

Is government primary education really free?

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Governance and Development

The parents of almost half the government primary school children need to pay bribes to get "free schooling" in rural Bangladesh, an expert said during a public lecture yesterday.

The paper states that if the total household income goes up 1 percent, the propensity of paying a bribe for schooling goes down by 1.06 percent.

"The brunt of the bribe is borne hugely by the poor," said M Shahe Emran, a researcher at Initiative for Policy, Columbia University, USA, in the lecture, "Admission is Free Only if Your Dad is Rich: Distributional Effects of Corruption in Schools in Developing Countries".

The average monthly income of a bribe-payer is as low as Tk 1,930, and a household ends up paying an average of Tk 241 in bribes per year, it revealed.

Bribes need to be paid for getting all types of educational facilities--for admission, for getting free books, for getting stipends or even for collecting scholarship money.

"The poor can spend up to 61 percent of their savings on paying bribes for [primary] education," said Shahe Emran, presenting the paper at Brac University in the capital.

The lecture was based on a survey conducted among 3,760 households in rural Bangladesh in 2010, and was organised by the Brac Institute of

While policy makers are encouraging investment in education theorising that it will reduce inequality, it is in fact increasing inequality in the short term, said speakers.

"Corruption is at the root of it," said Emran. The rich are usually well-connected, and

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

Is government primary

FROM PAGE 5

thus school authorities dare not ask for bribes from them, said Atonu Rabbani, an economics professor of Dhaka University.

The speakers observed that the situation got even worse by the need of private tutoring by the teachers after school hours.

Talking to The Daily Star by phone, Primary and Mass Education Secretary Quazi Akhtar Hossain said the information of bribing was new to him.

"Schooling is supposed to be free. In fact, we have to go around and persuade people to send their children to school--how is it possible that they have to pay bribes?" he wondered.