

Take steps towards major decentralisation

FROM PAGE 2

Development Programme. We also have PLCE (Post Literacy Continuity Education) and NPA-II is being prepared, which is the National Plan of Action based on Dakar goals. We need to review all these in light of the above priorities and consider necessary restructuring and changes in order to go forward.

Finally, I want to say in relation to the EFA goals, which we want to achieve by 2015, we are not on track, except in removing gender disparity (in enrolment only) in primary and secondary education.

Mahfuz Anam

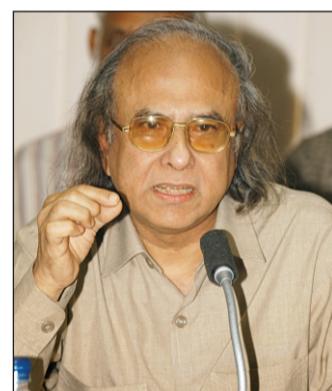
We are proceeding with today's programme as per the timing indicated in our agenda. If we continue our discussion up to one o'clock, we have about 1 hour and 45 minutes in hand. We have here two ex-Education Ministers, highly experienced government personnel at Secretary Level and some activists from NGOs who work in the education sector.

As a journalist I know the subject only superficially. As a novice let me ask you, after so many years of governmental investment of a large portion of the national budget, if half of our primary students still drop out and at secondary level 80 percent of them dropout, what are we doing? Those of you who had been in government leadership, those who have been ministers, may please answer. Kindly do not take this personally, because it is not a personal issue. I am sure you have tried heart and soul. Your respective governments must have tried too.

The fact of the matter is, in 2007, about 50 percent of our primary students leave their school before reaching class six. Although education is supposed to bridge social disparity, in our case it is being reinforced. The disparity between rich and poor is widening and there is a huge question about the quality of education. I, therefore, shall very humbly request all of you to discuss the issues cordially in order to find a correct direction to follow. Once again, as totally novice on the matter, I want you to focus on policy directions.

Let us also discuss the smaller operational issues, such as, bureaucratic employments in professional posts, i.e., a curriculum developer is appointed and gets transferred only after a year. Why can we not learn from the experiences of Thailand, Sri Lanka, China or India? I request you to participate in a future-looking discussion, without pointing fingers. Let us discuss the issues with foresight. I also request you to announce your names before you talk each time, because this entire proceeding is being recorded. And I would say that you need not thank anybody, but go straight to the point, please. Let us take it that we have already thanked UNESCO, Daily Star, BRAC and CAMPE. Now let us begin and please show us light through this darkness.

Ensuring Equal opportunities



Dr. Qazi Kholiuzzaman Ahmad
President, Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA)

I agree on all the points made, but one point was missing - that is, how to ensure that the desired results will be achieved? A system of supervision is needed. If effective supervision is not in place, whatever standard you may set regarding quality, whatever resource allocation you make, you will never know whether the resources reached

their intended destination. The current governmental system of supervision is non-functional according to our research. We need to develop a system of supervision by the people at the local level, especially at primary stage, and if possible at secondary stage as well. In a recent research we have found that there is a disparity in allocating governmental resources for different types of schools. There is also a great disparity between urban and rural areas. But if we want non-discriminatory universal education, this is not acceptable. There is a need for policy decision in this regard.

Secondly, I want to raise a point about stipends, which I suppose are given to maintain standards and draw children into education. We observed that all of those who are enrolled in the stipend programmes do not necessarily come to school. There is not enough accountability on how and where stipends are going. There are irregularities in the management at the school level that we have discovered in our study.

All these have a correlation with quality. The resources allocated by government are for salaries, school building and maintenance, but there is no resource allocation for quality inputs and teachers' training. There is no allocation for retaining the boys and girls or to arrange special measures for those who lag behind, as we see in many other countries.

Another point to note is that we always say primary education is free. As per Dakar Declaration, 'free' means a student needs not to spend any money. But in our recent study we have found out that in case of government school, 60 percent of a student's expenditure (including learning materials, private tutoring and other costs) is borne by his

family. In case of other schools, about 75 to 80 percent of expenditure is borne by families. In that case, how do we call it free?

In our study, we divided the households into five categories: very poor, poor, middle class, rich and very rich. We found that those who are very poor can spend only one-third or less money in comparison to the very rich. The disparity is even greater between urban and rural areas. Those who cannot spend money, they surely have to dropout. Even if they somehow manage to continue, they cannot learn and perform well at school. Often they do not have enough food at home; neither do they have tiffin at school.

Literacy - Too bleak a picture?



Dr. Saadat Husain
Chairman, Bangladesh NGO Foundation

I am an ex-Cabinet Secretary. And before that I was the Primary Education Secretary. I was Education Secretary too. In my opinion, a very pessimistic position has been presented unnecessarily. That's the reason Mr. Mahfuz Anam asked what we have done in all these years.

I appeared in Matriculation examination in 1961. In that year the total number of candidates in Bangladesh was 57 thousand. Today the number of SSC candidates is 1.1 million. That means the number has increased 20 to 22 times. Our population has increased 2.5 times during the corresponding period - from 60 million to 140 to 150 million. How do you explain this increase in number of students?

Today each and every primary school in Bangladesh, including government primary schools and private registered primary schools, has a masonry building. There is not a single thatched building. Today the enrolment rate is 97 percent and the dropout rate is 33 percent [the official figure]. We need to examine whether the talk of 50 percent dropout rate is correct.

We are being told that the literacy rate is 40 to 50 percent. This is wrong. We have given our statistics in the Dakar Conference [World EFA Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 2000]. The leader of the delegation is here and I was the alternate leader. We said that it was 64 percent. The President on the floor of the Parliament said that it was 64 percent. Last time, when the Awami League government ended its term and BNP government took over, 3 or 4 persons wanted to show that the rate was 40 to 50 percent. Then in the cabinet I presented the figure of 64 percent, collecting it from primary and mass education division. They vehemently opposed this figure and insisted that it was 40 or 41 percent. Ultimately it was decided that it should be examined and the government came out with the figure of 63 percent in a publication signed by Honourable Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. The persons who first said it was 40-41 percent agreed that it was 63 percent. It is unfortunate that the figure has not increased. If there is one single failure of the last government, it is in not projecting the improvement in education. So, 63 percent remains 63 percent until now.

The World Bank said when they were preparing the PEDPI that the literacy rate was 51 percent [some 12 years ago]. UNESCO was there with us, UNESCO worked with us and it did not contest the number. We have presented the numbers in Hamburg World Literacy Conference, in the Dakar EFA Forum, in Brazil, and in India. UNESCO was always with us, and they never contested this number.

Mahfuz Anam

UNESCO uses government statistics and does not want to embarrass any government. But let the persons who presented different figures defend these.

Dr. Saadat Husain

How will they defend it? They will tell their version, we shall tell ours.

I am presenting all these figures from the government documents. We start from the wrong premise if we say that the literacy rate is 41 percent. UNESCO worked with us in a working group and in the working group they could speak frankly without embarrassing anybody. The rate for Pakistan is about 60 percent. Are we lower than Pakistan? We were the leader. The Honourable Minister is here; others were also present in the different conferences on literacy and non-formal education. Bangladesh was a leader! Everyone tried to emulate Bangladesh. People wanted to come here to see [our achievements]. We got the UNESCO literacy award.

I fully agree with Dr. Kholiuzzaman and the presenter that great disparity was there.

We have not really benefited all the poor people, but some of the poor people have benefited. Both the governments, Awami League Government and BNP, have generously given the stipend. May be there have been leakages.

We have done many things and I think we should start

from that premise. We were the leader; we were far ahead of many other countries in realizing the objectives which have been adopted in Dakar Conference. Bangladesh is one of 4 or 5 countries, which prepared the EFA Action Plan. This is on record.

There have been some setbacks in primary education and in the literacy movement. We stopped the literacy movement because we thought it was a movement of the previous political government. If the literacy movement continued, perhaps today we would have been almost free of illiteracy. But all of a sudden one Minister declared that there was no need to teach the adult people because they could not remember anything. So the programme was stopped. I would not really be pessimistic. I would rather end by saying that some of these figures should be corrected.

About one education ministry, this is not a big problem. But there should be two different divisions; it had been like this earlier. And about a Permanent National Education Commission, I have serious reservations. I do not think these commissions will do anything. We formulated the National Education Policy. This was thrown out because this was prepared by the previous political government. So the new political regime prepared its own. And this will also be thrown out by the next regime which will come.

About the responsibility of the present Caretaker Government in education, I think it is outside the remit of the Caretaker Government. They have only two responsibilities, I believe; one is to hold the national election in a free, fair and acceptable way, and number two is to curb corruption. Our education policy is a very big issue, which a caretaker government should not handle. I think we can discuss about it but it should be left to the next political government.

Mahfuz Anam

I have a request for a clarification from UNESCO, Mr. Hassan A. Keynan

Hassan A. Keynan
Programme Specialist (Education), UNESCO, Bangladesh



I am going to state some facts.. UNESCO does not produce official statistics of its own. Number two, all the data that the United Nations uses to calculate literacy and primary education rates come from official government sources.. This is based on census that the governments produce and the education reports that governments send to the United Nations Population Centre in New York and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in Montreal. The definition is always the definition used by the respective government. And the statistics used in the EFA Global Monitoring Report and Human Development Report are based on official data provided by governments.

Only the government can send data. Data from the NGOs or any other authority are not accepted. If there is something wrong in the statistics, it is wrong in the sense that either incomplete information was sent to the UN or outdated and unreliable data were sent.

Mahfuz Anam

I think the controversy that has arisen regarding figures should be addressed. We don't want here to be mired in a debate about figures; yet, the point raised by Saadat Bhai is valid that the official figures have featured in so many documents. I would request others to kindly explain the basis of your figures. I would suggest that without really going into debate, you may just mention the sources of your data. Sadaat Bhai has already explained his sources.

More on Literacy: Where do we stand?

A.S.H.K. Sadique

Former Education Minister, Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

I just want to seek clarification on two points. First, it has been said that 'Children cannot complete respective stages.' Does this mean they go up to class ten in the secondary (level) or they fail [in the SSC examination]? At the primary level, many people do not go up to class six, because primary is up to class five. So [in reference to 50 percent dropout in primary education], do they stop before they complete class

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

