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Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and UNICEF, with the support of the European Union, jointly organised a roundtable titled 'Allocations for children in Bangladesh's public expenditure' on June 8, 2022. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

Allocations for children in Bangladesh's public expenditure



Professor Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) (Keynote Presenter)

In FY2015-16, the government, for the first time, prepared a separate budget for children. This was a reflection of the government's commitment towards raising the welfare of Bangladesh's children.

Children, belonging to the 0-18 year age group, make up two-fifths of our population. Ensuring the well-being of children is a development issue and also a rights issue enshrined in our Constitution and embedded in various government policies.

Between 2013 and 2019, Bangladesh made commendable progress in several child indicators such as infant mortality rate and stunting. On the other hand, progress was stalled, and even reversed, in terms of several other indicators particularly because of Covid-induced shocks. A BIGD (2020) study revealed that about 59 percent of students had lower protein intake and 34 percent of the households were compelled to reduce food expenses for adolescents. These negative footprints will leave long-term implications for the subsequent growth of children if not addressed properly with targeted interventions. The key finding of these surveys is that children were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. If a certain group is disproportionately affected, you will have to give them disproportionate treatment in order to bring them to the same level as others. We need to keep this in mind when we discuss allocations for children.

Studies indicate that deprivations



amount of the child budget rose to Tk 90,868 crore from the previous Tk. 80,197 crore, a growth of 13.3 percent. However, the share of the child budget in total public expenditure indeed saw a slight decline (from 15.3 percent to 15.1 percent); the same was the case in view of the GDP (from 2.78 percent to 2.63 percent).

If we look at the sectoral distribution, we see that 6 percent of the child budget has gone to the education sector, 12 percent to children's health and 13 percent to various social safety net programmes. However, only about 1 percent has gone toward child protection. Since issues such as child labour, child marriage, learning losses and violence had acquired urgency during the pandemic, there is a need to allocate more resources in view of these emergent needs.

We also need to take note of not only monetary allocations but also issues such as timeliness and quality of implementation, effective management of the projects and overall good governance. To recall, average spending during the first 10 months of FY2021-22 by the 15 child budget concerned entities was only 49 percent. Thus, the share of implemented child budget was lower than that of allocation.

Based on the above study, we would like to put forward a number of suggestions. First, the child budget should be prepared and published on a regular basis. Second, efforts should be taken to meet the target of 20 percent of all public expenditures to be spent on children. Third, allocations in the child budget should be geared towards addressing current concerns and future needs of children. Fourth, targeted measures are needed to address Covid-induced challenges including compensating for learning losses, bringing dropped out children back to school, ensuring their access to essential health services, preventing child marriage and child labour and providing children with a safe environment to live and grow up in as productive adults. Fifth, social safety net programmes for children need to be expanded both horizontally and vertically with a special focus on early-year programmes (e.g., Universal Mother and Child Benefit Programme, for which we have already seen some improvements in the budget for FY2022-23). Sixth, child budget should be prepared considering the shifting demands of the children. Addressing Covid-induced adverse impacts should not only inform allocative priorities in the child budget of FY2022-23, but also the budgets to come in the next few years. Finally, implementation of child-centric measures in the budget should be reviewed on a regular basis with multi-stakeholder participation.

experienced by children at the early stage of development are difficult to adequately compensate for through interventions during subsequent stages. Any mitigating interventions at a later stage also prove to be highly costly. Consequently, investment in children is considered as an act of paying forward. It is important for Bangladesh to undertake and prioritise time-sensitive investments in today's children while the country's demographic window of opportunity is still open.

According to the Ministry of Finance estimates, allocation for children in FY2018-19 was found to be only about 14.1 percent of the national budget. The aspiration of raising this share to 20 percent by 2020 was mentioned in the budget speech of FY2018-19. However, this was estimated to be only 15.3 percent in FY2019-20. Regrettably, child budget reports for the next two fiscal years (FY2020-21 and FY2021-22) have not been prepared.

CPD in partnership with UNICEF, as part of the EU-UNICEF Public Finance Facility for Children project supported by the European Union, undertook an exercise to estimate the child budget figures for FY2021-22. The objective was to highlight the need to increase the share of child budget in public expenditure, and enhance allocative efficiency by drawing attention to the specific needs of Covid-affected children.

The study found that while the budget of the selected 15 ministries/divisions in FY2021-22 has increased by 15.8 percent compared to the pre-Covid FY2019-20 budget, the share of child budget in total public expenditure had remained more or less the same. Over this period, the

demographic dividend which makes investment in children crucially important. Can we invest in programmes that are targeted to bring those children back to school who had dropped out during the pandemic? This is the time to invest in nutrition, health, and water and sanitation to ensure that every child gets the opportunity to grow up to attain their full potential. We also hope that the new budget will address harmful practices such as child marriage and violence against children. We have to keep in mind that investing USD 1 in children today is going to give us USD 13 in return in future.



Shaheen Anam, Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation

Children are not a homogenous group. There are many different groups within children – those from impoverished households, children from remote and hard-to-reach areas, and those with disabilities. Our budget must address the needs of all these different groups of children, particularly the vulnerable and marginalised children. It is unfortunate that the social welfare ministry, the key ministry tasked with ensuring protection of children, receives one of the lowest budgetary allocations.

We always talk about allocation, but we don't pay adequate attention to the monitoring and implementation of these funds. We, civil society organisations, are not able to monitor how the allocated funds are being used and to what extent the children are benefiting from these funds. Some key indicators to look at in this regard are the health condition of children, their education, and child marriage. All our social safety net allocations go to the family since the family is supposed to take care of the children. However, our study shows that many incidents of child abuse and neglect happen within families. We need to think about how we can provide support to families so that children are protected.



Kashfia Feroz, Director-Girls Rights, Plan International Bangladesh

The national plan of action to end child marriage is the key tool to monitor and measure our progress in terms of child marriage. I urge the government to allocate necessary funds for the effective implementation of this action plan.

In the first four months of this year, 366 cases of violence against children were filed (ASK data) which shows the enormity of the problem. I strongly recommend raising the child protection budget from 1 percent to 10 percent of child budget.



Dr. Eiko Narita, Country Representative, UNFPA

One of the key investment areas is education, particularly adolescent girls' education. We have to make sure that girls stay in school throughout the secondary school period.

Girls generally start skipping school when they experience menstruation. It is also a cultural symbol that the girl is ready for marriage. There is a clear link between menstruation, school dropout and child marriage. We have to look at this linkage when we

allocate budgets for adolescent girls.



Rasheda K Choudhury, Executive Director, CAMPE

We see negative growth in the allocation for children in the budget of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. This is unacceptable since the honourable Prime Minister has repeatedly highlighted the importance of creating a progressive cultural environment for children.

The mid-day meal programme was supposed to be an incentive to bring children back to school and better their nutritional status. The prime minister also pledged that by 2024 we would have universal mid-day meal coverage. The programme, affected by the pandemic, should be restarted in all earnest to reach the target on time.

The Bangkok Statement, adopted in the recently concluded 2nd Asia-Pacific Regional Education Minister's Conference, focuses on return, retain and catch-up. As a signatory to this statement, Bangladesh should keep in mind these three commitments when it makes budgetary allocations for children. At the conference, delegations from India and Pakistan submitted citizen budgets. We can also undertake a similar initiative.



Maurizio Cian, Head of Cooperation, Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh

In the coming years, money from development partners will reduce; also various trade preferences will no longer be available. However, it needs to be recognised that Bangladesh has the strength, both in terms of human capital and financial resources, to graduate and walk on its own.

The social protection budget for children focuses mainly on early childhood development. There are various national and international initiatives to support this phase of childhood. We should also allocate resources for other stages of children's lives including the adolescence period.

Different organisations have different types of data on children. This data needs to be shared among relevant stakeholders.



Khan Md. Nurul Amin NDC, Chief (Additional Secretary), General Economics Division (GED), Ministry of Planning

We must ensure food, shelter, health, nutrition, education, and decent living conditions for every child. Our national planning document clearly mentions how to achieve this goal: "More investment for children will be a priority of the Government during 8FYP. Following strategic actions will be undertaken: (a) evidences are generated to advocate for greater and better public investments for children by way of analysing child focused budgeting including preparation of budget brief, pursuing fiscal space analysis including institutional investment plans for children, pursuing public expenditure review for children, pursuing cost-benefit analysis of selected interventions for children, (b) capacity of duty bearers enhanced in child focused budgeting process, (c) involvement of citizens (including children) to empower them to participate in budgeting process to improve transparency and accountability" (8th Five-Year Plan, pg. 18).

The document further mentions, "Child focused budget gradually

needs increasing allocation for effective coverage. The incidence of child malnutrition has reduced significantly. However, progress in the area of children's nutrition requires additional effort. The incidence of child poverty is high, and the implementation of the consolidated Child Benefits Program recommended by the NSSS needs to be fast-tracked. Implementation capacity for enforcement of the Children Act 2013 also needs strengthening and needs deployment of a dedicated social service workforce for children including children with disabilities" (pg. 15).

We have clear policy guidelines regarding child welfare. We need to enhance our capacity to implement these programmes and mobilise local resources towards this.



Dr. Shamim Jahan, Acting Country Director, Save the Children in Bangladesh

A separate directorate should be established to strengthen the focus on children. There should be strong coordination among different government departments and ministries regarding the allocation of budget for children and proper implementation of child welfare programmes.

Data validation is critically important. We need to involve the private sector in child welfare programmes.



Mahfuz Anam, Editor & Publisher, The Daily Star

Budgetary allocation and expenditure for children is a topic that deserves adequate media attention. Collaborative efforts are key to pursuing these issues. I want to highlight one sentence from Dr. Mustafizur Rahman's presentation which says, "We need to talk about not only monetary allocation but also the timeliness and quality of implementation, effective management and overall governance of the process." The Daily Star would like to cover all these aspects. Please help us with your knowledge and resources in this regard.



Aroma Dutta, MP, Member of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Social Welfare

We need to focus on tracking and monitoring. It would help us know where and how to make investments. We need to have more interaction with the concerned ministries including Planning, Finance, Education, and Women and Children Affairs.

Our schools should have two curriculums so that students can gain more technical knowledge. Bangladesh is earning a significant amount of foreign exchange by sending her human capital abroad, but its children are not getting enough opportunities. These gaps need to be addressed. We also need a separate ministry for the children.



MA Mannan MP, Honourable Minister, Ministry of Planning

We are fighting on many fronts including poverty reduction, food security and creating employment. Children are the weakest link in the development chain. They need special care and attention. Despite many limitations, we want our children to have the best education. This is a huge battle and the government is keen to pursue this. We would like to pay more attention and allocate more funds for Bangladesh's children. I fully endorse the idea of a citizens' budget for children.

There has been a significant rise in the incidence of child marriage during the pandemic. If these girls come back to school, they should be given not only a stipend but also other benefits in appreciation of their long journey back to school.

We must stop the wastage of government funds. Our honourable Prime Minister has called on everyone to prevent wastage and make the best use of funds. I am earnestly seeking the media's help in this regard.