

Bangladesh EFA 2015 National Review: A Summary

Abstract

At the invitation of UNESCO to assess critically EFA progress and challenges, the Bangladesh EFA 2015 review has been undertaken. With the lead given by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME), a team consisting of Manzoor Ahmed (Lead Writer), Romij Ahmed, Mahmuda Akhter, Zoglul Haider, Altaf Hossain, Mehedi Hasan, Ziaus Sabur, and Somnath Saha has been engaged in preparing the Bangladesh EFA 2015 Review Report. The review is intended to be a contribution to the discourse on progress towards EFA 2015 goals and to the formulation of the post-2015 Education for All and the broader Sustainable Development Agenda through public dialogue. Considering the relevance and significance of the review, in order to make it easily accessible to the education community, a summary is presented here. The full report is available at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002305/230507e.pdf>

Key words: The Bangladesh Education For All (EFA) 2015 review was led by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) and carried out in consultation with key stakeholders including civil society.

Bangladesh Country Context

Participation in education has expanded remarkably in Bangladesh since the 1990s. Close to universal initial enrolment in primary has been achieved. Gender equality in enrolment at the primary and secondary levels is another accomplishment of the last two decades. Literacy rate among the 15+ adult population was estimated to be 59.8 percent in 2010 (BBS Literacy Assessment 2010)

In 2009 the democratically elected government received a strong mandate for political and economic change. A new education policy, adopted in 2010, appropriate for the time and the envisaged future, was a pledge of the government. The Sixth Five-Year National Development Plan (2011-16) and a perspective plan for ten years up to 2021 were formulated to begin implementation of the vision for development. A National Skill Development Policy was adopted in 2011 recognising the importance of skills and capacity building related to employment and livelihood in fighting poverty. These different articulations of policies and priorities called for looking critically at what have been achieved and what may be foreseen in education and human development

Tracking the Goals

Progress at-a-glance indicates successes and challenges in the run-up to 2015 and beyond.

Goal 1 - ECCE:

Under the second Primary Education Development Program– PEDP II (2004-11) and PEDP III (2011-16), one year of pre-primary education prior to school entry has been supported with every GPS having a pre-primary class. About 50 percent of pre-school children were estimated to be receiving some form of pre-primary education in 2012. DPE reported this proportion to be reaching 67 percent in 2013. (DPE/ASPR, 2014) An operational framework and GO-NGO collaboration guidelines have been developed to promote pre-primary education with common quality standards. A Comprehensive ECD Policy was adopted in 2013.

Goal 2 - UPE:

Remarkable progress has been recorded in enrolment reaching 97 percent by 2013. Progress also has been made in reducing dropout and improving completion. However, over one-fifth of students do not complete the five year primary cycle due to dropout and grade repetition.

Goal 3 - Youth and adult learning needs:

Less than half of children aged 11-15 years are enrolled in school. High dropout at the secondary level results in less than a third of the age group completing the secondary school certificate (10 years of schooling). Only around 11 percent of out-of-school youth participate in formal or non-formal work-related training, with informal apprenticeship counting for more than half. The Education Policy 2010 proposes raising compulsory primary education to grade 8 by 2018 and expanding vocational/technical training.

Goal 4 - Adult Literacy:

Adult literacy rate reached 59.8% in 2010 (2010 Literacy Survey). A recently approved literacy project (February 2014) will be the first major adult literacy project since 2003 and is expected to serve 4.5 million young adults in 3 years.

Goal 5 - Gender parity and equality in education:

Bangladesh has overcome gender disparity in access to primary and secondary education over the last two decades. Female enrolment and completion rates in fact surpass males, raising a concern about disadvantage of adolescent boys who may be drawn into child labour to support their families. The gender gap in adult literacy and in vocational-technical education and training, though improving, still persists.

Goal 6 - Quality of education:

Education quality is a continuing concern, especially in respect of achievement of essential competencies by learners. Pupil-teacher ratio remains short of the interim target of 40:1. Moreover, 80 percent of the schools run double shifts with learning time in a school year is about half of the international average of a thousand hours. These factors combine to limit

effective contact hours. Efforts are continuing to establish competency-based assessment of learning and improve the skills and professionalism of teachers.

This summation indicates challenges in ensuring better learning outcomes. It is not merely a matter of accelerating current efforts and plans up to 2015. Substantial rethinking is required regarding priorities for action in the immediate future and beyond 2015. Review and assessment in current programmes, such as PEDP III, implementation of skill development strategies, and designing actions regarding the comprehensive ECD policy offer new opportunities.

Emerging Issues

Progress and constraints related to the six goals indicate continuing issues in respect of:

- i) Consensus-building on how the state's role and responsibility for fulfilling the right to basic education of citizens should be exercised;
- ii) Moving the sub-sectors of primary (including pre-primary) and secondary education, which constitute the foundation of the national education system, away from a pattern of low investment and low performance;
- iii) Developing and implementing workable strategies for literacy, lifelong learning and building skills and capabilities of people related to work, citizenship and personal fulfilment; and
- iv) Promoting effective governance and management in education - establishing ownership, continuity and consensus-building in policy, strategy and priority.

Promising Initiatives

The large majority of children in Bangladesh do enrol in basic education and there have been improvements in completion of five-year primary education and progress in respect of indicators of efficiency and effectiveness of the system.

The positive outcomes are the results of a combination of policy measures and programme actions aimed at expanding educational opportunities, reaching out to disadvantaged groups, raising awareness and removing gender-related and other barriers to participation in education. A few of the salient policy and programme measures which have contributed to the positive results, are noted in the review, as listed below.

- A sub-sector-wide programme approach for primary education pursued since 2004.
- Conditional cash transfer to children from poor families in primary education and for rural girls in secondary education
- Distribution of free textbooks
- Use of ICT in education

- The pre-primary education initiative
- The School-level Improvement Plan (SLIP) Initiative
- Co-curricular activities – sports and student councils in primary school
- School feeding and school meal piloting

Some Key Lessons

The discussion on the six EFA goals indicating progress and constraints as well as other recent analyses suggest a few key general policy and operational lessons. These lessons, among others, which merit special attention, relate to coping with economic and poverty effect on school participation, late enrolment of children, area-based planning and management of education access and participation, and disadvantages of children in urban slums. The priorities in the immediate future and the post-2015 agenda have to take these into account.

Discourse on Post-2015 development and Vision for Education

Bangladesh's Planning Commission led preparation of a post-2015 development agenda for presentation to the UN. The 13-point agenda included an overall goal to "Secure economic growth that is inclusive, reduces poverty and inequality, creates sufficient numbers of decent jobs and is environmentally sustainable" (Goal 1) as well as other sectoral goals including a broad goal for quality, equity and expansion of education.

Considering progress of Bangladesh in achieving the second millennium development goal on primary education and challenges the country still faced in basic education, proposals have emerged from the civil society dialogues organised by CAMPE and the People's Forum for MDG.

Goals and indicators for early childhood, universal basic education up to age 14, post-primary and adult and lifelong learning have been proposed in the course of PFM and CAMPE discussion. Indicators were proposed for "desirable goals," and "minimum goals."

Conclusions and Way Forward

A policy emphasis on expanding enrolment since 1990 has created a formal system in primary education which now serves about 19 million students. During the same period, the number of young people who completed the primary cycle each year doubled and the participation of girls increased to the point where more girls than boys now enrol and complete formal primary school. An estimated 1.5 million learners participate in non-formal primary and basic education. Learning outcomes and completion rates, however, have not kept pace with advances in participation and gender parity in spite of investments in infrastructure and improvements including in teacher training, curriculum revision, textbooks provision, materials supply and other quality inputs. Based on this review and drawing on various recent analyses, ten priority actions areas have been identified.

- i) Responding to household poverty: The relationships found between non-participation in education and socio-economic variables including food security status, household income and parents' education raise questions about relative importance of demand and supply-side constraints. Available public resources for education can be better used, and a relatively higher priority is justified, in providing essential quality-enhancing inputs including school meal, measures to transform teaching-learning in classrooms, and improving quality in pre-primary education which directly impact learning results for children from poor and disadvantaged groups.
- ii) Trial of upazila (sub-district)-based universal primary and pre-primary education planning and management: A systematic trial can be designed involving local government and all service providers in selected upazilas as a key feature of the national education development strategy. This approach can help address the disadvantages originating from poverty, geography, ethnicity and special needs of children.
- iii) Greater authority with accountability at school level: Along with area-based coordination and planning, it is necessary to move with a greater sense of urgency and seriousness towards greater authority and responsibility at the institutional level for organizing teaching-learning, managing personnel, giving due attention to underperforming children and their specific difficulties, and using financial resources better. Skills and leadership of the head teacher and school management committee would be critical in this respect.
- iv) Literacy and non-formal education in a lifelong learning perspective: Literacy and non-formal education need to be conceptualised as integral components of widely available lifelong learning opportunities. A nationwide network of learning centres under local government auspices with active involvement of NGOs and community organisations can be the vehicle for lifelong learning, focusing on life skills and livelihood skills, complementing formal education.
- v) Addressing silent exclusion: This problem needs to be probed further in order to analyse the different types and reasons for silent exclusion – children nominally enrolled but not engaged in learning.
- vi) Priority to urban poor children: Expanding education services for the urban poor with special financial allocations to compensate for serious disparities in provisions and quality of services would be essential to maintain high level of enrolment and participation to reach the UPE goal.
- vii) ICT for enrichment of teaching and learning: Information technology should be included as a core competency to be developed through primary and secondary education, but also used as a means of teacher development and support and source of supplementary learning materials made widely available to teachers and learners.

- viii) A major increase in public expenditure for education: Given the low GDP share for education in Bangladesh, including the low per child allocation for primary and pre-primary education, which is inconsistent with the goal of education with quality and equity, ways have to be found within a time frame to increase public resources for education in a major way. The current situation, in particular the low per child allocation for primary and PPE, is inconsistent with the goal of education with quality and equity,
- ix) Birth registration: Incomplete application of birth registration is a source of confusing statistics regarding gross and net enrolment and other basic indicators. Completion and dropout data necessary for proper planning and management of the system need to be improved.
- x) Attention to regional and international cooperation: South Asia's common concerns and circumstances, in contrast to East and South-East Asia, for example, suggest opportunities and needs in sub-regional collaboration and exchange. There can be different areas and modalities of cooperation including the use of SAARC as the platform for pushing common agenda. Two areas stand out: a) inter-governmental as well as civil society cooperation to promote exchanges among national NGOs and academic and research institutions in the region in respect of common concerns; b) developing a common South Asia position on the post-2015 education agenda.

Progress and challenges summarised indicate the need to pursue current strategies and plans along with substantial rethinking of priorities for the future. Review and assessment of current programmes such as PEDP III, implementation of skill development strategies, designing actions regarding the comprehensive ECD policy and ensuring quality with equity in education through better governance offer new opportunities.