

Bangladesh

GEOGRAPHY

The People's Republic of Bangladesh is about twice the size of Tasmania. Apart from the hills near Chittagong, it is a flat low-lying country at the junction of three mighty rivers: the Padma (Ganges), the Jamuna (Brahmaputra) and the Meghna.

Melting snows from the Himalayan Mountains and heavy monsoonal rains between June and October often cause annual floods, covering up to a third of the land. Soil eroded from the cleared mountain slopes builds up the fertile plain, but also chokes the river beds, creating more flooding. Coastal areas are vulnerable to destructive cyclones starting in the Bay of Bengal.

PEOPLE

Bangladesh is one of the world's most densely populated countries. Most Bangladeshis still live in rural areas. The official language is Bangla. Almost 90 percent of the people are Muslims and nine percent are Hindus, with small minorities of Buddhists, Christians and other faiths.

HISTORY

Bengal (now Bangladesh) was first colonised by Turko-Afghans, who brought their Muslim religion and weaving skills; then by Moghuls from north India and the British in the 18th century. By then, East Bengal had a thriving textile industry and abundant rice harvests. To protect the British textile industry, the export of Bengali cotton was banned, severely damaging the local economy. Under the partition of British India in 1947, the mainly Muslim nation of Pakistan was established, with two parts (east and west) separated by India.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin

East Pakistan (the future Bangladesh) felt neglected by the central government in the west. The Awami League political party made pleas for self-government in the east.

In 1971, the People's Republic of Bangladesh was proclaimed. The next 20 years were marked by military rule, dotted with assassinations and coups. Since 1991, Bangladesh has had a parliamentary government dominated by two major parties – the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League. A recent increase in political violence has in turn led to significant instability in modern day Bangladesh.

ECONOMY

The vast majority of Bangladeshis earn their living from agriculture. The fertile soil and climate are ideal for growing rice, jute, sugarcane and tea. However, most people own very little land. Of Bangladesh's almost 160 million inhabitants, close to 4.5 million are completely landless. Those who are landless have to work for low wages or a share of the crop. Many can only find seasonal work. Some poor families settle on silt islands, at great risk from floods or tidal waves. Few can afford drainage control measures, or to store grain for the next year.

Agriculture cannot fully employ such an expanding population. About one-sixth of the workforce is engaged in industry; for example, processing jute and cotton. In contrast to other sectors, most workers in the new textiles and clothing factories are women and girls.

Positively, women have increasingly gained access to microcredit and this has expanded opportunities for employment and income generation.



World Vision's work in Bangladesh aims to promote the status of women and girls and ensure that they have equal opportunity to education and skills training.

Bangladesh is self-sufficient in natural gas, but has few other mineral resources. Forest cover is being reduced as timber is used for fuel and building. Inland and marine fishing are developing. The government has had some success in attracting overseas investment by setting up export processing zones with tax advantages.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Most Bangladeshis live in extreme poverty, and the country has been identified by the United Nations as having very high development needs. The majority of rural Bangladeshis live in small houses with woven bamboo walls, an earthen floor and thatched roof. Only the affluent can afford a tin roof.

A man, his wife, their sons and families may live in houses grouped together around a courtyard. Poorer households often include only the parents and their unmarried children.

In Dhaka, the wealthy have comfortable homes, but the poor crowd into unhealthy slums. They build houses from waste materials, without drainage and sanitation.

Water from tube-wells is increasingly used for drinking, but many people use water from ponds or rivers for cooking, dishwashing and bathing. However, widespread natural arsenic contamination of water supplies presents a problem. Less than half of the population have adequate sanitation, leading to diseases like cholera. Diarrhoea, respiratory infections and measles cause many young children's deaths.

Poor rural families are often short of food after the floods begin and before the crops are harvested. Thirty percent of the population is undernourished.



World Vision helps women to gain skills so that they can generate valuable income for their families.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	BANGLADESH	AUSTRALIA
Population	164.4 million	21.5 million
Urban population (as % of total)	28.1%	89.1 %
GNI per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$1,587	\$38,692
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	49.6%	0%
Population with sustainable access to an improved water source	80%	100%
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	55%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	66.9 years	81.9 years
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	54	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

The government has been trying to extend basic health services. Bangladesh has begun to manufacture cheap essential drugs and is adopting the practice of treating diarrhoea by replacing lost fluids with frequent drinks of a sugar/salt solution – or even water in which rice has been cooked. This method has saved millions of children's lives. But there is still a long way to go in reducing the sickness caused by poverty.

EDUCATION

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in increasing access to primary education for both girls and boys. In 2008, the percentage of children enrolled in primary school was 86.4 percent. However, a lack of trained teachers and consequently large classes result in a low retention rate.

Traditionally, parents have seen more value in educating sons, who are expected to look after them in their old age. Nevertheless, incentive programs encouraging girls to attend primary school have made significant progress. Bangladesh continues to face the challenge of enabling millions of illiterate adults to learn to read and write.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN BANGLADESH'

- assists sponsored children, their families and communities with better nutrition, healthcare and education
- provides opportunities for girls and women to gain new skills
- trains community members to handle small loans and to set up small businesses
- helps people prepare for and respond to emergencies such as floods and cyclones by distributing food and building materials, and constructing cyclone shelters

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