects—both on physical and economic health—have been better managed in some developing countries than in their richer counterparts. In the United Kingdom, the official death toll at the beginning of September is 40,000, whereas Bangladesh's official count stands around 4,000, despite having over twice the UK's population. And while the British economy is expected to contract by around 9 percent in 2020, Bangladesh's GDP may fall by around 2 percent. At the same time, developing countries may also find the post-pandemic world more hospitable to their continued rise, as the global economy becomes more digitized, more multipolar, and more fluid.

The better performance in parts of the developing world throughout the pandemic comes down mainly to two factors. First, major virus outbreaks hit Europe and the United States relatively early in the spread of the pandemic, which means they had less time to prepare. But the developed world was also complacent in the face of the virus, perhaps because it saw virus outbreaks as a third-world problem.

In 2016, an exercise to test Britain's ability to cope with a pandemic found gaping holes—including a lack of personal protective equipment and insufficient health care infrastructure—in preparedness. Those holes were never filled, perhaps because Zika, SARS, MERS, and swine flu were all health emergencies that affected poorer countries and spared richer ones. But such complacency means that in the ranking of coronavirus-related deaths per capita around the world, European countries and the United States account for six out of the top 10. Even given the possibility that cases in some developing countries are

undercounted, the difference is so large that observers can reliably say that many of those nations must be doing something right that some of their richer counterparts are not. Steven Friedman at the University of Johannesburg, for example, made such an argument in May under the headline "Covid-19 has blown away the myth about 'First' and 'Third' world competence." And there is ample evidence that he is right.

Consider the case of Vietnam, which quickly enforced public health measures such as increased health checks, travel restrictions, and extensive quarantines that took European countries months to put in place. Nigeria shut down when there were only 100 reported cases of the virus. Meanwhile, Turkey's track and trace system for viral spread was already in place and robust, built on decades of experience in tracking measles and other outbreaks. This has allowed Turkey, a country of 85 million people, to limit the official death count to just over 6,000. And many African countries had experience containing an outbreak from the Ebola epidemic of 2014, which surely helped when Covid-19 came knocking.

On paper, meanwhile, Bangladesh, the most crowded large country in the world, should have been among the worst affected by Covid-19. But at time of writing, the country's official death toll is less than a third that of Texas. It is worth asking whether the official count is low, but even if it is, the real number is still surely below many of the worst-case projections made early in the pandemic. The success depended on intelligent local lockdowns that focused on particular areas at particular times and a swift world-class telemedicine strategy, led from the very top of government.

Beyond the capacity for quick government action, another advantage for some developing countries has been their young populations, since the vast majority of serious cases, and an even vaster majority of deaths, are among the elderly. The median age of the population in Africa is only 19, whereas in Europe it's 43.

Just as much of the global south has been able to deal with Covid-19's health effects more effectively, the same is true of the economic fallout.

The United Kingdom recorded a 20 percent contraction in its GDP in the second quarter of this year. Emerging markets and developing economies are predicted to fare far better. This is almost inevitable, as many of them had stronger growth in the period immediately preceding the pandemic to begin with. For example, last year, Bangladesh was the sixth-fastest-growing economy in the world with a growth rate of 7.9 percent. The UK, by contrast, grew by just 1.4 percent, meaning it was already closer to recession.

Developing economies like Bangladesh are used to big challenges. Workers and industrial sectors may be more adaptive. Laid-off garment workers and shuttered factories quickly pivoted to manufacture of personal protective equipment such as masks and face shields. That was coupled with Bangladesh's ongoing digitization of its economy through an ambitious program, predating the pandemic, for all government services and significant swaths of economic activity to be conducted entirely online. Thanks to such initiatives, the government had tools already in place for nationwide telemedicine systems and to deliver aid to citizens efficiently. This same infrastructure has allowed a large portion of economic activity—especially education, financial services, and international trade—to continue throughout the pandemic.

Bangladesh is not alone in such initiatives, and the rise of developing countries like it will be hastened by greater acceptance of working from home. If a company is headquartered in London or New York and its employees are working from home, it makes less difference whether that home is 10 miles from the office or 1,000. In turn, the flow of talent and labor, long controlled by the supply of work visas, could change. The line between outsourcing to freelancers and in-house work is becoming blurred and may eventually disappear.

This bodes well for developing countries, which may see their ambitious plans to become developed countries coming to fruition sooner than expected.

Dhaka Tribune

From protest to progress

Four reforms for Bangladesh 2.0



Ashfaq Zaman

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At the end of July, Bangladesh's streets were transformed. What started as a student protest quickly escalated into a Gotham-like scene, with violence and rebellion erupting between the government and its citizens. The youth led the charge, and soon, the entire population joined in.

Like vigilantes, these students restored order when the police force withdrew in fear after Sheikh Hasina resigned on August 5. For that moment, they were the heroes we needed. But vigilante justice is never the answer to systemic decay. Bangladesh needed more than bravery in the streets -- it needed an overhaul and a fresh start.

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Now that we are several weeks into the interim government's tenure, led by Nobel Laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus, we stand at the precipice of change. Expectations are soaring, and the pressure is immense. The task: To undo decades of wrongs and lay the foundation for a better Bangladesh.

While there are numerous sectors needing attention, four key reforms are essential to build Bangladesh 2.0.

1. Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC): The first line of defense

The Anti-Corruption Commission once symbolized hope. Two decades ago, it was designed to be the people's shield against corruption, but now it is a shadow of its former self. The ACC today is not just ineffective -- it has morphed into a weapon used selectively against opposing voices, while the real perpetrators walk

free with most large-scale scandals going unchecked. We even saw how, in a controversial 2023 high court ruling, the ACC can even sack employees without proper reason.

The reason the ACC reform is of utmost priority is that even though the political parties come and go from power and have to convince voters to elect them, civil servants don't operate that way. The ACC has the power to prevent corruption among both politicians and government officials. The citizens of the country interact a lot more with government employees than with politicians.

Corruption has infiltrated every layer of our society. We rank 10th from the bottom on the Corruption Perceptions Index -- our worst standing in years. Bangladeshis abroad often speak of how corruption pushed them to leave, not just in search of opportunities but in pursuit of justice denied at home.

The organization's autonomy has been destroyed and any reforms must not only change the past people, but also the system of appointing the right people. To rebuild trust, reforms must ensure the ACC's independence. Appointments should be made by an impartial council, not by those who themselves need to be held accountable.

2. Election Commission: The guardian of democracy

A democracy falters when its elections are rigged, manipulated, or seen as mere formalities. In the recent past, the Election Commission has been seen facilitating all the three above. Were they truly powerless, or simply complicit in preserving the status quo? I lean towards the latter.

Many say they seemed powerless, but they chose to be powerless to benefit the powerful. They simply did not have the intent to

exercise appropriate authority over the law enforcement necessary to create a neutral ground around election time

The solution isn't just to grant the Election Commission more power but to ensure they have the will or intent to use it. Reform must focus on ensuring they stand firm against government overreach, use state resources judiciously, and provide a level playing field for all parties.

Once again, appointments should be made by a neutral body -- not a government with a vested interest in the outcome.

3. Judiciary: The last bastion of hope

When all else fails, we turn to the courts. But what happens when even the courts are tainted by bias? While our higher courts still retain some authority, the bigger problem lies with the appointment of certain biased judges. To truly defend the nation's people against any harmful government intentions, the higher courts must remain neutral and possess the constitutional mandate to enforce laws impartially.

Reform should begin with the lower courts, which, under the previous government, often acted as tools to execute the ruling party's will, seldom delivering true justice. Currently, genuine legal judgments often require appealing a lower court's decision in the higher courts.

However, not everyone has the resources to pursue such appeals, and the time it takes to move a case from the lower courts to the higher courts can significantly delay the process. As the saying goes, justice delayed is justice denied. Starting from the rusted "garodghor" to the cages of the court stands -- a complete rehaul is required.

The interim government must start by reforming the judiciary, beginning with the lower courts. If these are cleansed of corruption and bias, we can begin to restore faith in the legal system. The current notion that the accused are guilty until proven innocent must be turned on its head.

4. The nexus: ACC, EC, and judiciary together

These three institutions -- ACC, the Election Commission, and the judiciary -- are interdependent. The ACC, if functioning properly, can bar corrupt politicians from running for office. A strengthened Election Commission can then ensure that these candidates don't find loopholes to get elected. And if both these institutions falter, the judiciary must be the safety net, the final barrier protecting the people from the excesses of power.

This is the vision for Bangladesh 2.0: A nation where politicians can no longer treat elections like a formality, where corruption doesn't bleed into every sector, and where the courts protect the rights of the people, not the privileges of the powerful.

The road to Bangladesh 2.0 is long and fraught with obstacles, but it is one we must travel. Reform is not a luxury -- it's a necessity. And as we embark on this journey, let us remember: A nation is only as strong as the institutions that uphold it.

We are not only reforming Bangladesh -- we are building a new one.

Dhaka Tribune

Women lead the way

Women entrepreneurs in rural areas have made a massive impact towards Digital Bangladesh. Digital Centres have been a catalyst for them



Ashfaq Zaman

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Despite the advancement of digital public platforms, financial services, infrastructure, business, and skills, women still face social oppression and economic inequality. Without empowerment, women and gender equality -- social and economic development will be unrealized.

The Aspire to Innovate (a2i) program promotes women's entrepreneurship, labour participation, and economic activity through its Digital Centres, which is a bottom-up initiative of delivering public services, enabling access to effective information by e-service equipment at the union level.

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Notably, women and girls from the vulnerable and marginalized communities get the opportunity to strengthen their capacity to participate in economic activity, innovate, and engage with experts and professional networks. The government of Bangladesh is also committed to attaining the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) goal 5 (gender equality and empowering all women and girls).

In our society, inequality and discrimination towards women unfortunately start at an early age. This significantly limits their growth and decision-making capacity. By establishing the Digital Centres at the union level, a2i has accelerated rural women's ability to acquire skills and training and improve educational qualifications.

Through the 8,805 Digital Centres, it has facilitated over 5,000 women entrepreneurs to be self-sufficient. A woman entrepreneur named Mst Sheuli Akter from Srimongol of Moulvibazar remembered her journey to becoming an entrepreneur of Digital Centre:

“After my father's sudden illness, my family was in a great financial crisis. I felt an inferiority complex as I did not have any opportunity to

contribute to my family. Ignoring the outside noise, I took the risk to become an entrepreneur at the Digital Centre of Srimongol, facilitated by a2i.

Afterwards, I took responsibility for my whole family, consisting of seven members, completed my graduation degree, and also took responsibility for the treatment of a disabled girl. Currently, I earn more than Tk1 lakh and am proudly self-reliant."

Besides this, Mst Sheuly started a Facebook page to sell traditional Monipuri sarees and tea leaves during the lockdown of Covid-19, which was the heritage of Srimongol. She has created employment opportunities for others at her Digital Centre and online business. It can be said that the "Digital Bangladesh" initiative of the government has been a blessing for rural womenfolk to become self-reliant.

The establishment of the Digital Centre has enabled the e-governance of services effectively and efficiently by ensuring digital infrastructure at the lower levels of administration for people's rights and information. Meanwhile, the a2i program has won various awards at national and international levels for the simplification of service by saving time, cost, and (number of) visits (TCV) of service recipients towards service facilitation and digitization.

Currently, over 300 services are provided by the Digital Centres. Shilpi Khatun, a Digital Centre entrepreneur of Saguna (Sirajgonj), is among the pioneers of silently building a digital Bangladesh. She said:

"The citizens of Saguna were deprived of basic civic amenities before establishing the Digital Centre. Becoming economically self-sufficient, I had the opportunity to work for the development of my marginalized society. I made them aware of their rights and fought against inequality."

Besides running the Digital Centre of Saguna, Shilpi works for social awareness for unprivileged women in her village. She works to prevent child marriage, child abuse, the dowry system, and helps facilitate better health and education.

Along with improving the living standard of women entrepreneurs, the Digital Centre contributes to women's empowerment and gender

equality, which will be an optimal tool for building Smart Bangladesh 2041. The average income of women entrepreneurs at the Digital Centre has been lifted to Tk30,687 per month from only Tk3,100 -- far higher than their expectations.

The revolutionary journey of women entrepreneurs has started at Digital Centres. It is paving the way for the advancement of information technology and women's empowerment in the marketplace, workplace, and community. Woman entrepreneurs have fulfilled their dream and have made a massive impact in fulfilling Digital Bangladesh.

Shirin Zahan (Sumi), a woman entrepreneur of Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), shared her story of entrepreneurship:

"DNCC arranged a workshop facilitated by a2i, which made me realize my inherent will to be an entrepreneur. I have taken the opportunity to be an entrepreneur, and it boosted my confidence to work independently with skills and competence. Besides enhancing my skills, I have helped 20 entrepreneurs in the Dhaka district with graphic design training and have trained five people in outsourcing work -- and all are now established."

Nobody was concerned about the homemaker Sumi, but entrepreneur Sumi is known to many as the one who created job opportunities for others.

There is also the "Joyeeta Virtual Shop," where women entrepreneurs of rural/remote areas can bring their work handicrafts to the national and international community for exposure. The Digital Centre created this digital connectivity by bypassing multiple layers of intermediaries to secure the fair price of women entrepreneurs' products.

Indeed, it is gratifying to note that all stakeholders are benefitting from the services of Digital Centres and have realized the importance of adopting e-services. Technology is reaching the grassroots level with the public, private, people, and partnership (4Ps) model, and helping usher in a sustainable rural transformation in Bangladesh which will help the country achieve the SDGs by 2030 and become a smart, high-income nation by 2041.

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THE NEW ERA OF TRANSFORMING STRATEGIES



BBF Digital | July 24, 2019 | Insights

Compiled & Insights from Ashfaq Zaman, CPA

Despite all the progress made in the last few decades in strategy management, organizations are still failing to get things done in lieu with strategic vision & objectives. As per the

READ ONLINE

The New Era of Transforming Strategies

BBF Digital, Bangladesh Brand Forum
24 July 2019

Despite all the progress made in the last few decades in strategy management, organizations are still failing to get things done in lieu with strategic vision & objectives. As per the Economist Intelligence Unit survey, 90% of the senior executives admitted globally they are failing to meet 20% of their strategic long-term objectives. The situation is direr in our country as strong strategic objectives are missing in the first place for many organizations, let alone achieving it. This results into the organizational boom & bust- riding its fate like a roller coaster. When the economic conditions are good, the organizations have a very escalating ride and when the economic macro factors become unfavorable- it collapses along with a country's economy. In the current situation, everything seems to be going into a dream world- but we must embrace for what can be a dangerous future as well.

The big breakthrough on strategic management was led by Harvard Business School's Michael Porter, who translated an industrial economics framework in business strategy context. Porter was big on seriousness & rationality. Highly researched & determinedly logical, Porter linked success to market positioning. He ground down the competitive environment into five forces that firms should attend to and offered some thoughts about how firms might use an assessment of these five forces to adapt a strategy that would secure better commercial advantage. Porter also included the notion of value chain, a common business concept today.

So how can big corporations attain strategic management excellence in this Era? Well, every company has its core competencies. It is just a question of working out exactly what those core competencies were and then building & utilizing them to the best advantage. After a lot of tested & trialed periods of strategic management theories, strategic development has returned full circle to its ancient roots, looking at strategy in the context of governments & nations. This time, however,

instead of applying to military conflict, it is applied to the struggle for economic power & prosperity. Thus, Porter, Hamel, D'Aveni, Pankaj Ghemawat and others have considered the competitive strategy of nations, and political & economic systems. The world is strategic.
As Columbian professor Rita McGrath told us, "Strategy is really struggling both in the field and in the real world. You are seeing a bit of a gap. Porte's Five Forces, The BCG Matrix, SWOT analysis, a lot of those tools came from an era when the competition was much less vigorous. They are great tools in the context in which they were developed. If you've got a stable industry structure and you've got things that you can actually measure, they still work. But, today we're seeing industries competing with industries, different arenas when competition manifests itself." °Strategy, entrepreneurship, and innovation are all bleeding into each other` McGrath observed. And as they bleed into each other, so we are witnessing the emergence of new ideas and models.

TEN QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU TURN STRATEGY INTO REALITY

Sustainable growth depends on delivering the right strategies in the right way. Yet this is something that organizations appear ill-equipped to do. One suggestion is that business leaders need to answer ten key questions for their strategies to more effectively make the leap from design to delivery.

1. IS DELIVERY AS IMPORTANT TO YOU AS DESIGN?

Strategy design can be an exciting process. It is cerebral, based on marshaling facts and figures, views and opinions, hunches and suggestions. Creating a coherent and persuasive strategy is part art and part science. It is demanding, difficult and vitally important, but without implementation it is nothing. In a 2017 Economist Intelligence Unit global survey of 500 senior corporate executives, over 90 percent admitted they failed to reach all of their strategic goals because of flawed implementation.

2. DOES THE LEADERSHIP TEAM TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR DELIVERY TOO?

Once you have defined and clearly communicated the strategy, your responsibility shifts to tracking implementation. You need to know where in your organization change happens and who manages the programmes that drive change. You should proactively address emerging gaps and challenges that may impact delivery. Without this discipline, your strategy has little chance of success.

3. DO YOU MOBILIZE THE RIGHT RESOURCES?

Consulting firms and more fluid organizations are adept at ensuring that their best people are working on the projects that need them most. In contrast, hierarchical and other organizational structures can limit mobility and many organizations struggle to release their best minds to become involved with implementing key strategies. "Always put your best talent on critical initiatives and make sure that you reward them accordingly, but more importantly make sure that they will have roles after the completion of the assignment: advises David Marlow, company transformation lead at Bristol-Myers Squibb.

4. DO YOU LEVERAGE LNSIGHTS ON CUSTOMERS AND COMPETITORS?

Organizations atrophy when they lose touch with their customers, whereas the best leaders are constantly seeking insights from customers and competitors. In the El U survey, 53 percent of companies said that changing customer expectations/demands impeded implementation. As a result, the majority monitored customer trends. But only one in five reported having effective feedback loops to use all of these data in strategy delivery. In a Harvard Business Review article, Amy Edmondson and Paul Verdin argue that customer input - at all stages - is a vital lubricant of strategy and execution. It creates what they call "strategy as learning".

5. IS YOUR IMPLEMENTATION BOLD, FOCUSED AND AS SIMPLE AS POSSIBLE?

Delivery is complex - often global, always interconnected. To succeed. the constant emphasis must be on boldness, focus and simplicity. The Boston Consulting Group talks of "smart simplicity". This involves empowering people sufficiently for the requirements of their jobs by

giving them the right resources, removing unnecessary constraints. and aligning interests by consequences to actions and results.

6. DO YOU PROMOTE TEAM ENGAGEMENT AND CROSS-BUSINESS COOPERATION?

Support and understanding of the strategy throughout the organization is vital: Middle and line managers must be engaged and activated as strategy champions rather than just as managers and supervisors. In the EIU survey, 53 percent of respondents said that lack of buy-in from middle managers, line managers or both created a significant barrier to strategy implementation at their organizations. Second the understanding that teams are the means by which strategies are delivered. The Boston Consulting Group refers to performance integrity. By this, it means a highly motivated and thoughtful project team with a bias for action, clear on its objectives, with a strong leader and sufficient member resources, plus the right mix of skills for the effort.

7. DO YOU OWN THE DECISIONS YOU MAKE?

Commit to making strategic decisions rapidly. Move quickly to correct your course, reprioritize, and remove roadblocks. Accept that you likely won't have all the information you want, and rely on those you can trust to deliver sufficient reliable input to allow thoughtful decisions. Consider and address risks and interdependencies explicitly - both upfront and regularly throughout delivery. Build a lean and powerful governance structure to reinforce accountability, ownership and a bias towards action, based on agreed metrics and milestones.

8. DO YOU CHECK ONGOLNG LNITIATIVES BEFORE COMMITTING TO NEW ONES?

Organizations tend to overburden people with strategic initiatives of one form or another, creating change fatigue. You must regularly evaluate your portfolio of strategic initiatives. Add new initiatives in response to new opportunities, but first. focus and be sure you understand both the existing portfolio and your organization's capacity to deliver change. Agility, the organizational capability to quickly adapt strategy in response to external and internal changes. plays an

important role in both the governance and management of any portfolio of strategic initiatives.

9. DO YOU DEVELOP ROBUST PLANS BUT ALLOW FOR MISSTEPS?

We live in fast-moving times. Even the most far-reaching and elaborate strategies must contain room for learning and realignment. Strategy planning cycles are more rapid, dynamic, and agile than in the past. Delivery teams must be able to experiment and learn in an environment where it is safe to fail fast. In practice, this means you must discuss challenges openly, and adjust the plan as needed for success. Learn to reward failure, or at least accept it as a valuable input. In agile organizations, it is common to have frequent interactions between teams and leaders, to review and understand what went wrong, what worked well and what needs to be improved. It is a powerful iterative process. This is not simply about communication, it is about interaction up, down and across the company. Interestingly, what appears to be evolving is acceptance of the need for a hybrid approach to strategy. The intention is to manage the current business and operations while dynamically seeking out the next disruptive idea. This can be seen at Volkswagen Group. The company's chief strategy officer, Thomas Sedran, talks of a 'two-speed organization' – "One part goes with proven processes that lead to reliable products. This is necessary for those developing vehicles because delivering an unsafe one can cost you the company. For the other part, where you need to be much quicker, but where the impact of a failure is less severe, you need to be agile and have different planning and execution processes."

10. DO YOU CELEBRATE SUCCESS AND RECOGNIZE THOSE WHO HAVE DONE GOOD WORK? HOW MUCH HUMAN FACTOR IS LNVOLVED?

Success in organizations is often whispered rather than celebrated. If strategy delivery is to become embedded in any organizational culture, successes must be widely and wildly celebrated. It is notable how adept the best business leaders are at acknowledging good work. They tend to have developed a personal means of communicating great work - a handwritten note, a phone call. Any leader who can answer

these ten questions in the affirmative is well placed to translate strategy into delivery. Even failing to deal with the issues raised by one of the questions can fatally handicap even the most brilliant strategy.

Besides the other 9 questions, we need to really understand the Human factor. Over the last two decades, the world has changed almost beyond recognition. Economic, political and technological transformations have had a huge impact. Often in this side of world we include false successes, where an organization's good fortune is explained more by economic and social circumstances than by effective strategy execution, the picture is quite depressing. The simple fact is that the vast majority of organizations predictably fail to execute on their strategies.

Organizations are essentially human creations. As such they are not purely cognitive machines, but also emotional communities. They are affected by, among other things, the passion and ambition of their founders and leaders, the bonds developed with clients, the experiences they offer, and the engagement of their employees. As human creations, too, they carry a lot of the capabilities and fragility found in individuals and groups. These include the ability to: dream and imagine futures; create new products and services; engage with groups; and influence, be influenced and transform over time. These organizations contain possibilities that would be unimaginable even a few decades ago. However, all this creative and prosperous power coexists with our human limitations - such is the nature of the human condition.

A good analogy about how our limitations can interfere in the way we define and act in the world comes from the advent of behavioural economics. The work of Nobel laureate psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky has raised questions about the fundamentals of economic science. Human beings can no longer be seen as predominantly logical entities seeking to maximize utility in their decisions (something most people already knew intuitively). We carry as a result of our evolution several biases in our behaviours and decision-making processes. For example, we are often risk-seeking in

dealing with improbable gains and risk-averse in coping with unlikely losses; we make complex decisions based on remembered outcomes of entirely different situations and contexts; we are overconfident about our judgments and capabilities more than any objective analysis; we interpret risk and benefits as negative correlates.
People have concerns that go beyond helping the execution of an organization's strategy to achieve its goal. Our interests are diverse and mutant. We want to belong, to grow, to gain more, to take care of our children, to save the world, and those interests change throughout our lives as we discover or face new realities. People act predominantly in their own self-interest (even if it is in pursuing an altruistic purpose). It is difficult to perfectly align those interests with those of the organization. Moreover, their actions are influenced by positive emotions - joy, desire and passion - as well as negative ones like anger, fear and anxiety. The simple reality is that as human beings, we are much more diverse, unpredictable and complex than strategies would like us to be. Our capabilities, as well as biases and emotional condition, affect our successes or failures. As we clearly need to protect ourselves from our "design failures', we also have massive opportunities to leverage our potential as human beings, something that current practices still limit us to do.

Human nature is at the heart of this reality. People are at the centre of organizational dynamics. Processes, technologies and management models should exist to preserve and augment and not to condition and limit our human capabilities. Successful strategies are, ultimately, human accomplishments. But first thing first, we need to use that one thing, which differentiates us from other animals - our conscience and thought process!

THE BUSINESS STANDARD

Reform without rhetoric: A working model from the energy sector



No press conferences. No social media fanfare. No credit-taking speeches. Just quiet, focused work that delivered results.

In a country where political promises are often louder than action and where the word "reform" is more likely to show up in party manifestos than in the day-to-day machinery of government, one ministry has shown what meaningful change can look like. Not in theory, not on paper, but in practice.

This is the story of how Bangladesh's energy sector, long written off as too captured, too corrupt, too complex to fix, began to turn a corner. What's important is not just that it's

READ ONLINE

Reform Without Rhetoric: A Working Model from the Energy Sector

The Business Standard
15 July, 2025

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This is the story of how Bangladesh's energy sector, long written off as too captured, too corrupt, too complex to fix, began to turn a corner. What's important is not just that it's happening, but how it's happening.

Once the poster child for inefficiency and rent-seeking, the energy sector had become a drain on the public purse and a source of widespread public frustration. It was riddled with quick-rental power plants, many of which had been awarded without competitive bidding. The majority of such contracts went to politically connected entities. Opaque deals and inflated costs were par for the course. Load-shedding was a daily ordeal. Energy subsidies ballooned. Imported electricity came at eye-watering premiums. It was a system that didn't just malfunction—it did so predictably and expensively.
But over the last year, a shift has been quietly unfolding. Instead of dramatic clean-ups or sweeping anti-corruption drives, the ministry began removing the rot piece by piece. One of the most

telling steps was a simple one: many of the expensive rental contracts were allowed to expire. They weren't renewed, renegotiated, or defended; they just slipped out of the system. No court cases, no grand declarations. Just decisions are made with long-term public interest in mind.

And the impact was immediate hundreds of crores in subsidies saved, not through austerity or hardship, but by refusing to prop up inefficient, overpriced arrangements that had outlived their usefulness. No headlines, no blowback, just outcomes.
Even more remarkable was how energy tariffs were managed during this transition. Rather than passing the cost onto consumers as is often the case when subsidies are cut, the ministry worked to restructure the burden intelligently. Cross-subsidies were introduced. Pricing shocks were flattened. The usual panic that accompanies fuel price hikes was conspicuously absent. This allowed households to plan their expenses without anxiety, and businesses to budget without fearing sudden policy swings.

And then there's renewable energy. A sector that, for over a decade, lived mostly in PowerPoint presentations and press releases. Everyone talked about it, yet very little got built. This time, though, the groundwork was laid for actual investment. Solar and LNG-based projects moved forward not because of a single charismatic speech, but because the environment was finally conducive to long-term planning. This focused approach shows we are finally on the way to a future with truly sustainable energy.

Transparency, too, returned without a ribbon-cutting ceremony. Competitive bidding was quietly restored. Capacity payments were renegotiated. The procurement process, long derailed by political interference, began to run again on merit. The ministry

didn't make a show of cleaning house. It simply went about rebuilding systems that had been sidelined.

And the numbers speak volumes. For the first time in five years, the energy sector's budget deficit narrowed. Load-shedding in the first quarter of 2025 was the lowest since 2019. These aren't abstract metrics. They represent real improvements in the lives of ordinary people. Fewer hours without electricity, lower risk of blackouts, and more stable prices.

Why does this matter so much? Because in Bangladesh, energy isn't just infrastructure. It's politics. Power outages have sparked mass protests. Fuel prices have contributed to the downfall of governments. From the fall of BNP in 1996 to the unrest during Awami League's multiple terms, energy has always been a political powder keg. Reforming this sector wasn't just an administrative puzzle. It was a political risk.

It wasn't that the obstacles weren't there. There were former ruling party-aligned unions, deeply embedded patronage networks, regional dependencies—including controversial agreements like the Adani power deal. The same hurdles that are often used as excuses for inaction were all very much in place.

But the difference this time wasn't in the circumstances but rather in the approach.

Heading this quiet overhaul is Dr Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan, the current Energy Adviser. A veteran in public policy, Dr Khan brought a different style to the table. One that didn't involve chasing cameras or launching PR campaigns. He chose instead to focus on what could be fixed, and then quietly got to work fixing it. His leadership has been pivotal, not in being larger-than-life,

but in being methodical, steady, and largely immune to the usual political theatrics.

This isn't to make the story about one man. In fact, what makes this case so powerful is precisely that it isn't a one-man show. The real lesson here is that systems can be rebuilt. Even ones that seem hopelessly compromised. That reform isn't a mythical idea, but a living, breathing process. That if done right, and done quietly, it can survive the noise and cynicism that so often drowns out public trust.
The energy sector isn't "solved." There's more work needed on pricing, on diversification, on ensuring grid stability. But what's already been achieved is substantial enough to matter. And more importantly, it offers a replicable model.

Because if reform can happen here in a sector so deeply politicised and historically inefficient, then it can happen elsewhere too. In health. In education, in banking, in public transport. But it won't happen through slogans. It'll happen through systems that produce less noise and more work.

It's time we recognised the value of quiet competence. That we stopped confusing loudness with leadership and looked beyond drama for change-makers who deliver, not declare.
What's happened in the energy sector over the last year is not just a rare success. It's a reminder. Reform is not a fantasy. It's not out of reach. It's already underway.

We just need to listen closely enough to hear it.

The Daily Star

The future of Bangladesh depends on trust



Part of our problem is that we often try to build consensus without first rebuilding trust. FILE VISUAL: STAR

In Bangladesh, we often talk about roads, bridges, export zones, and shiny digital systems. These are the signs we look to when we speak of progress. But there's one kind of infrastructure that we've quietly left behind. We don't debate it on talk shows. We don't measure it in megawatts or kilometres. Yet without it, everything else struggles to stand. That missing piece is social trust.

Right now, Bangladesh is rising in numbers. Our GDP is growing. Our global partnerships are expanding. Our cities are full of cranes and construction. And yet, for all this growth, we seem to be shrinking in another way. People do not seem to trust one another. They don't trust institutions. They don't trust the process. We are moving forward on paper, but drifting apart in spirit.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama once called social trust the glue that holds society together. He meant the basic belief that others will act fairly, that institutions will serve everyone, and that public life is not a game rigged in advance. In countries where this kind of trust exists, people pay their taxes more willingly. Governments spend more effectively.

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The Daily Star
July 20, 2025

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Political scientist Francis Fukuyama once called social trust the glue that holds society together. He meant the basic belief that others will act fairly, that institutions will serve everyone, and that public life is not a game rigged in advance. In countries where this kind of trust exists, people pay their taxes more willingly. Governments spend more effectively. Citizens work together more easily. Trust, it turns out, is not just a moral value. It is a foundation for prosperity.

Here in Bangladesh, that foundation is weakening. The December 2024 pulse survey by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) indicates this deterioration of trust. It's a warning sign. When people believe that success depends on connections rather than competence, it becomes hard to dream and hard to believe that rules matter at all.

When people feel cheated, they often start to cheat, not out of malice, but to survive. You hear it all the time. "Everyone's doing it. Why shouldn't I?" In this way, mistrust becomes contagious. One small betrayal leads to another. Before long, a quiet cynicism seeps into everyday life.

This isn't just a Bangladeshi problem. Many countries have gone through similar phases. South Korea, for example, faced a major trust crisis in the 1970s. Their response wasn't limited to economic planning. They made public budgeting more transparent so people could see where every won, the South Korean currency, was going. They introduced tools so that citizens can directly provide the government with feedback. And they reimagined education, emphasising ethical citizenship, not just grades and ranks. Bit by bit, that changed how people felt about the system. It became more open, more accountable, more human.

Malaysia also went through a period of deep division after the ethnic riots of 1969. In response, they introduced "Rukun Negara," a five-point national philosophy focused on unity and justice. These weren't empty slogans. They were taught in schools, repeated in civil service training, and reflected in how the government communicated. Later, they even set up citizen feedback mechanisms within their policy labs, making people feel part of the process rather than subjects of it.
There's a lot Bangladesh can learn from these examples because trust is not something that appears on its own. It has to be designed and consistently practised.

And right now, we need it more than ever. Bangladesh is stepping into a more complex world, trying to balance relationships with China, India, and the West. At the same time, we're rolling out digital systems like e-filing, online land records, and AI-based services. None of these will succeed if people don't trust them.

An investor won't stay in a market where the rules change without warning. Young people won't believe in democracy if it feels like a show where the outcome is the same as before.

Part of our problem is that we often try to build consensus without first rebuilding trust. That's why reform commissions and national dialogues so often fall flat. When people come to the table already suspicious of one another's motives, no agreement lasts long. Consensus cannot be forced. It has to be rooted in good faith.

So, what can we do? For starters, we need to make transparency a right, not a favour. Every ministry should publish its spending, projects, and results so that people can understand them. Digital dashboards. Open tenders. Public feedback. In some places, technologies like blockchain can help track things like land transactions or local budgets in a way that's tamper-proof and clear.
We also need to rethink education. Our students need more than math and memorisation. They need to learn how to think critically, how to listen, and how to disagree without attacking. Subjects like design thinking, media literacy, civic responsibility, ethics, and even patriotism should be woven into the curriculum. Our schools and universities should be the spaces where young people learn to trust each other and build together.

We also cannot avoid the issue of inequality. When people feel left behind, they also stop believing in the system. Reducing inequality is not just about fairness. It's about social stability. It's about giving everyone a reason to invest in the country's future.

Media, too, plays a role. We need journalism that informs rather than inflames and holds power accountable without becoming a tool of power. Independent media councils and fact-checking bodies can help restore faith in what we read and hear.

And perhaps most importantly, our politics must lead by example. We need moments where leaders from different sides come together, for education, for climate, and national wellbeing, not just for show, but as a genuine signal that disagreement doesn't have to mean disunity.

According to an article published on the World Bank Blogs, trust in institutions is one of the strongest predictors of a country's ability to grow and transform. Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom found that even the most fragile communities can thrive when trust is present and respected.

Imagine a Bangladesh where a student believes that the public exam was fair, where a small business owner knows that policy won't change overnight. That is not a dream. That is a plan.

We don't need more slogans. We need more trust.

Technology and Digital Transformation

THE HILL

THE VIEWS EXPRESSED BY CONTRIBUTORS ARE THEIR OWN AND NOT THE VIEW OF THE HILL

Social media without fact-checking will destabilize the Global South

BY ASHFAQ ZAMAN, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 01/30/25 3:30 PM ET



People engage with their mobile phones at Dhaka University, Bangladesh, Dec. 21, 2023.

For Big Tech companies, the Global South has long been little more than an afterthought. The rollback of any form of robust or credible fact-checking on both X and Meta demonstrates this all too clearly. While the majority of X and Meta's users remain outside of the U.S. and Europe, their content moderation policies simply shift with America's ever-changing cultural and political tides.

Social media companies seem perfectly happy to profit off the masses of data they accumulate from users across the world. They are far less interested in investing in the systems and processes that ensure some semblance of accuracy or protection across their platforms.

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Social media without fact-checking will destabilize the Global South

The Hill
30 January, 2025

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Meta's decision to replace independent fact-checkers with an X-style "community notes" feature may be a somewhat cynical attempt to appease the new Trump administration. Yet despite America's current zeitgeist, tech executives must remember that their platforms still have global reach with global implications. While masquerading as a protection of "free speech," this move will have calamitous effects on places that lie beyond America's borders.

Of course, even before the removal of third-party fact-checkers, misinformation and disinformation on X and on Meta's various platforms have caused untold damage. This results in social division and, all too frequently, violence. That's because, all too often, that is what it's designed to do.

I have experienced this first hand. In my home country of Bangladesh, in the wake our country's revolution, we have been the victim of a concerted disinformation campaign designed to stir racial division and discredit the reputation of our country.

As documented in a BBC investigation, false reports of violence perpetrated by "Islamic radicals" have been spread by far-right, state-affiliated accounts from neighboring India. Various instances of false or misleading social media posts have been identified and debunked by the AI intelligence service Blackbird.AI. These include fake images of arson attacks at Hindu temples, shops and even houses, along with mistitled and misattributed videos of racially-driven mob beatings and killings.

In fact, this campaign has been so successful that even President Trump referenced "barbaric violence" against Hindus, Muslims and other minorities in Bangladesh (in a post he has since deleted) based on misinformation he had seen online.

This is part of a longstanding tradition in India. Indeed, the "Indian Chronicles" campaign was designed to discredit rival countries in the region and amplify pro-Indian interests.

Yet Bangladesh is not the only victim of lax content moderation protocols. Social media has been politically manipulated during political campaigns in both Brazil and Kenya. Health misinformation was allowed to run rampant across Nigeria, Indonesia and South Africa.

Economic disinformation has led to panic buying in Zimbabwe, while disinformation on Meta in Sri Lanka has led directly to violence against the Muslim community there. Indeed, one of the main motivating forces behind whistleblower Frances Haugen's release of the "Facebook papers" was her concerns around how the company handled misinformation in the Ethiopian election.

Both misinformation and disinformation pose unique threats to the Global South. Lower levels of digital literacy, combined with rapid mobile phone adoption, can leave falsehoods harder to distinguish from information gained from credible sources.

Similarly, many Big Tech platforms simply fail to decipher misinformation through cultural and linguistic nuance. Social media fills an information vacuum left when no credible, fact-checked sources of journalism are available.

Social media is no longer simply a tool for individuals to communicate. It is being used at the state level to launch weaponized information warfare campaigns. That's why the rollback of content moderation is a step in the wrong direction, taken at the wrong time.

We should call this what it is — digital colonialism. These companies use predatory algorithms to keep users engaged for as long as possible so that their data can be sold to the highest bidder. Despite their eye-watering profits, companies like Meta and X show little interest in protecting the users from which they profit so handsomely.

As technology advances, the stakes only get higher. The rise of both AI and deepfakes makes false information even harder to identify. In fact, researchers have already identified a "detection gap," whereby the tools or systems used to identify fake content in the Global South often work poorly, or not at all.

Of course, AI can be a useful tool for detecting deepfakes. However, as stated by Sabhanaz Rashid Diya, founder of the Tech Global Institute, "There's a lot more easily accessible tools and tech available that actually allows someone to create synthetic media than the ones that are available to actually detect it."

AI has made the internet both a more productive and more dangerous place to be. Removing content moderation and fact-checking on social media platforms is the opposite of what the global online community needs. Social media executives have ignored their civic duty in favor of a set of sycophantic policy changes signaling subservience to the new administration.

The early promise of a democratized, gatekeeper-free internet has been broken by a Tech Bro class that cares only about money and power. Sadly, it will be countries like mine in the Global South that will continue to drown in the flow of unregulated social media slop. Will the Western world listen?



The Telegraph

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Ashfaq Zaman

No 10 can learn crucial tech lessons from the developing world to fix testing chaos

Bangladesh offers an intriguing case study on the potential of a Silicon Valley-style response

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Ashfaq Zaman
21 September 2020 4:03pm BST

Britain's 'Covid fog' is making us all so obsessed with the details of what our own government will or will not do that we are blind to the big picture lessons from abroad, where expertise and technology have saved lives and livelihoods.

It is those lessons that Britain can heed, if it is to navigate the next phase of the pandemic more effectively than it has the past six months. This is particularly important after today's non-press conference by Sir Patrick Vallance and Professor Chris Whitty, which did much to alarm but less to inform or engage.

One of the most notable concerns around the government's strategy to date is the lack of tests. Accurate and reliable Covid tests are a scarce resource globally – not a single nation has an unlimited supply of them. The question then is, how can we ensure that tests are available for those who need them, and are not used as a regular 'just in case' measure by concerned parents or anxious but healthy individuals?

In Bangladesh, A2I (a Silicon Valley style innovation unit spanning the Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Office and the ICT Ministry) was quick to set up a National Information Centre where anyone could self-report their symptoms either online or over the phone. This avoided millions of

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Telegraph UK
21 September 2020

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In Bangladesh, A2I (a Silicon Valley style innovation unit spanning the Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Office and the ICT Ministry) was quick to set up a National Information Centre where anyone could self-report their symptoms either online or over the phone. This avoided millions of residents swarming test centres or hospitals, which would have increased the spread. The centre also provided real-time data on cases in each locality, allowing easy access to reliable official statistics and not forcing individuals to rely on media reports which can be unrepresentative or alarmist.

Data received by the centre was fed into algorithms which allowed laser-specific targeting of high risk areas, followed by hyper-local lockdowns and no sign of a second wave. This is in stark contrast to the broad regional lockdowns we are now seeing in the UK, with talk of a disastrous second national lockdown.

It is also essential that Doctors, and tests, are available wherever they are needed. As the NHS has learned, national capacity is no use when outbreaks can be within a particular building or street. Bangladesh's A2I launched 'Doctor's Pool', an app that is best described as Uber for Doctors and tests.

This was coupled with an aggressive – and unified – communications strategy, with public health information messages still being played before a phone call is connected, and consistently appearing across social media.

Perhaps the clearest difference between the British and Bangladeshi responses to the virus is the unified effort. In the UK, Downing Street is competing with different government departments (which are also competing with each other), as well as local mayors and councils. This is to say nothing of devolved leaders, who have been accused of using the virus as an opportunity to decouple themselves from London.

Every one of these bodies wants to be the focus of attention. This is a recipe for disaster2. During emergencies, there needs to be strong leadership from the very top. And that leadership needs to lean on the best technology and the smartest policies, not just political loyalty and catchy soundbites.

The Daily Star

Democracy in the digital age: Lessons from Bangladesh and beyond



File visual: STAR

Few men sitting thousands of miles away, on another continent, with no direct ties to a country's political parties, can have a significant impact on a revolution, challenge state narratives, and shape public perception in ways unimaginable just a decade ago. Their words can now be amplified by social media algorithms and reach millions in an instant, able to rally support, create dissent, and shift political discourse in almost real-time. This is not a hypothetical scenario anymore; it is our current reality. The recent wave of political awakening, the July uprising in Bangladesh, was heavily fuelled, in part, by various independent digital influencers who dissected state affairs, criticised government decisions, and reshaped public conversations, all without setting foot in the country.

This is the power of digitalisation. The internet, once a mere repository of information, has evolved into the most formidable arena for political engagement, where narratives are created, contested, and reshaped in real-time.

READ ONLINE

Democracy in the digital age: Lessons from Bangladesh and beyond

The Daily Star
Thu Apr 24, 2025

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In today's world, the internet has become an interwoven part of our lives. We are consistently spending a significant portion of our waking hours online. A fundamental shift in human behaviour through the way we communicate, engage, and interact, is being witnessed. A new societal standard has emerged where the internet is the primary source of news, education, and information.

The smartphone has taken centre stage as the first point of contact for knowledge, socialisation, and work. Online meetings have replaced many in-person interactions because they are often more convenient. The time saved from not having to prepare, travel, and for physical meetings makes virtual alternatives the preferred choice. This trend has

created a digital landscape where industries thrive, relationships form, and opinions shape without the need for physical presence. We are living in a digital society, and the younger generation is driving this transformation at an even faster pace.

This change is especially noticeable in the political sphere. Conventional methods and policies are finding it difficult to adjust to this new reality. Political parties that only use conventional strategies, like offline outreach and live rallies, are losing ground. On the other hand, those who utilize digital platforms in addition to real-life rallies are gaining traction and interacting with the public more successfully.

An effective illustration of this phenomenon is the July uprising. In recent years, numerous affiliated political parties have made several attempts to mobilise the populace in favour of governmental reform, democratic reforms, and sometimes for their own interests. These attempts, however, were mainly unsuccessful in organising any noticeable masses. However, what established political parties were unable to accomplish for years, a small group of students somehow succeeded in doing.

These students resonated with the public because they operated masterfully in the space where most people now spend their time—online. They spoke the language of the digital generation, understood their concerns, and connected with them on platforms that mattered. While jobs and family responsibilities dominate everyday life, the online world has now become the primary space where people engage in discussions, form opinions, and participate in movements.

By unlocking this digital space, the student-led movement was able to unite people around a common cause and translate online momentum into real-life action on the streets. Digital presence was not the only winning factor, but it was indeed a great amplifier to keep the momentum of the uprising going.

Now it doesn't necessarily mean that the value of the old-school on-the-street politics is dead. We cannot forget that despite a large amount of

dissent being expressed against the previous government online, the mass people had to come to the streets to actually see the end of the regime. This goes to show that the online presence of the new youth political leaders shouldn't divert them from learning the tricks of the street. If they wish to move forward towards long-term leadership, they will also have to learn quite a bit of the traditional political culture of Bangladesh.

This digital transformation is not unique to Bangladesh. We have seen similar movements worldwide, where social media played a pivotal role in mobilising people. The 2010-2012 Arab Spring served as an example of how political dissent could be amplified through digital platforms. Social media sites like Facebook and Twitter helped activists in Egypt and Tunisia plan demonstrations, disseminate real-time information, and mobilise support from around the world.

More recently, the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States saw unprecedented digital activism, where viral videos and hashtags (#BLM) brought police brutality and racial injustice into global consciousness. The problem existed throughout modern history, but the consciousness was shaken due to this impactful digital movement. The rise of digital-only political candidates further proves this point. Figures like Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Ukraine, who built much of his presidential campaign through digital engagement, and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador, who uses social media as his primary governance tool, show that traditional political structures are eroding. Voters are increasingly influenced by direct, unfiltered online engagement rather than party machinery and conventional political institutions.

If any case validates the power of digital persuasion, it is Cambridge Analytica. While widely condemned for unethical data use, what it truly exemplifies is how digital platforms can shape political behaviour at an unprecedented scale. By leveraging psychological profiling, Cambridge Analytica was able to influence the perceptions of millions of voters during the 2016 US presidential election and the Brexit referendum—in the two most powerful democracies in the world.

It was about accuracy, not just false information. Their microtargeting efforts crafted messages that struck a deep chord with people, reaffirming their convictions and influencing them to take particular political positions. This approach demonstrated that policy debates on debate stages and at campaign rallies are no longer the only way to win elections. Rather, the hallmarks of contemporary political warfare now include algorithmic influence, data analytics, and digital strategy.

This pattern is also present in Bangladesh. Political parties are dooming themselves if they disregard digital engagement as being less important than traditional campaigning. Voters are actively influencing political messages online rather than merely passively consuming them, which is a stark reality.

There are obvious repercussions for political parties that only use conventional structures: they become irrelevant and eventually fail. Parties that don't adjust to new technology eventually lose their base, as history has demonstrated.

Donald Trump's 2016 victory in the US was propelled by a digital-first campaign that made use of Facebook advertisements, Twitter, and grassroots online activism. Even though Hillary Clinton was a seasoned politician, she was unable to match the Trump campaign's digital energy, which outperformed her in online outreach.

Even during the 2019 UK elections, Boris Johnson's Conservative Party prevailed thanks to incredibly successful online campaigning, while the Labour Party lost its worst defeat in decades as a result of its inability to fully comprehend the potential of digital mobilisation.

While digital democracy is empowering, it is not without its dangers. The very tools that can fuel political engagement can also be weaponised for misinformation, polarisation, and manipulation. The same algorithms that drive engagement also amplify sensationalist content over facts, creating echo chambers that distort reality.

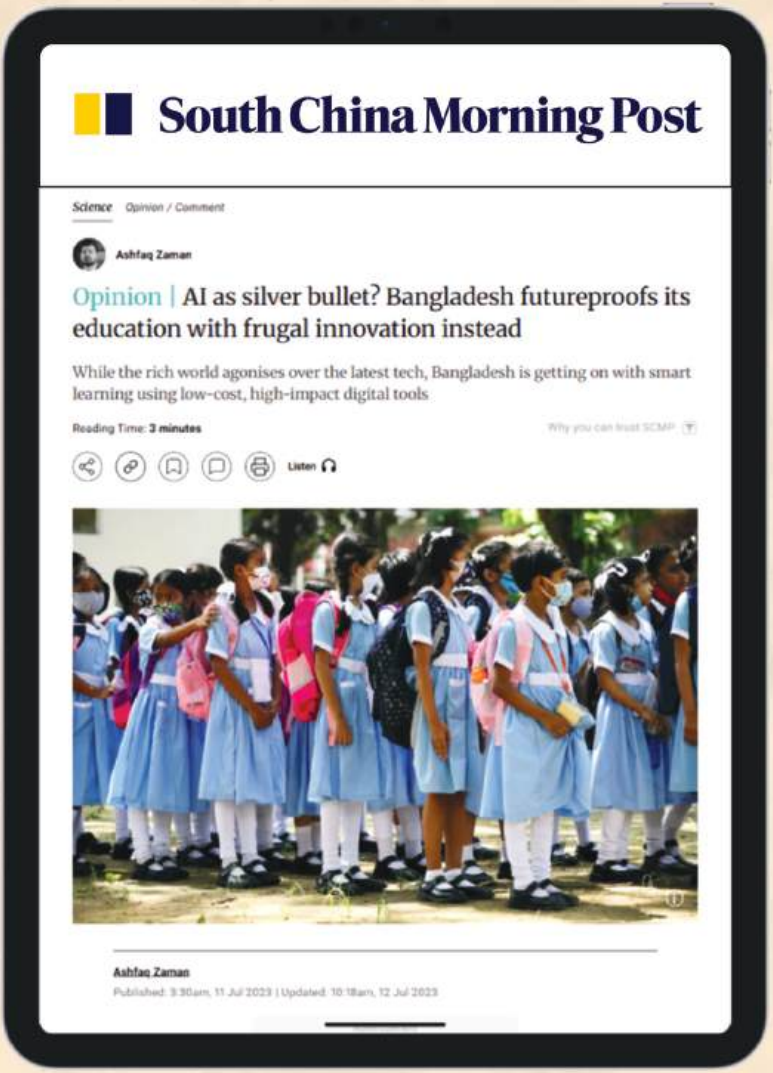
For this reason, regulation is required. The Digital Services Act and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of the European Union have established a standard for how countries can protect online speech while maintaining the accountability of digital platforms. To stop social media from being abused during elections, nations like Germany have implemented strict laws against hate speech and disinformation online.

Bangladesh needs to follow suit. Political parties must change not only to win elections but also to maintain the morality, equity, and transparency of digital democracy.

The future of democracy in Bangladesh depends on how well we navigate this digital revolution. The lessons from the July uprising, Arab Spring, and Cambridge Analytica's microtargeting are clear: the digital space is now the true battleground for political engagement.

Political parties that fail to adapt, innovate, and safeguard digital democracy will be left behind. But those who harness the power of technology while ensuring transparency, ethical engagement, and responsible governance will shape the political future.

The digital age is here, and democracy must evolve with it. The question is not whether politics will go digital—it already has. The real question is: can our parties adapt to it?


South China Morning Post
Science Opinion / Comment
Ashfaq Zaman
Opinion | AI as silver bullet? Bangladesh futureproofs its education with frugal innovation instead
While the rich world agonises over the latest tech, Bangladesh is getting on with smart learning using low-cost, high-impact digital tools
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Ashfaq Zaman
Published: 3:30am, 11 Jul 2023 | Updated: 10:18am, 12 Jul 2023

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AI as silver bullet? Bangladesh futureproofs its education with frugal innovation instead

While the rich world agonises over the latest tech, Bangladesh is getting on with smart learning using low-cost, high-impact digital tools

South China Morning Post
11 July 2023

The world is being swept away by the latest technological craze again. Artificial intelligence (AI) is being marked as the great turning point, with many assuming it will lead to a new era of either abundance or destruction.

This hysteria has swept over educational circles as a moral panic descended on institutions; ChatGPT has become to writing and researching what the calculator was to arithmetic. Equally, starry-eyed commentators pronounce AI a silver bullet for learning personalisation that could level the playing field across the world.

The true impact of AI on education is yet to be seen. As an adviser of strategic communication to Bangladesh's innovation initiative a2i, I can't help but feel déjà vu.

Before AI mania, there was blockchain, billed as the great disruptive force that would redistribute wealth and bring trust and ownership online. In education, blockchain was seen as the panacea for many ills, from certification authentication to examination verification. Yet the impact of blockchain on education, while real, has been modest.

Rather than fixate on the latest hyped-up technology, we should direct our attention towards simple, cost-effective

implementations that can genuinely transform the way we approach education.

In Bangladesh, we have a philosophy of "frugal innovation", which requires low-cost changes to our education systems that deliver disproportionate results. One example was seen over the pandemic. Even though schools were closed for 18 months, lessons were not stopped for more than two weeks.

As soon as schools shut down, the government set about turning the free-to-air parliamentary TV channel into a remote learning channel. The result was astounding. Before Covid-19, Bangladesh had a one-size-fits-all learning programme. Shifting education online meant each student's learning became personalised.

Circumstance, not design, triggered a shift towards personalised learning. This informed our vision for a "smart learning" approach in Bangladesh today. Bangladesh moved much faster in adapting its public services for education than many developed nations. The reason is simple. In Bangladesh, as with other populous emerging economies, the stakes are far higher. With a well-educated and young digitally ready workforce, a nation can leapfrog stages of development. But a poorly educated and idle youth population can destabilise a nation. Bangladesh has over 45 million young people aged 15 to 29.

In line with its vision to become a digitalised nation by 2041, building a solid base of future-proof skills today will prove crucial. It should come as no surprise that nine out of 10 jobseekers in Bangladesh today are required to have digital skills. Of course, the shift towards a more blended learning approach in Bangladesh did not start with the pandemic. The initiative to

move towards a digitally enabled approach to learning started as far back as 2010.

The need to raise a digitally literate generation led to an approach to learning that focuses more on problem-solving than memorising facts. Schools are also pivoting towards assessing students in real time, and not simply under stressful examination conditions. This helps to improve learning feedback and allows teachers to provide a more personalised learning programme.

Lean on empathy and update education to keep human edge over AI The approach extends to teachers and their training too. Reaching the large number of teachers across the country, especially those in rural areas, can be a challenge.

Blended approaches have therefore been introduced, including online training through the MuktoPaath e-learning platform. Training dissemination is monitored through a real-time dashboard, and it has been observed that more teachers from rural areas completed the courses compared to urban areas, showing the power of technology in increasing access to training. While Bangladesh is a leader in pushing for an innovative, blended learning approach, it is by no means alone. Rwanda's blended approach in training its healthcare workers has boosted HIV/Aids care. Students from Kenya's Bridge International Academies, low-cost private schools that use a blended learning approach, consistently achieve much better results than the national average in their primary school leaving examinations. Blended education uses simple digital tools to achieve real social mobility.

The point is simple. In many instances, developing nations have no choice but to accelerate towards an educational system fit for

the rapidly approaching future. Yet this has not been fuelled by an obsession over one particular technology. Rather, it has been achieved by a low-cost yet high-impact fusion of a range of digital tools.

When it comes to education, there is no silver bullet, not even for AI. Instead, nations like mine are focusing on the solutions that have been proven, not merely promised, to work.

TRT WORLD

By rejecting truth, Meta is imperiling public safety in the Global South

The recent decision to end independent fact-checking on Instagram and Facebook could fuel global disinformation and exacerbate violence, especially in vulnerable regions.

ASHFAQ ZAMAN



REUTERS

Heads of the world's largest tech companies at President Donald Trump's inauguration suggest Silicon Valley's policies align closely with the US administration's, including the removal of independent fact-checking (Reuters/Saul Loeb).

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg's decision to end independent fact-checking on his platforms may well be an attempt to build a frictionless relationship with the United States' incoming president.

Indeed, Zuckerberg joined Tesla's Elon Musk, OpenAI's Sam Altman,

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TRT World
7 January, 2025

Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg's decision to end independent fact-checking on his platforms may well be an attempt to build a frictionless relationship with the United States' incoming president.

Indeed, Zuckerberg joined Tesla's Elon Musk, OpenAI's Sam Altman, Amazon's Jeff Bezos and Apple's Tim Cook in their obsequious attendance at Donald Trump's inauguration. Beyond this display of allegiance, Silicon Valley's policies are more broadly signalling a desire for a cosy alliance between the incoming presidency and Big Tech.

However, Zuckerberg and the rest of the Tech Bro class must understand that their content policies have implications that stretch far beyond the American cultural and political zeitgeist.

Prioritising corporate convenience has dangerous real-world consequences for individuals and states across the world, especially in the Global South.

For a long time, countries across African and South-East Asian regions have been little more than an afterthought for Big Tech companies. This is astounding when according to Facebook's own SEC filings, 72 percent of its user base is outside of North America and Europe.

Take the Cambridge Analytica scandal. We know that through Facebook, Cambridge Analytica's military-grade digital technology could paint false pictures of political realities across the developing world, and change the outcome of dozens of elections.

Perversely, by interfering in elections in, for example, Kenya and Nigeria, Cambridge Analytica was merely training its algorithm in advance of the "real thing" in 2016 - the American election and the Brexit vote – where Britons voted for the United Kingdom to exit the European Union. In short, entire electorates were treated as lab rats under Meta's watch.

State-level disinformation

Even before Meta recently decided to remove its third-party fact-checkers, its platforms had been used by nation-states to sew deliberate misinformation campaigns against their neighbours and rivals.

In my home country of Bangladesh, we have experienced this first-hand. In the wake of our country's revolution and the fall of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, our nation has been the victim of a targeted disinformation campaign, proliferating largely across social media.

Like many disinformation campaigns, this one appears to have piggy-backed onto the fog of chaos caused by Hasina's exit to peddle a narrative designed to malign Bangladesh's reputation and instil fear in its minority populations.
During the revolution, it is true there have been attacks on police stations. There have also been (very few) instances of violence against minorities. However, the roots of these instances of violence were not racial, unlike claims suggested by various state-linked social media accounts. Instead, they were about land rights and personal disagreements.

Take the Durga Puja festival in October, Bangladesh's largest Hindu festival. The Puja celebrations proceeded without any major, notable forms of violence. However, at least 14 social media rumours were spread between October 6 and October 12. According to the voluntary fact-checking organisation Rumor Scanner, all of the rumours were based on old or edited videos of other countries.

These are not isolated incidents. Analysis from the Intelligence platform Blackbird.Ai has revealed and debunked doctored images, spread by social media supporters of certain interests, of a fire at the Bangladeshi cricket captain's house, Hindu women being held captive, and videos of fires at restaurants, among others.

Although it's hard to track the exact cause and effect of disinformation, having so much misleading information out there undoubtedly contributes to the confusion and chaos.

These types of narrative attacks are not new. A previous 15-year campaign referred to as the "Indian Chronicles" was designed to undermine neighbouring states and serve geopolitical interests by influencing international organisations through at least 750 fake news outlets across 119 countries.

In fact, according to the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Risk Report, the risk of narrative attacks from this region ranks among the highest globally.

Information as a weapon These social media posts and fake news articles have been allowed to proliferate across social media like wildfire. This doesn't just stir social discontent; it can and does ignite violence.

One need only look at the Herdsman-farmer conflict in Nigeria in 2018. These clashes, triggered by resource conflicts driven by desertification, have been ratcheted up online by misleading information shared on social media.

A BBC report has pointed to multiple instances where in the vacuum of official information, rumours of herdsmen violence, along with misleading images, have been shared thousands of times across Twitter, (now X). It's hard to separate the spread of online hate from instances of violence in real life.

Research has shown that misinformation can be especially potent in regions that suffer from an information vacuum. In the absence of

independent journalism, backed up fact-checking, misleading information spread on social, deliberately or otherwise, can fill the void far more rapidly and persuasively.

Equally, take the reports illuminated in the Facebook Files, suggesting that Facebook knew that its platform was being used to incite violence while doing little to prevent it.

Francs Haugen, ex-Facebook manager and whistleblower behind the Facebook papers stated one of her core motivations was how badly the platform was handling the stem of harmful information and calls for violence during Ethiopia's civil war.

Chillingly, she stated: "I genuinely fear that a huge number of people are going to die in the next five to 10 years, or 20 years, because of choices and underfunding."

Weaponised information is particularly dangerous. Unlike traditional weaponry, where impact and collateral can be roughly predicted, the effects of information on the mind can be wild and unpredictable, and they can linger for far longer than intended. Just as a fire can be controlled in the beginning, with enough fuel, the damage becomes exponential.

Despite its unpredictability, disinformation has become a favoured tool in the warfare of ideas. It is notoriously difficult to trace the roots of disinformation campaigns, and they are comparatively cheap to launch.

The truth is that sites like X and Meta have become the primary sources of news for many; with over half of Bangladeshis consuming news via social media. Studies show that in Southeast Asia, where internet penetration is approximately 14 percent above the global average, the unregulated nature of these platforms increases the ease, and risk, of disinformation dissemination.

Neither Meta nor X takes this responsibility seriously. Independent fact-checking was a flimsy backstop against the spread of pernicious

disinformation. To remove any pretence of content moderation is a clear mask slip; it is an admission Meta's business model flourishes from outrage, not accuracy.

Disinformation and violence

In many regions in the Global South, social media sites are essentially a public service. Given their eye-watering profits, you might expect these executives to take this responsibility seriously.

Yet, these platforms are still calibrated to profit off engagement, and nothing drives engagement like outrage. The truth or safety of the information provided has become even less of an afterthought. Not only have sites like Meta failed in their responsibility to their customers, but they've actively allowed top advertisers to circumvent content moderation procedures.

This indicates that tech companies like Meta are not only uninterested in regulating their platforms, but their business model incentivises them not to.

"Tech companies like Meta are not only uninterested in regulating their platforms, but their business model incentivises them not to."

Meta must remember that its influence is not merely domestic, but global. Social media can still be a powerful tool for the unvoiced and unheard. Meta's policy changes must reflect the needs and wishes of its entire customer base, instead of simply mirroring the mood music of the US.

That means ensuring that its platform cannot be used as a disinformation weapon but as a reliable, trustworthy and impartial vehicle of civil discourse. With the right corrections, Meta and the like can still rebuild themselves as the champions of gatekeeper-free communication that they once were.

If governments and the international community fail to grow a backbone, the cowboys of the new Wild West will lead the world so far down the post-truth rabbit hole that we may never see sunlight again.


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The Digital Divide is growing. Here's how to fix it.
By Anir Chowdhury and Ashfaq Zaman - 26 October 2023
DEVELOPMENT, INEQUALITY AND POVERTY
Anir Chowdhury and Ashfaq Zaman argue that the digital divide is the perfect priority case for the United Nations.
In many parts of the world, we see the advent of AI, cloud computing and IoT forming what many are calling the 'fourth industrial revolution'. We are seeing whole new industries being formed at often alarming rates, while governments across the globe are struggling to keep pace.
Yet the risk is that as digital industries continue to grow exponentially, the mix of digital 'haves and have nots' could grow ever wider.
Now is the time to make sure that we manage the fourth industrial revolution fairly and equitably. That's why we need a global resolution on digital inclusivity.
Of course, COVID saw a huge spike of people going online for the first time. Across the globe, some 466 million people went online for the first time.
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The Digital Divide is growing. Here's how to fix it.

Ashfaq Zaman and Anir Chowdhury

Global Policy Journal
26 October 2023

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Of course, COVID saw a huge spike of people going online for the first time. Across the globe, some 466 million people went online for the first time.

While this may be a cause for celebration, it obscures a deeper, more nuanced picture of an ever-expanding global digital divide. In reality, 2.7 billion people, representing a third of the world, do not have access to the internet, and 53% of the world does not have access to high-speed broadband.

Of course, this internet access breaks down dramatically when we factor in region. Internet penetration sits at its highest in Europe at 89% yet is still lagging at 40% in Africa.
This divide is not only broken down by region, but by gender. As of 2022, there are 264 million fewer women accessing the internet than men,

with women 7% less likely to own a mobile phone and 16% less likely to use mobile internet than men.

Yet the challenges of delivering digital equity are context-specific. For example, speaking at the UNGA, Botswana's Lorato Motsumi noted that "In 2022, only 36 per cent of LLDC populations had Internet access, in stark contrast to the global average of 66 per cent." She also highlighted how the cost of internet access is far higher for landlocked countries, and locks them into an often unhealthy dependency on neighboring countries with access to underwater internet cables.

Similarly, Nepal's speaker, speaking for the group of the Least Developed countries, mentioned that while developed countries are phasing out older-generation networks in order to support 5G, low-income countries have to work with 2G and 3G networks. This is primarily because of the barriers to 5G deployment, including high infrastructure costs, device affordability, unreliable electricity and regulatory and adoption constraints.

In regions such as Jamaica, a strengthened ICT infrastructure could help residents who died of incommunicable diseases, of whom women and girls make up the majority. Similarly, more spending on early advanced warning systems could also be instrumental for building climate resilience and saving lives.

As we can see, addressing the digital divide naturally dovetails with SDG 9 on infrastructure development, goal 4 on quality education, goal 5 on gender equality, and goal 10 reducing inequalities.
Currently, The UN's current Sustainable Development Goals do indeed encompass digital access. Buried in SDG 9C, who's overall goal is to "Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation," we can see the target to "significantly increase access to ICT and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the internet in LDCs by 2020."

Focussing on mere access is not enough. It is indeed only the front door to the online ecosystem. We now need to focus on quality and inclusive

access. This is the type of access that allows the poor, people with disabilities and marginalized communities to build businesses, access healthcare information, file taxes, and receive early natural disaster and climate warnings.

This is why we need a global, cross-government approach to building inclusive innovations, infrastructure and resilience in the emerging world.

Some approaches have already shown some promise. For example, the African Union's Digital Transformation Strategy has been a driving force for progress on the continent by focusing on policy goals based around foundational pillars to support the digital ecosystem.

Another example can be found in the Digital India Programme, which so far has been extremely successful in connecting its citizens to services through robust investment in infrastructure and broadband, with great spillover effects, including reducing poverty from 22% in 2012 to 16% in 2019.

In our own country of Bangladesh, where digital access is core to our Smart Bangladesh 2041 strategy, our "e-Quality Centre for inclusive innovation", will seek to operate as a blueprint for building digital inclusivity in the emerging world. The e-Quality center will be used to tech transfer, fund technologies and support research that seek to solve problems of digital inequality.

From going from what Kissinger described as a 'basket case' some 50 years ago, Bangladesh's frugal innovation and progressive digital policies mean that it is one of the most digitally connected developing countries in the world today. Some of Bangladesh's existing technologies, DPI and initiatives have already been exported to Malawi, Haiti and Yemen.

Similarly, the private sector has already shown some promise in addressing the digital divide. For example, Elon Musk's Starlink could be a feasible solution for driving access, even current 2022 data suggests

that only 2% of Starlink users live outside of the west. Google's Next Billion Users initiative similarly looks to build a more helpful and relevant to those who are new to the internet. However, private sector attempts to address the digital divide often focus on a narrow scope of the problem.

As we step forward into the new Industrial Revolution, now is the time to make sure that we pluck the fruits of the internet age, while distributing them equally. Managed correctly, the fourth industrial revolution could be one of the greatest drivers of social mobility we've ever witnessed. However if managed without caution, this industrial revolution could cement and exacerbate existing inequalities across lines of location, gender, income and climate exposure.

When speaking at the UN's High Level Political Forum and at the 78th general assembly, we have called for a global resolution for #ZeroDigitalDivide. Such a resolution could fix the eyes of the international community on this problem, and on the solutions that Bangladesh, and many other nations, have proven can work.

Such a resolution could make sure that we build the level of international cooperation that we need. The resolution would require the international community to promote affordable, high-quality connectivity through investment in digital infrastructure and design digital public services that are inclusive. On top of this, we need to promote context-specific methods to enhance digital literacy, in order to empower communities to use the internet safely and reliably.

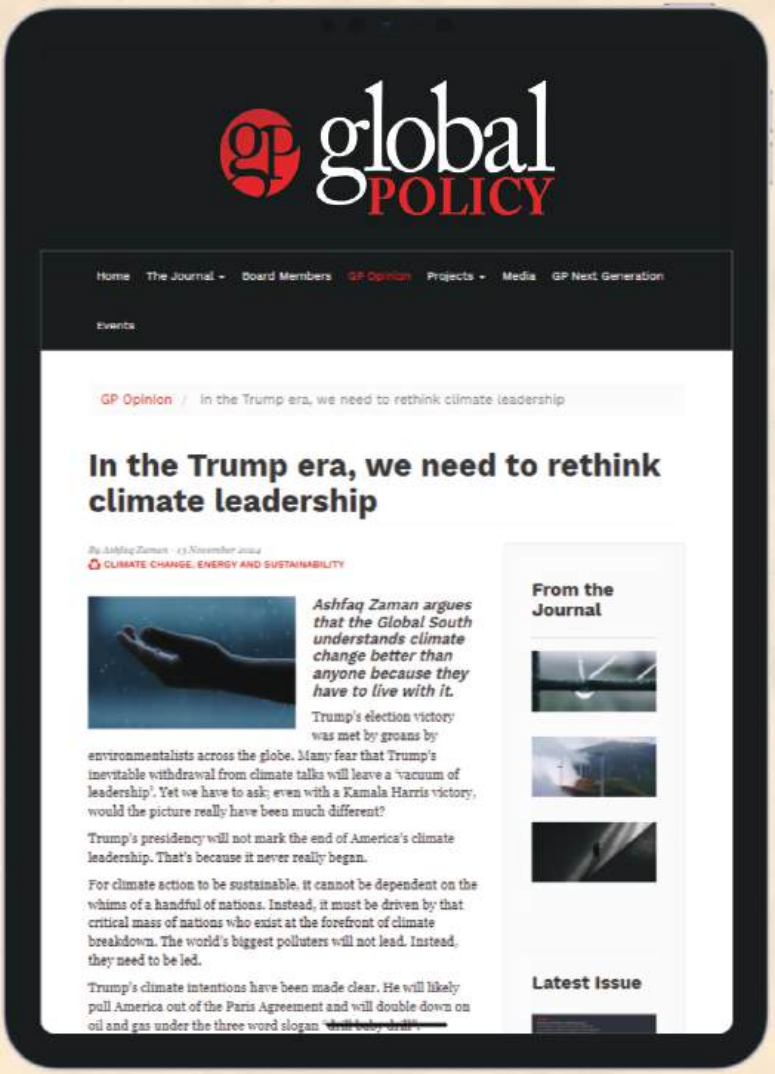
Finally, the global community must ensure that we create an environment that fosters digital innovation and entrepreneurship in order to allow lower-income countries to drive economic and social progress.

Most importantly, this cannot be done across geo-political lines. We need a unified, multilateral approach to tackling the digital literacy gap. The UN exists to promote cooperation, maintain global peace and

security, and enhance the well-being of the global population. That's exactly why the issue of the digital divide is the perfect priority case.

The global rally cry for a digitally fair and prosperous world has been made. It is now up to all of us to answer that call.

Climate Change and Environmental Innovation


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In the Trump era, we need to rethink climate leadership
By Ashfaq Zaman · 13 November 2024
CLIMATE CHANGE, ENERGY AND SUSTAINABILITY
Ashfaq Zaman argues that the Global South understands climate change better than anyone because they have to live with it.
Trump's election victory was met by groans by environmentalists across the globe. Many fear that Trump's inevitable withdrawal from climate talks will leave a 'vacuum of leadership'. Yet we have to ask; even with a Kamala Harris victory, would the picture really have been much different?
Trump's presidency will not mark the end of America's climate leadership. That's because it never really began.
For climate action to be sustainable, it cannot be dependent on the whims of a handful of nations. Instead, it must be driven by that critical mass of nations who exist at the forefront of climate breakdown. The world's biggest polluters will not lead. Instead, they need to be led.
Trump's climate intentions have been made clear. He will likely pull America out of the Paris Agreement and will double down on oil and gas under the three word slogan 'drill baby drill'.
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In the Trump era, we need to rethink climate leadership

Global Policy Journal
13 November 2024

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Trump's climate intentions have been made clear. He will likely pull America out of the Paris Agreement and will double down on oil and gas under the three word slogan "drill baby drill".

America will step back from any role that comes close to being called 'climate leadership'. However, let's take a step back for the moment and ask; was America ever really considered a 'climate leader' in the first place?

Make no mistake, America is one of the country's most responsible for climate change. As of 2021, the United States emitted approximately 5.0 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO_2), accounting for about 14% of global CO_2 emissions. The 46 Least Developed Countries which represent about 14% of the world's

population, collectively contributed only about 1.1% of global CO_2 emissions in 2019.

Similarly, some studies suggest that the US has inflicted nearly $2 trillion of damage onto other countries.

Of course, the US is not alone. The UK too has postured under the equally vague label 'climate leader'. It may point to the fact that it has cut its Greenhouse gas emissions by 50% since 1980. The truth is that this is nothing more than an accounting error. British carbon consumption has not decreased, only its domestic emissions. The same, carbon-intensive products it used to export are now imported. Deindustrialisation is not the same as decarbonisation.

For many around the world, COP climate conferences are increasingly viewed as 'talking shops', as nothing more than platforms for wealthy nations to signal their faux virtues. Perhaps if we want to rebuild faith in climate action, we need to stop pretending that the biggest polluters are really the solution?

Climate action is, by definition, unsustainable if it could be undermined by one election.

My home country of Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable nations on earth. Millions of Bangladeshi's find themselves at the front line of climate change.

As a result, we have become experts at adapting to climate change on a tight budget. While top-down investment and planning from the government is crucial, some of the best climate adaptation solutions are driven from the bottom-up. This approach has been recognized in Professor Muhammad Yunus's book "A World of Three Zeroes", which imagines an economic system that could deliver no net carbon emissions, poverty or unemployment.

Our citizens have had to innovate on a frugal budget. Take Bangladesh's 'floating gardens'. Communities have fashioned these flood-proof gardens from bamboo, and ensure that they can grow food, even through periods of drought. Communities have learnt to build homes and pharmacies on stilts. Schools have been designed to double up as cyclone shelters. They have developed early warning systems that are disseminated through text messages and radio. Sometimes it isn't just money that's needed. It's experience.

In reality, it is nations like mine that paint a picture of what true 'climate leadership' looks like. Instead of looking to the polluters for leadership, we should look to those who have real experience in climate adaptation and resilience.

Bangladesh is not alone in this. Many nations across the Global South face similar challenges, and have come up with similar solutions. Take Peru and Chile's fog nets. In coastal areas where water is increasingly scarce, farmers have set up nets that absorb water from fog. This water then collects and drips down into collection troughs, therefore providing a clean and sustainable source of water.

Equally, in the Andes and Guatemala, farmers have taken to storing and sharing traditional seeds that have evolved in that specific climatic context. This not only makes their crops resilient, this is essential for preserving the genetic diversity in our food supply. This is especially crucial when around 95% of the energy we get from food comes from only around 30 different kinds of crops.

These are the nations that are leading in climate adaptation and resilience, regardless of what G7 members say.

This has been proven time and time again. Bhutan has become the first country to become carbon-negative. The 'High Ambition Coalition', led by the Marshall Islands, made significant structural changes to the final Paris Agreement text. At Cop 26 in Glasgow, it

was the small-island nation of Barbados and Tuvalu who were able to finally push through the 'Loss and Adaptation fund' commitment. Yet again, we see the change is affected by those who are forced to live on the sharp end of climate change.

Of course, it all boils down to money. Nations like China, the US and the UK have the finances needed to fund the necessary climate adaptation and mitigation measures needed. This endows them with power over the negotiations. Yet we mustn't underestimate just how powerful a unified voice across the most climate-vulnerable regions could be.

Indeed, even though richer countries could provide climate finance, that doesn't mean they do. These nations consistently fall short of the funding requirements set at COP 27 for the Loss and Adaptation fund. Increasingly, climate finance comes from the private sector, through carbon market investments.

Partnerships between the private sector and climate-vulnerable nations could provide a new, more realistic and more effective form of climate leadership. Take, for example, organisations like BRAC and Grameen Bank. They have introduced microfinance schemes tailored for climate adaptation, allowing people in vulnerable areas to access funds for climate-resilient farming, small-scale renewable energy projects, and building resilient homes. This financial support helps families rebuild and adapt after climate disasters.

Similarly, Google had previously collaborated with the Bangladeshi government to provide AI-powered flood forecasting systems. This kind of public-private partnerships provide a promising blueprint. Climate-vulnerable nations have front-line experience, while multi-national tech firms have the resources and technological infrastructure needed to design for real climate resilience.

The Global South understands climate change better than anyone because they have to live with it. The private sector has the capital (and increasingly the will) to invest in climate adaptation and mitigation.

Trump coming to power isn't a blow to climate leadership. It's a reminder that the biggest polluters should never have been considered climate leaders in the first place.

In countries like Bangladesh, climate action happens from the bottom up. It's time that global climate action worked in the same way too.

CGTN

At COP26, Big Tech can save the planet and their reputations

Ashfaq Zaman



Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos (left) leaves the stage with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson (right) following an Action on Forests and Land Use event on day three of COP26 in Glasgow, United Kingdom, November 2, 2021. /Getty

Editor's note: *Ashfaq Zaman is founder of LEAD Academy and CNI News. The article reflects the author's opinions and not necessarily the views of CGTN.*

The leading Big Tech companies in the world have more money and contribute to creating more emissions than many small countries. This means they have just as much responsibility, and capability, to fight climate change as many of the nations represented at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) this week. So as world leaders meet in Glasgow, Big Tech companies need to be held to account to

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CGTN
10 November, 2021

The leading Big Tech companies in the world have more money and contribute to creating more emissions than many small countries. This means they have just as much responsibility, and capability, to fight climate change as many of the nations represented at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) this week. So as world leaders meet in Glasgow, Big Tech companies need to be held to account to robust, tangible climate change commitments, like the rest of the international community.

The devastating effects of climate change are reverberating across the world, from forest fires to floods and hurricanes. No nation is immune from the extreme weather that plagues the planet, or the devastation that it leaves behind – lost loved ones, destroyed homes, shattered communities and crippled economies. The number of climate-related disasters has tripled in the last 30 years and governments simply cannot be relied upon for the kind of sophisticated solutions that Big Tech can bring to bear, such as AI and predictive analytics. Climate change knows no borders, and neither does Big Tech.

Many tech companies have certainly made impressive climate pledges. Amazon has a target to be net-zero by 2040 and to power its operations with 100 percent renewable energy by 2025. Facebook has a target of net-zero emissions for its entire supply chain by 2030. Microsoft has pledged to become carbon negative by 2030.
These are promising claims, but what happens if these targets are not met? Microsoft would be the 65th largest economy in the world if it were a country, Meta, which previous known as Facebook, would be the 90th. Amazon, Google and Meta all individually produce more carbon dioxide per year than Tonga, Tuvalu and Kiribati. This means their commitments are just as significant as those made by many of the nations that are meeting in Glasgow.

At the moment, many of Big Tech's public commitments and private activities do not stack up. Amazon, Google, Apple and Microsoft are all among the top 10 users of corporate air travel in the United States. Critics also point to the fact that only a fraction of their lobbying spending has been devoted to climate policy. Amazon, Google and Microsoft have also received bad press for selling technology to help the oil and gas industry extract fossil fuels, which are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions.

Then there is the issue of how the various platforms, said to influence the decisions of four billion consumers every day, can better support societal behavior changes aimed at reducing emissions. Meta, in particular, continues to come under fire for indirectly enabling the spread of disinformation on climate science.

Big Tech companies have an open goal in front of them. They have an opportunity to rebuild some of their battered reputations, whilst also demonstrating that they are valuable, worthwhile partners in the fight against ecological breakdown.

We have to remember that Big Tech companies have the expertise and digital infrastructure that many nations simply do not have, meaning they are uniquely placed to help tackle climate change. Google's flood detection program in Bangladesh is one such example. Together with Bangladesh's digital innovation & transformation program at a2i (Access to Information, a program of the Prime Minister's Office), they have developed a flood forecasting system designed to provide an early warning that is accessible to marginalized people in remote areas. In a country regularly devastated by floods, this is a life-saving innovation.

Through the support of these key data, a2i is assisting the government to develop a pre-emptive social safety net program for the flood prone areas that can impact a significant number of lives saved and people affected. During the monsoon season between August 13 and 31, 2021, over 2.9 million notifications were sent to 1.5 million unique users. Countless lives and livelihoods have been saved as a result. This kind of

initiative should serve as a role model for disaster management in developing nations worldwide.

We simply cannot rely on nation-states to provide this form of cutting-edge technology to tackle climate change. The global COVID-19 pandemic has revealed just how archaic governmental technology can be. In the U.S., unemployment insurance systems failed in the early days of the pandemic, preventing many jobless people from signing up for benefits. In the UK, the government lost information on COVID-19 cases as a result of an Excel error. These entities do not seem to capitalize on our most cutting-edge technologies against our most pressing global problems.

Big Tech companies turn over eye-watering profits from harvesting the data of many millions of people worldwide. That should come with responsibility; businesses that are almost as powerful as many governments should not only serve their customers, but protect them too.

It is those who are the least responsible for climate change who are most vulnerable to its effects. Now, it's time to insist that Big Tech firms take their seats at the table. They need to make robust commitments not only on how they will slash their emissions but how they can use their technology to buffer the world's most vulnerable people against the impacts of a warming planet. Big Tech's reputation, and the future of our planet, depend on it and they surely have the capacity to do so.

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CLIMATE CHANGE, POLICY & ECONOMICS

What Climate-Vulnerable Nations Can Learn From Bangladesh's Economic Miracle

Opinion Article

BY ASHFAQ ZAMAN | ASIA | MAY 4TH 2023 | 5 MINS

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Bangladesh's economic miracle must be a blueprint for development in climate-vulnerable nations. The nation's unlikely climate resilience proves the power of community and leaders at COP28 must take note.

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What Climate-Vulnerable Nations Can Learn from Bangladesh's Economic Miracle

Earth.org
May 4th 2023

Bangladesh's economic miracle must be a blueprint for development in climate-vulnerable nations. The nation's unlikely climate resilience proves the power of community and leaders at COP28 must take note.

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Nations least responsible for climate are also the most vulnerable to its fallout. This inconvenient truth was laid bare at COP27, where the conversation pivoted from climate targets to the issue of climate finance, loss, and adaptation.

Buffering citizens and economies from climate change is an expensive business. Yet, as proven by Bangladesh, climate resilience can be built on a shoestring budget, if supplemented by innovation and community engagement.

As international leaders meet in Dubai this November, they will discuss how to facilitate a just, green transition. In Bangladesh, they have a blueprint for how against all the odds, climate-vulnerable nations can leapfrog traditional developmental stages, and become flourishing global economies.

Bangladesh has been described as 'ground zero' when it comes to climate vulnerability. The country ranks seven out of 181 countries for climate vulnerability on the Climate Risk Index, making it one of the countries most affected by extreme weather events.

This should have created an especially bleak outlook for Bangladesh. At the end of its bloody civil war in 1971, Kissinger described the nation as a 'basket case'. Yet the country's story is not one of victims, but one of heroes.

Bangladesh's economic miracle, owing to a combination of civil sector innovation, community cohesion and forward-thinking public policy.

The explosion of the nation's garment producing sector has brought millions out of poverty. Today, Bangladesh's economy remains robust; it was one of the few countries to maintain a high growth rate even through COVID, recording 6.94% growth in 2021.

This will prove to be instructive at COP28, is that Bangladesh's economic development has gone hand in hand with climate resiliency; for example, over the past 50 years, it has reduced cyclone-related deaths 100-fold.

Ultimately, we have to understand that building climate resiliency and growing an economy are symbiotic. Natural disasters are expensive affairs; Bangladesh's 2007 cyclone Sidr cost the country a predicted $1.67 billion.

Bangladesh's natural early warning system has become a trailblazer in terms of what an effective early warning system looks like, especially for nations with relatively few resources.

The Bangladesh Meteorological Department (BMD) monitors weather conditions constantly. In 1970, the country had only 2 coastal radars. Today, the country now has an early-warning system that is capable of evacuating millions of people in 24 hours.

This capability relies on being able to inform citizens of impending natural disasters quickly. The BMD disseminates warnings of

cyclones through PUSH messages, loud speakers as well as radio and TV broadcasts. These messages are tailored to be location specific, and are translated into the 44 native languages spoken in Bangladesh.

The same is true of detecting floods. By partnering with Google, Bangladesh's digital innovation & transformation agency 'Aspire to Innovate' (a2i) have developed a flood forecasting system designed to provide an early warning that is accessible to marginalised people in remote areas. As a result of this initiative, during the monsoon season between August 13 and 31, 2021, over 2.9 million notifications were sent to 1.5 million unique users, which invariably saved countless lives.

This is just a flavour of the agile thinking and frugal innovation that has been key to Bangladesh's unique climate resilience. Just as TV and radio networks double up as disaster warnings, Bangladesh's strategic public policy requires primary schools to be built on stilts, and made of cyclone resistant concrete, meaning they can double up as cyclone and hurricane shelters. Whereas in 1970 the country had only 100 shelters, today the nation has over 5,000, which can house nearly 5 million people.

Studies repeatedly find that community-led approaches to disaster response are often the most effective at saving lives. Today, it isn't uncommon to see local volunteers erecting flags with a colour-coded system referring to a storm's severity, and conducting practice evacuation drills. In fact, Bangladesh's Cyclone Preparedness Programme (CPP) has over 76,000 volunteers, half of whom are women.

The Asian nation proves that education, effective data dissemination and community engagement are all essential for disaster preparedness, and that these measures are possible on a small budget.

Yet, a common thread that runs through Bangladesh's unique climate resilience is the power of community.

Of course, disaster preparedness is only one sliver of the climate resilience question. The use of community-led solar power irrigation systems, along with small-scale water harvesting structures and climate-resilient houses built in the community all play their role in protecting Bangladesh's 169 million people.

Similarly, agriculture makes up over 11% of the nation's GDP. When crops are destroyed, livelihoods are destroyed with it. The introduction of climate friendly crop varieties, improved irrigation systems, promotion of sustainable farming practices and facilitation of access to microfinance and crop insurance have all buffered the nation's agriculture sectors, and livelihoods that depend on it, against the impact of climate change.

As Bangladesh implements its Vision 2041, of which digital transformation is essential, a2i is exploring Smart Agriculture with focus in both IoT and drone technology, which will arm farmers with the data they need to protect and maximise their yields in the era of increasingly erratic seasons.

Of course, investment is crucial to be able to implement these measures. However, what is more important than money and technology, is the people. Bangladesh proves that social cohesion and community action is the invisible glue that holds a climate vulnerable nation together.

As leaders coalesce in Dubai in November for COP28, they would be wise to learn from Bangladesh. As nations agree to commit funds to the Adaptation Fund, they must understand that local communities provide the most robust line of defence against climate fallout.

Excessive bureaucracy and regulation around exactly Adaptation Funds are spent will only hamper climate resilience efforts.

If leaders should take one Mantra from Bangladesh's economic miracle it would be this; Think global; act local.

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GREEN PLANET

2021 will be defined by the more long-term crisis facing humanity: Climate change

BY ASHFAQ ZAMAN

JANUARY 16, 2021



Rather than low-tech and often unworkable solutions (reduced or no travel, mass vegan diets) governments are increasingly embracing technology to help us understand and influence the climate – rather than merely respond to it. This should become the norm for public authorities across the world.

China's weather modification programme, for example, could be a lifeline for workable solutions to climate change globally. The technique, known as cloud-seeding, uses silver iodide and liquid nitrogen to thicken water droplets in the cloud, leading to increased rain or snowfall.

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And China's ambitious 'Sky River' programme could eventually divert 5 billion cubic meters of water annually across regions, which could protect millions of people from the effects of drought and water scarcity.

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Modern Diplomacy EU
January 16, 2021

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Necessity is the mother of invention, and this is truer than ever with regards to the climate. The world faces a climate-change induced water crisis, with 1.5 billion people affected globally.

The UN predicts that at the current water usage levels, water scarcity could displace 700 million people by 2030.

Carbon emissions are unlikely to be eliminated in high growth economies in regions like Asia, meaning that the world must develop a way to manage emissions' effects on the climate.

Whilst it is true that the basic solutions of eating less meat, cycling to work and cutting back on international flights can help to curb our carbon output in the long-run, it does nothing to help those who suffer from flooding or water scarcity today.

Ultimately, technology is an essential part of the solution.

Big Tech is leading the charge in tackling climate change through the use of Big Data and machine learning. In November 2019, a group of data scientists published a paper entitled 'Tackling Climate Change with Machine Learning'. The paper laid out 13 different applications of using machine learning to tackle the impacts of climate change. One such application was using machine-learning to predict extreme weather events.

Such an application is already being put into action. For example, Bangladesh is one of the most flood-prone countries in the world; approximately 5 million people were negatively affected by flooding last year alone. In order to help combat this, Google teamed up with the Bangladesh Water Development Board and the Access to Information (a2i) Programme to develop a flood notification app that is approximately 90% accurate.

The app, which is enabled by AI flooding simulation, provides the population with timely, updated, and critical information that can help users make informed decisions on the safety of their families and friends.

The same technology has been used in both India and South Africa, and has the potential to save thousands of lives and livelihoods. It is these sorts of innovations that we must rely on to help those who are most vulnerable to the impact of climate change.

It is not only cloud-seeding and weather prediction technologies that will provide humanity with a route out of its biggest existential threat. Breakthrough battery technology, green hydrogen, 5G-based smart grids and carbon-negative factories are set to become commonplace in our fight against rising CO2 levels.

As a global society, we must set our political divisions and some critics' technophobia aside, and step forward in a spirit of international collaboration.

Similarly to how the pandemic showed the need for united global action, climate change will do the same. And just as technology and science was a key part in how the pandemic was brought under control, climate change can only be addressed through tech-based solutions.

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Big Tech can save the planet - and their reputations

Ashfaq Zaman November 18, 2021 BUSINESS & TECHNOLOGY

fter COP26 saw countries make commitments to

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Big Tech can save the planet - and their reputations

Comment Central
November 18, 2021

After COP26 saw countries make commitments to combating climate change, Ashfaq Zaman writes that it's time big tech firms did the same.

The leading Big tech companies have more money and contribute to creating more emissions than many small countries. This means they have just as much responsibility, and capability, to fight climate change as many of the nations represented at COP26 earlier this month. After world leaders met in Glasgow, Big Tech companies need to be held to account to robust, tangible climate change commitments, like the rest of the international community.

The devastating effects of climate change are reverberating across the world, from forest fires to floods and hurricanes. No nation is immune from the extreme weather that plagues the planet, or the devastation that it leaves behind – lost loved ones, destroyed homes, shattered communities, crippled economies. The number of climate-related disasters has tripled in the last 30 years and governments simply cannot be relied upon for the kind of sophisticated solutions that Big Tech can bring to bear, such as AI and predictive analytics. Climate change knows no borders, and neither does Big Tech.

Many big tech companies have certainly made impressive climate pledges. Amazon has a target to be net-zero by 2040 and to power its operations with 100 per cent renewable energy by 2025. Facebook has a target of net-zero emissions for its entire supply chain by 2030. Microsoft has pledged to become carbon negative by 2030.

These are promising claims, but what happens if these targets are not met? Microsoft would be the 65th largest economy in the world if it were a country, Facebook would be 90th. Amazon, Google and Facebook all individually produce more C02 per year than Tonga, Tuvalu and

Kiribati. This means their commitments are just as significant as those made by many of the nations meeting in Glasgow.

At the moment, many of Big Tech's public commitments and private activities do not stack up. Amazon, Google, Apple and Microsoft are all among the top 10 users of corporate air travel in the United States. Critics also point to the fact that only a fraction of their lobbying spending has been devoted to climate policy. Amazon, Google and Microsoft have also received bad press for selling technology to help the oil and gas industry extract fossil fuels, which are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Then there is the issue of how the various platforms, said to influence the decisions of four billion consumers every day, can better support societal behaviour changes aimed at reducing emissions. Facebook, in particular, continues to come under fire for indirectly enabling the spread of disinformation on climate science.

Big Tech companies have an open goal in front of them. They have an opportunity to rebuild some of their battered reputations, whilst also demonstrating that they are valuable, worthwhile partners in the fight against ecological breakdown.

We have to remember that Big Tech companies have the expertise and digital infrastructure that many nations simply do not have, meaning they are uniquely placed to help tackle climate change. Google's flood detection programme in Bangladesh is one such example. Together with Bangladesh's digital innovation & transformation programme at a2i, they have developed a flood forecasting system designed to provide an early warning that is accessible to marginalized people in remote areas. In a country regularly devastated by floods, this is a life-saving innovation. Through the support of these key data, a2i is assisting the Bangladeshi government to develop a pre-emptive social safety net programme for the flood prone areas that can impact a significant number of lives saved & people affected. During the monsoon season between 13th-31st August 2021, over 2.9 million notifications were sent to 1.5 million unique users. Countless lives and livelihoods will have been saved as a result. This kind of initiative should serve as a role model for disaster management in developing nations worldwide.

We simply cannot rely on nation-states to provide this form of cutting-edge technology to tackle climate change. The pandemic has revealed just how archaic governmental technology can be. In the United States, unemployment insurance systems failed in the early days of the pandemic, preventing many jobless people from signing up for benefits. In the UK, the Government lost information on COVID-19 cases as a result of an Excel error. These entities do not seem to capitalise on our most cutting-edge technologies against our most pressing global problems.

Big Tech companies turn over eye-watering profits from harvesting the data of many millions of people worldwide. That should come with responsibility; businesses that are almost as powerful as many governments should not only serve their customers but protect them too.

It is those who are the least responsible for climate change who are most vulnerable to its effects. Now, it's time to insist that Big Tech takes its seat at the table. They need to make robust commitments not only on how they will slash their emissions but how they can use their technology to buffer the world's most vulnerable people against the impacts of a warming planet. Big tech's reputation, and the future of our planet, depend on it and they surely have the capacity to do so.


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Technology can reverse climate change. It's time to embrace it
The pandemic defined 2020. 2021 will be defined by a more long-term crisis facing humanity: climate change.
January 15, 2021
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Technology can reverse climate change. It's time to embrace it

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Indy100
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Necessity is the mother of invention, and this is truer than ever with regards to the climate. The world faces a climate-change-induced water crisis, with 2 billion people affected globally.

This disastrous year shows just how important emergency pet preparedness is!

Animals have similar needs to humans when it comes to disasters, but they can't take matters into their own hands. It's up to us.

The UN predicts that at the current water usage levels, water scarcity could displace 700 million people by 2030.

Carbon emissions are unlikely to be eliminated in high growth economies in regions like Asia, meaning that the world must develop a way to manage emissions' effects on the climate.

While it is true that the fundamental solutions of eating less meat, cycling to work, and cutting back on international flights can help curb our carbon output in the long-run, it does nothing to help those who suffer from flooding or water scarcity. Ultimately, technology is an essential part of the solution. Big tech is leading the charge in tackling climate change by using big data and machine learning.

In November 2019, a group of data scientists published a paper entitled 'Tackling Climate Change with Machine Learning'. The document laid out 13 different applications of using machine learning to tackle the impacts of climate change. One such application was using machine-learning to predict extreme weather events.

Such an application is already being put into action. For example, Bangladesh is one of the most flood-prone countries globally; approximately 5 million people were negatively affected by flooding last

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The government of Singapore is partnering with Apple to incentivize healthy behaviors.

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Features and Highlights

The Daily Star

Ashfaq Zaman's journey to LEAD



Photo: Arijeta Das Gupta

Young entrepreneur Ashfaq Zaman is the founder of Leadership Excellence and Development (LEAD), an organisation that specialises in leadership training, research, digital influencers and leadership incubation. He harboured the dream of becoming an academician and bringing about institutional changes in Bangladesh from an early age.

Having completed his O and A Levels in Dhaka, Ashfaq pursued his Bachelor's in Accountancy from Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh, and completed his CPA in the UK. "I was never passionate about accounting but to achieve my goals, I needed a strong background in finance, which my CPA course helped me gain," says Ashfaq. After returning to Dhaka, he found a lucrative business in strawberries, collecting imported seeds, which further helped him earn the capital he needed for his future projects.

He also applied for a course in leadership and entrepreneurship at Cambridge University. "Top entrepreneurs such as the CEO of Jaguar, Country Director of Microsoft and Regional Director of Google were my classmates in that course," says Ashfaq. "I took that course so that I could apply the knowledge I gained [illegible] the situations in my country in a

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The Daily Star
April 19, 2019

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LEAD, which focuses on skill development, was inspired from the lessons Ashfaq learned at Cambridge University. Initially, it focused on training corporate leaders and faculty members. Since its inception, LEAD has successfully trained over 1,500 teachers.

Ashfaq explained that university professors are not usually open to new ideas and after a stable career, they don't want to learn new things in life. "They are in a point of life where we cannot force them to start developing new skills. Yet, we were successful in bringing about some

changes. For example, many universities have started to adopt more inclusive curriculums," explains Ashfaq.

Recently, LEAD organised a workshop for which they selected 30 young candidates from various schools across the city and trained them for free. "We attempted to fill in the gaps left open by our education system and incorporate some vital life skills in the workshop for the young students," says Ashfaq.

Apart from training, LEAD has launched Leadership Counselling for Policy and Research (LCPR), a programme aimed at creating youth-based think tanks. The programme, which is still in its initial stages, will include solution-driven talks, round table conferences and activities for research and critical thinking.

"Youth-related think tanks are the need of the hour. We need to cultivate young innovators for the bright future of our country," concludes Ashfaq.

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Creating Nation Builders

Business @ The Prestige Magazine July 21, 2025 8 Minutes Read

1. Let's start with a little about yourself and your journey from being a Chartered Accountant to becoming an entrepreneur. What inspired you to make this significant career transition?

I am a Chartered Accountant (CA) by training, earning my CPA during an era when societal expectations revolved around becoming a doctor or an engineer. If those weren't an option, CA was considered the "safe second-best." For me, pursuing business studies and entering the CA profession was more than just meeting expectations—it became a path to discover my passion for solving problems and exploring the dynamic world of business.

In Bangladesh, the role of a CA is often reduced to auditing. However, in places like the UK, it extends to financial advisory and evaluating business health. This broader perspective shaped my understanding of what business truly stands for- finance at its core and impact as its purpose. Without wealth

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The Prestige Magazine
July 21, 2025

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In Bangladesh, the role of a CA is often reduced to auditing. However, in places like the UK, it extends to financial advisory and evaluating business health. This broader perspective shaped my understanding of what business truly stands for- finance at its core and impact as its purpose. Without wealth generation, sustainability is impossible; without creating impact, long-term value is lost. My CA training gave me a unique lens to assess financial health and make sound decisions, laying a strong foundation for my career.

Over time, I scaled these skills as the Asia Regional Director for SFAI, a global consultancy network ranked among the top 12 worldwide. Overseeing partner operations across 44 countries—including Australia, Malaysia, and China—gave me deep insights into the intersection of finance, strategy, and organizational dynamics. These experiences taught me how to connect dots, identify gaps, and create solutions that reinforced my natural inclination as a problem solver.
But my entrepreneurial journey didn't start in boardrooms or international offices. It began in 2008, while I was still studying, with a strawberry farm in Mymensingh. Inspired by my love for strawberry cheesecake and the realization that strawberries could be grown locally

at a fraction of their import cost, I took the leap. Soon, I was supplying top hotels like the former Sheraton with locally sourced strawberries, proving to myself that innovation isn't always about grand ideas—it's about spotting everyday problems and solving them with frugal innovations.

Later, I pursued a postgraduate degree at Cambridge in Entrepreneurship and Leadership and six sigma from University of Oxford. Cambridge transformed my approach to innovation, introducing me to the concept of "zero to one"—solving real, fundamental problems rather than iterating on existing solutions. This became a cornerstone of my entrepreneurial mindset.

Despite opportunities to build a life abroad—including a CA qualification and British citizenship—I chose to return to Bangladesh. My decision wasn't about convenience; it was about purpose. The West may offer opportunities for innovation amid fierce competition, but the subcontinent presents something far more compelling: vast, untapped challenges waiting to be solved.

My mission is to address these challenges through entrepreneurship, setting new bars of excellence and raising standards for society. It's about creating solutions that leave a transformative impact, proving that business can be more than just profit—it can be a force for change.

What was the vision behind founding LEAD Academy, and how did you identify the need for such a platform in Bangladesh?

I am passionate about education and have developed a diverse portfolio with five entities. These include Dhaka Institute of Fashion Technology (DIFT), Lead Academy, Springdale International School, and the newly launched Emerald Islamic School. Under Lead Academy, we also run Charity Right, a non-profit initiative providing free education and meals to underprivileged children across Bangladesh.

Lead Academy began as a training organization, inspired by my involvement with the World Bank's HEQEP and IQAC programs aimed

at improving higher education quality. As a consultant, I helped develop policy papers to enhance university standards. Initially, Lead Academy focused on training university faculty to foster outcome-based learning and bridge the gap between industry demands and academia. However, we soon realized systemic challenges: many universities haven't updated their curricula for decades, despite the rapidly changing industry landscape.

This led to Lead Academy evolving into a solution to supplement university education by providing targeted upskilling programs. For example, accounting graduates often lack practical skills like Excel macros, QuickBooks, and Xero proficiency—essential for today's job market. We address these gaps while preparing learners for future demands, including the integration of AI and advanced tools. Beyond professional training, we run a program called Dreamers, aimed at children aged 7–14, teaching coding and STEM to prepare them for a tech-driven future.

Another critical realization was the lack of inclusive education in Bangladesh. With over 1.2 million individuals with special needs, we became the first EdTech platform in the country to be accessible for persons with disabilities. For example, our website incorporates assistive technologies, and one of our instructors is visually impaired. We offer courses in speech therapy and skill development tailored for people with disabilities.

This approach has tangible results. We've partnered with companies like Unilever, where graduates of our courses have gained employment. At Intercontinental Hotel, staff trained in sign language through our academy are thriving in roles as chefs and waitstaff. These achievements underscore our commitment to creating opportunities for all.

How does LEAD Academy plan to bridge the gap between traditional education and the skills demanded by the modern workforce?

I consider myself a patriot, driven by the desire to see Bangladesh thrive. I believe the best way to transform a country's future is by cultivating

nation builders. A country's progress is shaped by the collective talent of its people—if many are corrupt, the nation reflects that, but if people are innovative, the country's perception shifts accordingly. Our vision is to create a generation of nation builders, and that's the core mission of our schools, universities, EdTech platforms, and Lead Academy.

To nurture future leaders, we need to begin at the school level. One of our main goals is to equip children with the technology skills necessary for tomorrow. Through coding, we not only teach technical skills but also foster problem-solving, creativity, and innovation. We aim to move away from the rote memorization culture and empower children to think critically. We are taking this online so that even children in rural areas can benefit. Our aspiration is to build a generation of children who excel in tech and problem-solving.

As Bangladesh's economy is heavily reliant on garments—accounting for 72% of our GDP—we recognize the risks of this dependency. Our mission is to shift the mindset from tailoring to programming. A garment worker may earn BDT 12,000, but a skilled programmer can earn BDT 120,000. We are already teaching coding in orphanages & Madrassas, and our goal is to create a knowledge-based society where young people are empowered with digital skills to improve their futures.

We envision a shift away from traditional MBA programs, which often lack relevance to current industry demands. During my recent studies at Stanford University, I saw how education is evolving into a "just-in-time, just-in-need" model. People are no longer interested in learning general knowledge but want skills tailored to their immediate needs. At Lead Academy, we are developing specific modules in HR, marketing, supply chain management, and other areas, focused on what learners need to succeed right now.

We also believe in a strong faculty—unlike many training institutions in Bangladesh, where instructors often lack real-world experience, we ensure that our teachers bring not only the right qualifications but also years of hands-on expertise that simply cannot be learned from

traditional books. By tapping into their practical knowledge, we aim to equip professionals with the skills and insights essential for thriving in today's fast-paced and ever-evolving job market.

Tell us a little about how your involvement in TEDx events influenced your perspective on education, innovation, or entrepreneurship.

My involvement as curator of TEDx stems from my patriotism and my desire to share Bangladesh's incredible stories with the world. I wanted to showcase the resilience, culture, and innovation of our people—stories like a blind individual overcoming immense challenges to introduce multimedia talking books into the national curriculum or how Coke Studio is preserving our endangered local music. These are narratives that deserve global attention, and my goal was to ensure the world hears them.

One key takeaway from TEDx was discovering how many extraordinary individuals in Bangladesh are making a significant impact, yet remain unnoticed by mainstream media. These unsung heroes, often working quietly, inspire with their remarkable journeys. For instance, we have an "Iron Man" in Bangladesh who competed and won the World Ironman Championship despite a broken back—a story that should inspire millions but remains largely untold. My experience with TEDx reinforced the importance of celebrating such achievements, learning from these inspiring journeys, and bringing them into the spotlight for others to draw motivation and hope.

As someone deeply involved in education and entrepreneurship, what do you see as the biggest challenges and opportunities in Bangladesh's education sector, and how do you envision technology shaping its evolution over the next five years, both locally and globally?

The main challenge we are addressing is the lack of high-quality human talent in Bangladesh. Despite significant progress in industries like garments, we still rely on hiring CEOs from countries like India or Sri Lanka. Even multinational corporations in Bangladesh struggle to find

capable local leaders. Our universities, though producing graduates, often fail to nurture top-level thinkers or innovators. This talent gap has stifled our potential for innovation. Historically, Bengal was one of the richest regions in the world, but we lost that edge due to a decline in integrity and cumulative talent.

Another significant challenge is the unfriendly business ecosystem. Bangladesh ranks low in ease of doing business, and practical challenges such as high tax rates, difficult capital-raising processes, and stringent government regulations create barriers. Startups often rely on foreign funding due to the immaturity of local funding sources. Moreover, utility services and overall business support systems need substantial improvement.

A third challenge is the lack of well-researched data and insights for innovative business ventures. Unlike global hubs like Silicon Valley, where universities and industries collaborate closely, Bangladesh lacks the academic-industry partnerships necessary for groundbreaking innovation. This absence forces businesses to replicate existing models rather than creating something new. Research success in Bangladesh is mostly limited to agriculture, with significant advancements in rice and poultry, but other sectors including RMG (ready-made garments) have seen little innovation.

On the flip side, Bangladesh has immense opportunities. The high consumption behavior of our population is a major strength. With 18 crore people in a relatively small area, there is a substantial consumer base. Moreover, Bangladeshis are hardworking, resilient, and often take on multiple jobs, driven by aspirations to grow and succeed.
Our young demographic is another key opportunity. With 63% of the population under 40, we have a vibrant and energetic workforce. This could drive higher consumption, production, and output—provided we invest in their development and channel their potential effectively.

Lastly, Bangladesh's geographical position as the world's largest delta presents unique opportunities. Throughout history, delta regions like New York, Mumbai, and London have thrived as economic hubs.

Bangladesh, with its strategic location and natural advantages, has the potential to follow suit if guided by visionary business leaders, supportive policymakers, and an enabling government.

Share your vision and what kind of impact you hope LEAD Academy will leave in the education and skills development landscape of Bangladesh.

I see myself less as an entrepreneur and more as a creator of ecosystems. My business, now in its twelfth year, has evolved from serial entrepreneurship into building impactful, life-encompassing services. My mission is to provide essential services that support people from birth to death, filling gaps where solutions are lacking. For instance, we're working on a graveyard near our resort & housing project to address inefficiencies like the struggles people face securing a burial spot in the city—a basic but overlooked need.

Our goal is to establish innovative, high-standard services across various aspects of life. We've launched a not-for-profit school, a salon for women, a gym, and agro-resorts producing safe food. We're building vacation spots, restaurants, and more, ensuring each venture sets a benchmark in its industry.

This vision goes beyond business—it's about transforming communities. By dedicating 30% of our profits to uplifting the underprivileged, we're setting a new standard for balancing enterprise with impact, and building a sustainable ecosystem that serves humanity with excellence.

CEO
REVIEW
Inspiring Business Leaders in Bangladesh



Coding a New Narrative of Bangladesh's Tech Revolution

Reading Time 7 mins

Ashfaq Zaman, Co-Founder & CEO, LEAD Academy

The number of Bangladeshi developer accounts on GitHub surged by nearly 67% in 2023, in just one year. Many probably have heard of GitHub, one of the biggest platforms for version control and collaborative development. This explosive growth ignited a powerful question: Is Bangladesh poised to become Asia's next tech powerhouse? With this question comes a natural subsequent thought- what factors are driving this tech revolution that was unthinkable even 20 years back? One of the pivotal changes came with Bangladesh's decision to incorporate coding into the school curriculum, marking a significant leap toward digital literacy. By 2023, coding was introduced in secondary schools, with plans to expand to primary education by 2025. This initiative reflected more than just a curriculum change for us; it embodies the "Mission 2041: I am the solution" narrative, where individuals can leverage technology to solve problems [redacted] crossing or in some cases superseding

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Coding a New Narrative of Bangladesh's Tech Revolution

CEO Review
July 2024

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One of the pivotal changes came with Bangladesh's decision to incorporate coding into the school curriculum, marking a significant leap toward digital literacy. By 2023, coding was introduced in secondary schools, with plans to expand to primary education by 2025. This initiative reflected more than just a curriculum change for us; it embodies the "Mission 2041: I am the solution" narrative, where individuals can leverage technology to solve problems independently, mirroring or in some cases supersiding trends worldwide.

Globally, we are witnessing this revolution firsthand. Businesses and startups leverage technology to innovate and solve complex challenges. For instance, in the medical field, research timelines have drastically shortened from a decade to just a few months through simulation and AI in data analytics. This rapid progress was pivotal in the development of revolutionary vaccines during the COVID-19 pandemic which saved millions of lives. Similarly, in agriculture, technology has revolutionised food production. Precision farming, which uses GPS and IoT devices, has increased crop yields and reduced waste. Countries like the Netherlands have become leaders in agricultural technology, transforming themselves into major food exporters despite having limited arable land.

Finland introduced coding to its national curriculum in 2016, making it a mandatory subject for students. This early adoption has resulted in a

generation of tech-savvy individuals who are well-prepared for the demands of the modern workforce. Finland's investment in technology education has also fostered a thriving startup ecosystem, with successful companies like Rovio Entertainment, the creator of Angry Birds, and Supercell, the developer of Clash of Clans.

According to the World Economic Forum, by 2025, 85 million jobs may be displaced by a shift in the division of labor between humans and machines, while 97 million new roles may emerge that are more adapted to the new division of labor between humans, machines, and algorithms. Upskilling is critical, and coding is at the heart of this transformation. Preparing school-going students with coding skills will ensure they are proactive and ready for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

Bangladesh has taken proactive steps to prepare its workforce, extending beyond the mere implementation of coding in our curriculum. Our IT industry is thriving at the moment, buoyed by success stories from both companies and freelancers. Our country's IT export revenue hit $1.3 billion in 2022, with projections to reach $5 billion by 2025. Many local IT firms have gained international recognition for their innovative solutions and high-quality services. Even on a global scale, the perception of Bangladesh's IT industry is evolving. While we were once primarily seen as a destination for low-cost outsourcing, we are now being recognised for its growing pool of skilled professionals and innovative contributions to the tech world. The shift is now occurring rapidly.

Technology has the potential to be a great equalizer, altering the status quo much like the first Industrial Revolution. If we prepare adequately, Bangladesh can emerge as a leader in the trillion-dollar tech market, addressing the global shortage of tech experts. We have the potential to become a global supplier of tech talent, our nation could evolve into an innovation hub, exporting technology alongside our traditional exports, such as garments. If planned properly, we can shift our demography talents from Tailors to Programmers, from international Labourers to Global AI engineers !

With continued investment in education, infrastructure, and support systems, I believe we can strengthen our position as a global technology leader. We can see a shift towards a more research-oriented approach, with universities and research institutions increasingly focusing on innovations. This momentum is critical as it fosters a culture of continuous development, essential for staying competitive in the fast-evolving tech landscape. The journey ahead is exciting, and with the right strategies and investments, Bangladesh can truly become a beacon of technological excellence on the global stage, not the poster child for poverty & climate disasters.

Podcasts and Interviews

(Transcribed)

LBC NEWS

IAIN DALE

LBC CATCH UP SHOW

50 years of independence in Bangladesh and current challenges that the country faces.

▶ Listen

Ashfaq Zaman

29 March 2021, 10:30



Iain Dale: This is LBC. We're talking about the 50 years of independence in Bangladesh and trying to learn a little bit about the history and current challenges that the country faces.

LISTEN ONLINE

Ashfaq Zaman Interview at LBC Catch Up Show with Iain Dale

LBC Podcast
March 29 , 2021

Iain Dale:
This is LBC. It's 90 minutes past 9.
We're talking about the 50 years of independence in Bangladesh and trying to learn a little bit about the history and current challenges that the country faces.
Well, Ashfaq Zaman joins us. He is the founder of CNI News. He joins us from Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.
Ashfaq, thank you very much for joining us. I think you contacted me on Twitter earlier and gave me a little lesson in the history of Bangladesh.

Let's concentrate on current-day Bangladesh and the challenges that the country faces. It's clearly developing economically. As I said before, the share of world GDP has nearly doubled over the past 40 years or so. What are the main challenges it faces now?

Ashfaq Zaman:
I think one of the main challenges is the population as well. You see, it's 180 million people living in a very, very small space—almost one-third that of the UK.

To manage such a big population in terms of their growing demand and infrastructure requirements, I think that should be the key.
We've definitely had a lot of development, but over the years it was not systematically planned.

So I think the key challenge is to ensure that not only people within the city get the benefit of this development, but also rural

Bangladesh—which probably consists of more than 70 or 80% of the population—also has access to that development and infrastructure. That is the key: to now look at how we can decentralize from the capital city Dhaka, where I'm staying now, and try to be more inclusive of rural Bangladesh.
That's exactly, I believe, the focus of the government now, as they want to become a middle-income country by 2021.

Iain Dale:
And you mentioned the geographical challenges. I talked a bit about the fact that the only time we ever really see Bangladesh in the TV news is when there are massive floods. With climate change, I guess those events might increase in the future. How much of a threat to Bangladesh's development is the geography and the climate?

Ashfaq Zaman:
I think we have made some significant strides in this case.
Yes, we've had great disasters. In fact, I remember reading that back in the day, when Henry Kissinger spoke about our independence, he said Bangladesh could be a "basket case"—and it looked to be the case at the time, because we had some major disasters following our independence.

But over the last five or ten years, even though we've still had floods and disasters, things are much more controlled now.
The warning systems and the digitalization efforts over the last few years have had a significant impact.

So much so that, for the last 10 years, our GDP has been growing at 6–7%, and we are even projected to surpass India in per capita GDP growth if we continue at this momentum over the next few years.

The fact that the disasters are still taking place, and we are still developing, is clear proof that we've done a great job managing and mitigating them.

As citizens, it's now evident—we are no longer really afraid or threatened by floods.
Of course, we don't have control over the climate—that's a natural phenomenon—but we certainly can manage its impact better, and we are doing that.

In our Vision 2041, which has been recently developed, we have made flood management, as well as preparation for cyclones and hurricanes, high priorities.
So I think we're doing well, and there's still room for improvement, which is built into the Vision 2041 roadmap.

Iain Dale:
Our previous guest reckons that there's somewhere between half a million and a million people with Bangladeshi backgrounds—either first generation or second generation—in the UK.
Given that, is it a source of frustration that we don't really think of Bangladesh in the same way that we think of India and Pakistan?
Obviously, it is a smaller country, but it is a significant country, and we have a significant number of people from a Bangladeshi heritage within the UK.

How can Bangladesh, I don't know—up its profile in the UK news media so that we all know a little bit more about it?

Ashfaq Zaman:
I think LBC is doing a fantastic job in doing so, and that could be the stepping stone.

Yes, for a variety of reasons—predominantly due to too much focus on floods and disasters—the global branding of Bangladesh hasn't been very positive.
And perhaps our own local media also hasn't done a great job in promoting our achievements.

But I believe our communities—our dual nationals that you mentioned—also have a role in showcasing the real Bangladesh.
As citizens, we can share our perspective on what it's like living in 21st-century Bangladesh—2021 Bangladesh—because at this point in time, the majority of us believe in the mandate that by 2041, Bangladesh will become a developed country.

If that's our mindset, if that's our belief, then we are no longer a "basket case."
We are no longer a country that's only thinking or worrying about floods.
We have more to think about—we have a satellite in space now.
So we need to focus on those aspects: technology, digitalization, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, rather than just floods and disasters.

Yes, I think our international community has a role to play in this as well.

Iain Dale:
What about trade between Bangladesh and Britain? How's that developing? What are the opportunities there for Global Britain?

Ashfaq Zaman:
I think there's enormous opportunity.
Boris Johnson, a few weeks back, also mentioned Bangladesh—he said he's pleasantly surprised about the growth, and there are a lot of lessons that Britain can learn from Bangladesh. That was one of his direct statements.

Within the Asian community, Bangladesh is tagged as the "Asian tiger."
There are a lot of opportunities, particularly with England—especially with Great Britain following Brexit.

Now, I think Britain is exploring and trying to find new partners, new trade partners, and Bangladesh is a country with enormous potential.

There's a lot to explore. I believe the High Commission here is also working on that.

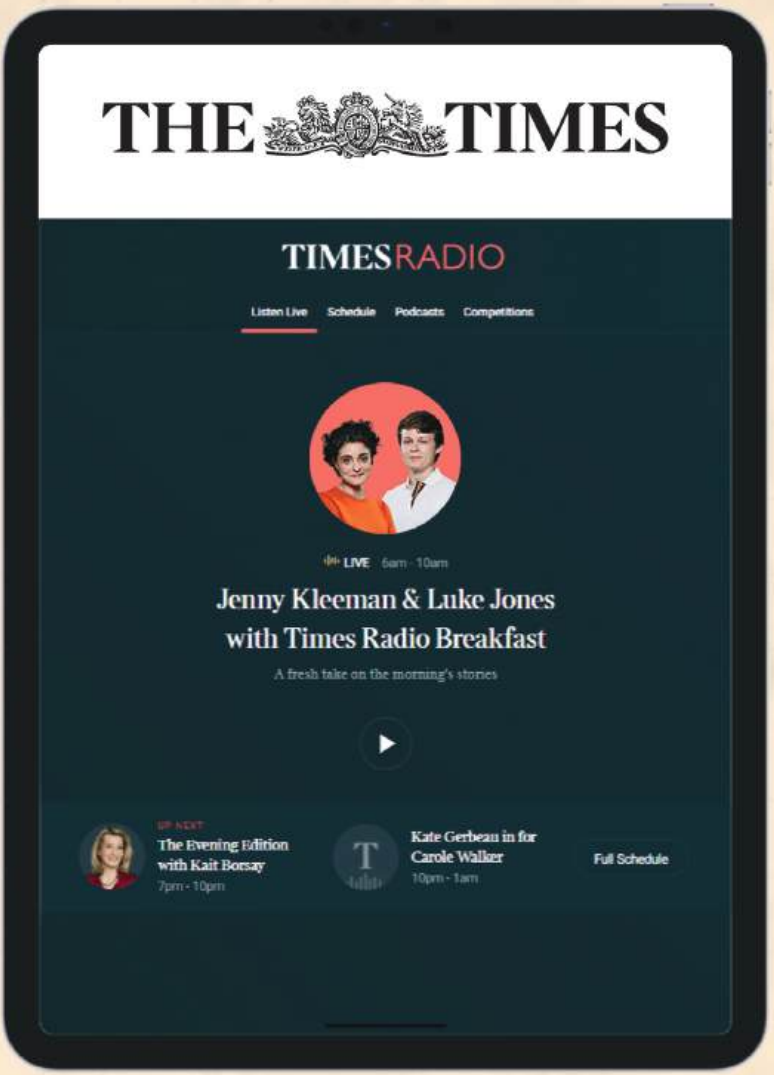
A lot of bilateral trade could happen, particularly in technology.
As Britain tries to explore new partnerships, Bangladesh could be a solid partner—because of its stability.

If you look at neighboring countries like Pakistan or India, I believe that at this present moment, Bangladesh is a far more stable economy.

And the proof is in how we've managed to keep our momentum going despite coronavirus.
Many developed nations have struggled, but our GDP has still shown significant improvement—this is a resilient society.

Iain Dale:
Well, I hereby appoint you our Dhaka correspondent on LBC!
If you have anything you think our listeners need to know, get in touch.
Thank you so much for joining us.

That's Ashfaq Zaman, founder of CNI News, reporting to us from Dhaka.



LISTEN ONLINE

Jenny Kleeman and Luke Jones with Times Radio Breakfast: A fresh take on the morning stories

Times Radio Podcast
18 July , 2020

Times Radio Host (Jenny Kleeman):
This is Times Radio.
It's 36 minutes past six. This is Breakfast with Jenny Clement and Luke Jones.

Let's take you to Bangladesh now.
A hospital owner there has been arrested for issuing thousands of fake negative COVID results.
He was caught trying to cross the border into India disguised in a burka.

A little bit earlier, we spoke to Ashfaq Zaman, who is the co-founder of CNI News and a director of the Dhaka Forum think tank.

Luke Jones:
What is the overall situation with COVID-19 in Bangladesh? How seriously has the country been hit?

Ashfaq Zaman:
It's massive at this point in time.
In fact, last year we had approximately 2,000 cases as well. The total testing number was something around 13,000.

That means that out of 13,000 tests, about 22–23% were positive—which is quite a significant number.

We believe that the testing is not adequate, because if it were, so many positives wouldn't have come up in such small numbers.

Now, as a country, we are trying to take it more seriously.
There's a forum called Dhaka Forum happening within Bangladesh to address these COVID-19 issues across different spectrums—starting from healthcare.

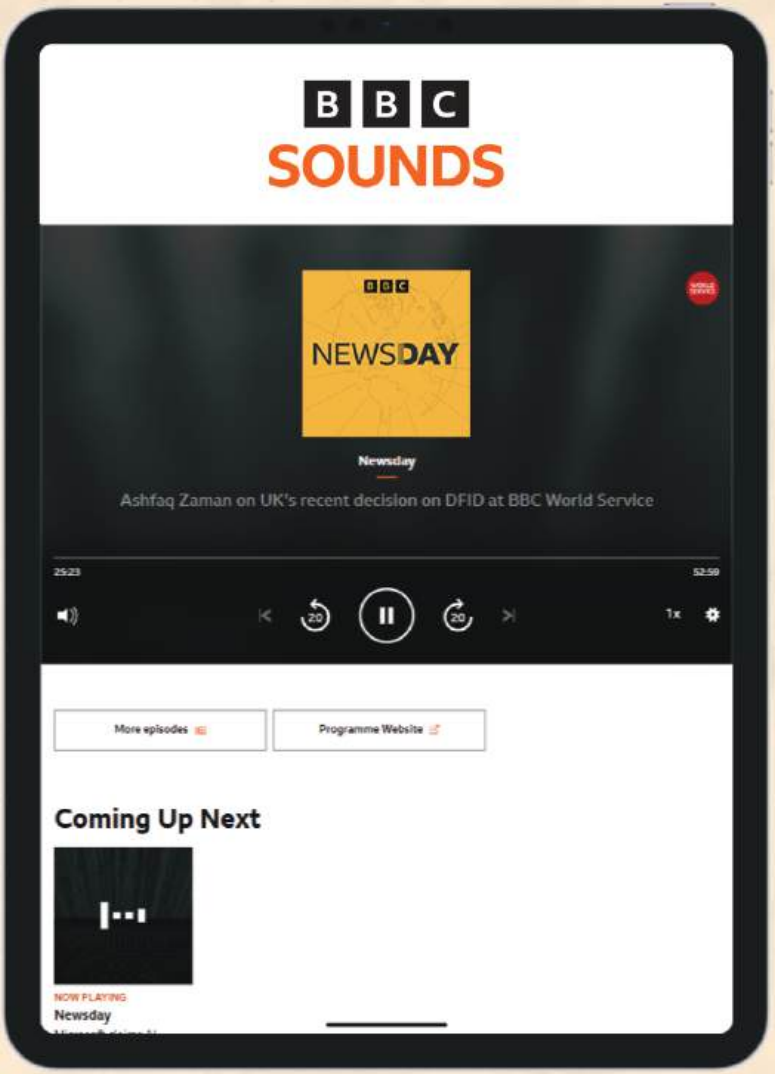
We are saying that we need to rethink our healthcare system, redesign our economy.

Six different segments will be discussed, using the best practices from around the world, so we can learn, grow, and correct the issues that need urgent attention.

It is high time for us to make those changes.

Jenny Kleeman:
You're listening to Times Radio Breakfast. That was Ashfaq Zaman, the co-founder of CNI News and director of the Dhaka Forum think tank, on that story about a hospital owner in Bangladesh arrested for issuing thousands of fake negative COVID results.

It's 6:42.



LISTEN ONLINE

BBC World Service Newsday: Ashfaq Zaman on UK's Recent Decision of UFID at BBC World Service

BBC Podcast
June 20 , 2020

BBC Host:
Let's now speak to Ashfaq Zaman.
He's an aid worker and co-founder of CNI News in Bangladesh, and he joins us now.
Bangladesh is a former British colony. Welcome to the program, Ashfaq. What's your view on this?

Ashfaq Zaman:
Thank you very much.
Well, I think at this very critical time—with Brexit, as well as the renewed and intensifying debate on Britain's colonial past, which you just mentioned—it really doesn't seem to be giving a good or positive signal to the global community, at least in terms of perception, for DFID to be abolished or merged with the Foreign Office.

The trust, goodwill, and social value that DFID has been able to generate over the years can be massively affected.
This could have an impact not only on Britain's soft power but also its leadership position among many developing countries and partners.

I mean, DFID over the years has done a phenomenal job in fighting poverty, hand in hand with some of the most underprivileged communities—while gradually offsetting the baggage of its colonial past in those very regions, which is the very criticism.

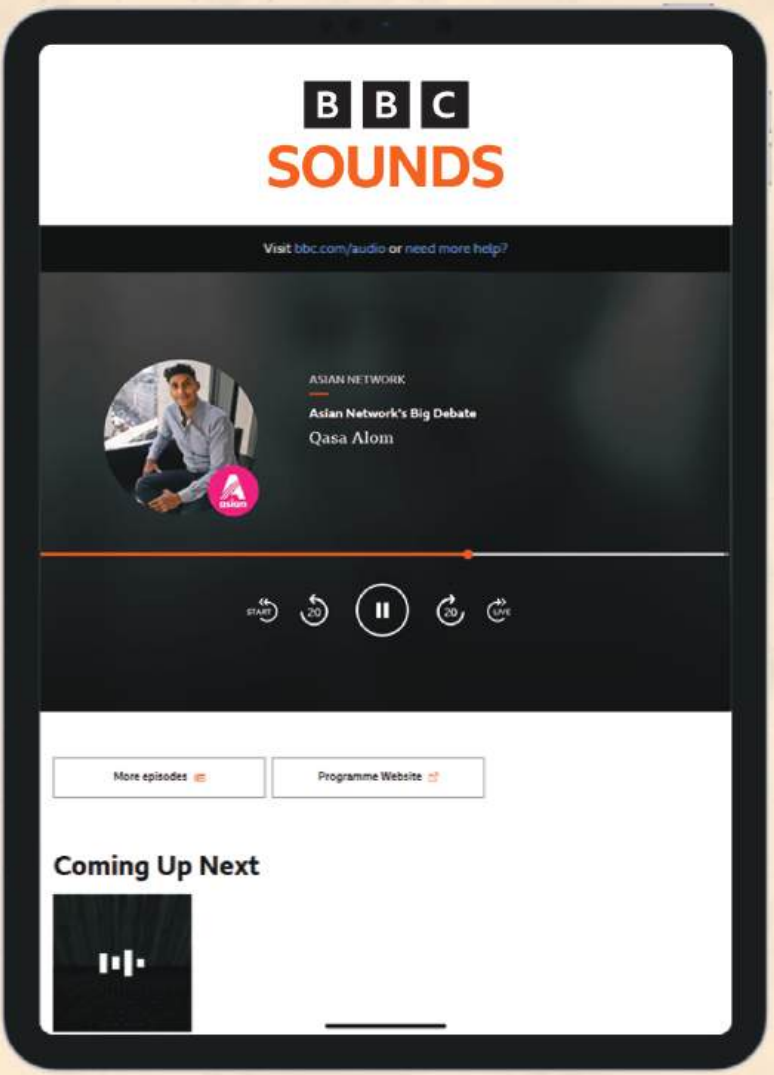
BBC Host:
But the Prime Minister has pledged that he would still continue to support aid.
What he's saying here is that the system of it being separate is outdated.
Other developed countries, for example, are already running aid as part of their foreign ministry.
So it seems like a fair enough merger, doesn't it?

Ashfaq Zaman:
See, on moral grounds, the essence of aid should never be conditioned on foreign policy goals.
It should always be pure to its core, with only the humanitarian aspect in consideration.
I mean, humanity is not only about trade and benefits.

And what David Cameron recently said—I believe it's true:
This may result in less respect for the UK overseas.

In our news portal, CNI News, this particular DFID decision was quite heavily criticized by local people.

It was quite evident that the decision itself has put a question mark on Britain's global leadership, even before the real outcomes of this decision are to be seen.



LISTEN ONLINE

Asian Network's Big Debate

BBC Live
Jan 17, 2021

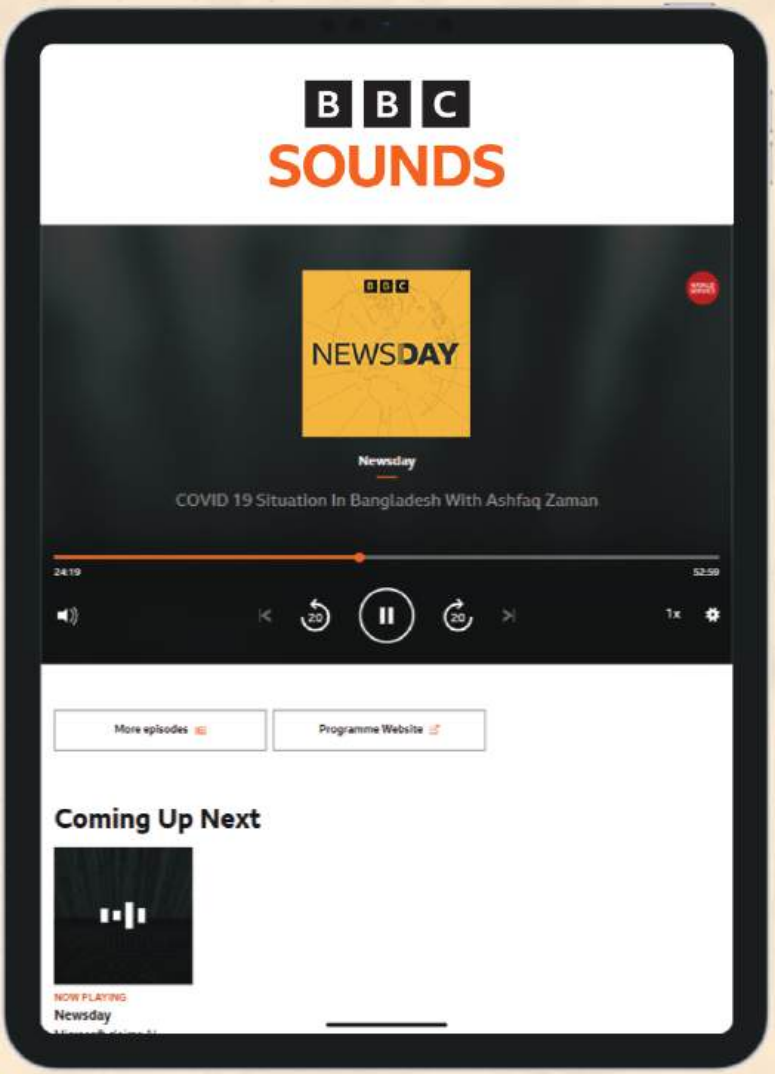
Host:
Joining me now is 27-year-old Gerald Bennett, who won multiple court cases after petitioning for PPE in Indian hospitals. We've also got Dhaka-based Ashfaq Zaman, an aid worker who founded the startup CNA News in Bangladesh. Thank you both for coming on.

Host (to Gerald):
You're in Nagpur, aren't you? What's it like there in terms of COVID?

Gerald Bennett:
Thank you for having me on the show. Here in Nagpur, in Maharashtra, overcrowding and the high population density have made things quite challenging. COVID has affected many people, but we're seeing a strong recovery rate. And with the vaccine on the horizon, it feels like a ray of sunshine. People are positive and hopeful about the future. India's healthcare infrastructure has really stepped up. It's robust, and it's providing essential care to citizens across the country.

Host (to Ashfaq):
And Ashfaq, what's the mood like in Bangladesh?

Ashfaq Zaman:
I think our citizens are, quite frankly, pleasantly surprised. Against all odds, especially during this second wave, we've managed quite well. Our current positivity rate is around 4.9%, which is encouraging. People aren't in panic mode anymore. Instead, there's a growing sense of security, a feeling that perhaps, just perhaps, the worst is behind us.



LISTEN ONLINE

BBC World Service Newsday: COVID 19 Situation in Bangladesh

BBC Live
May 10, 2020

Anchor:
From the African continent to Bangladesh, where the country is extending its lockdown until May 16th.
However, a number of businesses—from the textile industry and a few shopping malls—have been allowed to resume operations.

With more than 10,000 people infected with the deadly virus, many are questioning the plan of sending employees back to work.
Let's speak now to Ashfaq Zaman, he's the Bangladesh Country Director of Charity Right.

Welcome to the program, Ashfaq.
Before we go into why this decision has been made, can you just bring us up to date on the situation in the country with regard to the coronavirus?

Ashfaq Zaman:
Hello there, thanks for having me.

At this point in time, we have approximately 11,700 cases of coronavirus.

And I must say that the situation over here is very, very complex.

Not only is COVID-19 a deadly virus, but the risks are compounded by the fact that we are one of the most densely populated countries in the world—165 million people living in a very small space that's almost 60% the size of the UK.

Within this 165 million, we have 17.5 million people living in poverty, meaning whatever they earn in a day goes toward their basic food and just surviving.
And further, it's compounded by the fact that we have a very rudimentary healthcare sector.
So altogether, it's a very complex situation for us over here.

Anchor:
Well, given the complexity, then it begs the question as to why Bangladesh seems to be putting its economy before the people?

Ashfaq Zaman:
Well, as I mentioned to you about this poverty situation over here, there's a big debate going on—with polarization in both ends in terms of opinion.

For many people, it's seen as an either-or situation.
Either you take the risk of getting Corona, or you face the risk of starvation for a huge community of people who just basically survive on their day's earning.

And for the last one, one and a half months, they basically have had no access to income or food.
So in that context, it's very hard to say what the best path is.
But it is a tightrope walk between maintaining public health and ensuring people don't fall into destitution.

Podcasts

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MAR 6 · S4, E7 · 34 MIN

Season 4 Ep 7: Frugal innovations: solutions for the Global South with a2i

Shaken Not Burned

▶ Play

Climate resilience is essential to protect communities in vulnerable regions against extreme weather events. But the volume of funding for adaptation in the Global South, which bears the brunt of climate change, remains far smaller than that for mitigation, which is driving communities to find their own homegrown solutions. Richer nations, which contribute the majority of emissions, must be held accountable.

This week, Felicia talks to Ashfaq Zaman, strategic communication advisor for Aspire to Innovate (a2i), the Bangladeshi government's innovation agency, about resilience, vulnerability and reorganising the way we understand value.

We dive into climate resilience, climate justice, and the role of frugal solutions in tackling climate change, especially in the Global South. Our discussion explores how communities historically adapted to climate challenges and how innovation – both technological and mindset-driven – can drive sustainable change, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable innovation, policy reform, and equitable financial commitments to mitigate climate risks.

The key challenge today is to integrate natural, frugal, and homegrown solutions into modern climate strategies. While international climate initiatives and financial pledges have fallen short, local communities continue to innovate and adapt without external support. For example, farmers in Bangladesh are developing indigenous crops which can sustain high salt

LISTEN ONLINE

Frugal Innovations – Solutions for the Global South with a2i" from Shaken Not Burned.
Season 4 Ep 7

Apple Podcast
March 6, 2025

Welcome to Shaken Not Burned: A Cocktail of Solutions for a Sustainable Future. I'm Felicia Jackson. And I am Giulia Bottaro. Each week, we interview experts to talk about parts of the sustainable transition and what you and your business need to know to succeed.

Sustainability is complex and constantly evolving, and it can be hard for a business to adapt and remain competitive. We are here to help you learn all about the changing economy and the ongoing transition. So join us as we explore the concepts and the tools you need to plot a course for a sustainable future.

Felicia Jackson:
Hello and welcome to the latest episode of Shaken Not Burned, A Cocktail of Solutions for a Sustainable Future. Climate Change is no longer something that's a distant thing happening in a faraway place. It's not a distant threat. Its impacts are being felt all, all around the world as extreme weather seems to be accelerating. Wherever you look, this itself has huge implications for the global economy. Insurance premiums are on the increase. Wherever you look in the world, there are jurisdictions where you can't even get insurance, let alone jurisdictions where huge amounts of assets and homes are simply not insured. The risk of climate-accelerated impact is on the rise. So, as discussions around the concepts of ESG or sustainability or transitioning from fossil fuels become more polarized, there's a term that's come to the fore and is becoming more mainstream. And that term is climate resilience. The idea is a shift in focus from purely trying to mitigate emissions increase to actually focusing on what can be done to increase the resilience of the world in which we live. Whether that's supply chains from manufacturing to agriculture, or ensuring that buildings are built in different ways.

Perhaps most importantly, it's a discussion that recognizes that nothing happens in isolation, that impacts in one part of the world have knock-on effects elsewhere. And for any of us to be truly resilient to the impacts of climate change, we all need to be at the same time.

Today we're lucky enough to be joined by Ashfaq Zaman, who is the strategic communications advisor to the Aspire to Innovate or a2i program, which is a multinational digital transformation initiative set up by the government of Bangladesh. He's also the founder of the Dhaka Forum. He helped to facilitate the public private partnership between Bangladesh and Google that actually helped to roll out technology to protect against flooding. So welcome to the show.

Ashfaq, perhaps you could tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do, what climate resilience really is and why it matters.

Ashfaq Zaman:
Thank you, Felicia. Very nice to have me over here. My main work is basically trying to find suitable partners, like-minded partners, to advance the agenda that we have at this point of time. Basically focusing on two aspects. One is building digital public infrastructure within Bangladesh. So that's one of the priorities, so that we can create a more smart nation, a more digitally advanced nation, and at the same time also trying to focus on sustainability where climate is a big part of it.

Many of us think whenever we talk about sustainability, only the climate angle comes to mind, but actually that's not the case. Sustainability in itself is a big ecosystem. Commerce comes within sustainability, environment comes within sustainability. And maybe in the near future, the planetary system probably might also be included within the sustainability framework that we have, as we are trying to be a multi-planet species with the aspirations of many tech giants, as you probably know.

So my role predominantly is to connect with like-minded partners to find how we can create synergies and at the same time also do a bit of tech transfer. As we mainly focus on innovation and digitization and try

to see whether frugal innovations from this part of the world—that is, from South Asia or from the Global South—can be exported elsewhere. And at the same time, how we can take policies, advanced data, AI and other innovations that can be implemented within our region as well, predominantly Bangladesh.

Felicia Jackson:
Fantastic. So what is your understanding of climate resilience?

Ashfaq Zaman:
So I think these are very big terms. So if I just have to explain very simply, it's all about trying to cope better with the changes, with the aftereffects of climate change. In a simple way, that's the way I see being climate resilient. Because over the years, that's what our generations have been doing. I mean, without the advent of technology, without any funding, you'll see that human civilization actually progressed because they were resilient. Climate problems existed from the Ice Age.

So I mean, not only human species—all animal species—by their default, they have this within their DNA to actually evolve, to actually be resilient.

Particularly I'll say about Bangladesh, my home country—this idiom of saying, the famous idiom, "weathering the storm"—we actually weather the storm. I mean, historically our ancestors actually weathered the storm. So being resilient is part of our DNA, not only in terms of climate, but we see it across every social fabric. You throw anything at us, we will overcome that. And so that is basically, in my understanding, the natural way, the frugal way of coping with the problems of climate change. This is what I would like to understand climate resilience is all about.

Felicia Jackson:
So could you explain to me what are the sorts of things that can be done to help build climate resilience? We'll get to the idea of frugal innovation

later because I think that's quite exciting. But what sort of interventions does climate resilience require?

Ashfaq Zaman:
So you asked about innovation. For countries like us, why innovation actually matters in the first place—because we have seen that the global initiatives, the pledges, they have not really worked. I personally believe that aid is not the way forward because for climate issues to be addressed—and that itself to be sustainable—it has to be linked with commerce, it has to be self-sufficient. Aid is probably just a one-off solution; it probably will not actually focus on or solve the full problem.

So the most important part here is to actually find those solutions which will work in reality. And as we can see, innovation is probably the only way forward. Because if we're only concentrating on what has worked previously, we are not in a very good stage. If you see, we are still not progressing well in terms of our stance and our targets that we actually wanted to achieve—be it from the COP summit or the policies.

So innovation—not only in terms of technology—but I think innovation in approach and in mindset, on how we can tackle this, needs to be addressed both philosophically and strategically. If you allow, I'll just share a few ideas about how this should be addressed.

The innovation in terms of our thought process—I think I already shared one aspect—that the whole pledging system, the way world leaders are pledging to solve this problem, is not working. We know this for sure. Only 20% of the $100 billion that has been pledged has actually been fulfilled. Because fundamentally, the problem is that any promises without penalty will be penniless and will not solve the pain.

So I think the main focus is that we need to design in such a way that there has to be some sort of penalty for not mitigating or not fulfilling the promise. It could be in the form of taxation; it could be in the form of sanctions. So the whole process of how we are designing the framework—the thought process itself—needs innovation.

I mentioned moving away from aid. There has to be a sustainable economic wave. It's a capitalist society at the end of the day. I mean, the whole world is more or less moving toward that. So we need to make sustainability profitable to ensure the economy is very, very clear. So much so that—what are the unit metrics? What is the rate of return? If we actually make a mangrove forest, for every dollar we spend, we are getting a 10x result.

We have never really monetized that. We have never really put that into a country's balance sheet. We have never really seen what the savings are. So I think it's time to not only address the vulnerabilities, but also to see how much we can save and how much we can profit or capitalize when we are actually addressing climate issues.

Felicia Jackson:
Now, can I interrupt you there? Because this is a really, really important point as far as I'm concerned, which is this idea that—talk about the amount of money that can be leveraged. We talk about investment, the 100 billion. Whatever the issues coming through the COP process, the World Bank has talked about the fact that when it invests a dollar, it can leverage 8 to 10 dollars of further investment by de-risking whatever that investment is.

When you're talking about the impact of a mangrove— I don't know what to call it, plantation— you talk about the fact that it's 10 times the benefit. How are those benefits broken down? Obviously, the current system of valuation, you know, on the financial side doesn't really encompass how that works. I've looked at the triple dividend of resilience, which is a very interesting idea around avoided losses and economic benefit and social and environmental benefit. But what do you actually mean by monetize, and what are the sorts of returns that you're talking about?

Ashfaq Zaman:
So it depends on what field or what sector we're actually planning to focus on. But if I give you one good example—if you see how the whole world is prioritizing—the best way to see that is by looking at the big

investment organizations. For example, BlackRock, the world's largest asset manager, mentioned just last year that the next big investment wave will be climate solutions.
Now, when they say it, it means there is actually potential here, because they control or are heavily invested in stocks all over the world. So how do we monetize? We basically can do that in three ways.

The first is bringing in technological solutions as products which can not only benefit climate innovation or address climate change but at the same time can also be businesses of their own. For example, there's a very innovative company called Green Hydrogen—I'm not sure if you've heard of them. It's a very nice technology that can be adopted by countries all over the world, by corporations, by different sectors. You know the AI industry is a very big industry now. And the GPUs—they create a lot of electricity consumption. Now there are new industries exploring how to mitigate this energy consumption, and that itself is also an industry with a significant economy behind it.

So this is one side of it—where technology, innovation, and solutions are provided, and that itself becomes a business model. The end product is that they are creating solutions. Just like any startup: they try to address a problem, but by doing so they're also creating revenue, finance, and profit. Be it Uber or any big startup.

The second way is for governments to understand how much they are losing by not mitigating climate change properly—or the aftereffects of climate change. So for a country like Bangladesh, over the last 40 years we have lost around US$12 billion. If we could have saved that, we wouldn't need to seek a loan from the IMF, which is around 4 to 5 billion dollars. It's as simple as that.

It's like how we do depreciation in accounting—we should also have something like environmental depreciation, for lack of a better term. To understand how much we can save by ensuring a more sustainable environment. Because saving itself is a big part of the economy.

The third and final point is for long-term benefits. When we talk about green energy—we all know this has already been discussed in many places—if you move from a coal-based plant to a windmill plant or clean energy, what are the long-term returns? We know about that. So I think that transition needs to be made, and I think in that particular segment, we did make some global progress as well.

Felicia Jackson:
Excellent. Perhaps you could talk me through this idea of frugal innovation. Because as I say, I'm really interested in this idea of how you can encourage both the public and the private sector to invest in resilience. There are ways of looking at how you can generate profit, but at the same time, a number of adaptation projects are quite capital-intensive to begin with, and you get payback over a longer period of time. How do you do that frugally if you don't have the capital upfront?

Ashfaq Zaman:
I think for the Global South and for countries like Bangladesh, solutions are actually the only way. Because we have waited long for the expectation of funds. I mean, omission of funds means emissions in the air—that's the way I see it. So frugal solution is actually the only way forward—or frugal innovation, in that sense.
I'll probably give you three or four examples of what we are doing in Bangladesh. And of course, there are many other countries who are also coming up with their own frugal innovations. One of the essences of frugal innovation is that it has to be homegrown. What will work in this part of the world may not necessarily work elsewhere, because climate itself is very customized. The cyclones over here will not be the same as those in Florida. So we need custom solutions.

One thing that has historically happened in Bangladesh is floating harvesting in many rural areas. What they do is float bamboo structures—floating gardens—where they grow crops in flooded or high-water-level areas.

Similarly, in areas with high salinity, people are developing indigenous crops that can sustain those high salinity levels as well.

Felicia Jackson:
That's interesting.

Ashfaq Zaman:
Yeah. And these are not done by billion-dollar research. These are done by our farmers by only trial and error. So it's permutation and combination. And they saw that, well, this works. If we add a bit more urea fertilizer over here, that works. If you increase the nitrogen level, maybe that works. So it's all about permutation and combination. And they have figured it out that way. And those areas where we couldn't expect agriculture are actually producing—not only their own—but they are producing enough that can be exported globally.

Now we have, in our northeast region where we have this issue, they are now producing enough vegetables, enough food, which now can be exported to western countries as well. So that is a classic example of frugal innovation. I'll give you another one quickly: all across Bangladesh, in all the 64 districts, you will find schools, school establishments. They're built in such a way that they can also act as cyclone centers. So they are elevated, which means that during floods or cyclones, they can actually work as cyclone centers. These are frugal innovations from our end.

Felicia Jackson
So it's basically learning what's possible and transforming the way in which you do things to fit a changing environment, and at the same time ensuring that what you develop and deploy is multipurpose.

Ashfaq Zaman:
Absolutely, absolutely. And we just have to—you know, once we have done it, once we have seen the success—I think the most important part is to basically replicate it elsewhere. Because most of the time these are homegrown solutions. Maybe it's been identified in one part of the village, but if the government or the state can patronize that, and they can take the learning and replicate it in all the other areas, then it becomes part of your national policy and you truly get the benefit tenfold.

Felicia Jackson:
Yeah. And do you think that is how we make climate finance more efficient? Because one of the challenges—there have been so many battles over the amounts of climate finance.

In the original Kyoto Protocol, the idea was "common but differentiated responsibilities" and that Annex I countries should be providing finance. And then there were all the arguments—well, is it public finance, is it private finance, how much should it be? And then fast-start finance was repurposed overseas development aid, and it got incredibly complicated and confusing.

And then of course there was the agreement under Paris to provide $100 billion, which took, I think, until this year—possibly last year—to actually be deployed. And then, of course, the recent COP in Azerbaijan, where I think the final sum agreed—while it was more than was originally on the table—is a drop in the bucket compared to the $1 trillion that the Global South has said it needs in order to address climate change.

So what do we do?

Ashfaq Zaman:
Yeah, before I address your particular question, I think the way we are seeing things needs a little bit of redefinition. We probably need to have a fresh look at this. You see, 78% of this pollution is actually done by the—well, the Western world, if I may be very blunt about it—or the developed economies. And we are the ones who are suffering in the Global South or the developing economies.

And the whole debate is about climate finance. I think the debate should be about **climate justice**, because it's not justified. You know, we are dealing with problems. Bangladesh, for example, has been dealing with a problem of almost $12 billion in losses, 1.3 million people displaced—where we probably had 0.3% contribution to the overall problem. That is injustice, plain and simple.

If you put it in a legal perspective, that's injustice. So I think climate finance should not be the main focus. Climate justice should be the central focus. And if you put that into perspective, a lot of things could be addressed.

Again, we always talk about saving the planet, but essentially, if you really break it down, it's actually about saving humans. That's the core matter. If my economy is dying, if my people are dying, that's really what matters. We can make it fancy by using many fancy terms, but at the end of the day it's the humans who are getting affected.

You see the pollution in Lahore, the pollution in Delhi, the pollution in Dhaka. It's difficult for our children to breathe at this point. We do have some contribution—but not most of it.

Felicia Jackson:
No. And I think that's well understood by those who really understand what's going on in the climate sphere. But the reality is that a lot of people don't understand it. And if I'm going to be brutal about it, what you've seen politically in the Global North is that governments are not being politically penalized for not stepping up and taking action.

So while I may agree with you that it's an issue of climate justice, that doesn't change what is being agreed to or what is going on.
One of the questions—and one of my interests in the concept of climate resilience—is how you can turn the reality of the need for climate justice into something that can be understood politically in the economies of the Global North. And for me, that seems to be the connections between different economies.

Because when there are problems in a place like Bangladesh—honestly, I hate to say it—but part of the way a lot of humans behave is, if it doesn't affect them, they don't think about it.
So how does that connection work? And do you think that is a useful way of leveraging change?

Ashfaq Zaman
I think first and foremost, in global seats—in global forums, be it the COP summit or any other forum—I think those countries who are suffering the most need the biggest seat. Only then can the policies reflect the real needs. Because we are the sufferers, we know the solutions firsthand, and we know the problems firsthand as well.

Often this is not actually the case. It's being run by the global leaders who are part of the problem, but not necessarily facing the main consequences. You know, if you're not at the table, you're on the menu—and we are becoming part of the menu.

So we need the bigger seat, because the Global South—if you look closely—we have the **will**, but we don't have the **wealth**. The West or the developed economies probably have the **wealth**, but not necessarily the **will**, as we can clearly see.

And there needs to be a balance between these two elements. When the Global South takes leadership positions and they run the strategic apex—the frameworks, the practicality of it—I think eventually there will be a time when they will be talking about **enforcements**, **consequences**, and **penalties**.

Felicia Jackson:
Because while it makes a lot of sense on one level—that those most at risk from climate change should have the largest voice about how to deal with it—the reality is the current treaties don't have an enforcement mechanism.

You have to get agreement from everybody to move forward. And until you can find a way to make the economies of the Global North—and bluntly, that means the voters—understand the consequences of inaction, there will not be a political penalty.
And without a political penalty, it's unlikely that those governments—who are trying to deal with geopolitical tension, inflation, and their own domestic concerns—are going to prioritize climate action.

How do we make that connection? How do we show that the resilience of economies like Bangladesh—and other economies in the Global South—is necessary for the resilience of economies in the Global North?

Ashfaq Zaman
I think first and foremost, the Global South needs to be unified. Right now, we're all fighting in our own way. Bangladesh, for example, is primarily focused on the problems within Bangladesh. But climate doesn't work that way—it works at a macro level.

What's happening in the Philippines will eventually affect us. What's happening in Nepal—the sedimentation, the changes in the Himalayas—will affect us too. So I believe the Global South needs a more unified voice.

We already have global platforms like the UN where we can push for resolutions that are ratified by most nations. But we need to see a unified and serious approach from the Global South on this agenda.
I'll go one step further and say that we should create our **own platform**. Just like we have the OIC for Muslim countries or regional forums for the Middle East, there could be a **Global South Forum for Climate**.

This forum should advocate, apply political pressure, and crucially—**leverage our diaspora**. One of our biggest strengths in the Global South is our large diaspora, which can make a significant impact in the political economies of countries like the UK and the USA, as we've seen in recent elections.

It has to be a well-planned, well-strategized, unified effort. And again, I'll return to my earlier point: we need **an innovative outlook**. Historically, the Global South has waited and hoped for support from the advanced economies. But we now know—it's not coming. It's been false promises. It's time to recognize that and start taking action on our own. If we can do that, that's step one.

I'll add another idea I've written about in some of my op-eds: **Big Tech**. If you look at their economic size, companies like Google or Apple are bigger than the GDP of 14 or 15 developing nations combined.

They also have a **moral obligation**. Often their founders, their CEOs—these are problem-solvers at heart. So we need to **engage them**, bring them to the table. They have the funds, the technological capacity, and the expertise.

And I believe, if enough pressure is applied, they might also have the **will**.

Felicia Jackson:
You mentioned the recent U.S. election, and we're talking about leadership and how that might change things. What do you think the impact of a **Trump-led government** would be on the overall climate conversation?

Ashfaq Zaman:
To be honest, I have a rather controversial viewpoint on that: I think it might actually be better. You see, when we're chasing a dream that doesn't reflect reality, it's going to bite us—hard. But when we clearly diagnose the problem, that's when real solutions become possible.

Not knowing you have cancer is worse than actually having it. If you can identify it early, you can treat it. With a Trump administration, one thing is very clear: the U.S. will pull out of pledges and commitments like the Paris Accord. He's already declared that. His stance is known. So now we know where we stand. We can stop living in a utopia, hoping that things will somehow work out. We now know the problem. We know who supports us—and who doesn't. That clarity could work to our advantage, as long as we are prepared to take matters into our own hands, stop relying on global leaders who are doing very little, and start creating solutions ourselves.

Felicia Jackson:
That's a fascinating idea—because to a certain extent, there's an assumption that the climate crisis is such a big problem that only governments can address it.
But we also know that if you scale up a hundred million small actions, it can make a huge difference. So perhaps the idea that individuals and individual nations can start moving forward on their own is a really important way to look at it.

I suppose my final question is: What haven't I asked you that I should have?

Ashfaq Zaman:
We talked about innovation—which is my field of interest. And if you look at what's happening globally, all the major problems are being solved through technological advancement—whether in healthcare, finance, or energy.

So I think we need to ask: How can technology enable us to tackle global warming? Now yes, technology itself is sometimes the culprit—its production requires a lot of energy and resources.

Felicia Jackson:
Exactly. There's been a lot of talk about critical minerals lately, especially with China's embargo on exporting some of them. One of my concerns is: are we waiting for technological solutions to the detriment of non-technological action—just because those other actions are harder to quantify, value, or measure?
Is technology alone going to be enough?

Ashfaq Zaman:
Brilliant question. I think it needs to be a combination—a combination therapy. We need frugal innovation—that's key—because it doesn't require huge funding. It's indigenous. It's in our DNA. That's how we've survived for so long.
What we need now is a bit more research to optimize these local solutions. Take the floating farms in Bangladesh: if Harvard or

Cambridge were to study them, they might find ways to make them 20–30% more efficient. That kind of optimization could have the same impact as a $30 million grant.

But yes, we also need tech. Because tech can accelerate things. It can create fast, scalable, and effective solutions. Look at COVID: what used to take ten years to develop—a vaccine—was delivered in one year.

Of course, there were side effects and issues. But the fact that we could respond that fast? That was technology. So yes, I'm very optimistic about what tech can do. What matters is the intent behind it. If Big Tech has the right intent, they have the funds and the ability to create breakthrough solutions.

We might even get to a point where coal plants produce net-zero emissions. Who knows? We've seen rockets go up and come back. We might one day harvest energy from other planets.

It's all about intent—and that's what we need to ignite now. Frugal innovation is crucial, but with the way global warming is accelerating, we also need to move faster.

Felicia Jackson:
There's absolutely a critical need for rapid action. And in many ways, that's where my own focus on the financial aspect comes from. Because if we can get capital to shift direction, we change the emissions trajectory, the economy, and how we live. I also really appreciated your COVID analogy. One of the things I've heard in that context is: COVID happened to everyone at once. It was immediate. You knew someone affected.
But climate change? It happens elsewhere. It's a risk multiplier—it worsens things that are already bad. It's harder to say, "This specific event was caused by climate." So there are constant debates and confusion. And the challenge is connecting what happens in Bangladesh with what happens in the UK in a way that actually changes mindsets.

Ashfaq Zaman:
Oh, absolutely. I don't think we're far from a moment when the whole world realizes this. It's just a matter of time. But we don't want to wait until we've suffered too much. We don't want to wait until irreversible damage has been done. So yes, it's about advocacy, and about spreading the right information. We need better impact analysis, better climate literacy, and stronger public awareness.

And again—we may have to go back to technology. Look at social media: it can change the outcome of elections. That's how powerful it is. So we must use it to create public perception—to cut through the misinformation and confusion around climate change.

We were talking about myths earlier—those need to be debunked strategically. Look at how the internet enabled movements like Black Lives Matter and MeToo. Those issues existed long before—but it was strategic digital campaigns that brought them to global prominence. We need a similarly powerful, orchestrated strategy for climate literacy and public understanding.

Felicia Jackson:
I completely agree. That's absolutely the perfect note to end this conversation on.
Ashfaq, thank you so much for joining us today. I've really enjoyed listening to you and learning about your work. And to our listeners—thank you for joining us too. I hope you found today interesting. And if anyone has grand ideas for a global climate literacy campaign—please get in touch!

Ashfaq Zaman:
Thank you very much. Thank you for your time.

About the Author

Ashfaq Zaman is a thought leader, policy strategist, and founder of Dhaka Forum Initiative. Educated at Cambridge and Oxford, and a Master of Design Thinking from Stanford University, he is widely recognized for his expertise in foreign policy, AI for public good, and e-governance.

He has advised governments on building Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) to drive public service innovation and inclusion.

As a former advisor to the British Queen's Young Leaders Programme under the Queen's Commonwealth Trust, Zaman embodies the voice of the Global South, advocating for inclusive growth and bold climate action.

One of Bangladesh's most prolific international op-ed contributors, he invites readers to reflect deeply, challenge established narratives, and reimagine a future-ready world shaped by innovation, technology for social good, and digital equality.

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