

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 ensuring that 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

Responsibility for results

The most straightforward measure of a teacher's work and the one that most parents look to is results, and in Bangladesh this tends to mean exam results. But exams are not the only measure of results. Parents should be expecting young children to be learning the basic skills of reading and writing and be taking an interest in their learning. They should ask questions if their children do not appear to be learning rather than just accepting low levels of performance. They should be encouraging accountability on the part of the teachers. At higher levels public exams provide a concrete measure of results but there is little evidence of the teachers being held to account for these results. Parents engage private tutors and look to them for ensuring their children do well in exams. This has shifted blame for poor exam results and allowed the teachers to side-step their responsibilities. Whilst the parents and community should be encouraged in their attempts to make the teachers accountable, the responsibility for assuring teacher performance lies not with the parents, but with the education officials at Upazila level and above who supervise the teacher's work.

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 stated 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

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.

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.

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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 sides 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 Organisation (WEO) on the same level as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), will be seriously debated or not in the Rio+10 preparatory process. A WEO could augment, complement or replace existing institutions including the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Some developed countries led by USA have already dubbed UNEP as a sick organisation based in Nairobi.

The forthcoming General Assembly is scheduled to decide whether the Rio+10 process will be historic or historicity. Will the CSD be upgraded or shut down? What will be the fate of UNEP? Will UNEP's deficiencies really and finally be addressed? Will it be strengthened or abolished? Will the world community establish a World Environmental Organisation? Will the developed nations finally honour their commitments in Agenda 21? Will efforts to strengthen the legal protection of the world's forests and oceans be advanced? Will concert global plans to eradicate poverty be adopted? Will the General Assembly assume a greater institutional role relative to these issues and the WTO and Bretton Woods Institutes? These and other major issues will be greatly affected by the 55th General Assembly. What will be the role of Bangladesh in this historic Millennium Assembly? Have our Foreign Ministry and Environment Ministry chiefs made their minds and put their recommendations for the approval of the PM? We, definitely have some homework to do towards chalking out our strategies and taking firm decisions in the international context keeping in mind that Bangladesh is one of the worst hit country because of the global environmental degradation.

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 (G77), which reportedly has not met on this matter, will have this and the other difficult issues to wrestle with in September. With 134 members, the G77 could have a decisive role in the 189-member General Assembly. Neither the Asia Group nor the Africa Group appears to have organized their strategies for this important decision. It is expected that most Eastern European countries will ally with the EU and South Africa, but the position of the USA, Canada and the rest of the Americas are not known.

As of now, there are two main dates being proposed - the two weeks at the end of June or two weeks in September 2002. Denmark is reportedly lobbying for the September date when it will be serving as the Presidency of the EU. The Commonwealth, however, recently called the Secretariat to confirm July 2002 which could be another possibility.

The major support seems to exist for the CSD, specifically with CSD10 serving as the preparatory committee for the 2002 summit. CSD 10 will convene immediately after the conclusion of CSD 9 next April, to organise the preparatory process. For NGOs, the framework of the CSD should be most advantageous since the CSD has been one of the most inclusive forums for NGO participation in the history of the UN.

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 Topfer, Executive Director of UNEP, Juan Mayr Maldonado, former CSD chair and Environment Minister from Colombia and Cletus Avoka, 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'.

A key goal of the Forum is to create dialogue between stakeholders engaged in the globalisation debate. The President of the State of the World Forum noted The trick will be to make sure that globalisation has as positive an effect on the planet as democratisation has had in the last 10 years. A lot of what globalisation has to offer is good, but unless we work to protect all its diverse stakeholders, we are in danger of leaving most people behind.

The Forum will look at the impact of increased communications technologies, widening economies and increased market access. However the debate will also include at issues such as workers' rights, the environment, culture, health, ethics and development - seeking to provide a more holistic picture of the true extent and impacts of globalisation.

We believe that by expanding the definition of globalisation to include these issues, we will increase dialogue and understanding between diverse groups and better ensure economic and social benefits for all," says Garrison.

A number of panel sessions are planned to run from September 6 to 10, addressing a range of issues.

Women Shaping a New World of Enterprise, Enterprise for Development, Social Partnerships and the New Economy, Rio + 10, Core Economic Productivity and Sustainability in Globalisation and the Impact of High Technology on Globalisation will be some of the major issues to be addressed.

Therefore, I thought, Bangladesh can seize this opportunity by making some home work and take some bold decisions and try to shape the decision of the G-77 with a vision of 21st century to help protect the environment of mother Earth and sustainable living of our people.

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 bone aches) was attributed to Benjamin Rush in 1780. That the disease is caused by a virus transmitted by mosquitoes were 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 heterogeneous 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 incidences 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 infectious illness. 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 virus and its (and the insect's) 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 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 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 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 insanitary housing in slum and slumlike conditions with severely constrained municipal services are where the control efforts are failing. Communities without basic sanitation, preventive 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 inter-agency 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 deltaic Bengal by the behavioral and nutritional habits of the dispossessed inhabitants living at the margins of a feudal economy. The severity of cholera epidemics gradually reduced over the course of the twentieth century due to a combination of factors ranging from altered cultural habits of the local populace to the gradual improvement in socio economic status of the population and introduction of irrigation and drainage and perhaps a decreased pathogenicity of the epidemic organism. Indeed the threat of an epidemic spread of the emerging viral diseases (for example human immunodeficiency virus/HIV, dengue virus) is a possibility that ought to be taken seriously in Bangladesh. Many of the recently emerged and emerging viruses, with the notable exception of HIV, has hemorrhagic clinical manifestations and the mortality of these illnesses is very high. The Ebola virus outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) during the summer of 1995 and an earlier outbreak in the Sudan and Zaire in 1976 are illustrative of the serious nature of these infections with disease mortality approaching 90 per cent. In a worst case scenario, a previously unknown or little known viral pathogen with a mode of transmission similar to in-

fluenza and with the clinical manifestations of a hemorrhagic disease similar to Ebola wreak havoc in the poor countries of the underdeveloped world affecting millions of people.

Bangladesh's experience with community based infectious disease control is not substantial 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, be it 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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Beat the heat

by Navine Murshid

RECENTLY a panic rose among car and bus drivers as they fought their way to the petrol station to buy petrol. This panic created by the decision to increase oil and gas prices, left the petrol stations without oil for the day.

A customer who queued for petrol in reply to why he had come, said, "This decision came as a surprise. I wanted to fill up my tank before the prices went up. Such situations create panic buying and I wanted to beat the heat. Apparently, there are many people here who thought like me."

Another customer, who was at the front of the queue, got off early with a tank full of octane. However, he could not go too far. All of a sudden the car stopped. A close inspection showed that his tank was actually filled up with water.

In the midst of all the panic and tension, the question that popped up again and again was whether the price increase was justified.

The educated people among the petrol consumers seemed to think so.

"With international oil price constantly on the rise, price hike here is inevitable. How

long can we price oil below the international market price?" questioned one such 'educated' lady.

Three-wheeler drivers were mostly the ones who opposed this price hike. They felt that this could harm their business. People who were used to pay a fixed amount of money for a certain distance, would not be willing to pay more. The difference between what the customers would want to pay and what they would actually have to pay would increase.

Although, the government can subsidise the oil price hike, why should it? Why should the government subsidise a commodity that basically caters to the need of the rich? Besides, one way or the other, Bangladesh has to pay for the increase in price. Why divert money from crucial sectors (e.g. health and education) to help people go on polluting the environment?

This price hike is also being seen as a positive step towards a cleaner environment. There are many who contend that the prices should be increased further to drive away the three-wheelers and other vehicles

with two-stroke engines that create pollution, from the roads. The roads will be a better place without them.

Perhaps, this is the time to create a 'bus culture'. With gas prices high, people will now think twice before taking to their cars. Now, when people are looking for other means to travel, should the bus service be made available. However, the present bus service scenario leaves much to be desired. No one who can help it would look forward to a journey where one has to fight for a seat to begin with, only to find people pushing and pulling, hovering above them and at times making distasteful comments.

What is needed are more buses like the Premium buses, which have already become quite popular among young people. There should also be bus stops near to all residential homes so that people do not have to go too far to find a bus. A mechanism should also be created whereby buses would stop every five or 10 minutes so that travelers know when and where to find a bus that would go to certain destinations. One more thing: security has to be maintained.

TOM & JERRY

