

**Bangladesh**  
**Citizens' Perspective on Sustainable Development**

**Executive Summary**

*of the key messages Arising from deliberations of  
The Dhaka Meeting on Sustainable Development in Bangladesh:  
Achievements, Opportunities & Challenges at RIO+10*

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**Published by**  
Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP)

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Published by  
Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP)

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ISBN 984 8126 16 03

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## Preface

This is the executive summary of the key messages arising from deliberations at the **Dhaka Meet on Sustainable Development in Bangladesh: Achievements, Opportunities, and Challenges at Rio+10** held in Dhaka during 15-18 March 2002, in respect of various themes covered. The selection of what is included in this summary out of many challenges identified and recommendations offered in respect of each topic has been made by the editors. Details are available in the main report under the same title, which have been prepared on the basis of the presentations made and suggestions and comments offered during the deliberations. Over 1000 experts, professionals, and other interested persons participated in the 22 workshops held (one on each of the 22 themes covered), up to 50 in each.

We are thankful to all those who participated in the Meet in one capacity or another and all those, particularly BUP staff members, who worked hard to help make it all happen. The names of the guest of honour at the inaugural session and keynote speakers at and chairs of various workshops are recorded in the main report. The composition of the Steering Committee of the Meet is shown on page ii.

We thankfully acknowledge that the conference was organized with financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Dhaka.

Dhaka  
August 2002

Q K Ahmad  
Chairman, BUP

## **Introduction**

The world is passing through an age of unprecedented economic and technological advancement, and, at the same time, of persisting high levels of poverty, glaring and increasing inequity—internationally, nationally, and inter-generationally—and intensifying threats to the sustainability of the ecosystems as a result of anthropogenic global warming. There are many challenges facing the global society on the pathway to a safer, more peaceful, equitable, environmentally harmonious, and prosperous world, i.e. sustainable world. Obviously, combating inequity, poverty, environmental degradation, and the intensifying adverse consequences of anthropogenic global warming top the list of major challenges. These fundamental hurdles must be overcome for achieving sustainable development. This is an ambitious goal, given the rather entrenched unfavourable realities around the world at international, national, and local levels. But there is no reason why human ingenuity, that succeeded in achieving the phenomenal economic and technological advancement, should not be able to address these challenges successfully. What is necessary, however, is that the international community, national governments, the private sector, and other relevant actors accept that sustainable development can secure a sustainable world for the present as well as future generations.

A least developed, grossly iniquitous, elite-centric, severely resource constrained, poorly governed, and highly vulnerable to natural hazards which are anticipated to be intensified in the wake of anthropogenic climate change and sea level rise, Bangladesh, the most densely populated country in the world (over 130 million in an area of 143 570 sq. km.), except for the few city and tiny states, faces a stupendously uphill task. Hence, this nation needs to mobilize that much more resolute effort to succeed.

It is therefore absolutely necessary that the vision of sustainable development take firm root in Bangladesh to galvanize the nation for the gigantic task ahead. Let all concerned come together and act—fast and with determination towards realizing that vision. The alternative is downhill—towards an abyss.

## **A Ray of Hope**

We may take heart that Bangladesh has achieved noteworthy successes in reducing population growth rate, infant mortality rate, and illiteracy, and increasing food production. Some progress has also been achieved in raising women's social status—although it is largely confined to the middle classes—and in raising awareness regarding the need for environmental protection and enhancement. The holding of three parliamentary elections since the overthrow of an autocracy in December 1990 and the resulting smooth transfer of power are significant steps towards democratic transformation of the society, despite the continued disregard of democratic norms and practices all round.

Vigorously addressing the challenges and building on these few significant successes, Bangladesh can look forward to embarking upon a sustainable development pathway.

## **A Complication**

Certain dynamics of the globally ruling free market in which Bangladesh is an active participant are inherently antagonistic to some of the fundamental imperatives of sustainable development. The latter invokes social equity and environmental protection and enhancement along with economic growth. But the former is driven by individualism, efficiency considerations, and economic growth as the core values and, hence, the capitalists are given to profligacy in the use of natural resources to generate as much economic return as possible leading to environmental degradation and to amassing more and more wealth and power accentuating inequality and social divisiveness. The free market dynamics also limit the ability of the state to act in favour of people-centered development as the capitalist sector—national actors with links to Multinational Companies (MNCs)

and Transnational Companies (TNCs)—becomes increasingly powerful and, transcending the business sector, wields much influence on the national economic, even political, management.

The big question is: can sustainable development be implemented in practice, given that free market rules, supported and facilitated by the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, the regional Development Banks, and the developed countries, and while the corporate sector (the TNCs and MNCs, in particular) wields so much power concerning both national and international governance, often undermining social progress and environmental health.

## **The Way Forward**

In order to go forward it is necessary that all those who are convinced about the efficacy of sustainable development must work towards bringing about its triumph by devising ways of shaking off the free market distractions and by clearing up any remaining confusions about the concept of sustainable development and removing various obstacles.

Efforts are needed at all spaces—local, national, regional, global. The preparatory process of the forthcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) has sought to generate ideas and proposals from different regions/countries through meetings of eminent persons, Preparatory Committee meetings (PrepComs), and other workshops and consultations. National position papers are also being prepared by the national governments for circulation during the WSSD.

It is crucial at the national level that broad-based views are generated in respect of various pertinent national and international issues relating to sustainable development for removing the contradictions and obstacles towards creating an enabling environment in a particular country for its progress towards sustainable development. The global context is extremely important in this regard, because without an enabling global environment, a developing country will find it extremely difficult, even impossible, to embark on a sustainable development pathway. Hence, while it is essential that national perspectives are developed on the basis of as widely-based consultations as possible, international aspects need to be understood properly and appropriate responses need to be developed and pursued vigorously, making use of all possible means available.

## **A Consultation on Sustainable Development in Bangladesh: The Dhaka Meet**

### ***Organization and the Themes Addressed***

To contribute to the process of reviewing what has been happening in Bangladesh in relation to sustainable development—conceptualization, policy formulation, and implementation, the Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) organized a national conference entitled **Dhaka Meet on Sustainable Development in Bangladesh: Achievements, Opportunities, and Challenges at Rio+10**, during 15–18 March 2002. The overriding purpose was to generate key messages concerning the status, the challenges, and future directions relating to the selected themes through consultations involving a large number of experts and concerned people.

A Steering Committee was set up to guide the organization of the Conference. After extensive deliberations, 22 themes, representing all the three broad constituent processes—economic, social, and environmental—of sustainable development were selected for deliberations in the context of Bangladesh. Each theme was dealt with in a separate workshop, attended by a separate group of up to 50 persons with expertise and interest in the particular subject. The participants (a total of over 1000) included policy makers, administrators, business leaders, academics, development thinkers and practitioners, journalists, community leaders, social workers, and others concerned. Following an inaugural workshop on the first day, 22 workshops were held over three days, with half a day devoted to each; up to four workshops were simultaneously held in each half-day session.

The 22 themes covered are Freedom of choice and democratic governance; Corruption, criminalization, and violence; Local government and mobilization of local people and resources; Environmental governance; Globalization; Financing; Socially responsible private-public partnership; Sustainable agriculture and food security; The role of small and medium enterprises; Energy security; Technological issues; The role of information technology; Children and youth perspectives concerning; Empowering women; Development of human capabilities: education, training, and people's health; Integrated water resources management; Managing natural disasters; Managing climate change; Bio-diversity management; Managing urbanization; The role of the media; and Cultural dimensions.

### ***The Outcome—A Brief Summary***

he needs, circumstances, and aspirations of people at large, especially the poor, women, and the disadvantaged came up for discussion again and again in various workshops. Enhanced access of the poor to decision making processes, resources, and facilities is advocated and a strong focus on improving their capability in terms of education, training, and health is recommended. Another overriding issue that came up for discussion again and again in different workshops is governance. A clarion call is made for the establishment of good governance in the country. The theme-wise briefs are set out below.

Freedom of choice is essential for the people to make the best possible contribution to their own and national development. Their latent capability can flourish through proper education, training, and health services. Quality of these services must be ensured for robust results.

***Freedom of  
Choice and***

Ensured freedom of choice and enhanced capability enable people to participate in governance effectively. An essential concomitant of good governance is people's participation. Governance must be effective, which has no room for corrupt practices and procrastination. Transparency, accountability, coordination (lateral and vertical), right person at the right place, and professionalism of the functionaries are among the key characteristics of good governance. It is urged that good governance be established. Without good governance achieving progress in any direction is severely constrained. A workable consensus on key national issues among major political parties is called for as another essential pre-requisite for effective governance. Enlightened self-interest—the better the economy and society the greater is the scope for everybody to play whatever their role is whether in government or outside—should induce the political parties to find common ground concerning major national issues for working together to contribute to the nation-building processes.

Concern is expressed about the poor law and order situation. Effective steps must be taken to improve the situation. The rule of law must be established. The judiciary must be freed from executive control. Crime, criminalization, and violence are pervasive in the country. These are major impediments to establishing a safe, peaceful, and stable social environment as well as to securing good governance. A broad-based social movement is called for to mobilize social and political forces against these anti-social activities.

***Crime and Violence***

Effective democratic local governments are necessary as a framework for local people to participate in governance and, thereby, in socio-economic processes of development. Local governments must have properly devolved authority and assured finances through allocation of a given proportion of the total annual public budget determined by law for their effective functioning.

***Local Government***

Towards facilitating good governance, the establishment of three commissions has been strongly recommended.

- A **Sustainable Human Development Commission** to prepare a strategy for sustainable development for Bangladesh and formulate policy guidelines for programming and action to that end, and for monitoring the progress.
- A **National Anti-corruption Commission** with authority to bring to book anybody from the ordinary to the high and mighty without let or hindrance.
- A permanent **Finance Commission** for fiscal decentralization; one-third of the total central government budget may be allocated to local governments for supporting various programmes/projects identified through local consultative processes.

The ongoing environmental degradation, which will be compounded by the adverse impact of anthropogenic climate change and sea level rise, must be addressed effectively in the interest of sustainable development.

#### ***Environmental Governance***

In this context, environmental governance (policy making, programme development, implementation of policies and programmes, coordination among various agencies and programmes, linkages with relevant international processes) has the key role to play and must be properly shaped, decentralized, and institutionalized. Concern is expressed about poor implementation of the existing environment related policies and regulatory systems.

Globalization offers both opportunities and challenges. It is contended that Bangladesh with its weak economy and only a few exportables cannot find many advantages to be harnessed from globalization. In fact, the withdrawal of quota system relating to readymade garments in two years time is a major cause for concern. The consequences of trade-related intellectual property rights, requiring payment for the use of all patented activities/processes, mostly patented in the developed countries, mainly in the USA, are stacked against the poor countries including Bangladesh. Also, while official foreign assistance is fast declining, market access of developing country exports to developed countries remains limited, contracting in certain cases. Bangladesh should look into its economy and take measures to upgrade and strengthen, through appropriate steps, its ability to withstand competition within its borders from foreign goods and services and compete successfully in potential areas in the international market. Technology transfer to and foreign direct investment in Bangladesh remain extremely limited, which are supposed to be among the opportunities opened up by globalization. The profligate use of natural resources by the global corporate coalitions poses a serious threat to the environment. Against this, global coalition for the protection and enhancement of environment must be strengthened. Globalization has other dimensions as well—including cultural and social—which may shatter the very foundation of social strength of the country and should therefore be carefully monitored and countered as appropriate.

#### ***Globiliazation***

It is recognized that however good the framework for action and programming may be, progress is dependent on the availability of

#### ***Financial Resources***

financial resources. A high priority is attached to mobilization of resources from national sources through more effective tax administration, local level mobilization through an effective participatory local government, and streamlining of other arrangements. Macroeconomic stability is an essential pre-requisite for facilitating savings, investment, and growth within the country. Increased incentives and secure and efficient official remittance/transfer mechanisms are necessary to promote remittances through official channels and their subsequent investment. Efficiency enhancement at home and increased diplomatic efforts are recommended to salvage the gradually weakening export-earning ready-made garment sector. Other avenues such as training and sending of skilled hands to meet the emerging gaps in the western countries in the wake of declining populations may be actively sought and taken advantage of. But the importance of international assistance remains critical for Bangladesh for the country to make much headway towards sustainable development. The developed countries are urged to fulfill their commitment relating to transfer of financial resources and technologies for sustainable development to developing countries, including Bangladesh.

A socially responsible public-private partnership is called for, within the framework of which the government will facilitate and the private sector will exploit the existing and emerging market opportunities within the country and outside and the interests and needs of the people will, at the same time, be promoted through committed efforts by the state and the private sector, backed up by appropriate policies and guidelines arrived at through broad-based consultations with the people. A concern in the context of seeking a virtuous public-private partnership arises from the seeming incompatibility between participatory democracy and unfettered free market—a challenge which must be addressed while developing a conceptual framework for a socially responsible public-private partnership. In this process morality and ethical integrity need to be invoked as guiding principles underpinning the behaviour patterns of all concerned.

It is noted with satisfaction that the country has achieved self-sufficiency or near self-sufficiency in foodgrain production. However, it is recognized that on the downside there is a serious question relating to the sustainability of agricultural production. Repeated monoculture, particularly with high yielding varieties of rice, and increasing cropping intensity without proper steps taken for the replenishment of soil nutrients and micronutrients have diminished the soil quality and caused an erosion of crop germplasm diversity—both having detrimental impacts on sustainability of agriculture in the country. A concern is raised that non-sustainability of agriculture may lead to increased poverty since the large majority of the rural poor depend heavily on crop agriculture. Agricultural sector needs to be more efficient and more diversified, improving the prospects of its sustainability. Efficiency could be gained through the use of balanced and adequate inputs such as fertilizer and water, cultivation of high value crops and leguminous crops, sustainable crop rotations and inter-cropping, use of low input but high productivity technology, sustainable biotechnology, and improved product processing systems. Awareness building programmes including extension activities need to be designed and instituted to rectify and reverse the past mistakes, making way for the sustainable future of the sector.

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), particularly small enterprises, are viewed as vehicles to foster sustainable economic growth through the involvement of entrepreneurs of relatively small means, by contributing substantially to GDP as well as to the generation of employment—both directly and through backward and forward linkages—particularly by engaging people with limited skills, coming largely from rural Bangladesh. Unfortunately, despite their growth potential, SMEs have not flourished in Bangladesh. In addition to financial, technological, management, and marketing information constraints, there is an absence of active policy support provided by the government to assist the SMEs to flourish. Trade, particularly import trade, as an alternative activity, facilitating quick yielding finance capitalism, has attracted more investment. A strong plea is made for active

**Public-private  
Partnership**

**Sustainable  
Agriculture**

**SMEs**

promotion of and support to SMEs. Also, it is suggested that a sharp focus on environmental protection is needed as SMEs are promoted.

Development of the energy sector is an essential pre-requisite for sustained development—economic, social, and environmental. Despite a large natural gas endowment, most of the rural households still depend on low grade fuels—e.g. biomass. Moreover, the country suffers from energy insecurity—a major constraint on future sustainability against the backdrop of a volatile international energy market. The imperatives of energy security call for ensuring the availability of different energy sources and for meeting energy needs of all the citizens, irrespective of their locational advantage and social status. Emphasis is given to optimum development of different indigenous energy sources, with adequate attention to sustainable development of biomass fuels and new renewable sources of energy. The establishment of an independent **Regulatory Commission**, with the responsibility of rationalizing proper delivery and pricing of different types of energy services, is recommended.

Use of appropriate technologies is vital for the transition to sustainability. Despite the fact that a large proportion of the population is illiterate, it is noteworthy that Bangladeshi people in general are ready to accept technologies, although sometimes without a proper understanding concerning their long-term impact. It is deemed necessary to modify useful technologies to local conditions, identify and discard harmful technologies, and reduce dependence on indiscriminately imported technologies. Increased public finance and incentives are recommended to forge local research and development of technologies, with special emphasis on long-term sustainability of the development process.

A consensus is reached in identifying information and communication technologies (ICTs) as a prospective sector for large-scale employment and income generation, which requires special attention in terms of a healthy public-private partnership. The Meet calls for the formulation of appropriate policy guidelines and increased state facilitation towards the development of this emerging sector. The potential of ICTs toward fostering sustainable resource management needs special attention. A concern has been raised in relation to the possibility of a digital divide that may accentuate socio-economic inequity in the country. Spread of quality education is a necessary pre-requisite for a broad-based development of the ICTs sector.

Children and youth, who represent the future, participating in the deliberations, have expressed their frustrations and concerns regarding various problems and inadequacies permeating the country's educational system. They call for a better policy regime to foster national development; removal of political, bureaucratic, and elite-centric hindrances towards facilitating good governance; and request their teachers, parents, and social leaders to guide them properly in their preparation for the journey toward a sustainable future. Children and youth place a strong emphasis on enhancing moral education and social values, strengthening of our basic cultural traits, and ensuring of security, peace, and stability.

It is recognized that there has been some improvement in relation to women's empowerment, but that has remained limited to the middle classes only. While more is needed in terms of advancement of women throughout society, a special emphasis needs to be given to improving women's plight in the poorer segments of society—through proper application of laws and creation of economic and social opportunities. Serious concern is expressed regarding widespread violence against and various forms of oppression on women. Various aspects of gender inequity have been highlighted, and all concerned are called upon to take steps—legal, awareness raising, coalition formation etc—with a view to removing the obstacles and strengthening the opportunities for improving gender equality and cohesiveness. One specific recommendation in the economic arena is to remove wage

**Energy Security**

**Technological Issues**

**ICTs**

**Children and Youth**

**Womens' Empowerment**

differentials between men and women for the same work. It is recommended that gender issues be prominently incorporated in governance structures and processes at all levels with a view to promoting a gender cohesive society.

A strong plea is made in favour of development of human capabilities, primarily by ensuring quality education for all, imparting training to enhance skills, and assisting the citizenry of the country to maintain good health. The need for removing the existing inequity in terms of quality of and access to education is emphasized. Emphasis is placed on quality technical and vocational training to enable the students/trainees to be employed—self-employed or otherwise. To enhance quality of teaching at the secondary and higher secondary levels, access to and facilities for training of teachers need to be sufficiently increased. It is recommended that moral education be made an integral part of lessons at all levels.

**Human Capabilities:  
Education; Health**

Dissatisfaction is expressed with the prevailing state of affairs concerning health care, despite improvements achieved in certain respects. A broad-based programme of basic health education and primary health care services need to be implemented properly for reducing the existing inequity in the health sector and improving health services for all. It is agreed that it is the state's responsibility to ensure accessibility of health services of the desired quality to the rural poor. Concerted action is needed to tackle the burning issue of arsenic contamination in tubewell water, which is a health and, hence, a sustainability hazard.

Encroachment onto rivers and wetlands is regarded as a major threat to the sustenance of the riverine country. There is a growing concern in relation to gradual degradation of natural river courses due to human interventions. Deterioration of surface water quality is also prevalent and, alarmingly, increasing. Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) should be accepted as the guiding framework for devising and implementing future development activities in the water sector. Decentralized water management with local government playing a key role and women effectively involved in the process is strongly advocated. The National Water Policy adopted in 1999 invokes a number of principles, which are IWRM-focused. These must be implemented. However, the impact of the projected climate change on water has not been addressed in the policy. This is a critical area and must be properly addressed. Participation of people, both men and women, in deciding on future interventions in the water sector of Bangladesh is strongly advocated. Strengthening water diplomacy to promote regional cooperation in equitably managing shared water systems is also recommended.

**Water Management**

Other than tornadoes and earthquakes, all the other forms of disasters are water-related, which cause losses and damages to crops, assets, and infrastructure, and adversely impact on the prospects of sustainable development in the country. In recent years, the country has made laudable progress in reducing loss of lives during high intensity cyclones and major floods. While appreciating the success, it is recommended that a comprehensive National Disaster Management Programme (NDMP) be formulated and properly implemented—to reduce the impact of and vulnerability to floods, droughts, riverbank erosion, salinity ingress, and cyclone and storm surges. Both structural and non-structural measures, as appropriate, may be used. Emphasis is given to understanding the complex issues involving natural disasters and people, with particular focus on social, economic, environmental, and cultural aspects. In addition to an enrichment of the knowledge base, financial and institutional capacity building is regarded as priority aspects of disaster management.

**Disaster  
Management**

It is agreed that the threats of climate change are real, imminent, and alarming for the country's sustainable development. Under the anticipated climate change regime, unless appropriate adaptation measures are in place with strong facilitation by the state, developmental efforts to a large extent may turn out to be a futile exercise. A strong call is made for increasing capacity and raising awareness at all levels, especially at the higher political and bureaucratic

**Climate Change  
and Adaptation**

levels, where there is a dearth of understanding regarding the grave consequences of climate change, for addressing various challenges of climate change. It is recommended that a plan be prepared for long-term adaptations with short and medium term actions specified, which should be implemented according to national and local priorities.

An urgent intervention is called for in order to prevent rapid depletion of the nation's biological resource pool, which is absolutely necessary to maintain harmony in nature. Encroachment onto wetlands and denudation of forests, failure of institutional surveillance and monitoring regarding implementation of the regulatory regime, and lack of awareness have been identified as major problems in relation to the management of biodiversity. A people-centric conservation mechanism must be promoted and facilitated to restore and maintain endangered species, especially those uniquely observed in Bangladesh. There is a need to control extension of invasive species, while introduction of genetically engineered species must be brought under scrutiny and regulation.

### Biodiversity Management

Urbanization is viewed as an inevitable process in Bangladesh. But it is now occurring in an unplanned manner. Unless brought under proper planning, it can be severely harmful to the prospects of social progress and economic uplift. Dissatisfaction is expressed with regard to the current haphazard urbanization, especially regarding the growing inequity in terms of extent and quality of various urban services. Regulated and planned expansion of urban centres coupled with decentralization of enterprises, facilitated through effective pro-people governance mechanisms, and empowering urban local governments, are viewed as useful measures to guide urbanization towards a sustainable development pathway.

### Urbanization Management

It is agreed that the media, particularly the print media, are making useful contributions to disseminating news and information relating to development. It is strongly suggested that the media should play a more vigorous and constructive role to help promote sustainable development in the country. The media may help raise awareness about good practices—economic, social, and environmental—and encourage people to replicate those. The media may also help build a social movement towards promoting pro-people policies and programmes. The state must facilitate modernization of the media so that they may perform their tasks more effectively and remove any bottlenecks which restrict free flow of information.

### The Media

Bangladesh has a rich foundation of a multi-dimensional culture. Sustainable development is not possible unless it is firmly anchored on national identity and heritage-based cultural dynamics. In the pursuit of sustainable development the nation's cultural robustness and dynamics can galvanize the society, facilitating the process immensely. To adapt to the ethos of sustainable development, particularly those who are in leadership positions, and also all others who may need facilitation, must re-examine their values and alter their behaviour, *albeit* with due respect to national identity and heritage perspectives, to serve the cause of sustainable development.

### Cultural Dimensions

## Concluding Remarks

angladesh has signed/ratified many International Conventions/Protocols concerned with different aspects of sustainable development and has also adopted a number of policies, legal instruments, and guidelines at the national level in this regard. But progress has been extremely limited and capacity building remains at a low level. For real progress to be achieved, Bangladesh needs to prepare a comprehensive plan and key guidelines to organize necessary activities within a definitive but flexible framework. A political commitment, based on a broad consensus across political parties, is an overriding pre-requisite. Also a committed thrust forward is needed to establish effective governance at all levels—central to local—which is key to both the construction of and moving along an appropriate sustainable development pathway for the country.

But, Bangladesh is a resource constrained country and therefore needs international assistance to support its efforts for sustainable development. Developed countries have made commitments, as recorded in different International Conventions, Protocols, and Agreements, to transfer adequate financial resources and technologies to the developing countries for sustainable development. But the actual transfer has so far been meagre. It is urged that the developed countries respect their commitments. Bangladesh, given that it is a least developed country, prone to natural disasters of different types, and facing severe vulnerabilities as a consequence of the projected climate change and sea level rise, deserves adequate assistance commensurate with the adverse conditions faced and the urgency with which it needs to embark on a sustainable development pathway.