

# Opening Opportunities for Children

If children enjoy going to school, they are more likely to remain in school, and their younger ones will see this and enroll, tells UNICEF Country Representative in Bangladesh Shahida Azfar to Sabir Mustafa

**The Daily Star (DS):** There is a great deal of emphasis on increasing enrolment rate at primary schools. But do you feel it is possible to sustain a high quality, universal primary education in countries that suffer from severe resource constraints, low economic growth and widespread poverty? What policies is UNICEF proposing to ensure that high primary school enrolment is sustained?

**Shahida Azfar (SA):** First of all, we need to consider whether or not nations can afford not to provide an adequate education for all their children. According to Article 28 of the CRC children have the right to a free, compulsory education. Children are the future of a nation. If they are not educated to use all their mental abilities, then they will remain trapped in poverty and the productivity of the nation will suffer. UNICEF conducted a study of ten countries (nine countries and the state of Kerala) from all major developing regions that have achieved much better health and education results than others in the same region with similar income levels. All the countries with better health and education results achieved universal primary enrolment early in their development process. Regardless of political models, all the countries achieving good health and education results share a policy of strong state support for basic social services. While keeping unit costs relatively low, each has spent a higher proportion of per-capita income on primary education than have less successful neighbouring countries. This study demonstrates that it is political will, and not only available financial resources, that is crucial in ensuring children's access to quality education, and that 'poor' countries can work wonders with commitment and far-sightedness. (p. 80, SOWCR)

UNICEF is working with the Government of Bangladesh to increase access, to ensure equity and to improve the quality of primary education. UNICEF, based on the CRC, strives through education to develop the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential. (CRC, Article 29) This is done by creating classrooms that are child-friendly and by lessons that require active learning. There is a particular emphasis on ensuring that classrooms are girl-friendly. Research shows immense social benefits

of female education. These include:

- children of educated mothers stand a greater chance of survival. They are better nourished and suffer less illness;
- children, especially girls, of educated mothers are more likely to be educated themselves;
- girls who are educated tend to marry later and have fewer children (ultimately reducing population growth rates);
- educated women have healthier pregnancies, resulting in a reduction in maternal mortality;
- educated girls are less likely to be exploited by their families or society;
- educated girls are more likely to be involved in development initiatives; and
- educated girls are more likely to participate in political and economic decision-making.

All GOB/UNICEF initiatives to improve the quality of primary education strive to make classrooms safe, interesting and enjoyable places for learning, especially for girls. If children enjoy going to school, they are more likely to remain in school, and their younger brothers and sisters will see this and enroll. Through improving the quality of education and making it accessible to all, UNICEF is working with the GOB to ensure that high primary school enrollment is sustained and more children each year complete primary education.

**DS: Is UNICEF assisting the Government of Bangladesh to improve quality of teachers and teaching methods? If so, how and what measures are being taken to ensure that these qualitative improvements would be sustained?**

**SA:** UNICEF supports two GOB projects. The IDEAL Project works with Government primary schools to promote community involvement in primary education and to improve the teaching-learning methods used in the classrooms. The Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Children Project supports NGOs which organise and operate nonformal education centres for working children. In both projects a major emphasis is on the improvement of quality through effective teaching-learning strategies. Training is provided to teachers on effective teaching techniques. UNICEF has introduced in Bangladesh Multiple



Ways of Teaching and Learning (MWTL), which is based on multiple intelligence theory. It is recognised that children learn in a variety of ways and that teachers must therefore use a number of techniques building on various intelligences (verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, visual/spatial, musical/rhythmic, body/kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal) to ensure that all children learn to their full potential. A group of master trainers and core trainers has been developed to deliver the training to teachers. In the IDEAL Project most of the trainers are from the Primary Training Institutes or other Government departments. The capacity for delivering the training and monitoring its use in classrooms is being developed within the Government system, and this is the major factor which should ensure its sustainability.

**DS: This year's SOWCR has heaped praise on the non-formal education model of NGOs such as BRAC. Do you feel non-formal education can be a substitute for formal primary education? Or do you think NGOs can only play a supportive role?**

**SA:** As noted in the SOWCR (p. 38), what is being increasingly advocated in many countries is a unified system overseen by the State and founded on state-supported schools but also encompassing many different types of partner groups. Thus, the old divide between "formal" and "nonformal" is becoming irrelevant. What is

important is that every child is able to exercise their right to a quality primary education. Bangladesh has been one of the leaders in institutionalising this model. At present in Bangladesh there are many different types of educational institutions delivering primary education: registered GOB primary schools, registered non-Government primary schools, unregistered private schools, primary level madrasas, kindergartens, satellite schools and learning centres operated by NGOs. As the national body for overseeing education in the country, it is the primary responsibility of the Government to ensure quality basic education. Partnerships with community groups, NGOs and the private sector can make the education system more responsive to local needs and conditions, and can create opportunities for groups excluded from traditional education systems. The State can coordinate all of these components and fulfill its role of setting standards and ensuring that all children have access to a meaningful education. The State also sets the stage for education in the entire country, supplying the political will to see that education efforts succeed.

**DS: Given UNICEF's experience in Bangladesh, how far do you feel the country has come, in terms of enrolment and gender parity at primary schools? Do you feel the Government commitment to basic education, particularly for girls, is strong enough to meet the needs?**

**SA:** Given UNICEF's experience in Bangladesh, how far do you feel the country has come, in terms of enrolment and gender parity at primary schools? Do you feel the Government commitment to basic education, particularly for girls, is strong enough to meet the needs?

**SA:** Bangladesh has made great strides in improving primary enrollment through the commitment and concerted efforts of GOB, development partners and NGOs. Gross enrolments have increased by 20% during this decade. As noted in SOWCR (p. 14) Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the region which has achieved gender parity in primary schools. There is a strong commitment on the part of the Government and the people of Bangladesh. However, there is still much to be done. Over a third of the children who start primary school do not complete the 5-year primary cycle. Low attendance continues to be a problem. The Government, in partnership with UNICEF and other donors, is instituting the following measures to ensure that schools and classrooms are girl-friendly:

- introducing free or subsidised education for girls;
- locating schools closer to children's homes, which particularly helps girls' attendance;
- adapting curricula and school schedules to local needs;
- introducing flexible approaches;
- involving parents and communities in the management and administration of schools;
- increasing the number of women teachers (now up to 28% in government primary schools);
- employing administrators who are sensitive to the need for schools to be safe and clean and have appropriate facilities (studies have shown increased female school attendance at schools where there are latrines for girls—one district in Bangladesh has achieved almost 100% female latrines at all its schools);

• eliminating gender bias in curricula and in teacher education; and close monitoring of school efficiency and the gathering of sex-disaggregated data.

Although much has been accomplished, there is no room to be complacent. It will take the continued efforts on the part of all the people of Bangladesh to ensure Education for All.

**DS: The emphasis in recent years has been firmly on basic education, which most people agree is essential for development. But do you feel we are running the danger of neglecting secondary and higher education? Could such neglect not adversely affect economic development and intellectual growth of the nation?**

**SA:** In the past few years there has been a renewed emphasis on making basic primary education accessible to all children of Bangladesh. In my opinion this has been a necessary and important step to ensure that children are able to exercise their right to education. There is no reason this should lead to a neglect of other levels of education. On the contrary it has meant that the base for all formal education has been expanded. More children than ever before, and significantly a much higher ratio of girls, are entering secondary schools. The Government has introduced a stipend scheme for girls' secondary education, and the ratio of girls to boys has increased dramatically to approximately 48 to 52. An improvement in the primary education system will always yield results throughout the educational system. The intellectual base of the nation is being expanded. These gains must then be consolidated at the secondary and tertiary levels.

**DS: This year's SOWCR speaks of education as the best investment. But it seems the international community is less than forthcoming to make such investments. Why do you feel education still does not get top priority in the assistance policy of the developed world? And what is organisations like UNICEF doing to change that?**

**SA:** There is a growing awareness in the international community of the importance of education, and that is gradually being translated into more financial resources for education.

**DS: Thank you very much for your time.**

UNICEF has increased its allocation to education over the past few years, and we are active in encouraging other donors to support primary education. As noted in the SOWCR (p. 82), World Bank's influence as an advocate for financial investment in education has increased with its publication of research documenting the productive effects of primary schooling. Particularly there has been the acknowledgement of the value of girls' education. Primary education is accorded a high priority by development partners, but we in UNICEF are not satisfied with that.

Almost without exception, States do have adequate resources to discharge their educational responsibilities. Where they do not do so, the problem is usually lack of political will. The responsibility for ensuring that all children receive a basic education lies with national governments. However, many states continue to fail to make education a key priority. For example, Vietnam has achieved 93 per cent literacy, while Pakistan, with a much greater per capita income, has just 38 per cent literacy.

The world would need to spend an additional \$7 billion a year over the next ten years to provide universal access to quality education for all children. To accomplish this task, several steps are required: there must be an increased priority attached to provision of basic education at the state level; there must be increased donor aid; and (perhaps most importantly) there must be structural changes in the current economic situation to ensure that the poorest nations have a fighting chance to meet the formidable challenges involved in delivering universal quality education.

UNICEF urges a renewed commitment to the "20/20 Initiative," which requires governments of developing countries to devote 20 per cent of their budgets, and industrialised nations to devote 20 per cent of their development assistance to assisting basic social programmes in developing countries. Currently, developing countries allocate an average of only around 13 per cent of their national budgets to basic services, while donor countries devote around 10 per cent of their Overseas Development Assistance to supporting these services. Full implementation of the 20/20 Initiative would make available sufficient financial resources to achieve universal access to quality basic education within a decade.

We will continue to advocate that ensuring the right of children to a quality primary education must be for everyone at the very top of the priority list.

**DS: Child labour has long been identified as a major impediment to children's development in Bangladesh. But given the poverty situation in the country, do you feel it realistic to expect child labour to be abolished altogether? Or do you think children's education can be ensured while enabling them to retain their jobs?**

**SA:** Of the 15.73 million children aged 10 to 14 in Bangladesh, it is estimated that 6.6 million are working children. One of the projects which UNICEF supports is designed specifically to provide learning opportunities for working children. We cannot afford to wait for child labour to be abolished. We must intervene now in the actual situation. Working children too must be given the opportunity to exercise their right to a meaningful basic education. For this to happen flexible systems must be developed to cater to the needs of working children. The Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Children Project is based on the "learning while learning" strategy. Education is a necessary but not sufficient condition for breaking the cycle of poverty and child labour. The aim is to give children the opportunity to escape from exploitative labour conditions by giving them skills and opportunities to ensure better life prospects.

**DS: Thank you very much for your time.**

## The Week in Review

### Divorcee Benefit Lost

THE appellate division of the Supreme Court Dec. 3 overruled a High Court verdict which had held that divorcees were entitled to life-long maintenance by their former husband.

The verdict came after Hibzur Rahman appealed to the SC after a dissatisfactory verdict in the HC ordered him to look after his divorced wife till she remarries or dies.

In coming to this decision, the SC sought the interpretation of the Quran from Khatib of Battul Mukarram Mosque. Maulana Obaidul Huq, and Maulana Mahiuddin, editor of monthly *Madina*. Jurists such as Barrister Ishaq Ahmed, Dr Kamal Hossain and Barrister Aminul Islam were also present to give their views.

### Re-polling Demanded

BNP leader and former minister Abdul Mannan on Dec 3 demanded immediate re-polling in the Dhaka-10 constituency, where he had lost to his AL rival, Dr Iqbal in 1996.

This came after the election tribunal declared the voting results of 51 (out of 78) centres of Dhaka-10 void. Previously, Mannan wanted re-election in all 78 centres, but now came to a 'compromise' of re-polling in 51 centres only.

### Fund for Sundarbans

Asian Development Bank on Dec 2 approved 37 million dollar equivalent loan for a project of conservation that will introduce modern management systems involving all stakeholders in 17 sub-districts around the forests of Sundarban.

This management and biodiversity conservation seeks to protect us from cyclones in South-west Bangladesh, to protect the habitants in the ecosystem starting from fishers, shrimps, bird to the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger.

### Aventis Born

Jean-René Fourtou, chairman of Rhône-Poulenc, SA and Jürgen Dorman, chairman of Hoechst AG, announced on Dec 2 their common intention to merge their life sciences activities into a new company, called Aventis, equally owned by Hoechst and Rhône-Poulenc.

With 1997 proforma sales of US \$20 billion and 95,000 employees, Aventis will be a global leader in life sciences holding top positions in both pharmaceuticals and agriculture, as Aventis will comprise the pharmaceutical and agricultural businesses of both groups.

### Asiad Opens

The 13th Asian Games began on Dec 6 at the 60,000 capacity Rajamangala National Stadium.

A total of 6,846 athletes, of which 2,165 are women, are contending for the 377 gold medals.

The Bangladeshi squad comprises of 44 athletes who are competing in eight sports disciplines.

### Murder in Sirajganj

Shaheda Aziz (40), a Mahila Awami League leader was chopped to death and her daughter injured on Dec 4 in an attack by armed hoodlums in Raiganj thana.

They were attacked upon while returning from their relatives' house. Police arrested Marzina Khatun, a neighbour, in this connection.

### Jaswant India FM

The PM of India expanded his cabinet on Dec 5 by including Jaswant Singh as the External Affairs Minister and BJP General Secretary Pramod Mahajan as the Minister for Information and Broadcasting.

Rumour has it that it is his way of saying he is 'in firm control of the government and is the final authority', especially after the party's defeat in assembly polls in Madhya Pradesh.

### Magura Writes

Implementation of 'Bikoshito Magura' under the 'Total Literacy Movement' (TLM), has lead to a fully literate Magura district, where all can read and write.

Under the programme, 200,000 adults were given education to achieve this. It is hoped that by 2006, the whole country will be free from illiteracy.

### Unimpressed DfID

John Vereker, permanent secretary of Britain's Department for International Development (DfID), on Dec 5 said that economic stability is fragile here with insufficient foreign exchange reserves, a narrow export base and weak revenue performance. He criticised the country's defence spending saying that it was disproportionate to the needs.

Vereker, here on a 3-day visit, signed an agreement for financing three new projects worth 14.34 million pounds (Tk 114.72 crore) in the country's development sector. ERD Secretary Dr Mashru Rahman installed the deal on this side.



Shahida Azfar on a visit to a flood-affected village in Parangaj Union in Mymensingh this year.

## Education: The Best Investment

THE World Bank's influence as an advocate for financial investment in education has increased with its publication of research documenting the productive effects of primary schooling. Private rates of return—the amount earned by individuals in formal-sector employment in relation to that invested in their education—appear in all regions of the developing world to be higher for primary than for secondary and tertiary education. There is a great deal of evidence, for example, that basic education increases the output of small farmers. One study of 13 low-income countries demonstrated that four years of schooling resulted in an 8 per cent increase in arm production. Another study in Bolivia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Malaysia shows a correlation between the size of a company and the number of years of schooling its owner has had.

Even more important in recent years has been the acknowledgment of the paramount value of girls' education. In a 1992 speech before the Pakistan Society of Development Economists, Lawrence H. Summers, then Vice-President and Chief Economist of the World Bank, argued that 'investment in education of girls may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world.'

Mr Summers stated: 'Reflecting the biases of an economist, I have tried to concentrate on the concrete benefits of female education and explicitly contrast it with other proposed investments. Expenditures on increasing the education of girls do not just meet the seemingly easy test of being more socially productive than military outlays. They appear to be far more productive than other social-sector outlays and than the vastly large physical capital outlays that are projected over the next decade.'

As this report has stressed throughout, girls' schooling has a vital impact on the whole framework of human development. It not only reduces child mortality and improves the nutrition and general health of children, but it also reduces population growth since educated women tend to marry later and have fewer children. Fulfilling a girl's right to education empowers her, giving her more choices, more control over her life, and more potential for exercising the full entitlements of democratic citizenship. Inevitably, studies confirm, her education has a positive effect on the larger society: Her own children are more likely to be schooled and literate, and communities are more likely to have effective health and education services if educated women and men are available to staff them.

The value of investing in basic education, and especially the education of girls, is now almost universally accepted. Why then has the international community not rushed to embrace this most cherished project—an avenue that promises more than any other to reach the goal of delivering 'human development' worldwide?

The answer is familiar: The political will is lacking. When the international community decides that an idea or project is of urgent importance, it can move mountains. Nothing made this plainer than the economic crisis in East Asia in 1997-1998. The financial collapse first of Thailand, then the Republic of Korea, and then Indonesia (counted among the financial 'tigers' of Asia) proved such a shock to the international financial system that the OECD countries led by the Group of Seven responded with admirable urgency. In the space of a few short months, they mobilised over \$100 billion to bolster the collapsing Asian economies, to be distributed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in return for sweeping structural adjustment programmes similar to those which poorer countries have been undergoing for the last 15 years. Recognising that the crisis was so grave they could not afford to observe normal administrative procedures, donor nations IMF rules to accommodate the suffering 'tigers'.

In contrast, the leading industrial nations, IMF and the World Bank have been less accommodating with the world's poorest and most indebted countries, something that has not gone unnoticed. It cast a heavy shadow over events in the Côte d'Ivoire capital of Abidjan in February 1998, when a new structural-adjustment agreement was reached after nine months of painful negotiation, with the government agreeing to privatise measures in return for \$2 billion in new loans from IMF. This agreement followed almost two decades of economic belt-tightening. As Ngor Niamien, Côte d'Ivoire's Economic and Finance Minister, commented: 'We have observed the speedy reaction to Asia and seen the huge sums of money they have been able to come up with almost instantaneously, often bending the rules pretty freely. When it comes to us, our negotiations can drag on for months while they split hairs and act very finicky. One can easily get the impression of a double standard.'

IMF officials have pointed out that the size and speed of their economies to the global financial system, which underlines the point that resources are available—almost instantaneously—when there

is sufficient political will. It also demonstrates short-sightedness, wrongly suggesting that Africa's survival is less important to our global system. UNICEF was not alone in calling, as it did in The State of the World's Children 1988 report, for a sustained transfer of resources to the least developed nations, on the lines of the Marshall Plan with which the United States rescued a ravaged Europe following World War II. Although the idea has been continually dismissed as impossible and unrealistic, the East Asian and recent Russian bailouts make it plain that such resource transfers are eminently possible and entirely realistic.