

54

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The World Bank And Non-Formal Adult Education

Education is always a primary concern for there is always a question of how to obtain a suitable job. With most of the adult population lacking in skills, there is a chronic need for more adult education centres and non-formal types of schools where adolescents and young adults can either learn anew or make a fresh start. In the light of this need, the news that the World Bank is providing a credit of 10.5 million US dollar credit for a non-formal education project in Bangladesh to provide literacy to some 2.5 million illiterate adults, is more than welcome.

The credit from the Bank's concessionary lending arm, the International Development Association (IDA), is meant to aid the government in its efforts to raise the rate of literacy among people, particularly those in the 15-24 age group. That the government has recognised the limitations of the formal system in addressing this problem is somewhat comforting for most people hold the impression that, although there have been efforts to expand access to primary schooling, the government is not doing enough in the field of adult education, despite the ambitious targets set to raise the literacy rate from the present 33 per cent to 62 per cent by the year 2000.

But, with the persistence of the low rates of literacy right across the country, there is little choice but to opt for a non-formal action programme. The illiterate population in Bangladesh is now said to be around 40 million. This obviously poses a serious constraint on the government's efforts to curb the population growth rate and increase labour productivity. Something positive has to be done, and done on a priority basis.

Granting that in 1994 gross primary enrollments had reached almost 100 per cent, it is also true that less than half of those enrolled failed to complete the five year course and many who did make it took far longer than five years. In fact, even of those who had completed their primary schooling, less than half achieved a sustainable level of literacy which means that, within the shortest time, most had forgotten much of what they had learned in school, indicating the need for continued schooling.

While literacy is of course a problem for all age groups, it is particularly serious for the adolescent group and young adults, which is where the World Bank comes in, for its present programme is aimed at this most vulnerable group by providing opportunities for non-formal schooling. As this is a "new entry" field for the World Bank, ninety per cent of this credit will go towards financing NGOs in Bangladesh involved in non-formal education of the type meant for this particular age group.

As there are already more than 200 NGOs in this field who, between them, are delivering 75 per cent of the country's literacy and non-formal education programmes, it is logical for the World Bank to begin its programme through them, allowing them to continue the good work they have already begun. This project is, therefore, expected to bolster their efforts by allowing them to continue to be the primary providers of services. This they plan to do by involving them in programme development, delivery process, as well as the pilot programmes that demonstrate the alternative methods of non-formal education systems.

The World Bank and the Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) as the lead agency, hope to be able to help in the realisation of the goals of this country for eradicating illiteracy from the land, but there are other objectives too, like strengthening the country's institutional capacity to deliver programmes through NGOs and district administrations, and to help the government establish a non-formal education system that can successfully deliver large-scale literacy programmes at costs that are affordable.

As expected, the beneficiaries will come from the 30 districts with lowest rates of literacy rates which are, by definition, also the poorest. At least half the beneficiaries will be women, therefore it is hoped to incorporate programmes that include basic literacy, numeracy and life skills which include nutrition, hygiene, family planning, civic rights etc. and income generating programmes which, it is hoped, will bring substantial benefits in terms of increased economic productivity, better health — and schooling — for families and, of primary importance to the World Bank, lower fertility rates. Whatever the reasons, the move is welcome for the need is for more investment in these areas.

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