



## Literacy in Bangladesh: Reading between the lines

SARAH COOKE

**W**HAT happens when someone is not able to read and write? They are not reading this newspaper for sure, but what else are they not doing? They are not running a business, nor helping children with their studies. The recently published 2011 Bangladesh National Literacy Assessment Survey reported that 38% of Bangladeshi people cannot read or write, over one in three, despite much welcome progress.

Yet the potential of such people to run a business, contribute to a company's success or nurture and teach children is as good as any of us reading this article, if they are offered the opportunity to learn. Consider the story of Fatima, a 19-year-old girl from Gazipur. Fatima was married at 13, was asked to stop going to school and at 16 gave birth to a boy. Her marriage did not last. After enrolling at a Brac Adolescent Development Club, however, she has not only brushed up how to read, write and count but also learnt how to run a small business. With a small loan she is now planning to open a beauty salon for women in her slum.

UK aid supports a range of activities in Bangladesh, providing literacy, numeracy and other life skills to children and young people as part of the primary education development programme and in partnership with Brac and other organisations.

Since 2010 Bangladesh has enrolled over three million children in primary schools through the primary education programme. This means that about 98% of school-age children attend school -- boys and girls. The programme also provides over 100 million copies of textbooks to primary schools. Right now a new set of teacher training books is under trial, which experts believe will help teachers improve the quality of classroom teaching. Bangladesh deserves credit for and should celebrate these successes. The UK is proud to be playing its part.

Now, the 38% figure I mentioned at the outset needs further analysis. As much as it tells a story, it also hides one. There is a stark variation in literacy rates between men and women, between rural and urban areas, and regionally. This needs immediate attention. In rural areas the gap between men's and women's literacy can be as much as 12 percentage points. Disparities between rural and urban areas are even greater.

The 2010 National Education Policy clearly states Bangladesh's intention to provide all citizens with a quality

education. The policy also aims to reduce regional and gender based disparities in education and has a section on women's education. Bangladesh, like other modern countries, wants to educate all women, to unleash their potential so that they can become confident citizens contributing to social and economic development. The draft Education Act, which is under consultation, asks for further investment in education in order to fulfil Bangladesh's constitutional obligation to create a nation free of illiteracy.

Successive Bangladesh governments have rightly prioritised education. The stipend programme for example, especially the one for girls at secondary and higher levels, has contributed hugely to encouraging girls to start and continue education -- a similar instrument might provide a way to further reduce regional and gender disparities. Of course actual education expenditure in Bangladesh has increased from Tk. 120 billion in 2006 to Tk. 192 billion in 2012. It is important that this continues, both domestically and to keep up with international competitors. Bangladesh spends 2.3% of GDP on education against an international average of 3.5% of GDP.

A combination of policy, donor funding, efficient aid instruments and NGO-led innovations have contributed to some good results in Bangladesh. I mentioned Brac earlier. Pre-primary education is another such example of NGO innovation in Bangladesh delivered on a larger scale through the government-led primary education development programme. The Underprivileged Children's Education Programme (UCEP), also supported by UK aid, provides essential vocational skills and employment services to young people in urban slums. In urban slums and remote areas like the chars of the Jamuna and haor areas of Sunamganj, NGOs provide much needed support to schools, teachers and communities, in addition to the services provided by the government. The government can help Bangladesh's vibrant civil society and NGOs as they try to reach children who miss out on official schooling.

Over the last two decades the UK government has been a committed partner in Bangladesh's journey towards a literate and just society. We will continue to support the ambition, and constitutional obligation, to bring the opportunity of education to every Bangladeshi.

The writer is Country Representative for DFID Bangladesh.