

Education For All: National Plan Of Action

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IT is extremely important to be absolutely clear about what we mean by 'education for all' as the same concept may have different connotations to different sets of people, at different locations and at different points of time within the same location.'

The broadly accepted definitions of the relevant concepts are as follows:

Education for all refers to the provision of basic education for children, youths and adults.

Basic education refers to education intended to meet basic learning needs which refer to the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values necessary for people to survive, to improve the quality of their lives and to continue learning. It encompasses early childhood and primary education (first level instruction) to children usually in the 6-11 age group; secondary education in some countries; and education in literacy, general knowledge and life skills for youth and adults. Literacy refers to the ability to read and write with comprehension as well as to make simple arithmetical calculations (numeracy).

It is clearly evident from the above discussion that while there may be broad agreement regarding the concept of basic education in terms of basic learning needs, on-formal delivery mechanisms i.e. whether the needs can be fully met by starting education at the primary level only, there seems to be some disagreement as some countries are moved to operate an extended formal delivery mechanism of basic education encompassing secondary education as well. The situation becomes further complicated when we see wide divergence between countries in setting standards with respect to entry level age of their labour force who before joining the labour force are normally expected to acquire certain basic education. If the entry level age is set at 14, a norm widely practised all over the world, the content and scope of formal basic education usually has to be more than primary education.

Offering education for all, therefore, implies going beyond universal primary education. Educationists in Bangladesh had always been absolutely clear on this issue. Back in the First National Education Commission of Bangladesh emphasised recommended universal eight years basic education (Report of the Bangladesh Education Commission, 1974, p. 24), which was duly adopted by the subsequent National Commission of 1988 (Report of the Bangladesh National Commission, Feb. 1988,

p-5). Thus in terms of conception, 'Education for all' in Bangladesh connotes exactly the same as in most other countries i.e. provision of basic education to all children (aged 6-14 undergoing 8-year formal schooling), youths and adults.'

However, given the current status of education in 'Education for all in Bangladesh by the year 2000' would essentially imply achieving an intermediate target of universal primary education for all children (aged 6-11) and education in literacy, general knowledge and life skills for all adolescents (aged 11-14), youths and adults.

Current Status

An objective review of current status which is a prerequisite for formulation of the National Plan of Action is greatly hampered by woeful inadequacy of available data. Piecing together information from various sources, often of questionable reliability, we may however draw the following picture:

* Despite the fact that adult literacy rate in Bangladesh increased from 25.8% in 1974 to 29.2% in 1981, it is one of the lowest in the world.

* Enrollment rates in Bangladesh both at primary and secondary levels indicate that they are considerably lower, compared not only to developed countries, even by South Asian standards. Primary enrollment in Bangladesh in 1986 was 60% (69% for males and 50% for females) compared to 84% the South Asian average (98% for males and 69% for females). In 1987, the enrollment rate, registering a slight increase moved to 61% (71.5% for males and 49.8% for females). Secondary enrollment rate in Bangladesh in 1986 was only 18% (24% for males and 11% for females) compared to the South Asian average of 32% (41% for males and 22% for females). Only in case of enrollment at higher education that Bangladesh could equal the South Asian average.

* Another feature worth noting is that compared to certain other countries of the world, even of the region, say Nepal, Bangladesh's performance in the primary education sector has been rather poor. Nepal's primary enrollment rate increased from 20% in 1965 to 79% in 1986, while over the same period, Bangladesh's primary enrollment rate increased from 49% to 60% only.

* Wastage rates at all levels of education are very high in Bangladesh. In 1987, drop-out rate at primary education was as high as 66%. Failure rate at the secondary level is usually higher than 50%.

* Educational composition of the

labour force in Bangladesh indicates that in 1981, 62.4% had absolutely no education, 15.9% had complete secondary schooling and only 1.5% had higher education. The mean years of schooling was only 2.4.

* An overview of planned development in the primary education sector over 1973-1987 hardly indicates any significant improvement. Enrollment ratio marginally increased from 58% in 1973 to 61% in 1987 primarily due to increased enrollment of girls. Both the enrollment ratio for boys and the drop out rate seem to have deteriorated over 1973-1987. 1

* Most disconcerting of all, quality of education is far from satisfactory. The curriculum has little relevance to the needs of the economy. As a result the education sector could hardly contribute to the growth of the economy by appropriate skill formation in its labour force, which in its turn could have helped in raising their level of productivity. This also accounts for the lack of adequate demand for education from the relatively poorer sections of the people for whom education has considerable opportunity cost and they can be drawn to educational programmes only through real life demonstration of tangible benefits of education.

Due Emphasis

The above scenario of the basic education sector in Bangladesh can hardly be termed satisfactory. In all the previous plans due emphasis was laid on primary education, reasonably adequate financial resources were allocated, particularly during the eighties after the introduction of the Universal Primary Education Project in 1980. During the second plan 46.9% of total allocation to the education sector went to primary education.

The share of realised expenditure (41.4%) also did not indicate substantial shortfall as during the First Five-Year Plan period (realised expenditure in primary education turned out to be only 42.62% of a paltry allocation of only 18% of the total allocation to education sector). During the Third Plan also substantial resources (46% of total allocation to education sector) were allocated to primary education and realised expenditure over the last few years, has been considerable. But achievement in terms of raising the enrollment rate has been highly disappointing primarily due to pursuance of an essentially faulty strategy.

Ensuring access to schools must form the pivot of any strategy for universal primary education.

Although over 1980-88 the number of primary school age children increased by 23,74,000, the number of schools increased by 269 only (from 43,936 in 1980 to 44,200 in 1985 and 44,205 in 1988). Thus between 1985-88, the number of primary schools increased by only 5. A recent paper

of the MOE however shows that there exists at present 44,681 primary schools (MOE, Bangladesh country paper, SAARC Technical Committee Meeting, Dhaka, August 6-8, 1989). In order to bring to the fold of primary education larger number of children not yet covered by the existing network and also to make provision for additions to primary school age population, a sizable number of new schools needed to be constructed besides making fuller utilization of the existing facilities or in other words, there was considerable need for expanding the primary school net work to underserved areas but given the extremely small number of schools being constructed during the eighties, it becomes quite apparent that the most important aspect of ensuring access was grossly neglected in the plan strategies which concentrated primarily on nationalization and development of the existing net work or in other words, burdening the public sector with responsibilities which had traditionally been shouldered by the private sector.

Construction of toilets and sinking of tubewells in schools and provision of free school dresses to female students no doubt helped in raising female enrollment rate; and provision of free textbooks to all primary school students and strengthening of training to teachers definitely made positive contribution to improve quality of education but a lot more needs to be done for effective and regular functioning of the primary schools through greater involvement of the local community in their management. Another crucially neglected area in all plan strategies had been the pre-primary education strengthening of which would significantly contribute to reducing the wastage rate through drop outs.

Though not properly planned, adult literacy programme got a major thrust during the Second Plan but after it gained certain momentum it was abruptly discontinued in 1982 and the programme at a modest scale has been revived in 1987-88 with the objective of raising literacy level to 60% by the year 2000—an ambitious target inadequately matched by current programmes of direct government participation and through provision of subventions to a limited number of NGOs.

(To be continued.)