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# Transforming education: Five tasks



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## IDENTIFYING CRITICAL TASKS

Which five tasks should be on top of the list of someone appointed as the education tsar of Bangladesh? The question was posed by Dr. Binayak Sen, Director General of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies in a public discussion about this writer's recent book *Ekush Shotoke Bangladesh – Shikkhar Rupantor (Bangladesh in the 21st Century – Transformation of Education)*, published by Prothoma.

My off-the-cuff response was two-fold. That reforming the education system, a complex and multi-dimensional area of national endeavor, called for more than "silver bullets" or ticking off a short list of specific actions. And, that educational leadership required collective consensus-building, rather than the mere inspiration of a supremo. I went on to say that areas of priorities in policy and actions have to be identified, a broad consensus built on these, and plans and strategies

formulated and implemented accordingly, in which committed and bold leadership would have a critical role. So would be good-faith political backing that supports the process of academics and professionals interacting with major stakeholders, while politicians and bureaucrats restrain their urge to micro-manage and make ad hoc interventions.

Grasping the large picture,

setting policies and goals based on this understanding, planning pragmatic short and longer-term actions accordingly, and implementing the actions effectively and in an accountable manner – this is what was discussed in the book on the subject of the transformation of education. Twenty action points were proposed as the distillation of what needed to be done in six major subsectors, from school

education to tertiary level and vocational skill development to madrasas. Also, included in this enumeration necessary actions in four cross-cutting areas, such as preparing the education workforce, moral and ethical development of the next generation, governance of the system, and financing the sector. A chapter of the book was devoted to each of these topics.

## PARTIAL VIEW AND REACTIVE RESPONSE

As argued in the book, the initiatives, and efforts in reforming and improving the education system of Bangladesh are characterized by three tendencies: a) fragmented and partial actions rather than strategies and actions based on a comprehensive view of the education sector, thus, neglecting the links to and

effects of specific steps on rest of the subsectors or the whole education sector; b) a reactive approach to symptoms of disease or manifestation of a problem rather than diagnosing and addressing the roots of the problem; and c) the habit of pursuing "within the box" familiar solutions for reform and change, without rocking the boat.

The fragmented, reactive, and "within-the-box" character of education development actions is reflected in some major features of the system in Bangladesh. First, we do not have an education sector development plan. There are proclamations regarding very general goals such as the Sustainable Development Education Goal (SDG4), the "smart Bangladesh" slogan, and a compilation of the two ministries' intentions in the five-year development plan document. In respect of actual activities, there are various subsector projects, such as those for primary and secondary education or parts of vocational and tertiary education. Missing is an overall education sector plan that ties together or guides various sub-sector activities that contribute to well-articulated and time-bound national education and human development objectives.

With assistance from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) and UNESCO, a national team prepared a medium-term draft education



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