

Country profile: 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. While most Bangladeshis still live in rural areas, the capital Dhaka is a megacity with a population of over 15 million people. The official language is Bangla. Almost 90 percent of the people are Muslims and just over 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 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. 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, 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. Boycotts, strikes and violence affected the 2014 elections.

Economy

An estimated 47 percent of Bangladesh's work force is employed in agriculture, 40 percent in services and 13 percent in industry. Many people, however, do not have full-time employment and only receive a low wage. Agricultural products include rice, jute (a natural fibre), sugarcane and tea. The main industries include processing of jute and cotton, and manufacturing textiles and clothing. Garments make up 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports.

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. The government has had some success in attracting overseas investment by setting up export processing zones with tax advantages. Money sent back from Bangladeshi's working overseas (remittances) is also important for Bangladesh's economy.



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

Positively, women have increasingly gained access to microcredit and this has expanded opportunities for employment and income generation. In 2006, Muhammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize “for their efforts through microcredit to create economic and social development from below”.

Living Conditions

Many Bangladeshis live in extreme poverty. The majority of rural Bangladeshis live in small houses with woven bamboo walls, an earthen floor and thatched roof. Extended families may live in houses grouped together around a courtyard. In the capital Dhaka, the wealthy have comfortable homes, but the poor crowd into unhealthy slums. They often build houses from waste materials, without drainage and sanitation.

Water from tube-wells is increasingly used for drinking, but some people may still use water from ponds or rivers for cooking, dishwashing and bathing. Natural arsenic contamination of water supplies is a problem in some parts of Bangladesh. 45.3 percent of the population do not have adequate sanitation, leading to diseases like cholera. While there have been significant improvements in health, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and measles still cause many young children’s deaths.

Poor rural families are often short of food in the period before crops are harvested. 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. 41.3 percent of children under 5 years old experience moderate or severe stunting – a sign of chronic malnutrition.

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 significant progress in increasing access to primary education for both girls and boys. However, there is a lack of trained teachers, and large class sizes. Many children drop out of school before finishing primary school.

Bangladesh continues to face the challenge of enabling millions of illiterate adults to learn to read and write. Only 57.7 percent of Bangladeshis aged 15 and older are assessed as being literate.

World Vision Australia in Bangladesh

- Assists communities with nutrition, healthcare and education programs
- 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

Indicator	Bangladesh	Australia
Population (millions)	156.6 million	23.3 million
Urban population (% of total)	29.4%	89.5%
Gross National Income per capita (US\$ PPP)	\$2,713	\$41,524
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	43.25%	No data
Adult literacy rate (% age 15 and above)	57.7%	No data
Internet users (% of population)	6.3%	82.3%
Population using improved water source (% of total) ²	83.2%	100%
Doctors per 10,000 people	3.6	38.5
Under-five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	41	5
Life expectancy at birth	70.7 years	82.5 years
Human Development Index rank (out of 187)	142 nd	2 nd

Sources: UNDP Human Development Report 2014; ² UNICEF www.unicef.org/infobycountry/ [accessed March 2015]; and CIA The World Factbook www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html [accessed March 2015]