



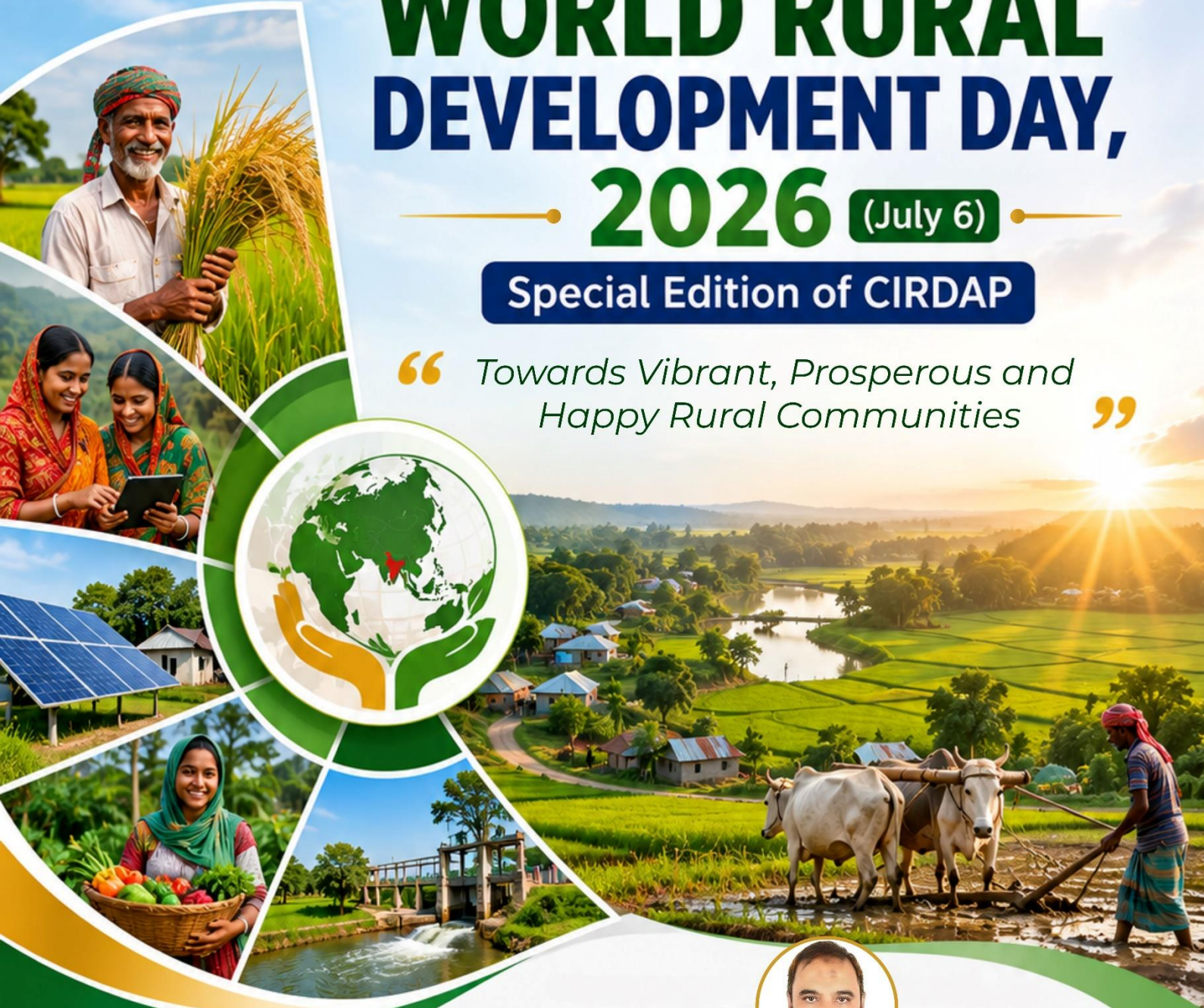
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“ Towards Vibrant, Prosperous and
Happy Rural Communities ”



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Transforming Rural Bangladesh: History, Institutions, and Development Pathways

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Introduction

The United Nations' declaration of World Rural Development Day¹ reflects a growing global recognition that, despite rapid urbanization, rural communities remain indispensable to food security, environmental sustainability, poverty reduction, and inclusive economic growth. For developing countries, rural development is no longer viewed merely as an agricultural concern; rather, it is increasingly recognized as a strategic pathway for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Bangladesh represents one of the most compelling examples of successful rural transformation in the contemporary developing world. At independence in 1971, Bangladesh faced formidable challenges in rebuilding its rural economy and improving the livelihoods of millions of rural households (Bertocci, 1976; Kabir et al., 2022). Over the past five decades, Bangladesh has achieved remarkable progress in agricultural productivity, food security, rural infrastructure, health, education, poverty reduction, and women's empowerment. The expansion of a dynamic non-farm rural economy has further accelerated growth.

This transformation did not occur spontaneously. Rather, it emerged through institutional innovation, cooperative development, community participation, and partnerships among government agencies, civil society organizations, and development partners. Central to this process has been the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RD CD) under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives (MLGRD&C), which has played a pivotal role in shaping rural development strategies and overseeing key institutions responsible for poverty alleviation, cooperative development, and empowering rural people. This article examines the historical evolution of rural development in Bangladesh, with particular attention to the institutional architecture led by the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RD CD).

2. Historical Evolution of Rural Development in Bangladesh

The evolution of rural development in Bangladesh reflects a gradual transition from an agrarian economy characterized by poverty and institutional weaknesses to a more organized and integrated approach to rural transformation.

During the colonial period, rural society was dominated by the Zamindari system, which concentrated land ownership in the hands of landlords and left many peasants economically vulnerable. Limited investment in rural infrastructure, irrigation, healthcare, and institutional finance further constrained rural development and productivity.

Following the partition of British India in 1947, the government of Pakistan recognized the need for a more systematic approach to rural development. One of the earliest initiatives was the Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) Programme launched in 1953 to promote

¹ In 2024, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution A/RES/78/326, officially designating 6 July as World Rural Development Day, recognizing the critical role of rural transformation in addressing poverty, food insecurity, inequality, and environmental vulnerability.

community participation, agricultural improvement, and local leadership. A major milestone came in 1959 with the introduction of the Comilla Model at the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development under the leadership of Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan. The model integrated agricultural modernization, rural infrastructure, cooperative development, and local governance, and later became an internationally recognized approach to rural development.

After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, rural development became a national priority due to widespread poverty, food shortages, and economic disruption. The government adopted policies aimed at increasing agricultural production, improving food security, and reducing rural poverty. In the same year, the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) was launched to organize small farmers into cooperatives and improve their access to credit, agricultural inputs, extension services, and modern farming technologies. The programme also played a significant role in disseminating Green Revolution technologies, contributing to increased agricultural productivity and rural economic growth.

Following the early post-independence rural development initiatives, Bangladesh gradually transitioned from project-based interventions to a more comprehensive and institutionalized approach to rural transformation. A significant milestone in this process was the establishment of the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RDCD) in 1982 under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. As the apex government body responsible for rural development policy and coordination, the RDCD has provided strategic direction and oversight for a wide range of programs and institutions working to improve rural livelihoods. The following section examines this institutional framework in greater detail.

3. Institutional Framework for Rural Development in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's institutional framework for rural development is a multi-layered system that translates national development priorities into grassroots action through coordinated institutions. At the apex, the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RDCD) provides policy direction, inter-agency coordination, and overall oversight of the rural and cooperative sectors. Under its leadership, a network of specialized organizations supports rural transformation through research, capacity building, service delivery, and poverty reduction programmes. This integrated structure links policy, implementation, and innovation, ensuring a coherent approach to rural development. The following section briefly examines the key institutions and their respective roles in this framework.

3.1 Role of the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RDCD)

Established in 1982, the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RDCD) is the principal government agency responsible for formulating policies, coordinating programmes, and providing administrative oversight for rural development and cooperative activities in Bangladesh. Operating under the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives, RDCD plays a pivotal role in promoting poverty reduction, rural economic growth, employment generation, and community empowerment. Its mandate encompasses the formulation of rural development policies, cooperative laws and regulations, and the implementation of programmes aimed at enhancing rural livelihoods and self-reliance (Ahmed & Tuzon, 2005).

The National Rural Development Policy (NRDP) provides the overarching policy framework for coordinated rural development in Bangladesh. The policy emphasizes integrated planning, institutional coordination, poverty reduction, local participation, and sustainable rural livelihoods. The Rural Development and Co-operatives Division plays a central role in facilitating the

implementation of this policy framework.

The Division serves as the central authority for the promotion and regulation of cooperative societies, encompassing cooperative-based marketing systems, banking and insurance services, as well as agricultural and small-scale industrial enterprises. Through targeted interventions such as microcredit provision, savings mobilization, entrepreneurship development, and value-chain enhancement, the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RDCD) seeks to stimulate rural production and expand self-employment opportunities. Strong emphasis is also placed on human resource development through structured training, capacity-building, and skills enhancement programmes. In addition, the Division supports the diversification of both farm and non-farm economic activities, thereby contributing to a more resilient and sustained rural economy. RDCD supervises the following network of specialized institutions:

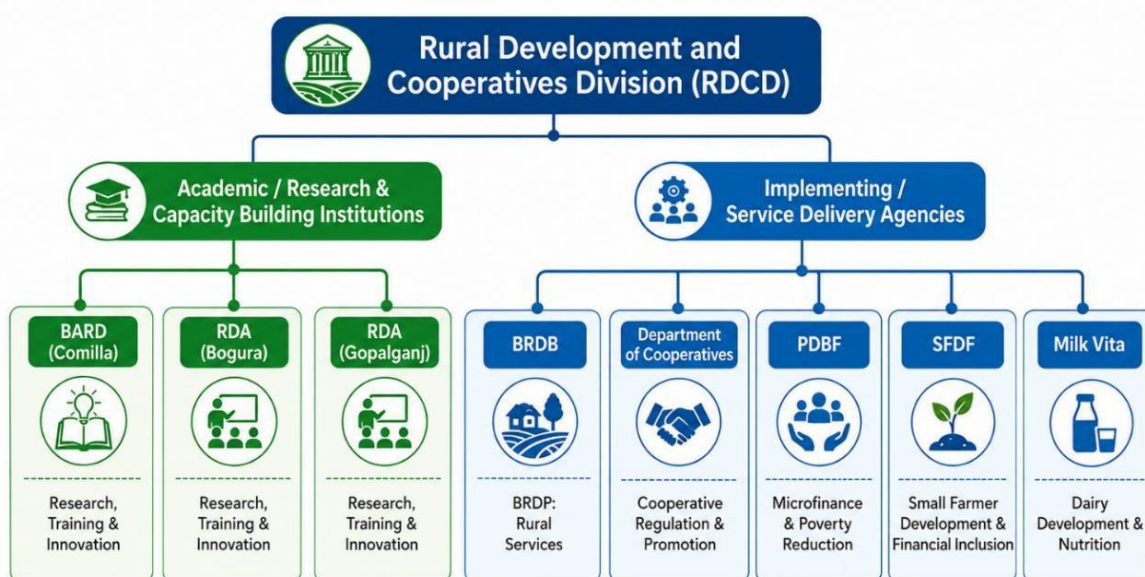


Figure 1. Institutional Framework of Rural Development under RDCD

3.2 BARD and Institutionalization of Rural Development: The Comilla Model

The formal institutionalization of rural development in Bangladesh can be traced back to the 1950s. One of the earliest initiatives was the Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) Programme, introduced in 1953 to encourage community participation in rural development through local-level initiatives. However, its impact remained limited, largely due to its top-down implementation approach, which restricted meaningful grassroots engagement and weakened its effectiveness in achieving sustained rural transformation.

A major turning point came in 1959 with the establishment of the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) in Comilla under the leadership of Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan. BARD pioneered an action-research approach by developing the Comilla “laboratory area,” where development interventions were systematically tested, refined, and evaluated before wider replication. Its methodology placed strong emphasis on grassroots participation, the development of local leadership, and evidence-based experimentation.

Through sustained action research, experimentation, and close engagement with rural communities, BARD developed the Comilla Model as an integrated framework for rural development comprising four core components. Although their structures and implementation

mechanisms evolved considerably over time, the fundamental principles of these innovations profoundly influenced Bangladesh’s rural development trajectory. Following figure illustrates the evolution, institutional transformation, and enduring legacy of the Comilla Model.

Comilla Approach to Rural Development

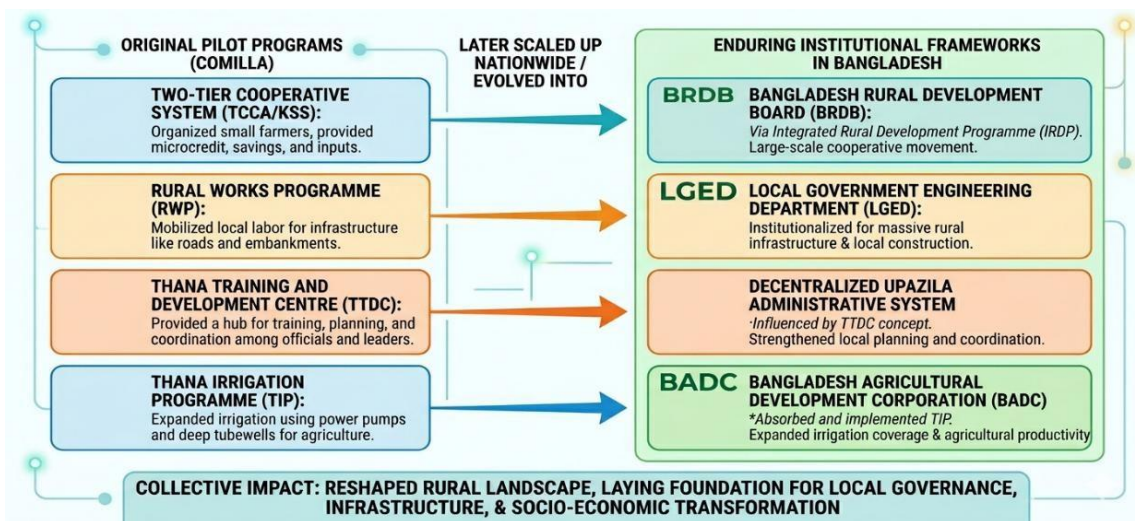


Figure 2. Evolution and Institutional Legacy of the Comilla Model

3.3 Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB)

Following a 1980 World Bank evaluation, the IRDP was upgraded via ordinance into BRDB in 1982 to institutionalize the two-tier cooperative system. BRDB is the nation's largest institutional network for rural development, organizing marginal farmers into cooperatives to deploy agricultural inputs and credit programs. BRDB utilizes a Bottom-up Planning approach, pioneered through the internationally recognized "Link Model" and Participatory Rural Development Projects. It operates through the Union Coordination Committee Meeting (UCCM)—acting as a grassroots Mini-Parliament to ensure community participation, transparency, and administrative accountability (BRDB, 2024). BRDB, evolved from the IRDP and Comilla Model, significantly boosted agricultural productivity through expanded cooperatives, mechanized irrigation, credit delivery, and training systems, contributing to higher crop yields and rural modernization. It also influenced the creation of institutions like PDBF, supporting targeted poverty reduction and women’s development, though equity challenges persisted (Toufique, 2017).

3.4 Department of Cooperatives (DoC)

The Department of Cooperatives, operating under the Rural Development and Co-operatives Division, serves as the principal statutory authority responsible for the promotion, regulation, and supervision of the cooperative movement in Bangladesh. The cooperative tradition gained momentum during the pre-independence period through pioneering initiatives such as the Comilla Model. Following independence in 1971, cooperatives received constitutional recognition under Article 13(b) as one of the fundamental forms of ownership.

Over time, the cooperative movement has become a cornerstone of rural development in Bangladesh. Through cooperative registration, training, auditing, and governance support, the Department of Cooperatives promotes capital formation, enterprise development, and social inclusion. These efforts have contributed to poverty reduction, employment generation, financial inclusion, and agricultural modernization.

3.5 Rural Development Academy (RDA), Bogura

The Rural Development Academy (RDA), Bogura, established on 19 June 1974, is a premier institution in Bangladesh dedicated to rural development training, research, and action research, particularly in the northern region. It was created to promote evidence-based development through field experimentation, capacity building, and innovative poverty reduction strategies. Over the years, RDA has played a pioneering role in designing and testing irrigation management, agricultural diversification, rural infrastructure, char development, and poverty alleviation. The Academy has introduced several nationally and internationally recognized innovations that have contributed to rural development in Bangladesh. These can be summarized as follows (RDA, 2024):

- Women in Seed Entrepreneurship (WISE) model
- Char development initiatives (M4C programme)
- Buried pipe irrigation system
- Dual-use deep tube well technology
- Low-cost multipurpose irrigation models

3.6 Small Farmers Development Foundation (SFDF)

Initially proposed by the FAO as an action-research project, the Small Farmers Development Project (SFDP) was introduced in 1978 and executed by BARD using a targeted, group-oriented approach. Aimed at the bottom 50% of the rural population—specifically landless laborers and smallholders—the initiative bypassed traditional elites by building local "receiving units".

Crucially, the project pioneered **Bangladesh's first collateral-free credit mechanism** by establishing a Guarantee-cum-Risk Fund with Janata Bank, unlocking credit disbursed at ten times the fund's value. Operating through disciplined, small informal groups (5–7 members) and micro-savings, the strategy focuses on capital formation to transition beneficiaries into a "risk-free credit zone," ensuring sustained income generation and market linkages (Bari, 1996).

Building upon this foundation, the Small Farmers Development Foundation (SFDF) continues to implement microfinance, savings mobilization, entrepreneurship development, and livelihood enhancement programmes targeting marginalized rural households across Bangladesh. The organization remains an important institutional mechanism for financial inclusion and poverty reduction in rural areas (SFDF, 2024).

4. Conclusion

While Bangladesh's rural transformation has yielded remarkable socioeconomic outcomes, the ongoing challenge lies in the "multiplicity of institutions". Dozens of line ministries (such as Agriculture, Land, and Fisheries & Livestock) operate parallel to the RDCD, often leading to uncoordinated, segmented, and duplicated efforts at both macro and micro levels. To foster a more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable rural economy, future strategies must transition from isolated project-based operations to a synchronized, holistic framework.

Furthermore, to establish an interactive, demand-driven service delivery system, Bangladesh must effectively operationalize and refine the institutional structures mapped out by the **National Rural Development Policy (NRDP)**. The policy's blueprint for high-powered, inter-ministerial steering bodies under the **Rural Development and Co-operatives Division (RDCD)** framework provides

the necessary foundation to bridge sectoral gaps.

Finally, fortifying a coordinated administrative framework and institutionalizing data-driven review systems, the RDCD and its partner agencies can actively shield the rural economy from the shocks of climate change and globalization, enhance market integration, and cement Bangladesh's status as a global leader in sustainable rural transformation.

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