

Towards Sustainable Social Development in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This special issue is a tribute to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II (21 April 1926 – 8 September 2022), who was the Head of the Commonwealth. Bangladesh became the 32nd member of the Commonwealth on 18 April 1972. As the Head of Commonwealth, Her Majesty was engaged in a number of Sustainable Development programs among the member states. In Bangladesh, her visit in 1983, alongside eulogisation on several occasions about the coping and resilience of the people of Bangladesh when natural disasters attacked the country, gave confidence and conviction among the people of Bangladesh, which in turn significantly impacted sustainable social development.

Social development is multidimensional as it covers all social sectors that bring about all-around development to health, education, family planning, environment, gender equality, infrastructure, social services and so on. It is not only social development but sustainable social development which has been recently emphasised by academics, researchers, development partners, environmentalists and many others.

Bangladesh, a lower middle-income country, has been thriving to ensure sustainable social development in different sectors, resulting in some commendable outcomes, despite many barriers that she faces now. The articles included in this special issue of *Space and Culture, India* journal, have focused on multidimensional and multifarious factors relating to sustainable social development in Bangladesh. The diverse perspectives explain and critically analyse varied issues that are directly linked to sustainable development goals (SDGs) declared by the United Nations (UN), which may be considered important for the overall improvement of the social development indicators of Bangladesh. These articles could be useful for the policymakers concerned about ensuring sustainable social development not only in Bangladesh but in all developing and least developed countries worldwide.

Keywords: Sustainable Social Development; Social Services; Pregnant Women; Political Economy; Patient's Safety; Bangladesh

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Introduction

This special issue is dedicated to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who passed away on 8 September 2022. She visited Bangladesh twice during her 70-year-long monarchy, once in 1961 during Pakistani rule and then in November 1983, when Bangladesh had already emerged as an independent and sovereign state. Both the times she visited Bangladesh under military rule. During her second visit, she met rural women in Gazipur and was pleased to see the women making puffed rice. The queen appreciated the rural women making handicrafts and selling them for their livelihoods. On several occasions, Her Majesty praised how Bangladesh dealt with recurrent natural disasters and offered sympathy to the disaster-affected people. Her demise causes the loss of a true friend of Bangladesh (Billah, 2022).

Bangladesh has been considered a 'development surprise' in entire South Asia because of its outstanding progress in the manifold fields of socioeconomic sectors, especially during the last one and half decades. Despite facing daunting challenges like recurring natural disasters, severe political instability, acute poverty, etc. immediately after the independence of the country, it has managed to overcome many of the difficulties and come up with significant improvements with respect to its socioeconomic indicators (Sawada et al., 2018). Bangladesh emerged on 16 December 1971 as an independent and sovereign country from the clutches of Pakistan after making the supreme sacrifice whilst putting strong resistance against the Pakistani army and its Bangladeshi collaborators, causing massive bloodshed of 3 million Bangladeshi people (Das et al., 2022). Though Bangladesh was born with such a magnitude of sacrifice, many politicians and economists around the world doubted its subsistence in the future because of its all-around dependency on other countries with a considerable population density. US foreign Secretary Henry Kissinger, notoriously known as a crooked personality, did everything to prevent Bangladesh from becoming an independent

country by extending all kinds of support to Pakistan during the liberation war in 1971. He went on to make a statement on Bangladesh after its independence that Bangladesh was a 'bottomless basket' considering its overall precarious socioeconomic conditions, depicting a gloomy future of the country (Chowdhury, 2008). This forecasting of a bottomless basket has been proven wrong as the country has been making steady progress in all socioeconomic fields, drastically reducing the poverty rate.

Bangladesh was one of the poorest countries in the world in 1971 but strived to achieve the status of a lower-middle income country in 2015. The poverty rate declined sharply from 43.5% in 1991 to 14.3% in 2016, according to the international poverty line, which shows income less than US\$1.90 a day as living below the poverty line (The World Bank, 2022). Bangladesh has maintained a more than 6% GDP growth rate over the last decade, resulting in improved quality of life for around 160 million people. In 1974, per capita income in Bangladesh was less than US\$100, and the poverty rate was over 70% (Sawada et al. 2018). Since then, per capita income consistently grew at the average rate of 1.9% per annum from 1975 to 2002; more specifically, it grew at the average rate of 3% from 1990 to 2002 (UNDP, 2004). It has been noted that Bangladesh was able to pull out over 15 million people from poverty from 1992 to date, and the per capita income increased from US\$90 in 1973 to US\$1314 in 2015.

Along with the impressive reduction of poverty and economic development, human development indexes of the country equally transformed into illuminating figures as life expectancy, literacy rate, food intake, etc. substantially increased (Hussain & Haque, 2017). The per capita income in the country was the US\$2,591 during the 2020-21 fiscal year, which has now reached the US\$2,824 during the 2021-22 fiscal year by a 9% year-on-year increase ("Bangladesh's per capita," 2022), that will further boost the economy of the country. Bangladesh was ranked 129th out of 191 countries on Human Development Index (HDI)

during 2021-22, and 133rd among 189 countries during 2020-21. The life expectancy has also increased to 74.2 years by 2022 (UNDP, 2022). Against this backdrop, multiple issues related to sustainable development in the context of Bangladesh have been critically discussed and analysed in this special issue of the journal.

Sustainable Development Goals

Bangladesh accomplished most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which have brought appreciation and recognition from the international communities, including the United Nations (UN). The country is now set to achieve the sustainable development goals (SDGs) declared in a conference of the UN in 2012, setting 17 goals, aiming to ensure viable socioeconomic development by 2030. Visible achievements have been made with regards to the goals of no poverty, zero hunger, good health and well-being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation. People living below the upper poverty line have plummeted from 31.5% in 2010 to 24.3% in 2016. The percentage of people suffering from undernourishment was 16.4 in 2016, which decreased to 14.7 in 2017. The mortality rate of below 5 was 125 in 1995, which declined in 2019 to 28. The maternal mortality rate was 165 per 100,000 live births in 2015, which decreased to 81 per 100,000 live births in 2019. In 2015, 4.3 per thousand people suffered from malaria, but in 2019, the incidence of malaria suffering came down to 1.6 per thousand people. The literacy rate has increased from 53.5% in 2015 to 73.9% in 2018. Currently, 82.6% of primary school students successfully completed their primary education, which has been the highest ever since the country's independence. The gender gap based on Global Gender Gap Index has reduced from the 68th position of 153 countries in 2014 to the 50th position in 2019. Around 89% of the household members had a source of pure drinking water in 2015, which has gone up to 98.5% in 2019. Better sanitation facilities were available for 63% of household members in 2015, up to 84.6% in 2019. The number of people accessing electricity has substantially increased over the last decade, as 74.44% of people had

access to electricity in 2015, and now it has gone up to 92% of people having access to electricity. Apart from the achievements mentioned above, steps are also taken toward different other goals attempting sustainable development to be obtained by 2030 ("Bangladesh performing", 2021; Rahman, 2021; Talukdar, 2022). Despite these remarkable successes, the country has been confronting a number of hurdles towards achieving the SDGs within the stipulated time. Significant challenges in this regard are lack of adequate resources, absence of international partnership and low revenue-GDP ratio ("Bangladesh performing", 2021). Besides, there are other factors too that slow down the achievements of SDGs in Bangladesh. This special issue of *Space and Culture, India* journal, deals with some of these 'other issues' that cause hindrances towards reaching SDGs in the country.

Articles focus on the issues related to SDGs

The articles included in this special issue of *Space and Culture, India* journal, focus on those issues that are directly related to SDGs and their overall situation in the context of Bangladesh. As mentioned, Bangladesh has already made robust efforts toward achieving SDGs, but many challenges need to be overcome to reach the goals. Thus, this special issue concentrates on social service programmes, local level budgeting, environmental and social effects of stone quarrying, pregnant women's mental and physical health, challenges of single motherhood, patients' safety, rural development initiatives and women's role in the district council, etc.

The study on sustainable development goals and social service programmes found that most of the programmes introduced at the sub-district levels are related to SDGs, but programmes are mostly connected to Goals 1 and 2, and also, these programmes were designed before the adoption of SDGs of UN. Thus, the author recommends that fresh programmes that are more consistent with SDGs may be undertaken. Moreover, the author identifies some limitations of these programmes, like inappropriate

prospective beneficiary selection, insufficient funds, limited coverage and lack of diversity, etc.

The article on the political economy of local level budgeting shows how people's participation and accountability in the activities of the lowest tier of local government in Bangladesh have been abused by the chairperson of the council and other elites. The authors argue that the beneficiaries of local government's initiatives, in many cases, are not the local common people but rather the leaders of dominant political parties, local elites, and other influential ones.

The study on the environmental and social effects of stone quarrying brings up some critical issues relating to environmental degradation and adverse social impacts caused by stone quarrying at a tourist spot in Bangladesh. The authors demonstrate how stone crushing triggers environmental disasters in the surrounding areas using *booma machines*. It has been recommended that stone be extracted during the monsoon without using machines, instead, manual quarrying may be carried out. The authors further suggest that stone quarrying in the lands of the forest department, near the hills, hillocks and arable lands, needs to be stopped to maintain ecological balance. The indigenous people face forcible eviction because of stone quarrying, and their land is often grabbed by the stone miners as well as the members of the mainstream community, which must be strictly dealt with.

The study on love, hope and despair of pregnant slum women focuses on abuse, torture, oppression of different sorts, ignorance and many other difficulties the slum women go through during the pregnancy, causing harms to the baby in the womb. The authors contend that these pregnant women do not have the opportunities to share their predicaments with anyone else, making their socio-psychological state weak and vulnerable, ultimately affecting their yet-to-be-born baby. Thus the researchers recommend psychological counselling for slum men and women both to cause sound health for pregnant slum women, ensuring healthy babies from them.

An article on the challenges of single motherhood deals with the overall vulnerability of single mothers in the rural context of Bangladesh. It shows how patriarchal and masculine mindsets, stigmatisation and violation of customary norms make the single mothers' life and livelihoods endangered. The authors recommend interventions considering social, economic, cultural and emotional aspects to reduce the vulnerability of single mothers living in the country's rural areas.

The article on patients' safety is related to the health of the patients admitted to the hospitals. The researcher argues that hospital social service is essential to ensure patients' safety and security. But, due to the absence of recognition of social work in Bangladesh, hospital social workers are not well respected, and their services are not considered essential, jeopardising the patients' safety and protection.

A study on a rural development initiative through a local government support project sheds light on some of the good practices that strengthen the lowest tier of local government in the rural areas that efficiently makes local planning and implementation of different programmes to benefit the local people using a participatory approach. According to the author, the project's support to the local government with the participation of various stakeholders and practice of transparency has ensured its good governance at the grassroots levels that helps alleviate poverty, raises public awareness and makes the elected leaders skilled and responsible. The author points out that the local government in rural areas needs to be strengthened and empowered to achieve SDGs in Bangladesh.

The article on the role of females in district council explains how women representatives in local governments could not ensure the improvement of the situation of women at the local levels as expected. Although the national constitution provides women representatives in the local government to ensure women's empowerment, their role in local government activities is often constrained by manifold hurdles they face. The author suggests that

instead of only increasing the number of female representatives in local government, there should be more emphasis on gender equity. The researcher feels that the gender-based identity of women in the local government needs to be questioned; instead, their identity, like the male representatives, should be only the people's representatives, thus, keeping the gender lens aside.

The analyses of these issues could be helpful for the policymakers and administrators of Bangladesh to take appropriate measures so that the barriers to obtaining SDGs be removed and reaching the goals might be ensured by 2030. Moreover, these articles could be good examples of learning for many developing and least developed countries striving to attain the SDGs.

Conclusion

Poverty is the common enemy of most South Asian countries, including Bangladesh. All other social problems across South Asia may be described as the by-product of poverty. Thus, fighting poverty should be this region's first and top priority, which could be instrumental in addressing many other social problems. Bangladesh has made tremendous efforts to fight poverty over the last couple of decades, gradually reducing poverty and improving social development indicators. Apart from measures taken to eradicate poverty, many policies and programmes have so far been formulated and implemented to address problems like unemployment, illiteracy, lack of health and hygiene, child and maternal mortality, malnutrition, gender discrimination, overpopulation, lack of education for women, absence of women in jobs and many more. MDGs of the UN set eight goals like reducing poverty, infant and under-5 mortality, child malnutrition, increasing school enrolment and completion, addressing gender disparities in schools, etc., to be achieved by 2015, considering 1990 as the base year. Bangladesh has achieved the targets of many MDGs like considerable reduction of poverty, decreased under-5 mortality, increased child enrolment in schools, reduced gender disparities in schooling,

and so forth. Substantial strides have also been grounded to obtain the SDGs from the part of Bangladesh after attaining many of the MDGs. There are 17 goals in SDGs, and Bangladesh looks confident as it has already tried to reach some of the goals, prioritising further poverty reduction, removal of hunger, health and well-being, standard education, gender equality and pure drinking water, and hygienic sanitation. Bangladesh's efforts to achieve MDGs and SDGs have drawn the attention of international actors who have highly praised its outstanding performance in this regard.

The articles on different issues relating to SDGs and their possible achievements in the context of Bangladesh may be considered paramount not only for attaining the SDGs in Bangladesh but may be helpful for many developing countries. The experience of Bangladesh in achieving MDGs and the robust steps already taken to achieve SDGs could be considered a kind of model that may be instrumental in fighting poverty and the by-products of poverty in developing nations. Going through these articles may help form perspectives that can push the concerned to take an appropriate approach to strike poverty, which has been causing many other socio-economic problems in the poorer nations. Therefore, this special issue could be critical reading for those who think of poverty and its eradication, leading to sustainable social development.

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