



General Economics Division (GED)
Bangladesh Planning Commission

GED POLICY BRIEF

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HARNESSING THE POTENTIALS OF YOUTH

A Policy Framework for Youth Development in Bangladesh

Key Issues

- With approximately 31.6 million young people aged 15-24 constituting nearly one-fifth of the population, Bangladesh possesses significant potential to capture a demographic dividend that could accelerate economic growth and social development.
- Restructuring the education-to-employment pipeline is a priority. This requires establishing an independent quality assurance mechanism for higher education institutions.
- Technical and vocational education must be elevated in social standing and resourced adequately.
- A coordination mechanism at the government level is essential to overcome the fragmentation in youth-related programming.
- The substance abuse epidemic requires a paradigm shift from enforcement-based approaches toward integrated treatment and social reintegration models.
- Online gambling demands modernized legal frameworks and financial system controls.
- Urban youth violence and gender-based harassment require community-based prevention strategies alongside strengthened protection mechanisms.
- Addressing these challenges will require significant increases in public investment in youth development, complemented by strategic partnerships with development partners, civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Overview

This policy brief presents a comprehensive assessment of the country's demographic opportunity and risks, emphasizing that its young people can be both a powerful development asset and a potential source of instability if structural challenges remain unaddressed. At the core of the analysis is the youth employment crisis: the official unemployment rate appears moderate, about 19.54% of young people aged 15–24 are economically inactive, reflecting deeper labour-market exclusion rather than simple joblessness.

The policy brief highlights how employment challenges intersect with broader social risks. Rising substance abuse, online gambling, urban youth violence, and widespread gender-based harassment are presented not as isolated problems but as interconnected consequences of youth marginalization and limited economic opportunity.

The policy brief recommends a coordinated national framework prioritizing education-to-employment alignment, stronger quality assurance mechanisms, expanded vocational pathways, and active private-sector engagement. It also calls for increased public investment, better data systems for policy monitoring, and institutional mechanisms enabling meaningful youth participation in decision-making.

Without decisive, well-coordinated reforms, Bangladesh risks converting its youth population into a demographic burden marked by unemployment and social unrest. The policy brief therefore frames youth development not merely as a social policy concern but as a central pillar of long-term economic competitiveness, governance stability, and national development strategy.

Editor: Dr. Monzur Hossain, Member, GED
Contributor: Dr. K.A.S Murshid
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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and Rationale

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable development progress over the past three decades, with sustained economic growth, significant poverty reduction, and notable improvements in human development indicators. The country has already transitioned to a lower-middle-income economy, with ambitions to achieve upper-middle-income status and graduate from Least Developed Country status.

Central to these aspirations is the country's demographic profile. Bangladesh is experiencing a demographic transition that presents a time-limited opportunity to accelerate development through productive employment of its large youth population. Demographic dividend theory suggests that when the working-age population grows relative to dependents, countries can achieve higher savings, investment, and economic growth, provided appropriate policies are in place to absorb young workers into productive employment.

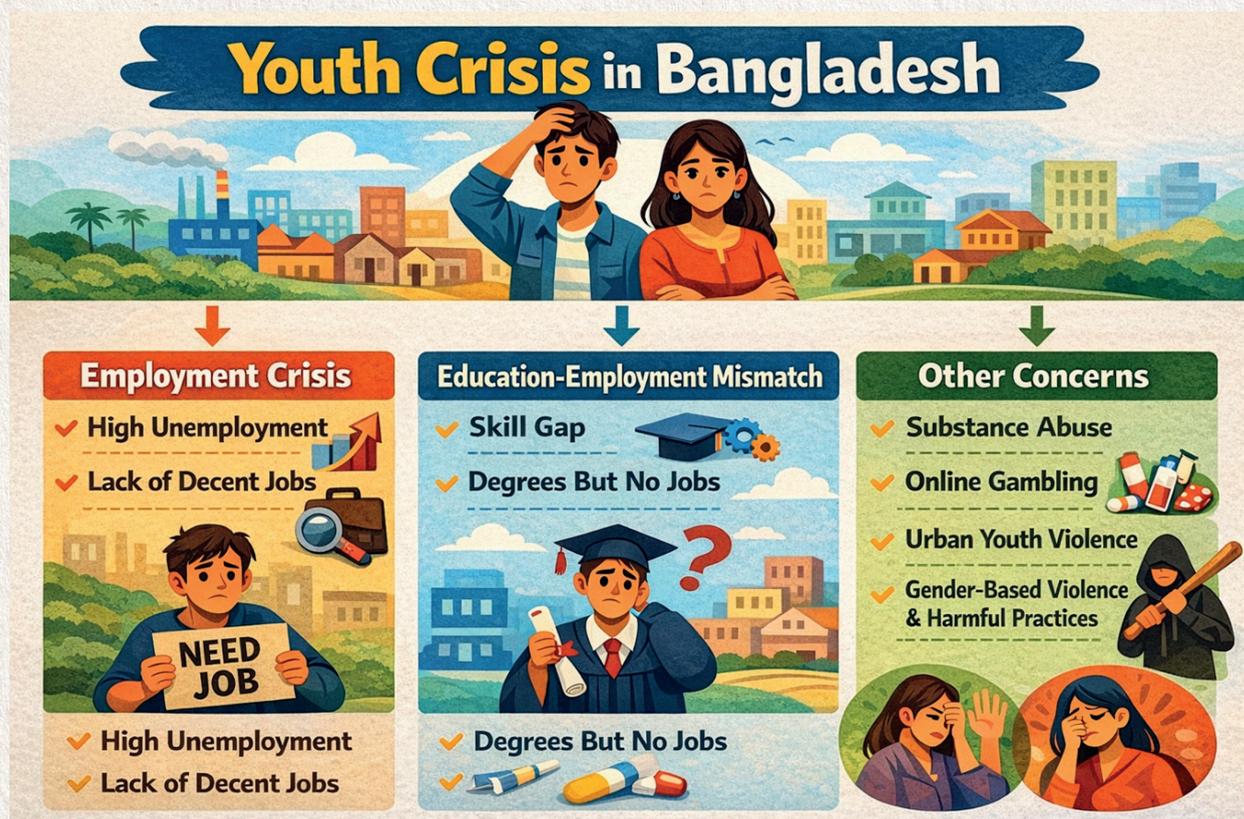
However, the realization of this demographic dividend is not automatic. International experience demonstrates that countries can either capture this dividend through strategic investments in education, health, and employment generation, or squander it through policy neglect, resulting in a 'demographic burden' characterized by unemployment, social instability, and unrealized human potential. Several indicators suggest Bangladesh may be trending toward the latter outcome provided current policies remain unchanged.

Recent developments across the region underscore the social and political consequences of unaddressed youth frustration. Major protest movements in Sri Lanka (March- November 2022), Bangladesh (July 2024), and Nepal (September 2025) share common characteristics: they were driven primarily by educated young people frustrated by limited economic opportunities and perceived exclusion from meaningful participation in governance. These movements demonstrate both the risks of policy neglect and the significant organizational capacity of contemporary youth populations.

1.2 Purpose and Scope

- This policy brief provides an analytical framework for understanding the interconnected challenges faced by Bangladeshi youth and proposes a coherent policy response.
 - The analysis prioritizes employment and skills development as the central concern while examining how emerging crises in substance abuse, online gambling, urban violence, and gender-based harassment both contribute to and result from the core employment challenge.
 - The policy brief draws on available data from government sources, international organizations, and academic research, while acknowledging significant gaps in the evidence base.
 - It examines current and planned interventions, identifies systematic limitations in existing approaches, and proposes reforms informed by international experience adapted to Bangladesh's specific context.
 - The recommendations are intended to inform policy dialogue rather than prescribe detailed implementation plans, which would require further technical work and stakeholder consultation.
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2. Understanding the Challenges



2.1 The Employment Crisis

While Bangladesh's headline youth unemployment rate of 8.07 percent appears moderate by regional standards, this figure obscures the true extent of labour market challenges. The more revealing statistic is that approximately 19.54 percent of youth aged 15-24, totaling an estimated 5.52 million young people, are economically inactive (BBS, 2024). This massive cohort represents effective withdrawal from the formal economy rather than unemployment in the classical sense of actively seeking but failing to find work.

Table 1 presents comparative youth labour market indicators across South Asia, illustrating both the regional nature of the challenge and Bangladesh's particular circumstances.

Table 1: Youth Labour Market Indicators in South Asia (2023-2024)

Country	Youth Unemployment ¹ Rate	Graduate Unemployment	Key Observation
Bangladesh	8.07%	28.24% (NU graduates)	19.54% NEET ² rate (15-24)
Nepal	21%	3x non-educated rate	Graduate disadvantage
Sri Lanka	~30% (graduates)	6x national average	Severe credential inflation
India	15.8%	Concentrated among educated	Skills mismatch evident

Sources: BBS 2024, ILO, 2024; World Bank Open Data. Ali, S.M.Z. (2024)

Note: Definitions and methodologies vary across countries.

1 Youth unemployment refers to the share of the youth labor force who do not have a job but are actively looking for work and available to start soon.

2 NEET stands for "Not in Education, Employment, or Training"

The structure of Bangladesh's labour market compounds these challenges. Approximately 85 percent of employment occurs in the informal sector, characterized by low productivity, limited wages, and minimal prospects for advancement. The formal sector remains constrained by regulatory frameworks and limited dynamism in labour-intensive industries beyond the garment sector.

2.2 The Education-Employment Mismatch

At the heart of the employment crisis lies a fundamental mismatch between educational outputs and labour market requirements. Bangladesh has experienced dramatic expansion in tertiary education, from a handful of universities in the 1970s to over 150 universities today enrolling more than one million students. This quantitative expansion, however, occurred without corresponding investments in quality or strategic alignment with workforce needs.

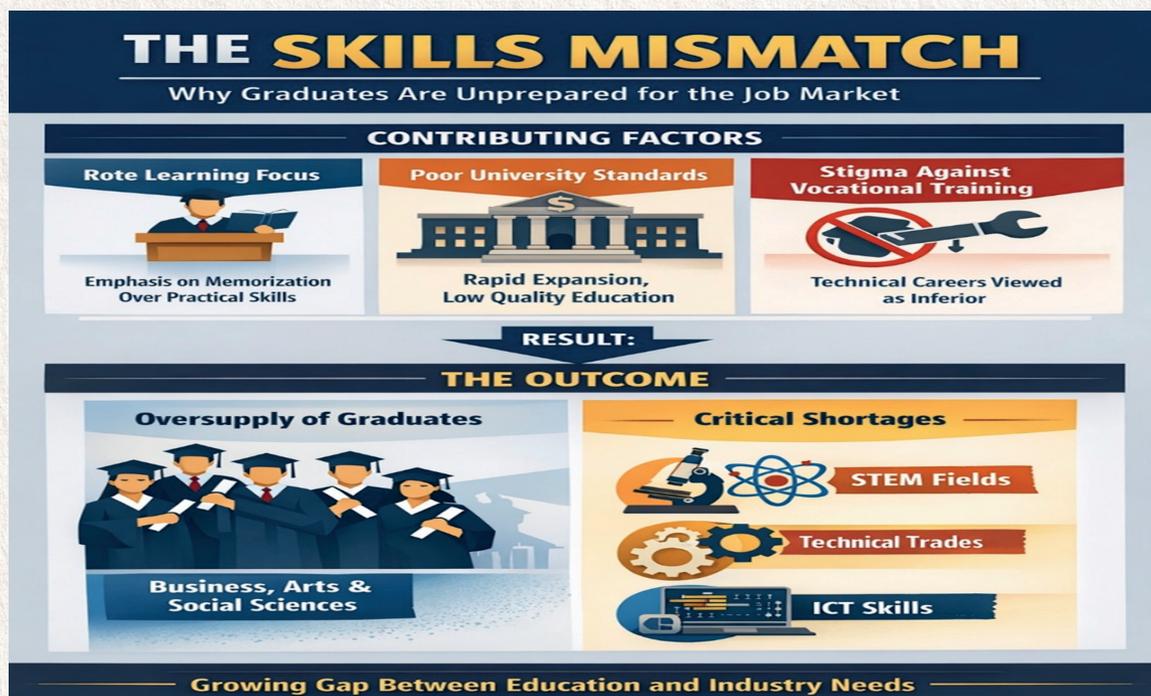
The consequences are evident in graduate employment outcomes:

- According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 28.24 percent of National University graduates remain unemployed (BBS, 2024)
- Out of approximately 2.6 million unemployed individuals in 2024, some 900,000 held university degrees (Ali, S.M.Z., 2024)
- This pattern, where educated youth experience higher unemployment than those without formal education, is consistent across South Asia and reflects systemic credential inflation rather than individual deficiencies.

Factors contributing to this mismatch

- Secondary education emphasizes rote learning over analytical and practical skills.
- Universities expanded through processes driven more by commercial interests than strategic workforce planning, often lacking qualified faculty, adequate infrastructure, or rigorous quality assurance.
- Cultural attitudes treat technical and vocational education with disdain despite superior employment outcomes in many trades.

The result is significant numbers of graduates in business, arts, and social sciences, with severe shortages in technical fields, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, and ICT-related skills.



Public Investment in Education

Public investment patterns reflect these misaligned priorities:

- Government expenditure on tertiary education has remained around one percent of the national budget in recent fiscal years, while overall education spending declined from 2.08 percent of GDP in FY22 to 1.69 percent in FY25 (The Daily Star, 2025).
- Families have responded by sending students abroad, with an estimated USD 2-3 billion legally transferred overseas for foreign education across nine fiscal years (Global Economy.com; CPD-IBRD, 2025; Dhaka Tribune, 2025).

2.3 Emerging Areas of Serious Concern

While employment represents the central challenge, several interconnected crises have emerged that both contribute to and result from youth marginalization. These require urgent attention as part of any comprehensive youth development strategy.

Substance Abuse

- Substance abuse has reached epidemic proportions.
- Based on surveys covering over 5,000 individuals across 16 districts, approximately 8.3 million people are affected by addiction, representing nearly 5 percent of the total population.
- With an estimated 80 percent of users being young people, mostly aged 18-35, youth dominate these statistics.
- Initial use typically begins between ages 15-18, with peer influence accounting for most of the initiation.
- Unemployment is strongly correlated with addiction, with over half of users being without formal employment.

Source: Department of Narcotics Control's 2024 Drug Report

Online Gambling

- Online gambling has emerged as a significant and rapidly growing concern.
- Current estimates suggest over 5 million individuals are affected, with projections indicating this could exceed 20 million by 2027 without effective intervention.
- The market size is estimated at USD 62-68 million and growing at 4.7-6.1 percent annually.
- Platforms operating through foreign servers with Bangla-language interfaces exploit legal ambiguities in the outdated 1867 Public Gambling Act.
- Mobile financial services enable transactions despite their illegality, with over 1,000 agents identified as facilitating gambling-related transfers.

Sources: Dhaka Tribune, 2025; Rahman, Shahinoor, 2025; Aminul, K., Mohammad, H., & Alam, N. (2025).

Urban Youth Violence

- Urban areas, particularly Dhaka, have witnessed the emergence of organized youth violence.
- Reports indicate approximately 50 active youth gangs operating in Dhaka alone as of early 2024. These groups engage in drug distribution, extortion, and various criminal enterprises.
- Since August 2024, security forces have arrested over 884 suspects linked to such groups in just two Dhaka neighbourhoods, yet the phenomenon persists.

- The gang-drug nexus operates as both cause and effect, with substance use facilitating recruitment into criminal networks.

Source: *The Daily Star*, 2024; *The Daily Star*, 2025.

Gender-Based Violence and Harmful Practices

- Young women face significant levels of harassment and violence.
- Survey data indicate that 84 percent of women experience sexual harassment in public spaces, workplaces, or educational institutions, while 90 percent of women and girls aged 10-18 have experienced harassment or unwanted physical contact.
- Intimate partner violence affects 76 percent of women over their lifetime, with young married women aged 15-19 facing the highest risk (VAW Survey, BBS, 2024).
- Media monitoring recorded 364 rape cases in 2024, with 60 percent of victims being children under 18.

Table 2 summarizes the scale of these emerging crisis areas.

Table 2: Scale of Emerging Youth Crisis Areas

Crisis Area	Estimated Affected Population	Key Demographic	Trend
Substance Abuse	8.3 million	80% youth (18-35)	Established epidemic
Online Gambling	5+ million (20m projected by 2027)	38% young adults	Rapidly growing
Urban Gang Violence	~50 active gangs (Dhaka)	Adolescents/young adults	Persistent
Gender-Based Harassment	84% of women affected	Highest risk: ages 15-19	Endemic

Sources: *DNC Drug Report 2024*, *UN Women Bangladesh*; media reports, survey data.

Note: Methodological limitations acknowledged.

2.4 The Interconnected Nature of the Challenges

These various crisis dimensions are not independent phenomena but rather interconnected manifestations of youth marginalization:

- Unemployment provides the idle time and economic frustration that makes quick wealth promises from gambling attractive and increases vulnerability to substance abuse.
- Addiction undermines employability, creating vicious cycles.
- Gang involvement offers both economic opportunity and social belonging for those excluded from legitimate pathways.
- Gender-based violence reflects broader power imbalances that limit women's economic participation and educational attainment.

A reported 55 percent of youth aged 18-35 actively seek opportunities to leave Bangladesh, reflecting a fundamental breakdown in the social contract between young people and the nation. This represents not merely individual choices but a collective judgement about the availability of meaningful futures within the country (Ridwanul Hoque and Shamim, S.,2024).

3. Current Interventions and Plans

Government agencies, development partners, and civil society organizations are implementing various programmes addressing youth challenges. This section reviews the principal interventions currently underway or planned.

3.1 Employment and Skills Development

- The National Skills Development Policy and accompanying National Action Plan for Skills Development (2022-2027) provide the policy framework for skills development, targeting 8.6 million trainees across 17 sectors.
- The National Skills Development Authority, established under the 2018 Act, is mandated to coordinate the fragmented technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system.
- Major donor-supported programmes include the Asian Development Bank's Skills for Employment Investment Program (SEIP), with USD 350 million in financing, which has trained approximately 280,000 individuals under its first tranche with reported job placement rates around 68 percent for new entrants.
- USAID's Bijoyee programme (USD 35 million) targets over 280,000 youth with soft skills, green skills, and digital training.
- The Department of Youth Development plans to train over 200,000 youth and provide microcredit support in the current fiscal year

Sources: ADB, 2014; ADB, 2016; ADB, 2021; USAID Bangladesh, 2024.

3.2 Substance Abuse Response

Drug Rehabilitation Centres

The government has approved a BDT 1,413 crore project (July 2025-June 2028) to establish seven new 200-bed drug rehabilitation centres in divisional cities (Dhaka Tribune, 2025, July 3), with an additional 250-bed centre planned for Dhaka. Currently, government treatment capacity stands at only 279 beds nationwide, supplemented by 387 private rehabilitation centres of varying quality (Prothom Alo English 2025, June 26).

Policy/ Strategy on Substance Use Disorders

A National Guideline for the Management of Substance Use Disorders has been drafted, referencing UNODC/WHO (2020) treatment principles, though it remains in draft form and has not been operationalized. The dominant approach continues to emphasize enforcement through the Narcotics Control Act (1990, amended 2018) and operations by the Department of Narcotics Control, police, and other security agencies (DNC, 2024).

3.3 Online Gambling Response

- The Cyber Security Ordinance 2025 (Section 20) criminalizes creation, operation, and promotion of online gambling platforms.
- The government has declared a zero-tolerance policy, banning gambling-related advertisements across digital and electronic media.
- Enforcement agencies have launched crackdowns identifying over 5,000 mobile financial service accounts linked to gambling, with over 2,600 websites blocked to date (BSS News, 2026).
- Bangladesh Bank has mandated AI-powered surveillance of financial transactions to detect gambling-related flows, though implementation remains at early stages.
- A coordinated platform involving multiple agencies (National Cybersecurity Agency, Cyber Security Act, Central Intelligence Department, CID, Bangladesh Telecom Regulatory Commission, BTRC, The National Security Agency, NSI, and Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit, FIU) is planned, with officials proposing a dedicated specialist agency.

3.4 Gender-Based Violence Response

Directive on Sexual Harassment

The 2009 High Court Directive on sexual harassment in workplaces and educational institutions remains the primary legal instrument, though it has never been enacted into standalone legislation. A Sexual Harassment Prevention and Protection Bill has been drafted with UN Women support but remains pending. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has announced plans to deploy trained social workers in villages and proposed large-scale training programmes for grassroots support.

Community Level Programmes

Development partners support various initiatives including community-level norm change programmes, factory-level workshops on workplace safety in the garment sector (UNDP, SWAPNO II), and transport-sector interventions under the World Bank's Bangladesh Road Safety Project incorporating bystander intervention training.

4. Gaps and Limitations in Current Approaches

Despite the various interventions described above, systematic limitations constrain their effectiveness. These gaps reflect both resource constraints and conceptual limitations in current approaches.

4.1 Scale Mismatch

The most fundamental limitation is the mismatch between intervention scale and problem magnitude.

- Providing training to only 3.64 percent of the 5.52 million economically inactive young people severely limits the potential of youth employment.
- On substance abuse, even with planned expansion, government treatment capacity will reach approximately 1,679 beds against 8.3 million affected individuals.
- On gambling, there is essentially no counselling or rehabilitation infrastructure for an estimated 5 million addicts, with the entire response focused on enforcement.

This scale mismatch is compounded by fragmentation. Multiple agencies implement programmes with limited coordination, unclear accountability, and insufficient monitoring and evaluation frameworks. The absence of systematic tracking makes it difficult to determine what interventions are producing results and at what cost.

4.2 Conceptual Limitations

Substance Abuse and Online Gambling

Current approaches to substance abuse and online gambling remain overwhelmingly enforcement-driven, treating these primarily as criminal matters rather than public health challenges with underlying social and economic drivers. This approach has demonstrably failed to reduce prevalence while consuming significant enforcement resources. The paradigm has not shifted toward the demand-side interventions that international evidence suggests are more effective.

Unemployment

On unemployment, there is insufficient connection between training outputs and actual employer demand. Labour market information systems remain weak, with no reliable mechanism linking skills programmes

to hiring outcomes. The TVET sector continues to suffer from stigma and underfunding, receiving only approximately 4.6 percent of education budget despite evidence of superior employment outcomes for graduates (Khan, Towfiqul Islam 2024).

Gender Based Violence

On gender-based violence, implementation of existing legal frameworks remains inadequate. Police often treat domestic violence as a private family matter, there are significant delays and corruption in the justice system, and conviction rates remain low. The last comprehensive government survey on gender-based violence was conducted in 2015, leaving significant data gaps.

4.3 Institutional Constraints

Coordination Issue

Youth-related responsibilities are dispersed across multiple ministries including Youth and Sports, Education, Labour, Home Affairs, Social Welfare, Women and Children Affairs, and others. No effective coordination mechanism exists to align priorities, avoid duplication, or address cross-cutting issues. The result is fragmented programming, gaps in coverage, and missed opportunities for synergy.

Quality Assurance Challenge

Quality assurance mechanisms for both education and rehabilitation services are either absent or ineffective. Many private universities and rehabilitation centres operate without meaningful oversight, producing variable and often poor outcomes. The draft National Guideline on Substance Use Disorders exemplifies a broader pattern: policy documents are developed but not operationalized (UNODC-WHO, 2020).

4.4 Youth Voice and Participation

Perhaps most fundamentally, current approaches treat youth primarily as beneficiaries or, implicitly, as problems to be managed rather than as active agents with legitimate voices in policy design and implementation. Meaningful youth participation structures are largely absent from governance at all levels. This exclusion both deprives policymaking of valuable perspectives and alienates the population whose engagement is essential for success.

5. Addressing the Gaps: Lessons from Experience

Addressing the limitations identified above requires both increased resources and fundamental shifts in approach. International and regional experience offers instructive models that can be adapted to Bangladesh's context.

5.1 Transforming Education and Employment Systems

Lessons from Singapore

Singapore's Skills Future programme (Government of Singapore, 2024) offers a systematic model for aligning education with economic needs. The programme combines continuous skills assessment against industry requirements, strong employer engagement in curriculum design, portability of credentials across institutions, and financial support for lifelong learning. The key insight is treating skills development as a continuous process requiring ongoing coordination between educational institutions and employers rather than a one-time credential.

Lessons from Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's National Education Policy Framework (2020) (Government of Sri Lanka, 2020) similarly emphasizes explicit alignment with labour market needs, prioritizing ICT and vocational skills designed to be adaptable and responsive to changing demands. Both models suggest Bangladesh needs to move beyond expanding enrolment toward ensuring that educational outputs match what the economy requires.

Way forward for Bangladesh

- Establish an independent quality assurance mechanism with authority to audit institutions and revoke accreditation for persistent underperformance.
- TVET requires both increased investment and status elevation through targeted scholarships, industry partnerships, and clear articulation pathways allowing vocational graduates to continue to higher degrees.
- Private sector engagement through structured apprenticeship programmes and hiring incentives can help bridge the gap between educational credentials and workplace requirements.

5.2 A Public Health Approach to Addiction

Portugal's drug policy reforms, implemented from 2001, demonstrate that treating addiction as a health condition rather than primarily a criminal matter produces measurably better outcomes. Facing comparable crisis levels in the late 1990s, when approximately 1 percent of the population used heroin, 80 percent of injecting users were HIV-positive, and 90 percent had never accessed treatment, Portugal decriminalized personal use while massively expanding treatment capacity (TRANSFORM, undated).

The results over two decades include dramatic reductions in drug-related HIV infection (90 percent decline), significant increases in treatment uptake (60 percent), and major decreases in overdose deaths. The approach emphasizes low-threshold access allowing same-day treatment enrolment, multidisciplinary care teams addressing mental health and social factors alongside medical treatment, and robust social reintegration support including employment assistance (Op. Cit.).

For Bangladesh, adopting elements of this model would require:

- Significantly expanding treatment capacity beyond the planned rehabilitation centres,
- Developing community-based and outpatient treatment networks,
- Training healthcare workers in addiction medicine, and creating pathways for social and economic reintegration,
- Redirecting enforcement resources toward disrupting supply chains and major trafficking networks rather than criminalizing individual users.

5.3 Community-Based Violence Prevention

Research across Latin America demonstrates that purely suppressive approaches to gang violence fail to produce sustainable reductions. The 'Cure Violence' model, successfully adapted in Trinidad and Tobago, Colombia, and El Salvador, treats violence as a behavioural and public health issue amenable to interruption through targeted intervention (Maguire, Edward R.; Oakley, Megan T.; Corsaro, Nicholas, 2018).

Trinidad and Tobago's adaptation achieved 55 percent reductions in homicides in intervention areas through violence interrupters with credibility in affected communities, mediation of conflicts before escalation, connection of at-risk individuals with services and alternatives, and building trust between communities and institutions. The key insight is that suppression alone drives activity underground and generates replacement leadership, while community-based approaches address underlying factors (Op. cit.).

For Bangladesh, this would involve:

- Supplementing law enforcement with community safety partnerships bringing together local leaders, religious figures, former gang members, social workers, and carefully selected police liaisons.
- Investment in genuine alternatives, including vocational training, mentorship, and economic opportunity, would provide pathways out of gang involvement.

5.4 Institutionalizing Youth Participation

International evidence confirms that meaningful civic engagement produces lasting benefits for both individuals and societies. Youth councils with genuine authority and resources, rather than token advisory bodies, can channel energy toward constructive problem-solving (World Bank, 2023). Service-learning programmes integrated with education demonstrate gains in civic knowledge and commitment while building practical skills.

For Bangladesh, this would involve:

- Establishing youth participation structures at ward, upazila, and national levels with clear mandates, adequate resources, and genuine decision-making authority over relevant issues.
- Annual national youth summits could provide platforms for direct engagement with policymakers, with formal requirements for governmental response to youth-generated recommendations.

Perhaps most importantly, civic education should be embedded throughout the formal education system, emphasizing critical thinking, media literacy, and active citizenship rather than passive civic knowledge. The goal is to develop young people as capable participants in democratic governance rather than simply recipients of government services.

6. Conclusions and Way Forward

6.1 The Stakes

Bangladesh faces a defining moment in its development trajectory. The statistics are sobering - millions of young people economically inactive, millions more affected by addiction, pervasive gender-based harassment, and a majority of youth seeking to leave the country. Yet these same statistics represent enormous human potential that, if properly channeled, could drive the economic growth and social transformation the country aspires to achieve.

Recent events in Bangladesh and across South Asia demonstrate that frustrated, excluded youth are not passive. They possess significant organizational capacity and are willing to take substantial risks in pursuit of change. The July 2024 movement revealed both the depth of youth frustration and their capacity for collective action. This energy will find outlets; the question is whether those outlets will be constructive or destructive.

6.2 Critical Constraints

Three interrelated constraints will determine whether Bangladesh can capture its demographic dividend:

- First, political will and sustained commitment are essential. Youth development cannot be treated as a peripheral social programme but must be positioned as a central national priority requiring whole-of-government engagement over multiple years. This requires political leadership willing to make difficult choices about resource allocation and institutional reform.
- Second, institutional capacity must be strengthened. Currently fragmented responsibilities need coordination mechanisms with genuine convening authority. Quality assurance systems for education and services must be established and enforced. Monitoring and evaluation frameworks must enable learning and adaptation rather than merely accounting for inputs.
- Third, resource mobilisation at scale is necessary. Current levels of investment are inadequate relative to the magnitude of challenges. This requires increased domestic budget allocations, strategic engagement of development partners, and meaningful private sector co-investment through structured partnerships rather than corporate social responsibility as charity.

6.3 Key Approaches

The policy framework outlined in this report suggests several key approaches:

- On employment and skills, the priority must be quality over quantity. Expanding enrolment without improving relevance will only deepen credential inflation. This requires tough decisions about institutional accreditation, sustained investment in TVET elevation, and structured employer engagement throughout the education-to-employment pipeline.
- On emerging crisis areas, paradigm shifts are necessary. Substance abuse and gambling require public health approaches emphasizing treatment and demand reduction alongside supply-side enforcement. Urban violence requires community-based prevention complementing law enforcement. Gender-based harassment requires both strengthened legal frameworks and sustained social norm change.
- On governance, coordination and participation are essential. A high-level mechanism must align currently fragmented programming. Youth participation structures must give young people genuine voice in policy design and implementation. Monitoring and evaluation systems must enable evidence-based adaptation.

6.4 The Opportunity

International experience demonstrates that the challenges Bangladesh faces are neither unprecedented nor insurmountable. For example, Portugal transformed from Europe's heroin capital to a model for compassionate, effective drug policy. Singapore systematically aligned education with economic needs to become a global leader in human capital development. Countries across Latin America have achieved significant violence reductions through community-based approaches.

Bangladesh possesses significant assets for addressing these challenges: a large, energetic youth population; demonstrated capacity for collective action; a growing economy; and committed development partners willing to support ambitious reform. The demographic window of opportunity remains open, though it will not remain so indefinitely.



The choice before Bangladesh is whether to invest strategically in youth as the nation's primary asset for future development, or to continue addressing symptoms through fragmented, under-resourced interventions while the demographic dividend window closes. The July 2024 movement demonstrated that young Bangladeshis will not accept the latter path quietly. The question is whether that energy will be channeled constructively through genuine partnership in national development, or whether it will continue to seek outlets through migration, social withdrawal, or further disruption.

This report has outlined a framework for constructive engagement. Implementation will require detailed technical work, stakeholder consultation, and sustained commitment. But the fundamental direction is clear: Bangladesh must treat its youth not as problems to be managed but as partners to be empowered. The returns from getting this right, measured in economic growth, social cohesion, and human flourishing, would be transformational. The costs of continued neglect are equally profound. The time for decisive action is now.



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