

Why Bangladesh's Agricultural Sector Deserves Attention

Article by Susu Alkier and Alina Vetter, January 11, 2021

Bangladesh has seen an economic upswing in recent years. Simultaneously, a shift in the sectors' relative contribution to the GDP has been noted. While the country's economy used to depend on the agricultural sector, a high share of its GDP now stems from industrial production and services (1).

Nevertheless, Bangladesh's agricultural sector is not to be ignored. The sector contributed 90% to the poverty reduction that took place between 2005 and 2010. Furthermore, the World Bank states that Bangladesh's agricultural sector has seen one of the "fastest rates of productivity growth" of the world in the last 25 years. The World Bank sees this as a result of investments into technology, rural infrastructure and human capital, combined with a sound policy framework (2). Despite the important contribution that agriculture has made to Bangladesh's economy in the past, it is crucial to pay attention to the problems of the sector nowadays.

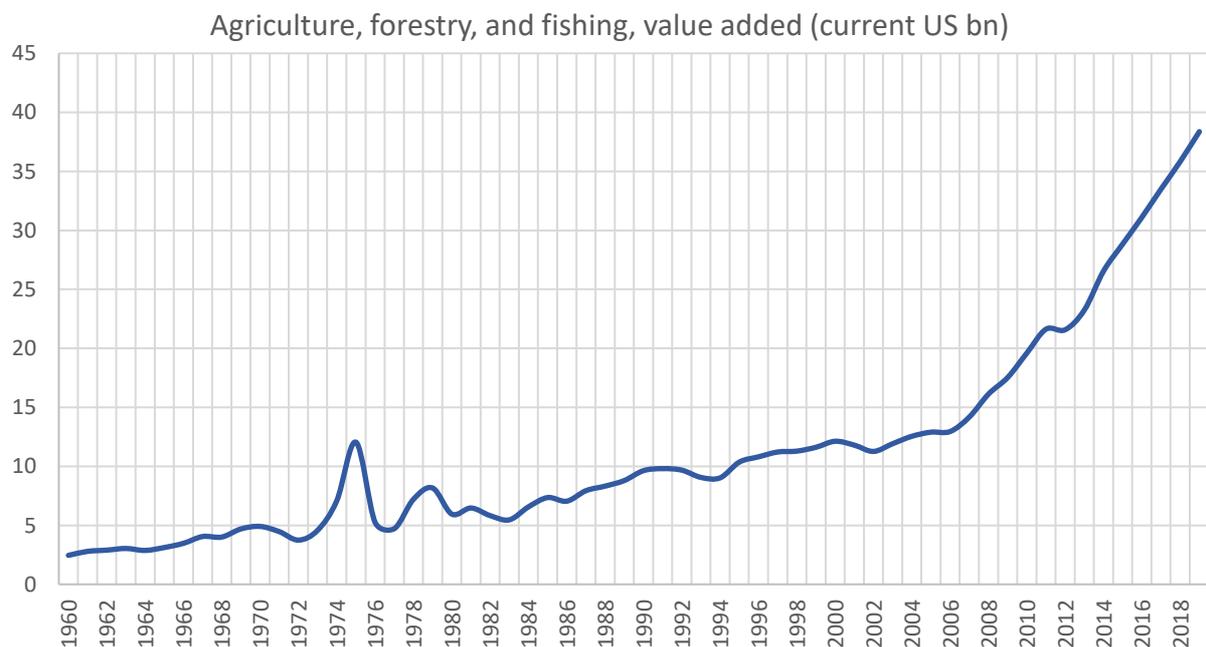


Figure 1 Agriculture, forestry and fishing, value added (current US bn). Source: (3)

Agricultural practices' negative health impacts

The greatest share of Bangladesh's agricultural land is arable land (4). Yet, this land is marked by the specialisation on one major crop: rice, which is occupying 80% of the arable land (1),



employs almost half of the employed people in rural areas and contributes to half of the GDP from agriculture (5), (6).

Human health is impacted by nutrition, which in turn depends on the agricultural products offered. Apart from undernourishment, a comparably high share of malnourished people can be seen in Bangladesh. Around 40% of women of reproductive age suffer from the prevalence of anaemia. A third of children under the age of 5 are stunted and 8% are affected by wasting (4). To combat malnutrition, the World Bank recommends a shift from rice to higher-value crops. To that, agricultural diversification is needed for faster rural growth and job creation (2).

Harmful practices destroy the soil

Additionally, the lack of crop diversity leads to problems for the soil. Monoculture farming, and also the inadequate use of pesticides and fertilisers, as well as shrimp farming in coastal areas, have reduced fertility of Bangladesh's soils dramatically in the recent years (1).

Harmful practices, such as agro-chemicals, deforestation, and inadequate waste management led to degradation of land and water resources as well as a loss of biodiversity. Already by 2010, 80.000 ha of arable land were lost every year (8). Bangladesh has long been a biodiverse country but these developments pose a serious threat to the country's agricultural sustainability (2), (6).

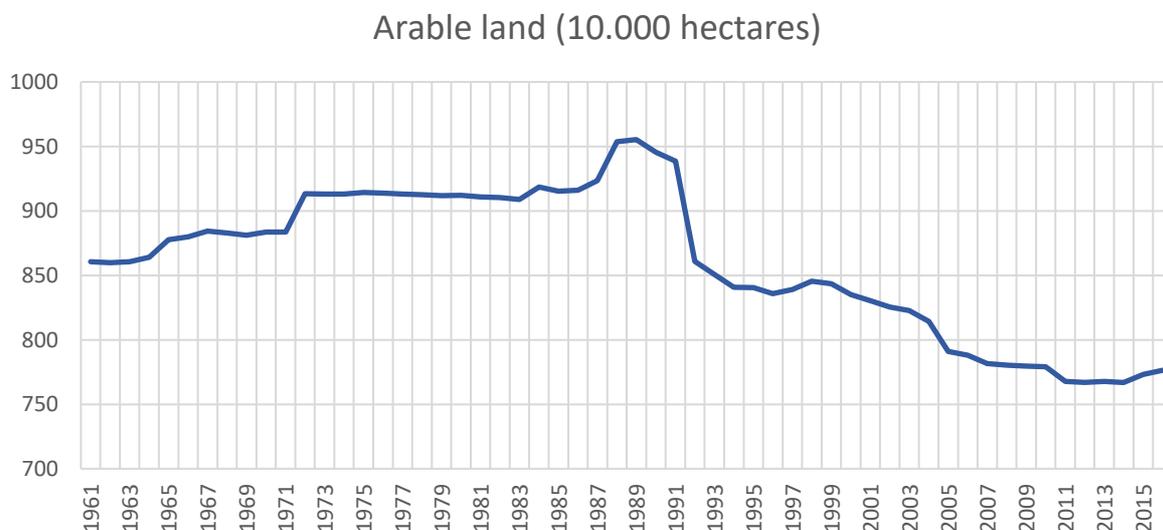


Figure 2 Arable land in 10.000 ha. Source: (3)

Deterioration through climate change and demographic developments

Climate change poses a special challenge to Bangladesh, especially floods, drought and salinity. A great share of Bangladesh's soils is affected by salinity. This circumstance is increased by the rising sea level. The frequency of floods has increased in recent years, thereby threatening harvests. It is crucial for the country to adapt to future climate-related challenges through new technologies, renewable energy, and afforestation (8), (2), (6), (7).

Moreover, population growth is expected to challenge Bangladesh's food system (8). Already today, around 13% of people in Bangladesh are undernourished and around 10% of people



are affected by severe food insecurities (4). Therefore, a sustainable crop production and the conservation of arable soil are crucial to ensure food security for the growing population.

Don't underestimate the importance of the agricultural sector

To highlight the importance of the agricultural sector, it has to be mentioned that it is the biggest employer in Bangladesh (1): 40% of employees are employed in agriculture nowadays (although 30 years ago it was 70%) (9), (6). Agriculture comprises 15% of the GDP (5), (6), which is very low compared to the number of people employed by it (1). However, the agricultural sector shows structural inequalities. Small farmers lack access to institutional credit and to cooperatives through which fair prices could be negotiated (8).

For these reasons – loss of biodiversity, soil degradation, climate change and negative health implications, and taking socio-economic contexts into consideration, investments into the agricultural sector are required for a sustainable future of the food production in Bangladesh. Farming practices must ensure the conservation of soil fertility and water quality and enable a well-balanced diet for local people.

JANAs experts recommend accessibility and awareness-raising

Between 2018 and 2020, JANA started a consolidation process with different experts from the field, and recommends taking the following actions on the local level:

First, crop diversification and the adoption of sustainable farming practices must be made more attractive and accessible to farmers. Second, to foster a sustainable farming system, farmers must be offered dedicated skills trainings and cooperatives must be established, so as to help farmers obtain fair prices. Third, to also tackle the demand side of sustainably produced and healthy food, education and awareness raising activities about nutrition, sustainable agriculture and waste & resource management must be offered to the local people.

Only when both the demand and supply side for sustainably produced and healthy organic foods increases, health and environment will improve.

[More information on JANAs agricultural activities](#)

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