



Where is the time-bound plan for universal secondary education in Bangladesh? PHOTO: STAR

We need a universal school education programme



Dr Manzoor Ahmed is emeritus professor at BRAC University, chair of Bangladesh ECD Network, adviser to the CAMPE Council, and Associate Editor of the International Journal of Educational Development.

MANZOOR AHMED

A fifth round of primary school development programme (PEDP5) for the next five years is under consideration by the government and development partners as the PEDP4 comes to an end this year. But should we not initiate the first universal school education programme (USEPI) instead?

A roundtable was hosted on May 9 involving government officials, NGOs, parents and students by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) on the topic of educational opportunities for out-of-school children. It was reported that compared to about 18 million children enrolled at the primary school stage, at least 10 million children of 6-14 years never enrolled in a school or dropped out early without acquiring basic literacy, which severely limited their life opportunities. This phenomenon of children's deprivation of education has been a longstanding feature of primary education even after a compulsory education law was adopted in 1990. The provisions of the law enjoining the obligations of the state and the parents have never been fully implemented.

As a response to this situation, non-formal primary education (one-room, one-teacher community school, free of cost to parents and managed by the sponsor NGO, viz., BRAC) was introduced in the mid-1980s. Through a course of three-four years, the 8 to 14-year-old children completed the equivalent of five years of primary education and a large majority went on to secondary school. The model served the purpose of educating out-of-school children remarkably well. By the mid-1990s there were over a million students, two-thirds girls, served at any one time in over 30,000 single-room, non-formal primary schools run by BRAC and smaller NGOs. International donors, impressed by the model's success, funded it, relieving impoverished families of the cost burden.

Donor environment and the government's attitudes shifted by the end of the 1990s. A sub-sector project for primary education was launched in 1997 by the government, which was actually a combination of several separate projects, and was retrospectively called primary education development programme I. As a sequel, and designed more as a coordinated sector (actually, a sub-sector) programme for primary education, PEDPII was begun in 2004. The so-called "sector-wide approach" or SWAP became the buzzword both with donors and the government. One significant characteristic of SWAP was that all international education assistance would be directed to SWAP and controlled by the government. Thus the NFPE programme of BRAC was largely cut off from donor assistance and the successful NFPE run by NGOs languished due to lack of funding.

In the four rounds of PEDP from 1997 to 2024, some \$20 billion (roughly Tk 1,50,000 crore) have been spent. Over 80 percent has been domestic funds from the government. But except for the expansion of enrolment and physical facilities, which still

remain inadequate, the outcome in learning has been disappointing. An assessment has shown that the majority of children, after five years of primary schooling, do not acquire basic literacy and numeracy at a functional level.

As part of PEDPII (2004-2011), an NFPE-type project called Reaching Out-of-School Children (ROSC) started with a grant from the World Bank. Its management and supervision were kept in the hands of the Directorate of Primary Education, instead of engaging the successful NGOs such as BRAC and others with proven track record to manage the project. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in an evaluation in 2014 found that "the project was implemented fully in terms of numbers.... [but] schools were established without taking the need of the community into consideration... and school management and monitoring were also weak in most cases." The outcome, therefore, was disappointing in contrast to the NGO-run NFPE.

Under PEDPIII and IV (2011-17 and 2018-24), ignoring the weaknesses and poor outcome of ROSC, a similar government-controlled approach (this time by the Bureau of Non-Formal Education, or BNFE, under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education) was followed, although the name of the project was now changed to "the second chance" education project. The Covid pandemic led to shutting down the project in 2021. It reopened on a reduced scale in 2023. But its learning outcome and management problems make many sceptical about the project's value and its future.

The round-table organised by CAMPE was an occasion for the project's direct beneficiaries—students, parents, teachers and BNFE staff—to make a plea for the continuation and accommodation of the second chance in the forthcoming PEDP V, the shape and size of which are to be considered now. Some have expressed their grievances about poor management, corruption, lack of transparency and accountability, and a lack of motivation and responsibility among personnel which led to disappointing results.

Some of the speakers (including myself) argued for a basic rethinking than just accommodating in PEDP V the current model of "second chance," which with its present management structure has not worked very well. The relevance and value of a fifth round of primary education development up to class V in government primary schools itself need to be rethought, some speakers pleaded.

Some basic questions arise if this line of rethinking is pursued. Is a subsector programme up to class V meaningful, when the SDG4 goal is for achieving quality, equity and inclusion (pre-primary, primary and in secondary education) for all children by 2030? Moreover, how can we reconcile the aspiration of an upper middle-income country by 2031, and a developed country by 2041, keeping large proportions of children and youth deprived of education up to secondary level?

Where is the time-bound plan for universal secondary education in Bangladesh, consistent with the aim of Smart Bangladesh and skilled youth?

In this context, how rational is the reported government decision to proceed with a plan for extending primary education up to class VIII by introducing classes VI-VIII in primary schools? Presumably, the Directorate of Primary Education would take control of junior secondary schools which offer lessons up to class VIII.

Two observations are pertinent here. Primary education up to class VIII as a compulsory and universal stage of education is a 50-year-old idea broached first in the 1974 Qudrat-e-Khuda Commission report and reiterated in the Education Policy 2010. But in all these years, this goal has not been implemented. This plan is now outmoded and irrelevant, when universal secondary-level school education is the worldwide norm and an imperative for Bangladesh's human development needs.

Secondly, repackaging the old plan of primary education up to class VIII is designed to fit the existing bureaucratic structure of two ministries for school education, rather than reshaping the organisational structure to meet the need of the programme. In other words, why shouldn't all school education, K-12, be brought under one ministerial jurisdiction, like everywhere else in the world? Thus, a coordinated and holistic school education development can be carried out. A turf battle between the two ministries has thwarted the implementation of universal education up to class VIII.

Coming back to the decision about extending primary level to class VIII, there are good technical reasons for not putting classes VI-VIII into primary schools. The nature of learning content and pedagogy begins to diverge from class VI onward from the primary level up to class V. At this level, the focus is on foundational skills of language and math which all primary teachers are expected to handle. From class VI onward, the learning content is divided into subjects and disciplines which require specifically trained teachers for these subjects. It will be impractical and expensive to try to provide for these additional teachers in primary schools if classes VI-VIII are inserted there. Indeed, this has been a problem in some 700 primary schools where the higher "primary" classes were introduced a few years ago. These schools are struggling to provide a credible educational experience to their students in the higher classes.

What is a pedagogically sound and logistically pragmatic way forward? First, school education should come under one ministerial jurisdiction so that a coordinated and total school development programme is undertaken. Secondly, the primary level up to class V with its distinctive features of foundational focus on literacy in the national language and the four arithmetic functions should be retained. Classes VI-XII should be regarded as the secondary stage with appropriate subject- and discipline-based provisions for teachers and learning facilities. We need to design and implement the first Universal School Education Programme (USEP I). A step-by-step, time-bound plan needs to be prepared for high-quality school education for all children in all localities of the country, so that no child is deprived of school education of acceptable quality.

How we can mitigate the effects of rising inequality



AN OPEN DIALOGUE
Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works for Change Healthcare, Inc., an information technology company. He also serves as senior research fellow at the US based International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI).

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

"The question is whether Bangladesh's strong economic performance can be sustained. As matters stand, the country's prospects are excellent, but there are risks that policymakers will need to take into account," wrote Kaushik Basu a few years ago. The question he posed is still on everyone's mind.

So, what are the risks that Basu, the former chief economist at the World Bank, is referring to? The growing level of income and wealth inequality is undoubtedly one of them. Inequality in Bangladesh is rising, slowly but steadily. And it poses a very severe risk to our economic development and social stability. The government and society at large have to pay attention and work on the issue on an ongoing and sustainable basis.

The data from the past Household Income and Expenditure Surveys (HIES) carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics over the last two decades clearly indicate the trend pointing to the rising levels of income and wealth inequality. Whether we take the well-known measure, the Gini coefficient, or an alternative measure, such as the Palma ratio, and compare the income share of the top 10 percent with the income share of the bottom 40 percent, the signs are clear. We are heading towards a very unequal society.

The final report of HIES 2022 released by BBS last December showed that the top 10 percent of households increased their share of wealth to 40.91 percent, around 2.83 percentage points rise in the past six years. In 2016, their share of wealth was 38.09 percent and 35.84 percent in 2010.

One of UN's Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 10, is unequivocal about the deleterious effects of an increasingly unequal society. First, it can weaken trust in public institutions and undermine democratic governance. Secondly, inequality threatens long-term social and economic development, harms poverty reduction, and destroys people's sense of fulfilment and self-worth. Finally, this, in turn, can breed crime, disease and environmental degradation. Obviously, all this also may also result in political unrest and stunted progression in other dimensions.

The Princeton economic historian Walter Scheidel paints a more ominous scenario. In his book "The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality", he offers a panoramic view from the Stone Age

to the 21st century, and provides the answer in unambiguous terms. "Are mass violence and catastrophes the only forces that can seriously decrease economic inequality? To judge by thousands of years of history, the answer is yes!"

When asked about Bangladesh's growing inequality, a top member of the ruling party and a cabinet minister brushed it aside. "If the country's income increases, people's income increases as well. There is currently nothing the government can do if someone's income climbs unnaturally or appears unappealing. You'll see in the future," he said. This perception, that the benefits of a growing economy



VISUAL: REHNUMA PROSHOON

will eventually benefit the lower rungs of the income scale, has been known as the "trickle down" theory but has been discredited in serious economic and political studies.

Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, the eminent economist who worked closely with the current regime over the last decade and a half, recently conceded that the concentration of wealth and income has reached epic heights leading to an erosion of our societal values. Dr Ahmed was the Chairman of Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF), the largest government agency for sustainable poverty reduction through employment generation.

At this critical point, the government must redouble its efforts to reduce the gap between the super-rich and the rest of society. The programmes to fund rural development and skills training must be strengthened. Youth unemployment and underemployment rates are at an all-time high. One of the reasons for rising inequality is the failure to pull

emerging markets experiencing an increase in civil unrest over the past five years. Alarming, Bangladesh ranks seventh highest on political risk related to civil unrest, according to the report.

As the new government consolidates its power, it can take up the issue of inequality, poverty, and social programmes as a priority. There are three lines of attack: skills training for the young and the experienced workers to keep up with global trends as technology shifts labour demand from routine low- to mid-level skills to new, higher-level skills; fiscal policy including estate and wealth tax to reverse the concentration of wealth as crony capitalism strengthens its grip on the economy; and foster policy to face head-on the forces that lead to "unequal distribution of capital income with rising market power and economic rents enjoyed by dominant firms in increasingly concentrated and winner-takes-all markets" (Brookings Institution, "Rising Inequality: A major Issue of our time", 2023).

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Jail Super Office

District Jail Manikganj

www.prison.manikganj.gov.bd

Memo: 58.04.5600.085.04.018.2024-1230(6)

Date: 25/05/2024

e-Tender Notice

This is to notify all concern that the following tender is invited in the National e-GP Portal.

SL No.	Tender Package No.	Tender ID No.	Name of goods tender	Publishing, closing date & time
01	Package No-1	988216	Supply of Dietary article Package No-1 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 10:00:00
02	Package No-2	988756	Supply of Dietary article Package No-2 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 10:20:00
03	Package No-3	Nil	Nil	Nil
04	Package No-4	988788	Supply of Dietary article Package No-4 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 10:40:00
05	Package No-5	988826	Supply of Dietary article Package No-5 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 11:00:00
06	Package No-6	988880	Supply of Dietary article Package No-6 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 11:20:00
07	Package No-7	988929	Supply of Dietary article Package No-7 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 11:40:00
08	Package No-8	989010	Supply of Dietary article Package No-8 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 12:00:00
09	Package No-9	989035	Supply of Dietary article Package No-9 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 12:20:00
10	Package No-10	989118	Supply of Dietary article Package No-10 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 12:40:00
11	Package No-11	989158	Supply of Dietary article Package No-11 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 13:00:00
12	Package No-12	989179	Supply of Dietary article Package No-12 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 13:20:00
13	Package No-13	989189	Supply of Dietary article Package No-13 for the period of July/2024 to December/2024	26-May-2024 10:00:00 10-Jun-2024 13:40:00

This is an online tender where only e-Tender will be accepted in the National e-GP Portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted. To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP System Portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

20240525

Md. Bazlur Rashid Akhanda

Jail Superintendent

District Jail Manikganj

GD- 856