



PROCEEDINGS

Seminar
on

HARNESSING THE YOUTH DIVIDEND: STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES FOR BANGLADESH IN A CHANGING WORLD

14 August 2025



Jointly Organised by

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and
Department of International Relations (IR), University of Dhaka



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Proceedings on **Harnessing the Youth Dividend: Strategic Imperatives for Bangladesh in a Changing World**

14 August 2025



Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS) organised a seminar on **“Harnessing the Youth Dividend: Strategic Imperatives for Bangladesh in a Changing World”** on Thursday, 14 August 2025, in collaboration with the Department of International Relations (IR), University of Dhaka. **H E Shiuneen Rasheed**, High Commissioner of the Republic of Maldives to Bangladesh, graced the occasion as the Guest of Honour. **Md Mahbub-ul-Alam**, Secretary, Ministry of Youth was the Special Guest and **Professor Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha**, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Administration), University of Dhaka was the Eminent Guest of the event. The seminar was divided into four sessions. The Inaugural Session was chaired by **Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman**, Professor, Department of IR, University of Dhaka. Thereafter, three consecutive sessions were chaired respectively by **Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas**, Professor, Department of IR, University of Dhaka; **Professor Dr Tofail Ahmed**, Chairman, Local Government Reform Commission, and **Major General (Retd) Md Emdad ul Bari, OSP, NDC, psc, te**, Chairman, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

Inaugural Session

Opening Remarks



Professor Dr A S M Ali Ashraf

Chairman

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

Professor Dr A S M Ali Ashraf delivered the opening remarks of the seminar and set the tone for an engaging and timely discussion. He began by extending a warm welcome to the distinguished guests, including H E Shiuneen Rasheed, High Commissioner of the Republic of Maldives to Bangladesh; Md Mahbub-Ul-Alam, Secretary of the Ministry of Youth and Sports; Professor Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Administration) of the University of Dhaka; and Major General Iftekhar Anis, Director General of BIIS.

Professor Ashraf highlighted that the seminar, titled “Harnessing the Youth Dividend: Strategic Imperatives for Bangladesh in a Changing World”, comes at a crucial moment when the world is undergoing profound transformations. He noted that while there may be definitional debates around who constitutes “youth”, there is widespread agreement that young people possess a defining set of qualities such as risk-taking capacity, creativity, and entrepreneurial energy. These characteristics, he remarked, make them uniquely positioned to address both domestic and global challenges.

Reflecting on the complex international landscape, Professor Ashraf pointed to the multiplicity of issues confronting the global community — from the enduring war on terror and the experience of the pandemic to the technological disruptions of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), the rise of artificial intelligence, territorial conflicts, and widening socio-economic disparities. Navigating these challenges, he stressed not only strategic foresight but also a scientific and analytical mindset capable of understanding their interconnections and long-term implications. He commended the collaborative effort between the Department of IR and BIIS in organising the seminar, describing it as a fitting example of academic and policy-oriented partnership. He said that such a platform enables young scholars, researchers, and students to explore solutions and policy alternatives for Bangladesh in a rapidly changing global environment.

In conclusion, Professor Ashraf underscored four key priorities. First, he called for recognising the urgency of harnessing the potential of Bangladeshi youth in the shifting

landscape of global geopolitics. Second, he emphasised that youth must be seen not merely as beneficiaries of change but as active shapers and drivers of it. Third, he emphasised the importance of equipping young people with the necessary skills, mentorship, and institutional access. Finally, he emphasised the importance of aligning Bangladesh's national priorities with responsible and constructive global engagement. He ended his remarks by expressing optimism that the seminar would inspire meaningful dialogue and contribute to shaping informed, strategic, and forward-looking youth engagement for Bangladesh's future.

Welcome Address



Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng
Director General
Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS)

Major General Iftekhar Anis, BSP, awc, afwc, psc, PEng extended his heartfelt gratitude to the distinguished guests for attending the Inaugural Session and formally welcomed all participants of the seminar. In his remarks, Major General Anis emphasised Bangladesh's unique demographic juncture, underscoring that over half of the population is under the age of 30. He highlighted that this “youth bulge” is not merely a demographic fact but a significant window of opportunity, which is often referred to as the youth

dividend. While recognising the immense potential embedded within this demographic momentum, he cautioned that such dividends are not automatically realised. Rather, they must be achieved through deliberate policymaking, inclusive development strategies, and sustained investments in human capital. The global landscape—characterised by swift technical advancements, changing geopolitical dynamics, environmental susceptibilities, and transforming economic frameworks—exacerbates the necessity to equip young Bangladeshis for significant participation both locally and globally.

The Director General further elaborated on the core objectives of the seminar, which seek to unpack the various dimensions through which youth can become catalysts of national progress. He stressed the importance of integrating youth perspectives into policymaking and acknowledged the younger generation's ability to reshape discourses on geopolitics, multilateral cooperation, and peacebuilding in an increasingly interconnected world. He pointed to digital transformation as a critical arena where Bangladeshi youth are already demonstrating leadership—especially in e-commerce, fintech, digital services, and innovation ecosystems. Additionally, he linked youth engagement to Bangladesh's broader development imperatives, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the journey beyond Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation, where youth are not passive beneficiaries but active agents of climate action, social justice, and inclusive growth.

As the address progressed, the Director General underscored the magnitude of the responsibility ahead. Harnessing the youth dividend, he noted, demands comprehensive investments in education that nurture critical thinking, skills training aligned with market demands, and the creation of platforms that empower youth participation and leadership.

Inclusivity was highlighted as a cornerstone, bridging divides across geography, gender, and socioeconomic strata. He acknowledged the distinguished composition of the seminar participants—former diplomats, academics, youth leaders, and policymakers—affirming that such cross-sectoral dialogue is essential for developing an actionable and coherent roadmap. He urged that the deliberations be viewed not as a mere academic exercise but as a collective call to action, with outcomes that reflect the aspirations of Bangladesh’s young citizens.

In his concluding note, he expressed sincere appreciation to the organisers, guests, speakers, moderators, and especially the youth participants, whose presence ensures that the discourse remains grounded in real-world challenges and ambitions. Reaffirming that youth are not only the leaders of tomorrow but active leaders of today—shaping culture, economy, and global identity—he emphasised that decisions made now will determine whether Bangladesh can truly convert its demographic advantage into a lasting national achievement. With a final call to listen, debate, and design visionary policies, he brought the welcome address to a close, thanking all participants for their commitment to youth empowerment.

Speech by the Eminent Guest



Professor Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha

Pro-Vice Chancellor (Administration)

University of Dhaka

Professor Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha delivered an insightful discussion on the importance of harnessing Bangladesh's youth potential within the framework of the country's ongoing demographic transition. She emphasised that the concept of a "youth dividend" does not occur spontaneously; instead, it requires deliberate efforts to improve the quality of education, skills, health, and productivity of young individuals, along with establishing significant opportunities for their participation.

Professor Bidisha noted that while Bangladesh is currently benefitting from a positive demographic transition, the real challenge lies in transforming this advantage into productive outcomes. She stressed that employment generation has not kept pace with economic growth, which is creating a mismatch between the expanding youth population and the availability of decent jobs. She also drew attention to the high proportion of young people categorised as Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs)—estimated at around 18 to 19 per cent. Addressing this gap, she argued, is essential to ensure that the country does not lose out on its potential demographic dividend.

In addition, Dr Bidisha pointed out the persistent gender gap in employment, especially in terms of job quality and labour force participation. She underscored the pressing issue of skill mismatch between graduates and labour market demands, observing that many meritorious and hardworking young people struggle to find appropriate employment due to a lack of alignment between academic training and industry needs. To address this, she mentioned that the University of Dhaka has formed a committee—under her leadership—focused on strengthening industry-academia linkages, with the aim of better integrating youth into the job market.

According to Dr Bidisha, another major concern is the country's low level of public expenditure on education, which makes it difficult for universities to provide a contemporary education focused on skills and aligned with global technological developments. She suggested that for young Bangladeshis to maintain their competitive edge in a rapidly changing world, they need cutting-edge knowledge, tools, and support from institutions. An all-encompassing and all-inclusive policy framework that separates strategies for various young groups, such as rural and urban youth, high-skilled and low-skilled workers, aspiring migrants, entrepreneurs, and freelancers, was something that she advocated for.

Dr Bidisha, then, emphasised the need to promote Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) as a key avenue for employment generation, especially in rural areas. She stressed that rural youth often lack access to information, technology, and market links, despite their strong motivation to engage in productive activities. Therefore, she called for flexible and youth-friendly policies to support entrepreneurship and innovation.

Dr Bidisha further emphasised the importance of technical and vocational education, highlighting the social stigma associated with it in Bangladesh. Overcoming this stigma, she argued, is crucial to developing a skilled and job-ready workforce. For young entrepreneurs and freelancers, she recommended ensuring access to flexible financing, timely and reliable information, and integration with the market ecosystem.

In conclusion, Dr Bidisha urged that education and employment systems be upgraded to align with modern technologies and global standards, so that Bangladeshi youth can compete internationally. In her view, the aftermath of the July uprising presents a critical opportunity to make youth empowerment and employment a national priority. She concluded by expressing optimism that collective ideas and policy dialogues from such forums would contribute to building an inclusive, fair, and just Bangladesh driven by the energy and innovation of its youth.

Speech by the Special Guest



Md Mahbub-ul-Alam

Secretary

Ministry of Youth and Sports

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Md Mahbub-ul-Alam commenced his remarks by describing the seminar as timely and thanking BIISS for organising such a diverse gathering of students, policy makers, diplomats, educators, development partners, and practitioners. He outlined several imperatives for young leaders, beginning with what he called “the promise of a generation”. Mr Alam explained that Bangladesh was currently experiencing a powerful youth dividend or youth bulge, with more than half of the population under the age of 30. He emphasised that this represented not a challenge but an unprecedented

opportunity—a demographic dividend that was not guaranteed but must be earned through investment, planning, and empowerment. He warned that failure to act appropriately could transform this advantage into a demographic disaster, potentially leading to issues such as drug abuse amongst the youth.

The Secretary's first strategic imperative focused on engaging young people in policy-making processes, which he believed would benefit everyone. Mr Alam declared that the time had come to make young people not merely participants but active partners, ensuring their voices were involved in national decisions concerning education, the economy, environment, and governance. He mentioned that his ministry had established youth councils to engage people, students, parliament, and advisory boards, and had recently organised policy competitions across 12 universities, including both public and private institutions.

The second strategic imperative addressed the reality that contemporary youth were global citizens and interconnected digital natives whose interactions could shape foreign policy, climate diplomacy, and international connectivity. In this regard, Mr Alam advocated for training young people in global affairs, digital diplomacy, and regional cooperation, suggesting that young leaders should be sent to attend international platforms, seminars, and sporting events globally.

Digital transformation formed the third imperative, with which he believed that young people were already shaping the digital future through fintech, e-commerce, software development, and freelancing. Mr Alam revealed that his ministry was training young people in freelancing through a project planned for implementation across all 64 districts in the country. He emphasised the necessity of facilitating access to technology, skills enhancement, capacity development, training, digital infrastructure, and initial funding to support this project.

The fourth imperative is related to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and managing the Least Developed Country (LDC) graduation transition period. Mr Alam explained that Bangladesh has to achieve the SDGs by 2030. For this reason, the government is working to implement and achieve these goals successfully, as it had previously done with the Millennium Development Goals. He noted that young people were already active in areas such as climate action and quality education and emphasised the need to provide them with access and recognition. The ministry was working with lead organisations and, with assistance from the World Bank, addressing the millions of young people not in education, employment, or any form of training.

Environmental sustainability constituted the fifth strategic imperative, of which Mr Alam asserted that no one understood the urgency of climate change better than the youth, who would inherit the consequences of present-day decisions. He advocated for empowering them to become green entrepreneurs and sustainability leaders through clean energy projects and climate advocacy, mentioning that the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change was also working on related projects.

The final imperative highlighted youth soft power by which Mr Alam explained how young people's creativity, talent, and global engagement were shaping and how the world perceived Bangladesh, thereby influencing the country's image. He declared that the greatest investment possible was in developing the capacity of young people through education, employment, entrepreneurship, and ethics, describing this not as charity but as a national strategy. His vision was to build a Bangladesh where every voice mattered, dreams were valid, and potential was unlimited, concluding that the future was not something to enter but to create alongside the youth.

Mr Alam briefly outlined some activities of his Ministry, explaining that they were working extensively on youth development and realigning the curriculum. Many projects had been initiated, including artificial intelligence programmes, self-defence projects, and entrepreneurship initiatives. He mentioned that a high-level committee had recently been formed to implement the entrepreneurship policy, formulated at the personal request of the Honourable Chief Adviser Dr Muhammad Yunus. The Secretary concluded with a quote from the Chief Adviser: "Young people are not future leaders; they are the leaders of today. If we give them the right environment, they will create a new world which we ourselves cannot imagine".

Speech by the Guest of Honour



H E Shiuneen Rasheed

High Commissioner of the Maldives to Bangladesh

H E Shiuneen Rasheed began her remarks by expressing deep appreciation for the opportunity to join the discussion and extended gratitude to BISS for the warm welcome and for organising this timely and vital conversation. In her speech, H E Rasheed emphasised that the concept of a “youth dividend” represents a rare and powerful demographic opportunity—a period when a nation’s working-age population reaches its peak, offering the potential to drive economic growth, foster social transformation, and strengthen national resilience. In this context, Bangladesh was described as standing at a crucial juncture, with nearly half of its population under the age of thirty. She noted that this demographic structure is not merely a number but a significant strategic advantage. However, history demonstrates that such opportunities do not automatically convert into dividends. Without sound policy frameworks, sustained investment, and a collective national commitment, this potential can easily be lost. Honourable High Commissioner also highlighted that the responsibility now lies in ensuring that young people are empowered, properly equipped with the necessary skills, and actively engaged as full partners in shaping the nation’s future.

Drawing on personal experiences, H E Rasheed shared vivid examples of Bangladesh’s youth in action—in classrooms, start-ups, social movements, and on international platforms. Reference was made to the dynamism of tech-savvy entrepreneurs who are developing solutions rooted in local contexts yet bearing global potential. She also noted the achievements of young professionals excelling in digital services, healthcare, climate science, and creative industries. Additionally, mention was made of student innovators who successfully integrate profitability with social purpose, illustrating a new model of development-oriented entrepreneurship. She stated that the question before the nation is not whether the youth of Bangladesh are capable—as they have already proven their potential and creativity—but rather how their collective energy can be harnessed and translated into enduring national and regional impact. Her speech set a reflective and action-oriented tone for subsequent discussions on how Bangladesh can strategically leverage its youth dividend for sustainable growth and transformation in an increasingly complex global landscape.

H E Rasheed, in her speech, captured the dynamic transformation of contemporary Bangladesh, portraying it as a nation where youth are not merely the hope for the future but active architects of the present. She emphasised that recent developments have shown how

the determination and collective voice of the country's youth can influence national outcomes. Citing the youth-led movement of 2024, which played a pivotal role in facilitating a peaceful transition of power, she emphasised that constructive civic engagement by young citizens directly contributes to shaping the nation's destiny.

Turning to environmental sustainability, H E Rasheed highlighted the critical role of Bangladesh's youth in addressing one of the country's most pressing challenges—climate vulnerability. As one of the world's most climate-affected nations, Bangladesh must lead by example in confronting environmental crises. She noted that young people are already taking the lead in areas such as green entrepreneurship, eco-conscious innovation, and community-based climate resilience. By fostering environmental awareness and providing youth with the necessary tools and opportunities, Bangladesh can prepare its next generation to tackle the global crises that endanger all humanity.

Honourable High Commissioner then identified the Maldives and Bangladesh as natural partners in this endeavour. Both being climate-vulnerable nations, they share not only a sense of urgency but also a common vision of empowering youth as champions of sustainable solutions. The address highlighted the potential for collaboration between Maldivian and Bangladeshi youth in fields such as climate action, digital innovation, and cultural exchange initiatives that would not only strengthen bilateral relations but also foster regional cooperation in South Asia. She linked this vision to Bangladesh's developmental trajectory, as the country moves toward graduating from its status as an LDC and works toward achieving the SDGs. The active participation of youth, she stressed, would be indispensable in this process. Whether through entrepreneurship, education, or climate advocacy, young people will be the driving force behind a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future.

To fully harness the youth dividend, H E Rasheed outlined three essential pillars. The first one is relevant and inclusive education. According to her, education must go beyond mere enrolment to become relevant to the realities of the modern world. It should equip students with critical thinking, adaptability, digital literacy, and emotional intelligence. In this regard, she called for collaboration among governments, academia, industry, and civil society to bridge the gap between classrooms and careers, enabling graduates not only to seek jobs but to create them. Second, she talked about the pathways to meaningful employment. Acknowledging the need to align ambition with opportunity, she commended Bangladesh's progress in the digital economy as an example of what can be achieved. With adequate infrastructure, market access, and inclusive financing, youth-led ideas can evolve into enterprises that drive economic growth and uplift local communities.

The third pillar, H E Rasheed pointed out, is youth engagement in Global dialogue. She emphasised that in today's interconnected world, diplomacy is no longer confined to officials. Young people are actively shaping international narratives through innovation, art, and collaboration, thereby contributing to national branding and soft power. These people-to-people connections were described as powerful tools for advancing Bangladesh's global engagement. H E Rasheed further stressed the importance of inclusion as the foundation of any youth-centred strategy. The youth dividend, she argued, must empower all — irrespective of gender, geography, or socioeconomic background. The determination of a young woman

in a rural village, the creativity of a young person in Dhaka, and the perspective of a student from a small island community were all described as equally vital to a shared and sustainable future.

Concluding the speech, the H E Rasheed addressed the audience—comprising dignitaries, distinguished guests, and students—with a reflective note. The youth dividend, they affirmed, is not a guarantee but a responsibility that requires vision, investment, and trust. It calls for faith in the ability of young people to lead, innovate, and build a better tomorrow. Expressing confidence that the seminar would produce not only innovative ideas but also actionable pathways and lasting partnerships, she envisioned this event as a milestone moment—when ambition met opportunity and the youth of Bangladesh emerged not merely as beneficiaries of progress, but as its boldest architects.

Summing up by the Session Chair



Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman

Professor

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman began his address by highlighting the demographic reality of Bangladesh, explaining that over 29 per cent of the population was between the ages of 14 to 29, constituting what he termed the nation's youth. Despite representing such a large portion of the population, he acknowledged that significant challenges and constraints remained. The session chair emphasised that in order to harness this demographic dividend, numerous issues needed to be addressed, including educational mismatches and a lack of technological expertise. He also noted that

climate change was affecting access to education and many essential resources.

Regarding global peace and security concerns, Professor Zaman stated that it was crucial to understand where problems were arising. These issues stemmed from systemic inequalities, power imbalances between states, and the failure of international mechanisms to fully integrate young people, leading to difficulties in various parts of the world. With this context in mind, he invited all attendees to listen carefully to the panellists throughout the day as they would discuss security, diplomacy, and the needs of young people, noting that student speakers would also contribute to these discussions.

Session 1

The Youth in Shaping Bangladesh's Foreign Policy, Diplomacy, and Security: Response to Regional and Global Geopolitics



“Youth in Global Affairs: Analysing Linkages and Navigating Geopolitics”



Lam-ya Mostaque

Research Fellow

BIISS

Lam-ya Mostaque, at the beginning of her deliberation, discussed the global scenario concerning youth demographics and engagement. She highlighted that there are currently 1.2 billion people aged between 15 and 24 years, representing approximately 16 per cent of the world's total population. This significant demographic segment, she noted, underscores the increasing global acknowledgement of the vital role and stake of young people in shaping the future. She further observed that youth today are not passive observers but active participants influencing global affairs — contributing meaningfully to international forums, shaping public

opinion, and even playing emerging roles in the sphere of geopolitics.

Ms Mostaque, in her presentation, elaborated on youth representation at global forums, highlighting that international organisations, including the United Nations (UN), are increasingly institutionalising youth participation through the establishment of youth forums and consultative platforms. She observed that youth action has been particularly visible in areas such as climate action and the implementation of the SDGs, where young leaders have demonstrated strong commitment and innovation. Furthermore, she noted that youth are now venturing into new domains such as peacebuilding, reflecting an expanding spectrum of their global engagement. In this regard, she acknowledged that Model United Nations (MUN) programmes have played an important role in raising awareness among students about global governance, diplomacy, and international cooperation.

In discussing youth representation in diplomacy, Ms Mostaque underscored that the influence of young people in global affairs extends well beyond activism. Youth today are shaping public opinion on key international issues, which in turn has a tangible impact on foreign policy decision-making processes. She further mentioned that several major powers are advancing soft power initiatives that directly engage young people — such as international scholarship programmes and youth exchange or visit initiatives — which aim to build mutual understanding and foster long-term diplomatic ties.

Addressing the dimension of security and geopolitics, Ms Mostaque acknowledged that youth contributions in these spheres are often less visible yet profoundly significant. She explained that the youth bulge — the growing proportion of young people in a population — can have lasting implications for peace, security, and conflict dynamics. Geopolitical shifts, she noted, not only shape the global environment but also influence young people's

aspirations, opportunities, and future plans. Importantly, she emphasised that youth possess the potential to alter the trajectory of both regional and global geopolitics, citing historical examples such as the Arab Spring and the Hong Kong protests, where youth movements played transformative roles in redefining political landscapes.

Ms Mostaque then discussed the evolving role of social media and its growing significance in youth engagement and global affairs. She highlighted that social media has emerged as a crucial tool in shaping foreign policy narratives and influencing global political processes. Describing it as a key instrument for political mobilisation, she noted that platforms now serve as spaces where youth voices can mobilise, organise, and advocate for policy change at both national and international levels. She further observed that major international organisations, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), are increasingly utilising social media influencers as part of their communication strategies to remain relevant in an era of digital diplomacy. Influencers, she emphasised, play a dual role—they can both spread and prevent disinformation, especially during times of conflict, making them crucial actors in the information ecosystem.

Ms Mostaque also pointed out that avenues for youth participation in significant domains of international politics and law have multiplied, offering new opportunities for involvement in global decision-making. However, she cautioned that structural and institutional barriers continue to hinder meaningful youth participation in formal policy processes. Despite being physically present in many global discussions, young people are often subjected to instrumentalisation, co-optation, or silencing, which limits their ability to influence outcomes substantively.

In the latter part of her deliberation, Ms Mostaque examined the role of youth in global affairs, situating the discussion within the context of Bangladesh and the broader South Asian region. She observed that while young people increasingly shape public opinion and foreign policy discourse, this area remains insufficiently explored in academic research. The speaker emphasised the need for systematic study to better understand how youth engagement influences diplomatic narratives and policy orientations at both national and regional levels.

Ms Mostaque noted that across South Asia, a growing number of social media influencers are producing content on geopolitics, reflecting a rising public interest in issues such as the Rohingya crisis, the Teesta water-sharing dispute, developments in Assam, and regional rivalries, including India–Pakistan and India–China relations. These online discussions, she pointed out, have created opportunities to challenge entrenched political monopolies and to broaden public participation in foreign policy dialogue. However, Ms Mostaque cautioned that youth participation must move beyond symbolic inclusion or token representation. She called for more impactful and meaningful engagement of young people within the framework of traditional diplomacy, where their perspectives could enrich policy formulation and enhance public diplomacy efforts.

In conclusion, Ms Mostaque stressed the responsibility of academia in studying and documenting the impact of youth on national and international affairs, especially in an era when digital communication is reshaping state–society relations. Concluding her remarks, Ms Mostaque observed that social media has transformed every individual into a potential ambassador, with the entire world as their audience. In this context, she urged young people to remain informed, vigilant, and guided by the principle of placing the nation’s interest above all else.

“Influencing Foreign Policy and Diplomacy from Below: The Role of Youth in a Multipolar World”



Monzima Haque

*Assistant Professor
Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Monzima Haque situated youth within the wider dynamics of multipolarity. She emphasised that multipolarity should not be perceived merely as a reallocation of power among major powers, but as an augmentation of participants, perspectives, and possibilities in influencing global matters. In this changing paradigm, youth were characterised not solely as recipients of decisions but as proactive participants capable of producing a “diplomatic dividend”.

By “diplomatic dividend”, Ms Haque referred to the networks, trust, and informal capital created through conferences, cultural exchanges, and professional collaborations. Connections formed during coffee breaks, side events, or even WhatsApp groups often evolved into long-term strategic assets. She noted that a decade from now, the same young leaders might be found at negotiation tables, approaching dialogue with the memory of prior collaboration rather than the weight of national rivalries.

Ms Haque illustrated this dynamic with two examples: the creation of the South Asian Youth Women in Water platform at World Water Week 2023 in Stockholm, and the Youth Parliament for Water at the World Water Forum 2024 in Bali, which directly influenced the ministerial outcome document. These cases, she argued, demonstrated how informal youth engagement could translate into tangible agenda-setting influence.

Building on these reflections, Ms Haque underscored that such initiatives exemplify the evolving nature of diplomacy, where informal interactions and youth-driven networks increasingly complement traditional statecraft. She emphasised that these emerging “micro-diplomatic spaces” allow young professionals to shape narratives, bridge policy divides, and inject fresh perspectives into global governance processes. Highlighting the continuity between informal engagement and institutional outcomes, she observed that these platforms foster not only individual empowerment but also collective regional trust-building. In her concluding remarks, Ms Haque urged that international institutions recognise and invest in these informal yet influential forms of connectivity, as they constitute the groundwork for more inclusive and resilient diplomatic processes in the years ahead.

Turning to Bangladesh, Ms Haque emphasised the potential of the country's youth population and diaspora, known as Non-Resident Bangladeshis (NRBs), as diplomatic bridges. She urged reframing the notion of "brain drain" as "brain circulation," viewing globally embedded Bangladeshis not as losses but as assets. She emphasised that NRBs already served as informal ambassadors through their skills, networks, and advocacy, while domestic youth were shaping perceptions through social media and grassroots activism. Collectively, these efforts broadened Bangladesh's international presence beyond state-led diplomacy.

At the same time, Ms Haque cautioned that enthusiasm alone was insufficient. Challenges included misinformation and disinformation, the difficulty of sustaining youth collaboration over time, and recognition gaps that often relegated youth contributions to the symbolic rather than the substantive. Without deliberate investments in capacity building, mentorship, and policy integration, she warned, the diplomatic dividend would remain underutilised.

In conclusion, Ms Haque reiterated that youth influence was not simply about gaining access to official forums but about reshaping the very content and character of diplomacy by embedding inclusivity, justice, and long-term thinking in processes too often dominated by short-term state interests. Multipolarity, she argued, should therefore be understood not only as shifting power centres but also as multiplying opportunities for participation.

“Youth as Public Diplomats: Building People-To-People Connectivity”



Faria Islam

Student

*Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Faria Islam emphasised the crucial role of youth as public diplomats in fostering people-to-people connectivity. She observed that in the modern, interconnected world, diplomacy is no longer limited to embassies or formal negotiations; it also takes place in classrooms, on sports fields, at cultural exchanges, and across digital platforms. In this transformation, young people stand at the centre as key actors.

Ms Islam made the connection between these ideas and broader global trends by pointing out that in forums like as COP28, young people had reframed arguments around justice, fairness, and inclusivity, expanding conversations beyond the technical or financial factors. She mentioned historical and contemporary mobilisations, such as the Arab Spring and Bangladesh’s own July Uprising, as evidence of youth functioning as both disruptors and innovators. Specifically, she referred to the Arab Spring. In a multipolar system marked by competition between the United States and China and the rise of middle powers, she noted that youth activism had emerged as a new pole of influence, one that was not only diffuse but also meaningful.

She highlighted that Bangladesh’s large youth population —more than 45 per cent under 25 — represents a unique demographic opportunity. Young Bangladeshis are already contributing by sharing cultural heritage abroad, participating in student clubs, and promoting the country’s identity globally. She pointed to examples such as youth-led cultural initiatives, climate diplomacy, and entrepreneurial ventures that have reshaped perceptions of Bangladesh. Notable cases include the international recognition of Bangladesh’s climate resilience, where youth activists have presented innovative local solutions at global forums, and the role of young entrepreneurs in connecting Bangladeshi talent with global markets.

Ms Islam also emphasised the contributions of the Bangladeshi diaspora, whose professionals abroad serve as informal ambassadors by linking entrepreneurs at home with international opportunities. Youth engagement in sports, arts, and cultural events was cited as another powerful form of soft diplomacy that builds goodwill beyond official channels.

Looking ahead, Ms Islam argued that Bangladesh's youth have the potential to play an even greater role in digital peacebuilding, countering misinformation, and fostering intercultural dialogue. Initiatives such as regional youth summits, international fellowships, and youth-led innovation for the SDGs were identified as possible pathways. She also suggested that Bangladesh could strengthen its global presence by promoting youth-led maritime diplomacy, particularly around marine conservation linked to the Bay of Bengal.

At the same time, Ms Islam acknowledged challenges such as limited access to scholarships, inadequate training in intercultural communication, persistent stereotypes, and geopolitical constraints. However, she described these not as barriers but as indicators of where further efforts are needed. She concluded by stressing that the most compelling narrative of Bangladesh will not be written in policy documents but in the lived experiences of young people who embody the nation's resilience, creativity, and values. In her words, the youth should not wait for permission to lead, as they themselves are the message, the bridge, and the future.

Open Discussion of Session 1



Dr Razia Sultana

Senior Research Fellow

BIISS

Dr Razia Sultana, while appreciating the insights of the young scholars, addressed a question to Monzima Haque. Referring to the evolving and somewhat blurred nature of Bangladesh's foreign policy over the past year, she emphasised youth engagement in multilateral platforms and international forums, and asked what other components, beyond participation in such forums, young people should harness to contribute effectively to foreign policy.

Md Asim Hossain

Student, Department of Economics

University of Dhaka

Md Asim Hossain asked Ms Hauqe about the role of social media and how it contributes to harnessing the youth divide within local communities.





Samantha Barua

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Samantha Barua asked Ms Haque about the strategies Bangladesh is adopting to leverage its diaspora for diplomatic advantage, considering the dual reality of brain drain and overseas skill acquisition.

Mashkur Hasnaine Adeeb

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Mashkur Hasnaine Adeeb raised a query to Ms Haque regarding practical steps, beyond policy support, that could help harness the youth dividend within local communities.



Ophelia Jamila Bupasha

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Ophelia Jamila Bupasha asked Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas about how Bangladesh could achieve cultural equilibrium in an era of globalisation, given that its youth were more attuned to foreign cultures than vice versa.

Responses from the Panellists



In response, **Monzima Haque** pointed to regional and multilateral platforms where youth from South Asia exchange perspectives and engage policymakers, stressing their role in countering misinformation and shaping narratives. She also underlined the value of conference ethnography as a strategy for building networks and gaining access despite geopolitical constraints, encouraging Bangladeshi youth to use such spaces for global exposure and diplomatic engagement. In response to another query, Ms Haque stated that youth-led initiatives were already empowering communities and should be further encouraged, noting that meaningful change often occurs without formal policy backing. In her final response, she argued that youth-led initiatives were already creating opportunities for rural communities and empowering both men and women. She argued that policy support was not always essential, as grassroots initiatives often succeeded independently. Furthermore, she also pointed to social media as a powerful tool for amplifying youth voices and shaping narratives. At the same time, she urged privileged youth to represent the diverse realities of all Bangladeshis, noting that cultural commonalities, such as shared global pop culture, could serve as platforms for collective problem-solving.



Lam-ya Mostaque highlighted the role of social media in amplifying youth voices, the importance of utilising a shared global culture as a common platform, and the responsibility of privileged youth to represent the diverse realities of all Bangladeshis.



Faria Islam, while responding to queries, stressed the importance of multilateral platforms where youth could share concerns and connect with policymakers, and emphasised the value of conferences for network-building and knowledge exchange. She urged reframing brain drain as “brain circulation” to utilise the skills and networks of Bangladeshis abroad for the country’s diplomatic and developmental benefits.



Finally, the Session Chair, **Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas** responded that culture was not static but continuously transformed through interaction. While Bangladesh's cultural identity was crucial, he stressed that cultural exchanges should not create divisions but foster inclusivity.

Summing up by the Session Chair



Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas

Professor

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas brought the session to a close by reflecting on the central theme of the youth dividend. He observed that discussions about what the youth “should do” are often framed by senior voices — an unfortunate reality. He stressed that it is equally vital for young people to articulate what the older generation ought to do in order to create enabling conditions for them. While acknowledging the resource constraints that make it difficult to organise youth-led seminars and initiatives, he emphasised that there remain significant opportunities for constructive engagement. He argued that senior academics, policymakers, and institutions have a responsibility to empower youth in ways that connect directly to foreign policy and security discourses.

Dr Biswas commended the panellists for offering insightful perspectives and enriching the Seminar with their scholarship. He concluded with a call to recognise the youth as partners in shaping agendas rather than as passive recipients of guidance.

Session 2

The Youth in National Policy Making and Reform



“Building Institutional Pathways for the Youth in Decision-Making: Vision, Models and Roadblocks”



Dr Mahfuz Kabir

Research Director

BIISS

Dr Mahfuz Kabir articulated the evolving dynamics of youth participation in political and governance processes, emphasising that young people today are not merely demographic assets but active stakeholders in policymaking and institutional reform. He began by outlining the youth political participation model, which recognises the plurality of youth perspectives and the distinct challenges they confront in engaging with formal political structures. Dr Kabir classified participation into conventional and unconventional modes. These modes range from voting, joining political parties, and contesting elections to protests, social movements, and digital activism. They capture both formal mechanisms, such as youth councils, student unions, and participatory budgeting, and informal pathways, including online platforms and community initiatives. These diverse modes, he argued, reflect a shifting paradigm in which youth agency demands recognition not only as a moral imperative but also as an institutional necessity. He underscored the aims of participation through a four-dimensional lens: rights-based participation that ensures access to political mechanisms, empowerment that equips youth with decision-making power, efficiency that enhances governance outcomes by including youth perspectives, and developmental participation that prepares youth for active citizenship. This foundational understanding formed the bedrock of his argument for institutionalising youth inclusion within democratic systems.

Building on this conceptual framework, Dr Kabir provided concrete examples of policies and programmes from various national contexts that illustrate evolving global practices in youth engagement. He elaborated on youth councils and parliaments that provide structured avenues for young voices in policy discussions, alongside e-government platforms that enable digital engagement in legislative processes. Civic education initiatives were highlighted for their role in cultivating informed participation, while youth-focused campaigns and social innovation programmes were noted as means to mobilise and harness youth creativity for community development. Referring to the Youth Participation and Empowerment Pyramid, he explained how youth agencies must progress from symbolic representation to shared power and decision-making authority. He then introduced the electoral cycle approach, emphasising that youth participation must be sustained across pre-electoral, electoral, and

post-electoral phases to cultivate a gender-responsive and inclusive democratic environment. Through this cycle, youth are positioned not only as voters but as peacebuilders, observers, and policy influencers. In this context, he emphasised the importance of fostering a culture of participation, incorporating flexibility into engagement strategies, adopting inclusive practices, and establishing long-term, sustainable mechanisms for youth empowerment. These mechanisms, he insisted, must transcend tokenism and translate into structured institutional reforms that guarantee youth roles in governance processes.

Dr Kabir further illustrated his insights through comparative case studies, highlighting how different countries have implemented institutional pathways for youth participation. He referenced Nigeria's youth engagement in the constitution review process, where coalitions of youth-based civil society organisations actively contributed to legislative reform through memorandum submissions and political dialogue platforms. The development of a Nigerian Youth Agenda on Political Participation prior to the 2015 elections, as analysed, demonstrated how youth can galvanise national discourse and demand institutional accountability. In Lebanon, the expansion of the Parliamentary Internship Programme provided young graduates with exposure to legislative and oversight functions, contributing to a youth action plan endorsed at the parliamentary level. Libya's transitional experience was discussed as another critical case, where youth-led advocacy organisations were trained in governance assessment, contributing to debates in the National Transitional Council and influencing constitutional discourse. He also discussed Cambodia's Strengthening Democracy Programme, which utilised multimedia civic education initiatives to reach millions of young voters. By broadcasting youth-oriented narratives about civic rights and responsibilities, these initiatives helped dismantle stereotypes that youth should be passive in public life, with post-broadcast research indicating improved attitudes toward democratic participation among the youth. These international experiences, Dr Kabir argued, demonstrate that youth inclusion is most effective when institutions invest in political literacy, create participatory infrastructures, and ensure continuity of engagement beyond episodic elections.

Turning to the Bangladeshi context, Dr Kabir reflected on both the potential and the obstacles in institutionalising youth participation within national governance structures. He noted that while Bangladesh possesses a vibrant youth demographic, systemic barriers continue to hinder its substantive engagement. Among the stumbling blocks he identified were the lack of discourse development, rising frustration, social and political fragmentation, detachment from grassroot realities, a widening trust deficit, and the absence of a coherent institutional vision for youth empowerment. These challenges, he argued, necessitate a policy response that moves beyond rhetoric to actionable frameworks. In his proposed way forward, he advocated promoting enabling environments through legal reforms, policy commitments, and youth-inclusive planning across electoral, parliamentary, public administration, and local governance domains. He placed special emphasis on enhancing the participation of young women, whose representation in decision-making remains disproportionately low, and on ensuring inclusion of youth from ethnic and marginalised communities, particularly those from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and other peripheral regions. Dr Kabir concluded by asserting that institutional pathways must not merely invite youth to the table but must redesign the table itself—embedding youth perspectives into the architecture of democratic governance. Only through such transformative commitments, he insisted, can Bangladesh harness its youth dividend as a strategic national asset in a rapidly changing world.

“Diaspora Youth and Policy Reform: Probable Challenges and Pathways”



Dr Saima Ahmed

Assistant Professor

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

Dr Saima Ahmed, in her presentation, focused on the evolving political and social role of the Bangladeshi diaspora. She explained that the Bangladeshi diaspora comprises individuals living abroad through both voluntary and involuntary migration, including students, professionals, and workers. In recent years, the community has undergone a notable shift—from being primarily a source of remittances to becoming an active participant in political and civic engagement. With nearly 53,000 students studying abroad in 2023 and around 50 million migrant workers residing

overseas, Bangladesh now has one of the largest diaspora populations globally.

Dr Ahmed noted that this transformation became particularly visible during the July 2024 uprising, when diaspora groups mobilised globally to support movements calling for democracy and human rights. Protests were organised across several countries, including the United Kingdom (UK), the US, Germany, Japan, and Egypt, led largely by Bangladeshi students and professionals. These actions, she observed, amplified international attention on Bangladesh’s political situation and created pressure on foreign governments and institutions to respond.

Dr Ahmed highlighted that migrant workers also engaged in political action, including the temporary suspension of remittance transfers during the uprising, which led to a decline in foreign currency reserves. However, such actions came at a cost, as dozens of Bangladeshi migrants were detained or imprisoned in countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and the Maldives for participating in protests. Dr Ahmed also discussed the emergence of a digitally active diaspora, noting that online activism and social media have become powerful tools for influencing public discourse. Figures such as Tasneem Khalil, Zulkarnain Saer Khan, and Khaled Mohiuddin, along with academics like Professor Ali Riaz, have used online platforms and international media to critique governance in Bangladesh and advocate for political reforms. Some diaspora scholars, she mentioned, have played a role in advising or influencing ongoing reform initiatives within the country.

At the same time, Dr Ahmed cautioned that the increasing digital activism among the diaspora carries certain risks. The widespread use of social media has sometimes led to misinformation, inflammatory language, and polarising narratives that have the potential to aggravate domestic tensions. The lack of legal accountability and credibility in online spaces, she warned, could complicate efforts to consolidate democracy and implement policy reforms.

In conclusion, Dr Ahmed emphasised the need for structured dialogue between national policymakers and diaspora representatives to harness their potential for constructive engagement. She suggested that both first-and second-generation members of the diaspora should be meaningfully included in Bangladesh's broader policy and development processes. Many members of the diaspora, she noted, hold influential roles in global think tanks, universities, and research institutions, and their expertise in areas such as climate change, migrant rights, and social justice could provide valuable contributions to national policymaking if effectively integrated.

“Education Policy Reform: Youth Perspective”



Md Mashrur Haque Nafis

Student

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

Md Mashrur Haque Nafis began his deliberation, opening with two thought-provoking quotations: Albert Einstein’s assertion that “Education is not the learning of facts, but the training of the mind to think”, and former US President Franklin Roosevelt’s observation that “Education without morals is a creation of menace to society”.

Mr Nafis highlighted the dividends of harnessing youth for Bangladesh, including overall national development, enhanced global competitiveness, and the creation of an equitable, stable, and prosperous society built upon innovative youth empowerment and leadership. Despite rising enrolment figures, he argued that the current educational landscape left much to be desired. When dissecting the underlying causes of the July 2024 uprising, he identified a lack of appropriate employment as one of the driving factors, which could indicate the needs of the nation’s youth and broader socioeconomic and political stability.

Mr Nafis then explained that proper employment corresponding to one’s educational qualifications was difficult to obtain in Bangladesh, whilst simultaneously, youth were not adequately equipped to survive and thrive in competitive job markets. This scenario prompted reflection on what was lacking in the educational system and what could be done to address these shortcomings. He suggested that a large-scale educational policy overhaul was likely the answer, as shrinking job opportunities combined with an outdated system had created deep-rooted frustration amongst highly ambitious young people.

Mr Nafis emphasised the need to adapt to the ever-changing scenarios of the 4IR, requiring a mental shift towards adapting, learning, unlearning, and relearning effectively. This meant that knowledge should not be rigid but rather a continuous and fluid process, ready to meet changing demands. He advocated for a well-rounded education that integrated traditional approaches with emerging technologies in the curriculum, stressing the paramount importance of interdisciplinary learning.

However, the presenter acknowledged that major obstacles remained. One significant source of national division was the country’s multifaceted education system and curricula,

which created segmentation that reinforced social divisions amongst youth. Gender-sensitive education was inadequate, resulting in a lack of gender awareness across all spheres, whilst inadequate and underutilised budgets in the education sector hampered growth. He noted that currently 22 per cent of youth were classified as NEET, and that no education reform commission had yet been formed in the country.

According to Mr Nafis, these issues were further compounded by cultural hurdles in vocational education. Cultural norms strongly favoured academic degrees over technical or vocational education, which was frequently regarded as having a lower level of prestige. Gender norms made it difficult for women to obtain technical education, particularly because they were sometimes coerced into traditional positions without being given the opportunity to exercise their own personal preferences. Their potential was mainly underutilised as a result of this lack of female participation, which contributed to the perpetuation of gender inequities in employment.

Despite these challenges, Mr Nafis maintained that the situation was not entirely bleak, declaring that Bangladesh stood on the cusp of a new dawn, guided by leaders committed to building a better nation. He outlined several youth-centric strategies to navigate the path forward, beginning with increased investment in education to build a future knowledge-based society. This would involve fostering quality education across primary, secondary, and tertiary levels whilst also promoting research, technical, and vocational skills. He advocated for smoother connectivity between universities and industry to foster collaboration between academia and industry. Above all, Mr Nafis stressed the need to change thinking processes and broaden horizons and perspectives, with the aim of fulfilling youth potential. He concluded that if educational policy reforms could echo these changes, the great Bangladeshi dream could become one where young people chose to stay in Bangladesh rather than seeking opportunities elsewhere.

Open Discussion of Session 2



Md Samin Mushfiq Islam

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Md Samin Mushfiq Islam raised a question about the feasibility of maintaining reserved seats for young people to ensure their representation in national policymaking. He emphasised the importance of creating avenues through which the voices of the youth could directly influence policy decisions and contribute meaningfully to governance.

Mashkur Hasnaine Adeeb

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Mashkur Hasnaine Adeeb addressed a question to Dr Saima Ahmed, seeking her views on the skills and competencies that young people should prioritise in order to effectively contribute to national policymaking and reform.





Md Mahfuj Hasan

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Md Mahfuj Hasan raised a question to Dr Kabir, noting that in many countries, a significant number of young people serve as members of parliament, yet this has been absent in the political history of Bangladesh. He referred to Dhaka University Central Students' Union (DUCSU) as an important platform for youth participation in policymaking and parliamentary affairs and sought clarification on the reasons behind the absence of youth representation in the parliament, as well as the irregularity of DUCSU elections.

Mr Hasan also posed a question to Dr Saima Ahmed, noting that many students from public universities travel abroad for higher studies but often do not return to contribute to national reform. He asked what could be done to address this challenge.

Md Abdul Hai

Southeast University

Md Abdul Hai directed his question to the Session Chair. He noted that while several reform commissions had been proposed, the education reform commission, which he considered to be the most crucial, had not yet been formed. He sought the Chair's views on this delay. He also referred to the Local Government Reform Commission, emphasising its importance in strengthening local governance. He observed that citizens had faced difficulties over the past year in accessing basic services, such as obtaining birth certificates. Referring to discussions about the possibility of local government elections, he asked for clarification on the current status of that proposal. In addition, he enquired about the requirements for minimum educational qualifications at the local government level.





Lamya Haque

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Lamya Haque directed her question to Dr Saima Ahmed. She referred to the online activism that took place in July 2024 alongside the remittance cut-offs initiated by sections of the Bangladeshi diaspora. She asked how such digital and financial interventions might shape the government's future approach to engaging with its diaspora communities. She further enquired whether these developments should be viewed as a momentary political outburst with global echoes or as the emergence of a more sustained transnational political force.

Mansura Amdad

*Lecturer, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Mansura Amdad addressed her remarks primarily to Dr Saima Ahmed and, to some extent, to Mr Mashrur. She reflected on the earlier discussion around the Bangladeshi diaspora, noting that the experience of migrant women workers in the Middle East often remained overlooked. She observed that these women had not been able to be mobilised, either socially or politically, and that they continued to remain at the margins. In highlighting the intersections of gender and exploitation, she asked whether there were possible pathways forward to address their exclusion.



Turning to the issue of youth mobilisation, Ms Amdad referred to Mr Mashrur's reference to a knowledge-based society, which she understood as being linked to the notion of a knowledge-based economy. She noted that such an economy involves the creative replacement of existing knowledge and the reconstruction of society through processes of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. She asked how he envisaged young people taking part in this transformation and what perspectives he could offer on their role in driving such change.



S M Fahim Shahriar

CEO & CO-Founder

SustainLaunch Labs

Fahim Shahriar reflected on the limitations of Bangladesh's current youth policy. He observed that although thousands of young people from Bangladesh participate each year in international conferences and entrepreneurship competitions, their insights and experiences regarding local ecosystems are rarely reflected in national youth policies. He highlighted education reform as a pressing concern, noting that emerging subjects such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, and entrepreneurship have not yet been incorporated into the curriculum. He further stressed the need to

revisit youth-led start-up funding mechanisms to create a more supportive environment for innovation. He concluded by asking Dr Kabir to share his vision or strategy on how such reforms could be advanced.

Responses from the Panellists



Dr Saima Ahmed responded to the first question on the skills and competencies that young people require to contribute to policymaking. She emphasised that the starting point for youth is a sound understanding of the country's current political and economic challenges, particularly the weaknesses within institutions and governance. Only by grasping these realities, she argued, can young people develop the knowledge and analytical capacity necessary to make meaningful contributions. She noted that to solve problems, it is essential to study and understand them thoroughly first.

Addressing the issue of why many students who go abroad do not return, Dr Ahmed observed that political and economic weaknesses have created limited opportunities at home. She highlighted the difficulty of securing employment, the high level of competition, and the comparatively low returns in Bangladesh when measured against opportunities in developed countries. To illustrate, she recounted the case of a former top student from IBA who, after being overlooked for opportunities in Bangladesh, went on to work for the World Bank, pursued studies at Fletcher, and later joined the Canadian Ministry of Finance. Having secured a well-compensated career abroad, he never returned, even to visit. Dr Ahmed suggested that such examples reflect the structural challenges deterring but returnees expressed optimism that the situation could change if the political and economic climate improved.

In response to the question of whether the diaspora might again play a decisive role, as it did during the July 2024 uprising, she considered it possible should the country revert to authoritarianism.

Turning to the issue raised on the vulnerabilities of Bangladeshi women workers in the Middle East, Dr Ahmed underscored the severe restrictions on women in that region, noting that such conditions explain their lack of visibility in mobilisations or protests. She stressed that while altering circumstances in the host countries may be difficult, Bangladesh has a responsibility to take stronger measures to protect its migrant women workers and address their vulnerabilities through national policies and support mechanisms.



Dr Mahfuz Kabir addressed questions concerning youth involvement in national policymaking and reforms. He observed that while policies already exist, such as the youth policy, there remains considerable scope for review and strengthening. He emphasised the importance of dialogue between policymakers and students, noting that such engagement could open pathways for revisiting sectoral policies and national plans.

On the issue of student representation, he emphasised the importance of holding DUCSU elections ahead of the upcoming national elections. He argued that opportunities should also be created for youth participation in local government structures, such as union councils, municipalities, and city corporations. According to him, students could contribute as part-time representatives while continuing their education, thereby gaining early experience in governance. He further proposed that parliamentary standing committees or caucuses could consider including student representatives, thereby allowing young voices to influence policy discussions at local and national levels.

Responding to questions about the role of the diaspora, Dr Kabir recalled their critical contribution during the communication shutdowns of the July 2024 uprising, when they helped disseminate information and mobilise support. He stressed that while Bangladeshi

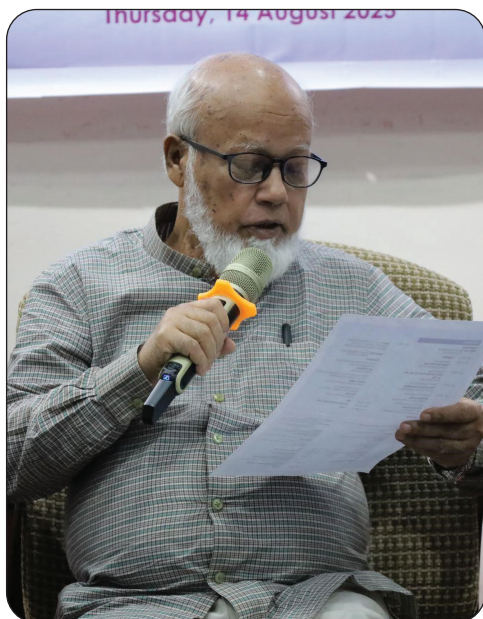
youth are active in international forums, their contributions are often fragmented and not systematically channelled into national policymaking. He suggested that greater efforts were needed to streamline and integrate these perspectives.

Turning to entrepreneurship, Dr Kabir highlighted the structural barriers faced by Bangladeshi youth. Unlike many countries where innovative ideas are sufficient to attract financing, young entrepreneurs in Bangladesh often struggle to secure funding without formal balance sheets or audit reports. He welcomed the interim government and Bangladesh Bank's creation of a start-up fund for young people, calling it an important step towards empowerment. However, he argued that the size of the fund must be expanded if it is to truly unlock the entrepreneurial potential of the country's youth.



Md Mashrur Haque Nafis, in response to a question from Ms Amdad, emphasised the centrality of moral education in shaping a just and sustainable society. He recalled his earlier reference to Franklin Roosevelt's assertion that education without morals risks creating a menace to society. He argued that while theoretical knowledge and the concept of a knowledge-based economy are important, these must be complemented by moral grounding. According to him, integrating moral education alongside academic and technical learning would help prevent the destructive misuse of knowledge and enable society to fully harness its positive potential.

Summing up by the Session Chair



Professor Dr Tofail Ahmed

Chairman

Local Government Reform Commission

Professor Dr Tofail Ahmed, responding to a question raised by Mr Abdul Hai, reflected on the broader challenges facing the nation regarding reform commissions and policy implementation. He observed that while numerous commissions exist and have produced reports, their recommendations often remain unfulfilled. He illustrated this through an anecdote about a student attending a committee meeting despite holding a full-time scholarship, highlighting a recurring theme of responsibility not being matched by capacity or opportunity. He emphasised that this gap between potential and

action represents a significant national challenge.

In summarising the session, Dr Ahmed stressed the transitional and productive nature of youth, noting that youth should be understood as a state of mind rather than a fixed age range. While officially defined as between 15 and 35 years old, he argued that youthful initiative and energy can persist well beyond these boundaries.

Drawing on American history, he cited the involvement of young individuals in the formation of the US. He noted that among the 56 signatories of the Declaration of Independence, two were under 30, seventeen were in their thirties, twenty were in their forties, and only seven were over 50, with Benjamin Franklin being the eldest at 70. He further highlighted the ages of the Founding Fathers: George Washington was 44, John Adams 41, Thomas Jefferson 33, Alexander Hamilton 23, James Madison 25, and John Jay 31. Dr Ahmed also referenced the authors of the Federalist Papers—Hamilton, Jay, and Madison—who were all under 40 at the time of writing, illustrating the historical precedence of youthful engagement in nation-building.

Dr Ahmed emphasised that youth alone do not guarantee productivity; rather, commitment and intellectual dedication are essential. Dr Ahmed cautioned that distractions and a lack of focus could hinder meaningful contribution, underlining the need for young people to cultivate responsibility, purpose, and dedication. He concluded by expressing his hope that such committed and visionary youth would emerge in Bangladesh, capable of effecting lasting social and political change.

Session 3

Youth in Digital Platforms: Maximising the Benefits through Digital Diplomacy



“Youth Driving Digital Transformation: Identifying Potential Tools for Bridging Rural Urban Gaps”



Muhammad Mazedul Haque

Research Officer

BIISS

Muhammad Mazedul Haque first discussed the context of the Rural-Urban Digital Divide in Bangladesh during his deliberation. He began by noting that youth constitute a significant segment of the nation’s population—over 33 per cent of the population falling within the age group of 18 to 35 years. This group, he argued, is at the core of Bangladesh’s digital transformation. However, he highlighted a growing disparity between rapid digital adoption in urban areas and the slower pace of access and digital literacy in rural regions.

Mr Haque emphasised that this divide has tangible consequences for equality in education, employment opportunities, healthcare accessibility, and participation in governance processes. While recognising digital transformation as a potential leveller of socioeconomic disparities, he cautioned that such potential can only be realised if inclusivity remains a central priority in national digital strategies. Citing data on internet usage, he drew attention to stark gender and locational disparities: in rural areas, only about 23 per cent of females have access to the internet compared to 66 per cent of males, whereas in urban areas, the figures rise significantly to 62.4 per cent for females and 71.3 per cent for males. These statistics, he noted, underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable digital access and participation across Bangladesh’s diverse social and geographic landscape.

Following his discussion on the rural–urban digital divide, Mr Haque elaborated on the pivotal role of youth in bridging this gap. He described youth as digital natives, highlighting their early adoption of new technologies and comfort with digital tools as a key advantage in accelerating digital inclusion. He further characterised them as change agents, emphasising their contribution to local innovations, including the development of mobile applications, e-services, and e-commerce platforms that address community-specific needs.

Mr Haque also underscored the role of youth as community connectors, who facilitate peer learning, conduct digital literacy training, and promote awareness of technology’s potential in underserved areas. In addition, he noted that youth increasingly act as policy advocates, leveraging social media and digital networks to push for inclusive ICT policies

and equitable infrastructure development. By combining technological fluency with civic engagement, he argued, young people are uniquely positioned to reduce disparities, enhance access, and shape a more digitally inclusive Bangladesh.

Afterwards, Mr Haque presented a range of potential tools and solutions aimed at bridging the rural–urban digital divide in Bangladesh. He emphasised the importance of affordable access tools, such as low-cost smartphones, community Wi-Fi networks, and data subsidies, as critical measures to ensure digital opportunities are available to all segments of the population, particularly in underserved rural areas.

Mr Haque further highlighted the role of digital literacy platforms, advocating for locally relevant learning modules in native languages and gamified training programmes that can engage youth effectively while enhancing their technological competencies. These initiatives, he argued, are crucial for promoting meaningful digital participation and enabling citizens to fully utilise technology in their daily lives.

In addition, Mr Haque identified the expansion of e-governance services as a key solution, citing digital platforms for birth registration, land records management, and public grievance portals as means to increase transparency, accessibility, and efficiency in government services.

Mr Haque also discussed e-health and e-education initiatives, including telemedicine hubs, online tutoring services, and skill development platforms, which can significantly reduce inequalities in access to healthcare and education. Moreover, he highlighted agri-tech applications, such as weather alerts, crop price information, and supply chain connectivity tools, as transformative solutions for rural farmers, empowering them with timely information and market linkages. Overall, Mr Haque stressed that these integrated solutions, when implemented inclusively, can leverage youth engagement to reduce disparities, foster innovation, and create a more equitable digital landscape across Bangladesh.

In concluding his deliberation, Mr Haque outlined a clear path forward and called for leveraging youth engagement to bridge the digital divide in Bangladesh. He emphasised the importance of collaboration among youth innovators, government institutions, and the private sector, highlighting that such partnerships are crucial to designing and implementing effective digital solutions.

Mr Haque advocated for the prioritisation of rural infrastructure investment, alongside comprehensive digital skill-building programmes, to ensure that young people in underserved areas are equipped to participate fully in the digital economy. The speaker further encouraged support for youth-led digital start-ups that focus on addressing specific rural challenges, noting that entrepreneurial initiatives have the potential to drive localised solutions and generate sustainable economic opportunities.

Finally, Mr Haque stressed the need to build a sustainable ecosystem, where the digital divide is not merely reduced but permanently closed. By fostering an inclusive, innovation-driven, and well-supported digital environment, he argued, Bangladesh can harness the full potential of its youth, ensuring equitable access to technology and enabling meaningful participation in the country's socio-economic transformation.

“Engaging Youth through Digital Diplomacy: Connecting Nations”



Md Tanvir Habib

Assistant Professor

Department of International Relations

University of Dhaka

Md Tanvir Habib, in his presentation, explored the evolving role of young people in shaping global narratives and influencing foreign policy through digital means. He noted that youth engagement in diplomacy has taken many forms, ranging from leadership and volunteerism to representation of affected communities. He highlighted that young people, particularly those impacted by climate change and socio-political challenges, can mobilise global public opinion in support of their causes.

Mr Habib pointed out that youth engagement is often dynamic and fast-paced, particularly on social media platforms where trends and sentiments shift rapidly. This volatility, he argued, requires adaptive strategies to harness youth energy effectively. He outlined three guiding principles to achieve this: education, empowerment, and the creation of an enabling environment that allows youth to engage meaningfully in digital, economic, and social movements.

Mr Habib discussed the concept of digital diplomacy, acknowledging the definitional ambiguities surrounding it. Some scholars and practitioners limit it to platform-based interactions, such as social media diplomacy, while others view it through the lens of algorithmic diplomacy where digital tools shape or filter narratives. Mr Habib stressed that digital diplomacy can either employ digital media as a tool for traditional diplomacy or use diplomatic efforts to resolve issues emerging within cyberspace itself.

Mr Habib observed that the interconnectedness of the modern world has given rise to “narrative battles” on the internet. For example, during limited conflicts, such as between India and Pakistan, social media became a site of intense nationalist exchanges through memes and online commentary, reflecting how digital spaces serve as informal arenas for public diplomacy.

Drawing from the global context, Mr Habib referred to Israel’s long-standing image of self-defence and its favourable perception among young Americans, which has been eroding due to counter-narratives on digital platforms. Younger generations in the US, less influenced

by historical sympathies, now display greater empathy toward the Palestinian cause despite the traditionally pro-Israeli media environment.

In the Bangladeshi context, Mr Habib cited how, following the events of 05 August 2024, Indian misinformation targeting Bangladesh's minority communities circulated widely online. Bangladeshi youth, though smaller in number and less dominant on platforms like Twitter, successfully countered these narratives, managing to shift the discourse in favour of Bangladesh's position. He noted, however, that Bangladesh lacks institutional mechanisms to engage young people in policymaking, which limits sustained digital engagement. Smaller nations, he suggested, could benefit from narrative battles as a form of asymmetric diplomacy, since such efforts are cost-effective, volunteer-driven, and capable of amplifying soft power.

In conclusion, Mr Habib characterised digital diplomacy as a blend of public diplomacy, soft power, and smart power. He emphasised that soft power can only be effective when built upon consistent and credible information. The transformative potential of digital diplomacy, he argued, lies in how nations conduct themselves within these digital spaces and how effectively they adapt their diplomatic practices to the realities of an interconnected, narrative-driven world.

“Social Media and the Youth Mind: Building Digital Literacy”



Afiea Ibnat Suchi

Student

*Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Afiea Ibnat Suchi highlighted the rapid expansion of social media use in Bangladesh, noting that there are approximately 52.9 million active user identities, accounting for 34.3 per cent of the population. Between early 2023 and the beginning of 2024, the number of users increased by 9.7 million, representing a growth of over 22 per cent. Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok were identified as the most widely used platforms. A significant gender disparity persists, with 65.8 per cent of users being male and only 34.2 per cent female. The majority of users fall

within the age range of 18 to 30.

Turning to the issue of digital literacy, she defined it as the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, critically assess, create, and communicate information, requiring both technical and cognitive skills. She outlined three core dimensions: the operational (technical use), the cultural (awareness of differing social and cultural contexts), and the critical (the capacity to evaluate online content and understand its influence on identity and behaviour). Digital literacy, she argued, supports informed choices, critical thinking, adaptability, online safety, digital etiquette, and awareness of digital rights and responsibilities.

Citing available data, Ms Suchi pointed out that digital literacy levels in Bangladesh remain limited. Only 46 per cent of respondents in one study demonstrated basic informational skills, while only 13 per cent possessed digital activity skills. Half of the surveyed population scored 0.25 or below on the Digital Literacy Index. A pronounced gender gap was again noted, with only 65 women out of every 100 men demonstrating satisfactory skills.

Ms Suchi described social media as a multifaceted medium that operates simultaneously as a tool of self-expression, news and information sourcing, entertainment, and opinion-building. Survey results indicate that 74 per cent of Bangladeshi youth prefer social media as their primary source of news, and nearly 64 per cent believe the information shared on these platforms to be accurate. This trend, she argued, highlights the increasing impact of digital platforms on shaping political, diplomatic, and socio-cultural narratives. She referred to examples such as the social media-centred electoral campaigns of Zohran Mamdani,

diplomatic practices under former US President Donald Trump, and the mobilisation of protests and relief initiatives during the July 2024 Uprising in Bangladesh and the 2024 flood crisis.

Focusing on the impact on young people, Ms Suchi discussed social media's role in identity formation, its capacity to encourage positive engagement, and the democratisation of “productive power” – the ability to set agendas and influence discourse. While this allows marginalised voices to be heard, it also facilitates misinformation, propaganda, and polarisation. Fact-checkers in Bangladesh verified over 3,000 pieces of misleading content that went viral in 2024, representing a 58 per cent increase compared to the previous year. According to reports, two out of every three young people in Bangladesh state that they consider misinformation to be a significant source of stress.

Ms Suchi noted further concerns about echo chambers, the mental health consequences of excessive social media use, and declining productivity. Young users are at twice the risk of negative outcomes such as depression, anxiety, attention difficulties, and social exclusion. Cybercrime disproportionately affects young women: 78.7 per cent of victims are aged between 18 and 30, and 59 per cent are women. Many victims reported loss of social standing as a result, while many cases remain unreported.

Addressing potential solutions, Ms Suchi stressed the importance of integrating digital literacy and critical thinking into school and university curricula, creating nationwide youth training programmes, and promoting community-based peer learning hubs. She recommended partnerships with technology companies to encourage safe practices, increased support for fact-checking organisations such as Rumour Scanner Bangladesh, and public campaigns to raise awareness of digital rights and responsibilities.

Ms Suchi also acknowledged the challenges ahead, including insufficient data, inadequate initiatives, and the lack of transformative capacity within policymaking. Existing programmes, such as Young Bangla, the JAAGO Foundation's Digital School, and the Bangladesh Computer Council's Skills for Employment initiative, were cited as important but limited in reach, particularly in rural areas and among women.

In conclusion, Ms Suchi argued that social media presents both risks and opportunities. To unlock its positive potential, Bangladesh must invest in creativity, innovation, and digital skills among its youth, positioning them as a transformative force in the 21st century.

Open Discussion of Session 3



Mansura Amdad

*Lecturer, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Mansura Amdad raised two questions directed at the presenters. First, addressing Muhammad Mazedul Haque, she asked how the rural–urban divide could truly be bridged when many young professionals from urban areas showed little willingness to return to rural or semi-rural communities to contribute to their development. She argued that this lack of commitment to “giving back” lies at the root of the problem, regardless of whether development is framed in digital, social, or economic terms.

Ms Amdad’s second question was posed to Afia Ibnat Suchi. Referring to the 35 per cent gender gap in digital self-expression, she asked how one might account for the recent experience of women’s participation in the events of 05 August 2024, where women were visibly present at the forefront but were subsequently marginalised. Ms Amdad highlighted that women appeared to have been systematically pushed aside from leading roles to secondary positions, and she asked how this issue could be addressed.

Dr Mahfuz Kabir

*Research Director
BISS*

Dr Mahfuz Kabir raised a question on the concept of the “digital subaltern”. Referring to subaltern theory, he noted that while many people now have access to the digital world, cyberspace is increasingly dominated by powerful and emerging communities. He observed that this has created a significant divide within society. He asked the speakers whether they viewed this as a major social division and what measures might be taken to address the issue in the age of artificial intelligence.





Md Mahfuj Hasan

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Md Mahfuj Hasan asked Md Tanvir Habib about the role of youth in digital diplomacy. The participant sought the speaker's views on the most impactful ways in which young people could engage in digital diplomacy through digital platforms.

Ophelia Jamila Bupasha

*Student, Department of International Relations
University of Dhaka*

Ophelia Jamila Bupasha addressed her question to Md Tanvir Habib. She observed that in the present age of online conflicts, certain themes quickly become sensitive, often discouraging constructive engagement among young people. Instead of problem-solving, the prevailing tendency appeared to be one of criticism. She asked how this culture could be transformed into a more solution-oriented approach.



Responses from the Panellists

ional Relations (IR), University of Dhaka (DU)

ursday, 14 August 2025



Muhammad Mazedul Haque discussed the digital divide, noting that beyond the familiar categories of connectivity and usage gaps, there may also be a “usefulness gap” in Bangladesh. This referred to whether the existing use of digital services delivers genuine utility to society, given that much of the data is spent on non-productive purposes such as entertainment. Another strand of his discussion highlighted the importance of market analysis when developing technological or entrepreneurial initiatives. One example cited was the failure of a robotics education project that lacked a clear roadmap and a thorough understanding of the market. This underscored that even innovative ideas require non-technical groundwork to succeed.

Mr Haque also reflected on rural–urban disparities. Questions were raised about whether young people in cities are willing to contribute meaningfully to rural development. This concept is linked to the idea of the “digital subaltern”, drawing on subaltern theory to examine how marginalised groups, despite having internet access, remain excluded from full participation in the digital sphere.



Afiea Ibnat Suchi discussed the July 2024 movement in Bangladesh in this context. She pointed out that although women were visible at the forefront of protests, they were often excluded from decision-making processes. Following political changes, patriarchal structures reasserted themselves, with women facing cyberbullying, marginalisation, and a lack of support mechanisms. She argued that while these challenges limited women's leadership roles, they also presented opportunities to build independent political voices—an opportunity that was not fully realised.



Md Tanvir Habib emphasised the need for youth engagement in digital diplomacy. It was argued that authenticity is essential in an era of fake accounts and misinformation. Constructive engagement, rooted in informed and critical participation, can lend credibility and influence. Examples were drawn from global conflicts, such as those in Palestine and Ukraine, where social media has provided spaces for alternative narratives. He also offered a foreign policy perspective, illustrating how online criticism and grassroots digital activism can be operationalised by states to pursue strategic interests.

Mr Habib further stressed that social media engagement requires active choices and responsibility. While algorithms encourage passive consumption, meaningful digital diplomacy demands informed decision-making, respect for digital rights, and responsible conduct online. It was suggested that governments should invest in digital literacy and youth capacity-building, but individuals also share responsibility for developing their own critical and diplomatic competencies.

Summing up by the Session Chair



Major General (Retd) Md Emdad ul Bari, OSP, NDC, psc, te

Chairman

Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC)

While summing up, the Session Chair, **Major General (Retd) Md Emdad ul Bari, OSP, NDC, psc, te** highlighted that while technology has empowered societies, it also raises profound ethical and existential questions, particularly with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI). It was noted that AI not only enhances productivity but also challenges traditional notions of identity, ethics, and human decision-making. In this environment, clarity of purpose and self-definition are crucial for effective

diplomacy.

The Session Chair urged young people to exercise responsibility in their digital lives, reminding them that every online action leaves a lasting footprint. Mistakes made in youth can have enduring consequences, but thoughtful, purposeful engagement can enable digital voices to serve the nation. The session ended with a call for participants to ensure their digital choices reflect responsibility and purpose.

Vote of Thanks



Colonel A H M Yeaseen Chowdhury, MPhil, PhD

*Research Director
BISS*

Colonel A H M Yeaseen Chowdhury, MPhil, PhD, delivered the Vote of Thanks at the conclusion of the Seminar, expressing profound gratitude to all distinguished attendees and contributors. He began by extending heartfelt appreciation to the esteemed guests, session chairs, respected speakers, colleagues from BISS and the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka, members of the media, and the students whose presence enriched the Seminar. He highlighted the honour and privilege of acknowledging the collective efforts behind this Seminar on the timely and thought-provoking theme, *“Harnessing the Youth Dividend: Strategic Imperatives for Bangladesh in a Changing World”*.

In his remarks, Colonel Chowdhury offered special thanks to the Eminent Guest, Professor Dr Sayema Haque Bidisha, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Administration) of the University of Dhaka, noting how her reflections illuminated the economic and social imperatives of harnessing the youth dividend, particularly emphasising the nexus between human capital development and national advancement. He also acknowledged with deep appreciation the presence of the Special Guest, Md Mahbub-ul-Alam, Secretary of the Ministry of Youth, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, whose perspectives added significant value to the dialogue on national youth strategy. Further, he recognised Her Excellency Shiuneen Rasheed, High Commissioner of the Republic of Maldives to Bangladesh, for offering regional and cross-cultural insights on youth engagement, which broadened the seminar’s comparative depth.

Colonel Chowdhury proceeded to acknowledge the Session Chairs—Professor Dr Rasheduzzaman, Professor Dr Niloy Ranjan Biswas, Professor Dr Tofail Ahmed, and Major General (Retd) Md Emdad ul Bari—for their skilful stewardship in steering the discussions and eliciting meaningful contributions from both panellists and participants. He conveyed special gratitude to the speakers, comprising distinguished academics and young scholars, whose presentations traversed critical domains ranging from foreign policy and diplomacy to policy reform and digital engagement, thereby enriching the discourse with both theoretical insights and practical recommendations.

In closing, Colonel Chowdhury recognised the tireless efforts of the organising teams from BISS and the Department of International, University of Dhaka, whose dedication,

coordination, and meticulous planning ensured the success of the Seminar. Addressing the participants and the youth in attendance, he underscored that their engagement and questions reaffirmed the Seminar's core purpose. He concluded with a call to action, reminding all that harnessing the youth dividend is not merely an opportunity but a responsibility—one that demands the translation of ideas into policy, collaboration, and sustained initiatives. On behalf of BIISS and the Department of International Relations, he expressed sincere thanks to all for their presence and commitment to shaping a brighter future for Bangladesh through the potential of its youth.

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