

# Whom does education serve in Bangladesh?

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Politicians' goals for basic education in South Asia are different from parents' goals. Politicians want school construction, teacher recruitment, free textbooks, and a centralised system of education. Parents want a quality education that gives their children a better future.

It's no surprise, then, to see a consistent increase among parents in South Asia sending their children to non-government schools ("low cost" private schools, NGO schools, madrasas) with the hope that their children will learn, at a minimum, the ability to read the local language at a basic level and do basic arithmetic.

But even in these modest desires, we believe both the children and their parents are betrayed by South Asian school systems—with the exception of Sri Lanka. For example, the "learning poverty" rates in the three most populous countries in South Asia range from 56 percent in India and 58 percent in Bangladesh, to 78 percent in Pakistan. The outlier is Sri Lanka where the rate is only 14 percent, better than many high-income countries.

Why is this the case given that, over the last three decades, there has been near universal access to primary education?

To understand this, you have to appreciate that school systems are composed of institutions dominated by the education bureaucracy, by politicians, and by teachers' unions. The dominant goal of those groups is not children's learning, but the protection of their own interests.

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**Gaming the system**  
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The "game" in Bangladesh and India has been to lower the bar to pass the Grade 5 exam, and to frequently allow question paper leakage before the exam day.

As an example, for more than a decade, Bangladesh conducted the National Student Assessment (NSA), a very sophisticated in-school assessment on a representative sample of primary school students in grades 3 and 5. But, in 2022, Bangladesh

After 1990, Bangladesh started receiving more development assistance in education. Politicians and bureaucrats used the money to create more positions for more teachers, build more classrooms, distribute free textbooks to all primary school students, and expand teacher training facilities. Everything improved except actual learning. After the Jomtien conference, the bureaucracy and politicians met their desires; the parents did not.

foundational literacy and numeracy in the fourth Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP), but their efforts were not concerted and sometimes subverted. The multilateral banks were more interested in disbursing funds than adding any accountability measures to achieve quality educational goals in primary education.

The second PEDP (2004-2010) received 37 percent as development assistance from 11 bilateral and multilateral donors for a total primary education budget of \$1.8 billion. But through PEDP-3 and PEDP-4, this reduced as much as eight percent, despite the absolute value of donor contributions remaining constant, as the government substantially increased its primary education budget.

The government funded this significant increase by negotiating more loans from multilateral banks, such as the World Bank and Asian Development Bank—loans which would have to be repaid. In effect, additional domestic government revenue mainly served political and bureaucratic goals—not learning goals for children and their parents, which continued to decline. Moreover, the declining donor share of the primary education budgets in Bangladesh reduced their influence in discussions about learning outcomes.

## Where now for basic education in Bangladesh?

Where does that leave basic education in Bangladesh under the new political dispensation?

Although education will not feature highly among Prof Muhammad Yunus's short-term priorities, there are opportunities to change and address the systemic failings highlighted above, not least through more consultative and inclusive processes.

Undertaking an assessment of students' foundational skills using the ASER process developed in India is one such opportunity. The results will reveal the scale of the problem and determine how to take action quickly to reduce learning poverty levels.

Investing in teachers is a second essential strategy. Teachers' professionalism and performance are drivers of change in education. A reimagined teaching profession should attract and retain the best talents in the profession, but that also needs changed performance standards, status, incentives, remuneration, and career paths. This rethinking about teachers will be a longer-term task, but it should begin in earnest now.

Decentralisation of education management under a single education ministry can open the process of reform to gain stronger traction and wider support. This will be important if a real impact is to be made on foundational literacy and numeracy.

There is a real opportunity now in Bangladesh to stop the betrayal of politicians and bureaucrats. By meeting the demands of parents through focusing on learning outcomes and reforming the education system to accommodate many voices, change can be made possible.

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Bangladesh has a learning poverty rate of 58 percent, a research has found.

PHOTO: USAID

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The most credible assessment of primary students' learning in India is ASER, a large-scale assessment conducted at students' homes with a statistically significant sample size. It's organised by Pratham, a large NGO. The most advanced questions posed are on the ability of sampled children to read a short story at Grade 2 level and divide a three-digit number by a one-digit number. The national averages of the latest ASER survey, in 2022, are dismal. At Grade 5, in government schools 39 percent of children can read the story and 22 percent can do the division. Though far from ideal, non-government schools perform much better: at Grade 5, about 57 percent can read the story and 37 percent can do the division.

But, this begs the question: why are children successfully graduating from school but can neither comprehend a Grade-2-level passage or solve a simple division problem?

compromised assessment integrity by offering special tutoring to Grade 5 students using the testing tools to demonstrate better performance in their latest NSA. Ironically, the national entity that oversees primary education service delivery played this "game" instead of protecting the integrity of the assessment. The international organisation that oversaw the 2022 NSA collaborated with the primary education department in Bangladesh and failed to protect minimum research integrity.

In Bangladesh, despite this kind of scam, international organisations have played an important role in expanding primary education opportunities for millions of children. Like many other developing countries, Bangladesh has received significant development assistance in education since the 1980s, following the elevation of education as an investment emanating from the Jomtien conference in Thailand and the subsequent Education for All commitment to universal primary education.

## Education as investment—for whom?

Around the world, national governments and multilateral and bilateral organisations have initiated development programmes aimed at alleviating poverty. In this development effort, education has always been considered as the single most important means for increasing the household income of the poor. The importance of basic literacy and numeracy is so obvious, and the evidence so overwhelming, that bilateral and multilateral agencies, philanthropies—even private businesses—are all investing in education.

However, the development assistance to education in South Asia has never kept pace with the basic education needs. International organisations put emphasis on quality and equity in basic education and "reluctantly" shared strategies, without adequate evidence, to convince political and bureaucratic leadership to address chronic quality deficits in basic education in South Asia.

In Bangladesh, a few development partners tried to include interventions to improve

# A new deal for Bangladesh-UK partnership in uncertain times

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Even before the recent change of government in the UK, its role in Bangladesh has been shifting, especially bilaterally. While it remains a funder to basic services and other programmes through its contributions to IFIs and UN agencies, as well as regional programmes and other global initiatives that include Bangladesh, such as the Girls Education Fund and climate change, its bilateral spending has reduced to a 20-year low. According to the Center for Global Development, a think tank based in Washington, DC and London, a further 900 million pounds will have to be diverted this year from the global UK aid budget to spend on asylum seekers in the UK. This represents a diversion of aid from overseas spending to meet domestic asylum pressures while still classifying that spending as ODA. Coincidentally, with Bangladesh approaching the developing country status, its social protection requirements are expected to be met by domestic revenue sources rather than aid. Due to its declining bilateral pot, UK Aid has shifted towards a stronger emphasis on strategic technical assistance to support policy reform—in other words, ideas and methods rather than cash.

The UK technical team in Dhaka focuses on strategic priorities like climate change, ongoing Rohingya emergency, gender, poverty among minorities and concerns for their political rights, civil society and conditions for democracy, and macroeconomic policies for growth within the SDG mantra of leaving "no one behind."

So much for where we are in terms of UK aid to Bangladesh. Given the desire in London for rethinking its position in the world, this is a good time for the interim government in Bangladesh to "place its order"! At the time of writing, the incoming Labour government has yet to share its approach to overseas aid. There are some hints, however. Foreign Secretary David Lammy has ordered a review of the DFID (i.e. UK Aid) and its current status in the Foreign Office as was. Also in a recent speech, he spoke of how he wants to modernise relationships with the Global South—more partnership, removing the paternalism of the post-colonial past. At the same time, former permanent secretary (2011-17), Sir Mark Lowcock, is about to publish a book with co-author Ranil Dissanayake, titled *The Rise and Fall of the Department for International Development*, attributing the DFID's "fall" to the capture of the UK Conservative Party by its right wing, populist factions. The book will offer proposals to the new incumbents at No.10 as they define the UK's position in a complex international landscape.

Exploring that Bangladesh-UK partnership is perhaps easier to do this side of August 5 than before. To me, as an independent observer, it comprises the following elements: expanding geopolitical alliances on key international issues which build on existing collaborations, e.g. over the Rohingya, but also over labour migration rights and protections; reform of global governance institutions (especially re climate change, planetary boundaries, and taxation

on international financial transactions as advanced by Tobin); corporate governance and responsibility, i.e. not just referring to the state, or corporate social responsibility, but towards a more acceptable face of capitalism where the accumulation of private profits no longer free rides upon public goods—the RMG sector being a case in point, with its low-waged insecure employees "subsidising" low-waged, insecure consumers in the West; and controlling and eliminating corruption—very

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familiar in Bangladesh, and with implications for the UK; reducing the propensity and need to migrate permanently away from one's own culture, (thereby fracturing family life and identity) by inward combinations of socially progressive FDI and investment in human capital alongside facilitating circular temporary migration to the West or elsewhere; knowledge-building through encouraging university collaborations (as with India in the last decade or so through

the UK-India Education and Research Initiative—UKIERI) and student internships and exchanges, perhaps especially within the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK; investing in gender-balanced secondary education and FE skills provision including access to training and learning opportunities; and sharing HE and FE management approaches as those sectors expand.

There are also spreading the principles of inclusive democracy (including the taxation/citizenship nexus, as the underpinning of stakeholding and functional participation); devolution to sub-state political arenas, perhaps necessary in days gone by when communications were difficult, but again necessary for participatory citizenship as it is for the UK; leapfrogging options for Bangladesh in a digital age (e.g. in health, but of course also for inclusive education, especially if the classroom teaching cadre remains underdeveloped); understanding the distribution of poverty between systemic and idiosyncratic explanations, so important for policy choices between fiscal levers and household level intervention; developing well-being indicators, not just income/spending ones, as a guide to policy (for both partners); exploring the state/market boundaries for the regulated pursuit of social objectives; thus understanding the political settlement between rights-based entitlements; philanthropy; voluntarism; not-for-profit services; market opportunities—whether labour or entrepreneurial ones; and support for the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK, especially youth, and particularly girls.

(Aspects of this agenda might constitute an argument for retaining DFID within FCDO to keep diplomacy, development and humanitarian aid in mutual support, though I would regret the loss of cabinet rank for international development, per se. The UK Treasury does have two cabinet rank positions as a model for similar representation in foreign affairs and international development.)

No doubt other items could be added to

this list. But its main characteristic is that these issues no longer represent the idea of "aid" as flowing in one direction, from a rich to poor country within some postcolonial framework of institutionalised philanthropy, combined with an element of self-interest or historical guilt. Rather, this agenda occurs with a genuine framework of mutuality—these issues are shared issues, and sometimes interactive ones. Bangladesh, for example, has much contemporary experience in engaging with poverty and has much practice to share alongside innovative action-research around supporting poor people's entry directly into market opportunities, not just via employment. And as Bangladesh approaches the developing country status, any notion of "development" becomes replaced by a notion of "social policy," entailing revenue-funded public intervention derived from rights, not just over-narrow targeting. Both countries, therefore, need to explore together welfare regimes comprising notions of citizens' income, universal basic services, and a Polanyian "de-commodification" of labour. I have also interacted with sharp minds in Bangladesh around the idea of the smart economy, indeed the smart political economy.

There is a sense here in Bangladesh of creative excitement, hence leapfrogging in the list above. At the same time, the UK has institutional baggage to overcome from its own development past in terms of outmoded trading assumptions in a climate-sensitive world, and investment priorities/practices overinfluenced by comparative advantage thinking, which neglect "decent" work. Such baggage continues to fuel privileged "rents" via regional, class and gender inequalities both globally and within the UK. Bangladesh's future should not be to replicate that institutional baggage, while the UK with its new Labour government should now be trying to discard it. There is a rich partnership agenda. Let's embrace it.