Volume 9
Number 1
Year 2007
ISSN 1529-0905

Journal of BANGLADESH STUDIES

BDI
Bangladesh Development Initiative

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Education in Bangladesh: The Vision for 2025

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ABSTRACT

Noting the assessment of the Education for All (EFA) Global Monitoring Report 2005 that Bangladesh (along with other South Asian countries) is not on track to achieve the modest 2015 EFA goals and similar U.N. Millennium Development Goals, this paper highlights the major deficiencies in the national education system. Deficits in aspects of access to basic education opportunities and establishment of quality standards and their enforcement are identified as the major problem areas. An attempt is made in the paper to construct a vision for the development of education in the next two decades. Fulfilling the vision would call for overcoming the current key deficits and setting and pursuing specific goals for the future. These goals, priorities and strategic actions are indicated in respect of minimum acceptable quality in education, significant improvement in access and participation in education, adoption of bilingualism as a strategic education goal with a high level of proficiency in Bangla and English to be achieved by the completers of secondary education, putting ICT to use in education, rethinking education governance and management, and ensuring availability of a threshold level of resources and their effective use. In conclusion, a consensus-forming process in favor of the vision is recommended. It is suggested that a group of distinguished and concerned citizens could take the lead in facilitating the dialog.

Introduction

The education system in Bangladesh consists of some 150, 000 institutions, 34 million students and over 900,000 teachers. Primary and secondary level institutions naturally form the bulk of the system with about 20 million students in primary education including madrasas and non-formal programs and 11 million students at the secondary level including madrasas (BANBEIS 2003).

Participation in education has expanded significantly in the decade of the 1990s. At the primary level, close to universal initial enrollment has been achieved, although a third of those enrolled drop out before completing the primary stage. Gender parity in enrollment at the primary and secondary levels is another accomplishment of the last decade. In spite of the expansion, overall enrollment ratios remain low at the secondary (about 45 percent of the relevant age group) and tertiary levels (about 5 percent). Effective participation measured by completion of the stage and acceptable learning achievements is much lower than what the enrollment rates may suggest.

What is the prognosis for education in Bangladesh in two decades, hence in the year 2025? Under United Nations auspices in 2000, leaders from member countries including Bangladesh set Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for the year 2015. With the overarching target of reducing by half the proportion of the population living in serious poverty, the MDGs also included goals on education, health, gender disparities, sustainable development and international cooperation, which all must contribute to achieving the overall objective of poverty reduction.

MDGs in education were defined in terms of participation and completion of primary education by all children and elimination of gender discrimination in education. These are important but modest objectives, which cannot be the totality of educational progress that Bangladesh and other developing countries must pursue in the decade ahead. Nor can these objectives capture the multiple ways education must contribute to fighting poverty and to achieving other national development priorities. The MDGs in education and in other areas have to be regarded as proxies or minimal conditions for development in the different spheres towards which nations must strive.

By the modest and minimal standards of the education MDGs, how are we doing? A global Education for All (EFA) monitoring group set up by UNESCO has been tracking progress in respect of the MDG goals. The 2005 report predicted bluntly that at the current trend and rate of progress, the goals of primary education for all children and elimination of gender disparities in education will not be achieved in Bangladesh by 2015. It can hardly be a matter of consolation that our South Asian neighbors, India, Nepal and Pakistan, were also projected to be in the same precarious position. (UNESCO, EFA Global

Monitoring Report 2004).

Current Status in Primary Education and Literacy

The official view of the situation in Bangladesh is optimistic. Government statements cite the statistics of 97 percent gross enrollment rate in primary education and parity in enrollment of boys and girls at the primary and secondary levels. Officials also note with pride the stipends program for up to 40 percent of the students in rural primary schools identified as poor, stipend and tuition exemption for girls in rural secondary schools, and distribution of free textbooks in primary schools. These measures indeed have resulted in enrollment growth, in general, and of girls, in particular.

A contentious issue is the rate of adult literacy in the country. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME), based on the target of "eradicating" illiteracy in a decade through the Total Literacy Movement (TLM) launched in 1997, declared that the adult literacy rate (for population of age 7 and over) had reached 64 percent by 2002. Independent evaluation carried out by the Education Watch research group, including national sample surveys and applying objective methodologies, revealed that the rate was around 42 percent. The Education Watch statistics, corroborated by other assessments, were accepted internationally and were used in UNESCO, UN and World Bank documents. These studies also showed a major gap in rates for urban and rural areas and for men and women – in the range of 10 to 20 percentage points.

In fact, the low rate and gender gap in literacy, and the absence of a credible and effective strategy to address the situation, contributed to the negative projections about meeting the MDG time-table. Added to this were the deficiencies in quality and access at all levels of education in spite of the very substantial accomplishments in gross enrollment and the reduction of gender gap in primary and secondary schools. While gross enrollment rates, which include children beyond the designated primary school age, have risen, one out of six children of the primary school age of 6 to 10 years is not going school and about one-third of those enrolled drop out before completing the primary cycle. As a result, over 40 percent of the children are not participating in a full cycle of primary education. In these circumstances, equality in enrollment of boys and girls, no doubt a commendable achievement, still leaves an unacceptably large number of both girls and boys out of primary and secondary schools.

The thumbnail sketch above of the basic education situation shows that government policies and programs, including incentive spending for stipends and free textbooks, reflect good intentions, but are inadequate for achieving even the modest MDG objectives in education. The situation at the tertiary level and in vocational and technical education, built on a weak foundation of primary and secondary education, cannot be any better.

Key Problems: Access and Quality

The problems of access and quality in education at all stages are symptoms of a deeper malaise that has developed through decades of neglect. In fact, a system that originated in the colonial era with its inherently restrictive perspective was pressed into service with only patchwork modifications to meet the demands and aspirations of human and national development of an independent nation.

Since the birth of Bangladesh, several national education commissions and committees have been appointed at various times to formulate education policies and priorities in line with national goals and aspirations. Beginning with the Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission report of 1974, at least half a dozen such initiatives have been undertaken. The common elements in the diagnosis of problems and recommendations in these reports outweigh the differences. The most important commonality of the reports is that few substantive recommendations have been implemented.

Decades of failure to address major reform needs in education have resulted in an accumulation of problems which have become deep-rooted and intractable. As a nation that has to rely primarily on its human resources to fulfill its vision of progress and development, the failings in education constitute a critical risk for all its development endeavors.

Various analyses of the education sector (viz. sector reviews supported by the World Bank and Japan Bank for International Cooperation), independent studies (such as the Education Watch annual reports since 1999), the PRSP document, and reports and documents pertaining to donor-supported development projects in education (such as those related to the Second Primary Education Development Program and the Secondary Education

Sector Improvement Program) collectively provide an account of education system deficiencies. A longer term view of priorities and needs, based on a historical perspective, can be derived from existing analyses and assessment. They point to the following inter-connected areas which must receive attention in constructing a vision for educational development by 2025:

- Reversing the decline in quality at all stages of education with attention to need-based educational content and competencies to cope with 21st century challenges;
- Building a unified system of primary and secondary education with equitable access for all utilizing flexible modes and alternative delivery formats as required;
- Aiming for bilingualism in the education system with proficiency in both Bangla and English;
- Utilizing fully the potential of ICT as a key strategy for expanding access and improving quality in education;
- Improving governance and management in education; and
- Guaranteeing adequate resources and using resources well to achieve educational goals.

Quality Goals for 2025

Reversing progressive deterioration of educational quality reflected in the skills and competencies acquired by learners is clearly a central concern. A concurrent issue is how to expand educational opportunities in order to ensure participation of all children in primary and secondary education and to achieve wider and equitable participation in tertiary, vocational and technical education. Quality with expanded and equitable access, therefore, is the overarching goal in education. Relevant and need-based curricula and their effective implementation in classrooms are critical concerns in realizing this goal.

Quality of teaching and learning in education sub-sectors

Mention of educational quality can generate a hot debate about its definition. This debate has its value, but in pragmatic terms, quality in education is best reflected in the learning achievements of students. A system of public examinations to measure learning achievements and competencies acquired at the primary level does not exist. At the secondary level, both the validity and the relevance of public examinations are suspect because they focus on rote memorization rather than development of skills and capabilities.

That the quality of primary education is far from acceptable is no news. The drop-out rate, non-completion of the full cycle, and the competency level of learners who complete five years of primary education, cited earlier, testify to the poor quality of the education delivered. A general improvement of the system following conventional solutions (e.g. more textbooks, more teacher-training and more supervision) has been pursued with the assumption that the benefits would accrue to all. The policies for quality improvement have not addressed the specific circumstances and obstacles of various deprived segments of the population, nor have they been based on analyses and diagnosis of the particular situations and constraints. *(*Education Watch 2003/4)

PEDP II (Primary Education Development Program II) aims to bring about significant quality improvement in primary education by introducing common Primary School Quality Levels (PSQL) in the formal schools which serve over 80 percent of students. PEDP II could better fit its label as a sub-sector program for primary education if it did not exclude the possibility of integrating the NFPE (Non-Formal Primary Education) approach into the primary education system, where appropriate. Studies have shown that, although educational quality is poor across the board, non-formal primary education programs perform significantly better than regular primary schools in respect of acquisition of student competencies prescribed in the curriculum and in student retention and completion rates (Education Watch 2000). This is remarkable because these programs, by definition, target the poor.

PEDP II has not taken a coordinated approach including NFPE to reach out to the neglected and the under-served. The potential benefits that may be derived for primary education in general from methods of teacher training, supervision, learning materials, community rapport, and parental involvement in NFPE need to be recognized in an agenda that emphasizes quality with equity. (Education Watch 2003/4)

Secondary education now serves essentially as a screening device for disqualifying the large majority of young people and for selecting a small minority for tertiary education, rather than having a purpose of its own. The curriculum and teaching are geared to preparation for higher education, to which only a

fraction of students can aspire. They do not relate to prospects of gainful employment, entrepreneurship and practical skills, which, of course, need not be a disqualification for further education. (ADB, Secondary Education Sector Development Plan 2000-2010, 1998)

A small proportion of teachers have any professional training (about a third in the non-government schools, which are 98 percent of all schools). Academic supervision of secondary schools is almost non-existent to compound the problem. (GOB, UNDP and UNESCO1992, p.44)

A recently introduced vocational-technical stream, after grade eight, runs counter to general international experience that shows that "vocationalising" formal secondary schools raises the cost of schooling without corresponding benefits in skill development or better employment prospects for students. International experience also suggests that the most useful vocational /occupational preparation in the secondary school is building a sound foundation of communication skills, mathematics and basic science, which make young people trainable for the employment market. (JBIC 2002, pp. 63-64) NEC2003 recommends that secondary education up to class 10 be one unified stream with adequate focus on communication skills, science and mathematics for all students.

The most appropriate way to look at the quality of VTE (Vocational Training and Education) is to judge it from the point of view of external effectiveness. This sub-sector, more than any other, should prove its worth by enabling students to cash in on the benefits of education and training through employment and income. Public sector VTE is regarded as disconnected from the formal and informal job market. The centralized management of the institutions throughout the country is based on standard curricula, courses, and organizational arrangements that limit interaction with local entrepreneurs and employers. Placement rates for VTI and TTC graduates were 40 to 65 percent, and "unemployment is also common among graduates of polytechnics." (World Bank, Education Sector Review Vol. III 2000, p. 9)

Non-governmental organizations such as UCEP (Under-privileged Children's Education Program) appear to be tackling the quality and effectiveness problems better than the public sector programs. UCEP has a high course completion and job placement rate. Per trainee cost in UCEP is 25 to 40 percent lower than in public institutions (JBIC 2002, pp. 65-66). This pragmatic model has useful lessons for viable skill development programs.

In summary, a results-oriented focus based on defined leaning outcomes needs to guide the efforts to improve quality. Key quality inputs such as teachers, learning materials, and essential facilities need to be looked at from this outcome perspective. Assessment of learning of students and performance of schools needs also to reflect the outcome orientation. The inputs and processes need to be managed, and capacities need to be built for this purpose from the same perspective.

Provisions for adequate numbers of teachers and improving their professional skills and competence:

There is a need for adequate numbers of qualified teachers in primary, secondary and tertiary education so that:

- Student-teacher ratio in primary schools is a *maximum* of 30:1;
- Learning time (contact hours) is increased to international levels with full-day (single shift) instruction for all students in primary schools;
- Provisions are made for required numbers of qualified teachers for math, science and English in secondary schools;
- Provisions are made for required numbers of teachers for subjects in colleges proportionate to enrollment in subject areas;
- Effective pre-service and in-service teacher training and academic supervision are provided at all levels; and
- Adequate remuneration and incentives are ensured for teachers to attract and retain qualified people to the teaching profession.

Quality physical and learning facilities at all levels of education:

Provisions for schools, classrooms, learning aids, playgrounds, libraries and laboratories must guarantee essential conditions for quality instruction at all levels. Specific provisions must include:

- Adequate numbers of schools at primary and secondary levels located and distributed to ensure access for all children within a reasonable distance from their homes, especially in undeserved areas such as *chars* and *haors*, coastal areas, and hill areas;
- Adequate numbers of classrooms with sufficient

space for active and learner-centered pedagogy and with provisions for electricity, adequate light and ventilation, and appropriate furniture; and
- Schools equipped with adequate libraries, laboratories, playground, sanitation and water provisions, located in a safe surrounding, protected from noise and traffic.

Quality curriculum, textbooks and learning materials:

Relevant curriculum developed with professional input, reviewed and updated on a continuing basis, and supported by appropriate syllabi, textbooks, and learning materials as well as an effective system of assessing learners' progress and achievement are essential ingredients of quality education. The provisions related to curriculum and learning materials should include:
- An autonomous curriculum development agency for primary and secondary education with adequate professional and technical capacity, performing its tasks without political and bureaucratic interference;
- Common core curricula at the primary and secondary levels which can be supplemented by appropriate content for different needs and circumstances of communities, regions and groups of learners;
- Textbooks and supplementary learning materials prepared by commercial publishers or non-profit organizations subject to conformity with national curricular objectives and quality guidelines; and
- Continuing learning assessment within institutions as well as public examinations at primary, secondary and tertiary levels which promote the learning of defined competencies, knowledge and skills, rather than rote memorization of texts.

Access and Participation Goals for 2025

Universal primary education access and completion up to grade eight:

The essential measures will include:
- Compulsory primary education extended to grade eight from present grade five;
- Step-by-step expansion of school facilities, classrooms and recruitment and training of teachers planned for each upazila to achieve the target of universal primary education up to grade eight;
- Planning for step-by-step progress with intermediate benchmarks for enrollment, prevention of dropout and completion of grade eight primary education by all children undertaken in each upazila;
- Inclusive primary education to accommodate and serve children with mild and moderate disabilities; special provisions planned for children with disabilities that would prevent them from participating in regular schools; and
- Assurance that expansion of access and participation will not compromise essential quality criteria indicated above.

Completion of secondary education (grade ten) by eighty percent of the relevant age-group:

- Schools, classrooms and teachers must be added to the system of secondary education to increase enrollment gradually by more than double from the present net rate of 45 percent;
- High dropout, repetition and failure rates at the secondary level must be prevented to achieve 80 percent completion rate; and
- Quality criteria regarding teachers, facilities and learning materials must be established and enforced to ensure the achievement of targeted completion rate.

A major expansion of post-primary vocational and technical education:

- Vocational and technical education opportunities at the post-primary level must be increased substantially to ensure increase in participation from the current rate of about three percent to at least 20 percent of the relevant age group in order to prepare those young people who do not continue in formal education for the world of work;
- New models of effective and high quality vocational and technical education must be designed to be responsive and adaptable to changing local, national and international market demands; and
- Government focus on policy-making, regulatory framework and overall planning must promote public-private collaboration and complementarities in provisions for market-responsive vocational and technical education.

A major expansion of tertiary education opportunities ensuring quality with equity, so that:

- Participation in tertiary education is increased

from the present level of under 5 percent to 20 percent of the relevant age-group in mainstream higher education institutions (universities, colleges and professional institutions);
- ICT-based and distance-mode education through Open University programs and extension programs of universities and colleges should provide extensive opportunities for higher education, professional upgrading and pursuit of personal development;
- A comprehensive and coordinated planning of higher education including public and private and general, specialized and professional colleges and universities aimed at meeting the demand for expanded participation, developing centers of excellence in different fields of higher education, and promoting educational, cultural and scientific focal points in selected institutions of higher learning in various regions and districts of the country.

A literate citizenry and lifelong learning opportunities:

- Elimination of illiteracy through effective universal primary education and basic non-formal education for youth and adults through establishing a network of multipurpose community learning centers; and
- Encouragement, support and incentive to community, voluntary and non-governmental organizations and the private sector to create and manage community learning centers, ICT centers and education programs for youth and adults as the building blocks of a "learning society."

Equitable access to education achieved through:

- Government policy and regulatory framework formulated for core curriculum standards and basic quality criteria for all children irrespective of provider organizations, geographical locations, and social and economic background of students at the primary and secondary level education institutions;
- Madrasa education, whether receiving public subvention or not, brought under regulatory framework to enforce basic education quality criteria and core curricular standards so that all children acquire basic science, mathematics and language skills and grow up to be productive citizens; policy regarding madrasa and other religion-based education reviewed and criteria for public funding support for such education established;
- Private and proprietary institutions including English medium institutions required to incorporate the core curricular standards and maintain common quality criteria for academic provisions and physical facilities; and
- The aim of equality of education opportunities regardless of differences in economic, geographic, ethnic or other factors promoted through regulatory framework for education, provisions for financial aid and scholarships, and economic incentives applied to both public and private institutions at all levels.

Bilingualism Goals for 2025

Literacy and communication skills constitute a key objective of primary and secondary education and are essential tools for further learning and success in life. A child's cognitive development and academic performance are dependent on language proficiency. One's mother tongue is the natural and pedagogically appropriate medium of instruction. In addition, proficiency in English has become particularly important because it is the dominant global language and the window to the world of science, technology, research and the limitless store of readily accessible information and knowledge in today's information age. In this era of ICT, individuals have to be proficient in a popular and universally used medium of communication to be competitive globally. We ignore at our peril that English is the universal medium.

Historically, the region of Bengal was well-served by a system of education in which Bangla was the medium of primary and secondary education, with English introduced as a second language from grade three in primary school, continued through secondary school, and used as the medium of teaching at the tertiary level. All who went through secondary education became bilingual – capable of functioning in both Bangla and English. This advantage was lost when in the post-liberation era Bangla was made the medium of instruction in higher education. Not only was the incentive to learn English lost, but the supply of qualified English teachers for primary and high school also diminished. It became a vicious cycle and the English advantage that the educated people in South Asia continue to enjoy was lost to Bangladesh. A general deterioration of quality in education over the years led to the phenomenon of college and university graduates unable to communicate

effectively either in Bangla or English.

One demagogic response to this situation was to introduce in the early 1980s instruction in English from class one in primary school even though very few primary school teachers had English proficiency. The time wasted on English meant that precious time was taken away from Bangla and math from already low teaching time in primary classes, which were predominantly double shift.
The private sector responded with the proliferation of English medium schools from KG to the secondary level which served only a small proportion of the children who belonged to the relatively well-off stratum of society. The government followed suit by re-introducing English in the Cadet Colleges which have highly selective admission. There are also plans for setting up model English medium schools with government support in district and upazila towns. These measures do not address the basic problem of the quality of language instruction in English and Bangla in the mainstream schools for the vast majority of children.

The 2025 goal must be to restore the historic bilingualism that prevailed in this region and to adopt urgently more immediate strategies which would redirect the educational system towards this goal. Actions that are needed at different stages of education from primary to tertiary are the following:

Effective language instruction at the primary and secondary stages:

- A policy of Bangla as the medium of instruction in all primary and secondary level institutions receiving public funding should be adopted with provision for teaching English as a second language effectively. Similarly, in the non-government English medium schools, a high level of proficiency in Bangla by all students should be ensured;
- At the primary level, building the foundation of literacy and language development in the mother tongue should be the main task in the first three years. At the primary level, English should be introduced only at a basic level in grades four and five. The aim should be to teach English effectively in the high school in grades 6 to 10 to enable students to acquire functional proficiency in English; and
- To achieve the goal of bilingual proficiency, modern teaching techniques and learning aids for teaching English as a second language should be used; to overcome the shortage of English teachers, people with English proficiency such as retired civil servants and people from the private sector can be given pedagogic orientation and pressed into service on a part-time and contract basis.

English at the tertiary level:

- In publicly supported tertiary level institutions, English should be used as the medium of instruction in physical science, mathematics, technology and specialized professional fields such as medicine, engineering and business. In other areas, such as humanities and social sciences, the options of either English or Bangla should be available.
- It is expected that private universities and higher institutions will mainly use English as the medium of instruction. However, the same options as for the public institutions should apply to private sector higher institutions to use English or Bangla in humanities and social sciences.
- Government should encourage and provide incentives to colleges and universities to prepare qualified teachers of English in order to overcome the shortage.

ICT-Based Education Plan for Bangladesh by 2025

ICT, especially the internet-based communication technologies, as well as electronically stored and archival materials and accessibility to the sources of knowledge they offer, has opened up unprecedented possibilities for education and learning. The best of the contents in various fields of study, the most authoritative expertise, and the most effective instructional methodology can be available through ICT to learners and institutions anywhere in the world. The quality deficiencies in terms of library and laboratory resources and qualified instructors most common in developing country institutions can be compensated by ICT if its potential is utilized imaginatively.

No society can function effectively in the information society without taking full advantage of ICT. Bangladesh will continue to lag behind other parts of the world unless there are interventions to increase the application of ICT in the education system. Educational institutions at all levels in Bangladesh

must utilize the power of modern information and telecommunications technologies to provide world-class quality education and training to citizens.

ICT does not automatically improve the education system: How ICT can be put to use in the specific context of Bangladesh education has to be understood. We have to use ICT to improve the delivery of education and broaden the range of options available for distance learning. Policy and strategy have to be tailored to local circumstances, and locally appropriate technologies have to be used to maximize the benefits and minimize the costs. (World Bank and AUSAID, Virtual Colombo Plan 2001)

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) facilitate the flow of information and knowledge, making these globally accessible at a reasonable cost. With increasing use of a variety of approaches in learning in the information age, learners are able to move away from being taught mostly in lectures or direct training sessions. They can have increased *flexibility* in learning—they can have more say in what they learn, when they learn, and where and how they learn.
That's the new reality.

New knowledge and developments in learning science and pedagogy underscore the importance of learning environments that suit students' needs and interests by offering them the choice of increased flexibility. No one single learning delivery method is capable of supporting the kind of flexibility that learners need. For example, physical classroom instruction limits the access to only those who can participate at a fixed time and location, whereas a virtual classroom event can include remote audiences and, when followed up with recorded lectures or information resources, can extend the reach to those who could not attend the event at a specific time. A mix of traditional and new learning approaches and technology - i.e. the strategy of blending learning approaches - can get the right content in the right format to the right people at the right time. Blended learning combines multiple delivery media that are designed to complement each other and promote flexibility in learning. It mixes various purposeful learning activities, including face-to-face classrooms, live e-learning, and self-paced learning (Khan 2005). The following goals for the development of an ICT-based education plan by 2025 are proposed:

Adoption of ICT-based learning approach as a key strategy for expanding the reach and improving the quality of education:

- The multi-dimensional ICT-based learning framework utilizing the attributes and resources of the internet, digital technologies and other modes of learning should be adopted as a key strategy in educational development in the next two decades;
- Special consideration should be given to ICT connectivity and accessibility for educational purposes. Bandwidth and spectrum of radio and television wavelengths should be allocated for education. Planning for connectivity infrastructure and regulations should promote and facilitate educational use of ICT;
- Research and technical collaboration should be directed at creating Bangla language portals and searchable databases for use in primary, secondary and adult education and teacher training; and
- Opportunities should be actively pursued to participate in exploratory and experimental programs for affordable computers for primary and secondary schools.

ICT in tertiary education:

- "ICT in education" standards should be developed for universities and institutions of higher education. They should be encouraged and supported to develop ICT plans for improving quality of instruction, expanding options in course offering, upgrading teacher skills, and enhancing library and laboratory resources;
- Central and regional digital libraries and resource centers should be developed which can serve institutions in their respective regions. Access to international library resources, research databases, and journals should be arranged for the regional resource centers on behalf of institutions in the region; and
- The blended learning approach combining conventional and digital technologies should be promoted and supported to create *the virtual university* to complement and supplement the conventional higher education institutions.

Governance and Management in Education by 2025

Governance issues:

Governance and management issues can be said to bring out in sharp relief the problems of the education system. All of the major problems of the education system can be attributed directly or indirectly to governance and management of the system. The administration and management procedures and processes are ruled by regulations and practices based on tradition, custom and precedence rather than responsiveness to changing needs and conditions.

Concern has been expressed in the Education Commission reports of 2000 and 2003 about rampant indiscipline, student unrest and other adverse influences of politicization of education decision-making. The related problems of corruption and mismanagement, spawned and nurtured by partisan politics, when disciplinary and remedial action cannot be taken, have become the most serious obstacles to educational reform and change. Pro-poor changes in the education system proposed in the PRSP cannot succeed unless the political obstacles to change can be removed or at least mitigated. The poor suffer most from this failure of the system because the rich and the elite can opt out of the system and go to private institutions or abroad, as many have.

Overall sectoral policy-making, coordination, and oversight:

An important systemic concern is how the education system as a whole and its sub-sectors function to make their contribution to meeting key social goals, including fighting poverty. It is a question of vertical and horizontal linkages and articulation within and among sub-sectors of education and the possibility of taking a systemic view of the organizational structures and function of the system and sub-systems.

The overall organization and management of education, for example, show critical disjunctions and discontinuities. At the primary level, the four major streams - the government and non-government registered schools, the madrasas, non-formal primary schools run by NGOs, and the proprietary English medium schools - operate with differing learning objectives and academic standards, with little opportunity for horizontal movement of students, and no interaction among organizational authorities running these different streams. The same applies to the secondary level, in respect of the parallel streams in general secondary education, madrasas, proprietary schools and post-primary vocational and technical education.

At the tertiary level, a system-wide view - embracing colleges, universities, professional and specialized education under public and private management; the potential for specialized training by professional bodies; and how these together match the demand for high level skills - does not exist.

The institutions of higher education include a variety of educational enterprises. Universities are governed by acts, orders and ordinances. Dhaka University, for example, was established through the DU Act of 1920. The act underwent several changes, such as the ordinance of 1961, the Dhaka University Order of 1973 and its amendments in 1997. The Order of 1973 revived the concept of autonomy of universities, restored the senate and established the principle of collective leadership of the vice-chancellor in the Syndicate.

In 1992, higher education witnessed the enactment of legal frameworks in three vital areas: establishment of private universities, distance education through Open University, and management of college education through the National University. Acts for setting up 12 new universities of science and technology was passed in the Parliament in 2001. The University Grants Commission serves as an intermediary between the government and universities in respect of financial allocations. It also approves and monitors academic programs of all universities including the private ones.

All of the concerns about horizontal and vertical links among sub-systems point to the need to rethink organizational structures, functions, and roles in the education system. A systemic approach has to contribute to overall education system goals defined by society's overarching priorities, such as poverty alleviation. The systems view will have to address broader human resource development issues, going beyond the parochial concerns of education sub-sectors. India, for example, has opted for a super-ministry for human resource development which coordinates the work of different ministry and department level agencies and organizations involved in various aspects of human resource development.

Thailand and Indonesia have permanent statutory commissions with similar functions. NEC2003 has recommended a permanent National Education Commission.

Allocation of authority and function at the central level:

The distribution of authority, functions and capacities among central entities - Ministries, directorates, and other support institutions - has been identified as a serious management issue. A need expressed by many is to redefine the division of roles and responsibilities between the secretariat of MOE, MOPME and the Directorates - ceding more of the responsibilities for planning, initiating policy reforms and overseeing policy implementation to the professional staff of the Directorates. A consequence of the present situation is that insufficient time and effort can be devoted to the critical functions of strategic policy development, inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral coordination and general public interest watch at the Ministry level (Ahmed et al., Education Sector Mapping 2004).

Decentralization and devolution of responsibility and authority:

The centralized structure of management of both government and government-assisted institutions has not changed over the years in spite of the rhetoric about decentralization. In recent years, increased politicization of education management has led to greater centralization with many small and large decisions, which should be disposed of at the directorate, district or upazila level, ending up at the highest level in the central ministry. Salary subvention and *ad hoc* grants paid to non-government institutions by the government, and enforcement of compliance to regulations for this purpose have provided an avenue for exercising various forms of central control over these institutions. The present practice of having the local MP, a political personality or the district administration head as the chairmen of governing bodies of all or many secondary schools and colleges in the locality is widely seen as a detrimental form of politicization leading to misuse of central compliance regulations (Ahmed et al., Education Sector Mapping 2004).

At the primary education level, the PEDP II Macro Plan says, "Fundamental to the process of quality improvement in primary education is the principle of decentralization and devolution of authority and responsibility to middle and local levels of the education system.…A distinctive thrust of the of PEDP II is to increase authority and accountability, and enhance resources at school level to achieve quality improvement in learning with equitable access. In line with this approach, key outreach support mechanisms will be developed at the upazila level… additional functions will be assigned to schools and upazilas, which will be strengthened in terms of infrastructure and staff." It would be important to ensure that these promises are actually fulfilled (PEDP II Final Plan 2002, pp. 48-49).

The quality of education can be enhanced and schools can be held accountable for performance when individual institutions take responsibility for managing their own learning programs. In the case of vocational and technical training institutions, for instance, this is the only way to assess and respond to skill demands in the local economy and to adapt to specific opportunities and circumstances.

Even in the current generally bleak picture, exceptional institutions which have earned a good reputation actually take greater responsibility for their own management, usually through good leadership of a head of the institution and support of an enlightened managing committee. These can serve as the model for a gradual move towards greater institutional responsibility and accountability. What is needed, therefore, to improve governance and management include the following

Education governance freed from partisan politics:

- Inasmuch as student fronts of political parties have become the prime source of violence, indiscipline and disruption of academic life as well as crime and corruption on campuses, a consensus has to be developed to impose legal restrictions on student front organizations of political parties; and
- A consensus has to be forged regarding political parties restraining themselves from involving teachers and teachers' organizations in partisan politics; educational decision-making including those on appointments, transfers and promotion should be protected from extraneous political influence.

A comprehensive law for national education:

- A comprehensive legal framework for national education should be developed in line with other

Asian countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and China. Such a law would provide the basis for implementing rights and obligations regarding education indicated in the national constitution and in international treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); and

- The comprehensive education law would spell out rights, responsibilities and obligations of citizens and government agencies at different levels, principles of decentralization and accountability, regulatory framework for different types of education programs and institutions, and principles of defining and protecting public interest in education.

Policy-making and coordination structures:

The Education Commission Report of 2003 suggested a permanent and independent National Education Commission as an institutional mechanism for public debate and scrutiny of educational policies and priorities and to protect education from undue political interference. The demand has been expressed for a strong and autonomous body, replacing the ineffective University Grants Commission, for greater coordination, the serving of national development needs, and the maintenance of standards for higher education. (UGC, Strategic Development for Higher Education, Draft 2006)

- A permanent National Commission on Education should be established, composed of distinguished and respected representatives of the major stakeholders – the civil society, the academic community, and the government education establishment – answerable directly to the national parliament. The Commission should be a statutory body with functions and status specified in a national education law. It should have a secretariat with technical capacity for policy review and evaluation of the performance of the education system. The Commission may provide an overall report on the national education system and a specific aspect or sub-sector of the system in alternate years; and
- A National Higher Education Council, established as a statutory body, would replace the University Grants Commission, and would have as its main functions to articulate policies and priorities in higher education in tune with the needs of the nation, set and maintain education standards, help mobilise resources for higher education and set principles and criteria for effective use of resources, and promote and protect the academic autonomy of higher education institutions.

***Decentralization of authority with accountability in educational management to local level and individual institutions*:**

- A structure of decentralization of education management should be developed which will assign central authorities such as the Ministry, Directorates and Boards broad policy and regulatory responsibilities, instead of the prevailing pattern of extreme centralization and non-transparent decision-making regarding activities, institutions and personnel;
- Planning and management of equitable access and enforcement of quality standards should be primarily at the district and upazila levels; individual institutions and their managing bodies should be provided incentives for taking greater responsibility and being accountable for meeting agreed performance standards;
- At the tertiary level, institutions should in principle be autonomous within a framework of regulations and standards developed and enforced by responsible bodies such as academic accreditation bodies and the Higher Education Council; the degree of autonomy of individual institutions would be progressively enhanced, based on their performance; and
- The professionalization of educational management should be augmented.

Education Finance by 2025

A pattern of simultaneous under-resourcing and waste characterizes financing of education in Bangladesh. It is a *low-cost and low-yield system*. Per student primary education expenditure is about $13 and for non-government secondary education it is $16 (BANBEIS 2003). The low per capita and total cost is no reason for satisfaction, because, educational quality – judged in terms of learning outcome, the pedagogic process and essential inputs – is clearly the victim of this situation. There is a *mismatch of financing and objectives.* Total national education expenditure, especially public budget allocation, around 2 percent of GNP, has to increase substantially in the medium term to meet national goals and priorities regarding expansion and quality improvement in education. The share of the

government budget for the education sector would need to rise from under 15 percent in 2000 to 26 percent in 2008 in order to achieve essential quality improvement (World Bank, Education Sector Review Vol. I, 2000, pp. 58-108).

Staff compensation dominates the recurrent budget (97 percent of the total) in primary education and is comparably high at other levels. This leaves very little funds for other essential quality inputs such as learning materials, upgrading of teachers and academic supervision.

There are high *incentive expenditures* in primary and secondary education. Development expenditure is dominated by the incentive payment in the form of stipends both at the primary and secondary levels. Stipends at the primary level amount to two thirds of the estimated development budget from the government's own resources and one third of the total primary sector development program (PEDP II). The important policy question that has arisen is whether the benefits in terms of participation, equity and quality improvement would not be better achieved by spending directly on improving inputs and performance in school. (Knowles 2001)

The experience of the NFPE program of the NGOs shows that the problem is of supply - offering quality schooling at the right time and place and in the right way without a direct cost burden on families for unofficial fees - rather than of creating demand by offering stipends. Such incentives in fact may defeat the purpose, if resources cannot be provided for essential quality inputs.

In principle, the generous system of public subvention for non-government institutions at all levels could be an important leverage for maintaining and enforcing quality standards in the non-government institutions. In practice, it fails to work this way because of the weak capacity of the regulatory and supervisory organizations in the government, and the intrusion of partisan politics in educational management.

Education Watch studies and other reviews have shown that at the primary level, average direct costs for households is comparable to per student public expenditure, although primary education is supposed to be free and compulsory. At the secondary level, depending on the type of institution, households spent multiples of per student public expenditure. (Education Watch 2003-4, Education Watch 2005)

Education finance arrangements reinforce *the pattern of inequity* in the education system. The share of benefits enjoyed by households from public spending in education rises with income levels of households at all stages of education, but especially in secondary and tertiary education (World Bank, 1998). In primary education, the expenditure roughly corresponded with income distribution of the population. But, in fact, effective spending and benefits, counting those who actually complete the primary stage, is far from equitable. The *significant household contribution for education* is not taken into account in the government public financing strategy for advancing policy objectives such as equity and quality improvement. The following may be considered to improve resource flows in the sector:

Ensuring adequate resources for quality education

- The proportion of GNP devoted to education in the public sector should be increased from around two percent at present to around 5 percent, which would still be below the average for developed countries, but at least in line with the average for developing countries;
- The proportion of government budget devoted to education should be doubled in the next two decades from the present level of around 15 percent; for Bangladesh, no other sector of national development can claim a higher priority; and
- Medium term budgetary framework (3 to 5 years) needs to be developed for both development and recurrent expenditures in education in order to achieve the target for ensuring adequate resources for education.

Ensuring cost-effective use of education resources

- The effectiveness and cost-benefits of high transfer payments (such as stipends and free tuition) should be critically assessed in terms of their impact on equity in participation, quality of education and learning performance of students;
- Adequate resources should be available for essential quality inputs for the education system – such as qualified and motivated teachers, learning materials and aids, and physical facilities; criteria for optimal allocation and utilization of resources should be developed and applied in sub-sectors and programs of education and individual institutions; and

- Public subvention and incentives to educational institutions should be linked to commitment and fulfilment of agreed performance criteria and targets; greater autonomy and control of resources can be offered to institutions that prove their capability to use resources effectively.

Promoting public-private complementarity and partnership

- The principle of public and private sector complementarity and collaboration in education to mobilize the necessary resources for improving and maintaining acceptable quality standards in the national education system should be recognized and education financing policies and strategies developed accordingly. Populist political promises, reflected in the manifestos of parties and pronouncements of leaders, to bring all education into the public sector and make it free of cost to beneficiaries, are impossible to follow through and are not helpful in developing rational policies and strategies;
- Financial allocations in the public sector, especially government subventions and grants to non-government institutions, should be provided with the aim of fulfilling specific objectives and targets in respect of equitable access and maintenance of quality standards in education sub-sectors; and
- Regulatory provisions as well as financial and tax incentives should be formulated and applied to all private sector institutions, including proprietary English medium institutions and private universities, to encourage participation of students from poor families and to promote equity objectives in general.

Conclusions

The daunting challenges in the area of education and human resource development in the next two decades require not only envisioning the future with boldness and realism, but also preparing the groundwork with seriousness and determination so that the vision becomes reality. A vital component of this groundwork will be to begin the process of building a consensus on the vision itself. An important step towards this end will be to embrace the application of ICT in education to improve the system at all levels with the help of the proposed ICT-based learning framework. A second critical step may be to bring together a group of distinguished and committed citizens to lead the consensus-building process. The group also can be a precursor to the proposed statutory national commission on education. A central issue around which the consensus-forming dialogue may begin is the purpose and content of the proposed national education law that will translate the constitutional provisions and common national aspirations regarding education into a legal framework for educational development.

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Commentary

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Manzoor Ahmed in this article addresses a range of issues in the education sector of Bangladesh. The scope of the paper is comprehensive – covering the primary, secondary and higher education – with a good review of the existing literature, ideas on improvement, policies implemented, and recommendations on changes in strategies and policies to greatly improve the education sector in the next twenty years.

My comments are limited to a few areas where I feel the author might have expanded his analysis or placed greater emphasis.

The author correctly points out that there is an apparent disconnect between the official statistics and reality. For example, the official pronouncements that the gross enrollment in primary education has reached 97%, or that the gender gap has been largely eliminated, or adult literacy rates have reached 64%, are overly optimistic. The best evidence indicates that even though progress has been made in each of these areas, there is much work that remains. To put this differently, even though Bangladesh has made considerable progress in the education sector, pleasantly surprising many in the international development community, the official statistics cannot be the sole basis of an impartial analysis of these achievements.

Considerable challenges remain before Bangladesh to achieve its true potential in the education sector. As the author states, education is a critically important sector in national development. There is no other sector that has greater potential for making a dent on systemic poverty and for permanently uplifting a large number of people from poverty to the middle class. I agree with the author that investment in education must be raised substantially from the current levels. The government must get its priorities right on this issue. For example, instead of adding more funds to the defense budget, Bangladesh should invest in the youth to be successful in the 21st century global economy since the returns on education ("education premium") has continued to rise. The information economy requires "knowledge" workers, and Bangladesh can only succeed in taking advantage of its most abundant resource – people with great work ethics – if it invests heavily in education. As a result, the next generation will be more productive and in greater demand in the world market as professionals with computer and English language skills, as opposed to being unskilled workers. Bangladesh has much to learn from its neighbor India and other successful nations in South Asia such as Malaysia and now China, where education has been made a national priority with emphasis on access and quality. It would have helped if the author had provided a few comparative statistics on the percentage of national budget devoted to education across the globe, especially the East Asian "tiger economies" that have experienced spectacular development in recent decades, thanks to their large investments in what economists call "human capital." When the author tells us that the proportion of the national budget devoted to education should be doubled, it would be useful to know where the increase should come from. In other words, as an economist might say the policy makers have to decide on the national production possibility curve and determine the appropriate combination, given the choice between "more schools or more tanks."

The author correctly describes the problem of language education. The move away from English in the post liberation era has been identified as a folly that has put the nation behind in taking advantage of the global economy. According to some experts, India has done so well in attracting foreign direct investment precisely because its high school and college graduates are reasonably proficient in English, the dominant language for global commerce and the Internet. The emphasis on English does not have to come at the cost of reduced emphasis on Bengali education – the recommendation that every student whether in the public or the expensive private school should be required instruction in the mother tongue is sensible. Children have a unique ability to learn more than one language (as we know from nations in Europe) and a proficiency in a foreign language gives a child great advantage in the long run.

There is not enough discussion of education in science, math and technology. As Professor Iqbal Mahmud states in a recent paper in this journal, Bangladesh needs to emphasize science and math learning in order to do well in the global high tech economy. Such education is the backbone of modern information and communications technology. This requires heavy investment in ensuring proper infrastructure and in closing the digital divide – the access to broadband connection for Internet use. Bangladesh should join developing nations such as Brazil that are adopting new technologies such as the $100 laptop for the children in schools. One cannot overemphasize the significance of access to the

Internet and computer literacy from an early age. Given the speed of these trends, the digital gap is likely to widen over time, unless developing nations concentrate their limited resources on modern information technologies to leapfrog into the 21st century.

The discussion on private education and especially the role of the private sector in higher education could be expanded. Besides the great success of garment exports, the positive impact of homegrown NGOs like the world famous Grameen Bank and BRAC, another positive development in Bangladesh in recent decades has been the growth of the nascent private universities. With the 1993 Private University Act and the formation of North South University, a movement started that has resulted in the establishment of at least 57 government-chartered private universities in Bangladesh today. To be sure, not all of these institutions are of good quality, or of high standard, yet taken together their positive impact has been considerable. In this arena, we are ahead of Pakistan, and India is only now catching up, although with great speed. Regarding the role of public policy, successive governments have mostly tolerated these new institutions rather than supporting them as an innovative homegrown solution to the gridlock and dysfunction in the public university sector. It is time to recognize the private universities as a welcome development, an expression of entrepreneurial spirit, a part of a worldwide movement that has greatly improved access to higher education and introduced a much needed dose of competition in this sector. True, the tuition and fee charged by these institutions are prohibitive for the low income families, but by siphoning off thousands of students (from well to do families) from the public universities, the private universities create much needed space for meritorious students from low income families and provide access to affordable public higher education.

The quality issue is paramount for the entire education sector, but especially for higher education. Unless we offer a curriculum that is "world class" we will keep on falling back. We have to invest in the training of our teachers at all levels, and we have to emphasize "outcome" based assessment of learning. This brings us to the issue of independent accreditation bodies. In the United States, one reason for the high quality of education is that institutions from high school, technical and community colleges and Universities, must seek and maintain accreditation from a regional body that accredits such institutions. Additional accreditation (Business, Nursing, Engineering, and Education) is available from professional accrediting bodies. Given the limited budget and ability of the University Grants Commission (UGC) in Bangladesh, the private universities sector must develop appropriate accrediting bodies whose independence, integrity and financial stability are guaranteed.

The author has alluded in several parts of the paper to the unwelcome politicization of education in Bangladesh. The centralization of power and the intervention of the elected officials have often been detrimental in running the schools or colleges. Most importantly, when administration or leadership in the academe is based on consideration other than meritocracy, quality inevitably suffers. Good governance requires that the administration of the education institutions should be in the hands of the best teachers and managers who are appointed in an unbiased manner and are held accountable for the educational outcomes. Corruption and mismanagement must be rooted out with a strong hand in the education sector, as elsewhere in the society. Student involvement in national politics should be greatly restricted to reduce disruption in the academic calendar, to reduce crime and to bring sanity and discipline to the education sector. As a nation we cannot afford to lose another generation of students to hartals and campus lockdowns. The education of the future generation is much too critical for national security and economic well being to be allowed to be held hostage to partisan politics.

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Commentary

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As an outsider, one has to respect the evidence, experience, knowledge and analysis that Manzoor Ahmed, as insider, brings to this forum. Bangladesh, known for its learning, its poetry and literature, its respect for education and humane ideals, and its vibrant culture of social entrepreneurship, is struggling to educate all of its people in line with those ideals. It is a truism that people are the primary resource of Bangladesh. Whether they lead economic and social development, or serve as a drain on its resources depends, in substantial part, on the resolution of issues Professor Ahmed so compellingly raises in this paper. Bangladesh must find a better way to develop and utilize its people if it is to prosper.

The paper lays out an ambitious vision for education and human development for the next two decades up to 2025. This vision is grounded in a series of analyses of the education sector, independent studies, the PRSP document, and reports from donor-supported education projects, as well as the author's own expertise and experience. Building a broader consensus on such a vision is an essential step in bringing it into being. Ahmed suggests the convening of a group of "distinguished and committed" citizens to lead the process, and this paper is a good starting point for such a dialogue.

The paper begins with a detailing of the status, successes and failures of the system. By and large, it is a sobering picture. Though initial primary school enrollment approaches universality, nearly half the students who begin school drop out before completing the five-year primary cycle. Secondary school enrollment remains low at 45%, with a curriculum oriented toward tertiary education, which enrolls only 5% of the relevant age group. There is little educational provision of training for work for the vast majority of students who will not take part in higher education. Adult literacy rates are low, with estimates ranging from 64% on the part of government, to independent estimates of 42%. Most enrollment and educational participation data are weak and there is little or no information on what most graduates of the system have or have not learned. Thus even at the most basic levels, the system is not doing sufficiently well to meet the needs of a nation that depends for its livelihood and well being on its human resources. Indeed, Bangladesh is not currently on target to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for primary education in 2015. The MDGs, while a necessary step in the right direction, are not, as Ahmed points out, adequate for sufficient progress in human development. Through "decades of neglect," the system has muddled through, with mere "patchwork" of change since colonial times, an "accumulation of problems which have become deep-rooted and intractable."

Resolution requires a vision, consensus on goals, specification of objectives and strategies, and process. Ahmed's paper provides a good draft, an ambitious set of goals and objectives and hints toward processes for reaching those goals. Politically, resolution of these issues requires a substantial political will, the willingness and wherewithal to change, as necessary to reach the vision, the "culture" of existing educational institutions. Also entailed is a willingness and capacity to try new things, to learn from their successes and failures, and to be wrong in the process of learning what's right. Ahmed's comprehensive and ambitious vision is discussed in terms of six major policy areas: improvements in quality, restructuring of the system for equitable access, English-Bangla bilingualism, ICT strategy, governance and management, and a sufficiency of resources effectively utilized. Some aspects of the vision are more thoroughly fleshed out than others. Access, for example, is more thoroughly detailed than ICTs. (This makes sense, as more is known about the dimensions and needed strategies for dealing with access.) Still the whole represents an important distillation of the status, needs and possible future direction of education in Bangladesh.

Current Limitations of Bangladesh's Education System

In detailing goals, objectives, strategies and challenges, the paper paints a vivid picture of the current system, some general points of which are noted here:

Lack of Effective Participation in Education

As noted, Bangladesh is not on target to achieve the MDGs by 2015, even though reaching them would not be a sufficient achievement to meet Bangladesh's human resource needs. Laudable as the goal of gender equality is, for example, simply achieving gender quality would leave many children out of school. Even as educational participation rates are

too low, data systems are insufficiently developed to track progress. Moreover, current efforts, Ahmed points out, focus too little on particular populations, whose needs may differ from those of the general population. The government's leading educational improvement initiative, the Primary Education Development Programme II (PEDP II), works only with the government and non-registered formal primary schools, leaving out the 20% children in other kinds of schools, the 10%+ of children who have never enrolled, and the 40+ percent who have dropped out. (Included in these other kinds of schools are a substantial number of non-formal primary schools aimed at the poor whose children have performed better on average than children in the formal system.) In such a context, initial primary enrollment rates are of limited use in gauging success: Better would be to define measures of "effective participation."

Failure to Impart Needed Learning Competencies

Much as enrollment is ultimately less useful than completion, Ahmed argues that educational improvement efforts must be evaluated in the final analysis by the extent to which they contribute to student learning. Theoretically simple, the notion is more difficult to put in practice. As Ahmed points out, the system currently lacks the means to assess the competencies students do acquire. It is not known, on a system-wide basis, what students are or are not learning. Arguably as important as the content of knowledge acquired is the manner by which knowledge is conveyed and acquired. Effective participation in the global economy will require that students acquire information skills more sophisticated than the "rote memorization of texts" currently required by examinations. Secondary education, Ahmed usefully notes, serves primarily to screen for higher education, which for the foreseeable future most students will be unable to attend. Yet there is no alternative provision of training students for anything else.

Limited Governance, Management, and Technical Capacity

The system is "administrative" in focus rather than managerial. Lacking a guiding vision and the technical expertise and habits of responding to changing needs and conditions, the education system relies largely on regulations and practices grounded in tradition, custom, and precedence, rather than data and strategic vision. Available data are rarely used for decision making. The technical capacities of the governing ministry and directorate are limited, and institutional memory short, as civil servants are transferred in and out of the sector without regard for sectoral expertise. In this sense, the system is always starting over. There are few if any national institutions on which the government relies for expertise. To a substantial extent, informed analysis of the system is carried out by external funding agencies, while management of the system is handled bureaucratically. Ahmed suggests greater system-wide articulation and coordination, a consensually-derived vision of the system, enactment of a comprehensive law of education, and creation of policy-making and coordinating structures outside the day-to-day administration of the system, but including representatives from the larger society as well as government. He suggests several ways in which a thoughtful process of decentralization might be initiated. He notes the negative role of partisan politics and suggests several ways they might be minimized.

A Pro-Rich not a Pro-Poor System

Given the larger inequalities of society, the benefits of education accrue to the better off, who are also positioned to take advantage of opportunities the poor cannot afford. In many ways, the current education system is effectively pro-rich rather than pro-poor. Despite official policies to the contrary, schooling is not free of cost to families. Ahmed cites research showing that families contribute roughly the same amounts as government to the education of their children. Under-resourced as a percentage of GDP and as a proportion of government expenditures, the education system is "low cost and low-yield." Salaries comprise 97% of the recurrent primary education budget, leaving virtually no resources in the regular budget to enable and support instruction, through, for example, supervision, learning materials, upgrading of teacher skills, and so forth. Often, support for such items is provided on an ad hoc basis through externally-assisted development projects. The low quality of schools further discourages learning. Primary-level stipends to stimulate demand make up two-thirds of the government's own development budget allocation and one third of the total primary sector development program budget. Ahmed wonders whether the funds might not be better spent providing a rich learning environment for students rather than encouraging children to attend under-resourced schools where learning is difficult. Experience from BRAC's non-formal primary education program suggests that children will attend

school and learn if provided with a suitable curriculum and learning environment. BRAC's schools' are roughly the same cost as government schools. In these ways, when the system fails to support student learning, it is the poor who suffer, as "the rich and the elite can opt out of the system and go to private institutions or abroad, as many have."

Macro-Changes in Provisional Strategy

In addition to articulating a comprehensive overall vision and specifying particular needs, Ahmed raises questions, mostly implicitly, about the provision of education. Here I note a few.

Who is responsible for education?

Implicit in the paper is a much broader and richer conception of responsibility for envisioning, supporting, carrying out, monitoring, and reforming/revising education than is currently in place. At present, virtually all of that responsibility for education lies with the government, specifically the central administrative bodies responsible for education, who lack the financial, managerial, and technical capacity for such an immense task. Even in the most well-resourced and capable systems, governmental administrative bodies are never fully responsible for education. Whether acknowledged and coordinated or not, parents, communities, and organizations in civil society already support education through moral support, the provision of children, assumption of direct and indirect costs of education, and the payment of taxes. At present, parents do play a role, as do communities and NGOs, but the roles are, at best, loosely articulated with the efforts of government. Often they are ignored by the authorities.

Implicit in Ahmed's recommendations is that the responsibilities for education be acknowledged, coordinated and shared, between central government, its district and local units, parents, community members, NGOs, and consultative groups of wise citizens yet to be constituted. NGOs and madrassas, for example, are already providing up to 20% of the primary education in the country, and yet they "operate with differing learning objectives and academic standards, with little opportunity for horizontal movement of students, and no interaction among organizational authorities running these different streams." Some NGOs have found ways to reach particularly disadvantaged populations, with higher levels of learning, at comparable costs, yet the system has not found a way to learn from such experience. Lacking a vision, the system must rely on precedent and procedure. Ahmed would likely center the ultimate responsibility and accountability for education at the local level, among parents, community members, teachers and school leaders, local education officials, and agents of civil society. In these ways, Ahmed challenges the capture of education by the government bureaucracy, who in the event, are overwhelmed by the task, lacking the resources and capacity to manage it all. He suggests several concrete ways in which decentralization might be started.

Where should the system focus?

Similarly, the paper implies a shift in the focus of the system, away from a focus on accounting for provision, regulation, and supply by central officials to provision of support to classroom instruction and evaluation of activities in light of learning outcomes at the school level. Such a shift would require a major decentralization in thinking as well as in planning and effort. The school and community would need capacity development. The center would need to redefine its role, away from implementer and controller of all initiatives to coordinator. Central government could still maintain control through specification of outcomes, standards and targets, but could leave more of the details of implementation to implementers. The shift is somewhat analogous to the shift in teachers' role from the source of all knowledge and learning in a "teacher-centered" pedagogy (where the focus is largely dependent on the teacher's expertise and initiative), to that of coordinator and facilitator of learning in "child-centered" pedagogy, where the focus is on children's acquisition of desired competencies. Ultimately, such a system should be cheaper and more sustainable, as implementation decisions are made closer to the source of information about conditions at the critical event of the system, classroom learning. Sustainability and accountability should be enhanced as the burden of implementation is shared with those with the greatest vested interest in success.
Ahmed challenges the system to trust local stakeholders and to help them learn to manage their schools.

How does the system think?

Given the technical limitations of system governors, thought needs to be given, Ahmed's document subtly implies, to how the system can be enabled to think.

Relying primarily at present on external funding agencies for technical expertise, the system would be greatly enhanced by a systematic and sustained effort to enhance the professionalism and technical capacity of system managers. Many system managers lack technical expertise in education, the development of which is hampered, along with institutional memory, by civil service transfer policies. Unlike other systems, Bangladesh does not—but could—utilize universities, think tanks, even NGOs, to help analyze the status of the system; examine particular problems; develop remedial strategies; design and evaluate experimental pilot projects; and carry out the kind of systemic and sector-wide planning that Ahmed calls for.

Also implicit in the paper is the importance of learning how to achieve the system's goals. Rather than rely solely on a central design and across-the-board implementation process, Ahmed suggests a more experimental approach, by which innovations are tried in local contexts, lessons learned and refined, and thoughtfully taken to scale, mindful of local conditions. Rather than one size fits all, Ahmed proposes the targeting of particular groups and conditions where those differ significantly from the mainstream. Such targeting requires careful attention to salient variations across locale, monitoring and analysis of local "experiments," as well as permission to carry them out in the first place.

Technical expertise is useful in informing the larger policy decisions, made ideally under a comprehensive education law devised in accordance with the country's current aspirations and situation, and under the guidance of a consultative body of representatives from the larger society and government's education managers. The paper usefully cites examples of such laws and consultative bodies in Bangladesh's neighbors.

How to realize the vision?

In large part, there is clarity about what needs to be done. What we don't know is how to do it under current conditions. Research has shown for several decades that a plan is a necessary but insufficient condition for change. Organizational wherewithal is partially a function of capacity and good ideas, but equally a function of organizational culture and political will. For historical reasons, Bangladesh's education system is not, at present, outcome-oriented, decentralized, or sufficiently professionalized. Organizationally, it is not, at present, vision-oriented or experimental. It is not at present particularly open to change or to broader participation.

The challenge will be to find ways, large and small, from both within the government and outside, to move in the desired directions. Some of this can come from outside, through negotiations between funding agencies and the government, or from the voices of civil society and the academy. Some can come from within the system by civil servants and leaders who share the vision. Some can emerge opportunistically, in response to openings in dialogue.

The vision and the recommendations are necessary and important. Now the need is to find creative ways to move the system, complex and naturally resistant as are all large organizations operating under difficult conditions, toward the attitudes, structures and resources named here to educate all of Bangladesh's people. This will require policy entrepreneurs inside and out.

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