

Education budget needs to be substantively increased

THE call of the education minister, Nurul Islam Nahid, on Tuesday for substantive increase in budgetary allocation for education couldn't have come at a better time as it did at a time when the finance minister is in pre-budget discussions with different sections of society. According to a report published in New Age on Wednesday, Nahid lamented that only 12 per cent of the total outlay for the education sector, that too for three ministries, cannot ensure the enhancement of the quality of education, which, he said, is a must for human resources development. The education minister referred to the UNESCO declaration that the allocation for the education sector should be at least 20 per cent of the national budget and 6 per cent of the gross domestic product, and pointed out that Senegal and Kenya allocate 40 and 31 per cent respectively of their national budgets for education.

Incidentally, the finance minister, Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, on Tuesday indicated at a pre-budget discussion that he would propose a budget of Tk 1.89 trillion for the next fiscal year, up from nearly Tk 1.64 trillion in the previous financial year. If the recent past is any indicator, education is likely to top sector-wise allocation. However, recent trends also suggest that there could be a further scaling down of education in terms of percentage. The allocation for education, including subsidies and pensions was 12.4 per cent of the total outlay in 2011-12, down from 13.51 per cent in 2010-11 and 18 per cent in 2009-10. Factoring in inflation, which, as Muhith himself admitted, according to a report front-paged in New Age on Wednesday, was hovering above the double-digit mark in the first eight months of the current financial year, a downsizing even by a small margin would translate into a significant cut in allocation for education.

Indeed, for a country with limited resources, Bangladesh may not be in a position to drastically increase education budget overnight. However, the incumbents need to realise that spending in education is actually investment, which is how it is deemed in the more economically developed countries. Unfortunately, successive governments seem to have ignored the simple fact and gradually decreased allocation for education. Moreover, a lion's share of the current education budget is spent on teachers' salaries, infrastructural costs, etc. Very little of the allocation actually goes into quality development. Most importantly, given the city-centricity of the policymakers, the limited allocation for quality development gets channelled to urban educational institutions by and large, further widening the urban-rural divide in education.

Little wonder then that educationists at a pre-budget discussion in the capital Dhaka on Tuesday decried discrimination in budgetary allocations that were creating disparity between rural and urban students. According to a report published in New Age on Wednesday, they said city schools, especially those in Dhaka, get more allocations than those in the rural areas, which eventually result in fewer facilities for rural school-goers and thus higher dropout rates. Suffice it to say, for wholesome development of the nation, education needs to be spread across the country both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

To this end, along with an attitudinal change of the incumbents, more allocation is needed for the education sector. Hence, the government needs to pay heed to the call, by the education minister and the educationists, and effect substantive increase in education budget.