

BANGLADESH EDUCATION SECTOR – AN OVERVIEW

Bangladesh as a country aspires to achieve the status of a reasonably educated society. The constitution of Bangladesh¹ enshrines the right of every citizen to free universal primary education. The emergence of Bangladesh after a bloody Liberation War in December 1971 gave impetus to the goal of universal primary education. Different political leaders and State functionaries running the country have given importance to this goal. As Bangladesh became relatively more open in the 1970s and started interacting more with the western capitalist countries, the State/government shared the world view of UN-agencies in the field of universal primary education (UPE)/basic education. As one of the most active least-developed countries (LDCs), Bangladesh has supported UPE by participating in the World Conference for Education for All (WCEFA), Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 and in the Dakar Conference on Education for All in 2000. Therefore, both by historical antecedents (of the Liberation War/ Constitutional imperative) and through international treaties and commitments, Bangladesh has given high priority to the attainment of basic education to its citizens.

In the education sector, Bangladesh a populous and low-income agriculture-dependent economy started off the twenty-first century with a mixture of achievements and challenges. The achievements were (a) high rate of growth of primary school enrolment (gross), from around 85 per cent in 1990 to about 104 per cent in 2000; (b) high rate of growth of secondary school enrolment (about seven per cent per year in 1991-2000); (c) gender-parity in both primary and secondary enrolment; (d) an innovative and cost-effective non-formal primary education (NFPE) delivery system organised by NGOs, such as BRAC, Proshika, CMES, and DAM, for the socio-economically disadvantaged children bypassed by the mainstream system; and (e) development of private universities

(numbering around 20 in 2000), bringing in long-felt elements of competitiveness, market-orientation and diversity in the higher education subsector of the country. On the flip-side, the education sector faced a number of persistent challenges: (a) the primary education subsector characterised by inefficiencies (high dropout, low survival and completer's rates), low contact hour, dismal achievement levels in target competencies and non-enrolment of the children from the poorest rural and urban households; (b) the secondary education (grades 6-12) subsector with inefficiencies (for example, low enrolment rates, both gross and net, high dropout rate, low survival and completer's rates, low pass-rates in public examinations, etc.), significant teacher-absenteeism, lack of good governance (e.g. poor/non-existent academic supervision, dysfunctional School Management Committee/Governing Body, corrupt practices in utilising State given salary-subventions); (c) the public universities could not shake off the high political profiles they had maintained (and settled for real professional/academic atmosphere), characterised by session-jams, lack of market-orientation, no mentionable research activities, and lack of optimal material incentives for potentially good teachers; and (d) the National University affiliated degree-awarding colleges and Madrasha Board-managed Islamic stream of higher education system suffered from similar inefficiencies and lack of good governance.

On the basis of empirical evidence on performance of the education sector in the closing decade (1991-2000) of the twentieth century and keeping in view the aspirational aspects (for example, basic education for all eligible citizens, children (6-10 years) adolescents, adults, complimentary secondary education subsector), the level and structure of economy, the resource availability (about 2.2 per cent of GDP being allocated by the State for the sector; a much higher GDP share is spent by the households/individuals as private costs), it is not difficult to prepare an indicative long-term plan for the education sector of the country. Different GoB prepared planning documents² have prepared medium-term (three yearly) development plan where education sector, as expected, figures quite prominently. In line with the

general thrust of PRSP document, the present volume emphasises that the priority should be given to primary education (for age-group 6 to 10 years) and secondary education (for age-group 11 to 15 years); the public educational³ budget-share of about 90 percent being allocated to these two subsectors is therefore sensible and should be continued till the EFA and the relevant MDGs on UPE, gender-parity and women's educational empowerment are attained for the country. Different State-owned policy documents whether PRSP, PEDP-II and National Education Commission Report (2003) attach importance to quality education at the primary and secondary education levels, effective community participation and accountability (through well-functioning School Management Committees/ Governing Bodies) and more decentralised educational planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. In the name of a comprehensive (though not fully in an aggregative multisectoral and consistency planning model) pro-poor development plan, a centralised planning, implementation and administration has been imposed on the people. Both the donors World Bank, ADB and other bilateral agencies, and the State-agencies such as the Planning Commission, the line Ministries, MoPME and MoE, in their efforts to obtain techno-economically sound plan documents for the education sector (for example 11 donor-supported Primary Education Development Programme II (PEDP-II) 2003-2009 for the primary education subsector and Programmatic Education Support Credit or PESC-2004 for secondary education subsector by World Bank) have unconsciously affected the potentially promising local level initiatives involving planning, resource mobilisation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The self-confidence of the localised social innovators/entrepreneurs, whether at the community (village), sub-district (upazila) or district levels, is greatly undermined by the top-down, techno-economic (mainly donor-driven), bureaucratic and myopic political approach. Both primary and secondary education subsectors will be better off with some effective devolution of powers to the district, upazila and SMC levels to plan, implement (including mobilisation of local resources), monitor and evaluate. The present system of State handouts of

salary-subventions/MPOs has stymied the local level creativity in educational delivery.

Ideally, the tertiary level education (First degree and above) should be a demand-driven phenomenon. The existing public universities, both general and technical types, should be less dependent on State's revenue budget. The beneficiaries of public universities are well-off families from urban and rural background. By phases, the university authorities/UGC should find some innovative ways to raise the tuition fees in the universities. In the public universities a combination of better teaching learning transactions which is quite poor when compared with the high tuition-fee-charging private universities and tuition fee-waiver for meritorious students, student loan system may be tried. Well-performing public and private universities equipped with good faculties should be given State, private philanthropic and foreign funding for undertaking research and publication. Research outputs are public good and therefore need public and social funding/support. Similarly, the State should withdraw recurrent financial support from the degree-awarding colleges (affiliated under the National University) and other tertiary level educational institutions. Only the regulatory, oversight and accreditation related aspects will be the responsibility of the State-agencies, such as NU and Madrasha Board.

A good number of private universities, covering about a quarter of the total campus-based university enrolment, are an important development in the country. The recent report (August 2005) by the UGC⁴ on the private universities shows how the oversight and external evaluation can further consolidate the gains achieved in this subsector. The State with the cooperation of the well-known private university organisers should try to develop a well-functioning accreditation and quality assurance system for these universities.

The non-formal primary education (NFPE) by NGOs such as BRAC, Proshika and CMES has earned reputation throughout the world for their innovativeness, cost-effectiveness and equity

aspects. It is now opportune for the State to gradually bring them together under some common denominator in terms of course contents, equivalency and teacher's qualifications (financial compensations). These programmes should not be dependent on foreign funding for an uncertain period; the State as a part of EFA should take up responsibility for their financial sustainability on the basis of programme performance.

Endnotes

¹See Government of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Constitution, Dhaka, 1972, (Article 17).

²See GoB, Planning Commission, Unlocking the Potential: National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction, 2004.

³See GoB, Ministry of Education, Report by National Education Commission 2003, March 2003, Dhaka.

⁴See UGC, Report on Governance and Management in Higher Education in Bangladesh, August 2005 (Draft), Dhaka.