

# Smart Bangladesh for Inclusive Future

## Parikshit Chowdhury

Arising from the aftermath of war into a thriving democracy with a promising future, Bangladesh is now embarking on the path towards a 'Smart Bangladesh.' This initiative reflects a forward-looking commitment to utilizing cutting-edge technologies and innovative solutions. The visionary pursuit involves a comprehensive approach that integrates digitalization, sustainable planning, and infrastructure development. Bangladesh aims to establish a dynamic and efficient ecosystem, enhancing the quality of life for its citizens and positioning the nation as a beacon of excellence in global smart and sustainable development.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina unveiled this master plan on December 12, 2022, with the ecosystem grounded on four key pillars: "Smart Citizen," "Smart Government," "Smart Society," and "Smart Economy." The government is actively engaging in extensive discussions with relevant stakeholders to implement these initiatives.

The Smart Citizen Pillar encompasses four key initiatives focusing on Universal Digital ID, Citizen up-skilling, Digital Collaboration Platforms, and the Smart Bangladesh Campaign. These programs empower each citizen to bring about positive changes and actively contribute to nation-building.

Smart governance involves several components such as smart education, a sophisticated healthcare system, efficient land management, advanced agriculture practices, e-marketplaces, streamlined revenue management, and enhanced employability, all operating under the umbrella of e-governance.

The Smart Society initiative focuses on building an inclusive and collaborative society that leads a sustainable lifestyle in a Green Bangladesh, where equality is fundamental

The Smart Economy aims to establish a circular economy driven by industry modernization, growth in the ICT sector, the development of a startup ecosystem, and supported by a robust technological infrastructure.

Meanwhile, during her initial meeting with secretaries, the Prime Minister issued directives to govern Bangladesh in alignment with the election manifesto she had unveiled before the 12th parliamentary election. This manifesto is centered around the overarching theme of 'Smart Bangladesh.'

We all know that Bangladesh has already gained the foundation for realizing the dream of Honorable Prime Minister for building a Smart Bangladesh. Continuing from Digital Bangladesh Vision 2021, the Bangladesh government has adopted Vision 2041 with the goal of eradicating extreme poverty and achieving high-income country status by 2041. It embeds a collective national aspiration of becoming an advanced economy by transcending the so called 'middle-income trap,' which many Asian countries have not been able to escape.

The country's narrative of success has been mounted in a variety of fields by the actions taken thus far, ranging from economic transformation and wellbeing of people, to innovation and entrepreneurship, to e-governance and international recognition.

Since 2009, This road towards becoming a digital nation has seen an extraordinary spread of ICT in these past years. Bangladesh has made significant strides in social development, particularly in education, healthcare, and gender equality. The country has achieved near-universal primary education enrollment, and literacy rates have increased steadily. Life expectancy has also improved, from 55 years in 1971 to 72 years in 2023.

Bangladesh is currently among the five fastest growing economies in the world, ranking 35<sup>th</sup> in terms of GDP. It has full filled all the criteria for the graduation to developing country from the LDC status and has been confirmed to be graduated from the LDC in 2026. Today, the per capita income is 5 times higher than it was in 2008. Our gross domestic product (GDP) is expected to grow by 6.5% in FY2024, compared to the 6.0% growth in the previous fiscal year, according to the latest Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The Padma Bridge, an engineering marvel, constructed with our own finance worth over US\$3.8 billion stands as a symbol of the economic transformation of Bangladesh. People are now getting full benefits of some other mega projects such as the Dhaka Metro Rail, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Karnaphuli River Tunnel (the first ever under the river tunnel in South Asia), first ever Elevated Expressway in Dhaka, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Terminal at Hazrat ShahJalal International Airport. Bangabandhu Satellite-1 and the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant (the 33<sup>rd</sup> Country in the world to produce to produce nuclear power) embody the nation's ambitious aspirations, propelling the country's economic growth. Construction of 564 Model Masjid and Islamic Cultural Centers across Bangladesh, Deep-Sea Port are other examples of building a smart country.

Government implemented 54 initiatives to strengthen the social safety net programme for the welfare and development of disadvantaged people in the country including the destitute, poor, helpless children, the disabled, adolescents, women (who are mistreated by husbands) and the elderly people. An allocation of Tk 1.26 trillion (Tk 126,272 crore) has been proposed for the social safety net programmes in the budget for FY 2023-24. Identifying the pitfalls of the social protection system and realizing the importance of improving it to meet certain objectives, Bangladesh adopted the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) in 2015. The government has allocated Tk 126,272 crore, around 7.4 percent more than last year's social protection allocation of Tk 113,576 crore.

With the aim of inclusive development, cent percent landless-homeless families of 334 upazilas in 21 districts have been rehabilitated in the country under the Ashrayan project. A total of 5, 55, 617 landless-homeless families were rehabilitated under this project from 1997 to July 2023- a unique instance in the world. Distribution of over 43 crore free copies of textbooks every year on the 1st of January is another notable initiative. All these programs gained enormous popularity in policy level in order to address the poverty and vulnerability in developing countries.

In the context of a smart nation, inclusivity is defined by the principle of leaving no one behind. The government has achieved noteworthy milestones in the pursuit of an inclusive and equitable society, underscoring the nation's steadfast commitment to comprehensive growth and societal advancement under the visionary leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

As Bangladesh aspires to become a "smart" nation, prioritizing inclusivity and social progress is imperative for its development agenda. It involves ensuring that everyone has the opportunity to partake in and reap the benefits of this growth. This is pivotal for poverty reduction, fostering social cohesion, and attaining sustainable development, addressing persistent social and economic challenges in Bangladesh. Such initiatives have played a crucial role in narrowing societal gaps and fostering a more inclusive environment.

To actualize this vision, the government is persisting in prioritizing inclusive policies and initiatives that cater to the needs of the most vulnerable. This involves investing in social protection programs, such as cash transfers and food assistance, to support those in extreme poverty. Additionally, promoting gender equality, empowering women, and safeguarding the rights of ethnic minorities and marginalized groups are getting more preference.

Facilitating an environment conducive to private sector investment and entrepreneurship, particularly in sectors conducive to inclusive growth like agriculture, small and medium-sized enterprises, and the digital economy, is on the priority list of government.

The collaboration of the government, private sector, and civil society is essential in ensuring that no one is excluded on the path to sustainable development. Addressing the root causes of inequality and exclusion, coupled with harnessing technology and innovation, can pave the way for a more just and equitable society in Bangladesh.

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