

# 4IR and Bangladesh: Are We Ready?

Mashiat Noor Prapti<sup>1\*</sup> and Md Rafid Abrar Miah<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lecturer, UCSI University Bangladesh Branch Campus

<sup>2</sup>Research Officer, BIISS

\*Corresponding Author

## Abstract

*The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is the era of convergence of advanced technology such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Internet of Things (IoT), automation, blockchain which is changing the rule of the game for the global economic and social paradigms. A transition from the labor-intensive sector to a diversified and technology driven economy represents greater opportunity for Bangladesh. But it faces challenges – from a lack of digital infrastructure, skill shortages and regulatory gaps – which could hinder its ability to reap the benefits. Based on a critical analysis of Bangladesh’s economy, this paper discusses the current dependence of low wage sectors like agriculture and readymade garments (RMG) industry and prospects for integration of 4IR technologies in enhancing sectoral productivity, creation of new job sectors and Human capital development. Key barriers of technological infrastructure deficits and cybersecurity risks, coupled with social inequality, could hamper efforts to reduce disparities, if not addressed with targeted interventions. The paper suggests how to tackle these challenges: by investing in digital infrastructure; educating and training the labor force; promoting public-private partnerships; and putting in place a capable regulatory framework. The utilization of the strategies stated above could help Bangladesh exceed 4IRs intricacies and pursue its sustainable and inclusive growth. It highlights the need for proactive policy making and strategic investment in order to ensure that Bangladesh remain in the race guiding towards becoming a competitive player in the global 4IR landscape.*

**Keywords:** 4IR, Bangladesh, Labor-intensive, RMG, Artificial Intelligence.

## **1. Introduction**

The Fourth Industrial Revolution marks a paradigm shift in which societies, industries and economies rapidly evolve as a result of fast developing innovations in technology. This isn't a revolution just like the earlier industrial revolutions fueled by mechanization, electricity, and digital computing; but therefore, it assembles some of the highest of modern technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, the Internet of Things, automation, biotechnology, and blockchain to support it. These innovations are highly efficient, smart, interconnected, and automated systems that integrate all physical, digital and biological domains in extremely efficient and creative ways and change not only the economic but also the social paradigm (Schwab, 2016). These technologies converge to provide the capability for real time data sharing, predictive analytics and autonomous decision making, any of which can meaningfully contribute to economic growth, productivity and enhanced quality of life.

But this paper argues that, while the 4IR has transformative potential for the Bangladeshi economy, realizing these gains depends on overcoming critical challenges in infrastructure, skill gaps, and regulations. The objective of the analysis is to analyse the opportunities that 4IR brings and the constraints that could limit Bangladesh's ability to capture the full benefit from 4IR. This paper provides insight into strategies, policies and investments for Bangladesh to sustain its growth in the era of transformation, by critically assessing these aspects.

The paper is organized as follows: The current situation of Bangladesh's economy is analyzed in Section II, giving the overall view of the economy, strengths and weaknesses, and the degree of technology adoption. Section III explores the potential 4IR can deliver – in terms of increasing productivity, the creation of new job sectors, improvement in infrastructure, and the development of social and human capital. In the next section, we propose that Bangladesh needs to tackle several challenges to properly implement 4IR technologies, including technological infrastructure gaps, the skills gap, and regulatory advancement.

Using an exploratory and qualitative methodology based on secondary data analysis, this paper develops an understanding of the impact of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on a developing economy, such as Bangladesh. It draws on academic journals, government reports and publications (among other sources) from international organizations, including the World Economic Forum, the Asian Development Bank and the United Nations. Recent studies and industry reports on impacts of 4IR technologies in Bangladesh along with their potential impacts on key sectors of the economy like manufacturing, agriculture and information and communication technology (ICT) are analysed.

The paper considers empirical data and theoretical frameworks regarding how 4IR technologies could influence productivity, job creation, infrastructure and human capital, in order to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the possibilities. Case studies reveal potential advantages of 4IR and the difficulties for developing countries to apply such technologies.

Thus, this analysis enables a detailed investigation of specific Bangladesh context vis-à-vis the 4IR environment with reference to pertinent comparison and discovering the best practices that would feed into policy recommendations (Schwab, 2016; UNDP, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2018).

This methodology is used to synthesize these insights from various sources, and provides a solid baseline for assessing both challenges and opportunities of 4IR for Bangladesh. Use of secondary data leads to customised recommendations balancing the global trends with the specific requirements and capacities of the Bangladeshi economy.

## **2. Bangladesh's Current Economic Landscape and Potential Opportunities of 4IR**

In the past few decades, Bangladesh's economic landscape has changed dramatically from an agrarian economy to manufacturing and service sectors. While substantial progress has been made, the economy still depends heavily on low wage, labour intensive industries including readymade garments (RMG) and agriculture which represent substantial share of employment and export earnings (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2019). However, Bangladesh needs to overcome structural challenges in its economy such as skill deficiencies, a limited digital infrastructure and dependence on other traditional economies to harness the potential in the full Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

### ***2.1 Key Sectors and Economic Contributions***

Bangladesh economy is highly dependent on the *Readymade Garments sector*, providing around 80 per cent of the country's export earnings with an employment of more than four million workers where majority are women (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association [BGMEA], 2020). The architecture of this sector has played an active role in driving economic growth and poverty reduction; however, it has a tendency to adopt low labour cost and limited levels of technological innovation in the form of IoT and automation. For illustration, automation on production lines in manufacturing has the potential to increase productivity, but its uptake has been constrained in Bangladesh on account of both inabilities to afford financial outlay and fear of job dislocation (ILO, 2019).

Bangladesh is still heavily dependent on *agriculture*, employing of approximately 40 percent of the workforce and providing its food security (World Bank, 2020). Although the industry is heavily dependent on traditional farming methods, there is very little incorporation of precision agriculture and other 4IR technologies that can help increase yields, and reduce waste of resources. There have been some initial successes in digital solution introductions, notably mobile apps targeting farmers (Islam & Grönlund, 2019), but large-scale adoption of IoT and data analytics in agriculture is still in very early stages.

According to the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA), government initiatives intend on turning Bangladesh a middle-income technology driven economy and *information and communication technology (ICT)* sector is emerging as an area of growth. The ICT sector is promising to follow a rapid growth trajectory, most evident in software development, business process outsourcing (BPO), and digital services. Though, despite this momentum, Bangladesh's ICT industry suffers from skill and infrastructure shortfalls, which reduce its international competitiveness and capacity to encourage broader economic digitalization (BIDA, 2020).

## ***2.2 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Bangladeshi Economy***

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has shown impressive economic growth (at least 6.5 percent annually) on the strength of a large young workforce and continuing urbanization (World Bank, 2020). This potential adaptability to new economic shifts, specifically the economic shifts of the 4IR (ADB, 2019), makes the economy appear strong, capable of bouncing back from global downturns due to its resilience. Consequently, this growth has largely been focused in low technology sophistication sectors that may hinder Bangladesh's transition to a 4IR driven economy.

The country's reliance on low value exports, especially from the RMG area, reflects a serious vulnerability. Due to low technological integration and limited automation, technology is only a limited constraint to productivity growth, leaving Bangladesh exposed to changes in global demand, and competition from other low-cost manufacturing hubs (ILO, 2019). Furthermore, Bangladesh's emphasis on labor intensive industries restricts its transition towards an organized economy as these industries are relatively less susceptible to disruptive 4IR technologies that could raise efficiency and add value.

## ***2.3 Current Level of Technological Adoption and Digital Infrastructure***

Although Bangladesh has made its way greatly in terms of ICT development, especially in urban areas, but the digital infrastructure of Bangladesh is not suitable to facilitate widespread 4IR adoption especially in rural areas. While penetration of Internet is around 34 percent of population, an important element of digitalization, it limits access to online resources and platforms that are essential to 4IR technologies (ITU, 2020). It presents a major challenge to this digital divide since a vast majority of the workforce lives in rural areas, areas that haven't tapped into technological advances to increase productivity and innovation.

In addition, the rate of digital literacy is low and a significant digital skills and technology access gap exists at all levels, especially regarding older and rural generations (Islam & Grönlund, 2019). Constraints such as these emphasize the need for investment in digital infrastructure, and in initiatives which aim to increase the digital literacy of the population. Without these foundational elements, large scale adoption of 4IR techs like IoT in agriculture or AI in urban management tends to stay limited.

Summing up, the Bangladesh economy is resilient and already on a fast track to growth; however, these dooms not escape structural and technological limitations that hindered countries from exploiting the potential impact of 4IR. This is visible in the labor-intensive industries and a digital infrastructure that is far behind international standards. For 4IR technologies to take root, therefore, policy interventions and strategic investments must create such an environment. Addressing these challenges presents the potential that Bangladesh could diversify its economic base, and improve productivity and competitiveness in an increasingly digital global economy.

### **3. Challenges of 4IR for Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has transformative opportunities arising out of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) but to take the fullest advantages of those, it needs to overcome significant challenges. Thus, the challenges to be tackled around 4IR integration in the region cut across the infrastructural, educational, social and regulatory domains all of which are key to ensuring a sustainable and inclusive integration of 4IR technologies. If Bangladesh fails to address these hurdles, inequalities would widen, the skills gap gets bigger and Bangladesh trails far behind in the global economy.

#### ***3.1 Technological Infrastructure Gaps***

The deficiency of technological infrastructure is a fundamental challenge for Bangladesh to adopt 4IR technologies. While high speed internet is a prerequisite to run advanced technologies such as IoT and artificial intelligence, it is not yet available for all, most particularly in rural and remote areas. Internet penetration in Bangladesh remains low (34 percent of the population has Internet access, (ITU, 2020) and this approximation of digital divide limit the ability of the 4IR in transforming the nation and deprive rural communities from enjoying productivity enhancing 4IR technologies, particularly in agriculture.

Additionally, electricity reliability is also an issue as there are frequent power outages that disrupted digital operations (Rahman et al., 2020). The power inconsistencies are also a big barrier as 4IR technologies are heavily reliant on a continuous stable energy supply. While the diffusion of 4IR technologies, such as IoT and automation, could lead to large gains in efficiency in sectors like manufacturing and agriculture, Bangladesh will not be able to implement these technologies broadly unless significant investment is made in both digital and energy infrastructure.

#### ***3.2 Skills Gap and Workforce Development Needs***

4IR brings fast advancing technology that requires the need for a workforce, that is skilled enough to execute complex digital and technical tasks. Though it is not very far off, Bangladesh's present educational and vocational system is not attuned to the ongoing demands of a 4IR economy. Most of the work force does not possess digital literacy and

skills required for high tech jobs, especially in data science, AI and robotics (Hasan et al., 2021). According to Islam & Grönlund (2019), only 10 percent of recent graduates in the ICT sector meet the technical requirements for 4IR related roles - showcasing a vast gap in employable skills.

Furthermore, the country's education system is over weighted in theory and low on practicality when it comes to digital skills and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. Without adequate investments in reskilling and upskilling, a mismatch in the skills of the Bangladeshi workforce and the need of a 4IR economy is around the corner. Certainly, as the WEF (2018) stipulates, there is a need to develop technical programmes on job training, increase vocational education and integrate digital literacy into school curriculum in order to have skilled workforce that would work in the future jobs.

### ***3.3 Job Displacement and Social Inequality***

Although 4IR has the potential to spur new industries and create new jobs, it presents a real threat to job displacement across low skill sectors through automation and robotics. Automation can become increasingly cost effective for industries that are heavily reliant on manual labour, for instance, RMG and agriculture may go through huge job loss. For example, the introduction of AI and robotics into manufacturing could cut demand for low skill workers—eventually eliminating those jobs and potentially causing a dislocation of the economy due to job losses (ILO, 2019).

Bangladesh is at higher risk for job displacement because of its substantial population living on labor intensive jobs for survival. Unless proactive steps are taken to create new opportunities for displaced workers as well as retrain them, 4IR could worsen social inequality and further push low skill workers to poverty. To lessen the negative effects of job displacement, the government must run social safety nets and pro-growth strategies and invest in retraining programs and in industrial areas that can offer and alternative employment (Rahman et al., 2020).

### ***3.4 Cybersecurity Threats and Data Privacy Concerns***

With the proliferation of digital connectivity of 4IR technologies, Bangladesh is exposed to the growing dangers of cybersecurity. In industries and government institutions, as they adopt IoT and AI and their data and infrastructure move into the cloud, they become more prone to data breaching, identity theft and cyber-attacks. Although Bangladesh has already experienced numerous high profile cyber incidents specifically the major cyber heist at Bangladesh Bank in 2016 that established Bangladesh's susceptibility to sophisticated cyber threats (BIPSS, 2020).

These risks are compounded by lack of robust cybersecurity framework and insufficient awareness over data privacy issues. The protection of data privacy assumes considerable importance in an economy driven by 4IR, where generation of huge amounts of personal and sensitive data becomes commonplace. In today's scenario, Bangladesh has

no comprehensive data protection laws which positions both these entities [individuals and businesses] at greater exposed risks of the data and unauthorized access (Chowdhury, 2021). Building up cybersecurity infrastructure, and raising awareness of data privacy is a beginning; encouraging the creation of regulatory measures is one step later.

## **5. Regulatory and Policy Challenges**

The specific difficulties of 4IR have not been adequately addressed by Bangladesh's current regulatory framework. The fast-paced evolution of technology makes it all the more important to have legislation that can adapt to new developments while also standing firm on fundamental concerns like data privacy, IP rights, and the ethical quandaries that arise from using AI. Despite the fact that the regulations of the 4IR driven economy are different from what Bangladesh is now implementing (Mazumdar & Alharahsheh, 2019).

Furthermore, policy execution is hindered by bureaucratic inefficiencies and a lack of cooperation across government institutions. Consider the information and communication technology (ICT) and biotechnology sectors, where a lack of adequate regulation on data ownership and intellectual property stifles innovation (BIPSS, 2020). In order to make the most of 4IR, Bangladesh needs a legislative framework that looks to the future and takes into account not only technological progress but also ethical discussions, data protection, and IP rights.

## **6. Ethical and Societal Implications**

AI, automation, and other Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies are being deployed with transparency and accountability, addressing the ethical challenges associated with these deployments. AI algorithms may perpetuate biases present in historical data, leading to biased practices in hiring, credit distribution, and law enforcement (UNDP, 2020). Bangladesh, as a developing nation with basic regulatory norms for AI transparency and accountability, encounters a distinct array of ethical challenges associated with this technology.

Moreover, Fourth Industrial Revolution technology may engender social repercussions that result in novel types of inequality. If not managed appropriately, the advantages of the Fourth Industrial Revolution may disproportionately benefit individuals in higher income and metropolitan areas, hence exacerbating the disadvantages faced by rural and marginalised groups (Hasan et al., 2021). Policies that promote equal access to Fourth Industrial Revolution technology and govern the ethical application of AI and automation will be essential to guarantee that the benefits of the Fourth Industrial Revolution are distributed across all segments of society.



## **7. Financial Constraints and Investment Needs**

The implementation costs of Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, such as AI, robots, and IoT, are substantial, posing financial obstacles for both the public and commercial sectors in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, small and medium firms represent a significant portion of the economy; however, constrained capital investments hinder their ability to compete in the Fourth Industrial Revolution-driven market (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies [BIDS], 2019).

Moreover, insufficient public support for technological infrastructure and research and development hinders the nation's adoption of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. To surmount these financial limitations, Bangladesh must attract international investment, collaborate with the business sector, and explore novel financing options that promote innovation and technical advancement. For example, incentives for the adoption of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (tax incentives, research and development grants, etc.) can encourage local enterprises to invest in Fourth Industrial Revolution capabilities (Chowdhury 2021). Without sufficient financial backing, Bangladesh would fall behind in a competitive global landscape marked by rapid technological progress.

## **8. Policy Recommendation**

To successfully navigate the challenges and harness the opportunities of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), Bangladesh requires a comprehensive policy framework that addresses infrastructure, skills development, regulation, and inclusivity. This section outlines a set of detailed policy recommendations aimed at creating an enabling environment for 4IR while promoting sustainable and inclusive growth. These recommendations emphasize government intervention, public-private partnerships, and investment in human capital to prepare Bangladesh for a 4IR-driven economy.

### ***8.1 Invest in Digital and Physical Infrastructure***

To adopt 4IR technologies, a strong digital infrastructure (such as high speed internet and reliable energy) is essential. At this time, Bangladesh has large deficits in both areas, especially in rural areas where Internet connectivity and electricity supply are not reliable (ITU, 2020). Money should go into laying the foundation for 4IR technologies in underserved regions, such as investments on expanding digital and energy infrastructure, where the government must give priority.

Broadband programs should be developed by the government for the benefit of rural areas to increase internet access, lower the connectivity cost, and provide the guarantee for the reliable electricity supply (Islam & Grönlund, 2019). Countries such as India have seen the use of public private partnerships (PPPs) to mobilise resources to expand rural broadband access (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, India, 2021). In addition, integrating renewable energy sources, for example, solar power can enhance renewable energy reliability in rural areas and less environmental impact (Rahman, Ahmed, & Chowdhury, 2020).



## ***8.2 Strengthen Educational and Vocational Training Systems***

4IR technologies are only successful when the workforce can handle the skills needed to manage complex digital and technical tasks. However, Bangladesh's current educational system is mainly focused on STEM and Digital skills where a large skill gap is found (Hasan, Hossain, & Karim, 2021). Consequently, in order to adequately equip the workforce for forthcoming obstacles, it is imperative that the education system be overhauled and vocational training be expanded.

If educational reforms are going to be made it is essential that we integrate STEM education and digital literacy into school curricula as early as we can. In the field of data science, AI, IoT and robotics, young adults are prepared for 4IR careers through the development of specialized vocational programs (WEF, 2018). Additionally, working with the private sector allows for support for on-the-job training, apprenticeship and internships, as proven effective in Germany as bridging the gap in skills (BMBF, 2020). Private firms can also be given incentives from the government to invest in their employees in training.

## ***8.3 Promote Inclusive Growth and Social Safety Nets***

Although 4IR will most certainly generate new employment opportunities, low-skilled sector jobs will be displaced as a result of these new jobs. This risk is particularly concerning in Bangladesh, where a significant number of workers are employed in the labour-intensive industry of ready-made garments (RMG) (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2019). This is why policies that promote inclusive development and policies that offer assistance to displaced workers are at the forefront. In the event that automation results in technological change, the government should provide social safety nets for workers, including rehabilitation programs and unemployment benefits. Additionally, it is imperative to establish inclusive policies that provide marginalised communities, such as women and rural populations, with access to 4IR. For instance, inclusive development may be achieved through targeted financing of female tech entrepreneurs and rural upskilling programs (Rahman, et al., 2020).

## ***8.4 Develop a Comprehensive Cybersecurity and Data Privacy Framework***

Cybersecurity and data privacy concerns, however, are only going to grow as a result of the 4IR's increased connectivity and data consumption. Nevertheless, Bangladesh has experienced numerous high-profile cyber incidents, necessitating the implementation of robust cybersecurity policies and regulations (BIPSS, 2020). The nation's ability to trust digital systems is becoming increasingly dependent on the protection of the nation's critical infrastructure from cyber threats and the preservation of the privacy of people's data, as more and more aspects of life in the country become digitally connected. In order to establish a comprehensive cybersecurity strategy in Bangladesh, it would be necessary to establish a national cybersecurity agency, enact data protection laws, and invest in cyber security infrastructure. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) has significantly increased the global standard for data protection

(European Commission, 2019), and there are valuable lessons to be learnt. Once more, the implementation of cybersecurity training programs for government employees, enterprises, and educational institutions will fortify Bangladesh's digital security and ensure that educational institutions are adequately prepared to withstand cyber threats. (Chowdhury, 2021)

### ***8.5 Update Regulatory Frameworks to Encourage Innovation and Address***

#### ***Ethical Concerns***

To address ethical concerns, including bias in AI, transparency, and accountability, innovation necessitates a regulatory framework that is both robust and adaptable. This constrains Bangladesh's potential, particularly in a time when other nations are transitioning to fusion economies (Mazumdar & Alharahsheh, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial to update regulations to promote a digital economy and to facilitate the adoption of ethical practices in the areas of artificial intelligence and data utilisation.

The government should establish a regulatory framework that prioritises innovation, safeguards consumer rights, and promotes the ethical implementation of AI and automation. One of the most well-known examples of regulatory sandboxes is their ability to foster innovation while simultaneously mitigating risks in a controlled environment (UNDP, 2020). Additionally, to establish ethical guidelines for the use of 4IR technology and a data governance council to ensure accountability and transparency in the use of 4IR technologies. (World Economic Forum, 2018).

### ***8.6 Foster Public-Private Partnerships for Innovation and R&D***

Access to mobilized resources, innovation and the speed of adoption of 4IR technologies require public private partnerships (PPPs). PPPs can promote development of research and development (R&D), infrastructure, and workforce training as means to enable a collaborative ecosystem in which the public and private sectors can both win. Such as country like Singapore in which, government and industry works together on R&D in the advanced manufacturing (Economic Development Board Singapore, 2021).

To promote PPPs in technology driven sector, Bangladeshi government should provide tax incentives and co-financing opportunities for R&D projects in AI, IoT and automation. Institutions such as the BIDA (2020) also encourage government agencies to work with private companies to build innovation hubs and digital incubators to support startups in the 4IR. The partnerships can spur innovation and help on the growth of SMEs and new job creation in the emerging industries.

### ***8.7 Expand Access to Financing and Incentives for Technology Adoption***

According to the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (2019), one of the 4IR blockers in Bangladesh is the high cost that attracts the use of advanced technologies which only large entities can afford, which some of the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) fail to afford (BIDS, 2019). Access to finance can expand to companies including

SMEs, to enable them invest in 4IR technologies and improve their competitiveness in a global market with incentives.

Second, the government should create technology funds, offer low interest loans and grant tax incentives to induce SMEs to incorporate 4IR technologies. Possible initiatives, including ‘innovation vouchers or grants’ for adopting new technologies and training staff could be supported for SMEs (Chowdhury, 2021). In addition, collaborating with international financial institutions to set up funding programs that will fit digital transformation funding programs for SMEs to acquire advanced technologies has been provided (ADB, 2019).

### ***8.8 Encourage Future-Oriented Research and Sector-Specific Strategies***

The 4IR technologies have different implications in different sectors of the economy among them manufacturing, agriculture and ICT. This will encourage sector specific research and future oriented studies to tailor policy measures that will optimally achieve benefits and minimise risks in each sector. Research can inform us about best practices, assess the feasibility of particular technologies, and generate evidence based policy and implementation recommendations.

In high impact sectors like AI for agriculture, IoT for logistics or automation in RMG, the government should sponsor the research. Knowledge sharing can be improved, as well as innovation within targeted sectors, by partnering with academic institutions and industry experts (Bangladesh Academy of Sciences, 2020). Bangladesh can develop tailor strategies to use 4IR regarding its differentiated landscape of 4IR by supporting sector specific studies.

## **9. Future Directions**

It’s likely that Bangladesh’s road to 4IR economy is going to be a process of ongoing adaptation and collaboration. In this regard, future direction of the country includes promotion of an innovation culture, creation of adaptive regulatory frameworks as well as development of new areas of research including green technology and sustainable manufacturing. When Bangladesh continues to boost its digital and physical infrastructure it will be vital to monitor the uptake of 4IR, adjust policies accordingly, and invest in new technologies which will further sustainability and resilience.

**Focus on Sustainable and Green Technologies:** By putting emphasize on the sustainable development within the 4IR framework, Bangladesh can reduce pollution and energy consumption challenges at the expense of promoting economic growth. IoT-enabled resource monitoring and AI driven energy optimization reduces environmental impact and drive green growth (Rahman et al., 2020).

**Encourage Cross-Border Collaborations and Knowledge Sharing:** Partnerships with similar developing nations crossing over into 4IR challenges is something that Bangladesh can benefit and learn from. The UNDP (2020) reports that cross border collaboration in knowledge sharing, technology exchange and joint R&D initiatives can help Bangladesh overcome its 4IR hurdles with the benefit of insights and resources.

**Monitor and Evaluate Policy Impact:** I end with the importance of creating systems of monitoring and evaluation of the 4IR policy impact in Bangladesh to refine and adapt to these strategies. Bangladesh's 4IR policies can remain responsive to the country's changing needs through regular assessments, stakeholder feed back and flexible policy adjustment.

With a focus on future oriented strategy, following the above listed recommendations, Bangladesh can capitalize the transformative power of 4IR to attain sustainable, inclusive and resilient economic growth.

## **10. Conclusion**

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) is a transformative paradigm of global economic and social systems that integrates technology in a distinctive manner, improving productivity and fostering sustained prosperity. In historically labour-intensive sectors like ready-made garments (RMG) and agriculture, the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) presents a chance for Bangladesh to transition to a technology-driven, diversified economy. However, this transformation is encountering difficulties and requires serious evaluation. This report examines Bangladesh's economic landscape to assess the potential and limitations of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, focussing on the influence of emerging technologies and the impediments to their adoption in the country.

During the last decade, Bangladesh has exhibited great economic resilience, achieving an average GDP growth of 6.5%. The RMG sector plays a strong role in its economy by contributing 80% of export earnings, with over four million workers, most of whom are women. The agriculture also provides a continued important role in employment and food security. These sectors however, are still very much dependent on traditional methods on low skilled labour and there are very limited integrations of automation, precision technologies or data driven solutions. Emerging ICT sector, backed by "Digital Bangladesh" initiatives, holds prospects of technology adoption; however, the infrastructural and skill backdrops depress its global competitiveness.

4IR has a critical challenge of its dependence on low-cost labor-intensive industries. And while technologies such as AI, robotics, and the Internet of Things (IoT) can boost productivity and cut costs, there is strong risk of displacing a large swathe of the workforce with them. The prominence these industries enjoy within the country's economic growth shows the urgent need for Bangladesh to diversify its economic base, and implement forward looking policies to equip its industries and workforce to face technological disruption. The economic transformation of Bangladesh could be unlocked by 4IR technologies. IoT can be integrated in agriculture, enhancing the nation's resource efficiency, reduce waste and increased crop yields, thus improving on food security. In the manufacturing field, automation and robotics is the key elements in enhancing the productivity and remain competitive in the world market despite of the increasing labor cost. The ICT sector has potential as a diversifier of the economy, as well as a source of innovation in software development, business process outsourcing (BPO) and digital

services. Beyond that, 4IR offers opportunities for dealing with the social challenges such as unemployment. Governance and service delivery can be improved, and corruption curbed, by the use of technologies like AI and blockchain. Digital platforms could be developed to help bridge rural – urban divides in order to fuel inclusive growth. But these benefits can only be possible in the event of sufficient infrastructure, skilled human capital and enabling regulatory frameworks.

Leveraging of the 4IR technologies pose a range of interconnected challenges to Bangladesh. Digital infrastructure, esp. in rural areas, does not yet exist. The adoption of IoT, automation and other advanced technology is handicapped by limited Internet penetration of only 34% and limited electricity reliability. In addition, expanding into the roles that digitalization can play to narrow social and gender inequality, digital divide impinges on inequalities of urban and rural populations, leaving a great deal of their workforce unconnected to the possibilities of digitalization. Finally, there's yet another critical barrier: the skills gap. Our current education and vocational training systems are not geared to meet 4IR expectations of workforce and skills and there is marginal emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and (STEM)'s practical digital skills. This ill prepared workforce for high tech roles as things stand now without reskilling initiatives and the risk for job displacement is very high in industries where people are more, RMG and agriculture for example. Beyond techno design challenges, 4IR implementation is further complicated by regulatory and policy challenges. Bangladesh has an outdated structure of the regulatory framework not flexible enough to handle challenges like data privacy, Intellectual property rights and ethical issues in AI and Automation. From massive breaches to high profile incidents such as the Bangladesh Bank cyber heist, cybersecurity vulnerabilities permeate critical infrastructure, calling for rapid development of significant frameworks to protect data and protect our critical assets. It sets out to attend to social and ethical concerns too. Furthermore, the unfair distribution of 4IR benefits will worsen the current inequalities and force rural people and low skilled workers to the side. Additional challenges include ethical issues from AI transparency, algorithmic bias, and accountability around the fair and equitable use of technology.

This paper proposes a multi-faceted response to these challenges including strategic investment, regulatory reform and inclusive policies. To close the urban rural divide, we first require significant digital and physical investments in infrastructure, laying the groundwork for 4IR technologies. In order to achieve this, expansion of broadband access, enhancement of electricity reliability and mixing of renewable energy sources are important steps. Second, a successful education reform is necessary to equip the workforce demands of the future. School curricula should incorporate STEM education and digital literacy, as well as its vocational training, in fields as AI, IoT and robotics so the workers can have the skills in the 4IR economy. These programs are funded and implemented mainly through public-private partnerships. Thirdly, regulatory frameworks need to be adapted to data privacy, cybersecurity and ethical questions related to data protection, as well as protection of competition and avoid stifling innovation. Regulatory sandboxes

can be set up, data protection laws can be written, and guidelines created to ensure ethical use of AI, all of which make a comfortable place for technological adoption. Fourth, 4IR requires social safety nets and inclusive policies to alleviate the negative consequences of job displacement and to ensure that marginalized groups reap the benefits of 4IR. In addition to retraining programs, unemployment benefits, and a targeted pot of finance aimed at female entrepreneurs particularly in rural areas, this can be promoted. Lastly, public private partnerships for innovation and R&D, providing financial incentives for technology adoption, as well as encouraging cross border collaboration can help mobilise resources and expertise to promote the adoption of technologies in Bangladesh leading to 4IR.

The opportunities that 4IR could bring are magnificent, and the burden of challenge is huge for a developing economy like Bangladesh. The extent to which the nation can access 4IR relies not only on its structural deficiencies, human capital investment, and forward thinking policy to facilitate 4IR. Considering the risks of exacerbating inequality, job displacement and cybersecurity vulnerabilities, a balanced approach that also gives due consideration to social inclusion is needed. However, Bangladesh's road to a 4IR driven economy will not be without hurdles, and whilst long overdue, the Bangladeshi government's recent adoption of a proactive approach to promote digital transformation should allow the country to emerge as a competitive player in a digitalized global economy. This analysis illustrates the need for more proactive and inclusive policymaking that will use 4IR to contribute to sustainable development, rather than propel inequality. As the pace of technological change moves ever faster, Bangladesh must take bold action to turn challenges into opportunities and ensure it has a place in the 4IR.

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