

Education for All: Post-Dakar Challenges

Education is the Best Investment for Our Future

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There should have been a representative of the government here to give us feedback in this regard. The Parliamentary Standing Committee in this regard can see how the state can intervene more effectively. There is also the matter of devolution of power.

The spadework has already been done. It is mainly how to deepen the reforms which are already there. Whichever government may come, the Awami League government is here now with another year ahead, they must carry out the reforms. The education-related institutions must be strengthened and improved. There is also the matter of resource mobilisation.

Dr. Quamrunnesa Begum, Director, Institute of Education Research: Good and sound planning is lacking in our country. We have failed till now to take up planning with commitment. We have taken up many plans, all too often limited to Dhaka City alone. Planning should not be restricted to mere slogans. Education for All, this is still just a slogan. We have to take up plans that can be implemented at grassroots level. We do not have such planning. We have failed to create a mechanism in this regard. Many things have taken place here and there. I admit that we have come a long way. From 1990 till now there definitely has been a lot of work done. This was started way back from 1980. There has been a new Director, adult education, non-formal education. But there is a wide gap.



Dr. Quamrunnesa Begum

It is said that out of the country's 20 million children, 15 million go to school. Of these, most of them are of Class One and Two. It was 60 per cent some time back, I don't know the exact percentage now. From 25 years ago we have seen that most of the children study in Class One and Two. Undoubtedly, in Bangladesh the parents send their children to school. They have become conscious. But most of them study in Class One and Two. That is what the statistics show. They study for one or two years and drop out.

We should plan our primary education so that they come to school for five years, attend school properly and remain in school for five years and gain quality education. That is what primary education is all about. We have failed to plan this. So we should think about plans which start from the capital and go down to the grassroots.

We have to include all the people in this planning. We have formed many committees, but these have not been effective. These are not functioning well. There are school management committees, parent-teacher associations, and many other bodies, but their work isn't effective. These have to be included in national planning to see how they can be monitored, supervised and assisted. So I just want to stress the importance of planning.

Mushtaque R. Chowdhury, BRAC: I would like to speak about the changes that Mr. Mahmudul Alam was speaking about, the increase in net enrollment rate and the disappearance of gender disparity at the primary level, in terms of enrolment and attendance. Other changes have also occurred. Completion rates have reached about 70 per cent. So 70 per cent of the children attending primary schools really complete primary education.

The other changes that have taken place, though small, is that there is indication in increase in the quality of education, their learning achievement.

Mahfuz Anam: Can you tell us what is the enrollment rate at the moment?

Mushtaque R. Chowdhury: As Mr. Mahmudul Alam said, the gross enrollment rate, as we found in the Education Watch, is 107 per cent and the net enrollment is about 77 per cent. This shows a 30 per cent difference between net and gross which means 30 per cent of the children beyond the primary school age group are coming to primary schools.

Mahfuz Anam: So enrollment is 107 per cent and the retention rate is 77 per cent. That is, 77 per cent complete primary education, are up to there till the end of Class Five.

Mushtaque R. Chowdhury: In that past which were the groups being disadvantaged, excluded? The girls were excluded. Children from rural areas were excluded. Children from poorer families were excluded. But here if we compare what we saw in 1993 and what we saw in 1998, over the five-year period, we see that changes have happened mostly in those groups which were hitherto not benefiting much from primary education. So the girls have come as far as boys. In fact, the girls have surpassed boys in enrollment. The enrollment in rural areas has surpassed urban enrollment. The improvement in the enrollment of the poor children has improved much faster than non-poor children. So these are some of the good statistics, the hopes that we see in our pri-

mary education system.

Mahfuz Anam: So we see the enrollment rates and the changes. Do all of you agree with this?

Participants: No.

ANM Eusuf: There is a difference. It is not a subtle difference. It is a big difference. When we say gross enrollment and the completion rate is on the basis of gross enrollment, so those who enroll, 107 per cent, of this gross enrollment 70 per cent is the completion rate. So if you say completion rate is 70 per cent of 77 per cent enrollment, there will be a big mistake.

Mahfuz Anam: So you are saying it is better?

ANM Eusuf: No, it is worse. The gross enrollment which is 107 per cent which consists of children who are above or below this age group 6 to 10 years. So they constitute the remaining 30 per cent. Of the age group, only 77 per cent which is the net enrollment of this primary school going age 6 to 10. That means primary school going age children, 23 per cent could not enroll. They still are outside the domain of primary education. But there are others who are above 10 or below 6 maybe.

Quamrunnesa Begum, Director, Institute of Education Research: About this completion rate, from '90 to '95, the enrollment and the number of students at different grade levels. I analysed something because I wrote a book on primary education. From '90 to '95 it was about 20 per cent enrolling in Class One who went to Class Five. First I did this from '85 to '90, then '91 to '95. I found that about 20 per cent children enrolled in Class One went to Class Five.

Shafi Ahmed: Did you only study the government schools?

Quamrunnesa Begum: No, the enrollment. For example, about 3.8 million were in Class One in 1985, then 1.6 million were in Class Two. I did that in 1990 to 1995 also. Only in Class One and two there were 60 per cent students. This is my analysis. I don't know how far it was correct, but that is what I found.

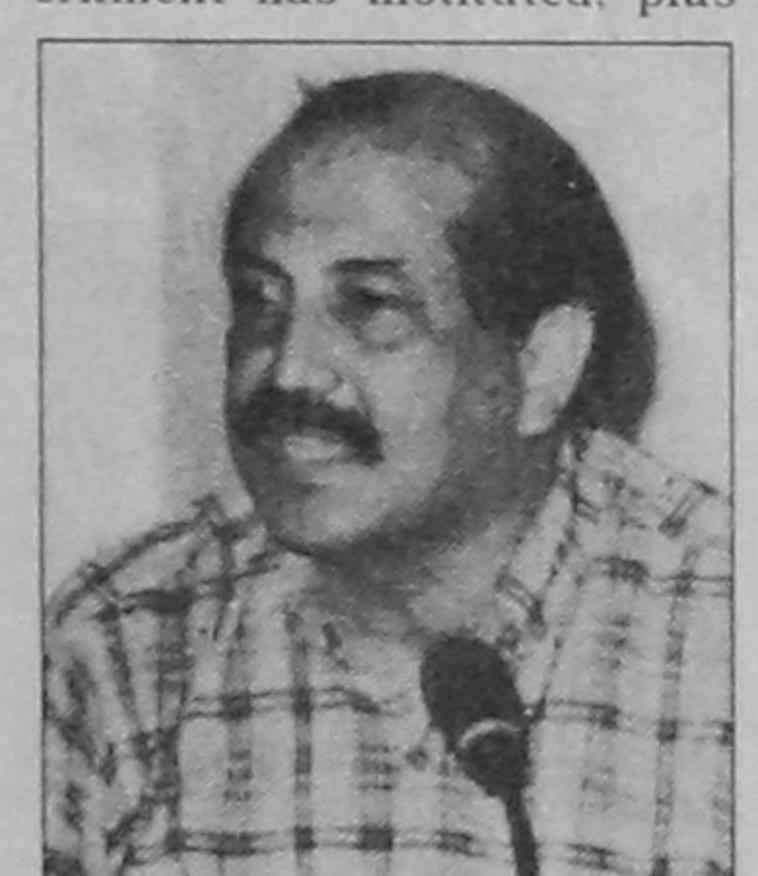
Mahfuz Anam: Can anyone rescue us here at this stage? I am looking for dependable, authentic statistics.

Mushtaque R. Chowdhury: The results that we have are the latest results, that of 1998. Dr. Quamrunnesa's results might be a bit outdated, the period being '90 to '95.

There is a general consensus that the completion rate has increased. The government says it is 67 per cent, we find it to be 71 per cent. But, 67 or 71 per cent makes no difference.

Mahfuz Anam: The government is claiming less!

Mushtaque R. Chowdhury: How do we explain this improvement that we are seeing in particular groups, girls, poorer groups, rural sections? I think those are related to certain incentive schemes that the government has instituted, plus



Mushtaque R. Chowdhury

some positive discriminatory steps that some of the NGOs have followed. For example, the government has started the secondary school stipends programme for girls which gives stipends to girls attending schools in the rural areas. The schools which enroll girls also get an amount of money for this. So this is a big incentive for the parents to keep their children in school.

The second important thing is the Food for Education Programme which gives food ration to poorer children from rural areas. These are the two public sector interventions or incentive schemes which might have led to an increase in enrollment for girls in the rural areas.

In addition to that, some of the NGOs have certain programmes which are discriminatory in the sense that they prefer girls; 70 per cent of students going to NGO schools are girls. They also enroll children from the poorer sections. These are some of the reasons probably, according to my analysis, why we are seeing improvement in enrollment.

Now the question is, what will happen in this situation? Is it going to be a really fragile improvement? Or is it going to sustain over a longer period? That's a question we have to think about.

Mahmudul Alam: Dr. Mushtaque talked about the disadvantaged groups, but those who are the poorest are still not being included. Things are not very good.

Professor Shafiqul Alam: Mr. Mahfuz Anam raised a question whether any national action plan was drawn up following the Education for All decision. As far as I know, there had been a committee constituted for the purpose. They worked and were supposed to submit a report. I don't know if there was any final report from this.

Then, Ms. Rasheda K Chowdhury said that the participation of children from a lower level should be ensured. I don't know

if many people know that the government has formally recognised pre-primary education two years ago. I think this is a very positive step. I was involved in developing the material called *Dekha Shuna*. This was introduced in some primary schools. The children were attracted to this. It was a nice book with pictures drawn by Mr. Mustafa Monwar.

About the gender issue, when a competency-based curriculum was introduced in 1991, there was a study to see how to reduce gender bias in the text books, like English, Bengali and Social Science. Special attention was paid to reduce gender bias. A lot of changes were brought about in the illustrations and the content and the previous gender bias has been reduced to a considerable extent.

Then the programmes taken up by the government, like Food for Education, have brought about some positive results. The Minister for Education has recently initiated a national education survey. It is surprising to note that even in *madrasas*, girl's education is higher than boys. In secondary schools, the participation of girls is 56 per cent. When this survey was going on, I personally visited a school near the Bandarban bus stand and saw in Grade Six 26 girls and seven boys sitting in the classroom. This was because of the girls' stipend programme perhaps. Maybe some of you will not find this positive, you will find that a balance is not being maintained. But this is what is happening and the number of girls in the schools, in *madrasas* too, is increasing steadily.

About NGOs, in our country we have Proshika, BRAC and other big NGOs, working in the education sub-sector, in non-formal education, but what is their actual picture? How far is their achievement? Will they be able to give us an accurate picture in this regard?

Shafi Ahmed: Our discussion is becoming a bit diverse. I am not getting any real direction. Can we have a direction? How can we go ahead with more strength? At what level is free and compulsory primary education in Bangladesh and what steps do we have to take to make it 100 per cent? How to banish adult illiteracy? Can we spend some time on these issues?

Mahfuz Anam: Is Education For All only a Phrase? Is it a catchword? What we have been talking about is literacy for all. There have been so many controversies over the definition of literacy as itself. When we say Education For All, we are concentrating more on literacy which is good. In that case, we have to see what we really mean by literacy and whether we have literacy when we say completion in government schools or condensed syllabuses being structured by the NGOs. Does it give a competency to make me an educated person or a literate person?

About this Compulsory Education Act, like all these conferences to which Ms. Rasheda K Chowdhury very frustratingly referred, the Compulsory Education Act is like that too. You pass it in the Parliament, but you don't enact it in reality. We speak so much in international conferences, in our Parliament and in our public meetings. We say so many things, but we really don't translate these into action.

It is the political will and political will has been so politicised in our country, it is so frustrating for us to know as educationists, that this country in this span of 29 years had so many education commissions. But we must have a direction. Every government, whoever succeeds, if Jamaat succeeds, I will not accept a government of Jamaat. I will morally say I don't want you. But if that type of government succeeds, I want education to be such a kind of an agenda, such an important national agenda that whoever starts, we have to take the positive things of the education commissions or the education policies.

Education is a continuous process. But we have seen that with the change of government, we bring in changes in the education policy. What is this? The aims which are to be achieved with the change of BNP and Awami League? Or are there certain universal achievements, very common achievement which we must know and which we must achieve. Education should be taken as a continuous process.

What is most important is the political will and that the political will should be nation-based, of a wider tolerance. It shouldn't be a BNP education policy and an Awami League education policy. We cannot undermine the wisdom that many of the education commission members and their chairmen had. But we have changed it and changed it again and again. That is not giving us any direction of where we should go. This should be a national continuous agenda. All the political forces should really commit themselves to educating this country, to have an Child Development Plans.

We are talking about Quality Basic Education, which calls for strong foundation, insightful learning that reflects the self esteem and creativity in teaching learning situation.

Only a strong beginning can ensure the same where the learners (children) feel free to ask questions, initiate things that they judge better working, accept and reject things with reasoning and reflection and contribute their maturity. Early stimulation is firmly anchored with brain cell development, which

vision is still hanging on that 19-storied building in Topkhana. NGOs are running good schools with community participation.

The government should also believe that investment in education is the best investment. This means not only education, but investment in human capital.

Shafi Ahmed:



Shafi Ahmed

who would publish books and then the DPI would basically say that these books can be adopted. Now, since the mid-sixties since the Swedish government gave us grant for publishing textbooks, we have standardised textbooks. This has taken away the creative approach to teaching by the teachers and creative learning approach of the students. It is important that first if there are NCTB books, there should be other books encouraged to come to the market and whoever are the authorities should basically say that these books cover the curriculum and thereby the school should have the autonomy to select the books which they think the best. This was the case when we were students. We have seen from the experience of GSS that it's not the textbooks, but also the creative supplementary reading that helps them learn essential vocabulary quickly.

At the moment if a primary school student has to read all the textbooks which requires a 35,000 word vocabulary, it is an impossibility. Developed countries require only 5000 words. So to be careful what sort of vocabulary we use in reducing the textbooks.

Mahfuz Anam: Let me clarify that. You are saying that the primary school textbooks that are to be read require a vocabulary of 35,000 words.

Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed: Yes, and this is basically impossible. That is why they commit it to memory and the teachers encourage them to commit this to memory and that is what they write. I will give you an example. My child used to study in one of the best schools in Dhaka run by Dhaka University. I will not name it. He wrote: *Pakhir dutt dana achhey* (The bird has two wings). The teacher said this is wrong. You should have written *pakhir dutt pakha achey*. So this is the kind of teaching that is going on. Because that is the exact sentence written there in the book, he has to reproduce this. So this is the problem. We are pushing our students towards non-creative ventures and to memorising. We should get out of this.

Then comes the question of adult literacy. Adult literacy programmes need special review. Unfortunately, the independent reviews of adult literacy programmes are quite adverse and the government does not really own these reports. The government's own departmental review is of course very different, saying that we are achieving targets. Various districts and sub-districts are said to be free of illiteracy. But if you go there and conduct a survey, you will see a lot of illiterate persons. So this is basically hypocritical. We need to get out of this hypocrisy. We want an educated, literate, value-oriented society.

About gender disparity, saying that the number of girls going to school is equal to boys is a one-dimensional way of thinking. You will find that girl students in the field of science are fewer than the boys. This is something which needs remedy. This is the picture not only at the tertiary level, but also at the secondary level. Girls' participation in science education is attention has to be given to this.

The other issue that has been raised is about the ethnic minorities. My trip to the Chittagong Hill Tracts identified one very important problem. And my visit to Rangpur to the schools of the Santals introduced another problem. First, as far as the Santals are concerned, because of social stigma, they are not allowed to sit in the same bench or the same school. Discrimination is

similar. Even though we find girl students in Vigarunnessa School are doing very well in SSC examinations, that does not tell you the whole story. The other side of the story is that there are no trained science teachers. Most of the secondary schools and primary schools do not have good English and Maths teachers. So that is one of the problems of primary education students who do not get the necessary orientation for numeracy which will help them learn at a secondary stage.

Incidentally, the recommendation to make primary school up to Class Eight has been there for the last 20 years. It has not been acted upon. This has been accepted, I understand, as a draft education policy, but this has not been made public. There is a primary education report besides the national education committee report which was prepared by Late Dr. Al-Muti Sharifuddin, but that has also not seen the light of the day. These recommendations are there, but the government has not acted on this. We have seen from the experience of GSS that it's not the textbooks, but also the creative supplementary reading that helps them learn essential vocabulary quickly.

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