

Primary Education: Promises and Perils

by Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal

It is imperative that the torch of learning must be carried to millions of illiterates and out-of-school children for whom the declaration about the right to education has had no meaning so far, otherwise our posterity, who will face the challenges of 21st century, will not forgive us for our failures.

ONE evening in the mid-seventies, a sticker pasted on the bumper of a car parked in the campus of Pennsylvania State University, USA, attracted my eyes. It was inscribed, "If you think education is expensive try ignorance." For a moment I was puzzled. Then I laughed to my heart's content and enjoyed the deep sense of humour. The western world, being aware of the inner meaning and implications of the subject, took adequate measures to spread the benefit of education. Our societies, on the other hand, did not take full advantage of educational pursuits. Rather, visibly, there is little or no conscious biting on the low progress of our own education development. Frankly speaking, we seem to have done very minimal to even restore the weaknesses and deficiencies of the system.

Twenty-five years later, I became more puzzled when the contents of the inscription reappeared in my mind. After my retirement from the public service in May 1999, I decided to devote more time on reading and writing on the three subjects that has an initial of English letter 'E' i.e. Energy, Environment and Education. So far, I concentrated on writing about the primary education issues (the latest on October 1, 1999, entitled "Gas Export: Let's not be called a bottomless basket again," published in The Daily Star). In fact, I have spent the best part of my service career in the primary education and primary education sectors respectively and could never rise above the primary level during the twenty-three year period between 1972-95 except some years spent within the com-

pound of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as Director-General, External Publicity of the Government. In this background, I now wish to share with the readers some events and experiences in the education sector, more specifically the primary education development in this decade.

We all know, development is for man, by man and for man. The same is true of education. Its purpose is to liberate men and women from the restraints and limitations of ignorance and dependency. Education, particularly basic education, enhances mental freedom to increase their control over themselves, their own lives, and the environment in which they live. Education implies learning, irrespective of where and how the learning takes place. It is a lifelong process spanning all the years from infancy to old age, assuming different forms, of which formal schooling is only one form. As distinct from hierarchically structured and chronologically graded formal system, non-formal education consists of mostly assortment of organized and semi-organized educational activities operating outside the regular structures and routines of formal frame, aimed at serving a great variety of learning needs of different age groups, both young and old. However, at times I wonder, whether we offered our most valuable thing i.e., education to some wrong people at a wrong time. Perhaps because of the wrong holders of education and their ill-gotten money, social values are greatly declining. Otherwise, why it is so that their utterances and activities

are devoid of sincerity and honesty and why it is that they appear to us to be so self-serving? Here is one example which may indicate that we picked up the wrong end of education. We witnessed with great disappointments the incident of broad daylight coup-d'etat attempt in a bank boardroom by de trop human beings like bank defaulters who drive costly air-conditioned cars and live in posh residential areas without being censured by the society. Is this the kind of education we are offering to our children?

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen once said, "the pre-eminent development of the 20th century is the rise of democracy." Indeed, the most striking development of this period, democracy, has flourished in many parts of the world. But it also seems pre-eminent that the intolerable erosion of human values in Bangladesh is harming democracy and civil society so much that it has now taken shelter in a kitchen where cooking is not taking place, not because of ignorance rather arrogance of cooks. If we take a good look outside our windows, we would most likely see things that we do not wish to see with our naked eyes nor do we want to participate in. For example, although many of us do not intend to join the charivari on either advocating the eviction process of slum dwellers or the

reaction to it, I tend to agree with the social scientists that the vicious circle of illiteracy and poverty in the rural areas are responsible for the forced migration of poor people to the already congested towns and cities. But it is a fact that a significant percentage of children are not attending the elementary school although it has been made compulsory in the early 90's. Many of the lucky ones, who are in schools, find themselves squeezed into crowded benches in dilapidated classrooms particularly in the rural areas. A number of surveys conducted in the past including the most recent one in the 90's, indicate that most of the rural schools cannot actually accommodate more than 70 per cent students enrolled. On another aspect of life, for example, we have become more democratic than it is necessary in controlling the city traffic system.

I am not sure whether it is because of ignorance or ku-shikho (bad education). In recent days, vehicular traffic violation red-light signs at the road crossings without being penalized, at times ushered by traffic controllers themselves. These things must be taken cognizance of. And unless the bull is caught by the horn now, the situation might turn into the proverbial warrior and the executioner example. The warrior and the exe-

cutioner do similar jobs, both kill enemies of the state. But there the similarity ends. From time immemorial the warrior has been fated and honoured. The public executioner, by contrast, has always had to lurk in the shadows, working anonymously or for a pittance. There is no glory in what he does. It reminds me of the appalling apartheid days in South Africa and emergence of Nelson Mandela. Mr. Mandela, like many other leaders, must have had thousands of desires when he became president, but he deliberately cut them to a bare minimum achievable ones within a given time frame. In his own words, "I shall have in a small way done my duty to my country and my people. I do not want to reach 100 years still trying to bring a solution to some complicated issues". The need of a correct choice is therefore critical in a nation's life.

If we look back in the early 90's, what we will find is that a National Plan of Action (NPA) was prepared and presented in the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) held in March 1990 at Jomtien, Thailand. The NPA proposed realistic strategies that mix innovative and unconventional approaches with conventional and traditional ones. The broader vision expressed in the WCEFA required that NGOs were to be encouraged to partic-

ipate as partners of educational development particularly in the non-formal mode of delivery. In brief, Bangladesh's NPA was supported by the Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) Act 1990, higher recruitment of female teachers (60 per cent against the prevailing 15 per cent) and tuition-waiver for girl students upto grade VIII (now enhanced to grade X). Thus in the rural areas, a remarkable beginning was made under the leadership of a young, energetic and committed Education Minister Sheikh Shahidul Islam and a competent civil servant secretary Hedayat Ahmed. A hard-core team was commissioned, in which this author was deputed as Joint Secretary assisted by an able Deputy Chief Dr. Delwar Hossain, to carry trouble shooting in the basic education programme. The team prepared within nine months (in 1989) a comprehensive programme (under the title General Education Project) to deal mainly with the quantitative aspects of the primary education.

NGOs were involved for the first time to work shoulder to shoulder with the formal system run by the government. The World Bank, ADB, SIDA (Swedish), NORAD and UNICEF provided technical and financial assistance (US\$ 320 million — the single largest donor

assisted project in the primary education). Reportedly, on completion of the project in 1996, no major follow-up was made by the government. Thus, what we find today is that almost 53 per cent of the total population are illiterate and almost 4.4 million (out of the total 19 million primary school-age boys and girls) or about 23 per cent are still out-of-school children. Some of the deficiencies in the system threaten to undercut the nation's growth prospects in the 21st century by leaving it short handed when it will need a largely literate work force capable of competing in technical skills even with other Asian countries. Almost 57 per cent of the students who enter primary schools do not complete their 5-year course (Ref: Bangladesh Study: The World Bank and BCAS Report Published in 1998).

Unfortunately, the belief of the early 90s are now turning sour, if not disbelief. A new wave of controversy appear to have emerged in the education parleys. For instance, a recent household survey and study interpretations sponsored by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a conglomerate of NGOs working in the education sector, underscored the need for inspiring internal efficiency of primary education. Among the key findings of CAMPE, on an average, one student needs 6.6 years to complete the 5-year primary cycle. Although the reported completion rate is high, the repeaters (38 per cent) and dropout rates are still very high too. The rural children lag behind their urban counterparts by one academic year. However, the

Education Minister ASHK Sadeque did not agree with the study results of CAMPE. He categorically mentioned that not only the government definition of primary education differed with the CAMPE analysis, the recent NPA for Education for All by 2000 has been set at 95 per cent enrollment target, 70 per cent completion and 62 per cent literacy from the existing figure of 56 per cent in December 1998. Incidentally, the year 2000 is less than 100 days ahead of us (and reportedly the adult literacy rate rose to 39 per cent in 1995 from 31 per cent in 1990).

To conclude, let me recall a statement of the president of the World Bank James Wolfensohn. In his most recent address to Board of Governors, he said, "We meet today on the threshold of a new millennium. ... Will we begin to judge our efforts not by the prosperity of the few but by the needs of many? Will we be prepared to hold ourselves accountable, to make the effort necessary to bring about change? These are very significant remarks and pointers for us as well. It is therefore imperative that the torch of learning must be carried to millions of illiterates and out-of-school children for whom the declaration about the right to education has had no meaning so far, otherwise our posterity, who will face the challenges of 21st century, will not forgive us for our failures. The holy Hadis said, 'Educate your children for they are born for a time that is not yours'."

The author is retired Additional Secretary to the Government

Global Carbon Trade: Can Bangladesh Get Its Share?

by Saleemul Huq

As one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change Bangladesh has a vital interest in moving the global community forward as quickly as possible to reduce the GHG emissions. As one of the lowest per capita GHG emitters Bangladesh has an opportunity to benefit from carbon trading.

THE United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) — signed in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro — is one of the most far-reaching global environmental treaties with enormous environmental as well as economic significance. It committed all the signatory countries to reduce global Green House Gas (GHG) emissions back to 1990 levels by 2010. The UNFCCC has a secretariat in Bonn, Germany and is governed by the Conference of Parties (COP) consisting of all the countries who have signed and subsequently ratified the treaty in their own parliaments. The COP meets each year to review and monitor the progress of the UNFCCC.

Over the first few years of the UNFCCC it was realised that although the signatories had agreed to reduce their production of GHGs over time to the 1990 levels since there was no country-by-country quota or target no one was taking the agreement seriously. Hence at the fourth COP held in Kyoto in 1997 after much vigorous negotiations the developed countries agreed to country-by-country targets for reductions in GHG emissions to be achieved by the year 2008 to 2012.

The Kyoto Protocol has set binding targets for GHG reductions for the developed countries (although the US which is the main GHG producer has not yet submitted the Kyoto Protocol for ratification to the US Congress and Senate which is necessary before it becomes national law).

Carbon Trading
The Kyoto Protocol also allowed the principle of carbon trading to enable countries to trade their quotas of GHG emissions. There are several mechanisms under which carbon trading can take place.

Hot Air: This is a term for excess amounts of GHGs which were expected to be produced by the countries of the former Soviet Union (including Russia) if

they had developed normally. However, due to the near collapse of these countries' economies they are no longer producing GHGs at the level they were previously, thus creating a deficit of GHGs not emitted called "Hot Air". It is theoretically possible for the countries who are continuing to produce more than their share of GHGs to "buy" GHG credits from Russia (and other former Soviet bloc countries) and thus fulfill their quota of GHG reductions. However, this is still a controversial form of trading and it has not been sanctioned by the COP.

Joint Implementation (JI): This is a process under which two countries agree to jointly carry out a GHG reduction project in one country (usually a developing country) and allow the GHG reduction benefit to be shared with another (usually developed) country in exchange for financial investments. The rationale for this is that if a developed country found that it was relatively more expensive for it to reduce GHG emissions in its own country but it could achieve the same reduction of GHG emissions in another developing country at a lower cost, then by making the financial investment in the developing partner country it could get some of the benefit of the GHG emission reductions achieved through the investment.

This is also called Activity Implemented Jointly (AIJ) and has been practised already between a number of developed (particularly USA and the Netherlands) and developing countries (Costa Rica is a pioneer in this respect). However this form of carbon trading is also still not sanctioned by the COP although it might be done after the pilot phase ends in 2002.

Clean Development Mechanism (CDM): This is a mechanism which was created at Kyoto to allow some form of carbon trading to take place internationally under UNFCCC auspices which would be certified

and approved by UNFCCC and would also allow some of the funds created through the CDM to be allocated for particularly vulnerable countries (such as Bangladesh) and for adaptation measures. While this remains one of the most promising and interesting avenues opened up for carbon trading it still remains bogged down in procedural difficulties about how it was to work, who would make it work, who will monitor it and who will allocate the proceeds. Nevertheless it's likely that these problems may be largely sorted out and some form of CDM may begin within a year or two.

Sixth Conference of Parties

The sixth COP is due to be held in Bonn, Germany from 25 October to 5 November and will discuss these different opportunities of carbon trading and perhaps move the process forward. This has great significance for Bangladesh for a number of reasons.

Firstly, as one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change Bangladesh has a vital interest in moving the global community forward as quickly as possible to reduce the GHG emissions. Secondly as one of the lowest per capita GHG emitters Bangladesh has an opportunity to benefit from Carbon trading (in whatever form). Thirdly Bangladesh is one of the countries earmarked to benefit from the Clean Development Mechanism directly and fourthly, because Bangladesh has a clear and unequivocal moral position as one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change which is the creation of other (developed) countries. This last moral argument is a very powerful one if

the country's negotiators can make full use of its power.

Need for a Strategy

It is important to realise that the issue of climate change is a long-term one and therefore requires some form of long-term strategic thinking and planning both at the national as well as at the international negotiations level. At the national level it is important to realise that almost all the hazardous impacts of climate change including droughts, floods, cyclones and meteorological changes are likely to occur in Bangladesh and hence all future planning and investments in the country must take the likely climate change impacts into account and incorporate adaptation measures to mitigate the impacts of climate change.

At the international negotiations level there are a number of important avenues that should be pursued.

Firstly, however it should be noted and recognized that our traditional approach to international diplomacy in which we usually make common cause with the developing countries through the G77 and perhaps through SAARC will not be best suited because several of the major developing countries such as India and China have strategies which are different from ours. Therefore Bangladesh should develop its own international negotiating strategy without looking to our traditional partners in such North-South negotiations. In this case Bangladesh, has more in common with the Association of Small Islands States (AOSIS) and other Least Developing Countries (LDCs) in Africa and Asia.

There are a number of

counts on which international advocacy should be mounted.

Adaptation: Whatever the result of the negotiations and the reductions of GHG emissions according to the Kyoto Protocol — even if all the countries comply completely, there will still be some serious impacts of climate change resulting in severe weather conditions which need to be addressed. These are generally called "Adaptation" to climate change and has been a neglected area within the climate change international negotiations so far.

For example the Global Environment Facility (GEF) which so far has funded "Mitigation of GHG" investments only should be enabled and mandated to invest in Adaptation investments also.

CDM: The CDM offers a major opportunity for Bangladesh to make the most of its position as a vulnerable country and will require the negotiators to be an integral part of the process of developing the rules of the game to enable Bangladesh to get its due benefits.

Equity: One of the most neglected areas of the negotiations so far has been the issue of equity. Although the treaties and conventions all make reference to the principle of equity, in practice this notion is completely absent from the negotiations. However it is too important an issue to be allowed to slip out of the negotiations and even if there are not many ready to support the cause Bangladesh should become the champion of the principle of equity in the international negotiations.

Carbon Debt: This is a relatively new concept that is increasingly being promoted to

compare the carbon debt to the debt owed to the rich countries by the poorest countries. What this means is that the global atmosphere should be regarded as a global right for every human being on the planet. Hence every human is entitled to an equal share of the atmosphere (which includes the right to pollute it with GHG). If we then imagine a maximum amount of GHG that may be allowed into the atmosphere before it becomes too much then it is possible to calculate the amount of GHG that every person on earth is entitled to emit and compare it what people are actually emitting at present.

A recent study by Christian Aid has calculated that on this basis the US is using 20 times its entitlement while Bangladesh is using only one-tenth of our entitlement.

What Can Bangladesh Do?

There are a number of things Bangladesh could do in the UNFCCC negotiations. However it must first realize that the issue is not really only an "environmental" concern but really a "development" concern for Bangladesh. A recent study commissioned by the World Bank looking at the impacts of climate change on Bangladesh and needs for adaptations shows clearly that in a number of respects the entire future development investment of the country over the next few decades could be completely wiped out if the worst fears about climate change come about.

Therefore for Bangladesh it is of the utmost importance to protect our country from the worst impacts of climate change to take up the international ne-

gotiations as a matter of highest national priority in order to protect our development efforts and people. This means that climate change as an issue must come out of the ghetto of "environmental problems" to take centre stage as a major developmental problem (albeit one that will have a long lead time in taking place but that does not diminish its significance to the country). The government should therefore convene a multi-ministerial task force at a suitably high level with representation from all relevant ministries, agencies and the non-government sectors. This task force will develop a strategy for Bangladesh for the international negotiations as well as for other actions to be taken within the country.

On the negotiations front, it is necessary to take a long-term strategic approach to climate change negotiations which means that rather than taking the traditional ad hoc approach to send whoever's turn it is for a foreign trip to each negotiating session, a permanent team of negotiators with individuals from the Department of Environment, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and even Ministry of Finance or ERD be set up who will regularly take part in all the COP meetings and (even more importantly) the inter-session meetings where much of the actual negotiations takes place. This negotiating team should be backed up by a national team of experts who would study the issues and prepare strategies for Bangladesh to adopt and advocate in the negotiations. If necessary international experts who are knowledgeable about the issues and sympathetic to Bangladesh should also be engaged to assist Bangladesh in advocating its negotiating position.

In addition to the formal COP meetings many additional meetings are also held such as the UNFCCC Subsidiary Bodies and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)

where much of the detailed science of climate change and details of CDM etc., are discussed at the expert level. Bangladesh must take a pro-active position and participate actively in these important meetings. To a large extent much of the meat of the negotiations takes place in these smaller meetings and only the major issues go to the COP for final decision. In order to be an actual player rather than mere spectator as we have been so far we must actively take part in all these important meetings with a long-term strategy and a team of experts and negotiators who are respected by the international community.

Fortunately Bangladesh already has quite a high recognition on the issue of vulnerability assessments and adaptation to climate change and several Bangladeshi experts already serve on key positions in the IPCC, particularly in writing the Third Assessment Report (TAR) currently under preparation where several Bangladeshi experts are Lead Authors for a number of the important chapters. Thus they will be able to raise the important issues for Bangladesh (such as Adaptation and Sustainable Development) but in order to be more effective these efforts need to be coupled with a capable negotiating team representing the government at the negotiations.

If Bangladesh can get its act together in terms of developing a strategy for negotiations on climate change and change its position from being a mere spectator to being an active participant and player, then there is the very real prospect of getting some substantial and real financial flows to the country in the coming three to five years. It requires that the government realise and prioritise this issue and take the requisite steps as outlined above.

The author is executive director of the Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies and is currently on a fellowship at the Huxley School of Environment at Imperial College, London, UK.

Regional Sheriff Boomed by Leaders

by Neville de Silva

Prime Minister John Howard's remarks that Australia will act as America's policeman in Asia has sent alarm bells ringing in the region. The move, says a Gemini News Service correspondent, looks set to undo the work of Howard's predecessors who carefully nurtured Australia's allegiance with Asia.

WITH Australia's new peacekeeping role in East Timor has come a dramatic shift in the country's foreign policy, raising concern and suspicion in Asia.

In an interview with the Australian political magazine, The Bulletin, Prime Minister John Howard spelt out his new doctrine which, as he put it, would make Canberra's deputy sheriff to the United States in regional peacekeeping.

Asian leaders could have dismissed Howard's remarks as those of a brash politician basking in the aftermath of media exposure following Australia's peacekeeping role in East Timor.

But they chose to perceive his upbeat foreign and defence policy as a sign of Australia's keenness to intervene in all or any of Asia's many inter- and intra-state disputes. Malaysia and Thailand have already criticised Howard's remarks.

In spite of a retraction by Howard, there is little doubt that it will be met with some scepticism in Asian capitals.

Howard's comment has also done irreparable damage to years of hard work by his predecessors to erase the image of Australia as a white bastion in the periphery of Asia.

His chosen role for Australia as Washington's point man in Asia comes at a time when Asian leaders are becoming increasingly hostile to the US role as global cop under the New World Order.

Any perceived nexus between Washington and Australia to dictate policy in Asia would be flatly rejected and could even hasten a new triangular strategic alliance between China, India and Russia.

Asian leaders are traditionally shy of either intervening themselves or encouraging external interventions — what they see as their domestic dis-

putes — even the United Nations appears to be irritating Asian leaders with its peacekeeping ambitions.

"Something is quite wrong with the manner in which this problem [of intervention] is being approached," Sri Lankan foreign minister Lakshman Kadirgamar told a news conference in New York on 27 September, warning that there would be a crisis if the UN intervened too frequently.

"If it did so 50 times, can you imagine what a mess the United Nations peacekeeping operations will be in?" The minister said.

Nothing illustrates this poli-

ty-attitude better than the opposition of many Asian countries to the US-led NATO military strikes against Yugoslavia during the Kosovo crisis earlier this year. That focus is bound to shift to Australia now.

For two decades or more, Australian leaders such as Gough Whitlam and Paul Keating have carefully crafted a trade-inspired policy to identify with Asia. If Canberra did not always agree with Asian leaders' political ideologies, it still kept its doors open to better bilateral relations by pursuing economic and trade policies that integrated the country more with its booming Asian

neighbours than distant Europe.

Australia consciously built a close relationship with its giant neighbour Indonesia despite strong criticism at home. Similarly it cultivated China's communist leaders despite Australia's stated commitment to human rights and political pluralism.

From Canberra's point of view such policies paid dividends: Australia, to an extent, came to be accepted as a part of Asia even though it had followed a 'white Australia' policy until the 1970s which allowed in only those migrants who could prove they came from



Australia's Prime Minister John Howard: 'US Deputy Sheriff'

mainly 'white' stock.

A further problem for Australia is that it is militarily no match for any of the major Asian powers such as China, India or Indonesia.

When UN Secretary General

Kofi Annan picked on Australia to lead its peacekeeping force to East Timor he was aware of the close relationship between Canberra and Jakarta: Australia was the only country which formally recognised Indonesia's annexation of east Timor in 1976.

Unsurprisingly, Howard decided to make political capital out of Australia's leadership role and its support for East Timor's independence, abandoning the bipartisan pro-Asian foreign policy tilt.

In adopting a new peacekeeping role, Howard is also sending a clear warning to Indonesia's military in case it is inclined to seize power and fill the power vacuum in Jakarta. From an Australian perspective that would pose a threat, for it has helped heap humiliation on the Indonesian military and its militia allies in East Timor.

In many Asian capitals the Howard doctrine is doubtless

being closely examined. Some Asian political leaders such as Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who doubted Australia's sincerity as an Asian partner, must surely feel their earlier scepticism has been vindicated.

Perhaps the country most concerned by this shift in policy in China which has always considered Washington's support for its renegade province Taiwan as the biggest obstacle to bilateral relations.

Prime Minister Howard's new role for Australia may well push the country back to the Cold War days when it was regarded suspiciously, as little more than an extension of the West, culturally and socially — a country which happened to be in Asia by an accident of history.

The author is Europe Editor for the 'Hong Kong Standard' and also specialises in Asia Pacific affairs.

