

# **Leave No One Behind**

**A H M Masum Billah**

The aspiration to transform Bangladesh into a smart nation by 2041 transcends beyond traditional notions of technological progress and economic metrics. It entails harnessing emerging technologies, networks, and data to create innovative solutions that propel the nation's development while steadfastly upholding the principles of equitable rights and opportunities for all its citizens. An indispensable dimension of this visionary endeavor is the active participation and contributions of every individual, including those with disabilities, constituting a population of nearly 46 lakh individuals. Their role in the realization of the Smart Bangladesh vision is immeasurable and should not be underestimated.

Smart Bangladesh 2041 is underpinned by several fundamental pillars, each playing a pivotal role in the nation's transformation. These pillars encompass achieving high-income status, eradicating poverty, attaining high human development, fostering sustainable urbanization, and, most importantly, ensuring equity. This vision goes beyond mere economic growth and extends its ambit to encompass social and human development. It is within this multifaceted context that the invaluable contributions of individuals with disabilities become particularly significant.

Data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reveals that approximately 46 lakh individuals in the country live with various forms of disabilities, with physical disabilities being the most prevalent at 1.35 percent. Visual and hearing impairments also represent significant categories within this population. While these statistics shed light on the magnitude of the challenge, they simultaneously underscore the immense potential for inclusivity and empowerment.

In the pursuit of Smart Bangladesh by 2041, ensuring accessibility to digital services and technologies for all citizens, including those with disabilities, is paramount. To this end, the approval of the Digital Service and Web Designing Guideline for Inclusive Accessibility in 2022 signifies the nation's unwavering commitment to providing inclusive digital services for all. This commitment seeks to empower individuals with disabilities and actively involve them in the realization of a Smart Bangladesh.

Individuals with disabilities are not a burden to the nation; rather, they represent a valuable human resource that, when adequately empowered, can make substantial contributions to the nation's progress. In the pursuit of building a developed Bangladesh, it is incumbent upon society to ensure that the rights and opportunities of individuals with disabilities are safeguarded. These individuals are not seeking charity but rather a fair opportunity to demonstrate their competence and dedication as contributors to the nation's growth.

Within the context of individuals with disabilities, this underscores the pivotal role of technology in enhancing the quality of life for this demographic. The vision accentuates the necessity for technology to be inclusive and accessible, enabling individuals with disabilities to independently access information, communicate, and navigate their surroundings. The evolution of Smart Bangladesh places a high priority on empowering individuals with disabilities through technology, enabling their active participation in education and employment. It emphasizes the development of assistive technologies and accessible digital services to facilitate their engagement in the digital era. For instance, individuals with visual impairments can utilize screen readers and braille displays, while those with mobility impairments can employ voice commands and adaptive devices to interact with digital platforms.

Moreover, Smart Bangladesh advocates for inclusive policies that ensure individuals with disabilities have equal access to government services and civic engagement. These policies involve making government buildings and information accessible and designing public transportation with their specific needs in mind. Active representation ensures their voices are heard, leading to policies addressing their unique challenges and promoting inclusion.

Additionally, Smart Bangladesh should recognize and actively encourage the entrepreneurial drive within the disability community. It should provide support and resources to empower individuals with disabilities to pursue entrepreneurship. These individuals can create businesses specializing in assistive technologies, accessible products, and services, offering not only tailored solutions but also significant global market potential.

In this regard, the government has taken substantial steps to enhance the lives of individuals with disabilities across the country. To further enhance the quality of life for people with disabilities, the Neuro-Developmental Disability Protection Trust Act was enacted in 2013. Moreover, legislative measures, such as Section 2 (13) of the Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013, define 'accessibility' and mandate making existing public facilities suitable for use by disabled persons. These actions underline the nation's commitment to equal opportunities, accessibility, and inclusion for all citizens, including those with disabilities.

Creating accessible infrastructure is vital for empowering individuals with disabilities in Smart Bangladesh 2041. This includes ramps, tactile paving, and inclusive public transportation systems, enhancing mobility and independence. Education must continually evolve to meet diverse learners' needs, offering accessible materials and adaptive technologies. Inclusive hiring practices in the job market, like reasonable accommodations, foster diversity, innovation, and productivity. Despite the remarkable contributions of individuals with disabilities, there's still substantial work needed for complete inclusion. Efforts in infrastructure, education, and employment practices collectively ensure a more inclusive Smart Bangladesh 2041, recognizing the potential of all citizens, regardless of their abilities.

**Advocacy groups and awareness campaigns are instrumental in promoting the rights and abilities of individuals with disabilities. They advocate for policy changes, resource access, and removing barriers to full participation of individuals with disabilities. These efforts challenge stereotypes, educate the public about diverse abilities, and nurture a culture of inclusion, ultimately creating a more inclusive society.**

In conclusion, these key areas form integral components in the effort to promote inclusivity and empower individuals with disabilities, contributing to the realization of the Smart Bangladesh vision by 2041. Smart Bangladesh 2041 is not merely a vision of technological advancement and economic growth; it is a vision rooted in principles of equity, inclusivity, and empowerment for all citizens. As we progress towards our goal of graduating from the UN's Least Developed Countries (LDC) list in 2026, it is essential to acknowledge the potential and capabilities of every individual, regardless of their physical or sensory limitations. By prioritizing accessible infrastructure, education, inclusive employment, healthcare, and awareness, Bangladesh can move towards a future of full participation and prosperity for all citizens, regardless of their abilities. By tapping into the talents, abilities, and inventive spirit of people with disabilities, we can turn the vision of a prosperous Smart Bangladesh by 2041, built on the principles of equal rights and opportunities, into a tangible reality.

#

Writer: Director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

PID Feature