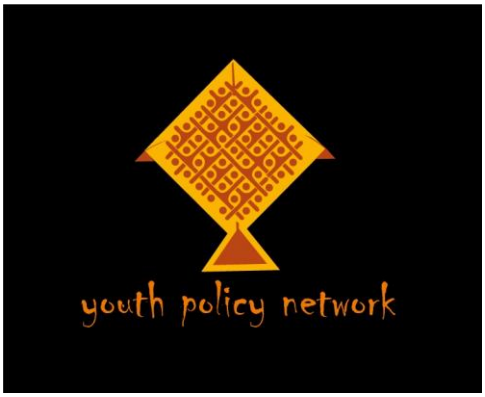
When the Meal Is Missing, So Is the State

A Ground-Level Pulse on Budget Expectations amid Economic Strain

Study By



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Introduction

In the heart of Bangladesh's cities and towns, a quiet storm is brewing. It's not loud, but it's everywhere—in skipped breakfasts, in worn-out sandals of rickshaw pullers, in the bottled water people don't buy, and in the tired sighs of young students who carry both books and burdens.

This study captures the everyday economic truth of over a thousand citizens—mostly invisible to formal policy conversations—who navigate life with dwindling incomes, skipped meals, and rising prices. From rickshaw pullers to young students, from day laborers to street vendors, the data reveals a population stretched thin by inflation, policy neglect, and systemic inequality.

The findings are both unsettling and urgent: more than 99% of respondents have skipped meals to survive, the majority live below or near the poverty line, and expectations from the national budget reflect a collective plea for fairness, dignity, and redistribution.

This research does more than just present statistics—it reflects a crisis of economic justice and social protection. When essential goods are taxed heavily, when budgets ignore the bottom rung, and when basic rights like food, water, and shelter become unaffordable luxuries, the very foundation of citizenship is shaken.

What emerges is a powerful call: for budgets that serve the people, for policies that respect lived realities, and for a governance model where the poor are not punished for being poor. This is not merely a report. It is a mirror held up to the conscience of the nation.

Demographic Snapshot: A Working-Class Voice

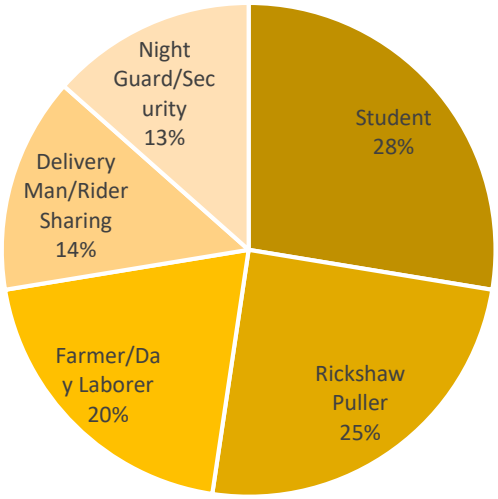
Total Surveyed: 1022

Of the 1,022 total respondents, only 29 were female. This stark gender gap in participation highlights the barriers women face, not only in the workforce but also in public and social engagement. Whether it's due to cultural norms, access to resources, or safety concerns, the overwhelming male participation is a powerful reminder of the societal divisions that still persist.

Occupation Insights: The Streets Speak

The survey captures the economic anxieties of Bangladesh's working class, mobile workforce, and emerging youth segment.

The student segment (28%) reflects youth voices—an age group grappling with uncertainty about jobs and affordability.



Family Structures

In terms of family composition, most respondents reported living in households with 3 to 4 members, indicating the prevalence of nuclear families. However, a sizeable number of larger families (5–6 members) and some smaller units were also present, reflecting moderate diversity in household size.

The survey has revealed that larger families face disproportionate strain under inflationary pressures, with limited economies of scale.

Income Insights: The Precarious Majority

Regarding income levels, the majority of respondents fall within the 10,000–15,000 BDT monthly range, followed by the 5,000–10,000 BDT bracket. This points to a population largely within the lower-income to lower-middle-income segments, with considerable financial precarity.

For this group, every taka counts, and every policy tweak can mean the difference between a meal or none.

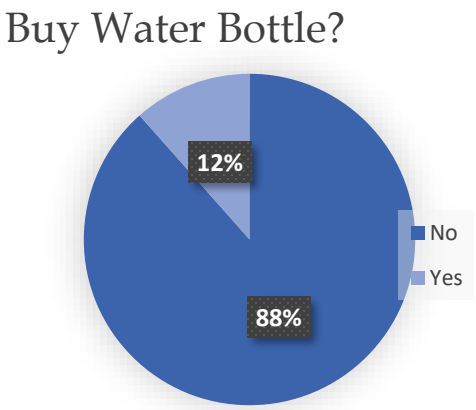
Skipping Meals to Save Money: A Grim Reality

Breakfast is for the privileged?

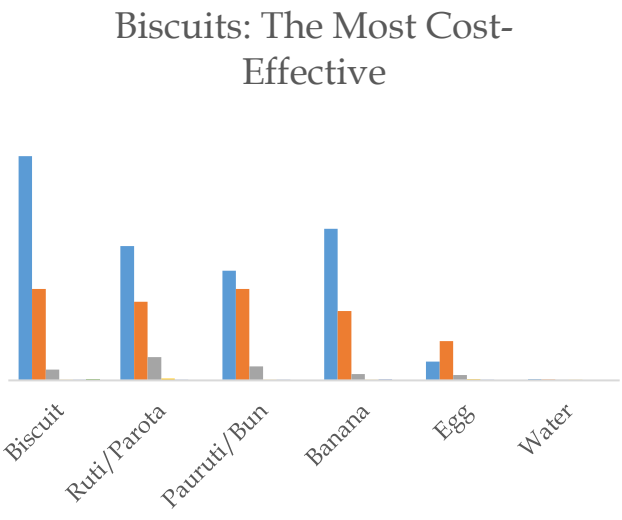
The survey findings reveal that 60% of individuals, particularly from lower-income groups, are skipping breakfast, likely due to its higher cost and time constraints in the morning. 17.03% of respondent's report skipping lunch, often because of limited financial resources to purchase nutritious meals during the day. Similarly, 17.03% skip afternoon snacks, which are seen as less essential, especially when incomes are stretched thin.

Survival Tactics: Cheap Food & No Water

904 respondents do not buy bottled water—highlighting how even water has become a luxury.



From a price perspective, when outside the home, people predominantly relied on the cheapest food items, such as biscuits, bananas, parathas, and eggs, all typically priced under 30 BDT.

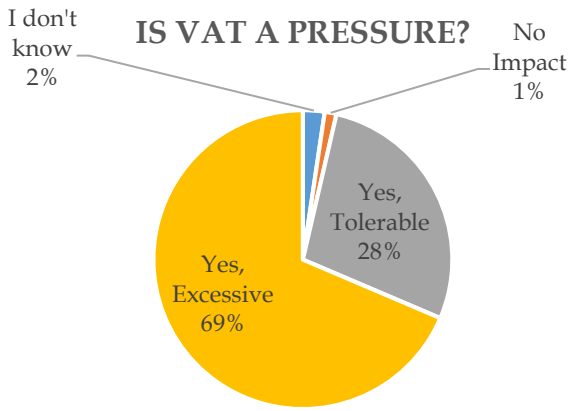


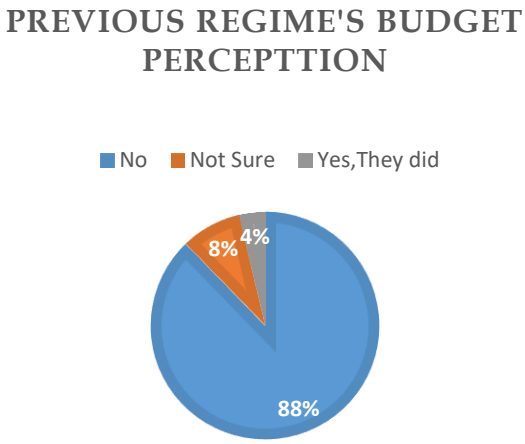
Biscuits stood out as the most cost-effective option, with 533 respondents citing them as their preferred choice. This indicates that, in the face of rising food prices, biscuits are seen as a highly affordable, convenient, and filling option for those with limited financial resources. The strong preference for biscuits underscores how price is a critical factor in food choices for lower-income groups.

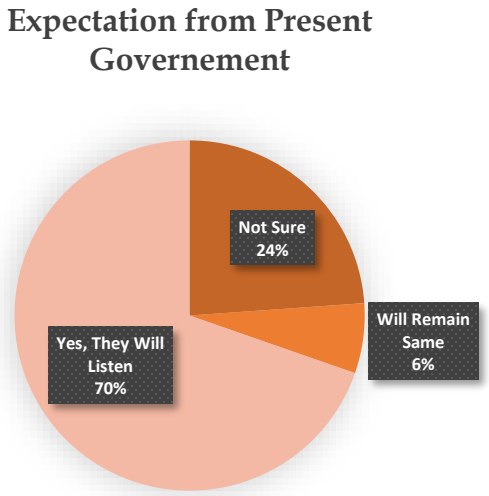
Importantly, mostly they prefer dry, starchy, or sugary foods—filling but not necessarily nutritious.

Perception on VAT & Past Budgets: The People Have Spoken

A majority—701 respondents—believed that VAT on essentials is excessive, while 284 considered it tolerable. The message is clear: VAT is widely seen as a financial burden. Furthermore, a significant number of respondents (897) felt that the previous government's budget did not reflect their needs, indicating disillusionment with past fiscal policies. Only 3.6% felt acknowledged in previous budgets, showing a major trust deficit.







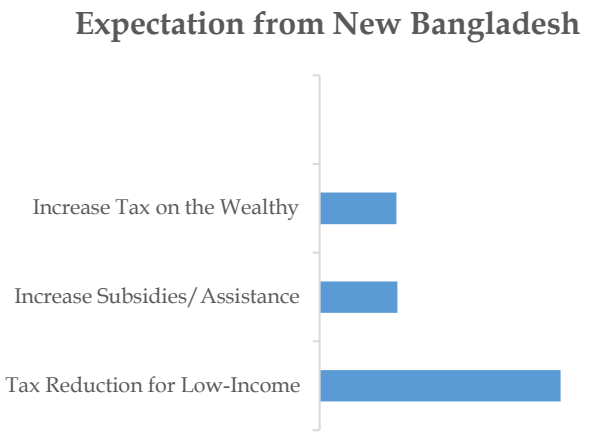
Bangladesh 2.0: Renewed Optimism

Although historically marginalized, the low-income group now exhibits a renewed sense of optimism. A total of 712 respondents expressed hope that the newly elected government will address their needs through the budget for the current year. This reflects a growing belief that the government may prioritize their concerns and take action to improve their socio-economic conditions.

Most expect fairness—not charity!

Hopes from the New Budget: Call for a Pro-Poor Paradigm

When asked what they hope to see from the new budget, 605 respondents expressed a desire for tax reductions for low-income groups, highlighting the need for financial relief. Additionally, 195 respondents advocated for an increase in subsidies and assistance, aiming to alleviate the burden on struggling households. There was also a call for greater taxation on the wealthy, with 193 respondents supporting measures to ensure a fairer distribution of resources. These responses reflect the pressing concerns of lower-income groups, who seek targeted relief and greater social equity in the upcoming budget.



Open-Ended Dreams: A People's Wishlist

When asked about their expectations, the dominant themes that emerged were: tax relief for low-income groups (605 responses), increased subsidies or assistance (195), and increased taxation on the wealthy (193). These expectations reveal a strong desire for progressive economic policies and social safety nets. In open-ended responses, themes like price reduction, pro-people budgeting, lower VAT, and a call for general price stabilization were common. Many also expressed no specific expectations, perhaps due to skepticism or resignation.

Conclusion

Prioritizing Fair Taxation for Low-Income Groups

The survey clearly highlights the struggle of low-income groups who rely on essential goods like biscuits and bread for daily nutrition. The current 7.50% VAT on these items disproportionately affects the poor, further limiting their access to affordable food. To support these vulnerable populations, it is essential for the government to withdraw VAT on essential goods, reducing it to a range of 0%-5%. This adjustment would ease the financial burden on low-income groups, ensuring that basic nutrition remains accessible. The focus should shift from taxing essential items to targeting VAT on luxury goods, promoting a more equitable and fair economic system for all.

In the spirit of inclusive development and the roadmap to New Bangladesh, these insights should not be overlooked. It is no longer a matter of economics—it's a matter of dignity.