The Daily Star
FOUNDER EDITOR: **LATE S. M. ALI**

Child stunting putting our future at risk

Govt must address children's nutritional deficiencies urgently

The implication of 24 percent of our children (aged five and under) being stunted due to chronic malnutrition and poor health during early childhood can only be described as devastating. It is a deep-seated handicap in the future of our most precious asset—the human resources. This sobering statistic has come from Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics'(BBS), with experts highlighting the role of poverty, poor nutrition, early pregnancy, and unhealthy practices for the situation to reach this alarming level.

The BBS survey shows that one in four children have been deprived of proper nutrition in the first three years of their life, which is a critical period for physical and brain development. It is predictable how this deprivation will affect the future of these children, increasing their vulnerability to respiratory conditions and diarrhoeal diseases, even leading to premature deaths. Poor nutrition was a factor in the recent deaths of hundreds of children afflicted with measles and measles-like symptoms. Malnutrition also hinders one's brain development, adversely affecting cognitive abilities, and hampering learning and educational attainment. A World Bank study found that stunted children often enrol in school later, repeat grades, and have lower education levels compared to their healthier peers. If this learning gap remains unaddressed, it will lead to lower skills and educational levels with corresponding low-paying employment later.

Thus, malnutrition continues the vicious cycle of poverty. Clearly, we cannot plan for a prosperous country when such a large proportion of the population is deprived of reaching their productive potential. Sadly, the root causes of malnutrition have not been addressed effectively over the decades. One of these causes is child marriage, which remains very high in Bangladesh and often leads to early pregnancy, increasing risks for both mothers and their babies. Most women in poor households do not get the recommended minimum of four checkups during pregnancy, resulting in complications such as low birth weight and maternal malnutrition going unchecked.

Government interventions, therefore, must start with preventing child marriage using the relevant law, providing incentives for girls to stay in school, and conducting awareness campaigns about the harms caused by child marriage. Authorities must also keep food prices low, and increase the scope of open market sales (OMS) and other programmes that provide poorer citizens with subsidised or free food rations. Improving nutrition also requires massive awareness building and educating people on what constitutes nutritious food. Programmes to teach rural women, often in charge of family meals, to grow kitchen gardens near their homes, and which foods are nutritious and which are not, can go a long way. School curricula should also feature lessons on nutrition from the earliest classes.

To address the critical issue of our children growing up stunted, a comprehensive, sustained, and well-coordinated effort involving the government, communities, schools, and families is essential. Bangladesh cannot aspire to achieve higher economic growth and development while so many of its children are being denied the opportunity to reach their full potential.

Don't let another waterway project fail

Govt must learn from past failures, make waterways a reliable transport option

Historically, the country's government, irrespective of whether they were political or non-political, has usually ended up wasting resources—both natural and tax-funded. This is quite evident in the case of introducing and operating waterway transport surrounding the capital. A recent report by *Prothom Alo* illustrates how, since the beginning of the millennium, there have been several failed attempts and at least Tk 122 crore lost in establishing waterways and passenger waterbuses on the rivers and canals in and around Dhaka. More than two decades later, the incumbent BNP government is reportedly considering the revival of the capital's waterways to curb pollution, improve drainage, increase navigability, and introduce waterbuses. But before these plans materialise, will the authorities stop to really learn from past failures?

Reportedly, between 2000 and 2005, Tk 36 crore was spent to build 10 landing stations, seven terminals, and other infrastructure along 29 km on the Ashulia-Sadarghat route. Two launches, dubbed "waterbuses," were also introduced in 2004, but their service ended shortly after. Between 2007 and 2010, the 40-km water route from Ashulia to Kanchpur Bridge via Tongi was developed with three landing stations and using Tk 47 crore, while an additional Tk 38 crore went towards purchasing waterbuses. Although the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) claims that the services of these several waterbuses along multiple key routes failed due to a shortage of passengers, commuters cite the service's lack of punctuality as what drove them away.

Efficient public transport is perhaps one of the most needed services in and around the capital. Therefore, it is obvious that the circular waterway project has largely failed due to a combination of poor planning and inadequate service quality. For instance, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority data shows that of the 25 road bridges and three railway bridges across the circular waterway, at least 20 are too low to facilitate the passage of waterbuses. Besides, in 2017, a BIWTC committee made several recommendations to rectify issues such as the Buriganga's pollution, terminal inaccessibility, and lack of walkways on banks, which were unheeded. The same issues still plague the system today.

As the government considers reviving these waterways and incorporating them into the capital's transportation network, it must plan for decades ahead instead of hastily implementing projects to tout as achievements in the next election. The people of this country are painfully familiar with grand plans and wastage of crores of taka, with nothing to show but dilapidated components. This must not be the case for the next Dhaka circular waterway plan.

A rosy narrative on school decentralisation is not helpful



Dr Manzoor Ahmed
is emeritus professor at BRAC University, chair at Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN), and adviser to Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE). Views expressed in the article are his own.

MANZOOR AHMED

The narrative of a success story about reaching near-universal enrolment and closing the gender gap in primary education in Bangladesh is quite justified, but the achievement itself is neither exceptional nor improbable, as is sometimes claimed. An acceleration in the enrolment of both girls and boys in low-income countries globally has been the larger picture since the onset of the "Education for All" movement in the 1990s. The disappointment is that this growth in numbers has not been matched by children acquiring the basic skills of reading, writing and counting. Bangladesh and most low-income countries are struggling to overcome this schooling-without-learning challenge. The term "learning poverty," indicating the proportion of children who cannot read a simple text in the national language, has sadly become a key descriptor of education systems in many countries.

Clearly, there is no magic potion that can remedy the persistent problem of schooling without learning or mitigate learning poverty. As I explained in a previous article published by this daily, a focus on student learning achievements has specific implications for teacher preparation and school management, as well as for system governance, public investment and accountability, and ensuring acceptable quality for all children. It also has implications for a common core curriculum and learning content for all children, as well as assessment systems that provide a credible picture of what children learn.

The management of primary and secondary school education in Bangladesh is among the most centralised in the world, given the size of its enrolment and number of institutions. All major aspects of running a government-funded school—curriculum and learning content, teaching personnel, school calendar and teaching hours, infrastructure and facilities, student evaluation, and financing and budgets—are strictly regulated by laws, rules and directives from the divisions of two education ministries and a plethora of other bodies at the central level. Little room is left for schools to plan and manage education activities, teaching personnel and school budgets in order to make schools adaptive and responsive to the needs and circumstances of children and families in each community. There is no such thing as area-based planning of school education with a headcount of all children in an upazila to ensure that all of them are adequately served.

Yes, rhetorical support for greater authority and responsibility at the school and community level has been expressed in policy statements such as the National Education Policy 2010. This aspect of the policy has never been translated into operational measures, however. This is part of a larger picture of the state of politics and governance in Bangladesh. The ruling oligarchy comprising the political class, the business class, and the higher civil and military bureaucracy finds the highly unitary and centralised governance structure advantageous for itself. Article 59 of the Constitution of Bangladesh provides for local government bodies composed of elected representatives to carry out functions related to public order, public services and economic development. But this article is being continuously violated with the tacit consent of all major political parties.

In response to demands for decentralised school management, a small flat grant of Tk 20,000 per school per year was approved in 2009 to allow schools to buy learning materials and stationery while covering minor repairs and maintenance. No such fund was available to schools at that time. The grant was gradually increased under the Third Primary Education Development Program (PEDP3) and the PEDP4 to an amount of Tk 50,000-Tk 70,000, depending on the size of the school. This was called SLIP (or School Level Improvement Plan). The decision-makers, however, seemed to have overlooked the irony that a "slip" can also mean a careless or accidental mistake.

If SLIP was meant to be an initiative to change the historic practice and culture of top-down decisions regarding teaching-learning, teacher management, school maintenance, and student assessment, and to shift authority and decision-making down to the school level, its design and implementation were not up to the task.

Moreover, even after the increase in the per-school annual grant to Tk 50,000 to Tk 70,000, the SLIP grant amounts to one to two percent of the total government spending for a school. According to the primary and mass education ministry's Annual Sector Performance Report (ASPR) 2024, the total government expenditure per primary school student was Tk 17,613 in FY2023-24. The annual SLIP grant for an average government primary school enrolling 200-250 students translates to Tk 200 to Tk 300 per student. Up to 99 percent of public primary education spending is controlled centrally—mainly for teacher salaries, infrastructure, textbook distribution and administrative overhead—about which schools have no say.

Even the tiny amount available at schools is subject to detailed rules and restrictions, with many layers of control from the upazila education office to the central ministry level for approval of spending proposals and the actual transfer of funds. The grant, paid as reimbursement after the school provides documentation for spending the money according to an approved plan, has added to delays, red tape and scope for corruption. The most recent 2023 guideline for the SLIP grant is a 24-page, closely printed document detailing the procedures and formalities to be followed by the school. Thus, SLIP may be described as a highly centralised project to promote decentralisation.

By equating the transfer of a tiny fraction of school financing to schools (under various restrictions, no less) with greater authority and responsibility at the school and community level, SLIP limits and distorts the concept of decentralisation. One cannot help but wonder whether there is a lack of understanding of decentralised education governance among policymakers, or whether there is deliberate resistance to meaningful decentralisation.

The fifth phase of the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP5) is supposed to have begun in July this year. SLIP is again being seen as the mechanism for providing schools with expanded autonomy, shifting the emphasis from basic physical maintenance towards interventions directly linked to improving student learning, foundational literacy and numeracy, and climate-resilient school environments. A SLIP effectiveness study commissioned by the Directorate of Primary Education and Unicef was undertaken by the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC). A policy brief based on the study ambiguously concludes that SLIP has "not failed" but it has "drastically underperformed its own design potential." The single largest reason for the drastic underperformance is seen to be the fact that "SLIP still operates on a reimbursement basis." *("Why Bangladesh's schools need financial autonomy," The Daily Star, August 1, 2026).*

It is disappointing that the PPRC policy brief based on the SLIP effectiveness study argues that an administrative detail—reimbursement versus advance payment—can determine whether decentralisation reforms succeed or fail. The brief further states, "As Bangladesh mulls the launch of PEDP5, more than any grand design... shifting from a reimbursement principle to one of advance payment is what now stands between Bangladesh's primary schools and the learning outcomes its enrolment statistics have long promised but not yet delivered." It thus reduces the concept of decentralisation of education governance and school management to a minor technical fix regarding the transfer of a small amount of funding to schools.

The effectiveness study itself implies that decentralised school management is much more than transferring a small amount of funding to schools and that SLIP's scope and procedures do not match its objectives. Given the current circumstances, what Bangladesh needs is not merely a better mechanism for administering SLIP, but a genuine rethinking of how primary education is governed and managed to improve learning outcomes. Meaningful decentralisation would give schools and communities real authority, resources and responsibility needed to respond to local needs, but within a framework that safeguards common standards and equity.



VISUAL: **ANWAR SOHEL**

We must restore parliament's oversight role



Muhtasim M. Musanna
is a student in the Department of Public Administration at Dhaka University.

MUHTASIM M. MUSANNA

The question of accountability and transparency in state institutions often arise when Bangladesh faces a major public controversy. But this question almost always remains without a meaningful answer. The lack of accountability is often caused by the weakness in the institutions that are supposed to ensure it. And some of the most consistently overlooked institutions for this task are the parliamentary standing committees.

The need for parliamentary standing committees is recognised in the Constitution of Bangladesh. Article 76 provides for the establishment of such committees, including those for individual ministries. It also empowers parliament to determine the composition and functions of these committees through the Rules of Procedure. The vision for this is straightforward: the parliamentary standing committees will continuously oversee how the executive branch of the government—the ministries and other officials—perform and implement policies.

Parliamentary oversight is considered a bedrock of democracy, and we often see it in practice. In the US, for instance, the Congressional committee hearings have compelled many influential figures to answer for their actions. We have seen Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg testify before the Senate on issues ranging from data privacy to misinformation spread. FBI directors often appear before the committees to answer questions on surveillance, investigations, and national security. In the UK, it is routine for Parliamentary Select Committees to question ministers about their handling of government policies and affairs. These hearings demonstrate a simple democratic principle: in a functional democracy, no public institution, official or corporation is beyond scrutiny.

The parliamentary standing committees in Bangladesh are designed for this function. Their tasks include reviewing proposed legislation before it reaches the floor of the House, examining the performance of ministries, scrutinising public expenses, and inviting officials and ministers to justify their actions. The hearings can take place behind closed doors if it's related to national security, or in a public setting, if appropriate. Furthermore, the standing committees have investigative authority to look into irregularities across sectors.

However, the reality is different. Parliamentary committees rarely exercise their independence and authority to ensure accountability in the public sector. The executive branch's influence over the legislature is a key reason that limits the committees' willingness to scrutinise ministries. In most cases, the committees are dominated by ruling party lawmakers, and those members often prioritise party loyalty over accountability, as a 2015 TIB report found. Also, the committees don't meet regularly, and there is poor coordination, limited technical support, and low public awareness.

A strong oversight mechanism is vital when governments exercise significant executive power. Decisions on issues such as public procurement, surveillance, digital governance, and the delivery of public services that affect the citizens should be questioned by effective parliamentary committees, which can review administrative actions and provide recommendations, and further improve accountability, transparency, and public trust in governance.

To this end, the country doesn't need any constitutional reform; Article 76 already outlines the framework of these committees. What is needed is to allow them to function independently and equip them with adequate resources so they can perform their oversight role effectively.

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