

Addressing the gaps in education policy for middle-income Bangladesh

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BOAT SCHOOLS FOR RURAL CHILDREN: BRAC supports young children get to school

Bangladesh has secured impressive gains in the expansion of income, reduction of poverty and improving the basic indicators of human development. Buoyed by the success with income growth, whereby the World Bank-defined threshold for lower middle-income country (LMIC) was crossed in 2015, Bangladesh now aspires to reach upper middle-income country (UMIC) status by 2030. If this happens, this will be fastest transition from LMIC to UMIC. China, for example, took 17 years to secure this transition. While many policy and institutional challenges will be needed to be met to secure this aspiration, a major contributor will be the quality of the labour force, which, in turn, is a function of the quantity and quality of education and training.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES IN EDUCATION: Despite past progress, the quantity and quality of education and training remain a substantial policy challenge. BANBIES (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information & Statistics) data for 2014 shows that the dropout rate for primary education was 21.4 per cent; net enrolment in secondary education was only 50.2 per cent; and less than 50 per cent of secondary school students completed the full 5-year cycle. Enrolment at the tertiary level is estimated at a mere 12 per cent; the gender gap in tertiary education is large with female students accounting for only 30 per cent of total enrolment.

The issue of quality is pervasive at all levels of education and reflected in several dimensions of education inputs including high student-teacher ratios; inadequacy of teacher skills;

shortage of certified teachers, and inadequacy of physical facilities relating to class rooms, toilet facilities, especially for girls, and laboratories and computers. Another challenge is the rapid growth in madrasa education, growing faster than general education. The relevance of madrasa education to the job market and the overall development of Bangladesh has increasingly become a major policy dilemma.

There are also concerns about the equity of education spending. For example, from an equity point of view, the gross enrolment rate (GER) for the poor at the secondary level is only 45 per cent, which is significantly lower than that of non-poor (76 per cent).

In the area of non-formal education (NFE), some good progress has been made in increasing adult literacy and narrowing the gender gap. However, sticking to a conventional literacy approach ignoring the need for functional literacy skills as a first step for lifelong learning and not adopting a strategy along this line impede literacy programme's effectiveness and popularity.

THE WAY FORWARD: The 7th Five-Year Plan is an important opportunity to articulate goals and objectives for education and training policy in the light of Education Policy (2010), National Skills Development Policy (2011), aspirations for securing UMIC status (2030) and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) education goals and targets (2030). The challenge of moving forward would be to refine, elaborate, and ensure consistency and alignment with stated and identified national priorities, especially giving attention to issues that have not been addressed adequately. To support this task, several specific policy and institutional reform options are presented below.

First, at around 2.0 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), public spending on education is low and inconsistent with the government's targets for the sector. This level of spending is amongst the lowest globally and must be reversed. Within a medium-term time frame (five years or so), the proportion of GDP for public education budget should be raised to at least 4.0 per cent. Education budget planning needs to be informed and guided by the objective of attaining the 7th FYP targets and laying the ground for achieving the education goals of the SDGs.

Second, the existing national objectives and targets as regards education included in 7th FYP

need to be placed in and aligned with the framework of the targets and indicators of SDG4/Education 2030 and the UMIC 2030 target. The objectives and policies will need to be backed up by a set of quantifiable annual targets. No specific universalisation plan exists yet for education beyond grade 5, though official target is grade 8. Steps have to be taken to reconcile the global target of universal full secondary education by 2030 with the national grade 8 target.

Third, the highly centralised structure of education governance with decision-making and management concentrated in the capital city for a student population of some 40 million, 200,000 institutions, and a million teachers, remains intact as government education delivery strategy. Education resource mobilisation, budget making, management and service delivery can be strengthened by decentralisation involving Upazila and district based-planning and management of primary and secondary school education. A permanent statutory National Education Commission, anticipated in Education Policy 2010, can be a mechanism for guiding, exercising oversight and assessing progress and impact of education reforms.

Fourth, new thinking about teachers is needed. By far the largest expenditure item in education is the teaching personnel. Finance and budget measures have to provide for sufficient number of teachers and ensure effective teacher learning. Apart from improving current in-service training of teachers, measures have to be taken to make teaching one of the first career choices for talented young people, rather than the last one. A ten-year plan could be adopted to bring about this transformation, learning from both developed OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries and those in East Asia, including China.

Four key elements in this plan would be: (a) the creation of a National Teaching Service Corps (NTSC) with high remuneration and prestige; (b) attracting bright young people with stipend and lure of NTSC job into a four-year teacher preparation track after higher secondary; (c) introducing in the four-year general degree programme (BA or BSc) education as a subject; and (d) ensuring high quality of this degree programme by enforcing quality standards in at least 100 government degree colleges in the country.

Fifth, the unacceptably low quality of degree colleges (with three quarters of tertiary enrolment in these colleges, which also are the suppliers of primary and secondary school

teachers) creates a vicious cycle in education, which must be addressed with urgency. Higher education quality improvement efforts at present are confined mostly to regular universities.

Sixth, non-formal alternatives for out-of-school children have to be effectively funded. Three to four million children of primary school age are still out of school, either because they have never enrolled in school or have dropped out early. Bangladesh NGOs, led by BRAC, pioneered the non-formal second-chance primary education programme in the 1980s, which has been successfully scaled up. A second-chance programme must be a part of the main strategy for universal primary education in order to serve out-of-school children of all kinds – dropouts, working children, those in remote areas and those in other special circumstances.

Seventh, expansion of pre-primary education with acceptable quality has to be supported. A good start has been made in expanding a year of pre-primary education now serving more than half of those entering primary school. Early childhood development for younger children also needs to be expanded, for which the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs is the focal point. No specific target for early childhood development below pre-primary has been set; only scattered activities for young child development, mostly by NGOs, are in existence.

Eighth, lifelong learning has to be supported with literacy as the first step. The principles and practice of lifelong learning have come to the fore again in the context of SDG2030/SDG4. To make lifelong learning a reality and expand functional literacy for youth and adults, a network of community learning centres (CLCs) offering relevant learning activities and supported by essential resources, complementing formal education, must be built up.

Ninth, supply-driven skills development with low quality and market relevance, and minimal attention to apprenticeship and needs of the informal economy (though it accounts for over 80 per cent of employment) need to change, as anticipated in the National Skills Development Policy. Overall technical and vocational education and training (TVET) participation is low for the secondary education age-group-even lower for females. Expansion of TVET within the present structure, without major reform, will not help in achieving the objectives in this area.

Tenth, ideally, a significant increase in the revenue share of GDP and enhancing revenue-

raising capacity of local government bodies should provide for necessary increase in education budgets. These have to be the longer-term direction to be pursued. Meanwhile, two pragmatic measures to increase local government revenues could be considered – a reform of the property tax system and tax incentives for individual and corporate contribution to education.

Eleventh, Bangladesh's foreign aid strategy for education will need to be redesigned in view of the targets of the 7th FYP and the SDGs. Foreign aid will continue to be an important source for financing education over the near-to-medium term. It is necessary to engage in dialogue with the development partners on a continuing basis for predictable support to fulfil the SDG4 agenda appropriately adapted and indicators for assessing and reporting progress elaborated.

Twelfth, all school education should be brought under one national administrative jurisdiction. School education divided under two ministries, creates problems of curriculum continuity, student assessment, teacher preparation and supervision, and developing and guiding and implementing an overall quality-with-equity strategy in the national education system. A separate agency for primary education up to grade 5, introduced with the adoption of the compulsory primary education law, which later transformed into a full Ministry, is no longer relevant in the context of SDG4 target of universal education that embraces secondary education.