Q3 2025 | Issue #06

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

ART!CULATE

Jobs & Education

Konrad Adenauer, Turkey, 1954.
Photographed by Ara Güler.

Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Programme Asia

Named after Germany's first chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) Media Programme Asia was established in 1996 to promote a free, responsible and ethical press in Asia. The KAS Media Programme Asia therefore connects leading journalists with one another, collaborating with colleagues and partners worldwide. The overarching goal of our work is to promote and support Asian media institutions and journalists in the development of professional journalistic standards in the region, to support young journalists as best as possible throughout their careers, and to advocate and promote the importance of media as an integral part of democratic and liberal societies.

The Adenauer Fellowship

The Adenauer Fellowship is a scholarship programme offered by the KAS Media Programme Asia to support journalism education in the region. The KAS Media Programme Asia partners with several educational institutions in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and the Philippines. For more information about applications and application deadlines, please visit: https://adenauer.careers

@media.programme.asia
@media.programme.asia
@KASMediaAsia
@KASMediaProgrammeAsia
@kas-media-asia
media.singapore@kas.de
https://www.kas.de
https://kas-media.asia
https://adenauer.careers

Foreword

Throughout human cultural history, education has always been more than just an individual means to get a good job and professional success. Education was a commitment to the future of society. 'If you want to plan for a year, plant rice. If you want to plan for a decade, plant trees. If you want to plan for a century, educate people,' said the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi over 2,000 years ago. Later, it was Confucius whose thinking shaped the understanding of education in many East Asian societies—such as China, South Korea, Vietnam, and Japan—as a moral duty, a path to self-cultivation and harmonious integration into society. Teachers were not only educators of knowledge, but moral authorities, almost on a par with parents.

Is this still the case today? Or is Gen Z breaking with this legacy? An article in this issue states that young people today no longer start their careers by asking about money, but about meaning.

This is true not only in Asia. More and more young people around the world are questioning the pure performance mindset. They want to know what the point of learning is beyond the question of salary.

This kind of awareness can move the world forward. As long as the willingness to perform and make an effort is not lost in the process. Young people, perhaps more often in Europe than here in Asia, are prioritising a four-day week and work-life balance. But when too much work is cut back, there is also less life left, because societies cannot function without growth—nowhere in the world and at no point in history.

Education therefore remains the plan for the future. Learning remains our obligation.

And, as I have learnt for myself, this applies to every stage of life. Since 2021, I headed the Media Programme Asia of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) from Singapore. Now I have returned to Europe.

This position was not only a job; it was a great opportunity for a journalist who comes from Europe, has worked in America for several years and has now also had the chance to get to know Asia. I saw my time here as an opportunity to learn about a part of the world that I previously only knew from short research trips—and I think I took advantage of this opportunity to learn. I would like to thank all of you who taught me about Asia, its complex politics, its impressive culture, and its wonderful people.

Early on in my time here, Lisa approached me with the convincing idea of launching a periodical specifically for fellows in our media programme. I am proud that I came up with the title 'ArtIQulate', with a capital 'IQ' to reflect the high standards we expect of our readers and authors, who also include alumni and other journalists—friends and family, so to speak. Does the title sound snobbish with its unusual spelling? Or is it an appropriate nod to the classic ideals of education? I'm going with the latter. And I would like to use my final foreword to thank all *ArtIQulate* contributors for their commitment and all readers for their interest. Keep up the good work!

I returned to Germany to work as a journalist again and additionally, for the first time, as a manager for an ambitious publishing company in Bavaria. So I will be learning new things again. I am looking forward to it. And I hope that we all, dear *ArtIQulate* colleagues and readers, will stay in touch—via LinkedIn or via X.

Best wishes to you all and thank you very much for four exciting years in Singapore and Asia. ■

Ansgar Graw

Former Director,
KAS Media Programme Asia

Ansgar Graw is the former director of the Media Programme Asia at the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation Ltd. in Singapore. The journalist and former TV host has published numerous books on Donald Trump, international affairs and German politics, amongst others, and has a strong focus on business journalism through his work with the German media outlets Die Welt (e.g. as correspondent in Washington D.C.) and The European.

@potomaker
@ansgargraw
ansgar.graw@kas.de

Table of Contents

Feature

Adenauer Fellowship

Sometimes,
all dreams need is a little push.

Navneeta Nandan

Navneeta Nandan is the first Indian correspondent for The Insurer in the Thomson Reuters family. An alumna of the Asian College of Journalism under the Adenauer Fellowship by the KAS Media Programme Asia, she has a keen interest in investigations, stock market, and data-driven stories. Storytelling is her passion, napping is her superpower!

@navneeta.nandan
@navneetanandan
@navneetanandan
@navneeta-nandan-a0698a1a3
@navneetanandan

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) has given wings to roughly 300 dreams across over 10 countries in Asia since its inception in 1996.

History of KAS

KAS is associated with, but independent of, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

This foundation's educational agenda, which had already started to develop its roots at the end of 1955, was aimed at 'promoting freedom and liberty, peace, and justice through furthering European unification, improving transatlantic relations, and deepening development co-operation,' said Thomas Stehling, the first director of KAS Media Programme Asia from 1996 to 2001.

The KAS Media Programme Asia, instituted in 1996, is primarily focused on raising the standards of journalism in Asia. It prompts free, responsible, and ethical press across Asia, alongside strengthening investigative journalism in the region. It has a reputation for development work in emerging democracies across the globe.[1]

One of the core value propositions of the Singapore-based programme is the vast network of journalists and colleagues it connects.

'You are probably weak alone, but if you are together in a strong network of not just like-minded colleagues and journalists, but a network of people who understand that they have common challenges and common expectations, then you can have a chance,' Stehling said on why he started this network.[2]

Adrija Saha, who did her postgraduate diploma in integrated multimedia journalism at the Asian College of Journalism in association with the Adenauer Fellowship, said, 'I have made friends for life from all the networking sessions. Over the years, I have collaborated with many of them in different capacities, across countries and time zones. I think at KAS we have created a community of people who are extremely creative and brave.' Working as the associate editor at Adamas and Rice Group in Kolkata, India, she added, 'Recently, I have started working on something of my own and I have received help from my fellow colleagues in various capacities. Even though we only meet once a year, our collaboration continues all the time and it's not always formal. Sometimes we just discuss matters, and simply talking to someone marks a greater collaboration.'

The Adenauer Fellowship

The Adenauer Fellowship, which is a scholarship programme, supports journalism- and photojournalism-focused students through financial assistance and a broad professional network of journalists across Asia.

It started with an association, and a couple of degrees at the then Konrad Adenauer Asian Centre for Journalism (now called the Asian Centre for Journalism) at the Ateneo De Manila University in the Philippines.

The fellowship went international five years ago and extended their partnership to India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The partnerships typically have validity for two years, and have continued to evolve over time. The fellowship focuses on countries on the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) list of Official Development Assistance (ODA) recipients to support their development.

Currently, the fellowship has alumni from countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam.

About 10 fellows are accepted each year, depending on the number of applicants. This more than doubled during the pandemic to support journalism students during those challenging times.

Let's talk money

KAS is largely financed by the federal and land government funds. The official website clearly states, '99% of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's funds come from public remittances.'

Since the organisation uses public funds, it is required to justify to the state as to why it is supporting a particular candidate. This is partly why scholarship holders have to submit application documents.

Having had the privilege of being a fellow myself, I can confidently vouch for the fellowship's exceptional ability to revolutionise one's career trajectory and yield multifaceted growth in a short span of time.

'The Adenauer Fellowship was a ray of hope at a critical juncture in my career,' Ruhina Ferdous, sub-editor at *Global Investigative Journalism Network, Bangladesh (GIJN-Bangla)* said. Speaking about her postgraduate diploma in the film and television programme at Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in 2021 in association with the Adenauer Fellowship, she said, 'This marked a turning point in my career. I put my best effort into the application process and was fortunate to be selected as a fellow. Without the Adenauer Fellowship, pursuing this diploma would have been nearly impossible for me. The fellowship provided crucial financial support, allowing me to successfully complete the program.'

Additionally, the fellowship has also served as an anchor in the personal lives of many of its fellows. 'The Adenauer Fellowship has been a gift for me. It helped me climb out of a hellish situation in my personal life by opening my world to higher education and thereby providing me the possibility for career growth,' Prateebha Tuladhar, who is currently a lecturer at the Asian Centre for Journalism, Ateneo de Manila University, said. She completed her master's degree in journalism at the Asian Centre for Journalism as an Adenauer fellow in 2008. She eventually went on to work as a wire reporter for *DPA-German Press Agency*, making her the first Nepali woman to write out of Nepal as a wire correspondent.

Tempted to apply?

The scholarship is open to aspiring journalists, journalism students, and young media professionals. It has no age limit to support lifelong learning. However, work experience and journalistic engagement in accordance to one's age is taken into consideration. Additionally, one's reasons to be associated with KAS and its values stated in a motivation or cover letter is also assessed. Given a candidate's lifelong association with the organisation post-acceptance, they are judged in accordance with the foundation's values as well.

Johanna Mariflor L. Añes, who is the assistant editor at *Asia News Network (ANN)* said, 'Despite my age—I think I'm among the oldest fellows—I consider myself a newbie in the field, as I was a teacher for most of my professional life, 13 years to be exact. I've only been writing professionally for a little over five years. My two-year traineeship with *ANN*, in association with the Adenauer Fellowship, has enabled me to go beyond my comfort zone, which is lifestyle journalism, helping me develop my nose for news and allowing me to get to know Asia better beyond my home country.'

As has been well-established, networking is an extremely crucial part of this fellowship. Pre-pandemic times saw the Adenauer Fall School and Adenauer Summer School serve as networking sessions for the fellows.

After the pandemic swept the world and the fellowship went global, Adenauer Media Leaders Academy (AMLA) became the ultimate networking event for all the curious minds from across Asia. While the first AMLA was held online due to lockdown restrictions, it was later held in Bali in 2022, Kathmandu in 2023, and in Kuala Lumpur in 2024.

This year will see the diverse talent pool travel to Phnom Penh in Cambodia to address the world's most critical and pressing issues and foster a collaborative exchange of collective impact.

'AMLA has played a huge part in my Adenauer Fellowship. It has been a learning ground. Every year I attend, I take something new home from the fellows I meet. And not just new lessons but also friendships and better perspectives,' Muzhira Amin, a 2023 Adenauer fellow at *Dawn* in Pakistan, said. She added, 'This is why I am really looking forward to AMLA this year, especially because it is in Cambodia, a country that has so much history.' ■

1 https://www.kas.de/en/web/medien-asien/about-us

2 https://kas-media.asia/about/

Rural Education

Indigenous children studying in a primary school run by charity organisation Caritas Bangladesh in Dinajpur, a district in the northern part of Bangladesh. The school ensures that students receive primary education in their native language to later join mainstream schools. Since Bengali is not the mother tongue of the indigenous community, learning in their native language helps them understand what they are later taught in Bengali-language mainstream schools.

Photograph by
Stephan Uttom Rozario, 2018.

Of Theories and Practice:

The Role of Communication Theories in Today's Visual Journalism

In an era of generative AI, deepfakes, and algorithmic media, the role of visual journalism has expanded beyond documentation to ensuring audiences can distinguish real from fake. Communication theories are now essential for understanding how visuals influence public perception. From classic theories like Framing and Agenda-Setting to newer insights like Solutions Photojournalism, these theories help journalists create effective, credible stories. As financial pressures threaten the profession, structured journalism education remains valuable, equipping journalists with critical skills.

Alec is a photojournalist and editor with over a decade of experience. An Adenauer Fellow, he earned a diploma in Photojournalism at the Asian Centre for Journalism (ACFJ) and a master's degree in journalism from Ateneo de Manila. His other roles as program coordinator for ACFJ's Diploma in Visual Journalism and a university lecturer underscores his commitment to the power of images in storytelling.

@alec_corpuz
@alec-corpuz
acacorpuz@gmail.com

Alec Corpuz

Visual journalism has always been a powerful force, possessing the ability to shape public discourse and influence how people understand events. However, with the rise of generative AI, deepfakes, and algorithmic media, it can be argued the role of visual journalists has expanded. Documentation is no longer the be-all and end-all for visual journalists. They must now also make certain that viewers can tell the difference between what is real and what is not.

The ubiquity of generative AI is threatening to take over visual storytelling, as shown by Michael Christopher Brown's work 90 Miles[1], an AI reporting illustration experiment, and the hundreds of fictional images of politicians and disaster areas on the internet, jeopardising the credibility and integrity of visual journalists.

As such, communication theories have become less of an academic luxury and more of a practical necessity. These tools help in navigating the relationship between visuals, information dissemination, and public perception.

Not just a pretty picture

Since the rise of the internet, visual journalism has evolved beyond photographs and video footage. Nowadays, visual journalism means infographics, data visualisation, and interactive media—among other design elements—which is why understanding how viewers interpret them is critical.

While it can be argued visual journalism, especially photography and videography, are instinctive skills, being trained in communication theories ensures visuals are used adequately and effectively. Even a modicum of knowledge on semiotics will enhance their use in a story. Classic theories such as framing, agenda-setting, and gatekeeping still have their uses in getting a message across. Solutions photojournalism and uses and gratification theory, on the other hand, can provide insight into how and why audiences consume the news.

Simply put, making use of communication theories allows for more effective storytelling and makes visual journalists better understand the broader implications of how visuals shape public opinion. More than clicks and viewership, a news outlet's true value lies in its perceived trustworthiness and diligent reporting. In the case of photojournalism, effective and authentic visuals taken in the field can drive public engagement. Newsrooms that commit to original and in-depth reporting need professional photojournalists for nuanced and contextual images to further stories. This then arguably produces work that stands up more robustly against scrutiny. A trait that is increasingly important in today's media landscape, which has seen itself bleed money, with visual journalists usually the first ones let go in its financial triage.

The price of truth

It goes without saying, of course, that journalism is not the most lucrative of careers. Even less so for visual journalists. This begs the question, is J-school still worth it? Is it conscionable for colleges and universities to ask for massive tuition fees knowing full-well that most, if not all, graduates will never see a six-figure salary?

But the question here isn't if a journalism degree is worth it. A degree offers structured learning that equips graduates with essential skills, mentorship, networking opportunities, and credibility. Graduates that continue into the profession ensure that issues are brought to attention and speak truth to power. These factors, it can be argued, are worth every cent.

Telling stories effectively

Like most things in life, the necessity of studying and applying communication theories in visual journalism isn't black and white. Some of the greatest visual journalists were never formally educated in communications theories and rely instead on instinct and an innate curiosity. However, the world is changing, and generative AI is no longer the future—it is the now. AI-generated images can distort reality and shape public opinion, allowing misinformation to spread far and wide.

Familiarity with communication theories gives visual journalists the tools needed to be effective storytellers. It also ensures there is still truth in visuals. 'Pics, or it didn't happen,' indeed. ■

> "Making use of communication theories allows for more effective storytelling and makes visual journalists better understand the broader implications of how visuals shape public opinion. (...) Newsrooms that commit to original and in-depth reporting need professional photojournalists for nuanced and contextual images to further stories. This then arguably produces work that stands up more robustly against scrutiny."

References

1 Brown Michael Christopher. *90 Miles.* Digital illustration (AI). 2023. Los Angeles, USA. https://www.airlab.co/90-miles.

Sukanta Kumar is a freelance documentary photographer, multimedia journalist, and filmmaker based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is currently working as a freelancer in film for *NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation)*. He also works for many NGOs and INGOs as a consultant in documentary photography and filmmaking. His work focuses on investigative stories, politics, human rights, environmental issues, and social issues.

@SukantaKumar0
@sukanta_kumar1
@sukanta_kumar01
@sukanta-kumar-902140147
paumvillanueva@gmail.com

A young student on his daily journey home from school in the drizzling rain on Dal Lake in Srinagar, Kashmir, India.

Photograph by Sukanta Kumar, 2023.

Two madrassa students carrying books and a Rehal, a book rest used for holding and displaying religious scriptures, on the road to Geneva Camp in Dhaka, Bangladesh, a settlement of stranded Pakistanis.

Photograph by Sukanta Kumar, 2021.

Qawmi Education System in Bangladesh: Certificates, but No Careers

The Qawmi education system in Bangladesh, rooted in Islamic tradition, remains beyond government regulation, leaving graduates with limited job prospects. Many Qawmi students struggle to find employment outside of madrassas or mosques. Majority of these students come from poor backgrounds, and their education is sustained by religious donations. There have been discussions on curriculum reform, but no significant changes have been implemented. The government's political considerations and the madrassas' resistance to governmental oversight further complicate the issue, leaving students uncertain about their future.

Md. Ibrahim Khalil

Amjad Hossain, 31, teaches at a Qawmi madrassa in a small town. His monthly salary is only BDT 3,000 (USD 25)! With rising inflation and soaring cost of living in Bangladesh, he struggles to support his wife and child on this meager income. To make ends meet, he cultivates rice on a 0.31-acre plot of land alongside his teaching job, barely managing to sustain his family.

Hossain spends sleepless nights worrying about his child's future. Although he himself received an Islamic education at madrassa, he wants his child to study in the mainstream education system. He believes his schooling under the Qawmi education system has limited his opportunities and is responsible for his current financial struggles.

In Bangladesh, mosque-based madrassas are primarily known as Qawmi madrassas. Their core textbooks are in Urdu (the national language of Pakistan) and Persian. According to the latest government data from 2022, there were 19,199 Qawmi madrassas in the country,[1] with a total of 13.88 million students enrolled.[2] However, the government has no control over the curriculum. As a result, graduates from these institutions are not eligible for government jobs. Apart from teaching in madrassas or working as mosque imams (who lead prayers in the mosque), they struggle to find jobs in private or multinational companies. Despite hundreds of thousands of students graduating from Qawmi madrassas each year, most of them remain unemployed or live in extreme poverty.

So, why do so many students continue to enroll in Qawmi madrassas every year? Why is their education system beyond state regulation, and why do they struggle to secure employment? And what is the public perception of the Qawmi system and its graduates?

> The government has no control over the curriculum [of Qawmi madrassas]. As a result, graduates from these institutions are not eligible for government jobs.

The Qawmi education system was introduced through the establishment of Darul Uloom Deoband madrassa in Uttar Pradesh, India, on 30 May 1866. Following the model of the Deoband madrassa in India, the Qawmi madrassa education system was also introduced in Bangladesh. At the time of its establishment, the Deoband madrassa adopted eight guiding principles for its administration. One of the key principles was to keep the madrassa free from government influence and the control of powerful individuals.[3] In keeping with this, Qawmi madrassa authorities in Bangladesh have remained beyond all forms of government regulation and have consistently opposed any governmental oversight. These madrassas operate through donations from individuals and funds collected through zakat (a mandatory donation of wealth to charity that is one of the five pillars of Islam. Muslims who meet certain requirements must pay 2.5% of their wealth as zakat once a year).

But when the future of the younger generation is at stake, can the state remain silent in the face of a religious group? Ideally, no. But when votes, power, and displeasing certain factions of the public is at risk, then the answer is still yes!

Although Qawmi madrassa teachers and students claim to abstain from politics, they have been actively involved in political movements over the past decade through an organisation called Hefazat-e-Islam. They have opposed various government decisions and taken to the streets in protest. In 2013, the government undertook strict measures to suppress Hefazat-e-Islam. However, in an effort to secure support from 91.04% of the country's population and remain in power, the government eventually conceded to many of Hefazat-e-Islam's demands, including the immediate release of arrested madrassa scholars and students and an end to 'anti-Islamic' activities.

Under pressure from academics, intellectuals, and civil society, the government announced intentions to indirectly regulate the Qawmi education system in 2017. But the Bangladesh Qawmi Madrassa Education Board, known as Wifaqul Madarisil Arabia Bangladesh (Wifaq), only agreed to the government's proposal on the condition that there would be no interference in their syllabus. They also requested the government to recognise the highest degree in the Qawmi madrassa system, Dawra-e-Hadith, as equivalent to a master's degree. At the Dawra-e-Hadith level, students are taught only the six books of hadith known as Sihah Sittah. Despite this, on 11 April 2017, the then-prime minister Sheikh Hasina officially declared the Dawra-e-Hadith degree equivalent to a master's degree.

Because of this, the scholars of Qawmi madrassa conferred the title of 'Qawmi Janani' (Mother of the Qawmi Community) on Hasina. After awarding her this title on 4 November 2018, the relationship between the then-government and Hefazat-e-Islam was largely positive.

But granting Dawra-e-Hadith the status of a master's degree had little impact on the employment opportunities of Qawmi students because the Qawmi education system does not have primary, secondary, higher secondary, or bachelor's degree certifications. While some madrassas have defined their own degree standards, they are not officially recognised by the government. As a result, madrassa qualifications are not recognised unless students go on to earn a master's-level degree, and those who do not receive no formal recognition for their qualifications.

Instead, to showcase the success of the government's directive to formally recognise—some—madrassa certification, the government introduced a quota for Qawmi madrassa graduates in an Islamic Foundation project aimed at mosque-based early childhood education. The project was designed to provide religious education to children every morning before they attended state school. Initially, out of the 1,800 scholars recruited to be teachers, 915 were appointed through the Qawmi quota.[4] The monthly salary for these positions was approximately BDT 5,000 (USD 42).

But after this first and only round of recruitment, no further job opportunities were provided for Qawmi students. Moreover, Qawmi madrassa

> Despite hundreds of thousands of students graduating from Qawmi madrassas each year, most of them remain unemployed or live in extreme poverty.

degrees are not accepted as valid qualifications in the national job application portal for government employment. Yet, nothing has been said about their lack of job opportunities. On this issue, Wifaq, Hefazat-e-Islam, and even madrassa students have remained completely silent—because they never want to come under government control.

Now, the question is, despite the lack of employment opportunities that await them, why do students continue to pursue this education? And why does the public keep these madrassas running through financial support? The answer lies in religious beliefs. Muslims believe that by investing time and money in religious education, they will attain heaven after death. In India, due to the lack of educational institutions for Muslims, the Darul Uloom Deoband madrassa was established. However, over time, its administrators did not reform the system as needed. Similarly, in Bangladesh, madrassas continue to operate in the same traditional manner.

In addition, most of the students studying in madrassas come from poor families. Many madrassas offer education and boarding without charge, and since many parents cannot afford the cost of state or private education—not to mention additional costs of private tuition classes that many state school students take—they enroll their children in madrassas. After completing madrassa studies, most female students become homemakers, while some pursue teaching positions in Qawmi madrassas. This is as far as reality allows their aspirations to go.

There are many Qawmi madrassas in Dhaka, and one such renowned institution is Jameul Uloom Madrassa. I visited this madrassa to observe the situation firsthand. This six-story building houses approximately 1,500 students who study, live, and eat within the institution itself.

On the first floor of the building is the office of the madrassa's principal, Mufti Md. Abul Bashar Nomani. When I met him, I wanted to discuss the current state and challenges faced by the Qawmi education system, but he did not show much enthusiasm. The principal is also a member of Wifaq.

He only said, 'All Qawmi madrassa degrees need to be structured in a way that enables students to secure jobs. This is a time-consuming process and requires government approval. We are planning to design the curriculum accordingly.'

On the second floor of the madrassa, I saw Dawra-e-Hadith examinees studying. They will complete their higher degree in just a few months. Yet, they remain uncertain about what awaits them after their studies. A student named Sakibul Islam said, 'We will receive a degree, but it doesn't help us in getting a job. Still, I believe that Allah [god] will surely provide a way for us to survive.'

While leaving the madrassa, I met an 11-year-old boy named Abrar Hossain. He had recently moved up from the beginner's class to the Nazirah class (class one). He stood by the window, gazing outside with a vacant stare. His eyes held many unanswered questions—but can the state provide him with the answers? ■

References

1 Staff reporter. 'There are 19,199 Qawmi madrassas in the country: Education Minister'. *Prothom Alo*. 23 January 2022. https://tinyurl.com/rn8z9xrz. [Accessed: 17 April 2025].

2 Azad, Abul Kalam. 'What is taught in Qawmi madrassas in Bangladesh?'. *BBC Bangla*. 20 April 2017. https://www.bbc.com/bengali/39654139. [Accessed: 17 April 2025].

3 Rahman, Muhammad Habibur. 'Deoband Darul Uloom'. *Prothom Alo*. 1 February 2023. https://www.prothomalo.com/religion/islam/2r9s8nyo6g. [Accessed: 5 April 2025].

4 Azad, Abul Kalam. 'What is taught in Qawmi madrassas in Bangladesh?'.

Md. Ibrahim Khalil is an Adenauer Fellowship alumnus and currently serves as the Executive Editor of *Magic Lanthon*, a film and media-based journal in Bangladesh. He also works as a Communications Officer for the Tobacco Tax Project at the Bureau of Economic Research, University of Dhaka.

@ibrahimmcj
@ibrahim_1khalil
@Ibrahim37223729
@ibrahim-khalil-52ba93212
ibrahimrumcj@gmail.com

Crafting Experience: The Unmatched Value of Technical Education

In my nearly 10 years of professional experience, I have seen that technical education is the only path that can ensure a successful career. It was only when I graduated that I realised the importance of career-oriented education.

Stephan Uttom Rozario

Mirpur Agricultural Workshop and Training School (MAWTS), a vocational training institution run by Catholic charity Caritas Bangladesh. Photograph by Stephan Uttom Rozario, 2024.

Left: Morjina Soren, 22, daughter of a low-income indigenous family in northern Bangladesh, receiving a diploma in civil technology. Photograph by Stephan Uttom Rozario, 2024.

Middle: A student of MAWTS receiving practical education on welding. Photograph by Stephan Uttom Rozario, 2024.

Right: Mirpur Agricultural Workshop and Training School (MAWTS) students enrol in technical training to ensure job security. Photograph by Stephan Uttom Rozario, 2024.

Stephan Uttom Rozario is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. His work focuses on human rights, minorities, environment, climate change and other contemporary issues. Rozario also cover stories related to the indigenous people, and the Catholic church in Bangladesh.

@uttom.rozario
@stephan-rozario-91314a33
uttomsrozario@gmail.com

In my nearly 10 years of professional experience, I have seen that technical education—that is, hands-on training in areas such as automobile building, carpentry, welding, and others outside of academic studies—is the only path that can ensure job security. When I graduated, I realised the importance of career-oriented education. Since I loved to take pictures, I considered pursuing photography as a profession.

According to my passion, I took up photography in one institution as my main area of study, with a side interest in economics in another. Taking small courses in photography, taking on some freelance work—this hands-on education in photography has brought me to where I am today.

I believe that it is technical education that ensures a career. Many people are unemployed after completing the traditional educational route in Bangladesh, a phenomenon common in other countries as well. On the other hand, technical education is the more sensible choice, especially for underprivileged families.

Take Morjina Soren, 22, daughter of a poor indigenous family in northern Bangladesh, for example. Her father is a day labourer and supports the family. After passing 10th grade, Soren realised that continuing to study in the traditional system would not be financially viable and decided to take up technical education. But that also required money.

Soren is now studying civil technology in her final semester at Mirpur Agricultural Workshop and Training School (MAWTS), run by Catholic charity Caritas Bangladesh Trust.

'The financial condition of our family is not good. I got the opportunity to study at 40% of the cost with the help of Caritas Bangladesh. This is why I came here to study,' said Morjina.

'I chose technical education because, after graduating, I should be able to get a job quickly and become self-reliant. I am the eldest daughter so I need to provide some financial support to the family,' said Morjina.

She also said that she wants to pursue higher studies in civil technology and will do so at her own expense.

'If I had not come to MAWTS, I would have been married like my friends. Maybe I would have become a mother by now, because my family cannot afford to pay for my studies anymore.'

Soren's house is made with mud walls and a tin roof. But she wants to construct a building of her own design, with her own money, and gift it to her parents after her studies.

Technical education has given hope to this rural girl, and taught her to think about the future. Technical education is the path forward at a time when thousands of young graduates are still in search of jobs.

Teachers and instructors I spoke with at technical training centres said that Bangladesh's education system is not career-oriented and everyone is headed towards a general graduation. As a result, the educated unemployment rate is high. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) labour force survey in 2023, out of 6.5 million unemployed people, 5.5 million are university-educated.[1]

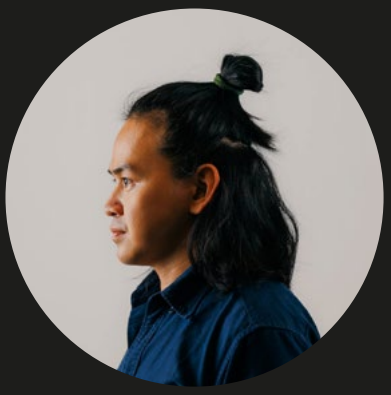
'If our government gave importance to technical or vocational education, there would not be educated unemployed. They could have easily gotten a job in some organisation, or else the government should give employment opportunities to more people by setting up an organisation,' said MAWTS director James Gomes.

> "Teachers and instructors I spoke with at technical training centres said that Bangladesh's education system is not career-oriented (...) According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) labour force survey in 2023, out of 6.5 million unemployed people, 5.5 million are university-educated."

Every year, employers visit MAWTS to recruit qualified personnel. Gomes said, 'We have not found anyone who is unemployed after getting vocational education like mechanical, automobile, carpentry, or civil engineering. Even if they can't get a job in the country, at least they can go abroad as skilled workers and send foreign remittance for the country.' ■

References

1 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. *Labour Force Survey 2023* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2024).



Jilson Tiu is a freelance photographer and photojournalist. He contributes to various corporations and NGOs in both print and online platforms, local and abroad. His personal work revolves around environmental and social issues. He loves black coffee.

@jilson.tiu
jilsontiu.co

Students waiting for a ride home along the highway at Pasay, Metro Manila, after the first day of school. Public school students rely mostly on public transport, while private school students often have school buses. But public transportation in the Philippines is still a struggle, and despite years of effort from multiple administrations there have been no significant improvements since 2010.

Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024. All facts are verified via Edcom (Educational Commission) of the Senate of the Philippines.

LEARNING IN THE MARGINS – A student completing her homework in a public market stall.
Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

Learning in the Margins: The Growing Divide in Philippines' Education System

Inside a dimly-lit public market, a student pores over her homework—a scene emblematic of the stark reality of the Philippine education system. As the country grapples with its 77th ranking among 81 countries in the 2022 PISA, the widening gap between private and public education is a primary concern. Private school students outperform their public school counterparts by up to 83 points in core subjects. While Filipino parents see education as their children's ticket out of poverty, studies reveal how socioeconomic status perpetuates academic inequality. This story uncovers the elusive promise of education as a social equaliser for millions of Filipino learners.

Andreana Chavez

Lagging behind

In the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Philippines ranked 77th out of 81 participating countries and economies, a slight improvement from its last-place ranking in 2018, but still a less-than-desirable result.[1]

Filipino students' scores are substantially below the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average across all three core subjects: mathematics (355), science (356), and reading (347). These results reveal not just a performance gap, but also a deeper story of systemic inequality within the country's education system. Furthermore, the Philippines' PISA scores are behind most of its neighbouring countries in the ASEAN region.[2]

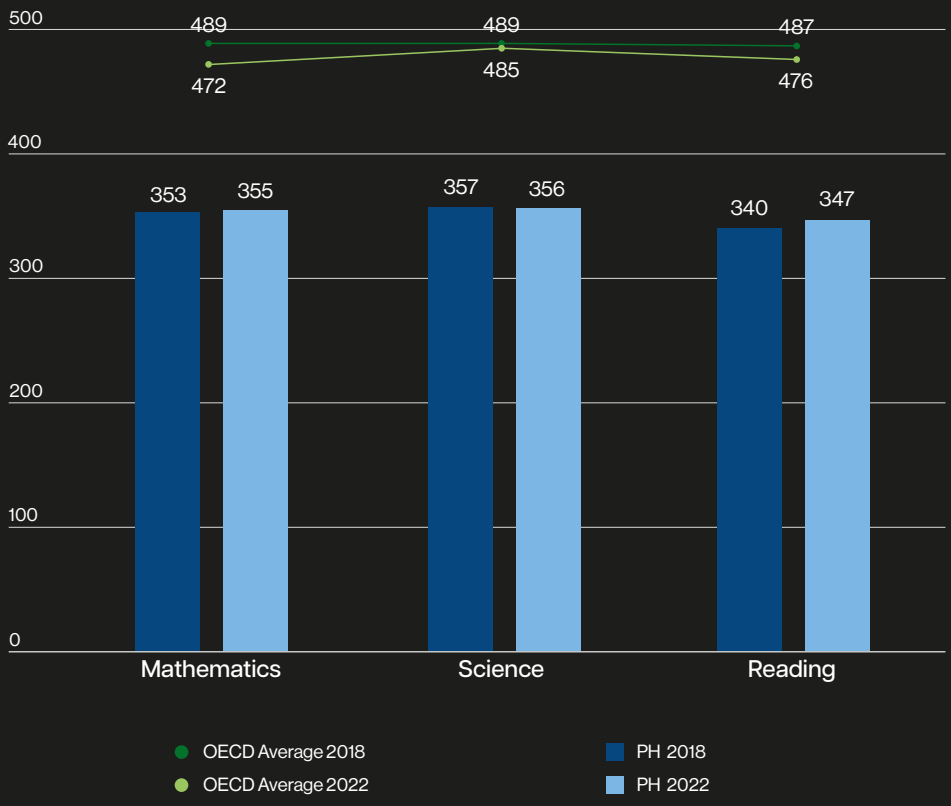
Troubling patterns

Recent educational assessment data from 2018-22 reveals a complex picture of the Philippines' education system, with persistent socioeconomic disparities affecting student achievement.

The most concerning trend emerges in mathematics, where scores fell from 353 points in 2018 to 325 points in 2022, a substantial 28-point decline. This represents an average decline of seven points per year over the four-year period. More alarmingly, the data indicates a 12.7% increase in the number of low-performing students in mathematics, suggesting growing challenges in mathematics instruction and maintaining basic mathematical competency among Filipino students.[3]

PH Performance in the 2018 and 2022 PISA

Source: Data from OECD PISA 2018 and 2022



In contrast to mathematics, reading performance offers a glimmer of hope. Scores improved modestly from 340 in 2018 to 347 in 2022. This translates to an average increase of 1.75 points per year during this period. Notably, the proportion of low-performing students in reading decreased by 4.2%, indicating successful interventions in basic literacy development.[4]

Meanwhile, science education presents a picture of relative stability, though not necessarily one of positive growth. The minimal change from 357 points in 2018 to 356 points in 2022 suggests a plateau in science education outcomes. But the marginal decline of 0.25 points per year over the four-year period, with low-performing students increasing by 2.4%, indicates a subtle but consistent decline in science education.[5]

Persisting socioeconomic disparities

One of the most striking revelations from the PISA data is the stark contrast between public and private school students.

PISA score points can be used to define the difference in student performance. For example, in mathematics, the difference between the 90th percentile and the 10th percentile is more than 135 score points across all countries and economies. In the 81 OECD countries, an average of 235 score points separate these extremes.[6]

An increase or decrease of 20 score points is considered a 'large' difference, roughly equivalent to the typical annual learning gain by students around the age of 15.[7]

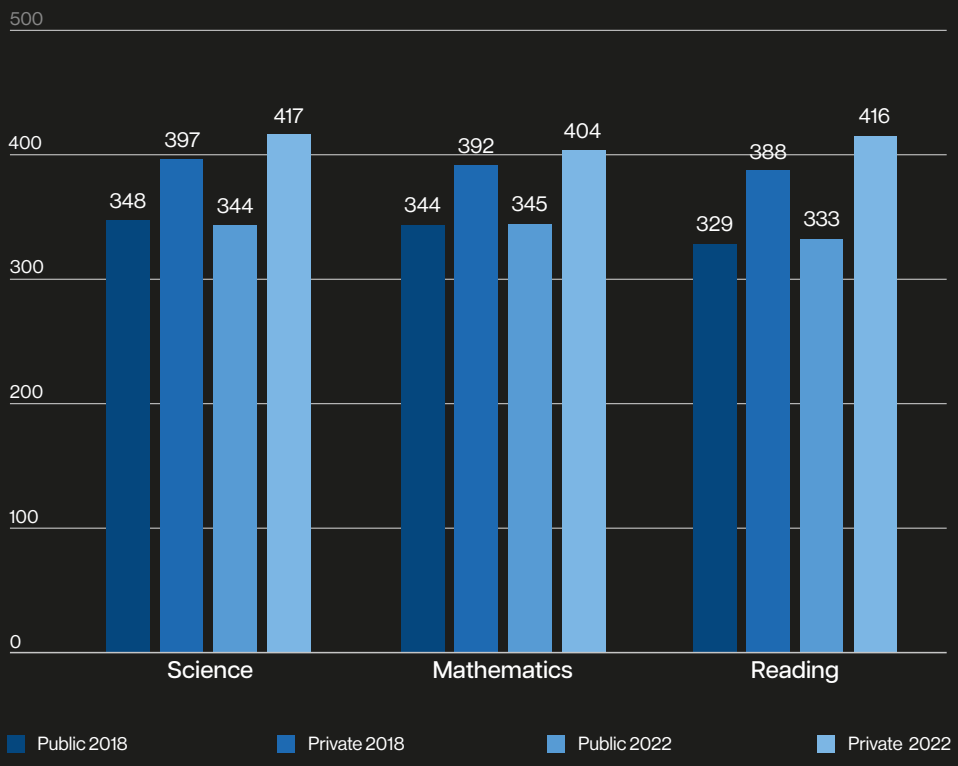
In the Philippines, private school students scored significantly higher than public school students in 2022. The difference in scores are: 59 points in mathematics, 73 points in science, and 83 points in reading.[8]

Several key factors contribute to this gap:

1. Teacher-to-student ratios. Public schools often have overcrowded classrooms, leading to less individualised instruction. In contrast, private schools maintain smaller class sizes, allowing for more effective teaching.[9]
2. Differences in facilities and learning resources. Many public schools lack basic infrastructure, such as science labs, libraries, and digital tools, which are more commonly found in private institutions.[10]
3. Per-student spending. Government expenditure per student in public schools is significantly lower than the tuition collected by private schools, leading to disparities in quality of education.

Public vs. Private School Performance in the Philippines, 2018-2022

Source: Data from OECD PISA 2018 and 2022



4. Access to enrichment programs. Private school students frequently receive additional tutoring, extracurricular activities, and supplementary learning resources, while public school students often miss out, further widening the achievement gap.

The grip of poverty

Research demonstrates the impact of socioeconomic status (SES) on educational outcomes. The 2017 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) showed that only 23.7% of respondents below the poverty line had completed high school and beyond, compared to 54% in the upper 70% income stratum.[11] Even between schools of equal academic quality, a poor child can seldom catch up with a rich one.[12] The Filipino term 'iginapang' (to crawl or undergo a painstaking process) captures this reality—the exhausting, uphill battle families face just to keep their kids in school.[13] For low-income students, the day does not end when the bell rings. Some work part-time jobs to help their families, others walk miles just to get to and from class, and many skip meals because they cannot afford it.

For many Filipinos, education is not just a pathway to success—it is a daily fight to stay afloat. Individual determination alone is not enough to overcome the systemic barriers that prevent many disadvantaged students from achieving their full potential.[14] This is further reinforced by the vicious circle of poverty, where a child's socio-economic status not only determines their access to quality schools, but also shapes the cultural resources available for their learning, thereby influencing their performance.[15]

The complex role of family

Education is deeply valued in Filipino families, where a child's completion of higher education (makapagtapos) is a source of immense pride. Parents view supporting their children's education as a primary goal, often at great personal sacrifice. However, attending school also presents a difficulty for many families who rely on their children to contribute to the household income. This tension highlights the complex relationship between the cultural value placed on education and the daily economic realities of underprivileged families. For Filipino students, fulfilling their educational goals is also seen as a way to accomplish their duties to their family.[16] Academic success is a means for Filipino children to repay their parents, and for underprivileged children, this feeling is especially heightened. The weight of securing a better future for the family is placed on their shoulders, and the sense of familial obligation is amplified because they must navigate significant socioeconomic barriers in tandem to managing their

academic performance, in addition to pulling their weight to help with the family's finances.

Systemic issues at play

PISA data reveals that the Philippine education system is not effectively addressing the needs of all its learners. Public education, while intended to be accessible, is not entirely free, as families still need to bear costs like uniforms, books, and transportation, which pose a significant burden for low-income households.[17] These financial barriers create a two-tiered system where quality education becomes a privilege rather than a right.

In 2025, the Department of Education's (DepEd) proposed budget was cut by PHP 12 billion (USD 207 million), including a PHP 10 billion (USD 175 million) reduction in the computerisation programme. This devastating cut comes at precisely the moment when digital literacy has become essential for participation in the global economy.[18] Some legislators believe decreasing funding is not the answer to alleged corruption in the department and that students, teachers, and education support personnel should not suffer because of anomalies in the budget. They suggest strengthening accountability measures and increasing support for learners instead.[19]

The modest improvements in reading scores, while encouraging, must be viewed against the backdrop of persistent inequality. When we celebrate small victories without addressing the systemic failures that leave countless children behind, we become complicit in perpetuating educational injustice. True progress requires not incremental changes but a fundamental reimagining of our educational priorities.

The slow decline in science education reflects a broader stagnation in our commitment to evidence-based learning and critical thinking. In an era of misinformation and technological transformation, this failure to advance scientific literacy undermines our collective future and democracy itself.

As the Philippines continues to grapple with these educational disparities, we must ask: How long will scenes like this define the reality for millions of Filipino learners? When will we finally summon the moral courage to place children's futures above political calculations and budgetary constraints? The path forward demands not just resources, but rethinking how we value education as the cornerstone of a just and equitable society. ■

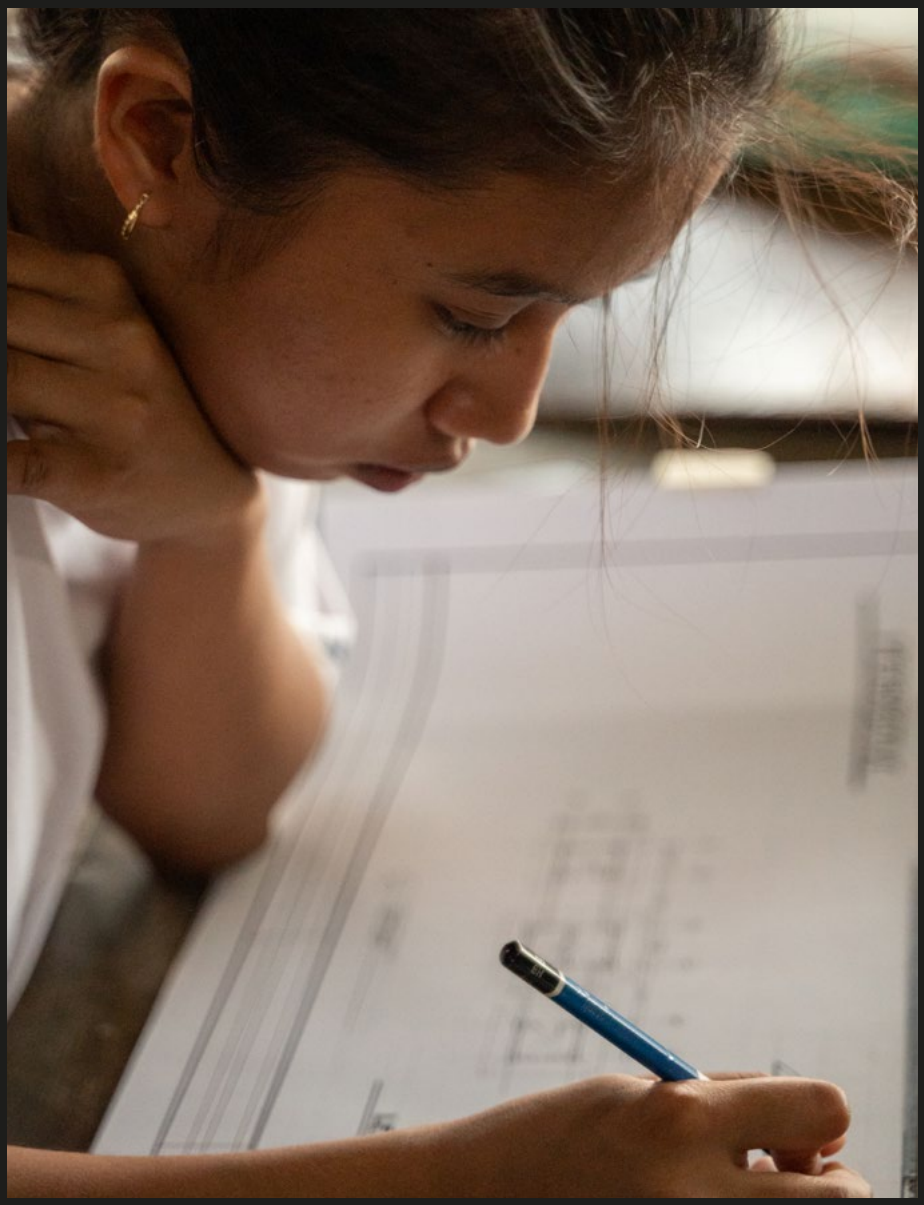
Reference

1. Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department, *Philippines' Performance in the 2018 and 2022 PISA* (Philippines: Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department, 2024).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *PISA 2022 Results (Volume I): The State of Learning and Equity in Education* (Paros: OECD Publishing, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1787/53f23881-en.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. Emma Sorbring and Jennifer E. Lansford, eds, 'School Systems, Parent Behavior, and Academic Achievement: An International Perspective', *Young People and Learning Processes in School and Everyday Life 3* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-28277-6.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Philippine Statistics Authority, *Annual Poverty Indicators Survey 2017* (Philippines: Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017).
12. S. S. Satapathy, *Sociology of Education* (Utkal University in Odisha, India, n.d.), https://ddceutkal.ac.in/Syllabus/MA_SOCIOLOGY/Paper-16.pdf.
13. *Ibid.*
14. T. R. Tsou, 'Family Background, Schooling, and Academic Achievement: Taiwan as an Illustrative Case', *SAGE Open* 14, no. 4 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241301893.
15. *Ibid;* Satapathy, *Sociology of Education*; Sorbring, 'School Systems, Parent Behavior, and Academic Achievement'.
16. Carmela O. Granada, and Rochelle A. Luzano, 'Family Support and Academic Performance of Learners', *International Journal of Research Publications* 127, no. 1 (June, 2023), https://doi.org/10.47119/IJRP1001271620235042; Claudine O. Retuya *et al*, 'The Priming Effect of Family Obligation on Filipino Students' Academic Performance', *Philippine Journal of Psychology* 50, no. 2 (2017).
17. Niyang Bai, 'Educational Challenges in the Philippines', *Broken Chalk*, 4 August 2023, https://brokenchalk.org/educational-challenges-in-the-philippines/.
18. Cristina Chi, 'Teachers Angered by 'P10 Billion Cut' to DepEd's Computerisation Program', *Philstar Global*, 13 December 2024, https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/12/13/2407152/teachers-angered-p10-billion-cut-depeds-computerization-program
19. David Dizon, 'Budget Cuts to Derail DepEd Digitization: Teachers' Group', *ABS-CBN News*, 30 December 2024, https://www.abs-cbn.com/news/nation/2024/12/30/budget-cuts-to-derail-deped-digitization-teachers-group-1016.

BUSTLING CLASSROOM – An aerial view of a public market in Ilocos Norte, Philippines, where vendors calculate prices and negotiate sales, practicing real-world mathematics beyond classroom walls. Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

MARKETS TO MARGINS – A Filipino student toiling away at her homework, having transformed a crowded market stall into her study space. Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

BUILDING DREAMS – A student working on architectural drawings. Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.



DAILY REALITY – A student's worn shoes beside kitchenware. Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

FAITH AND FORTITUDE – A weathered image of Jesus watching over a market stall. Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

SACRED SPACE – A small Santo Niño statue standing sentinel among market goods, reflecting the deep spiritual roots that sustain Filipino families through daily challenges. Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

Andreana Chavez is a third year undergraduate student at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines in Manila, pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology. She interned at Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Philippines from September–December 2024. In 2023, she was a recipient of the Gene Boyd Lumawag Workshop grant from the Photojournalists' Centre of the Philippines Inc.

Beyond academics, she has been an active volunteer photographer at Angat Buhay (Angat Pinas Inc.) since 2023. Her interests include youth empowerment, politics, and environmental issues.

@chavezandreana
@andreana.chavez
@andreanachavez
lagmanandreana@gmail.com

Raising Autistic Children: A Mother's Perspective

Prateebha Tuladhar

Mothers with autistic children encouter many challenges in navigating day-to-day life in Nepal, where healthcare and knowledge on autism is sparse.

Autism is a topic close to my heart, because many people in my life are on the spectrum or caring for people who are. My friend Bhavna Adhikari and my sister Loonibha Tuladhar are both mothers to autistic children. And their challenges are aplenty.

Their parenting concerns are very different from those of other mothers I know, the first challenge being navigating the dearth of knowledge on autism in Nepal. Loonibha often says that whenever she has to tell someone that her son is on the spectrum, she has to explain how children with autism think differently and so they behave differently and have to be treated with kindness.

Bhavna concurs: 'Autistic people or people with autism, their brains are wired differently; they think differently, they interact differently. Because they don't fit into the mould created by society to interact, behave and communicate in a certain way, they're frowned upon.'

Over time, the term 'autism' has also come to be replaced by broader terms such as 'neurodivergent' and 'neurospicy' (a lighthearted phrase to describe neurodivergence), alluding to how diverse the traits and experiences of people on the spectrum are.

People on the spectrum do not refer or conform to norms prescribed by wider society, which makes their life challenging and makes society see them

as a challenge. There are societies that don't even recognise or acknowledge autism. In the Nepali language, there is no word equivalent to 'autism' or terms that describe such a condition—socially, it is unacknowledged and therefore rejected.

According to Autism Care Nepal Society, there are 300,000 autistic persons in Nepal, among them around 90,000 severely affected.[1] News reports have shown how autistic children in some remote parts of the country are sometimes restrained by their families.[2] This stems from a lack of understanding of their condition as well as the inability to provide care, because of poor access to healthcare.

In the cities, where health services are more accessible, attention to issues like autism are still not always a priority. For Bhavna and Loonibha, they always knew their children were different, and they weren't as worried about the diagnosis as much as they were about how society would receive their children or what kind of education and career opportunities they would have.

It was when Bhavna was studying for her master's degree in Australia that she got a full diagnosis for her son, Drishtant, for autism spectrum disorder (ASD). 'I would go to the bathroom and cry. What would his future look like? That's the worry for most parents. It's not the day-to-day struggle so much as his future,' explains Bhavna. 'My concern is more around the fact that he's not going to have a social circle, a career like we do, or a family. That worries me. I always have to be there for him.'

When children do not meet learning milestones in junior school, it starts to become a concern. Now, more and more schools are asking parents to get their children diagnosed when they show signs of neurodivergence. But an autism therapist I spoke to recently said that in a country like Nepal, diagnosis doesn't provide much relief because there are no provisions to help children with special needs, and in fact only adds to the burden the parents and the child must bear.

'People tell me not to tell others he's autistic, that there will be a stigma against him. But if we don't talk about it how will the situation ever improve?' Loonibha questions. Her son, Paartha, is now nine years old and was diagnosed with ASD and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) when he was four. 'If we hide it and do not help people understand and educate them on autism, how will my child adjust socially? What kind of environment will schools give him? What kind of skills will he learn?'

Paartha has been subjected to discrimination by relatives and strangers on multiple occasions, as has Drishtant. Both mothers have in the past been asked to remove their child from certain events or weren't even invited in the first place. When autistic children are seen stimming (performing repetitive behaviours or motions to help cope with emotions) or having meltdowns, neither of which can be helped, they tend to be misunderstood by people as problem children.

Autistic children don't understand social cues, and schools are wary of enrolling students who are different because of the extra management needed to handle them. That is exactly what needs to change about the education system, Bhavna says.

'When we talk about social inclusion, we aren't just talking about race or gender. We are also talking about accepting all kinds of people with limitations and disabilities. And schools have to teach that,' says Bhavna, who even took a couple of years off work at one point to tutor her son.

Drishtant, now 17, attends Phoenix School in Kathmandu, one of the very few schools in the country that accepts all children. Discovering the

> People think kids with special needs should go to a special school. I find that problematic. They have to be going to a mainstream institution because outside of school, they're part of the same society. The so-called "normal" people have to understand there are all kinds of people and everyone should be accepted.
>
> **BHAVNA ADHIKARI**
> Mother to an autistic child

> While for most parents, success is measured in their child's academic achievements, for mothers whose children have special needs, success revolves around them being able to take care of themselves in future. That's where the role of education comes in. Schools are the first external environment children experience away from their home, and that space has to be safe.

school was a relief for Bhavna, who initially struggled to find somewhere to send her son.

'People think kids with special needs should go to a special school. I find that problematic. They have to be going to a mainstream institution because outside of school, they're part of the same society. The so-called "normal" people have to understand there are all kinds of people and everyone should be accepted,' says Bhavna.

The first time she walked into Phoenix School, she spotted a girl in a wheelchair among the other children. There were all kinds of students in the school, and she decided then and there that was the school she would send her son to.

Loonibha picked the school for her child for the same reason and says neurotypical children should be taught to live with those who have special needs, because that's the only way they can learn to build an inclusive society. She is proud whenever Paartha comes home and shares how he gave his seat to someone else because that child was in more need than him. That kind of education is just as important as other skills she expects him to learn, she says.

Both Drishtant and Paartha struggle with reading and writing comprehension, but excel at breaking down concepts, and immerse themselves in topics that interest them. And as Drishtant prepares to complete 10th grade next year and graduate, Bhavna's concerns about his future have intensified.

'I don't know what his future will be after 10th grade. I'm worried; he loves his school. I really wish for more schools that don't just manufacture a workforce, but build an inclusive, wholesome education system,' she says.

Loonibha shares similar concerns for Paartha. Neither women have the privilege of considering their child's grades a priority. Instead, they revel in small wins like when their child buttons their shirt correctly, zips up their jacket, ties their shoelaces or flushes the toilet after use. While for most parents, success is measured in their child's academic achievements, for mothers whose children have special needs, success revolves around them being able to take care of themselves in future. That's where the role of education comes in. Schools are the first external environment children experience away from their home, and that space has to be safe.

Drishtant used to want to be a game developer or a carpenter. At the moment, he is reassessing his plans. Paartha often says he wants to be a biologist, but he's only just learning to read and write and it's going to be a long road for him, something his teachers and parents understand.

> I really wish for more schools that don't just manufacture a workforce, but build an inclusive, wholesome education system.
>
> **BHAVNA ADHIKARI**

Nepal's education system currently follows a structure where the students are expected to pass a written examination at the end of every academic year in order to advance. The students who do well are those who are able to read and write. Others who don't conform to these standards get left behind.

'We need an educational system that is willing to change. Not all children can sit down for three hours to take a written exam, and it takes away opportunities from children who have disabilities. We need to create exams that suit everyone, like verbal assessments or assistance with writing down answers,' Loonibha argues.

'I can't imagine he will be successful in his career and be this and that, I just hope Drishtant is able to take care of himself,' Bhavna says about her son's future. And in order for that hope to be met, an environment should be created so people who are on the spectrum are accepted and can be safe.

Loonibha, my eternally optimistic sister, says the future isn't all that bleak. 'Paartha is quite good at math and he says he would like to run his own store, so I often think that maybe that's the option for him. He could be a shopkeeper in the future, and I think he would manage fine,' she says with a smile. ■

Reference

1. *Autism Care Nepal Society,* 'Prevalence', accessed 23 March 2025, https://autismnepal.org/prevalence/.
2. Sumitra Luital, 'Sabita Upreti: A dedicated mother for autistic children in Nepal', *online khabar*, 8 March 2024, https://english.onlinekhabar.com/sabita-upreti-autistic-children-nepal.html.

Prateebha Tuladhar is Adenauer Fellow from 2009 and holds a master's degree in journalism. She lives in Kathmandu, writes for Nepali Times, teaches journalism at Asian universities, and talks to dogs and trees.

@subhaaye
@pratibha-tuladhar-06493b122
emailprateebha@gmail.com


MONGOL 482

Previous spread: The morning flag ceremony at a public school in Pasay, Metro Manila, Philippines. The teacher student ratio in the Philippines is 1:40. The Department of Education (DepEd) has a teacher shortage of 86,000, with 43,014 unfilled positions as of 2025.

Left: An old, used school table in a public school at Cotabato, Mindanao, Philippines. The country's education sector has deep-rooted chronic problems, including a lack of school infrastructures, that stem from political corruption.

Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024. All facts are verified via the Edcom (Educational Commission) of the Senate of the Philippines.

Educating Health Workers Who Stay

For nearly five decades, the University of the Philippines' small campus in Palo, Leyte has been running a successful experiment in medical education. They accept scholars from disadvantaged barangays, train them through a curriculum without numerical grades, and send them back as doctors, nurses or midwives to serve the communities where they are needed most.

Cristina Chi

Cristina Chi is a journalist from the Philippines who covers education, diplomacy and human rights, among other topics close to her heart. Her work on labour migration has been recognised by the International Labor Organisation, Covering Climate Now and the Philippine media watchdog Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility.

@chicristina_
@cristinachi
ma.cristinachi@gmail.com

This article first appeared on Philstar.com.

PALO, Leyte – On this sweltering day in rural Leyte, a first-year college student tracks down a municipal mayor at his farm. The health sciences major only has one agenda: to ask for enough funds to complete the health program for one of the villages under the mayor's jurisdiction.

His pitch is confident, detailed, practised. The mayor listens.

It's an unlikely sight: a freshman student trudging through a farm, lobbying for support for a health program of a barangay that isn't even his.

Days later, the freshman students of the University of the Philippines School of Health Sciences (UPM SHS) cobble together enough funds to rent a sound system. Curious residents of the sleepy town of Tolosa, Leyte, listen to the students describe how far their barangay has come in health and sanitation in just one month. For the first time, through borrowed speakers, many hear of real change.

This is no ordinary medical school. At the UPM SHS, healthcare workers in training are taught to serve where others won't go.

For nearly five decades, UP's small campus in Palo, Leyte, has been running a successful experiment in medical education. They accept students from disadvantaged barangays nominated by their community, train them through a curriculum without numerical grades, and send them to where they're needed most as doctors, nurses or midwives.

The results are striking. While most of the healthcare workers from other Philippine universities flee to cities or jobs abroad, leaving several rural areas without a single doctor, at least nine out of 10 graduates from the UPM SHS have stayed in the country since its establishment in 1976.

'The Philippine healthcare education typically produces graduates that go abroad. But in our school, 95% of our graduates are in the country and have returned to their endorsing communities,' said Filedito Tandinco, former dean of the original UPM SHS campus in Palo, Leyte. Other campuses are in Baler and Koronodal.

For Tandinco, UP has quietly cracked a problem that has long-stumped the Philippines: how to get healthcare workers to serve—and stay—in the country's poorest villages.

'We're moving away from calling it a return service obligation,' Tandinco told Philstar.com. 'It's more of an expression of the commitment of the student to do return service in appreciation of the fact that they were sent to SHS in the first place.'

> University of the Philippines School of Health Sciences (UPM SHS) accept students from disadvantaged barangays nominated by their community, train them through a curriculum without numerical grades, and send them to where they're needed most as doctors, nurses or midwives.

School of the people

The unique approach starts even before classes begin. Each student is nominated by their local government unit (LGU), often from underserved barangays. The committee, formed by the barangay chair and representatives from the Department of Education, selects students to receive a full-ride scholarship to UPM SHS—with the stipulation that they return to the barangay to serve their community.

To qualify for admission, students must be permanent residents of a depressed community with limited access to health services, where they must have resided for at least a year prior to nomination. They must be nominated by the community via a Barangay Resolution signed by 75% of household heads and have a family income not exceeding PHP 100,000 (USD 1,744) per year. Additionally, scholars must commit to a Return Service Agreement, where they will serve underserved areas for two years for every year of training.

The university's curriculum itself is tailored to helping students return and serve their communities. Under the 'stepladder curriculum'—the first of its kind in Asia—students begin with a two-and-a-half-year midwifery programme. They can then de-

> While most of the healthcare workers from other Philippine universities flee to cities or jobs abroad, leaving several rural areas without a single doctor, at least nine out of 10 graduates from the UPM SHS have stayed in the country since its establishment in 1976.

cide to return to serve their barangays or continue on to nursing, then medicine. The choice usually depends on what their endorsing communities need. Most exit early by design.

'We're not just a medical school,' Tandinco explains. 'We're a midwifery school, nursing school, and medical school rolled into one. Our primary strategy is to serve underserved communities, like rural and geographically isolated areas.'

'We customise our graduates to what communities need,' he added.

For every 10 students that complete midwifery training, only three will go into nursing. Out of those, only one will become a doctor, according to Tandinco's estimate. At least 97–100% of the school's midwifery graduates pass the national licensure exam, with consistent topnotchers.

For every level completed, students go on 'service leave', returning to their communities to implement what they've learned. This is in addition to the return service agreement.

'In fact, we say that our programme doesn't sponsor the students themselves. We support the LGUs and communities, and the students are here to represent their interests,' Tandinco said.

No numerical grades

Unlike other departments at UP, there are no numerical grades at UPM SHS. There is only 'Pass' or 'Needs Tutorial'.

This system, Tandinco said, shifts students' focus from competition to competency. 'They're less grade-conscious and focus more on delivering results,' he added.

'The benefit is that students look forward to accomplishing what they're expected to do […] This is a stronger motivation than simply trying to compete with each other,' Tandinco explained.

Students are also thrust into community work from day one. Janus Navier Gatela, now in the nursing program after getting his certification in midwifery, went on a community integration programme in the first quarter of his first year at UPM SHS. He was among those assigned to Barangay Kapangihan in Tolosa, a fifth-class municipality.

> We customise our graduates to what communities need.
>
> **FILEDITO TANDINCO**
> Former dean of the original UPM SHS campus in Palo, Leyte

'You're still adapting to the institution, and then you're suddenly immersed. It's no-holds-barred education,' he told Philstar.com.

Gatela recalls having to sleep in barangay halls, conduct house-to-house health surveys and improvise with limited resources. Some of his classmates also had to learn the local language to communicate with residents, who are essential in implementing programmes.

And their work extends beyond medical services. When his assigned community in Tolosa needed a drainage system but couldn't afford PVC pipes, his team fashioned one from locally available bamboo. When they noticed garbage bins were scarce, they built makeshift bins from old rice sacks.

'We had to be creative. We also developed [determination] to pull through despite limited resources. Whatever's available, we had to make do,' said Gatela, who also ranked first in the November 2022 national midwifery licensure exam.

Even midwifery students learn skills like circumcision, which is not required in traditional medical curricula but vital in communities where access to doctors is limited. They're also taught community planning and project management from the start.

'The students have to know how to manage the health system of a barangay because they will be calling the shots in that jurisdiction,' Tandinco explained. 'It serves them well, because in the Philippine health system, there are really areas without a doctor or nurse.'

Over the years, the school's reach has expanded, with graduates serving across the country. The distribution of graduates is also strategic. The Palo campus takes care of the Visayas, Bicol, and Caraga region. Baler handles northern and eastern Luzon. Tarlac covers Region 4A and western Region 3. Koronadal serves the entire of Mindanao.

'Based on our tracking, the majority of graduates have gone back to the LGUs that sent them,' Tandinco says proudly. 'We did a study 10 years ago, and they were still there in the rural health unit. We know where they are.'

Despite its successes, the school faces steep challenges ahead. The contract for their Palo campus expires in 2032. While there is alternative land in Tacloban City (the school's original home), it remains undeveloped and unfunded.

'We need to think of expanding our learning spaces now,' Tandinco said, noting that the school is awaiting PHP 50 million (USD 871,984) to build additional floors for their academic building.

It's a far cry from 1976, when this approach was considered so experimental it was dubbed the 'Tacloban Experiment'. The school's first home was a modest two-classroom building behind what is now the Eastern Visayas Medical Centre.

Even the devastation of Typhoon Yolanda on Leyte in 2013 didn't stop the university from delivering its man-

UP health workers serve where they study

Regions hosting UP Maila School of Health Sciences campuses have received the highest number of deployed health workers, with Eastern Visayas – home to the first campus – getting 1,289 midwifery, nursing and medicine graduates since the establishment of the Palo, Leyte campus in 1976.

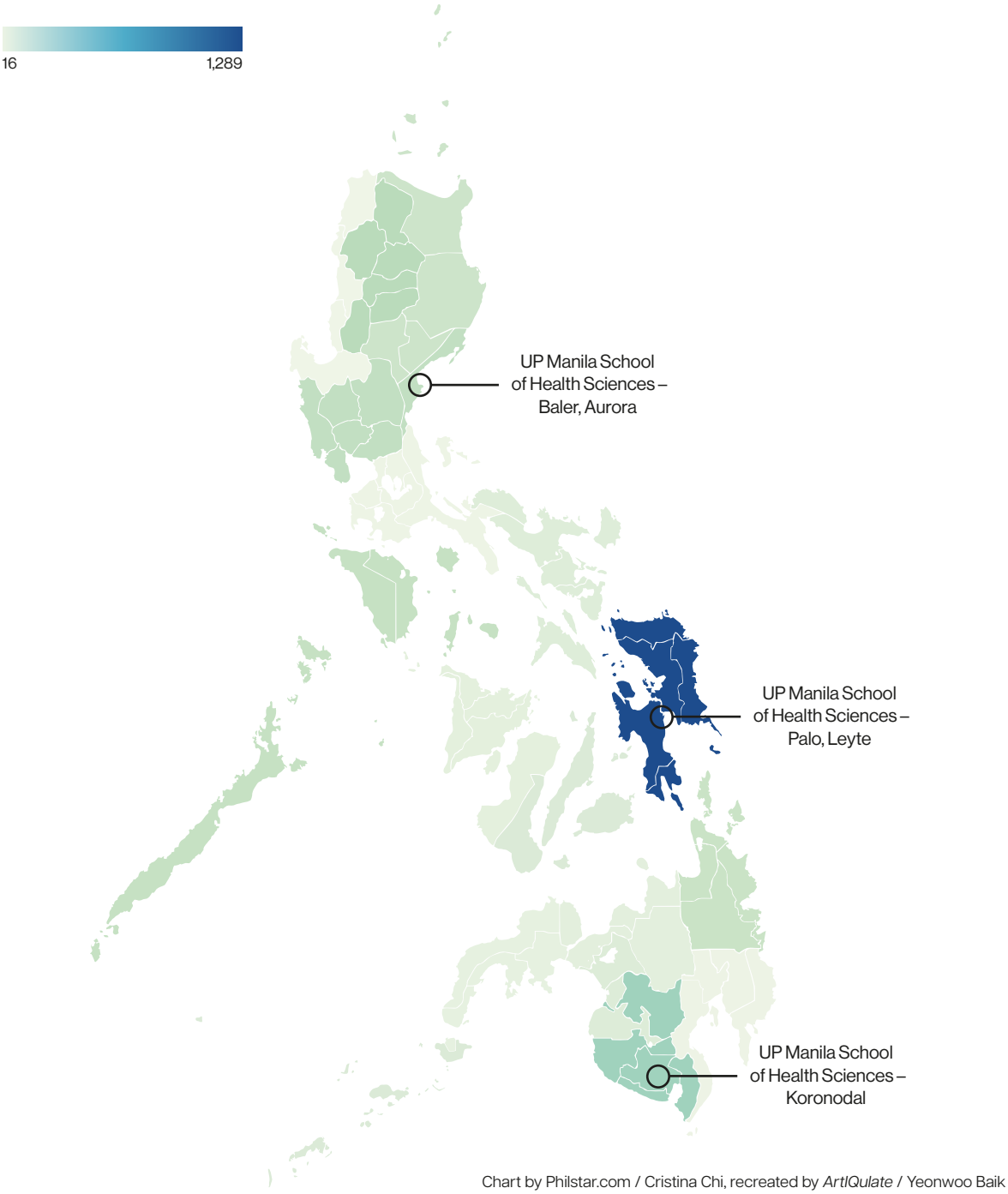


Chart by Philstar.com / Cristina Chi, recreated by *ArtIQulate* / Yeonwoo Baik

date. The school rebuilt, expanded and continued its mission.

'Our graduates were able to contribute to social transformation in rural areas,' Tandinco said. 'When they become municipal health officers, they transform communities with high mortality indices to communities with low or zero indices.'

Gatela believes the SHS model should be replicated across the entire UP education system. Here, he said, students learn quickly. Sometimes, the most important medical equipment isn't a stethoscope or scalpel, but a length of bamboo and the will to make it work.

'We are really bound to go back to the grassroots, to the communities kung saan tayo nanggaling (where we came from), because we are Filipinos,' he said. ■

Bakwit School (2018–21)
The Lumad's Fight for Education and Survival

Pau Villanueva

The Bakwit School, a mobile school for Lumad—internally displaced non-Moro Indigenous groups from Mindanao, Philippines—was established in Manila in 2017 after then-President Duterte threatened to bomb all their schools.[1] Created to defend their right to education amid an ongoing land conflict, the Bakwit School allowed the non-Moro Indigenous community to pursue their studies in Metro Manila, where the government's power is centered. Through Bakwit School, the largest Indigenous group in the Philippines had a chance to make their struggles known—which have been long overlooked by the nation. Equipped with knowledge of their Indigenous rights, self-determination, and ancestral lands, the Bakwit School became both an act of resistance and a response to displacement.

In 2021, a week before their graduation and moving-up ceremony, a government-imposed lockdown during the global pandemic forced Bakwit students to remain in a densely populated shelter with no access to healthcare or social services, indefinitely delaying their return to their homelands in Mindanao. Isolated from their families and facing yet another crisis, Lumad students and teachers leaned on one another—not just for comfort, but for survival—finding strength in their shared struggle and resilience in the face of uncertainty. Since then, forced school closures and persistent attacks throughout the pandemic have resulted in the closure of all Lumad schools in Mindanao. Bakwit School has temporarily halted operations since 2021, leaving many students disenfranchised and without access to education.

1 Associated Press. 'Philippines: Duterte threatens to bomb indigenous schools'. *The Guardian*. 26 July 2017. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/26/philippines-duterte-threatens-to-bomb-indigenous-schools. [Accessed: 13 March 2025].

The Bakwit School, a mobile school for Lumad—internally displaced non-Moro Indigenous groups from Mindanao, Philippines—was established in 2017 after then-President Duterte threatened to bomb their schools. Created to defend their right to education amid a land conflict, it allowed them to study in Metro Manila, where they had a rare chance to make their struggles known. In 2021, a week before graduation, a government-imposed lockdown left them stranded in a crowded shelter with no healthcare or social services. Isolated from their families, students and teachers relied on each other—not just for comfort, but for survival, turning shared hardship into collective resilience.

A Lumad student taking notes during science class at the Bakwit School, where displaced Indigenous youths continue their education despite systemic barriers. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2018.

Lumad students chanting and raising placards at a protest, demanding justice and resisting martial law in Mindanao, Philippines. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2018.

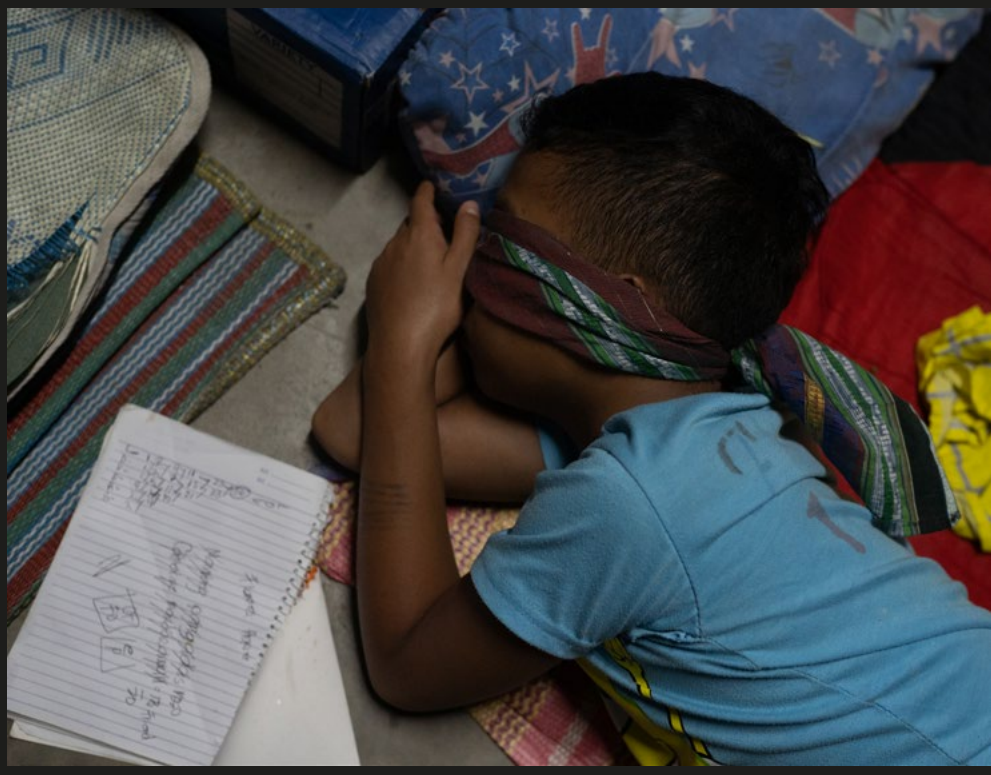
A Lumad student re-enacting her moving up ceremony, which was cancelled due to COVID-19. She is wearing traditional adornments and donated medals to honour her hard work. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2021.

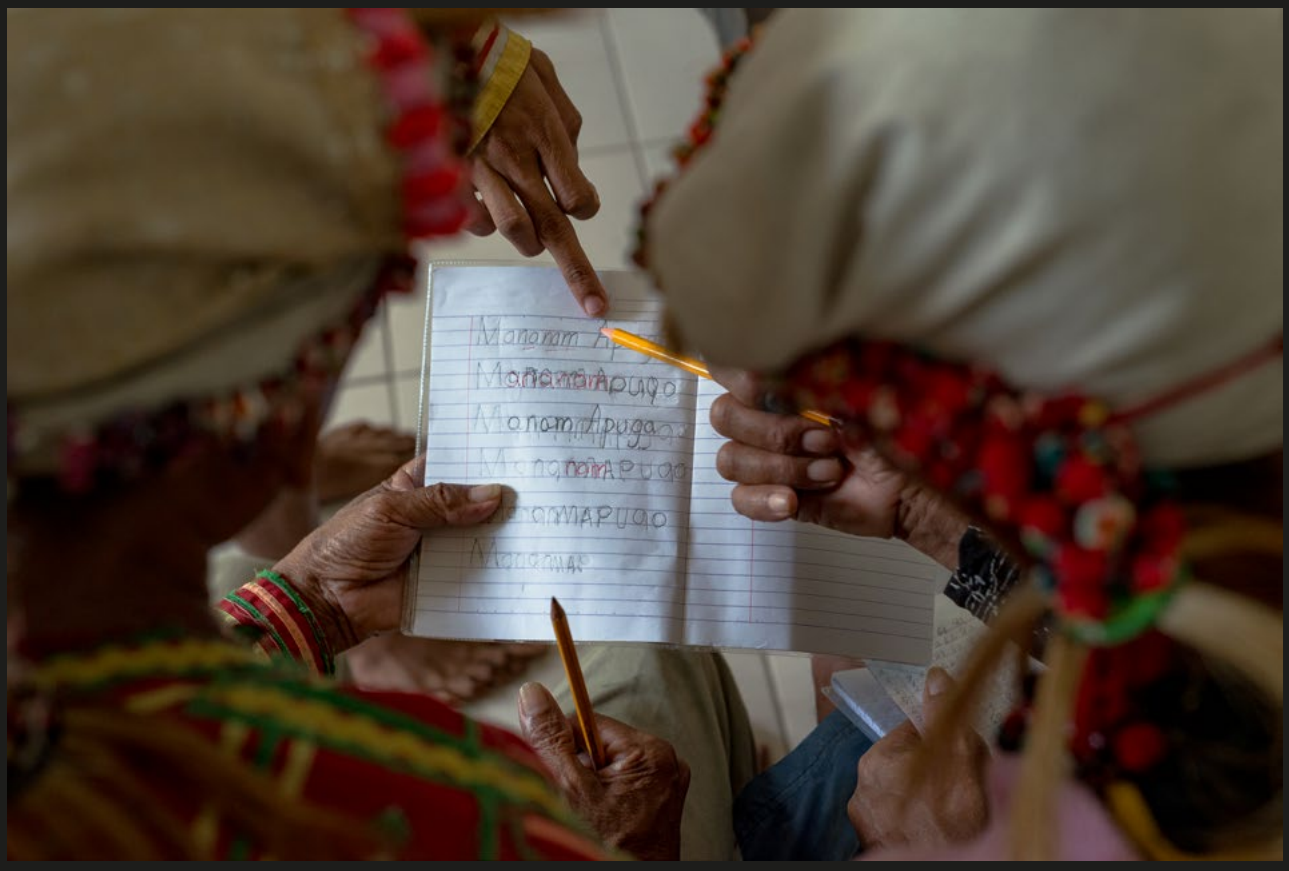
A grade school Lumad student vividly portraying the forced displacement and militarisation of their homeland in Mindanao, Philippines, through their drawing during an art therapy session at the Bakwit School. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2021.

The Lumad community attending a welcoming Mass at Baclaran Church, seeking solace and solidarity as they navigate the uncertainties of displacement. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2018.

Top: A Lumad student from the Manobo tribe sleeping on a woven mat, using a ‘tubaw’ to shield his eyes. In their temporary shelter, each finds ways to create a sense of home. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2021.

Bottom: Literacy and numeracy classes at the Bakwit School extend to Lumad elders, giving them the opportunity to learn how to read and write. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2018.





Lumad students at the Bakwit School performing a cultural piece, turning their lived experiences of militarisation in Mindanao, Philippines, into a powerful narrative of resistance. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2018.

A Lumad student, and the only T'boli at the Bakwit School, wearing a K'gal. A gift from her mother, the attire is more than tradition—it is a symbol of identity and cultural continuity. Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2021.


JUNK

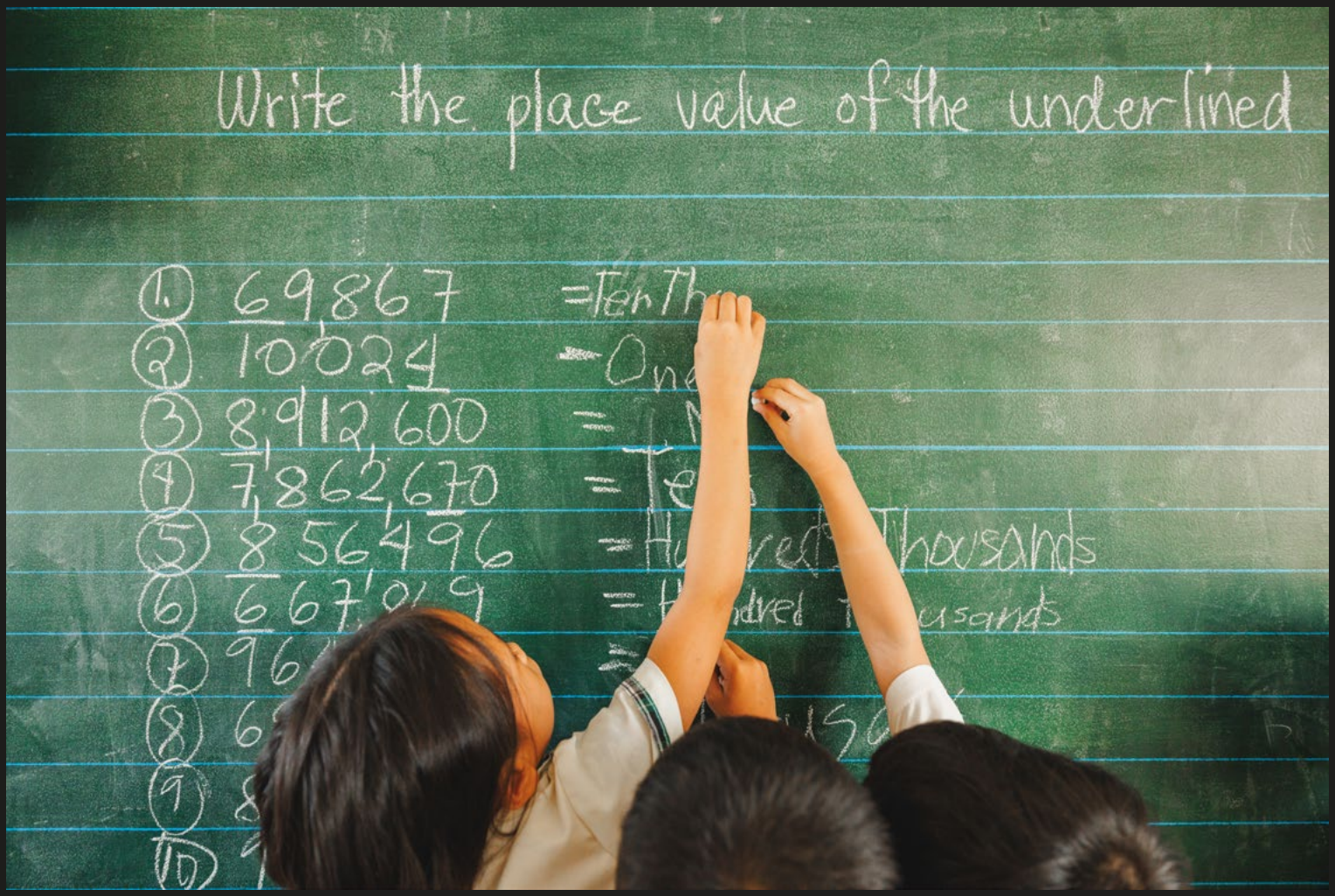
A Lumad student clinging to a dress—her mother's parting gift. 'If you miss me, hold it tight. Forgive me, this is all I can give you.' Photograph by Pau Villanueva, 2018.

Pau Villanueva is a Filipino photographer and visual storyteller from Manila, Philippines. A National Geographic Explorer, his work examines the human condition—exploring the discovery of self as he documents gender-expansive Indigenous communities in Mindanao. Pau also mentors emerging storytellers and Indigenous youth, facilitating workshops across Southeast Asia. His involvement includes the 2021 Women Photograph Mentorship, PCP and PCIJ Capturing Human Rights Fellowship, and the 15th Edition Angkor Photo Festival & Workshops. He is an alumnus of the Visual Journalism Program at the ACFJ at ADMU, and is an Adenauer fellow. He holds a BFA degree in Visual Communication from UP Diliman.

@pauvill
@villanuevapau
@villanuevapau
pauvillanueva.com
paumvillanueva@gmail.com

Children answering a math problem in a public school in Cavite, Philippines. Compared to 81 countries, the Philippines ranked 77th in mathematics and science literacy in 2022.

Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024. All facts are verified via Edcom (Educational Commission) of the Senate of the Philippines.


Write the place value of the underlined
1. 69867 =TenTh
2. 10024 =One
3. 8,912,600 =
4. 7,862,670 =
5. 856496 =Hundred Thousands
6. 667,019 =Hundred Thousands
7. 96
8. 6
9. 8
10. 7


Reading product labels can help you identify whether the product is useful or harmful. These simple symbols in labels give ideas on how to use and store the product properly, and to help prevent accidents from happening and therefore save lives.

A teacher discussing the importance of recycling at a grade school in Naic, Cavite, Philippines. Public school facilities around the Philippines lack proper learning spaces, especially in last mile schools. These schools have fewer than 100 students and are located in difficult-to-access areas, typically more than an hour away from town centres.

Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024. All facts are verified via Edcom (Educational Commission) of the Senate of the Philippines.

From Boardrooms to Beaches:

How Gen Z Is Ditching the 9-to-5 for a Purpose

Young people are redefining success by prioritising meaning over money. And they're finding it in the most unexpected places.

Jacque Manabat

Zambales City, Philippines – The sky is ablaze with streaks of gold and crimson, and the sun resembles a molten coin sinking into the vast ocean of the quaint surf town of LiwLiwa. Federico, a 28-year-old Italian, stands barefoot on the powdery grey sand, pointing excitedly at the breathtaking spectacle with a broad grin.

'San Felipe!' Federico exclaims. He sprints towards the sunset and disappears underneath the surf. The rhythmic crash of the waves against the shore provides the perfect soundtrack to the scene, creating a natural symphony to accompany Federico's carefree sprint.

Riccardo Zucchetti, a 29-year-old Italian, films Federico's playful chase towards the sunset. 'Let's go!' he calls out to him. Minutes later, the video is uploaded to the Greenspace Artist Village Instagram page, capturing a snapshot of Federico's life in this little slice of paradise.

A few days later, they are filming inside the community kitchen of The Greenspace Artist Village. Federico is once again the focus of Riccardo's camera. This time, the focus of the film is on something far more domestic yet equally essential: spaghetti. The clip shows Federico theatrically reading the word 'spaghetti' from the packaging of a Filipino brand of pasta while carefully extracting a single strand of the pasta from a pot of boiling water to test if it is al dente. Riccardo then plucks fragrant basil leaves from Greenspace's little garden, adding a touch of freshness to the recipe. The following clip shows Federico and Riccardo serving guests who happily devour the squid and fish pasta they have prepared.

Outside, onlookers watch curiously. Foreigners, who were enjoying the beach moments ago, are now serving food and cleaning the kitchen. Federico and Riccardo are workaway volunteers at Greenspace Artist Village, a resort haven with art-covered huts nestled near the beach and waterfalls. They enjoy free accommodation for two weeks in exchange for four hours of daily work—from upkeep and guest relations to teaching art to local children and managing the hub's Instagram account.

Federico and Riccardo's experience reflects a global trend: young people seeking purpose beyond traditional career paths. In the Philippines, a nation significantly shaped by its 2.2 million overseas workers, Federico and Riccardos' choice is particularly striking. Their new normal is a life far-removed from their structured past in Italy.

Growing hub for remote workers

Manila, Philippines, a top-10 global remote work hub in 2023 alongside Tokyo, Da Nang, Kuala Lumpur, and Penang, is attracting a generation of purpose-seekers with its appealing combination of affordability and lifestyle. Nomads data reveals Manila is the fifth fastest-growing digital nomad hub, with check-ins skyrocketing by 78% from 2018 to 2022 and surging by another 60% in 2023.[1]

The search for purpose is a driving force behind the digital nomad movement, particularly among Gen Z (born 1997–2012), according to research from freelance work management firm MBO Partners.[2] Young workers favour self-employment as freelancers or independent contractors that enables them to seamlessly integrate work and leisure. From WWOOFING (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms) to the rising popularity of 'workcations', this quest for meaning manifests in various ways.

At Greenspace, Federico spends some weekends teaching local children how to play guitar, while Riccardo manages his photography business remotely, showcasing the hub's reliable internet connection with Greenspace's Instagram videos. They maintain the upkeep of the hub and entertain the guests. On slow days, particularly on weekends, both hit the beach, play basketball, or explore the nearby waterfalls.

'It's not just about escaping the city,' Federico explains. 'It's about immersing oneself in environments that inspire, rejuvenate, and connect to something bigger.'

'I love this place. I'm a digital nomad, and the internet here is even faster than in my house in Milan, Italy. There are basketball courts everywhere and you can play with anyone on the street. I will definitely come back and maybe book a hut here for a month,' Riccardo said.

A significant draw to the country for many is the Philippines' relatively low cost of living compared to the Western countries. Accommodation, food, transportation, and entertainment are generally affordable, especially outside major cities like Manila and Makati. While internet connectivity can vary, larger cities and popular tourist spots usually offer reliable and fast service, with Wisevoter reporting an average speed of 132.36 Mbps.[3]

The low cost of living, along with the country's stunning natural beauty, rich culture, and widespread English proficiency, makes the Philippines a highly desirable destination for tourists and digital nomads alike.

Recognising the growing trend of digital nomads, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. recently approved the issuance of digital nomad visas to non-immigrant foreigners who wish to enter or temporarily stay in the Philippines.[4]

The economic benefits of digital nomads are widely recognised. They 'spend more money than tourists, don't put much strain on public services, create jobs for locals, and even start local businesses,' according to MBO Partners, which found that digital nomads spent an average of $3,000 per month in 2019 globally, with 70% going to local goods and services.[5]

Mirroring a global trend, the Philippines' digital nomad visa places it alongside a growing number of nations worldwide. As of April 2025, 58 countries, including Germany, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Norway, and Thailand, offer special visa categories for digital nomads.

With international visitor arrivals still lagging behind pre-pandemic figures, the Philippine government anticipates that the digital nomad visa will help revitalise the tourism sector. The scheme aims to attract long-term visitors who can contribute to the local economy through their spending power without directly competing for jobs within the domestic labour market. Official government data indicates that tourism remains a significant economic driver for the Philippines, accounting for 8.6% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product in 2023. Authorities are hopeful that this new visa category will provide a crucial pathway to further boost this vital industry by welcoming a new segment of remote workers.

"The low cost of living, along with the country's stunning natural beauty, rich culture, and widespread English proficiency, makes the Philippines a highly desirable destination for tourists and digital nomads alike."

Portal to a different life

Federico's journey is a microcosm of a larger trend in work and travel. He worked as a wine trader in Italy right after finishing his studies. The whirlwind of business meetings and relentless pressure to succeed felt increasingly hollow.

'I felt I was not doing what I was supposed to,' he said. 'I was earning, yes, but I wasn't enjoying life.'

Even his travels around Italy and to the bustling European cities of London, Barcelona, and Madrid couldn't quell the restlessness. Federico craved nature, a life with deeper meaning, a world away from the concrete jungle he longed to escape.

He had heard whispers of a growing trend: WWOOFING. In essence, it involved working on a farm or similar projects in a different country in exchange for food and accommodation. It is a way to travel the world, not just for work, but with purpose.

Workaway.info, a website for people to find and advertise homestays and cultural exchanges, became Federico's constant companion, a portal to a different life. He'd spend hours browsing the listings, imagining himself on organic farms, in eco-villages, immersed in other cultures. The website's simple question, 'What kind of exchange are you looking for?' opened up a world of possibilities, from working with non-governmental organisations to house sitting, from boats to farm stays. The website offered 50,000 opportunities in more than 170 countries worldwide. He could help build a community centre in a rural area, develop a farmland, or even teach English in a remote village. The possibilities were endless.

One October morning, a quiet certainty settled over Federico. It wasn't a sudden epiphany, but a deep inner acceptance. Sitting on his sofa, laptop on a small table, he finally booked a flight. Destination: India.

He remembers his mother's tears, a mixture of worry and perhaps a hint of understanding.

She knew her son was searching for something more.

She knew it wouldn't be easy.

> "Federico explains that working away isn't just about escaping; it is about a willingness to embrace the unknown."

Federico explains that working away isn't just about escaping; it is about a willingness to embrace the unknown. Approaching his thirties, Federico felt the pull towards a different path. He was at the end of his work contract as a wine trader and was helping his father make suits.

Without a wife, children, or a business, Federico recognised this as the perfect moment to pursue this plan. He was ready to redefine success, not by his pay cheque, but by the richness of his experiences.

'So I told my best friend, "F*ck it. I am leaving everything." It was not an easy choice. Most people I talked to say they envy what I do now. What they do not know is that I have prepared for this. This is a cheaper way to travel, but I know how to budget.'

Federico first went to India before he arrived in the Philippines. Prior to Greenspace, he explored the islands of Iloilo and Siargao, staying in simple barong-barongs (traditional makeshift dwellings) and working the land, even taking on minor construction projects. The curious glances of Filipinos as he gathered wood and planted seeds barefoot eventually gave way to familiarity.

And, as is so often the Filipino way, Federico was met with warm smiles and home-cooked meals from families who welcomed him into their lives.

Greenspace Artist Village: A hub for global citizens

At Greenspace, Federico found what he was searching for. He's not merely a volunteer; he's part of a community. He shares his skills, learns from others, and immerses himself in Filipino culture. He teaches music to local children, sharing his passion. He embraces the local cuisine, even Filipino spaghetti—a controversial dish for Italians like him—and navigates the cultural nuances with an open mind and a sense of humour. He finds joy not just in the stunning landscapes but in the everyday moments of cultural exchange. And even the occasional culture shock.

Federico's values are shifting. He marvels at the Filipinos' resourcefulness, their clever use of the tabo (a plastic ladle) for all manner of things, from bathing to washing dishes. He's embracing a simpler life, finding joy in the everyday, and discovering a purpose far removed from the corporate ladder—a purpose found in connecting with people, contributing to a community, and living in harmony with nature. It's a stark contrast to the life he left behind, a life that left him feeling empty despite its outward appearance of success.

Greenspace Artist Village has become a haven for many of these purpose-seekers. Since opening in April 2018 for workaways, it has received a flood

Illustration: Federico tuning his guitar while children look on. He teaches them how to read musical notes on some Sundays at Greenspace Artist Village. Traced and illustrated in watercolour by Hannah Dormido, 2025.

of applications with the allure of the beach and the appeal of an artist's hub.

'It's also an advantage for Greenspace because I do not need to hire additional help to look after the place,' says founder Karr Cotamora. 'The guests also come here and gain a positive experience with the cultural exchanges with the workaways. The children we host every Sunday for free workshops also gain confidence in speaking to foreigners who we are not culturally accustomed to. I envision Greenspace as a global citizens' hub.'

Greenspace has welcomed over 30 workaways, primarily from Europe. Cotamora values the exchange, ensuring volunteers contribute by working for the equivalent to the cost of their stay, which she estimates at around USD 400 for two weeks.

To protect against ill-intent workaways, the websites on which Cotamora advertises Greenspace as a

> From eco-lodges in Costa Rica to permaculture farms in Portugal, young people are drawn to spaces that offer more than just accommodation; they offer connection, contribution, and the chance to discover what truly matters.

host have feedback mechanisms for reporting untoward behaviour. So far, she has only good words for the workers she has welcomed.

The hub's close ties with the local community allow volunteers to experience Filipino culture firsthand. The community kitchen becomes a melting pot, where volunteers like Julie Guez from France and Jose Arturo and Bertha Itzel from Mexico share recipes, stories, and skills, leaving their mark on Greenspace.

Like Federico and Riccardo, they document their experiences, sharing glimpses of their lives on the hub's Instagram page.

Greenspace is just one example of a global phenomenon. From eco-lodges in Costa Rica to permaculture farms in Portugal, young people are drawn to spaces that offer more than just accommodation; they offer connection, contribution, and the chance to discover what truly matters.

Rewriting the rules of work and success

When asked how long he plans to maintain this work-and-travel lifestyle, Federico says he's giving himself until just before his 30th birthday.

'Giving yourself time in this chapter of your life, giving your mind time to process,' he reflected. 'A breather from the busy life. A break in which I can look back on somewhere down the line, back in my old life, where I can say that I have enjoyed the sands and mountains of the Philippines, walked through the alleys of India, and shared my passion with a community whose culture is different from mine. This experience was a blank canvas for me, and I painted it colourfully, so that when I go back to Italy, I have a different perspective on life.'

Is this the future of work? Will purpose and meaning become the new measures of success? What will be the impact on communities? These questions, especially for the Philippines, require further study.

However, the answers may lie not with experts, but with young workers and travellers like Federico, Riccardo, Loren, and Emilia, who are choosing purpose over profit. They've grown up in a world of information overload, bombarded by images of material success. They're not just looking for jobs; they're searching for meaning. ■

> A breather from the busy life. A break in which I can look back on somewhere down the line, back in my old life, where I can say that I have enjoyed the sands and mountains of the Philippines, walked through the alleys of India, and shared my passion with a community whose culture is different from mine. This experience was a blank canvas for me, and I painted it colourfully, so that when I go back to Italy, I have a different perspective on life.

FEDERICO, 28
Volunteer at The Greenspace Artist Village,
LiwLiwa San Felipe Zambales, the Philippines

References

1 Nomads, 'Fastest growing digital nomad hotspots of 2025', accessed 1 May 2025, https://nomads.com/fastest-growing-remote-work-hubs.

2 MBO Partners, *Digital Nomads: Nomading Normalises* in 2024 (Texas: MBO Partners, 2024), https://www.mbopartners.com/state-of-independence/digital-nomads/.

3 Lauren Seberos, '5 Things We Know About the Philippines Digital Nomad Visa', *RemoFirst*, 24 November 2024, https://www.remofirst.com/post/philippines-digital-nomad-visa.

4 Jerome Carlo Paunan, 'DICT chief lauds Marcos Jr.'s approval of Digital Nomad Visa Program', *Philippine Information Authority*, 28 April 2025, https://pia.gov.ph/dict-chief-lauds-marcos-jr-s-approval-of-digital-nomad-visa-program/.

5 MBO Partners, *Working from the Road: The Aspirations and Reality for Digital Nomads* (Texas: MBO Partners, 2022), https://info.mbopartners.com/rs/mbo/images/2022_Digital_Nomads_Report.pdf; Sofia Germanos, 'The Rise of Digital Nomad Villages: Revolutionising Work and Lifestyle in the Post-Pandemic World', Catalyst, 25 February 2024, https://catalystmcgill.com/the-rise-of-digital-nomad-villages-revolutionizing-work-and-lifestyle-in-the-post-pandemic-world.

Jacque Manabat is an award-winning journalist and digital storyteller, pioneering media innovation in Southeast Asia. With nearly two decades of experience at *ABS-CBN News*, she now independently mentors newsrooms and journalism schools, bringing together content creation and journalism. Founder of the Young Creators Network and co-founder of Amber Studios, she empowers aspiring storytellers. She has been featured in numerous publications as a woman breaking barriers and holds a master's degree in journalism from Ateneo de Manila University. Her achievements have also been recognised by prestigious fellowships including IVLP (USA, 2024), Adenauer Fellowship (Germany, 2016), and ILO (Italy, 2013).

@jacquemanabat
@jacquemanabat
@jacquemanabat
@jacquemanabat
@jacquemanabat
jacquemanabat.com
workwithjacquemanabat@gmail.com

INDOMITABLE SPIRIT – While others prioritise safety and well-being, fisherman Randy Zuniega, 46, continues to sail amidst the rough seas near the Pacific Ocean, in Cabcab, San Andres, Catanduanes, Philippines. He employs traditional fishing techniques to maximise his fruitful catch. Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

ON THE PRECIPICE OF EXTREME PERIL – Due to the nation's escalating oil and gasoline prices, some jeepney (a type of public utility vehicle) drivers are forced to work around the clock. Others are concerned about the recent jeepney phaseout because their income is insufficient to cover the cost of a modernised jeep, which costs several million Philippine pesos (more than USD 17,000). Photograph by Andreana Chavez, 2023.

The Quota Reform Movement Toppled Regime in Bangladesh, but Closed Doors for Women and Indigenous Groups

The Quota Reform Movement in Bangladesh led to the fall of Sheikh Hasina's autocratic government on 5 August 2024. Initially a student-led protest against the reinstatement of quotas for government jobs, the movement escalated after violent crackdowns, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances. But despite the overthrow of an autocratic regime, concerns remain over the flawed quota reforms, particularly the abolition of the women's quota, which may hinder female workforce participation.

Article by
Md. Ibrahim Khalil

Photography by
Sukanta Kumar

After ruling Bangladesh for 15 years and seven months, the autocratic ruler Sheikh Hasina fell from power. On 5 August 2024, she fled to India to escape public outrage. She has been widely criticised for prolonged misgovernance, sham elections, ruling through fear, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances of dissidents, and fostering a culture of impunity. Using state law enforcement agencies and her own party members, she governed in a way that prevented opposition parties from organising any resistance movements. Dissenters were imprisoned for extended periods in false and politically motivated legal cases.

Her regime had structured the state apparatus so effectively that the public once believed the Awami League would reign for the next 50 years. However, in the end, they fell from power—a downfall that began with the student-led Quota Reform Movement for government jobs.

Students speaking passionately at Shahbagh, Dhaka, during the Quota Reform Movement, initially demanding for reforms to the job quota system. The movement soon escalated, culminating in the government's downfall. Photograph by Sukanta Kumar, 2024.

After Bangladesh's independence, from 1972 to 1976, 20% of government positions were filled based on merit, while the remaining 80% was allocated through quotas. In 1976, the merit-based recruitment percentage increased to 40%. In 1985, a new system was introduced for first- and second-class jobs, where 45% of government jobs were allocated based on merit, while the remaining 55% were reserved under various quota categories.

This quota included 30% for freedom fighters who fought against Pakistani forces in the Bangladesh Liberation War, 10% for women, 10% for under-represented districts, and 5% for ethnic minorities. Later, a 1% quota was introduced for disabled candidates, bringing the total quota allocation to 56%. The freedom fighter quota initially included only individuals who had been members of liberation groups themselves, but was later extended to include their children and subsequently their grandchildren.

Students have raised objections specifically against the inclusion of grandchildren in the freedom fighter quota. Their concern was that this provision disproportionately benefits the ruling political party and pointed towards political favoritism.

"Students have raised objections specifically against the inclusion of grandchildren in the freedom fighter quota. Their concern was that this provision disproportionately benefits the ruling political party and pointed towards political favoritism."

Students waving flags during a protest demanding quota reform. Photograph by Sukanta Kumar, 2024.

> In an attempt to appease students and end the protests, (...) the country's leaders failed to consider the knock-on impact the decision [regarding the quota reform] would have on minority communities, especially indigenous groups and women. Only a 1% quota remains for indigenous communities, while the previous 10% quota for women in government jobs has now been abolished.

In Bangladesh, the salary scale ranges from the 1st to the 20th grade. Direct recruitment for government jobs is conducted for positions in the 9th to 20th grade, whereby candidates are hired through job-specific examinations, while jobs in the 1st to 8th grade are filled through promotions. In 2018, following student protests demanding reform, the government abolished the quota system for government jobs in grades 9 to 13, but the 56% quota remained in place for grades 14 to 20. In 2021, several children of freedom fighters filed a petition against the government's decision to abolish the quota. On 5 June 2024, the High Court declared the government's notification illegal and ruled to reinstate all quotas.

Protests erupted over this decision, leading to widespread violence across the country. At one point, the government imposed a curfew and deployed the military. Internet service was shut down nationwide. On 16 July 2024, the movement escalated further when a protesting student was shot and killed by the police, sparking demonstrations across the country. To contain public outrage, the Supreme Court announced on 21 July 2024 that 93% of government job recruitments from grades 9 to 20 would be based on merit. The remaining 7% would be allocated as follows: 5% for children of freedom fighters, 1% for ethnic minorities, and 1% for persons with disabilities and third-gender individuals.

But by then, the movement had turned into a violent uprising. The indiscriminate killing of hundreds of students by state forces incited a rage that had been building for some time. The arrest, torture, extrajudicial killings, and enforced disappearances of the movement's coordinators further fuelled student outrage, leading them to call for the government's overthrow. Finally, on 5 August 2024, the Hasina government fell.

According to a fact-finding report by the UN office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), 1,400 people were killed, while thousands more suffered severe life-altering injuries.[1] More than 11,700 people were arrested and detained by the police and the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). Alarmingly, 12–13% of those killed were children.

In an attempt to appease students and end the protests, the government amended the quota system—only 7% of the total quota has been retained. With this sweeping mandate, the country's leaders failed to consider the knock-on impact the decision would have on minority communities, especially indigenous groups and women. Only a 1% quota remains for indigenous communities, while the previous 10% quota for women in government jobs has now been abolished.

In Bangladesh, the number of women receiving higher education is already low. Women from underprivileged backgrounds must overcome significant obstacles to access educational opportunities. But with the removal of the women's quota, their participation in government jobs will continue to decline, leading to increased inequality in both female education and employment. Workplaces will become less inclusive and less supportive of women.

Although quota reforms have been implemented across most government jobs, they had not been fully applied to the recruitment of teachers in government primary schools until recently. These schools primarily serve young children, and until

now, 60% of teaching positions were reserved for women. However, in the draft of the *Government Primary School Teacher Recruitment Rules 2025*, all quotas—except the government-declared 7% quota for the groups stated above—have been abolished, including the quota for women. As a result, a future decline in the number of female teachers may negatively impact the primary education system and further restrict women's employment opportunities. In 2024, just one month before the quota reform, women accounted for 61.35% of the teaching workforce.[2] Losing this employment avenue will weigh on the already limited job prospects for women.

In the face of an unfair quota system, Bangladesh's youth rose up to defend their right to fair employment. But after the fall of the government, political parties are now focusing on the upcoming elections and their future plans. Students have returned to their classes. Discussion about the flawed quota reform implemented by the autocratic government has died down. The post-Hasina administration has similarly shown no interest in reforming the quota system. It has made no mention of reinstating the women's quota or expanding quotas for indigenous groups. On the contrary, it has actively impeded women's recruitment and employment opportunities by eradicating the women's quota.

Ironically, the students who led the Quota Reform Movement never called for the elimination of the women's quota; their main point of contention was the scale of allocation to freedom fighters and their grandchildren. As a result, although the anti-quota movement succeeded in toppling an autocratic regime, students' aspirations for genuine and inclusive quota reform remain unfulfilled—and whether that hope will ever be realised now remains uncertain. ■

Reference

1 Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, 'UN report: 1,400 people killed in July uprising', *Dhaka Tribune*, 12 February 2025. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/373524/un-report-1-400-people-killed-in-july-uprising.

2 Star Online Report, 'Female teachers in primary schools have increased threefold in the last 15 years: Prime Minister', *The Daily Star*, 27 June 2024. https://bangla.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/politics/news-593176.

The Fight for Fair Jobs that Overthrew a Dictator

What began as a protest against an unfair government job reservation system quickly transformed into a nationwide uprising against Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule. The brutal killing of student Abu Sayed by security forces ignited mass outrage, culminating in Hasina's flight from Bangladesh. This article traces socio-political factors behind the movement, and the urgent need for sustainable reforms in education, employment, and governance.

Article by
Mashfiq Mizan

Photography by
Naimur Rahman

Abu Sayed stands tall. A stick in his hand. Arms outstretched, defiant. The police rush toward him. They shoot him at almost point-blank range. He falls to the ground. He dies a moment later. Sayed's cold-blooded murder on 16 July 2024 marked a turning point in Bangladesh. As news of his death spread, what began as a protest against an unfair quota system in government job recruitment turned into a mass uprising. His death sparked widespread outrage, with cultural and artistic responses emerging in the form of sketches, graffiti, poems, and songs.

The youngest of nine siblings, Sayed was pursuing an English degree at Begum Rokeya University, Rangpur. He was a beacon of hope for a family battered by poverty. His elder brothers and sisters were forced to abandon their studies because of financial hardship, but they pooled what little resources they had to ensure that Sayed could have the education they were not able to receive.

With dreams of joining the civil service—a career he believed could transform his family's destiny—Sayed joined the protest against the job reservation system.

All he wanted was a fair shot at securing a government job. But he was gunned down.

In over 15 years of Awami League rule—what many in opposition parties called 'fascism'—elections were rigged, activists vanished into secret prisons, and extrajudicial killings ran rampant. Hasina consolidated power with promises of development and stability. Despite multiple anti-government protests, the opposition failed to stop Hasina's regime.

Then, the quota reform protests began on 5 June 2024. They started at a time when economic challenges were mounting in Bangladesh—in July 2024, inflation rose to a 12-year high of nearly 12% and youth unemployment spiked to an alarming threefold higher than the national average. The demand for equitable jobs by the youth of Bangladesh toppled the dictatorship like a house of cards. What the opposition could not do in 15 years, the youth achieved in just 15 days.

The genesis

Established in 1972, Bangladesh's quota system was designed to uplift marginalised groups by reserving a significant portion of government jobs for underrepresented communities. Initially, 30% of positions were allocated to the families of freedom fighters from the 1971 Liberation War, with additional allocations for women and residents of underdeveloped

> The demand for equitable jobs by the youth toppled the dictatorship like a house of cards. What the opposition could not do in 15 years, the youth achieved in just 15 days.

districts. Over time, these quotas expanded to cover 56% of government jobs—leaving only 44% of positions available solely on merit. While the policy was justified on the grounds of social justice and inclusion, critics argued that such extensive quotas curtailed opportunities for highly qualified candidates in a country already wrestling with high youth unemployment.

Furthermore, controversy arose from a provision that allowed even the grandchildren of freedom fighters to benefit from the quota system. Protesters argued that over 50 years after the war, such a sizeable reservation for the relatives of the nation's freedom fighters was illogical and politically motivated. They alleged that the Awami League handed jobs over to its loyalists in the name of representation.

The spark of protest

In June 2024, the High Court reinstated the 30% quota for descendants of freedom fighters, reversing a 2018 decision that had abolished it following earlier student protests. This reversal reignited discontent among students, who viewed the quota as a policy that favoured political loyalties over merit-based recruitment. Peaceful demonstrations quickly spread across universities as students called for a re-evaluation of the quota system to ensure fairness and meritocracy.

Rather than engaging with protesters' calls for fair job opportunities, then-Prime Minister Hasina responded with brute force. She dismissed the young demonstrators as razakars—a slur reserved for traitors during Bangladesh's Liberation War—pouring fuel on an already raging fire.

Within days, Hasina deployed the full force of the state. The army, police, Border Guard Bangladesh, and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion unleashed a co-ordinated crackdown. The government's student

The Central Shaheed Minar and adjacent roads were filled with thousands of people, including teachers, lawyers, guardians with their children, civil society members, cultural and political activists, freedom fighters and day labourers. From across the capital, protestors braved the rain and joined the anti-discrimination student movement, during which calls for Sheikh Hasina's resignation were rampant. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2024.

wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League, attacked protesters with machetes and sticks, targeting women in particular. Police soon followed with bullets. On 16 July, seven students, including the soft-spoken Sayed, were gunned down.

Over 1,400 people were killed in just three weeks—many with military-grade weapons. Sayed's autopsy revealed his chest was riddled with over 90 metal pellets, a sign of state-sanctioned slaughter. The UN's Fact-Finding Mission later revealed that Hasina had ordered security forces to 'kill them and hide their bodies'.[1]

What began as a protest for jobs had become a revolution against impunity. On 5 August, following 15 days of state-enforced massacre, Hasina fled to India as thousands marched on Dhaka. Her palace was taken without resistance. Students took to the streets in droves, chanting, 'The dictator is gone.'

The jobless youth had toppled the regime that denied them fair employment.

The aftermath and politics of job security

In the wake of Hasina's departure, an interim government led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus took charge, pledging democratic reforms and measures to address deep-seated socio-economic issues. However, significant challenges remain. As of January 2025, inflation has surged to around 10%, severely affecting the cost of living. Recent data from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicates that while the overall unemployment rate in Bangladesh hovers around 4.2%, youth unemployment is at nearly 16.8%.[2] In a nation of 170 million people—where nearly 32 million young individuals are either unemployed or out of education—the need for sustainable job creation is critical.

At its core, the unrest in Bangladesh reaffirms the fundamental truth that politics ultimately comes down to bread and butter. With a burgeoning young population facing scarce job opportunities and struggling to afford three square meals a day, lofty promises of democratic reform ring hollow without tangible improvements in employment and living standards. The economic hardships served as a catalyst for political change, reminding policymakers that without addressing the immediate needs of the populace, long-term reforms will fail to take root.

In pursuit of sustainable change

To tackle the deep-rooted issues revealed by the 2024 uprising, a comprehensive, multi-pronged strategy is essential.

First, the educational system must be overhauled to meet modern market demands. Modernising curricula to include vocational training, STEM subjects, and soft skills will equip students with the tools necessary for today's job market. Strengthening higher education through increased investment in research and innovation can create an ecosystem that nurtures both entrepreneurship and technical expertise. This focus addresses the chronic mismatch between education and employment needs.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) Socio-Economic and Demographic Survey 2023, only 0.83% of the educated population in Bangladesh have obtained technical education, encompassing fields such as engineering, IT, and vocational training. In contrast, 92.02% have pursued general education, and 7.15% have received religious education.[3]

This significant disparity highlights a persistent skills gap in high-demand sectors, indicating that the current educational trends may not sufficiently prepare students for technical and innovation-driven careers.

To combat this, the Bangladeshi government set a target to increase enrolment in technical education to 30% by 2030, up from the current 17.25%. This initiative aims to create a skilled workforce compatible with the demands of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.[4]

Additionally, gender disparity remains a concern, with women comprising only 14% of all STEM professionals in Bangladesh—a trend that is mirrored in the educational level, where fewer female students pursue STEM subjects—underscoring the need for inclusive strategies in technical education.[5]

Clearly, current educational trends do not sufficiently prepare students for technical and innovation-driven careers. This trend is problematic because it limits the country's capacity for technological

> "At its core, the unrest in Bangladesh reaffirms the fundamental truth that politics ultimately comes down to bread and butter. (...) lofty promises of democratic reform ring hollow without tangible improvements in employment and living standards."

After 15 years in power, Bangladesh's 'Iron Lady' bowed to a public uprising. Sheikh Hasina, who had served as prime minister since 2009, was forced to resign and flee the country as hundreds of thousands defied a curfew and marched towards Dhaka in protest of unfair job quotas. Crowds erupted in celebration in front of the National Parliament Building soon after her departure. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2024.

advancement and economic diversification, leaving it vulnerable to rapid changes in global markets. To solve this issue, policy measures should be implemented to prioritise STEM education. This could include offering scholarships and financial incentives for students pursuing STEM fields, establishing specialised training programs in collaboration with industries, and integrating practical, hands-on learning experiences into school and university curricula. Additionally, early education initiatives that spark interest in science and technology can help build a robust pipeline of future STEM professionals, ultimately aligning the workforce with the demands of a modern, dynamic economy.

Simultaneously, economic diversification is crucial. Bangladesh must shift away from an overreliance on traditional sectors such as the readymade garment industry by investing in emerging industries such as technology and renewable energy. These sectors offer the promise of a broader employment base, essential for a nation grappling with high youth unemployment. In tandem with these investments, fostering private sector growth through targeted incentives can help create an environment where start-ups and small businesses flourish, providing new avenues for job creation and sustainable growth.

Supporting entrepreneurship is another key pillar. Improving access to finance—through expanded microloan and credit facilities—can empower young entrepreneurs to launch and scale innovative ventures. Coupling these financial resources with robust mentorship programs will facilitate critical skills transfer, ensuring that new businesses can not only start, but thrive. This dynamic approach is vital for transforming entrepreneurial potential into tangible economic opportunities.

Infrastructure development further underpins these efforts. Enhancing digital connectivity is imperative to support remote work and drive digital transformation, while modernising transportation and energy systems will attract both domestic and foreign investment. Upgraded infrastructure not only boosts economic productivity, but also makes the business environment more competitive and resilient in a rapidly evolving global market.

Finally, transparent and inclusive governance is essential to ensure that reforms are both effective and sustainable. Implementing robust anti-corruption measures can restore public trust, while engaging civil society, academia, and the private sector in policymaking ensures that the reforms address the real needs of the people. A transparent governance

framework is critical for holding leaders accountable and creating an environment where progress is inclusive and equitable.

The road ahead

Bangladesh's path to lasting stability and prosperity lies in a holistic approach that modernises education, diversifies the economy, supports entrepreneurship, upgrades infrastructure, and ensures transparent governance. This strategy not only addresses the immediate challenges of job creation and economic growth but also lays the groundwork for a future where every citizen can enjoy the basic dignity of a good life.

The quota reform protests stand as a powerful reminder of the youth's determination to secure fair opportunities—opportunities that many have sacrificed their lives for. Their bravery and relentless pursuit of justice demand that we act decisively to reform our systems.

Let us honour their sacrifice by embracing these transformative changes, ensuring that the promise of merit and inclusivity will guide Bangladesh into a truly prosperous future. We must not fail the generation that dared to challenge an unjust system. ■

Reference

1 United Nations Office of High Commissioner, *OHCHR Fact-Finding Report: Human Rights Violations and Abuses related to the Protests of July and August 2024 in Bangladesh* (Geneva: United Nations, 2025).

2 International Labour Organisation, 'Bangladesh: Job creation and economic diversification remains top priority for government, employers and workers in 2025', *ILO News*, 4 March 2025. https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/bangladesh-job-creation-and-economic-diversification-remains-top-priority?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

3 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Report on Socio-Economic and Demographic Survey 2023* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

3 United News of Bangladesh, 'Govt aims to increase enrolment in technical education to 30% by 2030', *Dhaka Tribune*, 5 September 2022. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/education/293569/govt-aims-to-increase-enrolment-in-technical.

4 Nurul Islam Hasib, 'British Council focuses on 3 areas to close STEM gender gap', *Dhaka Tribune*, 7 December 2023. https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/education/333253/british-council-focuses-on-3-areas-to-close-stem.

Mashfiq Mizan is a journalist and sub-editor at *The Daily Star*.

@mugdho.mizan

Naimur Rahman is a dynamic storyteller and multimedia journalist with a knack for creating compelling stories across digital platforms. Skilled in blending cinematic visuals with engaging narratives, Naimur wants to bring light to untold stories.

@naimurjo
@naimurjo
@naimur22
naimur9250@gmail.com

The Untold Labour of Stone Lifters

Along the Piyain River in Sylhet, Bangladesh, hundreds of men work tirelessly to lift stones from watery depths. Their labour fuels Bangladesh's construction industry, but despite the vital role they play in shaping cities, these stone lifters remain invisible, their struggles unnoticed. With no work contracts, no safety measures, and no recognition, they endure long hours in cold water, facing constant health risks and uncertainty. This story sheds light on their silent, backbreaking work and the harsh realities of their lives—unacknowledged but essential to the country's growth.

Naimur Rahman

Several boats standing by as two workers dive deep into the river to collect stones, which they then load onto the boats. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2025.

The Piyain River cuts through the landscape of Sylhet like a vein, carrying more than just water. It carries the weight of labour, of struggle, of survival. Along its banks and in its cold depths, hundreds of men work in silence, lifting stones from the riverbed, loading boats, and hauling them to shore. There are no statistics that document their existence. These workers—stone lifters—go unnoticed, though their labour fuels the construction industry across Bangladesh. The stones they pull from the water will travel far, reaching the capital and other cities, becoming the foundations of buildings, roads, and bridges. But the men who lift them remain nameless, forgotten in the flow of progress.

I travelled to Sylhet to meet these workers, to see the world they inhabit, to understand the toil behind the stones that shape our cities. The journey took me to the banks of the Piyain River, where hundreds of workers stand knee-deep in the cold water, their hands dipping below the surface, searching for stones. Their faces are tired, their bodies lean and strong from years of backbreaking labour. There are no records of how many people do this work, no official data, no surveys. No one has counted them because no one cares to. They are part of an invisible workforce, unrecognised by the government, without rights or protection.

The sands and stones in the Piyain River originate from the hilly regions of Meghalaya, India. The river, a branch of the Surma River, carries sediments downstream from the Umgat River in Assam as it flows southward into Bangladesh. During the monsoon season, heavy rainfall and strong currents wash down massive amounts of sand, pebbles, and stones from the Meghalaya Plateau, depositing them along the riverbed and floodplains. Over time, these natural deposits accumulate, forming rich alluvial fans near Jaflong, making it a prime location for sand and stone extraction.

Eight years ago, stone quarries were banned in Bangladesh due to environmental concerns. But construction projects never stopped, and the demand for stone only grew. With no other choice, workers turned to the rivers, spending eight, 10, or even 12 hours a day in cold water, their bodies aching, their health deteriorating. During the monsoon season, they dive deep, filling buckets with stones while battling strong currents. There are no work contracts, no safety regulations—just survival.

Bojlu has been doing this job for nine years. He is 35 now, though his body seems older, shaped by years of lifting and hauling. 'I wake up before the sun, step into the river at six in the morning, and don't stop until evening,' he said. On other days, he starts at noon and works into the night. His job never really ends—it only pauses when exhaustion forces him to rest. 'The hardest part?'—he wrings out his soaked shirt, water dripping onto the muddy ground—'We have to stay in wet clothes the whole time. We step down from the boat, grab the stones, and when the boat is full, we take it to shore to sell. By then, we are freezing.'

The work is relentless, but stopping means losing a day's wage. They earn by the boatload, and prices vary depending on the quality of the stones. The best stones—those that fetch the highest price—are also the hardest to pull up.

Salam Mia, 48, has been lifting stones for six years. He is cautious when he speaks, glancing around. 'Sometimes, the police come,' he said. 'They tell us we can't work here, but we don't know if that's true or not. We're just trying to survive.'

There is a constant worry of being forced to stop, of losing the fragile livelihood they have. Unlike workers in factories or formal labour sectors, there are no unions, no safety nets. If they get sick, they stay home. If they stay home, they earn nothing. And sickness is common. The water is cold, their bodies stay wet for hours, and there is no time to dry off between trips.

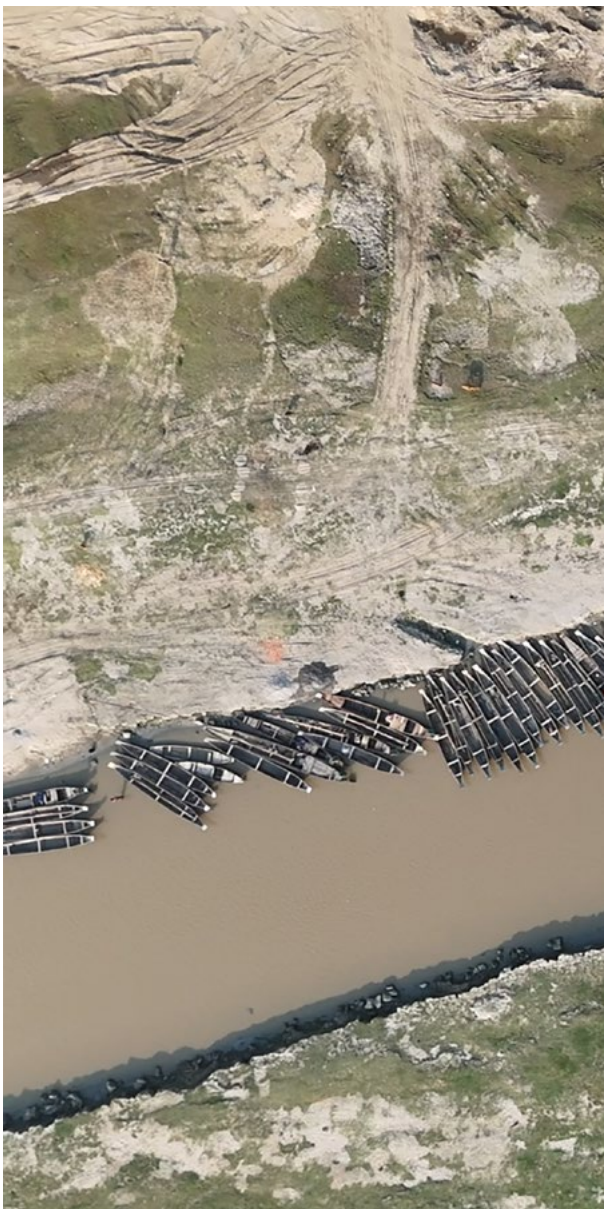
Monsoon season is the worst. The river swells, the currents become stronger, and the water turns murky. It's harder to see the stones, harder to breathe when diving. The men tie ropes around their waists, securing themselves to boats or wooden poles to avoid getting swept away. They dive repeatedly, filling buckets with stones, bringing them up one by one. The constant exposure to cold water weakens their immune systems. Fevers and colds are frequent, but they have no money for treatment. They take herbal remedies, drink hot water, and hope to recover quickly. A few days of sickness means no work, and no work means no money. The river does not wait, and neither do their expenses.

"The stones they pull from the water will travel far, reaching the capital and other cities, becoming the foundations of buildings, roads, and bridges. But the men who lift them remain nameless, forgotten in the flow of progress."

Top: A worker lifting large stones from the river and loading them onto a boat while two other workers stand by. They take turns—when one tires, another goes into the water. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2025.

Middle: A worker lifting a bucket full of stones from the Piyain River, allowing water to drain out from holes in the bottom. Photograph taken by Naimur Rahman, 2025.

Bottom: A man pushing his stone-laden boat through the Piyain River, heading towards traders waiting on the shore. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2025.



Despite the difficulties, they continue. The stones don't move themselves, and there's always someone willing to do the work. A full boatload can be worth anywhere from BDT 1,000–7,000 (USD 8-58), depending on the stone's quality and the size of the haul. In some parts of the river, workers earn as little as BDT 400 (USD 3) per boat. They make multiple trips a day; four or five, if they are lucky. It's just enough to survive, never enough to save.

The stone lifters don't work alone. Every boat consists of three or four men, each with a role in the process. One steers the boat while the others dive into the water, searching for stones, filling their buckets with whatever they can find. It's a rhythm that's been practiced for years, a rhythm that helps them survive another day.

Among them is Utsho, just 19 years old. He started working two years ago, following in his father's footsteps. He didn't finish school. 'I started with my father,' he says simply. 'He was the only provider for our family. Now I can help too.' There is no complaint in his voice, only quiet acceptance. 'It's a hard job, but we're poor. We have to do it.'

Stone-lifting doesn't just happen in the river. There are those who dig in plain lands, others who work along the riverbanks, pulling up buried stones. But the struggle is the same. None of them have savings. They live hand to mouth, hoping for good days, dreading the bad ones.

There is no research on these workers, no studies documenting the toll this job takes on their bodies, their lives. The stones they lift shape the country, but their own existence remains unacknowledged. The buildings that rise in Dhaka, the roads that connect cities, the bridges that stretch over rivers—these all rest on the backs of men like Bojlu, Salam, and Utsho. Yet, their work is uncelebrated, their names unknown.

The river gives, and the river takes. And for those who work in its depths, there is no rest. ■

Below: Boats that are used for extracting stones and sand waiting by the shore of the river while the workers go on an afternoon break. Photograph by Naimur Rahman, 2025.

Kalabagi: The Struggle Between Water's Blessing and Curse

Kalabagi, in southern Bangladesh, is witnessing the devastating effects of climate change. A community once sustained by fishing now faces the cruel irony of rising seas consuming their land. For generations, the Kalabagi people have lived in sync with the rhythms of the water, but today, that very water threatens to swallow their homes. With each passing year, more land is lost, and the future of their community grows ever more uncertain.

Aerial view of the southern part of the coastal area at Kalabagi, Bangladesh.
Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.

Ziaul Haque Oisharjh

Ziaul Haque Oisharjh is documentary photographer and filmmaker from Bangladesh. He is attracted to people's lives and their untold stories. After graduating from business school, he completed his post graduate diploma in Visual Journalism at the Asian Centre for Journalism at Ateneo de Manila University with the support of Adenauer fellowship. He has been working in photography and videography for more than half a decade and has worked with many national and international media outlets and various NGOs and INGOs. He is passionate about going further on his photography voyage and contribute to society.

@oisharjh
@ziaulhaqueoisharjh
@oisharjh
@ziaul-haque-oisharjh-99a3b2149
oisharjh.com
oisharjh@gmail.com

Kalabagi, located in the southern part of Bangladesh, is a place where the effects of climate change are painfully visible. The people here have always relied on the water that surrounds them. Fishing is not only their way of life; it is their livelihood. But today, the water they once considered a blessing is now also a curse, a force that both sustains and is slowly swallowing their world.

For generations, the people of Kalabagi have known little else but the rhythms of the sea—rowing their boats, casting their nets, and living off the bounty of the waters. Fishing is not merely a trade; it is a legacy passed down over generations. But now, this ancient profession is under threat as the land they call home slowly sinks beneath the rising tide. The very waters that have provided for them have begun to take away everything they hold dear.

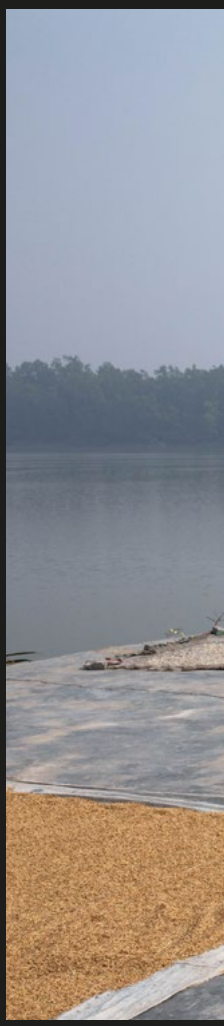
Kalabagi has endured many natural disasters in the past, but the current threat is unlike anything they have faced before. The land, once firm beneath their feet, is gradually vanishing, consumed by the relentless rise of the sea. In just a few years, there may be little left but water where land once stood.

Despite being surrounded by water, the people of Kalabagi cannot drink a drop of it. The water that floods their homes and fields is saline, unsuitable for consumption. For drinking and cooking, they rely on rainwater stored in tanks or trek to distant pumps—an exhausting and often unreliable source of fresh water.

Every year, more and more of their land is lost to the sea. With each passing season, the people of Kalabagi are left wondering what the future holds. Will their children have a home? Will there be land for them to live on? As the waters continue to rise, these questions grow more urgent, and the reality of their existence becomes ever more uncertain. ■

Top: A man inspecting his boat for possible damage.
Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.

Below: A fisherman fixing his net.
Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.



Top: A fisherman returning home. Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.
Below: A hanging toilet made out of bamboo. Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.

Top: A boy on his way to madrassa (Islamic school). Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.
Below: A man with his daughters visiting a site submerged by the river. Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.

Women collecting drinking water for their families from the nearest handpump. Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.

Siblings playing on the bed while their mother prepares and cleans rice. Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.

Fishermen fishing and preparing nets on boats by the coastal area of Kalabagi, Bangladesh. Photograph by Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, 2024.


JOB OPENING

Cats sleeping among used school books. The books are sold for a very low price along Recto Avenue, Metro Manila, Philippines. From 2018 to 2022, only PHP 1 billion of the government's PHP 12 billion allotment for textbooks was used.

Photograph by Jilson Tiu, 2024. All facts are verified via Edcom (Educational Commission) of the Senate of the Philippines.

Epilogue

Lisa Wlaschek holds a Master of Arts in Photography Studies and Research, a curatorial degree, from the Folkwang University of the Arts in Germany, and a Bachelor of Arts in Asia Studies with a minor in Japanese. She is currently working as a Project Manager at the KAS Media Programme Asia in Singapore.

linkedin.com/in/lisawlaschek
lisa.sg
lisa.wlaschek@kas.de

My mother once told me that she was only able to study and do her homework for a limited period of time each day since my grandparents wanted her to help with farm work. I remember that, when the *only* Christmas gift I received from her when I was about thirteen years old was an ugly, bulky, heavy, green English dictionary, I felt quite hurt. 'Here we go, mummy criticising me for my bad grades again! And on Christmas. Oh boy.' Many years later, I understand that the symbol behind this was to give me something she didn't have the privilege of: education. (And perhaps also a bit of mockery on her side). Quite frankly, during my teenage years, life was overwhelming to an extent that all I wanted was to draw.

After years of drawing and discovering an additional talent for languages with logographic writing systems and other scripts, I now curate and manage creative content from talented people within the Asian region. I studied Asia Studies in my undergraduate days, and I graduated with a master's degree in Photography Studies and Research. Having built a life in Asia, I often think that I would have chosen another degree that would guarantee promising digits on my pay cheque had I needed to pay back what would most likely have been a costly education loan. But public universities in Germany are supported by the government's initiative to offer free education for everyone, as the education of the future workforce should not depend on their parents' ability to afford tuition fees.

A snapshot of serendipity in Tokyo's Shibuya district, taken analogue with a film camera.
Photograph by Lisa Wlaschek, 2017.

A more common thought in different parts of the globe is that, if you invest in education, you'll most likely want your returns as with stocks or the real estate market. It is therefore even more important that we support media professionals in their training since many of them work under uncertain conditions and without employment or health benefits. We do this through the Adenauer Fellowship, a scholarship programme by Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, as well as through this magazine, *ArtIQulate*, as Ansgar Graw described in his foreword.

We start the magazine with Alexis Carlo Corpuz' 'Of Theories and Practice' on the educational approach for visual journalism. Alexis, as an alumnus of the Adenauer Fellowship, is currently engaged with one of our longest standing partners, the Asian Centre for Journalism, which is excelling in journalism education in the Philippines.

This edition of *ArtIQulate* also includes a feature story on the Adenauer Fellowship, the scholarship programme by the KAS Media Programme Asia, written by Adenauer Fellowship alumnus and Reuters correspondent Navneeta Nandan.

Naimur Rahman, an Adenauer Fellowship alumnus as well, submitted a strong multi-media story documenting the life of stone-lifters in Bangladesh. The story is complimented by reportage from Ziaul Haque Oisharjh, also from Bangladesh, about labouring on water under the pressure of climate change.

Everyone's path is unique. Andreana Chavez shows us an example of learning in the margins by documenting a student who has made a bustling market her study space, while Jacque Manabat illustrates the journey in search of meaningful work. Pau Villanueva offers an insight into the studies of the Lumad, an indigenous group in the Philippines.

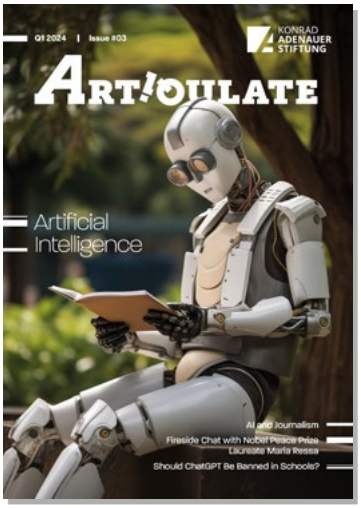
The articles are supported by single photos from talented photographers around Asia, which are placed as a break between the pages. Stephan Rozario from Bangladesh submitted a strong single photo for this edition of the magazine. The magazine is also supported by single photos from Jilson Tiu, Sukanta Kumar and first-time author Andreana Chavez.

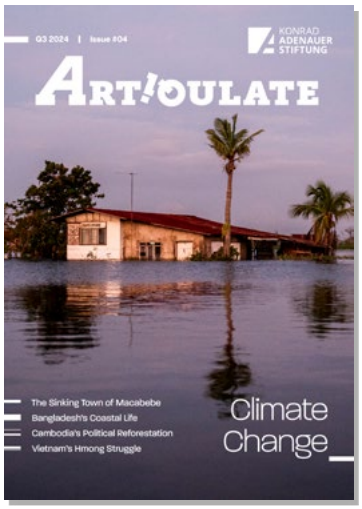
Other authors include Christina Chi, Ibrahim Khalil, Mashfiq Maizan and his co-author Naimur Rahman, and Stephan Uttom.

We hope that you enjoyed this edition of the magazine as much as we enjoyed creating it. The next edition of *ArtIQulate* will feature the topic 'Home'. ■

'The Mess' by Lisa Wlaschek via https://lisa.sg.
Watercolour and ballpoint pen illustration, 2019.
This illustration came to mind after a minimalising phase, which I still benefit from today. It shows the chaos I felt of organising, donating, and selling most of my possessions.

Discover _Previous Issues





https://www.kas.de/mediaasia

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG
MEDIA PROGRAMME ASIA

ArtIQulate is a publication for the Adenauer Fellowship, a scholarship programme by the Media Programme Asia, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd.

Editors
Ansgar Graw, Lisa Wlaschek

Publisher
Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd. (Konrad Adenauer Foundation)
ARC380, 380 Jalan Besar, #11-01, Singapore 209000
+65 6603 6181
media.singapore@kas.de
https://kas-media.asia
Registration Number 201228783N

ISSN 2972-3930

Cover Photography: Jilson Tiu, https://jilsontiu.co
Editing: Ariel Lee, https://www.linkedin.com/in/ariel-lee-editor
Layout: Yeonwoo Baik, https://romantikker.myportfolio.com

ART!CULATE

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd. (Konrad Adenauer Foundation)
ARC380, 380 Jalan Besar, #11-01, Singapore 209000
+65 6603 6181
media.singapore@kas.de
https://www.kas.de/de/web/medien-asien

ArtIQulate is a publication by the Media Programme Asia, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Ltd.

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

ADENAUER FELLOWSHIP