

Quality of education

The draft policy has addressed many important issues but its merits are bound by the traditional virtues. I am afraid that it will be hard to succeed in developing a sustainable, responsive, and responsible education system within the constraints of traditional values and structures.

MAWDUDUR RAHMAN

THE education level of a country is the primary determinant of its economic welfare (UNDP, 2007). The lack of high quality education perpetuates poverty (Perry et al, 2006; Hanushek and Woessmann, 2007).

The government of Bangladesh needs to be congratulated for taking education reform as a priority. Within a short time, a draft education policy has been prepared.

Instead of exploring in detail, I have focused on the aspects which may contribute towards making the policy more proactive to align it with global education paradigms, and may help in realising long-term national education goals. I have outlined my brief comments in six sections:

- Committee tasks,
 - Structural issues,
 - Corruption issues,
 - Technological imperatives,
 - Research goals, and
 - Incentives system focusing on evaluation, opportunities, and competition.
- The above factors have been included in the model below to show the relationships.

Committee tasks

A policy is a "formal set of statements," a

statement of principles and values which signifies long-term commitments. It appears that the committee, along with developing policy statements, spent much time on the implementation plans. Developing curricula or suggesting financial plans is not usually the task of a policy formulating committee. The people who deal with curriculum development or budget preparation will do this job better, based on the policy statements adopted by the Committee. Moreover, a financial plan should not be a part of the policy statement. Financial constraints are separate issues.

I now focus on other issues needing attention. In spite of its robustness in contents and considerations the draft education policy has missed some major areas, which need to be addressed before the report is ready for implementation.

Structural issues

The system and structure are the vehicles through which the mission, goals and policies are implemented. Hanushek and Woessmann (2007) found that institutional structure was the main reason for the poor quality of education in developing countries. The best plan will surely fail in an inefficient and ineffective structure. The committee did not consider the

system and structural issues in its report.

Everyone will agree that the education system and structure in Bangladesh is inefficient and archaic. We inherited a bureaucratic culture in our education. It has been proved time and again that trained Bangladeshi people can deliver. Our failure is not because of our people; it is the system, which is the biggest drawback.

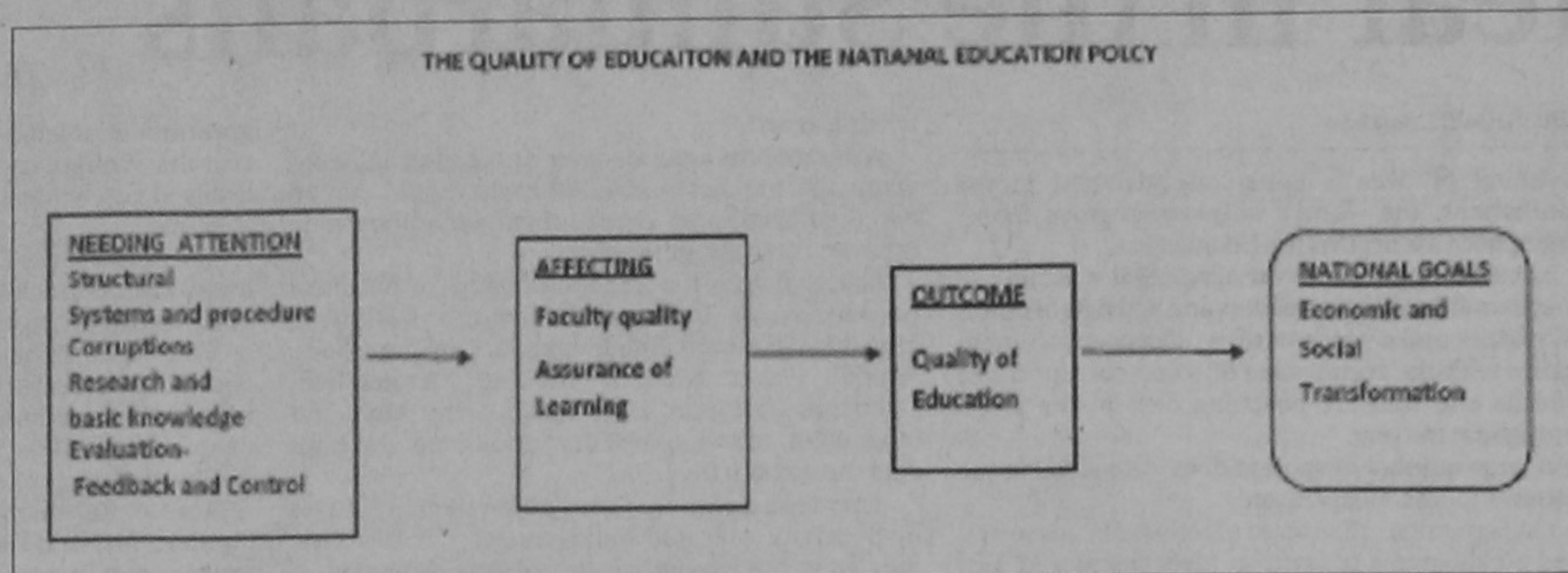
The structure of the University Grants Commission (UGC), school and college boards, government departments and university trustees, are layers of fossils in their composition and character. We need a major reshuffle in the structure of each of these. What does the Committee expect to get out of these fossils? These systems and structures need to be completely recast and reorganised before a serious national policy is implemented.

Corruption issues

The education system in Bangladesh is plagued with corruption. Except a small and silent minority, most people who develop, manage, and deliver education are intellectually incompetent and financially insatiable. The education system has been turned into a money-making machine. The Committee remained silent on this issue except for its comments on notebook publishing. The Committee needs help from Bangladeshi experts (not non-Bangladeshis who have no idea of the history or culture of Bangladesh) with long and active experience with quality education in the developed countries.

Technology

The committee did not put enough emphasis on the importance and applica-



tion of technology in the development and delivery of education. This is where we need another major structural change. We need a comprehensive policy statement stressing that all education initiatives should be technology based to harmonise with the global education system and deliver a forward-looking education. Digital education is the future. A major investment of the education sector should be in educational technology. Technology areas should include:

- Class-room technology,
- Digital textbook,
- Ancillary educational materials,
- Research technology,
- Online education tools and programs;
- Web enabled education, and
- Digital knowledge banks.

Research goals

Emphasis should be placed on academic research at all levels. The future of higher education in Bangladesh is uncertain

due to the vested interests that are driven by goals other than quality of education. The importance of basic research and publication has been relegated to the back seat.

The policy should clearly state that adequate resources should be made available for research at PhD and post-doctoral level to create the opportunity for access to a world-class research community. Developing high quality research universities should be one of the priorities of the nation. Private philanthropists and the government should join together to promote such universities.

Incentives: evaluation, opportunities, and competition

What is needed is a culture change in the education system. A proactive education system is built on incentives, evaluations, opportunities, and competition as a part of the paradigm guiding the education system and policies. The Committee was

silent about all of these, including evaluation at the institutional and individual levels. The Committee discussed the examination of the students, which is the tradition of the archaic system.

The Committee also briefly mentioned the accreditation of universities. The quality issues are much broader than these. Many research studies, especially from developing countries, are available, which can provide guidelines for creating a responsive and responsible education system for Bangladesh.

The draft policy has addressed many important issues but its merits are bound by the traditional virtues. I am afraid that it will be hard to succeed in developing a sustainable, responsive, and responsible education system within the constraints of traditional values and structures.

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Political "climate" must change to achieve a climate treaty

Others, however, maintain that stopping the global warming process is fundamentally a problem of political will and that any further delay in global action could lead to an irreversible situation.

SYED MUAZZEM ALI

YES, the international negotiating climate must change dramatically if the Copenhagen Summit, which is just five weeks away, has to achieve a comprehensive climate change treaty. Time is running out fast and still there are a large number of substantive issues, which must be agreed upon. In order to the break the current deadlock, the industrialised countries, which are primarily responsible for the global warming process, have to demonstrate that they are committed to establishing a fair and legally binding international instrument to halt and reverse the climate-changing trends.

The good news is that at the recent UN General Assembly session the world leaders had taken a positive approach. President Obama has signalled a major departure from the Bush era, and Washington, after years of non-cooperation, is now lumbering towards a carbon cap. Chinese President Hu Jintao said that they were "endeavouring" to cut down their carbon emissions. The Indian leadership also showed some flexibility. The Europeans, who have been at the forefront of the current negotiations, have also ratcheted down their

emissions target.

The bad news is that these mere pronouncements and gestures are not enough to meet the serious challenges, which lie ahead. The situation on the ground is far more damaging than was apprehended. The original global target was to cut down warming pollution by 80% by 2050 by stabilising the heat-trapping carbon dioxide to about 450 per parts per million (ppm) so that the global temperature did not rise by more than 2 degrees Celsius from 1990 levels. Unfortunately, it now seems that the 450 ppm level had already been reached about four years ago.

Consequently, scientists are now calling for more drastic action to bring down the warming level to 350 ppm urgently to avoid the collapse of the continental ice sheets, which could cause dangerous rise in the sea level. This would also mean adoption of highly ambitious measures of 97% reduction in carbon emissions by completely switching to renewable energy systems by mid-century.

The other major challenge before the industrialised countries is creating a global fund to help the developing countries, particularly the vulnerable countries, and paying for the development of renewable energy resources.

The current estimate calls for a commitment of about \$160 billion from the industrialised countries each year by 2020.

Cynics believe that the time available is too short to resolve all outstanding issues and work out a comprehensive climate change treaty. They are more or less resigned to the idea that the Copenhagen Summit, at best, would be able to adopt a general declaration of some broad principles and pave the way for continuation of negotiations towards a ratifiable comprehensive agreement sometime next year.

Others, however, maintain that stopping the global warming process is fundamentally a problem of political will and that any further delay in global action could lead to an irreversible situation. The authors of a recent report for "Economics for Equity and Environment Network" -- an affiliate of the non-profit Ecotrust, which undertook a study on the cost of meeting the 350 ppm goal -- are of the opinion that for the sake of longer term economic gains it is necessary to take most expeditious action to meet the ambitious targets.



Engulfing the world.

As regards the creation of a fund, they point out that with an investment of approximately 1-3% of global domestic product, or \$600 billion to \$1.8 trillion, it should be possible to rapidly switch to renewable and clean energy sources, including wind and solar power, and to replenish global forests which could trap billions of tons of carbon. They further argue that these efforts would create millions of new jobs and also save the industrialised countries from frequent loss due to fluctuating oil prices.

Apparently, the price of 1-3% of global GDP appears to be too high, but they point out that in reality that may not be the case and cite the instance of the United States. US economy is currently growing at 2.5 annually and, hence, it should be possible for them to achieve the target just by skipping one year's growth.

They also underline that both US and China are currently spending more than 4% of their GDP in defence, which is much higher than what it would cost them to stop the global warming.

Climate change is a matter of life and death for Bangladesh and other badly affected South Asian countries. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has effectively highlighted our grave concern at the preparatory meeting in Geneva, at the UN General Assembly and, most recently, at the EU sponsored preparatory meeting in Stockholm. Five out of the eight countries in our region are Least Developed Countries and they just do not have the means to face the fall-out of the global phenomenon.

Topographically, countries like Bangladesh and Maldives are most vulnerable, and if the sea level rises by about one meter then it is apprehended that one-fourth to one-third of our country might go under the sea while Maldives might just disappear from the face of the earth.

Simultaneously, the rapid melting of Himalayan glaciers by as much as 23 metres annually would seriously affect two billion people of the Indo-China region.

The meltdown has already increased the frequency of floods, but it could soon lead to acute water shortage and the drying of our rivers. Bangladesh has already experienced unprecedented natural disasters, colossal tidal surges, drastic change in the rainfall pattern, landslides, heavy river erosion, dramatic fall in agricultural production and serious health hazards.

The fall-out of climate change has already affected all the countries, developed or developing, and in this era of emerging globalisation and interdependence, a negative impact in one area will inevitably affect other parts. Given the longer term catastrophic consequences of climate change, we in Bangladesh would expect that the global leaders would demonstrate much greater political will in Copenhagen and adopt a legal regime under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

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The awful plight of RMG workers

As the garment workers do not have appointment letters to use as proof of employment and the government turns a blind eye to their plight, owners of the garment factories can sack workers at any time without serving any notice.

RIPAN KUMAR BISWAS

100 percent cotton slim fit T-shirts with "Made in Bangladesh tag."

I looked at the customer who was commenting on those T-shirts to his friends at H&M departmental store in New York. "Wow! These shirts are really nothing short of sumptuous and have unique luster and captivating look."

Starting in the late '70s, Bangladesh today has more than 5,000 garment manufacturing and exporting units to boost the country's economy. They employ about three million workers of whom 90% are women. The garment industries, in addition, support another 10 million to 15 million, or roughly 10 percent of the population.

Despite the financial meltdown and adverse economic situation in the consumer market worldwide, Bangladesh readymade garments (RMG) earned nearly 80 percent of the

\$15.56 billion export earnings in the 2008-09 fiscal year. Each year, RMG industries earn \$1.6 billion from Europe and \$2 billion from US, and are expected to double the earnings, from \$50 million to \$1 billion, over the next two years from Japan, which is the world's fourth largest garment importer -- importing \$23 billion worth of ready-made garments, mostly from China. Bangladesh managed to maintain its comparative advantage despite rising prices.

While Bangladeshi RMG is now widely considered as the lifeline of national income, clashes in the garment producing areas are continuing. The main issues are alleged victimisation of workers, back-pay, and non-implementation of previously agreed concessions. On occasions, strikes take place at individual factories, and the workers of nearby factories join in the demonstrations. Clashes with police,

army and factory security continue, as do attacks on company property.

The recent death of three garment workers and injuries to 200, workers and police, in police firing during a clash at Tongi on October 31 is one more baneful example of unabated unrest in the garments sectors. According to the news, out of three, two people were killed on the spot as the police fired into Nippon Garment's workers rallying for arrear pay for three months and sudden closure of their factory without prior notice. A similar incident cost two lives and injuries to several hundreds workers of scores of factories at the Ashulia industrial zone over wage cuts and unpaid salaries in June.

The workers are allegedly being stripped of their rights, trapped like slaves, paid just a few pennies an hour, work exhausting hours, live in utter misery, and sacked, penniless and worn out, when they reach 35 years of age. Bangladeshi garment workers get the lowest wages in the world, with most getting only Tk. 800 to 950 (\$13 to 15) per month, though a ten-point agreement was signed between the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturing Employers' Association (BGMEA), the government, and 12 garments workers'

federations to ensure a minimum wage of \$25. With overtime, a skilled garment worker can earn up to \$150 a month.

According to law and international standards, women should not be made to work after 8 pm but, at times, they are asked to work until 10 pm or 11 pm. Sometimes they even work the whole night. In many cases there is no provision for maternity leave. Many factories do not have day-care centers, though, as per the agreements, they are now trying to catch up. In many cases, management does not pay the monthly wage and overtime payment by the 7th of the month. In hundreds of smaller factories monthly wages and overtime payments remain outstanding for 2/3 months. As the garment workers do not have appointment letters to use as proof of employment and the government turns a blind eye to their plight, owners of the garment factories can sack workers at any time without serving any notice.

Apart from these allegations against most of the garments factories, many of them are reportedly cutting wages to compete for orders with countries such as Vietnam, China, and India.

We are being told that a plot hatched by outsiders lay behind this current

unrest. According to BGMEA, the incident was not the result of any worker unrest, rather it was planned sabotage to destabilise the industry on the eve of the Bangladesh apparel and textile exposition scheduled from November 5 to 7 in the city. The same was echoed by Israfil Alam, member of the parliamentary standing committee on labour and employment ministry, while, according to police and workers, the sudden shutdown without any prior notice fueled the agitation.

To normalise the situation and prevent future unrest, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has asked the home ministry to take necessary action against the authorities responsible. "Whoever is found responsible for the incident will be dealt with severely," the home minister said. An intelligence agency had alerted the government a week ago about a possible unrest in the garments sector. The presence of police at the spot the previous night hinted at possible unrest as the owner was going to shut down the factory without any notice.

However, the government is yet to form a committee to probe the unrest, as was ordered by the home affairs ministry on Sunday. The government

has decided to introduce trade union in the garments sector following a meeting between ministers, garment factory owners, workers and representatives of BGMEA. A trade union with proper safeguards to protect the workers' rights is always a good initiative. But Bangladeshi trade unionism is characterised by political activism and sudden strikes.

In May, Unite, the UK's largest trade union, signed a joint statement with the US-based union United Steelworkers and the German United Services Union in support of labour standards in Bangladesh. The joint statement is the result of growing international concern about labour standards in the Bangladeshi textiles sector. But it will require concrete action by all of the parties involved if it is to succeed in its aims.

Except a very few sceptics, none will disagree that the garment industry of Bangladesh has been the key export division and a main source of foreign exchange in the country. So something tangible should be done immediately, rather than accusing one another or leaving the real cause aside.

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