

Governance in education

Who should be held accountable?

by Richard Johanson and Hillary Thornton

'EVERYBODY REMEMBERS A GOOD TEACHER' is the caption on a current UK cinema advertisement. This sentiment has been echoed throughout history, not just in the UK but in all cultures throughout the world. At the heart of Bengali culture are famous poets and writers such as Tagore and Nazrul. They too were mentors and teachers and an inspiration to those who listened and learnt from them. Village teachers in Bangladesh served the community and in turn were looked up to and respected. With this cultural heritage that put the mentor or teacher at the centre of learning, it is hard to understand why the teachers in Bangladesh today seem to have lost that central role and now enjoy such a low status within society.

Parents, politicians and the media all seem to complain about the behaviour of the teachers. Newspaper reports tell us of teachers not turning up for school or turning up late. They are 'not attentive in their duties' and their teaching is 'not up to the mark'. Teachers are blamed for 'drop out' from school and for poor examination results. We hear how they are taking on out-of-school tuition or other work that detracts from their main responsibilities within the school, college or university. Blame is apportioned to teachers who are urged to take their work more seriously. Of course the teachers are responsible for those in their charge are well educated, but others also have a part to play in ensuring that quality education takes place. Parents must support their children and expect high standards from the teacher, and managers and politicians must ensure that supplies are provided and examinations held are free of corruption. All bear a responsibility to support and monitor the teachers in their

wages by taking on additional employment. Pay them more, give them incentives for good performance, hold them to account for results and you have the makings of a more professional workforce.

Efficiency and corruption

Encouraging the teachers to be more professional should be part of a drive to ensure that the whole education system is more efficient. At present there are many examples of inefficiencies, which act against quality improvement. Take for example what happens to primary school textbooks that are provided free by the government. Books are produced centrally in Dhaka and distributed at school level. There have been frequent reports in the media of books arriving late, books being siphoned off for sale in the market or insufficient books arriving at schools, all of which point to inefficiencies within the system. Where within the system the problems occur seems unclear, but solutions are more straightforward. If management control were shifted nearer to where teaching takes place, there would be less scope for books going astray and more opportunity for the community to express its concern over this and other issues directly concerning the school. At present there is ample opportunity for 'passing the buck' and opting out of taking responsibility by blaming the teacher at one end of the spectrum or central government at the other end.

Systems of supervision exist at all levels of education but models of supervision are weak and sanctions are few. Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that teachers turn up to work but there are no clearly defined standards against which supervisors can measure teacher performance. Hence there are no incentives for good performance and few sanctions for poor performance. In this climate it is easy to understand why teachers seize opportunities to increase their meagre

Exams themselves highlight problems within the system. This year's SSC results were the lowest for five years and naturally some blame was apportioned to the teachers for this poor performance. However, media reports focussed on two other interesting issues. They suggested that the poor performance resulted from: the fact

that students were prevented from cheating through improved invigilation, and the fact that the questions were different to those set in the model answer books. These two reasons suggest a change in attitude on the part of the exam boards that could have a significant impact on the education system as a whole. Firstly, they show that by setting up vigilance teams, cheating in exams could be reduced, thus setting a precedent for removing the practice from the public forum. Secondly, the move away from stock answers to exam questions reduces scope for cheating and may result in teaching for understanding rather than emphasising rote learning. Teachers would have to give more thought to the teaching and learning process, which would improve teaching and reduce the need for private tuition. Without the private tutors parents would expect more of teachers and teachers in turn would need to strive to meet the demands of the parents and guardians. The government is holding an enquiry into this year's exam results. This should be seen as a positive move and a step in the right direction for promoting improved accountability and reduced corruption.

These problems of governance occur throughout the education system, but they can be addressed. Ownership of education by parents and the wider community needs to exist and teachers, managers and government officials need to be held accountable, through supervision, for their work. The supply of books and equipment needs to be more efficiently administered and corruption must be removed from public exams.

The focus so far in this article has been mainly on schools but universities and colleges share similar concerns. Fur-

ther concerns in higher education relate to the politicisation of teacher selection and promotion, which leads to appointment and promotion of candidates with lower qualifications and fewer academic publications. In addition, levels of student unrest and violence on campuses have led to loss of instructional time, resulting in degree programmes taking longer to complete and to problems within the student community. Much of this unrest is supported and nurtured by political parties, which leads to weaken governance within the country as a whole.

Shifting power closer to the centre of learning

Steps are being taken to improve governance as illustrated by the vigilance teams in the SSC exams, the change in the form of questions and recent reports of university authorities taking a tough stand against violence on campus. However, without national government support and some devolution of power closer to the centre of learning, there will be little change. More power should be given to the managers of secondary schools, colleges and universities to organise and operate their institutions subject only to specified standards of performance. Primary schools too should be managed at District and Upazila level with greater power being given to School Management Committees.

Central government has a strong role to play in terms of setting policy, establishment of standards and performance measurement, but actual delivery of educational services needs to take place as close to the centre of learning as possible and all providers need to be held accountable for results.

The authors are with the World Bank.

The dengue crisis

An emerging health threat to Bangladesh

by Dr. Mahmud Husain

THE first clinical record of dengue or 'breakbone fever' (so named for the accompanied severe bony aches) was attributed to Benjamin Rush in 1780. That the disease is caused by a virus transmitted by mosquitoes was demonstrated by studies in human volunteers in 1905-1906 although the virus was not conclusively identified in the laboratory until 1944. Four antigenically distinct viruses (types 1-4) were subsequently established as the cause of dengue fever. In 1954, a new syndrome, dengue haemorrhagic fever (DHF) associated with dengue infection was reported from the Philippines. Dengue incidence has increased dramatically in southeast Asia in the last 25 years, and DHF emerged as an epidemic in the Americas, particularly in big cities like Sao Paulo and Rio De Janeiro in the 1980's following the re-colonization of the continent by Aedes aegypti mosquito eradicated earlier. The first outbreak of dengue fever in Bangladesh was reported in 1964. All dengue serotypes cause nearly identical clinical illness. DHF and its most severe form, dengue shock syndrome (DSS), is strongly associated with prior sensitization by a heterologous dengue infection.

Dengue viruses are principally, but not exclusively, transmitted by the bite of Aedes aegypti mosquito, a day active species abundant in and around human habitation. This vector can potentially harbour a closely related flavivirus, the yellow fever virus (usual vectors being Aedes africanus in Africa and Haemagogus species in the Americas) whose spread in Bangladesh as well as the rest of the subcontinent can be regarded as a potentially serious epidemic threat. The surge of recent incidence of classical as well as DHF and DSS dengue in our urban areas has created concern in the minds of citizens apprehensive of their vulnerability to this unfamiliar infection. Accurate figures are hard to come by due to inadequate testing and reporting and timely dissemination of information to the public. If re-

cent press reports are to be believed, scores of deaths and hundreds of hospital admissions have resulted due to this outbreak of clinically severe dengue.

The cause of such upsurge of dengue infections is a matter of intense speculation in the media. Theories abound, from the fantastic to the surreal, in the absence of credible clarification from the public health authorities. Thorough institutional and community level investigation has not been carried out for confirmation of the agent responsible in the suspected outbreak. Information about the clinical disease, the pros and cons (and the necessity) of testing and appropriate resources to access in case of need was not disseminated among the general public. As situations such as this are ripe for runaway speculation and rumor mongering, it is incumbent upon the public health authorities to dispel unfounded notions to avoid panic.

The Mayor of Dhaka City Corporation recently observed in a press interview that the agent responsible for the recent dengue outbreak spread into the country from India. It was not readily apparent from the statement whether the Mayor was articulating epidemiological principles regarding cross border disease propagation or simply shifting blame, as politicians are apt to do. It is possible that a different subtype of the virus other than the one commonly encountered among the Bangladeshi population has spread across the international border into Bangladesh. Co-circulation of multiple dengue serotypes is thought to be an important factor in the development of hemorrhagic manifestations in dengue infected persons. Thus, there is a possibility that a serotype of dengue not ordinarily prevalent is causing infection in a population previously immunized by another strain of the virus. But that requires laboratory facilities for strain identification not currently available in Bangladesh and to speculate on the origins of an emerging epidemic is dangerous. The prob-

lems of a rapidly deteriorating physical environment of the metropolitan areas and urban townships, the absence of civic resources at the community level and the systemic flaws in mechanisms of urban governance, however, did not merit mention by the Mayor. Our cities are turning into toxic wastelands habitable only at the margins of human health and happiness. The vast expanses of unsanitary housing in slum and shumlike conditions with severely constrained municipal services are where the control efforts are failing. Communities without basic preventive, promotive and curative healthcare and little or no organized social services inhabit the neighborhoods where the disease virtually resides. And this is where the issues of inequality and inequity of the urban underclass need addressing for dengue and other infectious disease control.

Flexibility of response, innovation and broad community participation should be the hallmarks of a control programme. Sadly, the urban health systems run by our city corporations and municipalities are ill prepared to respond to health crises such as the current one and reassure the public with timely information, education and counseling on disease prevention and possible control measures. Strengthening information management on the ground as well as investigating the salient laboratory features of the outbreak is now an urgent need. An open and transparent information dissemination policy and media sensitization for balanced and fair reporting is also necessary. The philosophy of our public health governance and epidemic preparedness requires immediate attention of our policymakers as well. One of the factors responsible for the often woefully inadequate response is the lack of valid and reliable epidemiological information at the disposal of the decision makers. Technical capabilities of government laboratories acting as reference labs for infectious diseases are also severely limited for an accurate

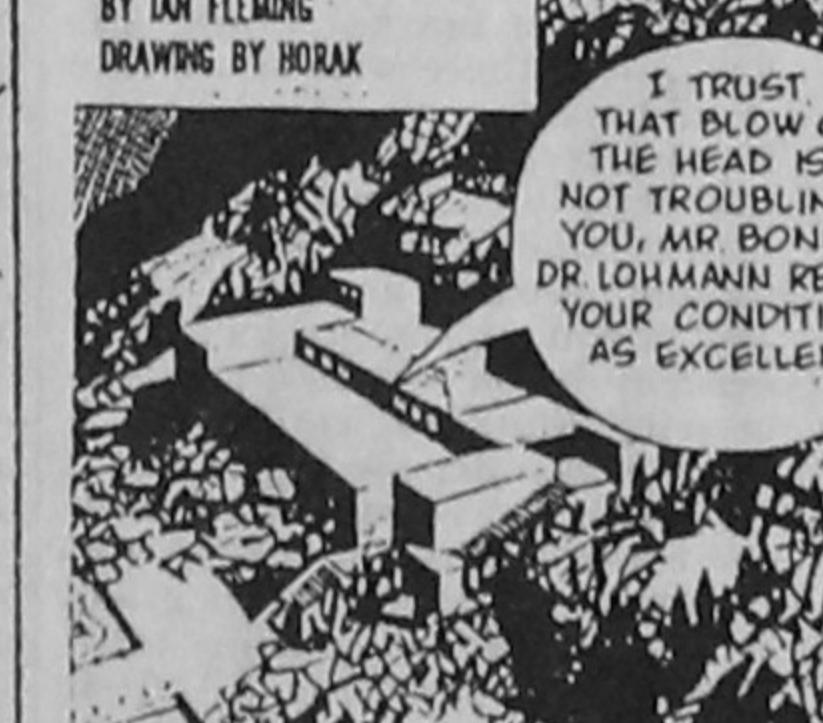
determination of disease status. The information generated at various levels of public health system lack central integration for an accurate assessment of the ground realities before embarking on a national programme. These handicaps are often exacerbated by interagency conflict and discord and by the absence of clear demarcation of authority and accountability in programme implementation.

Epidemics of infectious diseases grow surreptitiously in pockets of overcrowded foci in population centers where malnutrition and poverty are endemic and which are neglected in resource-poor settings. The great cholera epidemics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were nurtured and sustained in the rural backwaters of perma-swamp delta Bengal by the behavioral and nutritional habits of the dispossessed inhabitants living at the margins of a feudal economy. Confusion and panic in a populace distrustful of a historically insensitive government can lead to serious impediments in a coordinated prevention and control effort. A sudden epidemic outbreak of a previously little known or unknown viral disease can be catastrophic considering the inadequate state of preparedness of the public health system, lack of investigative and treatment facilities and the absence of adequate technical human resources capable of responding within the country. Dengue may be the harbinger of a new reality of infectious disease epidemic to this part of the world that coincidentally is also a hemorrhagic illness in its more severe form. It may also be an early warning sign of the threat of a generalized epidemic of an emerging viral disease in the not too distant future if dengue virus, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or some other microorganism. We will only ignore such a threat at our own peril. And the time to act may be fast receding.

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James Bond

BY IAN FLEMING
DRAWING BY HORAK



Green and brown shades of development

UN Millennium General Assembly at New York begins next week. Shall there be a Rio+10 Summit to debate sustainable development, wonders Quamrul Islam Chowdhury

THE ISSUES OF green and brown shades of sustainable development will be one of the major agenda of the forthcoming United Nations Millennium General Assembly scheduled to meet in New York next week.

This historic and most important 55th General Assembly will debate a resolution on the preparation for the ten-year review of Agenda 21 that could have major implications for the advancement of global environment and development policy in this 21st century. During the next four months the General Assembly, the UN's supreme policy-making body, will decide whether the ten-year review will be, like the Rio Summit in 1992, a heads of state summit making major decisions about the future of "sustainable development", or just another paper "review" exercise. The GA debate and resolution should reveal whether major proposals, for example the EU initiative to create a new World Environment Organization (WEO) have been adopted.

A major organisational issue will be whether a Secretary General (SG) will be chosen to lead the preparations for the summit. A number of individuals are being suggested including UNCED SG Maurice Strong, Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of UNEP, Juan Mayr Maldonado, former CSD chair and Environment Minister from Columbia and Cletus Avoca, Ghana's Environment Minister. Governments could also ask UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to serve as the summit SG or ask Annan to appoint a SG for the summit.

These major institutional issues could be decided by the 2002 summit, will play a key role in this decision.

The CSD has already recommended four preparatory committee meetings, one organisational and three to address the substantive issues. The first committee one will meet from April 30 through May 2, 2001. The second, third and fourth are likely to meet for two weeks, one week and one week respectively in January, March and May 2002. The second and third Preparatory Committees are to conduct the ten-year review, and the fourth to develop a draft declaration and plan of action for the next 10 years. Thus, the proposal is to avoid in Rio+10 a repetition of the mostly lackadaisical +5 reviews and set the stage for the summit to be, like Rio, historic and substantive. Rio was not only the largest summit in history, but produced Agenda 21, major treaties and processes.

The State of World Forum

The State of the World Forum will convene its fifth annual meeting in New York from September 4-10, 2000. The event will take place concurrently with the UN Millennium Summit, adopting the theme, "Shaping Globalisation: Convening the Community of Stakeholders".

The General Assembly will also decide the preparatory process for the summit, how the summit will be organised and financed, its dates and location. The negotiations will be conducted in the GA Second (Economic and Financial) Committee. Negotiations on the resolution will likely be ongoing throughout October and November, but given the magnitude of the issues the debate could continue right up to December 22.

The CSD 8 and ECOSOC have already advanced comprehensive recommendations suggesting that the 2002 meeting should be a summit like Rio Earth Summit. They recommended that it should be convened away from UN Headquarters and hosted by a developing country. Indonesia and South Africa are the main countries vying for the summit and both have serious financial and political backers. The EU seems to be assuming South Africa will be chosen. Germany and the United Kingdom have pledged major financial support to South Africa.

Japan is promising major support to Indonesia, and possibly other developed nations in Asia will join in supporting Jakarta. Australia and New Zealand are supporting Indonesia. Bangladesh is yet to take side.

The role of Bangladesh is very important as a leader of the G 77. The group of 134 developing countries grow rapidly and there is a corps of field personnel in the government as well as in the non-government development sector capable of contributing usefully in an outbreak or an epidemic in the community. These resources can be located, coordinated and used in a broad-based community control programme. Instead, there seems to be a denial of the magnitude and severity of the outbreak by the powers that be. An underestimating of the threat potential of an unusual viral disease outbreak at the community level can have serious consequences. Confusion and panic in a populace distrustful of a historically insensitive government can lead to serious impediments in a coordinated prevention and control effort. A sudden epidemic outbreak of a previously little known or unknown viral disease can be catastrophic considering the inadequate state of preparedness of the public health system, lack of investigative and treatment facilities and the absence of adequate technical human resources capable of responding within the country. Dengue may be the harbinger of a new reality of infectious disease epidemic to this part of the world that coincidentally is also a hemorrhagic illness in its more severe form. It may also be an early warning sign of the threat of a generalized epidemic of an emerging viral disease in the not too distant future if dengue virus, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or some other microorganism. We will only ignore such a threat at our own peril. And the time to act may be fast receding.

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