

LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit

June 2018

The Idea of Bangladesh



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LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit

Working Paper 2: The Idea of Bangladesh

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Executive Summary

The Idea of Bangladesh panel in the LSE-UC Berkeley Bangladesh Summit explored the positive global footprints of Bangladesh in three areas. The presentations cover Bangladesh's iconic and immeasurable hospitable response to the Rohingya refugee crisis, the role of Bangladesh military in UN peacekeeping forces in Sierra Leone, and Bangladesh's success story of industrial and environmental compliance in the ready-made garments sector.



Recommendations

- Along with relief and rehabilitation, the Bangladesh government needs to put pressure on Myanmar to convince and influence them. Bangladesh and the international community have a duty to influence Myanmar to take responsibility for protecting its diverse population. The prospect of refugees returning voluntarily and safely relies on how Bangladesh, Myanmar and the international community responds to these larger political, economic and humanitarian interests.
- Bangladeshi peacekeepers should participate more in international peacekeeping activities and train its security forces accordingly to heighten its world presence.
- Evidence-based dialogue, such as PaCT, highlights the business case for green apparel. In order to fully integrate in the green supply chain, Bangladesh needs to join hands with the RMG stakeholders at both home and abroad. It needs to help factories overcome the economic and institutional barriers in order to be more environmentally compliant.

Panellists

- Dr Meghna Guhathakurta, Executive Director of Research Initiatives Bangladesh (RIB), a research support organization based in Dhaka.
- Dr Kieran Mitton, Senior Lecturer in International Relations, King's College London.
- Dr Shahpar Selim, Visiting Researcher, International Centre for Climate Change and Development, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
- The panel was moderated by Dr Sanchita Saxena, Director of the Subir and Malini Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh Studies, and Executive Director of the Institute for South Asia Studies (ISAS), University of California-Berkeley.



Introduction



The panel discussing 'The Idea of Bangladesh'

Dr Sanchita Saxena begins by pointing out that Bangladesh for decades has received little attention or only negative attention in the media by both academics and policy-makers.

While certain areas have been over studied, little attention has been given to important nuances. If one looks beyond the headlines to understand and truly appreciate Bangladesh's contribution to the rest of the world, the country's leadership is obvious in a number of areas, including South-South development, improvements in child and maternal health, women's empowerment and primary education, to name just a few.

Dr Saxena highlights that her own work in the garments industry has found Bangladesh to be far more advanced in labour organising, particularly non-traditional female led labour movements when compared to countries that seemingly have better working conditions but have very limited opportunity for female workers to articulate their interests.



Dr Saxena emphasises that the goal of this summit is not to focus on Bangladesh as a country characterised by a host of problems that infer solutions, but rather as one that is marked by resilience and is ripe with opportunities and possibilities to envision how the country can serve as a model for innovation.

The panel covers several different topics which all fit together around the broad theme of Bangladesh and its positive global footprints. The three presentations cover Bangladesh's iconic and immeasurable hospitable response to the Rohingya refugee crisis, the role of Bangladesh military in UN peacekeeping forces in Sierra Leone, and Bangladesh's success story of industrial and environmental compliance in the ready-made garments sector.

The Rohingya Refugees - Humanitarianism Entrenched in Larger Political Analysis

The Rohingya issue in Bangladesh is often seen through the humanitarian lens. While Bangladesh has been praised immensely for the humanity it has shown to Rohingya refugees during the recent influx, knowing the longer history, Dr Meghna Guhathakurta asserts that, this has not always been the case. Therefore, analysing the situation only through the humanitarian lens diminishes its complexity.

According to Dr Guhathakurta, a larger political analysis can help us understand the situation better. She begins by highlighting three different tiers of her analysis.



First, understanding the crises in democratisation; second, analysing the emerging geopolitical narratives in the region; and finally, considering how humanitarian response is embedded in all these complexities.

Crisis in democratisation

Bangladesh and Myanmar share both sea and land boundaries. While the media tends to focus on people coming by boat, it is important to recognise that the land boundary these countries share is not only in the Cox's Bazar district but also in the Chittagong hill tracts.

Both Myanmar and Bangladesh are developing countries with flawed democracies and weak institutions. It is not just a borderland area but a frontier of culture, where Islam meets Buddhism. Therefore, the significance of cultural diversity is momentous, despite the fact that the area contains only 6.14% of the total land boundary of Bangladesh.

There are also citizenship concerns on both sides of the border. While the Rohingyas consider themselves stateless, they also consider themselves Rohingya, even though Rohingyas are not formally recognised by Myanmar; moreover, Myanmar's media often tend to equate Muslims with radicalisation. This notion of radicalisation provides the military regime with an excuse for greater security and control in the border regions. This radicalisation is not an intrinsic part of being a Rohingya, but a popular perception of them.

Since this is an election year, at present, electoral politics overrides all other politics. The communities and constituencies of border areas are socially very conservative. Even though Awami League alliance has a majority of the seats in the parliament, Cox's Bazar is still a Jamaat-e-Islami constituency.



On the other hand, Teknaf is an Awami League constituency. The Awami League representative in Cox's Bazar is a popular leader who mobilises local support by perpetuating anti-Rohingya rhetoric.

Crisis in democratisation

Geographically, the region is hilly with less cultivable land. Therefore, most people need to buy food in the market. It is also one of the twenty 'lagging districts' in Bangladesh, in terms of economic and human development. Such paucities further emphasise the vulnerability of the region and the angst of the local community towards Rohingya refugees.

During the recent influx, a lot of Rohingyas had been trying to come through the Chittagong hill tracts in trying to reach Bangladesh, but were led away into the coastal Cox's Bazar region.

Although, this has not been studied, many indigenous communities claim that, during the last influx in 2012, many Rohingyas were allowed to settle in Bandarban because Bengali settlers wanted to upset the vote balance in their favour. However, since the region is now a reliable constituency for the current regime, the Bengalis do not want to upset the vote balance anymore.

On the other hand, the coastal areas where Rohingyas settled have been traditionally small arms, drugs and human trafficking zone. At the same time, it is also a prospective place for development, where Asian highway is about to be constructed. This explains much of the humanitarian response by the Bangladeshi government. For example, the government will not allow buildings to be built where the Rohingya refugees live because it is a prime land.



At the same time, with potential rise of the blue economy (including deep sea ports, offshore oil drilling, deep sea fishing), the global and regional powers, such as China and India, are increasingly more interested in the control of the region.

Humanitarian response

Nationally, Bangladeshis too have fled to India and Myanmar during the 1971 war. Young people have memories of 1971 transmitted to them through pictures and documents; it is that sentiment which has resulted in the humanitarian response.

Nonetheless, the humanitarian response is embedded in politics and economics.

Currently, there is a debate on the time and scale of humanitarian response. At the moment, the UN has a declaration for the appeal funds for Rohingya refugee until 2018. Dr Guhathakurta's research suggests that Rohingya refugees do not want to return to Myanmar until the conditions change, and the security of their lives and property is ensured.

Within Bangladesh the discussion is that Rohingyas are here to stay because none of the promises made by the Myanmar government has satisfied or convinced the refugees that they can go back safely. The Bangladesh government has tried indirect pressure to send these refugees back to Myanmar by enlisting them forcefully, however, the Rohingya have their own leadership structures who are very articulate. Indeed they have engages in protests and are convinced that they will not be pushed back.

Justice and accountability issues are also dually implicated. Along with relief and rehabilitation, the Bangladeshi government needs to put pressure on Myanmar to convince and influence them. The prospect of refugees returning voluntarily and safely lies on how Bangladesh, Myanmar and the international community responds to these larger political, economic and humanitarian interests.



Building Bridges: Bangladesh's Peacekeepers in Sierra Leone

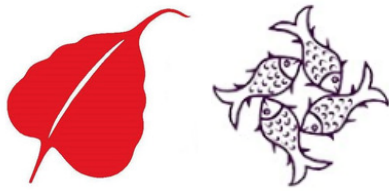
Dr Kieran Mitton presents the idea of Bangladesh and its peacekeepers from the perspective of Sierra Leoneans. Sierra Leoneans have a uniformly positive perspective of the Bangladeshi security forces and police. Many military forces like to get involved in peacekeeping because it is a form of soft power, which wins both national pride and diplomatic benefits. It is also a rebranding and PR exercise for military forces to build a positive image. Furthermore, UN peacekeeping work is financially lucrative.

The Sierra Leone civil war raged for over a decade decimating the country and causing unimaginable suffering upon civilians, including children. It has widely been regarded as stemming from desperate political and socio-economic conditions.

In 1999, the international community pressured Sierra Leone to sign a peace agreement with the rebels, after which the UN deployed peacekeeping forces.

The initial mandate was to deploy about 6,000 personnel, who would spread out across Sierra Leone and help oversee disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration process. They will also help oversee some transitional elections and other aspects of the transition to peace. The rebels still occupied large parts of the South, East and the North of the country, where they were carrying diamond mining and other illicit activities.

This UN deployment had many problems. It was very hard for the peacekeepers to keep a peace that didn't exist. The peacekeepers and civilians were often attacked by rebels. The rebels who had given up their weapons and gone into the disarmament camp were forcedly taken out of those camps and given weapons back again by the former commanders.



Between May and August in 1999, there were series of abductions of British personnel and soldiers.

This changed the British mission from an evacuation mandate to more of a direct military intervention. By early 2000, the UN expanded the mandate of its peacekeeping mission. Just before the Bangladeshi troops were deployed, 300 Zambian peacekeepers were attacked.

The major power, the US, did not want to deploy troops. Furthermore, after eleven years of brutal civil conflicts, the infrastructures (bridges, roads, schools) had been destroyed, and there was very little economic activity. Therefore, the mission of the UN peacekeeping was not only to ensure physical security but also to provide human security.

It is in these circumstances that Bangladesh offered troops. While Bangladesh had its self-interested reasons for deploying troops, from the Sierra Leone's perspective, this was perceived as a very positive move.

They welcomed that Bangladesh has deployed substantial numbers of troops to help their peacekeeping mission, when others were not willing to do so. The Bangladeshi deployment covered the area of the North and the East, where the rebels did not leave. They oversaw disarmament and security, but also provided support to carry out logistical exercise and infrastructure building.

Dr Mitton's research finds that neutrality is important for the success of UN peacekeeping. Bangladeshi deployment was successful in disarmament because they were perceived as neutral, in contrast to the Zambian contingent. Furthermore, Bangladeshi peacekeepers provided care and assistance to the local community.

These activities played a crucial role in building trust with the community, particularly with those, who have been terrorised by men in uniforms.



There were also a lot of literal bridge building, which connected the communities back into the economy. This helped revive farming, get produce to the market and allowed the refugees to return home. It was reassuring for the rebels as well because the Bangladeshi military was not promising them empowerment, but the visible signs of change (however small) were everywhere.

By the end of the conflict, when the UN started to withdraw troops, the Bangladeshi contingencies would receive ceremonial goodbyes. The UN considers Bangladeshi soldiers as the 'cream' of UN peacekeepers. This is because they are highly disciplined, and there are far fewer complaints against them than soldiers from many other countries.

The Bangladeshi troops have also been invested in the communities where they were deployed. Moreover, while the British troops also played a positive role, it reinforced a negative view that Sierra Leone's armed forces must be trained by the UK. This is because as a former colony, there is a negative self-image about reliance on the West, particularly on Britain.

In contrast, the role of Bangladeshi peacekeepers was to show that they should expect these services from their own armed forces. The Bangladeshi peacekeepers reinforced the idea that the military can play a positive role.

Made in Bangladesh: Scaling Up Green Apparel Manufacturing

Bangladesh is now the world's second largest garment exporting country. Bangladesh is no longer a 'basket case' and it is no longer a disaster story. The GDP in Bangladesh has been growing steadily at 6% for the past decade. Industrial share of the GDP is 29%, the lion's share of which comes for the ready-made garments (RMG) industry.

Around 50 million people in Bangladesh depend on the RMG sector for making a living. The RMG industry has around 4,000 active factories. It employs 4.4 million workers, of which 80% are women. In such a conservative society, this in itself is a remarkable story.



Compliance has always been a big challenge for the garments factories in Bangladesh. This is because the garments factories were not set up in an organised way. Many of these factories rented out establishments that existed in the market. There are two kinds of compliance: the first is social compliance, which deals with child labour, wage, working environment etc. The other is environmental compliance.

Social compliance

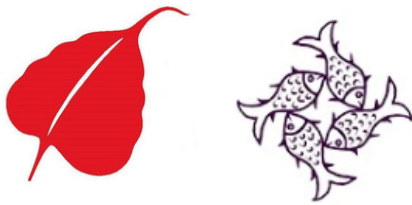
In the early 1990s, child labour and sweat shops were a very sad part of the economic reality in Bangladesh. The Harkin's bill, which threatened to boycott the Bangladeshi garment factories, had led to the Child Labour Deterrence Act. Bangladesh has also been the stage for some of the world's most tragic industrial accidents: in 2012, the Tazreen factory fire incident killed 119 workers and in 2013, the Rana Plaza building collapse killed around 1,134 workers. Collectively, these tragedies shook the entire supply chain. It brought the buyers, governments, international development agencies, factory owners, labour groups, NGOs, trade bodies together.

They came up with a much more collaborative governance system, where the buyer groups had their own governance structures (e.g. Accord and Alliance).

Dr Shahpar Selim highlights the difference between how the child labour issue was handled in the 1990s and how the building safety issues were managed later. In the early 1990s, Bangladesh was not an important player in the RMG sector. Therefore, in respect to child labour, it was possible to threaten boycotts. In contrast, when the Rana Plaza disaster happened, the response was no longer to boycott and alienate, but one of collective responsibility sharing.

Consequently, there has been a very marked difference in the way compliance has been thought of in Bangladesh, and among the buyers and suppliers that are connected to the sector.

While child labour is still prevalent in Bangladesh, particularly, in the informal economic work (and in the murky corners of the subcontracting supply chain), a UNICEF report suggests that child labour is uncommon in the garment sector.

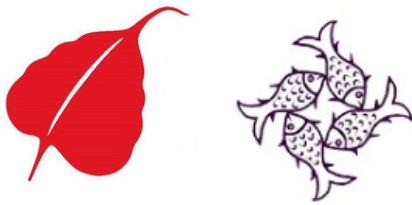


The ILO and the buyer group, Accord and Alliance, have inspected all the garment factories in the past five years. They have remedied these factories to a certain extent for building and fire safety. A lot of the factories, which were non-compliant, have since been shut down. Some of them have moved to newer premises, while some are still taking corrective actions.

Approximately, one billion dollars have been invested by factory owners to ensure better working conditions. Buyers now agree that working conditions are much better in Bangladesh. While there may be a spectrum of compliance, the idea of non-compliant factories does not exist in Bangladesh anymore.

To be in business in the RMG sector, the entrepreneurs have to be in compliance with agreed working conditions. Furthermore, compliance is a process (which requires maintaining), therefore, no factory is ever fully compliant.

The world's greenest garment factories are in Bangladesh. 67 factories have achieved LEED certification^[1]; out of which 17 are platinum rated and 37 are gold rated. 280 new factories are in the process of getting LEED certified. Bangladesh's garment sector is therefore becoming known for its sustainability initiatives. It is home to the Partnership for Cleaner Textiles (PaCT) project, which is the world's largest resource efficiency program. Phase I of the PaCT project reached out to 215 factories and worked intensively with them. The project has achieved some extremely impressive results, including, saving 21.6 billion litres of groundwater per year, saving 2.5 million Mega Watts of energy per year, as well as avoiding 460,428 tonnes Carbon dioxide emission equivalent per year of Green House Gas emissions. Furthermore, under the PaCT project, USD 39 million invested by entrepreneurs were paid back within 10 months. It also generated USD 16.3 million cost savings per year. The PaCT project is now in Phase II, with even more ambitious targets.



Transformation change

Going from LEED superstars and PaCT success stories to bringing transformational change to the rest of the RMG sectors is full of economic and institutional barriers. To ensure Bangladesh's role in the green supply chain Bangladesh needs to understand and change the entrepreneur's mind-set. The entrepreneur is in a business to make profit; therefore, green technologies has to be economically viable. Cleaner productions have high initial capital costs. The entrepreneur needs to consider the availability of the capital as well as the risks associated with it.

Furthermore, new technologies and green technologies require operational knowledge. It also requires capital costs of training staff operations. There are also institutional barriers to transformational change. These include, low internalization of environmental externalities in a highly competitive supply chain; inertia of moving away from incumbent technologies; perverse tax incentives on new green technologies.

Joining hands

The LEED and PaCT experience highlights that to scale up the process of green technology in the RMG sector all the stakeholders need to collaborate. Dr Selim suggests that joining hands requires strong regulatory signals from the government favouring cleaner production in factories as opposed to the traditional end-of-pipe treatments.

This would mean changing the environmental targets and regulatory measures that the Department of Environment currently has.

The government needs to remove perverse resource pricing in order to encourage energy and water savings. Furthermore, long-term institutional changes need to be implemented. These include: transparent and simplified financial markets for green technologies and favourable conditions for getting green advisory.



To bridge the gap between the credit amount available and what is needed, economic and financial incentives for banks and factory owners needs to also be provided. More collaborative and coordinated efforts are required to foster peer networks of green skills building and trust formation. Such collaboration is integral to achieving behavioural change throughout the sector.

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