



**COVID-19:  
WORKERS DEMAND  
JOBS, INCOME AND  
SOCIAL  
PROTECTION**

## COVID-19: WORKERS NEED RESPONSES FOR RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

Bangladesh went into lockdown on 26 March. The Covid-19 pandemic showed that the government of Bangladesh must strengthen the country's resilience to future shocks by investing in an efficient Universal Social Protection system, including free access to healthcare and income protection provisions. Furthermore, the government of Bangladesh must shift resources from the National Development Plan to activate a Covid-19 Emergency Support Fund for all socially vulnerable people and workers, including those in the informal economy, as well as micro-industries.

This far, the government of Bangladesh's current response plan has consisted in an extensive preventive information and awareness campaign; the opening of nine testing centres across the country; the provision of financial incentives as wage support for workers in export-oriented industries; and the distribution of limited-scale free food packages for informal workers, socially vulnerable and low-income groups across the country, who lost their work because of the pandemic.

### ARE TRADE UNIONS AT THE TABLE?

The government of Bangladesh has integrated the SDGs in its 7th Five-Year National Development Plan. The General Economics Division (GED) under the Ministry of Planning (MoP) is coordinating the implementation of Agenda 2030. In addition, an SDG Coordinator has been appointed in the office of the Prime Minister.

Some attempts at ensuring transparency are being made by the government of Bangladesh as access to information on the implementation of SDGs is open to all and some publications on SDG progress are available to citizens and civil society groups. However, trade unions state that the reporting mechanisms are not fully adequate and that not all information is made available.

While some consultations on SDG implementation are held, trade unions are only consulted on the implementation of SDG 8 and financing for the SDGs, and only to a limited extent. Trade unions and workers representatives have not been effectively involved by the government as a social partner in a dialogue on the implementation of SDGs at national level. While some trade unions' inputs have been taken up by the government, the progress of implementation leaves much to be desired.

Trade unions report that the government of Bangladesh has developed an SDG Financing Plan funded by internal resources, ODA from international donors and the private sector.

#### TRANSPARENCY



Irregular access to limited information

#### CONSULTATION



Informal or ad hoc consultation

#### SOCIAL DIALOGUE



Social partners contribute individually to government's SDG national plan



Jatio Sramik League (JSL)  
Bangladesh Labour Federation (BLF)  
Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal (BJSD)

Bangladesh Mukto Sramik Federation (BMSF)  
Bangladesh Sanjukta Sramik Federation (BSSF)  
Bangladesh Free Trade Union Congress (BFTUC)



# IS THE (DECENT) WORK GETTING DONE?

The data below are related to the country situation pre-Covid. Certainly, the impact of the pandemic will make the overall scenario even worse if adequate responses are not put in place urgently.

The proportion of people living on below \$1 per day in Bangladesh declined from 34.8 per cent in 2000 to 14.8 per cent in 2017. However, the rate of decline in poverty over that period weakened between 2010-16 compared to 2005-2010, a trend which can be attributed to rising income inequality. This indicates that **target 1.1 (eradicate extreme poverty for all people)** is far from being reached. While extreme poverty has been falling in both urban and rural areas, the disparity in income between them is profound, with extreme poverty rates being twice as high in rural areas.

Reaching **target 1.3 (implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures)** is far off the mark: while the government has put forward a wide array of social protection mechanisms, their coverage is very limited. 28 per cent of the population is covered by at least one social protection benefit; only 33 per cent of persons above retirement age receive a pension and only 29 per cent of children are covered by social protection benefits. No unemployment benefits are made available.

Women are more likely to be in informal employment than men and an overwhelming majority of them work in the informal labour market (91.8 per cent of women, as compared to 82.1 per cent of men), suggesting efforts need to be made to progress on **target 5.4 (recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work)**. With regards to **target 5.5 (ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life)**, in 2017, female enrolment in secondary education in Bangladesh stood at 67 per cent. With the impact of COVID19 and its resulting loss of paid work this figure is expected to fall significantly.

There are significant obstacles to Bangladesh meeting the targets set by **SDG 8 (promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all)**. Only 14.9 per cent of people worked in the formal economy in 2018, with higher rates for urban (22.7 per cent) than rural areas (11.9 per cent), posing a challenge to reach **target 8.3 (support**

**productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of MSMEs)**. Achieving **target 8.5 (full and productive employment and decent work for all)** is still far off, as the wage disparity between women and men has recently deteriorated due to a faster reduction in real wage rates for female workers (estimated at 3.8 per cent in 2016, compared to 1.9 per cent for male workers for the same type of work). Indicators on **target 8.7 (take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour)** remain worrying, as in 2019, 10.8 per cent of children aged between 5-17 were engaged in child labour. Delivering on **target 8.8 (protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers)** is a serious challenge given the legal and administrative barriers to union registration and that the labour court system in Bangladesh fails to meet the minimum standards due to the low number of labour courts compared to the high number of labour disputes and pending cases. In addition, the unionisation rate is estimated at an extremely low 5 per cent.

Significant progress remains to be made for Bangladesh to reach **target 10.4 (adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, and progressively achieve greater equality)**, as for the bottom 20 per cent of the income earners in the country, the growth rate of household income per capita increased by only a paltry 1.3 per cent between 2010-2016.

The government of Bangladesh has so far failed to substantially address the implementation of **target 13.2 (integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning)**, despite the fact that according to 2017 estimates, over 12 million people in Bangladesh were afflicted by adverse effects of climate change. Rising sea levels and the inundation of fertile lands is an enormous threat.

Performance on **target 16.10 (ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements)** remains poor. According to the ITUC Rights Index, Bangladesh is one of the top ten countries violating trade union rights and is listed as a 'Country at Risk'.

## TRADE UNION ASKS TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

The government of Bangladesh needs to put in place policies and measures in order to tackle the economic and social shocks resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic. Today more than ever the SDGs show the way in building a sustainable and inclusive economy and society.

Trade unions call on the government of Bangladesh to ensure urgent action to cope with the pandemic crisis in line with the SDGs, including:

- A detailed impact and needs assessment analysis at different industrial sectors, especially to agriculture sector production to ensure national food security and prevention of famine as result from the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Establishing an Emergency Fund for Covid-19 response with appropriate resources and accountability mechanisms at different levels to grant free access to healthcare, as well as, income support for working people and their families.
- Develop a two year national economic and social recovery plan from the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Ensure better industrial relations at national and sector level, through a functioning National Tripartite Consultation platform and a possible national agreement between government- employer and trade unions during the pandemic period.
- Trade Unions in Bangladesh welcome the [Global action to support the garment industry](#) which sees employer and worker organisations along with leading brands, retailers endorse a [call for action](#) and commit to work with governments and financial institutions to mobilise sufficient funding to enable manufacturers to ensure business continuity including the payment of wages, as well as income-support and job-retention schemes to address the impact of the crisis.



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