Vision for a better Bangladesh
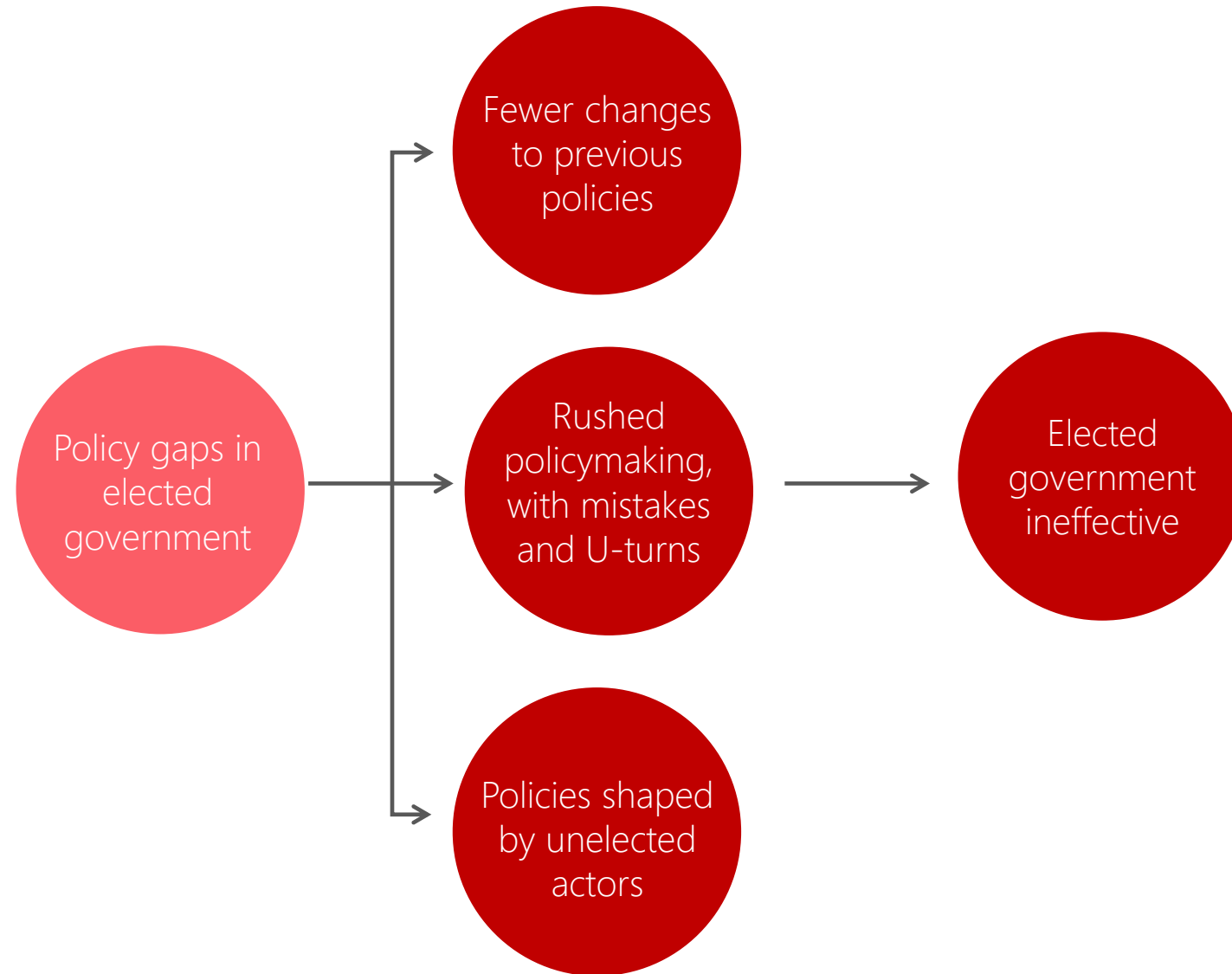## A policy roadmap for a new, different government

**Launch Event
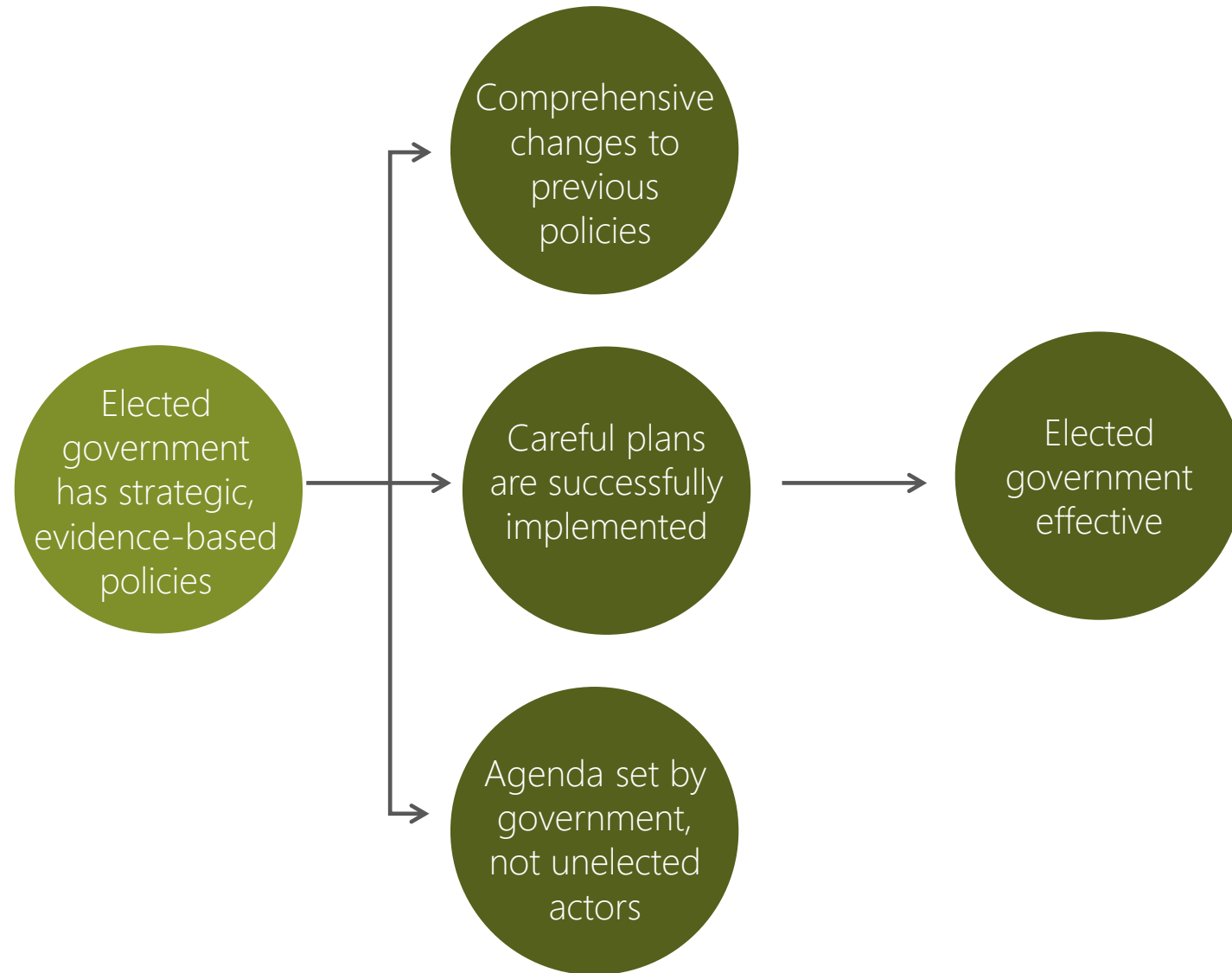5 February 2025**

Hosted by the Overseas Development Institute

The Future Institute
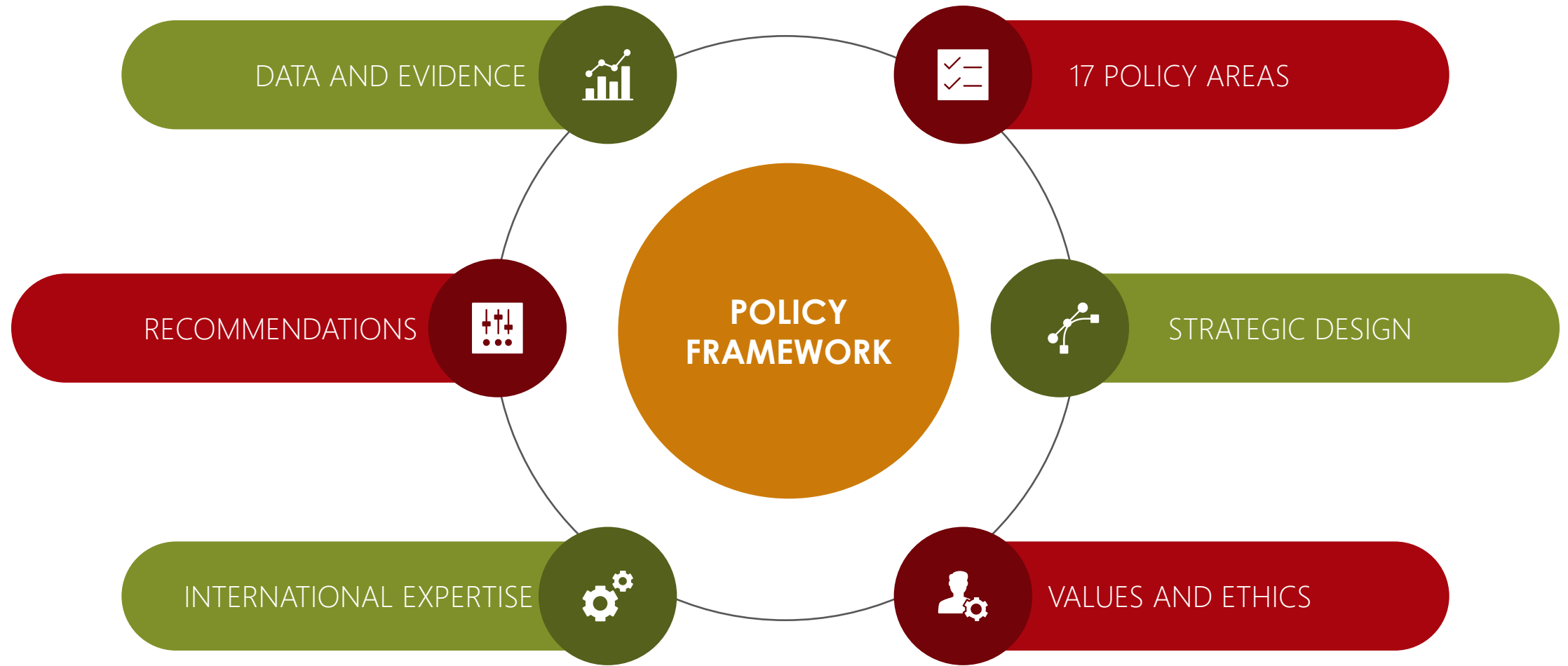*Developing Winning Strategies for Emerging Nations*

Bangladesh, historically

Where we want to be

Policy Areas

RESTORING INTEGRITY AND TRUST

Eliminating Corruption

Judicial Reform

Civil Service Reform

Civilian Security Forces Reform

STRATEGIES FOR NATIONAL GROWTH

Economic Policy

Population and Demography

Information and Communication Technology

STRENGTHENING SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH DIPLOMACY AND DEFENCE

Foreign Policy

Defence

DEVELOPING INFRASTRUCTURE FOR A RESILIENT SOCIETY

Health
Education
Agriculture and Food Security
Environment and Climate Change
Transport
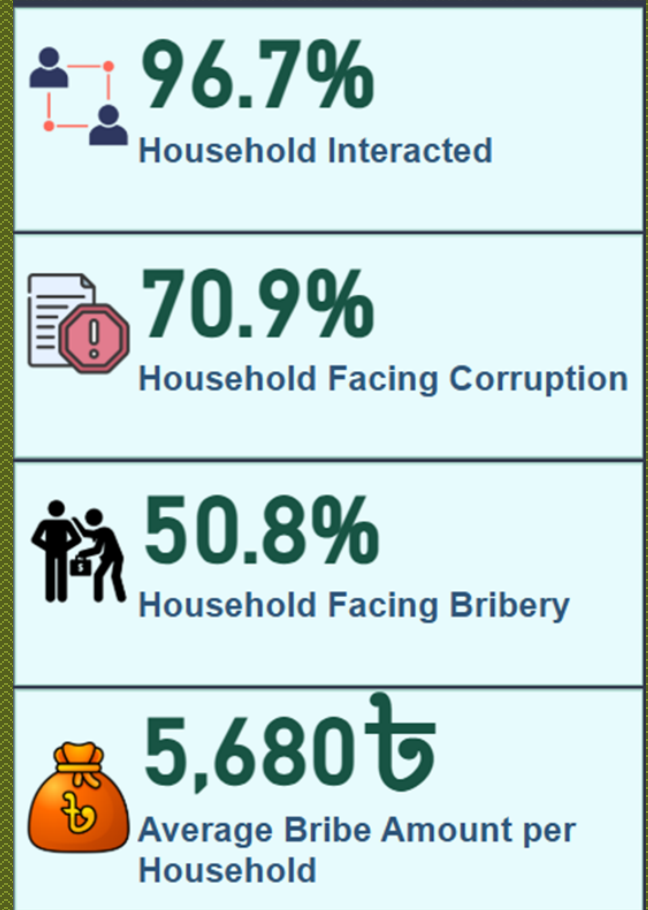
CULTURE, INCLUSION AND MEDIA

Cultural Policy

Women and Disadvantaged Communities

Media

RESTORING INTEGRITY AND TRUST

1. Eliminating Corruption

- Much of corruption is *systemic*.
- Recommendations:
  - Targeted, bottom-up reforms in high-impact sectors.
  - Simplifying regulations so they are reasonable to follow.
  - A public campaign on values and integrity.
  - An alternative reform programme for the Anti-Corruption Commission, emphasising predictability rather than more powers.

96.7%
Household Interacted

70.9%
Household Facing Corruption

50.8%
Household Facing Bribery

5,680৳
Average Bribe Amount per Household

2. Judicial Reform

- The judiciary is formally independent, but politically compromised in practice.

- Recommendations:
  - Put the seniority convention for Chief Justice appointments on a statutory footing.
  - Establish a Judicial Appointments Commission with transparent procedures.
  - Monitor Bar Council elections to prevent partisan interference.
  - Digitise case management to reduce discretionary control over case progress and listings.

3. Civil Service Reform

- Challenges:
  - Weak analytical capacity
  - Fragmented training
  - Prolonged donor influence
  - Politicisation
- Recommendations:
  - In-house policy research and training units
  - Promotions linked to demonstrated competence
  - Public Appointments Commission for leadership roles
  - A Civil Service Code enshrining neutrality

4. Civilian Security Forces Reform

- Bangladesh's security forces have not fulfilled their crime-fighting potential due to politicisation, corruption and a sense of impunity.

- Recommendations:
    - A new Civilian Code for Use of Force prioritising de-escalation and proportionality.
    - Merit-based, predictable systems for recruitment, promotion, pay and postings.
    - Restructure the Police Commission and National Human Rights Commission to prevent political capture.
    - Community policing through local social structures.

STRATEGIES FOR NATIONAL GROWTH

5. Economic Policy

- Bangladesh faces urgent, neglected macroeconomic challenges:
  - Persistent inflation
  - Rising debt
  - High non-performing loans (NPLs)
  - Narrow tax base
  - Fragile foreign exchange reserves

- We lead on governance reform:
  - Increasing autonomy for the Bangladesh Bank
  - A unified exchange rate
  - Increasing tax compliance before broadening the base
  - A package of financial sector and SOE reforms

6. Population and Demography

- This is a hugely misunderstood issue.

- Fertility in Bangladesh has fallen to replacement level, and the global trend is for such declines to drop much further.

- Fewer births means fewer future workers, and fewer future parents. If it continues, a sudden acceleration in ageing, economic decline and a care crisis will hit Bangladesh within decades.

- Evidence from low-fertility countries shows that financial incentives cannot reverse what is essentially a change in social norms.

- A range of non-coercive reforms are proposed to policies which are closely linked with fertility decline:
    - Family planning policies promoting small families.
    - Embedding increase of female labour force participation as a policy target.
    - Education structures which assume students are not parents.
    - Ban on marriage under 21 (male) and under 18 (female).

- Stopping to incentivise decline won't be enough – much more research is needed on what policy levers could help stabilise the population.

Pregnant pause

Fertility rate, births per woman

---- Replacement rate

China
India
United States
World
Japan
Germany

2.1

1960 70 80 90 2000 10 18

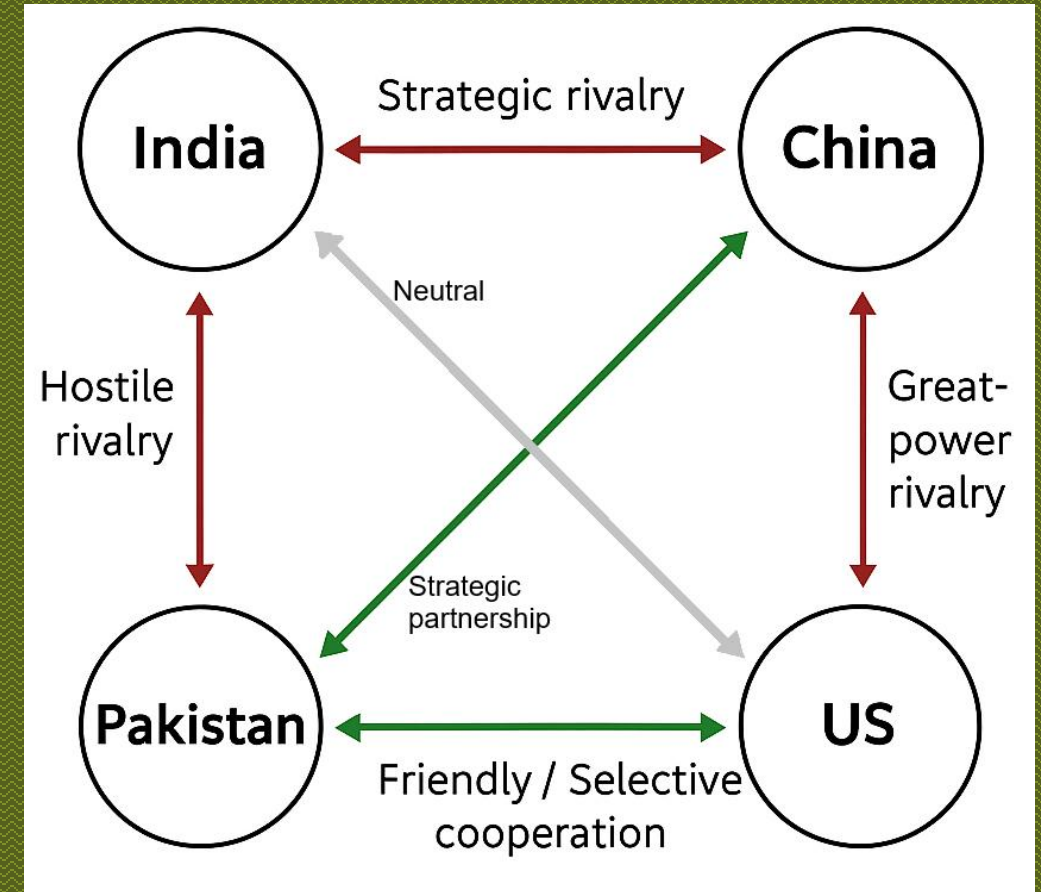Sources: OECD; UN Population Dynamics

The Economist

7. ICT

- Bangladesh holds the foundation for rapid digital transformation:
  - Strong mobile penetration and improving broadband infrastructure
  - A vibrant entrepreneurial youth

- Gaps remain:
  - Uneven digital access in rural areas
  - Skills mismatches between graduates and industry
  - Nascent cybersecurity capacity
  - Regulatory uncertainty for digital services
  - Limited early-stage capital for startups

- We recommend:
  - Last Mile Connectivity Fund
  - Startup acceleration
  - Education matched to skills and the future
  - Strengthening cybersecurity capacity
  - Actively participate in international bodies and adopt global standards, including in data protection

STRENGTHENING SOVEREIGNTY THROUGH DIPLOMACY AND DEFENCE

8. Foreign Policy

- Proximity to great powers and geopolitical rivalry in Asia places pressure on Bangladesh's sovereignty.

- Bangladesh must position itself as an "Equal Friend to All", engaging with all major powers and regions, while avoiding subordination to larger actors or entanglement in rivalries.

- Stable relations with India and China must be complemented with diversification to reduce dependence.

- The Muslim world and Middle East offers underused strategic depth, large markets and an opportunity to cooperate on defence capabiltiy without wider geopolitical alignment.
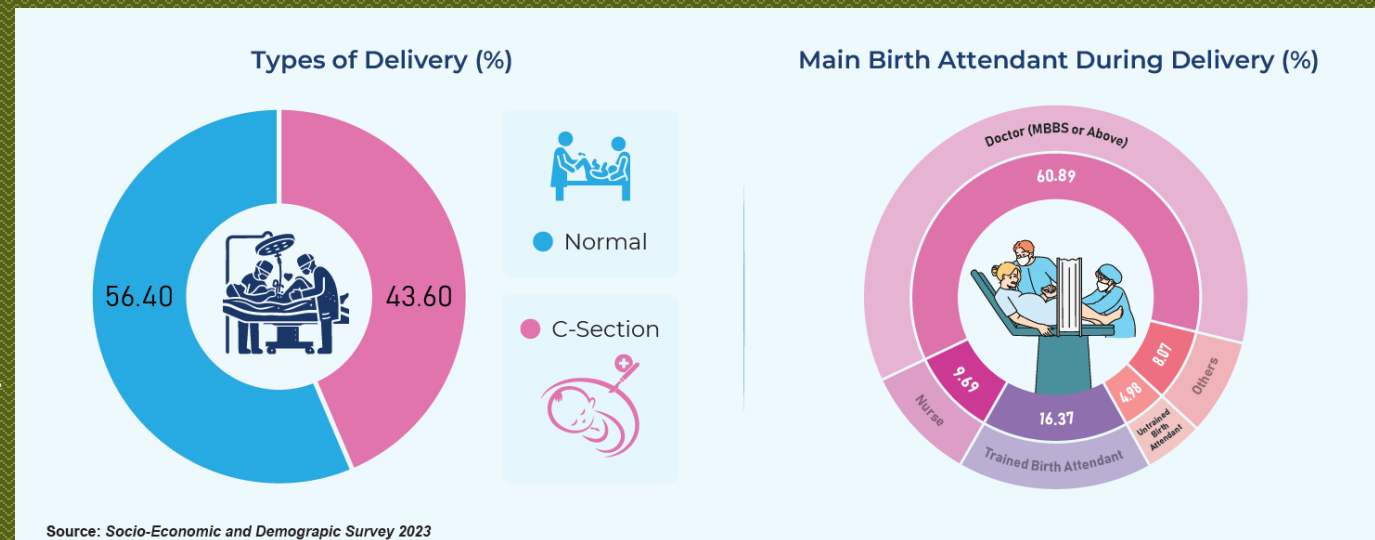
9. Defence

- Bangladesh faces a tougher and more coercive security environment.
- Defence policy must focus on protecting sovereignty and resilience.
- Recommendations:
  - A smart, professional and neutral military built for deterrence, not size.
  - Strong civilian oversight, and legal guarantees of political neutrality.
  - A trained national reserve through one year of universal military training to strengthen mobilisation and social resilience.
  - Invest in low-cost, high-impact capabilities like drones, cyber, surveillance, and domestic defence industry.

10. Health

- Bangladesh needs a people-centred, morally grounded health system that protects households and delivers care fairly.

- Recommendations:
  - Make primary care the backbone through a national Minimum Essential Service Package and strong referral pathways.
  - Protect families from financial ruin with a tiered Catastrophic Health Protection Fund for high-cost care.
  - Regulate and govern the system with drug quality control, hospital ethics oversight, and accountable public–private rules
  - Reduce over-medicalisation by enforcing standard treatment guidelines and team-based, nurse/midwife-led care models.

Types of Delivery (%)

56.40 — Normal
43.60 — C-Section

Main Birth Attendant During Delivery (%)

Doctor (MBBS or Above) 60.89
Nurse 9.69
Trained Birth Attendant 16.37
Untrained Birth Attendant 4.98
Others 8.07

Source: Socio-Economic and Demograpic Survey 2023

11. Education

- Bangladesh's education system needs to move from exam-focused credentials to real skills for life and work.

- Recommendations:
  - A unified basic education encompassing capabilities like literacy, numeracy, communication, digital skills, Islamic studies and vocational learning.
  - Make technical and vocational education a first-class pathway with strong industry links and work-based learning.
  - Improve teacher quality through better recruitment, training, evaluation, and continuous professional development.
  - Refocus universities on applied and professional programmes with clear labour-market value instead of expansion for its own sake.

12. Agriculture and Food Security

- Bangladesh must shift agriculture from import dependence to resilient, self-reliant food systems.

- Recommendations:
  - Invest in storage, cold chains, research, and modern mills to cut post-harvest losses and reduce imports.
  - Support small farmers with better seeds, training, storage, and direct access to markets to raise productivity and incomes.
  - Promote crop diversification and value-added processing to strengthen food security and rural livelihoods.
  - Use by-products and sustainable practices to boost efficiency and environmental resilience.

13. Environment and Climate Change

- Bangladesh faces a climate emergency, so policy must move from plans on paper to action on the ground.

- Recommendations:
  - Prioritise implementation by strengthening oversight, transparency, and anti-corruption controls in all climate funding and projects.
  - Replace one-size-fits-all engineering with locally grounded, ecosystem-based solutions that work with natural water and sediment systems.
  - Stop harmful practices like unplanned embankments, destructive shrimp farming, and poorly regulated urban expansion.
  - Align climate action with livelihoods by protecting agriculture, fisheries, and climate-vulnerable communities.
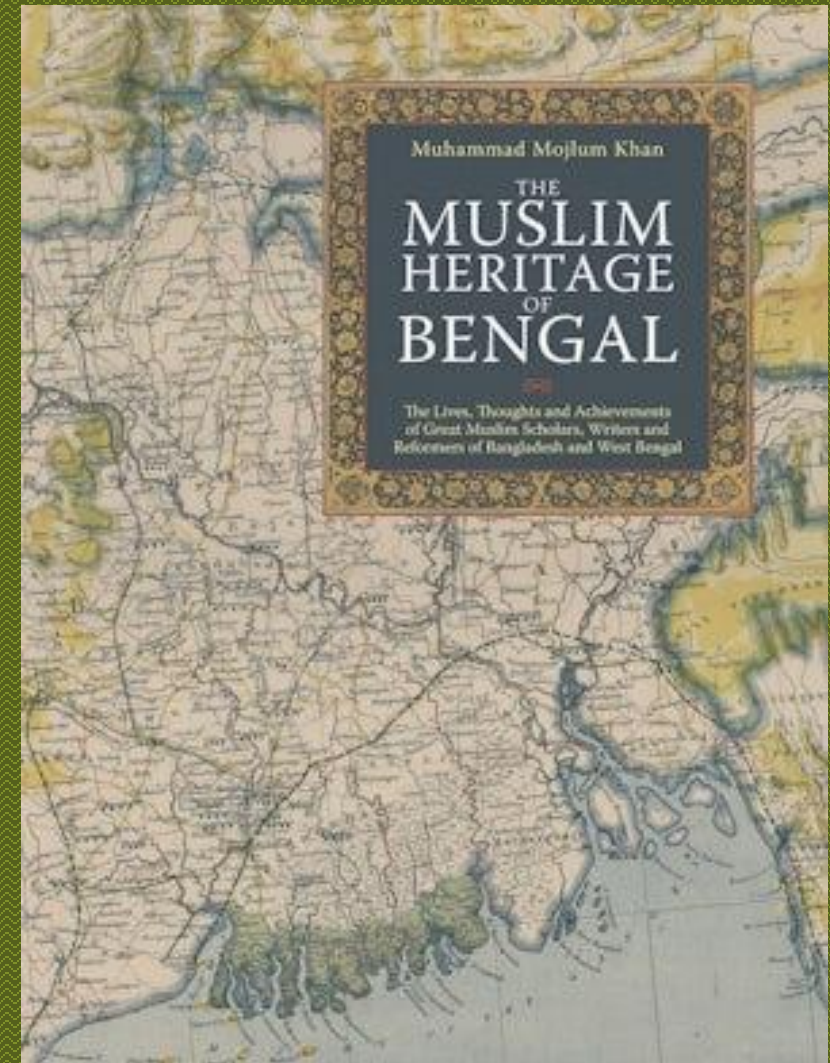

© DW/Jacopo Pasotti

14. Transport

- Bangladesh's transport system needs to shift from expansion-focused projects to efficient, integrated, and people-centered mobility.

- Recommendations:
  - Focus on better use of existing infrastructure through maintenance, multimodal integration, and reliable operations.
  - Treat inland waterways as a strategic asset with dredging, modern terminals, and container-on-barge services.
  - Modernise rail for long-distance travel and freight with upgraded tracks, signalling, rolling stock, and intermodal hubs.
  - Design cities around high-capacity public transport, walking, cycling, and gender-sensitive urban mobility.
  - Link ports and logistics through multimodal corridors, digital customs, and harmonised standards to reduce costs.

CULTURE, INCLUSION AND MEDIA

15. Cultural Policy

- Bangladesh's cultural and intellectual life needs to be restored with confidence, coherence, and ethical grounding.
- Recommendations:
  - Strengthen public cultural institutions through merit-based leadership, independent boards, and transparent governance.
  - Integrate indigenous Islamic and Bengali intellectual traditions with modern education, scholarship, and public history initiatives.
  - Protect children from harmful digital content through age-based restrictions, safe platforms, and digital education.
  - Expand strategic cultural diplomacy and Global South partnerships to project Bangladesh's culture internationally.

Muhammad Mojlum Khan

THE MUSLIM HERITAGE OF BENGAL

The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of Great Muslim Scholars, Writers and Reformers of Bangladesh and West Bengal

16. Women and Disadvantaged Communities

- Inclusion in Bangladesh must be built on protection, justice, enforcement and functioning institutions, not just more declarations, unimplemented laws and untargeted spending.

- Recommendations:
  - Rather than an unpopular reform of religious inheritance law, end usurpation of women's inheritance under existing law through fast investigations, reliable prosecution, functioning courts, and clear administrative accountability.
  - Protect women through fast-track courts, First Information Report audits, forensic reforms, public-space policing, and targeted legal aid.
  - Safeguard religious minorities with rapid response teams, dedicated investigators, public communication standards, and faster land dispute resolution.
  - Support ethnic minorities through documentation, secure land rights, mobile registration units, and strengthened local administration.
  - Refocus the Ministry of Social Welfare on coordinating protection, linking vulnerable populations to justice, and monitoring real outcomes.

17. Media

- Bangladesh's media sector needs structural safeguards to protect independence, credibility, and public trust.

- Recommendations:
  - Protect journalists by removing criminal liability for lawful reporting, limiting frivolous prosecutions, and providing legal and security support.
  - Reduce government influence by making public broadcasting mandates clear and allocating advertising transparently.
  - Introduce balanced content regulation to tackle poor journalism and digital misinformation with civil remedies, right-of-reply mechanisms, and judicial oversight of digital takedowns.

Thank You