



Workshop Report

Youth Perspectives on the Future of Social Protection in Bangladesh

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Introduction

Bangladesh stands at a pivotal moment in its socio-economic development. The Constitution of Bangladesh, under Article 15(d), mandates the State to ensure social security for all citizens, while international commitments including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognize social protection as a fundamental right. Since 2015, the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) has guided national efforts through a lifecycle-based approach aimed at reducing poverty, vulnerability, and inequality. As the current NSSS (2015–2026) approaches its conclusion, the Government of Bangladesh has a strategic opportunity to strengthen and reformulate its social protection system in response to emerging national priorities and global development commitments.

This policy moment is particularly significant given Bangladesh's demographic profile. According to UNFPA (2023), 47 percent of the population is below the age of 25, and nearly one-third of eligible voters are under 35. This demographic dividend presents a critical opportunity for accelerated and inclusive growth, provided that young people are meaningfully engaged in governance and policy processes. Recent social and political movements, led largely by students and young citizens, further highlight the central role of youth in shaping the country's development trajectory.

Global evidence underscores youth engagement as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that student participation in policy processes strengthens democratic accountability, while the ILO's Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202) calls for universal and inclusive systems that consider the needs of younger generations who will sustain and expand social protection in the future. Within this context, engaging university students in Bangladesh's social protection discourse is both a matter of representation and a strategic investment in the long-term relevance and sustainability of reform efforts.

This report documents the outcomes of an inception workshop convened to engage university students in dialogue on the future direction of Bangladesh's social protection system, particularly in relation to the formulation of the Next Generation National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2026 and beyond. The workshop brought together 50 students from public and private universities across the country, ensuring gender balance and diversity of academic backgrounds. Through structured sessions, group discussions, and direct interaction with representatives from the Cabinet Division and relevant ministries, participants examined the evolution of the NSSS, reflected on current socio-economic

challenges, and articulated youth-driven priorities for the next phase of social protection reform.

The report presents key discussions, group work findings, and student perspectives that emerged during the workshop. It highlights how youth perceive employment, skills development, education quality, technological preparedness, social protection, and empowerment as interconnected priorities. By capturing these insights, the report aims to inform policymakers, contribute evidence to the NSSS 2026 formulation process, and demonstrate the value of institutionalizing youth engagement within social protection governance in Bangladesh.

Significance of the Workshop

The inception workshop held considerable significance in advancing youth engagement in Bangladesh's social protection landscape:

- 1. Capacity Development:** The workshop helped a cohort of students with a deeper understanding of social protection policies, frameworks, and national priorities. Equipped with this knowledge, participants got the basic level of understanding to contribute meaningfully to policy deliberations and actively support the Cabinet Division in the lead-up to the National Conference on Social Protection 2025.
- 2. Capturing Youth Perspectives:** The workshop provided a platform to understand how young citizens envision the future of social protection. Participants shared their expectations, priorities, and innovative ideas, highlighting the aspects they believe should be addressed in the Next Generation NSSS. These insights will serve as critical inputs to ensure that youth needs and aspirations are systematically incorporated into policy design.
- 3. Building a Network of Social Protection Youth Champions:** Beyond knowledge and ideas, the workshop fostered the creation of a network of engaged students who can act as advocates and champions for social protection. This network will facilitate ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and sustained youth-led initiatives, strengthening the connection between policymakers and the country's largest demographic group.

Together, these outcomes reinforce the dual purpose of the workshop: strengthening the capacity of young leaders while institutionalizing their voice in shaping a social protection system that is inclusive, equitable, and reflective of Bangladesh's demographic dividend.

Welcome Remarks

Aminul Arifeen



Welcome Remarks by Mr. Aminul Arifeen, National Programme Manager, Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme, UNDP

In his welcome remarks, Mr. Aminul Arifeen warmly greeted the participating students and underscored the critical role of social protection in Bangladesh's development journey. He emphasized that social protection is not merely a welfare mechanism, but a foundational policy instrument that ensures dignity, inclusion, and resilience for citizens, particularly those facing economic and social vulnerabilities. He noted that understanding social protection is essential for young professionals, as it sits at the intersection of governance, equity, and sustainable development.

Mr. Arifeen provided an overview of Bangladesh's National Social Security Strategy (NSSS), describing it as the country's first comprehensive and coordinated framework for social protection. He explained that the NSSS was developed with technical support from UNDP through the Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme and aims to harmonize social protection interventions across ministries and agencies. The strategy focuses on poverty reduction, inclusion of vulnerable groups, and improving the effectiveness and efficiency of service delivery. He highlighted that implementation and coordination are overseen by the Coordination Management Committee (CMC) under the Cabinet Division, ensuring alignment across institutions and accountability within the system.

Introducing the SSPS Programme, Mr. Arifeen described it as a flagship initiative led by the Cabinet Division and the General Economics Division (GED), designed to act as a catalyst for NSSS reforms. He explained that the programme supports evidence-based policymaking through policy diagnostics, system strengthening, and institutional capacity development.

Mr. Arifeen elaborated on the programme's dual focus on strengthening governance and improving delivery systems. On governance, he highlighted close engagement with the CMC and inter-ministerial coordination to ensure coherence across sectors. He also explained how the programme works through thematic clusters such as food security, social insurance, and labour and livelihoods to address diverse vulnerabilities across the life cycle. Emphasizing inclusivity, he noted the importance of collaboration with non-state actors, including NGOs, research institutions, and alliances working with marginalized communities, and referred to recent mapping and diagnostic exercises that assess social protection gaps for underserved populations.

On delivery systems, Mr. Arifeen discussed several key reforms aimed at improving transparency, efficiency, and citizen trust. These included the expansion of Government-to-Person (G2P) digital payment systems, piloting of Mobile Financial Services (MFS) in selected districts, and the development of a roadmap for a Single Registry Management Information System (MIS) to better target beneficiaries and reduce duplication. He also highlighted the establishment and strengthening of Grievance Redress Systems (GRS), which allow beneficiaries to raise concerns and seek timely resolution, thereby reinforcing accountability and rights-based service delivery.

Mr. Arifeen further noted that capacity-building initiatives are a core component of SSPS programme, including training programmes for civil servants and support to Local Consultative

Groups to ensure that reforms are effectively implemented at the local level. He emphasized that the programme also promotes adaptive social protection approaches, enabling the system to respond to shocks such as natural disasters, economic crises, or public health emergencies.

In conclusion, Mr. Arifeen reflected on the programme's major achievements, including the formulation of NSSS Action Plans for Phase I and Phase II involving up to 39 ministries, and the publication of key diagnostics on gender, urban social protection, and COVID-19 responses. Looking ahead, he shared the programme's forward vision for 2024-2025, which includes advancing universal pension initiatives for persons with disabilities, scaling up social insurance schemes, and supporting the drafting of the NSSS 2026 and beyond for government consideration.

He concluded by encouraging students to actively engage in the workshop, critically reflect on the evolving social protection landscape, and contribute ideas for strengthening the system. He emphasized that the perspectives of young professionals are vital for shaping the next generation of social protection policies that are inclusive, resilient, and responsive to Bangladesh's future challenges.

Group Work Exercise

Youth Perspectives on Bangladesh's Socio-Economic Priorities (2025-2035)

As part of the group exercise, participants were divided into five groups for discussion purposes only. Each group was tasked with identifying three key socio-economic needs that Bangladesh should prioritize over the next ten years, from a youth perspective. While the group labels were thematic in nature, the responses were not confined to those themes; rather, they reflected broader, cross-cutting concerns related to education, employment, technological transformation, and social stability. Following one hour of group deliberation, the key issues identified by each group are summarized below in an academic and analytical manner.

Group 1

The first group identified youth unemployment as the most critical socio-economic challenge that Bangladesh must address over the next decade. Participants noted that although the country has experienced steady economic growth and structural transformation in recent years, job creation has not kept pace with the rapidly growing number of educated youths entering the labor market. They emphasized that these disconnects poses risks not only to individual livelihoods but also to social stability and long-term economic productivity. The group argued for comprehensive structural reforms aimed at stimulating employment generation across both public and private sectors, with particular attention to emerging and non-traditional industries such as ICT, green jobs, care economy, and creative industries, which have the potential to absorb young talent on a scale.

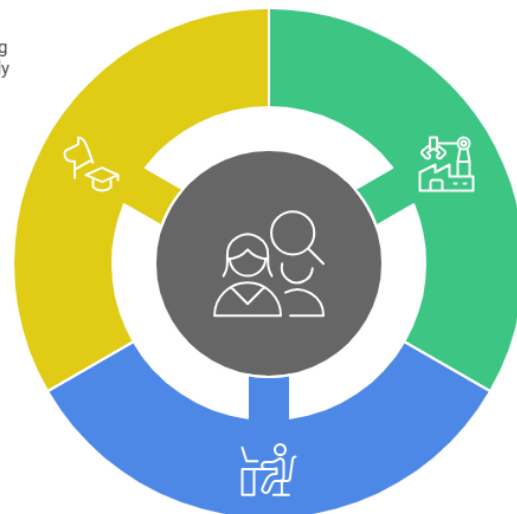
“As students, we face long waits between graduation and meaningful employment. The government must create structured internship and job placement programs, because without early work experience, our skills remain underutilized and Bangladesh risks losing its demographic advantage”

Group 1

As a second priority, the group highlighted the persistent issue of skill mismatch between graduates' competencies and labor market requirements. They have mentioned that many young people complete secondary and tertiary education without acquiring practical, market-relevant, or transferable skills demanded by employers. This gap, they noted, often results in underemployment, prolonged job searches, and a growing sense of frustration among graduates. The group emphasized that skill mismatch reflects deeper systemic challenges, including outdated curricula, limited industry engagement in education planning, and insufficient emphasis on applied learning. Addressing this issue, they argued, is essential to improving labor productivity and maximizing returns on investments in education.

The third key need identified was early exposure to the labor market prior to graduation. The group strongly advocated structured opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, work-study arrangements, and part-time employment embedded within academic programs.

Smooth Transition
Strategies to help young people move seamlessly from education to employment



Job Creation
Initiatives to generate new employment opportunities for youth

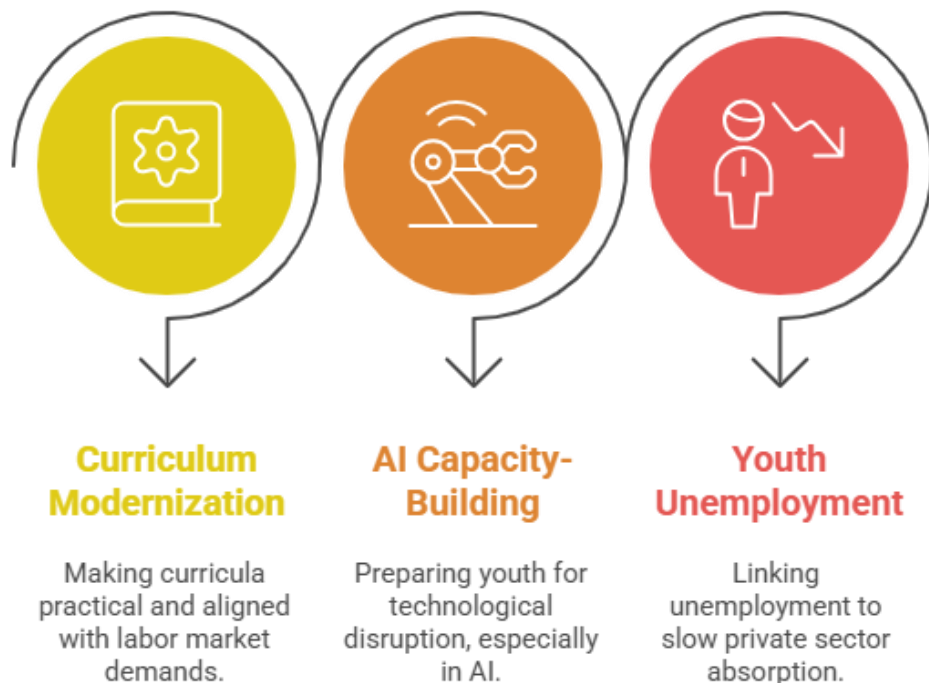
Early Labor Market Exposure
Programs to provide young people with work experience before graduation

They argued that early labor market exposure enables students to develop workplace competencies, professional networks, and realistic career expectations, thereby easing the transition from education to employment. The group further emphasized that such exposure enhances employability by aligning academic learning with real-world practice and reducing the gap between formal education and labor market entry.



Group 2

The second group emphasized curriculum modernization as a foundational requirement for Bangladesh's sustainable socio-economic development over the next decade. They argued that existing curricula at both secondary and tertiary levels remain largely theoretical, examination-oriented, and insufficiently responsive to the evolving demands of the labor market and society. They noted that this disconnects limits graduates' employability and reduces their ability to respond effectively to complex national challenges, including food security, disaster management, and climate-related risks. The group stressed the importance of integrating experiential learning approaches, such as field-based assignments, project work, simulations, and problem-based learning, across disciplines. In addition, participants highlighted the need to mainstream digital literacy, data analysis, and critical problem-solving skills within curricula, enabling students to apply knowledge in real-world contexts rather than merely reproducing theoretical content.



In parallel, the group identified capacity-building in artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced technologies as a critical priority for youth preparedness in a rapidly transforming global economy. They observed that technological change is reshaping sectors ranging from agriculture and disaster response to logistics, finance, and public service delivery. Without deliberate investment in AI literacy, digital skills, and emerging technologies, they cautioned that Bangladeshi youth risk being marginalized in both domestic and international labor markets. The group emphasized that AI education should not be limited to technical training alone, but should also include ethical considerations, responsible use, and societal impacts, ensuring that technological advancement supports inclusive and sustainable development rather than deepening inequality.



"Our classrooms are overcrowded, and curricula are outdated. To prepare us for the future, education must integrate AI, digital skills, and practical problem-solving so that young people can contribute to a resilient and innovation-driven economy"

Group 2

The third major concern raised by the group was youth unemployment, particularly among first-time job seekers and recent graduates. Participants linked this challenge to limited private sector absorption, slow job creation in high-productivity sectors, and the scarcity of innovation-driven enterprises capable of generating decent employment. They argued that prolonged unemployment at the early stages of working life has long-term consequences for income security, skills retention, and social confidence. The group stressed the need for policies that stimulate youth-oriented entrepreneurship, start-up ecosystems, and innovation hubs, alongside stronger linkages between education institutions, industry, and national development priorities. Addressing youth unemployment, they concluded, is essential not only for economic growth but also for social stability and intergenerational equity.

Group 3

The third group underscored the importance of creating quality employment opportunities for students before graduation, noting that the existing education-to-employment pathway in Bangladesh often results in a prolonged transition period between completion of studies and entry into productive work. The group argued that delayed labor market entry contributes to graduate unemployment, skills depreciation, and frustration among young people. To address this, they emphasized the need for institutionalized and structured partnerships between academic institutions and industry, including mandatory internships, apprenticeships, work-study programs, and industry-led projects. Such arrangements, they noted, would enable students to gain hands-on experience, develop workplace competencies, and access income-generating opportunities while still enrolled in education.



In addition, the group identified skill mismatch as a systemic and persistent challenge, stemming primarily from weak coordination between education providers and employers. They have also highlighted that curricula are often designed without adequate consideration of evolving labor market demands, resulting in graduates who are academically qualified but insufficiently prepared for practical roles. The group recommended regular and evidence-based labor market assessments to inform curriculum design, skills training programs, and career guidance services. They further stressed the importance of continuous dialogue between universities, training institutes, and the private sector to ensure that skills development remains relevant and future oriented.

"Youth empowerment requires more than education alone. We need social protection that supports us during job searches, skills development linked to real employment, and opportunities that allow young people to transition with dignity from education to work"

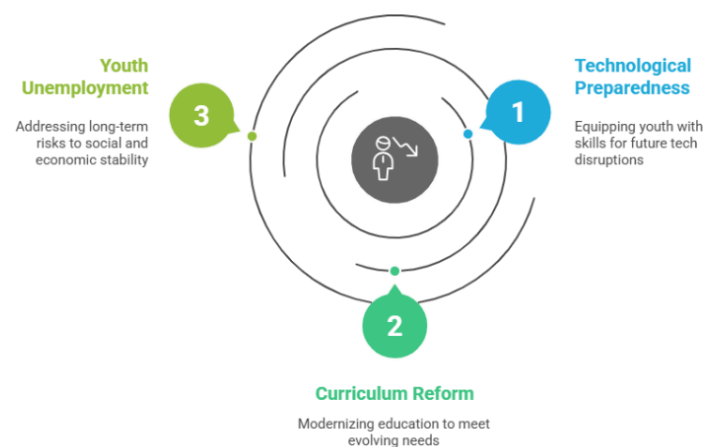
Group 3



Finally, the group raised public security as a critical but often overlooked factor influencing youth participation in economic life. Participants noted that concerns related to personal safety, harassment, and digital insecurity significantly restrict the mobility and employment choices of young people particularly women. They emphasized that safe transportation, secure workplaces, and protection in digital spaces are essential preconditions for inclusive labor market participation. Without addressing these security concerns, the group argued, efforts to enhance youth employment and empowerment are unlikely to achieve their intended outcomes.

Group 4

The fourth group placed strong emphasis on technological preparedness, particularly in the context of rapid advancements in artificial intelligence (AI), automation, and digital transformation. Participants highlighted that while these technologies present significant opportunities for productivity growth and innovation, they also pose substantial risks of job displacement if the workforce is not adequately prepared. The group argued that Bangladesh must adopt a proactive and forward-looking approach





to equip its youth with relevant digital and technological competencies. This includes targeted training in AI, data analytics, automation, and emerging technologies, alongside education on the ethical, social, and economic implications of AI. They further emphasized the need to foster innovation ecosystems, such as tech hubs, startup incubators, and research-industry collaborations, to enable young people to translate technological skills into employment and entrepreneurship.

In addition, the group underscored the

importance of comprehensive curriculum reform as a critical response to both technological change and labor market demands. They observed that current education systems often operate in disciplinary silos and fail to develop the diverse skill sets required in modern workplaces. To address this, the group recommended the introduction of interdisciplinary education models that integrate technical skills with social sciences, communication, critical thinking, and entrepreneurial competencies. Such an approach, they argued, would enhance adaptability, innovation, and employability, thereby reducing both unemployment and underemployment among graduates.

Finally, the group identified youth unemployment as a broader structural challenge with implications beyond the labor market. Participants cautioned that persistent unemployment among educated youth could undermine social cohesion, increase frustration and disengagement, and pose long-term risks to economic stability. They emphasized that addressing youth unemployment requires coordinated action across education, skills development, industrial policy, and technological preparedness. Without timely and integrated interventions, the group argued, Bangladesh risks failing to fully harness its demographic dividend in the coming decade.

"Technology and AI are changing jobs faster than our training systems. Youth need targeted skills programs, innovation support, and clear pathways into emerging sectors so automation becomes an opportunity, not a threat"

Group 4

Group 5

The fifth group placed strong emphasis on human capital development as a foundational driver of Bangladesh's future socio-economic progress. They argued that sustained economic growth and global competitiveness cannot be achieved without significant investment in quality education systems that go beyond rote learning. They stressed the importance of cultivating critical thinking, analytical reasoning, creativity, and problem-solving skills, which they identified as essential competencies for navigating an increasingly complex and competitive labor market. The group further highlighted the need to institutionalize lifelong learning frameworks, enabling individuals to continuously update their skills in response to technological change, shifting labor market demands, and evolving economic structures.

Public Security

Ensuring safe environments for youth



Human Capital Development

Investing in education and skills

Skill Mismatch

Addressing gaps in ICT, energy, and services

In addition, the group identified skill mismatch as a major constraint on productivity and innovation, particularly in fast-growing and future-oriented sectors such as information and communication technology (ICT), renewable energy, and the services sector. Participants noted that while these sectors demonstrate strong growth potential, the education and training systems have not adequately aligned with their specific skill requirements. As a result, employers face difficulties in recruiting suitably skilled workers, while young graduates struggle to secure relevant employment. The group emphasized the need for closer coordination between education



institutions, training providers, and industry actors to ensure that skills development pathways respond effectively to sector-specific demands.

Lastly, the group highlighted public security and social stability as essential preconditions for meaningful youth participation in economic, civic, and social life. Students argued that insecurity whether in public spaces, workplaces, or digital environments limits young people's confidence, restricts mobility, and discourages active engagement in education, employment, and community activities. They particularly underscored the disproportionate impact of insecurity on women and marginalized youth. The group concluded that without ensuring safe and stable social environments, investments in education and skills development are unlikely to translate into the full realization of human potential.



"Quality education is not just about enrollment; it depends on teachers, learning environments, and long-term skill development. Investing in human capital and lifelong learning is essential if youth are to drive Bangladesh's future growth."

Group 5

Summary of the Group Work

The group work exercise provided a comprehensive understanding of how youth perceive Bangladesh's socio-economic priorities over the next decade, with the explicit goal of informing the upcoming National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2026 and beyond. The discussions offered valuable insight into the challenges, aspirations, and expectations of young people, highlighting the critical role of youth in shaping the country's development trajectory.

Across all groups, participants demonstrated a strong awareness of structural constraints in employment generation, skills development, education reform, technological transformation, and social stability. There was a shared understanding that Bangladesh's demographic dividend can only be realized if youth are equipped with relevant skills, provided with timely employment opportunities, and supported by enabling institutional frameworks and secure environments.

A dominant theme emerging from the presentations was youth unemployment, consistently identified as a major risk to economic growth, social cohesion, and political stability. Closely linked to this was skill mismatch, stemming from outdated curricula, limited industry engagement, and insufficient exposure to practical work environments. Participants emphasized that education reform must go beyond access, focusing on quality, relevance, and adaptability to future labor market needs.

Another cross-cutting concern was technological preparedness, particularly in relation to artificial intelligence (AI) and automation. Students highlighted both the opportunities and risks of rapid technological change, underlining the need for early investment in digital literacy, ethical AI education, and innovation ecosystems to ensure youth are not marginalized in the evolving labor market.

Public security and social stability were also highlighted as foundational conditions for youth participation in economic, civic, and social life, with particular concern for women's mobility and safety. Participants noted that insecurity, physical or digital undermines confidence, restricts opportunities, and limits long-term human capital development.

Overall, the exercise underscored that addressing youth-related socio-economic challenges requires an integrated, multi-sectoral approach that aligns education, labor markets, technological innovation, and social protection systems. Participants called for forward-looking, youth-responsive policies that prioritize inclusive growth, skills relevance, and empowerment to ensure sustainable development over the next ten years, providing concrete inputs for the NSSS 2026 and beyond.







Conclusion

The inception workshop marked an important step toward strengthening youth engagement in Bangladesh's evolving social protection landscape and informing the development of the Next Generation National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2026. By bringing university students into structured dialogue on social protection, employment, skills development, and human capital, the workshop successfully bridged the gap between policy frameworks and youth lived realities.

The group discussions and presentations revealed that young people possess a nuanced understanding of Bangladesh's socio-economic challenges and are keenly aware of the structural barriers affecting their transition from education to employment. Issues such as youth unemployment, skill mismatch, inadequate quality of education, limited exposure to the labor market before graduation, and uneven access to social protection emerged as central concerns. The discussions consistently emphasized that without targeted interventions addressing these challenges, Bangladesh risks underutilizing its demographic dividend.

Importantly, the workshop highlighted youth expectations for a more integrated and forward-looking social protection system; one that does not operate in isolation, but is closely aligned with education reform, skills development, labor market needs, and technological transformation. Students underscored the importance of adaptive social protection mechanisms that support young people during key life transitions, including entry into the labor market, skills upgrading, and periods of economic vulnerability. Beyond generating policy-relevant insights, the workshop contributed to capacity development by equipping students with foundational knowledge of social protection policies and national priorities.

The workshop has successfully created a network of Youth Social Protection Champions that stands out as a significant outcome of the workshop. This emerging network provides a platform for sustained dialogue, advocacy, and collaboration between young citizens and policymakers, ensuring that youth perspectives continue to inform policy processes beyond this single event. In conclusion, the workshop demonstrated that youth are not merely beneficiaries of social protection policies but are significant stakeholders in shaping their design and implementation. Integrating these youth-driven insights into the NSSS 2026 will be essential to developing an inclusive, responsive, and social protection system that is inclusive, responsive and capable of supporting Bangladesh's long-term socio-economic transformation.