

The Urban-Rural Gap In Education

At the inauguration of a three-day conference on "Governance in Education: Accountability and Effectiveness" held in the capital recently, the Chief Adviser said the urban rural divide in primary and secondary education has created divisions in society and that the phenomenon is a serious problem that has intensified over the past decades.

Needless to say education is a principal precondition for human resource development but with the concentration of good educational institutions disproportionately higher in cities than villages, it is clear that the overall quality of education is far higher in the urban areas. Such an arrangement however, causes divisions in society and affords urbanites undesirable privileges over rural people vis-à-vis not only education but also opportunities for employment. This urban-rural gap in education translates out as domination by urbanites in the decision- and policy-making process. Until and unless the development policy is tuned to the needs of the rural populace, this gap will widen.

But education is a human right, but more than that it is an essential element in sustainable development and the reduction of poverty. It is the lack of education that prevents people from realising their potential both as individuals and as productive members of society. But the education system in Bangladesh is a story of two worlds. Children from poor families cannot compete with children of rich families, even when urban based because the rich families can afford private coaching.

Developing skills is however, an economic necessity which it would now seem our early policy makers failed to appreciate. The question is have we waited too long to appreciate this fundamental because today we have a population that is more of a handicap than an asset. If the elimination of illiteracy is worth the sacrifice, how do we get around constraints like the rural-urban gap and the chronic shortage of funds? Worker productivity, life expectancy, income per capita show a strong correlation with increased literacy levels. When we know the greatest resource of a country is the educational level and technical skills of its workforce, why are we still lagging behind?

The greatest challenge Bangladesh faces is how to bridge the knowledge gap between it and the developed nations because, though technology has brought revolutionary changes into our lives, it does have a downside as it has divided the nation into two parts. It is these revolutionarily technological changes that keep some people ahead while others lag behind but those who cannot keep pace will suffer. No matter how beneficial, technology is also creating socio-economic discrimination between people and only those who can utilise these technological privileges can improve their well-being.

If it is only by making human capital technologically literate that we can become an emerging economic power, we are falling short despite the numerous efforts and incentives of various governments. But despite the six education commissions formed to deal with the problem of education the result is that the education system is still in limbo and we need to bridge the gaps as soon as possible starting with the primary section and working our way up.

If we are to lay the foundation for future excellence we must first motivate the teachers because if we do not, the aim of primary education will be lost. Already troubled by a high number of dropouts and a slide back into illiteracy, the country cannot afford to pussy-foot