



PROCEEDINGS

Seminar
on

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Seminar on The Power of Local: How Grassroot Communities Drive SDG Achievement in Bangladesh 04 September 2025



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS), in collaboration with the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), organised a Seminar titled “**The Power of Local: How Grassroot Communities Drive SDG Achievement in Bangladesh**” on Thursday, 04 September 2025 at the BISS Auditorium. **Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng**, Director General of BISS, delivered the Welcome Address. **H E Håkon Arald Gulbrandsen**, Ambassador of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Dhaka graced the event as the Chief Guest, while **Iqbal Abdullah Harun**, Secretary, Planning Division, Ministry of Planning attended the event as Special Guest. **Dr Kazi Maruful Islam**, Professor, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka delivered the Keynote Presentation. **Dr Michal Krejza**, Head of Development Cooperation for the European Union (EU) Delegation to Bangladesh, and **Md Toufiq-ur Rahman**, Director General, Multilateral Economic Affairs Wing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh spoke as distinguished guests. **Khushi Kabir**, Secretary of Nijera Kori shared her perspective as a “Voice of the Community Leader”. An open discussion session took place featured active participation from experts and practitioners. **Dr Fahmida Khatun**, Executive Director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), moderated the Seminar. The event brought together government officials, representatives from development partners, civil society, academia, and research institutions. Participants shared their perspectives and recommendations on strengthening local governance, promoting inclusive development, and accelerating Bangladesh’s progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Welcome Address



**Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP,
awc, afwc, psc, PEng**

Director General, BISS

Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng, Director General of BISS, at the outset of his welcome address, stated that Bangladesh stands at a defining juncture in its development trajectory, having achieved remarkable progress in multiple sectors, including poverty reduction, gender parity, education, healthcare, and economic growth. This collective advancement, he noted, has positioned Bangladesh as a recognised development success story, now poised to graduate from the Least Developed Country (LDC) category by 2026. However, he cautioned that the path toward achieving developed country status and achieving

the SDGs by 2030 demands renewed commitment and innovative strategies.

Emphasising the central objective of the Seminar, Major General Anis asserted that achieving the SDGs cannot be the sole responsibility of governments or policymakers. Instead, it requires empowering communities at the grassroots level, where development challenges are most pronounced and practical, and innovative solutions often emerge. He described the localisation of the SDGs as a process of translating global goals into context-specific actions that address the realities of towns, cities, and rural areas across Bangladesh. Highlighting national efforts, he commended Bangladesh's initiatives toward SDG localisation, including the identification of 39 national priority targets and one local priority target, as well as the formulation of an SDG Communications Strategy. Nevertheless, he emphasised that the real catalyst for change lies within local communities themselves. He mentioned that, whether the task involves combating urban poverty, addressing malnutrition, advancing gender equality, or enhancing climate resilience, grassroots actors are at the forefront of shaping sustainable futures. While acknowledging these achievements, Major General Anis also highlighted the challenges impeding progress. He pointed out that many local government institutions face severe financial and institutional limitations. Issues such as inadequate coordination, fragmented data systems, and the absence of disaggregated, real-time data continue to hinder effective decision-making and implementation. Furthermore, he noted that widening inequalities and regional disparities threaten to undermine the foundational SDG principle of “Leaving No One Behind”.

The Director General also proposed several guiding questions for collective reflection, such as how to empower local governments with greater administrative and fiscal autonomy; how to design innovative financing mechanisms—through public-private partnerships,

community initiatives, and international climate finance—to sustain local development; how to strengthen data ecosystems using digital tools for evidence-based planning; and how to promote a whole-of-society approach by engaging civil society, academia, the private sector, and local communities as equal stakeholders in driving the SDGs. He underscored that the Seminar was not merely a forum for discussion but a platform to generate consensus, new ideas, and actionable policy recommendations. These, he noted, should aim to reinforce local governance, enhance data systems, expand financing avenues, and ensure inclusivity in development programming. The Director General affirmed that the insights emerging from the discussions would inform the ongoing work of BIIS and UNOPS and contribute to the broader national agenda of fostering locally driven, resilient, and inclusive development pathways. Reiterating the human-centred nature of the SDGs, Major General Anis reminded participants that these global goals are not abstract commitments but concrete promises to improve lives. Whether in rural villages or urban slums, he observed, people’s aspirations for education, healthcare, livelihoods, and dignity embody the spirit of the SDGs. He emphasised that by harnessing the power of local communities, Bangladesh can ensure that development progress truly benefits every citizen across the nation.

In conclusion, Major General Anis expressed his sincere appreciation to the chief guest, special guest, distinguished participants, UNOPS partners, panellists, and all attendees for their presence and contributions. He noted that their collective wisdom and commitment would play a vital role in accelerating Bangladesh’s journey toward achieving the SDGs.



Special Remarks



Sudhir Muralidharan

Country Manager

*United Nations Office for Project Services
(UNOPS) Bangladesh and Bhutan*

Sudhir Muralidharan began by setting the context of Bangladesh's performance in achieving the SDGs. He noted that the country ranks 107th out of 167 nations in the *2024 Sustainable Development Report*. While this represents a challenge, he emphasised that Bangladesh remains ahead of India and Pakistan, though still behind Sri Lanka and Bhutan. He also highlighted that the country is currently off track in roughly 80 per cent of the SDG targets, yet has achieved remarkable progress in several areas. For instance, extreme poverty has been reduced to 5.6 per cent. Also, major progress

has been made in ensuring gender parity in primary and secondary education, access to primary healthcare, and in achieving strong performance in clean and affordable energy. The country has maintained an economy which has also been growing steadily at 6–7 per cent over the past decade, which he described as a source of optimism.

Despite these achievements, Mr Muralidharan identified several persistent challenges that hinder the localisation of the SDGs. One major obstacle, he noted, is the absence of disaggregated data, with approximately 44 per cent of SDG indicators lacking local-level information. This, he argued, impedes effective planning and monitoring at the grassroots level. He also called for greater institutional capacity within local government bodies to ensure that development outcomes are implemented efficiently and inclusively. Echoing earlier remarks by another speaker, he stressed the importance of ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of the SDGs, particularly vulnerable and marginalised populations. Addressing the perception that the SDGs are owned exclusively by the United Nations (UN) or governments, Mr Muralidharan underscored that these goals belong to everyone. He emphasised that the responsibility for achieving the SDGs lies with individuals and communities, not distant institutions. With two-thirds of the SDG timeline already elapsed, he cautioned that Bangladesh has limited time—only until 2030—to meet its commitments. Therefore, he emphasised the importance of collective ownership and personal engagement in the pursuit of sustainable development.

Drawing on UNOPS's experience, Mr Muralidharan elaborated on the organisation's collaboration with the government in developing the *SDG Communication Strategy*, led by the Office of the Principal Coordinator (SDG Affairs). Through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), particularly at the classroom level, UNOPS discovered that the youth of Bangladesh must be

involved. There is no way to achieve the SDGs without their participation. To bridge this gap, UNOPS introduced an innovative slogan— *“Don’t look at SDGs as Sustainable Development Goals, see them as Start Doing Good”*. He explained that everyday actions, such as turning off taps, saving electricity, and avoiding food waste, constitute meaningful contributions to sustainable development. These seemingly minor individual acts, when aggregated at the community and national levels, have a transformative impact on overall progress toward the SDGs.

Mr Muralidharan emphasised the need to translate the SDGs into everyday actions, into language that resonates with the youth. These small, daily contributions, aggregated across households and communities, will ultimately lead to national and global progress. That connection must be made between the individual to the national, and from the national to the global level. He encouraged them to spend a little less time on their phones and a bit more time doing something for the greater good. What is found is that most young people want to contribute; they are not unwilling, but do not know how. For that reason, he urged that the message of personal responsibility for sustainable development be spread widely, as achieving the SDGs is not the job of others but a shared obligation.

Afterwards, Mr Muralidharan provided an overview of UNOPS and its operational mandate. He explained that UNOPS, the operational arm of the United Nations (UN), is tasked with delivering tangible results through infrastructure, procurement, and contract management. Unlike other UN agencies with sectoral mandates such as health or education, UNOPS holds an implementation mandate, enabling it to work flexibly across multiple SDGs. Its comparative advantage lies in bridging the gap between policy and finance through concrete implementation. By combining public-sector accountability with private-sector agility, UNOPS operates effectively even in the most fragile contexts. He noted that 50–60 per cent of UNOPS’s work takes place in conflict-affected or challenging environments such as Gaza, Ukraine, Yemen, South Sudan, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Myanmar, demonstrating its capacity to deliver under difficult conditions.

As the world approaches the final five years of the SDG era, Mr Muralidharan stressed that Bangladesh must refocus on implementation, which is often underestimated. While many may claim to implement, he argued, effective implementation requires technical expertise, experience, and operational efficiency—areas in which UNOPS specialises. In this regard, he reaffirmed that UNOPS takes pride in its non-normative, non-programmatic, and highly adaptive approach to delivering measurable outcomes.

In conclusion, Mr Muralidharan expressed his gratitude to the co-hosts, BIISS, for organising the Seminar and facilitating an important discussion on grassroots-driven SDG achievement. He ended his remarks reiterating his appreciation for the shared commitment to sustainable development and collective action toward achieving the SDGs.

Keynote Presentation



Dr Kazi Maruful Islam

Professor

Department of Development Studies

University of Dhaka

Dr Kazi Maruful Islam began his presentation by sharing his personal reflection that framed the central theme of his deliberation. He recounted his childhood in a remote village in Narail during the mid-1970s and onwards. His earliest education, he explained, was shaped entirely by community-led initiatives: a primary school established by neighbours, a high school created by a church-based charity, and a college run by another community-based institution. This personal narrative, he emphasised, revealed a distinct pattern—communities identified their own problems

and acted first, while the state followed later. For him, this experience captured the “power of the local”, a concept that he described as deeply meaningful not only in his professional work but also in his personal life. Community-led action, he argued, lies at the heart of the SDGs, especially their central commitment to “leave no one behind”.

Dr Islam discussed Bangladesh’s progress on the SDGs within the broader global context. He recalled earlier presentations that highlighted global setbacks, noting that only about 17 per cent of SDG targets worldwide are on track. Multiple factors—COVID-19, geopolitical tensions, wars, economic instability, climate change, and natural disasters—have contributed to this slow progress, including in Bangladesh. Despite these global disruptions, he stated that Bangladesh has achieved significant successes that merit recognition. Building on its strong Millenium Development Goal (MDG) performance, the country made significant early strides in SDG implementation, though its progress varies across different goals. He then reviewed several key achievements. Under SDG 1, extreme poverty declined from 13.4 per cent in 2016 to around 6 per cent, and social protection coverage more than doubled during the same period. Under SDG 2, Bangladesh has improved its hunger indicators. Under SDG 3, innovative models have expanded access to affordable treatment for non-communicable diseases. Under SDG 13, the country stands out globally for its climate adaptation and disaster resilience efforts, driven by community-based models, early warning systems, evacuation mechanisms, and preparedness initiatives. These achievements, he remarked, reflect real progress that deserves recognition.

Moving to SDG localisation, Dr Islam stressed that translating global ambitions into local action is essential for meaningful progress. Localisation, he explained, involves

adopting, implementing, and monitoring the SDGs at the local level by empowering local governments, encouraging bottom-up participation, and integrating SDG priorities into planning and budgeting. Bangladesh took this process seriously from the outset. Beginning in 2018, the government extended SDG-related initiatives down to upazila and, in some cases, union levels, leading to the development of the widely praised “39+1 model”. Under this model, 39 nationally prioritised indicators were complemented by one additional indicator chosen locally by each district or upazila. Through extensive consultations and workshops, Bangladesh identified 492 upazila-level indicators and 64 district-level indicators, in addition to the national 39. Many of these matched national priorities, but many were newly derived from local needs. Of these, 84 upazilas identified agriculture as their top priority, 70 identified employment, while another 70 prioritised primary education. Additionally, 42 prioritised safe water and sanitation, 37 disaster management, 32 health, and 24 nutrition. Among the 492 indicators, 175 aligned with national indicators, 184 with international indicators, and 284 were entirely new—reflecting community concerns, local realities, and context-specific needs. This, he noted, clearly illustrates that local perspectives must shape national and global SDG achievements. To underscore the power of community action, Dr Islam shared the example of a bamboo footbridge in Rangpur, built more than a decade ago entirely by local residents using traditional knowledge and local materials. Serving people on both sides of a river, the structure was constructed without any support from upazila authorities or national agencies. He described this as only one of countless such initiatives nationwide, demonstrating how communities often identify needs early and take action without waiting for external intervention.



Dr Islam then turned to the challenges of localising the SDGs. First, he noted persistent financial constraints, as local governments lack adequate fiscal autonomy and resources. He referenced a recent study he conducted in Dinajpur and Rangpur, in which 27 of 46 Union Parishads had developed SDG-aligned plans but remained severely constrained by insufficient funds. Second, he highlighted capacity gaps: despite training efforts, many local officials have differing levels of understanding. Some remain unsure about how to integrate SDG targets in

planning, while others lack the technical capacity to collect or analyse necessary data. Third, data disaggregation remains a major obstacle. Numerous local projects are implemented, but the resulting data often remains uncollected or unintegrated into national systems, making progress measurement difficult. Finally, he identified mainstreaming challenges, noting that SDG work often remains project-based rather than being integrated into local planning and budgeting processes.

Dr Islam then proposed several practical measures. These included increasing block grants, enhancing local revenue generation, establishing a Local SDG Challenge Fund, and cultivating local SDG champions. He emphasised the importance of community-led data mapping and reiterated the earlier call to engage young people, arguing that without youth participation and local innovation, achieving the SDGs will remain elusive. Before concluding, he reflected on the broader social context. Over the past two decades, he observed that deep political polarisation has fragmented communities, weakening collective action and eroding community resilience. Power, he reminded the audience, does not lie in resources alone; it lies in the ability of communities to utilise those resources to influence the decisions that affect their lives. Thus, supporting local actors, safeguarding their autonomy, and creating environments that foster independent leadership are essential.

Dr Islam ended his presentation by recalling the events immediately following 05 August 2024, when formal state authority was largely absent. During this period, communities—especially youth, children, and local residents—stepped forward to maintain order, ensure essential services, and support each other. At this moment, he asserted, it reaffirmed a profound truth: the real power rests with the people. If communities are trusted, facilitated, and empowered, they can drive transformative changes.

Remarks by the Special Guest



Iqbal Abdullah Harun

Secretary

*Planning Division, Ministry of Planning
Government of the People's Republic of
Bangladesh*

Iqbal Abdullah Harun highlighted the unique global consensus around the SDGs. He observed that, in a world divided by differing political philosophies and national interests, the SDGs stand out as a rare and universal agreement that unites nations around a shared development vision. Reflecting on global and national progress, he noted that while many countries, including Bangladesh, have integrated the SDGs into their policy frameworks, the question remains how effectively these commitments are being implemented in practice. He emphasised the need for genuine integration of the SDGs into national development priorities rather than treating them as parallel or symbolic initiatives.

Discussing the realities of achieving the ambitious vision of the SDGs, Mr Harun noted that the ultimate goal is not to create a world of absolute equality, but to reduce the unacceptable levels of disparity and deprivation that persist globally and locally. He underlined that the persistence of hunger, poverty, discrimination, and inequality challenges the very notion of shared human dignity. The SDGs, in his view, call for a collective moral awakening and a sense of responsibility that moves societies from passive observation to active local engagement. In this regard, he stressed that localisation is central to this process. While global awareness of inequalities is important, genuine transformation can only take place at the community level, where deprivation and exclusion are directly experienced. He observed that localisation should not be confined to the administrative local government framework of Bangladesh alone, but should be approached contextually—at the national, regional, and micro levels—wherever disparities exist.

Turning to Bangladesh's national implementation mechanism, Mr Harun explained that government investments are primarily executed through development projects coordinated by the Planning Division. He informed participants that approximately 1,200 projects are currently being implemented across four key sectors: socio-economic development, physical infrastructure, water resources and rural institutions, and industry and energy. He described the bottom-up process by which project ideas are generated, often emerging from local demand and refined through coordination across different levels of administration. The relevant ministry then reviews these proposals and ultimately approves them through the Planning Commission. Projects are designed to address development needs that cannot be managed

within regular government structures, particularly when specialised expertise or additional manpower is required. To ensure accountability and efficiency, the Planning Commission oversees the design, implementation, and evaluation of the impact of these projects. Final approval is granted by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), chaired by the Prime Minister, underscoring the political significance of the development process. The Special Guest emphasised that without political ownership and alignment with national philosophy, bureaucratic efforts alone cannot deliver sustainable results.

Mr Harun stressed the importance of expanding development partnerships beyond government efforts. He noted that while 1,200 government projects are underway, this is insufficient to address all areas of need. Stronger engagement of the private sector, development partners, and local actors is therefore crucial. Collaborative planning and programming could enhance coordination, prevent overlapping initiatives, and harness innovation from both public and private sectors. He further mentioned that within the Planning Ministry, both the Programming Division and the Planning Division work in close coordination to avoid institutional fragmentation. As Secretary overseeing both divisions, he explained that this dual responsibility ensures a more integrated and strategic approach to development planning.

In closing, Mr Harun emphasised that continuous dialogue in such forums is vital for identifying gaps, improving coordination, and building consensus around practical solutions. He expressed his appreciation to the organisers for facilitating an open exchange of ideas, noting that constructive discussion and feedback from various stakeholders are essential for enhancing the effectiveness and inclusivity of Bangladesh's development planning process.



Speech by the Chief Guest



H E Håkon Arald Gulbrandsen

Ambassador of the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Dhaka

H E Håkon Arald Gulbrandsen noted that the Seminar provided a valuable opportunity to discuss the critical role of local communities in achieving the SDGs.

Emphasising the principle of “*Leaving no one behind*” as central to the 2030 Agenda, H E Gulbrandsen highlighted that the SDGs can only be realised through the meaningful participation of local actors. He observed that localisation not only addresses inclusion but also enables the development of solutions that reflect local realities, capacities, and challenges. Such efforts, he added, foster greater ownership and accountability at the

community level. Referring to Bangladesh’s notable progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda, Ambassador Gulbrandsen mentioned that despite resource constraints and climate vulnerabilities, the government has made significant strides. These include establishing an inter-ministerial committee on SDG implementation, developing an SDG Tracker with 39 indicators, and formulating a national action plan that assigns specific targets to ministries and divisions.

The Ambassador drew particular attention to the “*Natore Model*”—an innovative local government initiative that integrates SDGs into district-level planning. The Natore administration, he explained, developed an SDG District Action Plan to align government agencies and stakeholders with the 2030 Agenda. This model, now recognised as a national example, demonstrates how localised approaches can effectively address context-specific issues and could be replicated across other regions. The Chief Guest then outlined Norway’s broader engagement in supporting SDG localisation efforts in developing countries. He explained that Norway’s assistance typically focuses on areas such as human rights, governance, peace, gender equality, climate action, and natural resource management. Norwegian cooperation also includes political dialogue on democracy, corruption, and human rights to ensure that localisation processes embody principles of good governance and inclusiveness.

Ambassador Gulbrandsen stated that Norway assists local governments through training, technical expertise, and the development of tools to integrate SDGs into planning and budgeting processes. This support extends to enhancing statistical capacity, data collection, and the development of local indicators. In Bangladesh, Norway has been actively supporting initiatives to strengthen democratic institutions and promote women’s participation in politics. Examples include contributions to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-led Ballot Project in preparation for the upcoming parliamentary elections, as well as

to other projects focused on women's leadership. Past initiatives have included programmes promoting tolerance and inclusivity, as well as partnerships with civil society organisations to advance women's rights and community participation.

Norway's ongoing collaboration also spans climate resilience, disaster risk reduction, renewable energy, and adaptation projects. The country has previously supported women's rights organisations, legal aid non-government organisations (NGOs), and community climate groups, aligning these efforts with both the MDGs and the SDGs. Several examples of Norwegian-supported local projects were highlighted. These include collaborations with Plan International Bangladesh and community organisations such as Youth Environment and Development Organization (YEDO), to prevent child marriage, as well as integrated initiatives promoting sustainable plastic management and marine litter prevention. He noted a nationwide clean-up campaign engaging thousands of volunteers and over 50 community-based organisations. Another notable example is the *"Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships (SENSREC) Project"*, jointly implemented by Norway and the International Maritime Organization (IMO), which aims to ensure safe ship recycling practices and provide technical training to workers.



Through its core funding to United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other partners, Norway has also supported women-led climate resilience committees and school management committees among indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Moreover, Norwegian contributions to global initiatives such as the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and GAVI, The Vaccine Alliance, have directly benefited Bangladesh. Humanitarian assistance has also been extended to the Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, focusing on preparedness and resilience measures, weather monitoring, legal aid, and access

to clean energy. H E noted that Norway's provision of Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) for cooking has helped prevent deforestation equivalent to three to five football fields per day.

In identifying challenges, the Chief Guest observed that Bangladesh continues to face limitations in the institutional capacity of local governments, inadequate coordination, overlapping activities, and weak linkages between policy and practice. Other constraints include insufficient resource mobilisation, limited popular participation, and the need for stronger political commitment to local governance reforms. Addressing these challenges, he said, is essential for the effective localisation of the SDGs. Strengthening local government institutions to design, implement, and monitor programmes aligned with national and local priorities remains a critical requirement. He also noted that national funding tends to be concentrated in infrastructure projects, particularly in large urban areas, which may impede equitable development nationwide.

In conclusion, H E Gulbrandsen commended BISS and UNOPS for convening the Seminar and for bringing together experts and practitioners to exchange ideas on sustainable development. He expressed confidence that the insights and recommendations generated through the discussion would help reinvigorate Bangladesh's commitment to achieving the SDGs through an inclusive, locally grounded approach that ensures no citizen is left behind.

Remarks by the Distinguished Guests



Dr Michal Krejza

*Head of Development Cooperation
The European Union (EU) Delegation to
Bangladesh*

Dr Michal Krejza began his remarks by focusing on local ownership and the role of communities, local governments, and grassroots organisations in translating national ambitions into practical outcomes for citizens. He commended Bangladesh for its remarkable progress in achieving the SDGs over the past decades and acknowledged the country's forthcoming graduation from LDC status in 2026 as a milestone reflecting resilience and sustained growth. However, he observed that progress across regions remains uneven. Local government institutions, which are closest to the people, often lack fiscal space, trained personnel, and sufficient autonomy to address local priorities effectively. He highlighted that disparities are still visible—such as higher child malnutrition rates in the northwest compared to Dhaka and persistent literacy gaps between rural and urban areas—underscoring the need for localisation to remain crucial.

Dr Krejza expressed that SDGs cannot succeed solely through a top-down approach, particularly in a highly centralised country like Bangladesh. He emphasised that these goals become truly meaningful when translated into tangible benefits for communities at the village and municipal levels—benefits that citizens can see and experience. From the EU perspective, he explained that efforts have consistently been directed towards supporting Bangladesh in embedding SDG localisation through programmes that prioritise communities, women, and youth. He shared five key examples to demonstrate this approach.

The first example concerned social protection. Since 2019, the EU has provided € 285 million in grants through budget support to Bangladesh's social protection system. He clarified that this assistance is not merely budgetary supplementation but rather an investment in innovative delivery models. He cited the Mother and Child Benefit Programme, which is set to reach nearly two million women this year and provide families with predictable income support. Digital integration between cash transfer systems and health services has improved targeting accuracy and reduced inefficiencies, while local clinics have reported increased utilisation of prenatal care. He described this as localisation in practice, where national policy is translated into real, measurable improvements at the household level.

The second example involved promoting resilient livelihoods. Dr Krejza mentioned the EU's partnership with UNDP in the CHTs through the "Partnerships for Resilient Livelihoods" project. He referred to findings from a recent study on SDG localisation, which identified overlapping institutional responsibilities, weak data management, and low community participation as key bottlenecks. The study recommended stronger governance structures, better coordination mechanisms, and full implementation of the Peace Accord. Importantly, he noted that women's and youth empowerment must be treated not as supplementary goals but as prerequisites for sustainable progress. Local women's groups are now being trained in market access and leadership skills, demonstrating how inclusive participation strengthens community resilience.

Turning to the third example, Dr Krejza discussed the advancement of decent work. The EU, in collaboration with Denmark, the Netherlands, and Sweden, is funding a € 23 million International Labour Organization (ILO) programme that promotes fair labour practices. This initiative focuses on strengthening labour laws, fostering gender-responsive policies, and ensuring that the voices of workers and trade unions are integrated into reform processes. He highlighted that regular consultations with local unions and women workers are contributing to safer, more equitable workplaces, thereby enhancing social dialogue and representation within labour governance frameworks.

As a fourth area of focus, Dr Krejza mentioned access to local justice. The EU's € 25 million Village Courts Programme, implemented in collaboration with UNDP and the Ministry of Local Government, now covers over 8,000 union parishads. These courts handle minor disputes quickly and legally, avoiding the expense and delay associated with formal judicial systems. In 2024 alone, more than 22,000 cases—many related to land conflicts—were resolved, which he described as a testament to the effectiveness of localised governance in delivering justice at the community level.

The fifth example he presented involved civic engagement. After extensive preparation, the EU is joining the Civic Engagement Fund, with UNOPS serving as the implementing partner. This initiative will provide direct support to civil society organisations (CSOs) and grassroots groups across Bangladesh, particularly those representing women, youth, and marginalised communities. The fund aims to strengthen its capacity to hold institutions accountable and to actively contribute to SDG achievement from the bottom up.

Dr Krejza stressed that localisation must extend beyond projects to encompass systemic reforms. He outlined three areas where stronger action is necessary: governance and capacity, data and evidence, and financing. In terms of governance, he emphasised that local governments need greater authority, predictable financing mechanisms, and skilled personnel to deliver effectively. Drawing from the EU's experience, he observed that decentralised systems empower municipalities to provide more responsive services and improve accountability. Regarding data, he pointed out that approximately 44 per cent of SDG indicators in Bangladesh currently lack disaggregated, real-time data, making it difficult to identify and assist the most vulnerable populations. He suggested that localised data dashboards, digital tools, and community-based monitoring could help bridge this gap and affirmed that the EU is prepared to share technical expertise from its own statistical and digital governance systems.

On the issue of financing, Dr Krejza argued that local financing structures should not merely mirror those at the central level. Citing examples from Europe, he explained that in most EU countries, real estate taxes are collected and retained by local authorities, allowing them to allocate funds independently. As a citizen of the Netherlands, he highlighted the Dutch model of water management as a successful example of decentralised financing. Special regional bodies there levy and manage their own water taxes, which remain within those organisations. This, he explained, has been a key factor behind the Netherlands' globally recognised expertise in water management, a sector in which the country has also provided extensive support to Bangladesh.

In conclusion, Dr Krejza reaffirmed the EU's role as a consistent and reliable development partner. Unlike some other donors, the EU maintains stable budgets and is committed to continuing its support in the years to come. He explained that the EU's role is threefold: to provide financing where appropriate, to convene diverse stakeholders, and to offer targeted technical assistance. However, he underscored that true ownership of the development process must rest with Bangladesh—both nationally and locally. He commended the roundtable as a timely initiative that provided an opportunity for reflection, listening, and learning. With the EU's forthcoming participation in the Civic Engagement Fund, he noted that concrete steps are being taken to strengthen grassroots engagement in shaping Bangladesh's SDG agenda. Dr Krejza concluded by emphasising that the power of the local should not merely serve as a discussion theme, but as the driving force behind Bangladesh's Vision 2041 and the 2030 Agenda. With strong government leadership, community ownership, and international partnership, he expressed confidence that Bangladesh can achieve its development goals and serve as a model of locally driven progress.



Md Toufiq-ur Rahman

*Director General, Multilateral Economic Affairs Wing
Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)*

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Md Toufiq-ur Rahman began by summarising the essence of the discussion, noting that it revolved around three major points: the importance of local power and why community-level actions matter more than ever; the tangible contributions of grassroots communities to achieving the SDGs; and the practical steps that governments, development partners, and communities must now take to strengthen these efforts, including identifying priorities in international cooperation.

Mr Rahman highlighted that Bangladesh's journey towards prosperity is inseparable from the strength and resilience of its communities. The recently submitted Voluntary National Review (VNR) at the UN reflected this reality, demonstrating that local capacities are central to achieving national and global development goals. Mr Rahman pointed to two key contextual realities underpinning this argument. First, Bangladesh faces recurring climate shocks, such as floods, cyclones, and riverbank erosion, that directly affect community livelihoods and infrastructure. The devastating floods of the previous year illustrated that rapid local response capacity is critical in saving lives and protecting livelihoods. Second, he observed that Bangladesh is undergoing both economic and social transitions, where sustaining progress requires resilient local institutions capable of delivering services and managing shocks without excluding vulnerable populations. In this process, he underscored the indispensable role of women and youth.

Reflecting on the contributions of grassroots communities to SDG progress, Mr Rahman identified four specific areas of achievement. In the domain of primary health and nutrition, he noted that community clinics and local health systems have been instrumental in reducing maternal and infant mortality rates and addressing malnutrition. In terms of climate resilience, he explained that community-based adaptation initiatives form the operational backbone of Bangladesh's National Adaptation Plans, recognising that local investments are essential for climate response. Regarding poverty reduction, he argued that locally driven and scalable interventions can effectively lift people out of extreme poverty and enable social mobility. He also highlighted the growing role of women's leadership in local governance. Union Parishads, ward committees, and informal women's groups have demonstrated their effectiveness in social protection targeting, community dispute resolution, and public health outreach. He emphasised that when women are included and empowered in local councils, both transparency and social outcomes improve, amplifying SDG gains across gender and governance sectors. Mr Rahman acknowledged the contribution of Bangladesh's development partners, particularly UN organisations such as UNOPS, for their continued support to the government in building community-level infrastructure and resilience. He mentioned that

UNOPS has made significant strides in addressing climate variability and environmental challenges through initiatives such as water supply and solid waste management projects. Turning to the way forward, Mr Rahman outlined several practical priorities. The first was financing local resilience and service delivery. He stressed that national strategies should allocate predictable resources to local councils and community systems, including dedicated funds for community clinics, flood shelters, local early warning mechanisms, and women's livelihood programmes. He emphasised the need for integrated budgeting that aligns national plans with local implementation and allows communities to control funds for maintenance and emergency response.

The second priority involved investment in local capacity, particularly in laboratories, digital surveillance, and “One Health” initiatives. Mr Rahman stated that strengthening local disease surveillance, sequencing, and animal-human health linkages is crucial for preventing outbreaks and managing health risks associated with climate change. He recommended equipping community health workers with digital tools that connect local surveillance systems to national early warning mechanisms and urged donors to prioritise such investments to reduce dependency on external laboratories. As a third priority, Mr Rahman called for scaling up of community-led adaptation and livelihood initiatives. He suggested that blended finance mechanisms, which combine public and private capital, could support community-level projects and transition them from pilot phases to mainstream programming. The fourth priority focused on formalising partnerships with NGOs and social enterprises. He observed that Bangladesh's NGOs are uniquely positioned to scale community-based interventions, and institutionalising contracting processes, simplifying due diligence, and ensuring predictable co-financing could significantly enhance service delivery.

Mr Rahman identified women's empowerment as another central priority, asserting that women's leadership in local government and community groups should be expanded through training, financial incentives, and legal empowerment. Women's groups, he stated, serve as both innovators and reliable delivery mechanisms for improving health, nutrition, and education outcomes. Investing in women's leadership, therefore, offers one of the highest returns on accelerating SDG progress. Discussing international cooperation, Mr Rahman recommended targeted and predictable financing for local resilience, technology transfer, capacity building, and support for market and value chain development. He emphasised the importance of improving data systems and conducting introspection to identify areas where SDG progress remains insufficient, so that resources and efforts can be redirected accordingly. He also mentioned the potential of adopting the “three zeros” concept—zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions—as an umbrella approach to align local and national development strategies.

In conclusion, Mr Rahman reaffirmed Bangladesh's commitment to empowering communities, strengthening union capacities, expanding community clinics, investing in local surveillance and disaster preparedness, and scaling up community financing mechanisms. However, he cautioned that national efforts must be complemented by predictable, targeted international support at the local level. He concluded by emphasising that the SDGs must not remain aspirational; instead, communities should be at the heart of their implementation. Financing, trust, and systems built on local knowledge are, in his words, the foundation for Bangladesh's survival and continued prosperity.

Voice of the Community Leader



Khushi Kabir

*Secretary
Nijera Kori*

Khushi Kabir began her reflections by stressing a foundational point: a community is never homogeneous. Each community comprises various interest groups, internal conflicts, and diverse perceptions regarding the best pathways to achieve the SDGs. These differences arise from varying lived experiences and social positions. Therefore, she argued, true achievement of the SDGs requires inclusion of all groups, particularly those most marginalised and excluded. This principle, she noted, lies at the heart of the SDG pledge to “leave no one behind”. If this pledge is to be meaningful, it must be applied within communities as much as

across nations.

Ms Kabir then outlined the nature of her organisation’s work. Although she serves as the Secretary of the Executive Committee, she also works as the Coordinator, overseeing programme implementation and ensuring that organisational activities progress effectively. Nijera Kori works at the grassroots level with some of the most marginalised communities in the country, focusing on strengthening autonomous organisations of the landless. Their approach is to build collective agency so that these communities can work together to transform their own lives and surroundings. Their organisational activities now span approximately 1,100 villages across 13 districts and involve around 232,000 members. While the SDGs were formalised in 2015, she noted that Nijera Kori’s work began more than 45 years ago—long before the global goals were articulated—and yet aligns closely with six SDGs.

Ms Kabir proceeded to share concrete examples illustrating how local communities contribute directly to SDG progress. Of the 17 SDGs, she stated, at least 12 or 13 have a direct and immediate impact on people’s daily lives. Beginning with SDG 1, No Poverty, she noted that human development is an ongoing process and cannot be confined to a 2030 deadline. While the SDGs provide a framework and momentum, issues such as poverty, inequality, and exploitation cannot be eradicated instantly. Therefore, she cautioned that commitment to the SDGs must continue beyond 2030, with governments, multilateral institutions, and civil society maintaining active engagement.

At the local level, one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty is to provide the poor with access to productive assets. Through collective mobilisation and, where

needed, legal support, communities have secured access to roughly 1,500 acres of land in the past two to three years, benefiting more than 13,000 households. These gains were largely achieved through collective advocacy and action, which helped break the cycles of poverty and enabled sustainable livelihood development. She emphasised that such success demonstrates the transformative potential of local agency. Ms Kabir also highlighted the importance of incorporating marginalised voices into policymaking. While many policies and laws in Bangladesh are supportive on paper, their implementation is often weak. Grassroots communities, she emphasised, play a vital role in ensuring that laws and policies are effectively implemented and benefit the populations they are intended to serve.

Turning to SDG 2, Zero Hunger, she explained that local communities have developed effective methods for managing natural assets in ways that benefit the poorest. Their achievements stem not from top-down assistance but from ensuring that resources, programmes, and legal provisions intended for them are actually implemented. This demonstrates that community participation is not merely desirable but essential for achieving meaningful progress. Regarding SDG 4, Quality Education, she described local experiences in which teachers in rural areas fail to attend classes regularly or impose private tutoring fees. Community monitoring can improve accountability by ensuring teacher attendance and fair distribution of government-provided textbooks. Local oversight, she argued, can significantly enhance learning outcomes.

Regarding SDG 5, Gender Equality, she identified violence against women as a persistent and widespread challenge. Grassroots communities have taken critical steps to prevent such violence and ensure justice. Traditionally, local mediation forums (*Shalish*) were male-dominated, but many communities have worked to make these spaces more inclusive by involving women and members of other social groups. As a result, outcomes are becoming more equitable and legally aligned. She noted additional shifts within households, where more men are now participating in domestic responsibilities and supporting women's empowerment—an encouraging sign of social transformation. She also described how collective savings groups, created and managed by community members, have replaced exploitative credit systems. These member-owned funds support decent work opportunities, crisis resilience, and democratic control over local economic resources. This has contributed to reduced inequalities, strengthened legal empowerment, and increased representation of marginalised groups in local governance bodies such as Union Councils and school committees. Ms Kabir emphasised that building social harmony among diverse groups is crucial for advancing all 17 SDGs. She highlighted SDG 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, as particularly central. Strong institutions, she argued, must be accountable, participatory, and inclusive in order to function effectively. Without these qualities, the SDGs will remain aspirational statements and not become lived realities.

Ms Kabir concluded by reiterating that even the most marginalised communities can play an active and transformative role in achieving the SDGs. Their experiences demonstrate that meaningful and sustainable development emerges when communities are empowered, heard, and supported. She thanked the organisers for the opportunity to share grassroots experiences and perspectives at the Seminar.

Open Discussion



Ambassador M Shameem Ahsan

Former Ambassador of Bangladesh

Ambassador Shameem Ahsan, who last served in Geneva, emphasised that the topic deserves greater attention than it currently receives. Drawing attention to the persistent challenge of inadequate and disaggregated data, he recalled the early stage of the SDGs, which was a decade ago, when Bangladesh had full data for only 70 indicators, partial data for 108, and no mechanism to collect data for 63 indicators. Referring to a point raised earlier in the session, he noted that 44 per cent of SDG indicators still lacked data—equivalent to about 100 indicators—and invited clarification on whether this figure was accurate.

Ambassador Ahsan also focused on the issue of health, particularly universal health coverage, which had been prioritised in Bangladesh’s 2025 VNR. He observed that out-of-pocket healthcare expenditure remained extremely high, reflecting persistent poverty and vulnerability. Citing data from 2024 attributed to the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), he noted that although earlier estimates suggested 73 per cent of health expenditure came from personal pockets, the latest figure stood at 64 per cent—a seemingly significant reduction within one year—and he sought clarification on this variation.

Ambassador Ahsan further observed that discussions on the SDGs tended to remain confined to technically sound professionals, while public awareness and engagement had diminished. In his view, media coverage of the SDGs had notably declined in recent years, despite the global deadline approaching rapidly, with only about 17 per cent of goals or 70 per cent of targets reportedly achieved. He stressed the importance of renewed media visibility and public discourse. In the end, Ambassador Ahsan drew attention to a minor semantic inconsistency between the Seminar title—“The Power of Local”—and the phrase repeatedly used by the keynote speaker, “The Power of the Local”, seeking clarification as to which was intended.



Ambassador Md Mustafizur Rahman

Former Ambassador of Bangladesh

Ambassador Md Mustafizur Rahman offered two comments—one general and the other related to the Seminar’s main theme. He observed that the SDGs were an ambitious and comprehensive global agenda encompassing nearly all aspects of human life, except for issues of security and disarmament, which powerful countries deliberately excluded. However, he stressed that the fundamental challenge to achieving the SDGs remained the availability of financial resources.

Ambassador Rahman recalled that the importance of global partnership had been recognised since the drafting of the SDGs, as domestic resource mobilisation alone was insufficient to realise such ambitious goals. He noted that in the current global geopolitical and geoeconomic context—marked by shrinking development assistance—it was essential to revisit the question of feasibility. He suggested that, given the short time remaining before 2030, it might be prudent to prioritise certain SDGs or targets in line with national needs and aspirations, such as poverty eradication, universal health coverage, and education for all.

Turning to the specific theme of the Seminar, Ambassador Rahman observed that meaningful local empowerment required not only community mobilisation but also adequate fiscal and policy space. Bangladesh’s system, he noted, remained highly centralised. Without decentralisation and sufficient financial autonomy for local governments, he cautioned that the concept of “power of local” might remain merely a slogan. He also questioned whether NGOs, which were active at the grassroots level, could effectively fill this gap by mobilising communities and providing financial assistance within the existing system.

Mohammad Borhanuddin

*Coordinator, International Humanitarian Law and Humanitarian Diplomacy
Bangladesh Red Crescent Society*

Mohammad Borhanuddin, referring to earlier comments about data availability, raised concerns regarding the accuracy and reliability of the data used to assess SDG progress. He remarked that if the data were accurate, the authorities deserved commendation. However, if there were discrepancies or limitations, such issues could undermine evidence-based policymaking. He therefore asked what measures could be taken to ensure higher-quality data and more reliable, evidence-based decisions in the future.





Shabira Nupur

*Head of Advocacy and Communication
International Rescue Committee*

Shabira Nupur, drawing on her professional experience working with the Rohingya community in Cox's Bazar, raised several questions related to inclusivity within the SDG framework. She highlighted that over 1.1 million Rohingya people had been residing in Bangladesh for eight years, and that both host and refugee communities faced growing pressure due to shrinking space and resources.

Ms Nupur pointed out that the majority of the Rohingya population were children and youth, and with only five years left to achieve the SDGs, it was essential to ensure that they were not left behind—particularly in areas such as health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), and livelihoods. While acknowledging the legal and practical challenges of including non-citizens, she urged policymakers to explore ways to engage and empower Rohingya youth so that their potential could be utilised productively.

Ms Nupur also raised a second issue concerning child labour and early marriage in Bangladesh. Referring to a recent event on child labour, she noted that there were 3.5 million working children in the country, of whom 1.7 million were engaged in hazardous occupations. Although the government had planned to remove all 1.7 million children from such work, progress had been limited. Additionally, she pointed out that 51 per cent of girls in Bangladesh were married before the age of 18. She emphasised that children—especially girls in remote and marginalised areas—remained largely invisible despite their potential and called for strategies to bring them to the forefront, give them a voice, and meaningfully engage them in the localisation process to advance SDG achievement.

Tasmiah Nuhiya Ahmed

*Journalist
Deutsche Welle South Asia*

Tasmiah Nuhiya Ahmed, referring to the discussions by the panellists, acknowledged that Bangladesh had made remarkable progress toward achieving the SDGs. However, she expressed concern that the benefits of this progress might not be reaching all citizens equally, particularly women in grassroots communities.



Ms Ahmed emphasised that grassroots communities are the real drivers of SDG implementation, yet they continue to face persistent challenges, including youth unemployment, gender inequality, weak local governance, and vulnerability to climate change. She specifically referred to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), emphasising that addressing gender disparities and local-level governance gaps would be crucial to achieving these goals.

Citing a recent example, Ms Ahmed mentioned the controversy surrounding the Women's Affairs Reform Commission's report, which had faced significant public backlash despite being an official policy recommendation. She noted that such reactions reflect deep-rooted societal resistance to women's empowerment. As a woman journalist and lawyer, she expressed insecurity, noting that whenever women's issues are raised, they often encounter hostility and attempts at exclusion from policymaking.

Ms Ahmed concluded by questioning whether Bangladesh's progress toward the SDGs was truly inclusive and equitable and asked how policymakers and institutions could ensure that grassroots women are not left behind during the final years of the SDG timeline.



Dr Md Golam Azam

Professor

Institute of Social Welfare and Research

University of Dhaka

According to James Miss Le's principle of "think globally, act locally", **Dr Md Golam Azam** asked which strategies, grounded in theoretical models, could be practically applied to ensure effective local implementation of global development goals.

Ambassador Shahed Akter

*Former Ambassador of Bangladesh to Spain,
Thailand and Cambodia*

Ambassador Shahed Akhtar raised the issue of regional disparity and local empowerment. He observed that there is a vast discrepancy in development across different parts of Bangladesh. Certain regions have performed well while others have continued to lag behind. He noted that many local people remain unemployed and feel disheartened



because new job opportunities are not being created. As a result, many are migrating to urban areas in search of work. He pointed out that so far, there has been a lack of innovative ideas or effective interventions to address this challenge. He therefore asked how Bangladesh is coping with “the power of the local” and how this imbalance can be corrected.



Razia Sultana

Manager

HR & Regional Lead

Bata Children Program, APAC

Representing the largest CSR initiative of the Bata Group, **Razia Sultana** explained that their organisation works closely with schools, primarily through partnerships with non-profit organisations. The Bata Children Program engages children in education, health, and well-being initiatives by collaborating with local NGOs. She asked whether there are more formal and institutionalised mechanisms for private and non-profit actors like theirs to engage with government schools. Her concern was that formal collaboration could improve the effectiveness

of government schools and ensure that CSR activities align with national educational priorities.

Tasnim Mohsin Mishu

Journalist

Samakal

Tasnim Mohsin Mishu expressed concern about the government’s communication and accountability in implementing the SDGs. He remarked that over the last ten years, neither the government nor other relevant bodies had made clear efforts to explain or share what the SDGs are with the common people. He asked how people at the local level can be made more aware and engaged with the SDGs. He further asked: how much has been spent on SDG implementation over the past decade? Do we have any reliable data on this? He also questioned the achievements, noting that when we talk about Goal 1—poverty alleviation, poverty seems to have increased rather than decreased. He asked whether Bangladesh is moving in the right or



wrong direction in achieving the SDGs.

Dr Anindita Shabnam Kuraishi

*Assistant Director, Planning and Research
Directorate General of Health Services
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare
Government of the People's Republic of
Bangladesh*

Dr Anindita Shabnam Kuraishi highlighted the Community Clinics as one of the major strengths of Bangladesh's primary healthcare system. These clinics are designed to serve a fixed population of about 6,000 people each, rather than a specific geographical area, which she viewed as a unique and effective feature. However, she expressed concern over a systemic weakness that threatens to undermine these achievements: corruption. She asked how this persistent problem could be addressed to preserve the integrity of the healthcare system.



Jasmima Sabatina

Student

Jasmima Sabatina highlighted the role of young people in national development. Noting that youth constitute around 45 per cent of Bangladesh's population, she expressed concern that their engagement in SDG processes remains largely symbolic rather than meaningful. She asked how the government, CSOs, NGOs, and other actors are institutionalising youth leadership within the SDG framework and implementation processes. In addition, she mentioned the growing emphasis on data-driven projects and asked how inclusivity and transparency can be ensured for all communities, including those in coastal regions. Referring to the TAPI framework — Transparency, Accuracy, Participation, and Inclusivity — she asked how these principles can be integrated into project design and implementation to guarantee fairness and accountability.



Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director

BIISS

Dr Mahfuz Kabir focused on the financial empowerment of local government institutions. He explained that two model concepts had been proposed to strengthen local governments: one involving tax or revenue sharing between the central and local governments, and the other recommending changes to the model tax schedule for local bodies. However, despite their potential impact, these proposals had not been implemented because key commissions and consultative bodies had failed to meet and discuss them. He asked why these models have been neglected and what can be done to revitalise such initiatives.



Response from the Panellists



Sudhir Muralidharan

Country Manager

*United Nations Office for Project Services
(UNOPS) Bangladesh and Bhutan*

Sudhir Muralidharan addressed the issue of the limited time remaining to achieve the SDGs. He noted that rather than viewing the five years ahead as insufficient, they should be seen as an opportunity to accelerate progress. He acknowledged that the COVID-19 pandemic and successive climate-related disasters had set back development gains globally, with losses amounting to approximately US\$ 200 billion annually in immediate damages and nearly US\$ 2 trillion when considering long-term economic consequences. He stressed that infrastructure and policy decisions must now prioritise climate resilience, as rebuilding climate-vulnerable systems in the future

would cost many times more than current investments.

Responding to concerns over data reliability and measurement, Mr Muralidharan recognised ongoing challenges but emphasised that Bangladesh had significantly expanded its data systems since the beginning of the SDG period. He argued that the SDG framework should be viewed as a continuous process of progress, rather than competition among nations, urging stakeholders to celebrate achievements while addressing weaknesses through sustained effort. Regarding resource constraints, he explained that as countries progress economically, Official Development Assistance (ODA) naturally declines, marking a positive shift toward self-reliance. He emphasised the need for domestic resource mobilisation, leveraging Bangladesh's large population and internal markets rather than excessive dependence on external funding.

Regarding the Rohingya crisis, Mr Muralidharan acknowledged the global decline in donor attention and funding but highlighted that some reliable partners remain active. He stressed that long-term solutions would depend on the government's policy framework and the ability to empower the refugee population through sustainable, skills-based activities. Touching on the role of youth, he highlighted the importance of connecting young people with mentors, universities, and community leaders to foster awareness of the SDGs. He underscored the need to communicate and de-jargonise development language, ensuring that every individual—particularly the youth—understands their role in advancing national goals. Finally, he reaffirmed the need to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, acknowledging that while there are no quick fixes, Bangladesh continues to make progress. Finally, he emphasised that achieving the SDGs requires both national ownership and collective participation across society.



Khushi Kabir
Secretary, Nijera Kori

Khushi Kabir began by thanking the previous speaker and the audience, stating that the points raised on gender equality were deeply valid and essential to address. She observed that the challenges facing women in Bangladesh are well-known, and rather than reiterating existing statistics, it was crucial to focus on bridging the gap between policy formulation and implementation at the local level. She stressed that effective communication and coordination between policymakers, implementers, and local communities are vital to ensure that gender commitments translate into tangible progress. Ms Kabir emphasised that gender is not confined to SDG 5 alone; rather, it cuts across all other goals and must

be integrated into every sectoral policy.

Referring to Ms Ahmed's example of the Women's Affairs Reform Commission Report, Ms Kabir noted that the public backlash against it revealed the persistence of deep-seated gender biases in social attitudes. She argued that unless these cultural and institutional mindsets change—from national policymakers to community leaders—gender equality will remain elusive.

Ms Kabir concluded by urging all stakeholders to recognise that inclusive development cannot be achieved while half the population remains marginalised. Ensuring women's participation, representation, and protection is essential for Bangladesh to meet its SDG commitments.



Dr Kazi Maruful Islam

Professor

Department of Development Studies

University of Dhaka

Dr Kazi Maruful Islam responded by explaining that the idea of “local” goes far beyond geography. The term does not only refer to areas situated far from the centre of power, but also to communities that possess their own unique identity, creativity, and internal resources. Each community has distinctive ways of addressing its own challenges. Therefore, theoretical models and practical strategies should be designed to harness these local characteristics rather than imposing a uniform, top-down approach. Effective local development must emerge from inclusive, participatory frameworks that recognise local agency, social capital, and community-specific strengths.

Then, Dr Islam appreciated the observation and clarified the conceptual distinction between “the local” and “local”. He further explained that when we say “the local”, we often refer to a spatial area distant from the centre. In contrast, “local” refers to a community’s own identity, values, and resources. Each community has its own creative capacities and solutions, which must be recognised and supported. He emphasised that development policies must not treat local areas merely as peripheral spaces, but as dynamic and self-reliant entities. Dr Islam also acknowledged the existing inequality between the centre and the periphery, using a vivid example: in Dhaka City, footpaths are renovated every two years, while in many rural areas, residents have waited more than a decade for a small bridge. Such disparities illustrate how resources and responsibilities are unequally distributed. To truly empower the locals, he said, there must be equitable distribution of resources, genuine decentralisation, and recognition of community autonomy.

Professor Islam also recognised the positive contribution of NGOs and CSR programmes in advancing the SDGs, particularly in the education sector. However, he cautioned that delegating too much responsibility to NGOs can sometimes lead the state to withdraw from its obligations. Assigning NGO-led solutions at the local level may inadvertently undermine the role of central institutions. He pointed out that while urban centres like Dhaka enjoy regular upgrades in public infrastructure, many rural communities struggle for years with basic needs. This disparity, he said, reflects an imbalance in how responsibilities are shared between the centre and the local level. He concluded that collaboration between NGOs, CSR programmes, and government institutions should be formalised in a way that reinforces, rather than replaces, the state’s role in public service delivery.

Dr Islam then acknowledged the concern regarding health and reiterated that corruption is indeed a serious barrier to sustainable development across all sectors, including

health. While his presentation did not directly address this issue, he noted that the broader principles of good governance, transparency, and local accountability must be applied consistently. According to him, strengthening institutional integrity, enabling community oversight, and ensuring transparent management of public funds are critical to addressing corruption in public health.

Professor Islam also agreed that young people must not be treated merely as beneficiaries of policies but as active partners and leaders in shaping them. Institutionalising youth participation, he said, requires formal mechanisms within government and civil society that give young people a voice in decision-making, planning, and monitoring processes. Applying the TAPI framework in project design can help ensure that youth and marginalised communities are genuinely included in local and national development initiatives.



Dr Michal Krejza

*Head of Development Cooperation
The European Union (EU) Delegation to
Bangladesh*

Dr Michal Krejza responded by identifying three major concerns that emerged from the discussion. First, he addressed data availability and quality. In every European country, he explained, there is a national statistics bureau that operates independently, collecting and publishing data without government interference. In Bangladesh, however, until August of the previous year, key statistics could not be released without prior government approval. While he acknowledged that there have been positive movements towards reform, the Bureau of Statistics still lacks sufficient independence and capacity. He

stressed that reliable, transparent data are essential for sound policymaking and progress tracking.

Dr Krejza commented on NGO freedom and informed that Bangladesh continues to operate an NGO Affairs Bureau, a system that does not exist in Europe. He explained that in European countries, NGOs are trusted to act independently without state approval, except in rare cases involving illegal activities. He expressed hope that Bangladesh would allow greater freedom for its NGOs, enabling them to carry out their missions effectively.

Finally, Dr Krejza focused on domestic revenue mobilisation. He described it as one of Bangladesh's most pressing challenges. In his view, "We have been talking here for hours about the fight against poverty, but you can only fight poverty if there is a system for raising taxes and redistributing resources". He further noted that Bangladesh's tax-to-GDP ratio is about 8 per cent. Considering tax exemptions worth approximately 5 per cent of GDP, the effective tax effort stands at only 3 per cent. "That's absolutely amazing, frankly speaking", he remarked. He added that without tackling such structural issues, any discussion on poverty alleviation would be incomplete. He also pointed out that only 4.5 million people submitted tax declarations last year, showing a psychological resistance to tax compliance. In his opinion, unless citizens begin to view taxation as a civic duty, broader development efforts will remain superficial.



Md Toufiq-ur Rahman

*Director General, Multilateral Economic Affairs Wing
Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA)
Government of the People's Republic of
Bangladesh*

Md Toufiq-ur Rahman supplemented the response by addressing the broader issue of SDG progress and data management. He noted that with only five years left before 2030, Bangladesh must undertake serious introspection at both national and global levels. The SDGs, he said, were originally conceived as an ambitious framework meant to inspire political leadership and mobilise communities. However, after years marked by climatic shocks, budgetary constraints, and changing dynamics of global cooperation, it is crucial to evaluate what has worked and what has not. He stressed that strengthening data systems, improving fiscal management, and fostering innovation in domestic resource mobilisation will be key to achieving meaningful progress in the remaining years.

Mr Rahman also responded that local government reform is indeed under active consideration. Efforts are being made to provide greater fiscal autonomy to local institutions by allowing them to retain and utilise a share of the revenue they generate. Discussions are ongoing to ensure that locally raised funds can be used for local development initiatives, improving service delivery, and accountability. He stressed that genuine empowerment of local governments will require both political commitment and institutional reform to enable them to operate effectively and responsibly.

Concluding Remarks by the Moderator



Dr Fahmida Khatun

Executive Director

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

Dr Fahmida Khatun, in her concluding remarks as the Moderator, emphasised three key themes that had emerged during the Seminar. She observed that effective collaboration is fundamental to implementing the SDGs or any other community-focused programmes. This requires coordinated engagement among the government, local communities, and development partners. She noted that, given Bangladesh's current stage of economic development, shared effort and partnership are essential for the success of initiatives in poverty alleviation, education, and healthcare.

Regarding data, Dr Khatun highlighted concerns raised by participants about availability, accuracy, disaggregation, integrity, and accessibility. She acknowledged that unreliable or incomplete data could result in flawed policy making and ineffective outcomes. She mentioned that the government had recently formed a task force, of which she is a member, to strengthen the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and the national data system. The task force aims to enhance institutional capacity, ensure independence, improve data quality, and expand public accessibility, thereby addressing the gaps identified in discussions.

The third theme she addressed was finance. Dr Khatun stressed that while development partners will continue to play a role in SDG funding, domestic resource mobilisation is critical, particularly as Bangladesh transitions from an LDC to a developing country, reducing access to concessional financing and ODA. She highlighted the need for institutional strengthening, good governance, and accountability to ensure efficient fiscal management. She also pointed to the potential of innovative financing models, including partnerships with the private sector, which could combine profitability with social service delivery in a sustainable manner.

Dr Khatun further underscored that effective use of financial resources is as important as their mobilisation. She emphasised the need to allocate funds appropriately, ensure sound governance, and implement robust monitoring mechanisms to promote transparency and accountability. She also stressed the crucial role of local communities, noting that their involvement in monitoring and governance is as significant as their participation in planning and implementation.

In summarising, Dr Khatun concluded that the Seminar had highlighted three interconnected priorities for Bangladesh's sustainable development: collaboration, credible data, and sustainable financing. She stressed that these pillars, supported by good governance, accountability, and active public participation, must guide future efforts to achieve the SDGs.

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Mailing Address

1/46, Old Elephant Road (West of Ramna Police Station), Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh.
Fax: 88-02-48312625, info@biiss.org, website: www.biiss.org