

## Education Response to Covid-19 in Bangladesh – A Missing Opportunity?

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### Abstract

*The unexpected shock of the Covid-19 pandemic with its health, social and economic impact has brought to the fore the critical need for emergency preparedness and response capacity. The educational implications are immediate and there is a longer term need to build resilience to various types of vulnerabilities. The purpose of this paper is to examine the immediate and longer term impact of the corona pandemic on education of children at the school level in Bangladesh, the response of education authorities to deal with the impact, and whether and how the response takes into account the pre-existing weaknesses in the school system. The Covid-19 Response and Recovery Plan of Ministry of Primary and Mass Education and the education part of the FY2020-21 Budget proposal have been analyzed. The Covid-response plan formulated by the government, more specifically, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, has focused narrowly on the direct and visible impact manifested in disruption and cessation of schooling rather than the deeper and pre-existing problems of the system which have been aggravated by the crisis. The education budget also follows the pattern of expenditures to maintain and keep the current system operational. Has thus an opportunity been lost? Arguably, if even the measures proposed for the manifest symptoms rather than deeper challenges could be implemented effectively, this could contribute to addressing the long-standing problems. In conclusion, elements of short-term and longer term contingency plans have been recommended.*

**Keywords:** Bangladesh education, Education response to Covid-19, Education budget for FY 2020-21

### 1. Introduction

The multi-dimensional effects of Covid-19 pandemic and disruption and interruptions to education have immediate and longer term implications. There is a serious risk of regression for children whose basic, foundational learning (such as, reading, writing and math) was not strong to begin with. Millions of vulnerable children, who have remained deprived of their right to education, especially girls and those in poverty and other disadvantages, are now exposed to greater health, psychological and well-being risks due to the effects of Covid-19.

The unexpected shock of the Covid-19 pandemic with its health, social and economic impact has brought to the fore the critical need for emergency preparedness and response capacity. The educational implications are immediate and there is a longer term need to build resilience to various types of vulnerabilities.

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Schools have been shut down and children and families have been placed in unprecedented anxiety and uncertainty. As in all emergencies, children from lower income families and socio-cultural disadvantages are more vulnerable than others. The priority in this instance is to keep children engaged in learning activities at home with use of ICT and reaching out to parents and families with assurance and support. The scale and intensity of the pandemic point to the importance of considering longer term implications for education systems of hazards with major societal disruptions which may very well recur (UNESCO, 2020).

All educational institutions in Bangladesh had been shut down since 14 March 2020 due to the pandemic and the closure has been extended to 6 August, 2020 at the time of writing. This may very well be extended. The education authorities have taken steps to broadcast primary and secondary school lessons by a TV channel used to broadcast national Parliament proceedings. This channel does not reach all parts of the country. Moreover, only about half of the households (56%) with children have access to TV according to MICS 2019 (UNICEF, 2019). Other means of digital communication, such as through internet or smartphone, are even more limited. Nonetheless, the TV broadcast of lessons is seen as a positive move. There are lessons to be learned about how digital and distance means of learning can be made a regular feature of school education more effectively to improve teaching-learning and to enhance the resilience of students and the school community.

The pandemic has exposed the pre-existing deficits in the system and has exacerbated these causing greater harm to those who were already vulnerable. The pandemic is certainly pushing more children into vulnerability. Arguably, the objectives of the emergency response should be more than just reverting to the “old normal,” which was not so great for a large proportion of students. It is necessary to imagine and create a “new normal” that overcomes or at least mitigates the basic weaknesses of the system that pre-existed the crisis.

## **2. Purpose and study method**

The purpose of this paper is to examine the immediate and longer term impact of the corona pandemic on education of children at the school level in Bangladesh, the response of education authorities to deal with the impact, and whether and how the response takes into account the pre-existing weaknesses in the school system.

More specifically, the paper aims to look at the scope of disruption and cessation of education of children, which are still unfolding, from documents and rapid survey of stakeholders regarding the situation. It reviews the response of the government as reflected in its articulation of the problem and response to it. It also analyses the indicated response approach and content regarding recognition and action strategy on basic weaknesses in the school system.

As the purpose of the paper suggests, it relies on secondary data on the still unfolding situation, to understand the impact on children’s education and the response to it. The main sources are the following:

- A rapid survey undertaken by the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) on the education impact of covid-19 as perceived by its member organizations and teachers' organizations with whom CAMPE collaborates on education advocacy and a BRAC Education program rapid survey.
- A Covid-19 Response and Recovery Plan of Ministry of Primary and Mass Education
- The education part of the FY2020-21 Budget proposal presented to the national parliament
- Other relevant articles and reports in national newspapers.

Review and analysis of these materials provided an overall view of the immediate and longer term impact on children and their education of the corona pandemic as well as the premises, strategies and content of the responses undertaken or envisaged. A critical analysis of these also led to conclusions regarding the extent and manner the responses take into account the pre-existing weaknesses in the school system and make a contribution to overcoming these shortcomings of the system.

### **3. Education Impact of Covid-19 – short-term and longer term**

*CAMPE Rapid survey.* Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), a civil society forum of education NGOs, undertook a rapid on-line survey of its member organizations who conduct education-related activities in the country and various teachers' associations teaching at primary and secondary levels. They were asked to answer questions based on their own information and perception about: a. activities they were able to undertake in response to the pandemic, b. their judgement about how the education activities and children were affected, and c. what education authorities could and should do and the organizations could do on their own or with support from the government (Ahmed, 2020c)

Responses were received between mid-April and mid-May from 115 NGOs engaged in education activities and 11 teachers' organisations and were shared in a webinar on May 19. The survey revealed serious concerns about the risk of reversal of the progress made in recent years in education and setting back the efforts on the quality, equity and inclusion objectives. The findings pointed to long-standing weaknesses in the education system which have been aggravated now by the crisis.

Dropout of children from school would rise according to 85 percent of respondents. Child labour will increase hampering education of children, thought 71 percent respondents. Eighty percent felt absenteeism and irregular school attendance would rise. Seventy percent respondents found teachers of non-government schools, the vast majority at the secondary level and at least a third at the primary level, are in deep anxiety about not receiving salaries or even losing their job.

Analysing the respondents' perception of problems and priorities, the study team recommended measures for protection and recovery of the education system. Two main areas of actions

proposed are about a medium term recovery plan and the necessary budgetary support for this plan. The recovery has to take the education activities to a "new normal" that mitigates the pre-existing weaknesses now exposed, rather than take us back to business-as-usual that left many children poorly served. A collaborative approach involving NGOs, local government, communities are needed, it was recommended (Ahmed, 2020c)

*BRAC Education Rapid Survey.* Another rapid survey carried out by BRAC Education Program, conducted on a random sample of 1,938 primary and secondary level students in 16 districts during May 4-7 highlighted children's deep anxiety, fear, psychological stress and being in a state of despair and apathy. The survey found that 16% (of 31 million children in mainstream primary and secondary schools in Bangladesh) were in deep anxiety and fear about the effects of the pandemic. More than one-third of them (34%) were in what could be described as depression, experiencing varying symptoms – uninterested in study or play, unwilling to enter into a conversation, fearful of strangers, and afraid of being alone. At the same time, 18% engaged in risky behavior, going out without observing stay-at-home and social distance rules. Almost a quarter (22%) of respondents reported food shortage at home. More than half (56%) did not attend or were not able to attend, due to lack of access, the broadcast TV lessons for primary and secondary level classes. (BRAC, 2020: Daily Janakantha, 21 June, 2020).

A larger and deeper consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic on education may be the consequences of the economic downturn caused by the pandemic control measures. The latest Household Income Expenditure Survey, 2016 showed that – before the crisis, 23.9% (or 8.4 million) of the students' families were below the poverty line. Assuming a three month long lockdown since March 25, resulting in a 25% fall in annual per capita income, it may cause as many as 43.9% of the students' families fall below the poverty line (with more than 51.7% of families with primary school children), estimates Dhaka University economist Mahtab Uddin (Uddin, 2020).

Hence, there could be as many as 7.7 million additional students' families falling below the poverty line during this crisis, taking the total number of students' families below the poverty line to 16 million. Such a fallout in poverty from economic crisis can precipitate higher rates of child-labor, child marriage, and sexual exploitation of children. Out of the students from 16 million poor families including the newly poor many may never come to schools ever. The pre-crisis dropout rate was 18% at the primary stage, 37.6% at the secondary level, and 19.6% in higher secondary education according to the official education data from BANBEIS. (Uddin Ibid.).

### **Education impact – the Context**

A response and recovery plan to face the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the school system prepared by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) has been proposed to the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) for funding support. The situation and context of the education impact of the pandemic have been summarized in this proposal.

In describing the impact of COVID-19 in the Bangladesh Education System, the proposal mentions two government programs -- Fourth Primary Education Development Program (PEDP4) and Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP) – which are the current major development programs for school education under the Ministries of Primary and Mass Education (responsible for primary education up to grade 5) and Ministry of Education (MOE), responsible for secondary and higher education. It recognizes that “even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangladesh was grappling with issues of out-of-school children and low and unequal learning outcomes. There are also large differences among sub-populations: student from well-off and urban areas do better than those from poorer families and rural areas.” (MoPME, 2020, p.5)

It is noted that direct impact of the COVID 19 has caused cessation of schooling for around 36.8 million school students. In addition, the pilot phase of the “second chance education scheme,” planned to serve one million out of school children has been disrupted. Youth and adult literacy programs of the Government and NGOs have also been suspended. There are also longer term impact arising in part from the prevailing shortcomings in respect of quality, equity and inclusion in the system.

Major impacts on education arising from the pandemic in Bangladesh are summarized as follows:

- **Learning loss due to discontinuation:** The current situation is disrupting the planned activities of the school year and may result in a complete loss of one year in the worst-case scenario. Keeping children engaged in some form of learning, especially among families with less educated parents and from poverty-prone areas, is a special challenge.
- **Learning outcomes and assessment:** National Student Assessments show that among Grade 3 students, 62 percent do not achieve grade-relevant competencies in Mathematics. Among grade 5 students, grade-relevant competencies were achieved by only 36 percent of students in Bangla and only 24 percent of students in Mathematics. At the Grade 8 level, only 44 percent and 35 percent of students achieved grade-relevant competencies in English and Mathematics, respectively. The suspension of schooling and scheduled assessments will affect adversely learning outcomes and the percentage of students achieving grade-level competencies.
- **Inequality in learning:** The more educated and wealthier families will be better able to sustain their children’s learning at home during school closure. They are more likely to have computers and Internet connectivity, space to study, books and other learning materials. This means that when schooling restarts, disadvantaged children will find themselves further behind their peers. Teachers will have to deal with wider learning gaps among their students.
- **Dropout rate and out-of-school children (OOSC):** Around seven million children and adolescents (80 percent in rural areas) aged between 6-16 years were

out-of-school in 2016; 87 percent of this population are girls. The drop-out rate at primary and secondary levels is likely to increase, especially among girls and children from disadvantaged families – showing a spike from the current around 18% at primary level and 35% at the secondary level.

- **Teacher engagement and development:** The lives of teachers have been disrupted by the pandemic and school closures. Coping with the changing nature of remote learning activities and lack of learning opportunities for school teachers in using the online methods is an added challenge. The nature of assessments will also be changed, requiring innovative solutions to be adapted to the current situation and address the anticipated increase in learning gaps among students. Teachers will have to be more adept to make a response plan effective.
- **Health and nutrition of school children:** The government-led School Feeding Program in Poverty Prone Areas reaches over 2.7 million children each year. School closure means that missed nutrition intakes will increase risks of malnutrition for children. There has been no system of regular basic health checkups for children before the crisis.
- **Hygiene risks:** The cleanliness and level of hygiene of the school environment would be an area of concern once schools resume. Among government primary schools of Bangladesh around 71% have wash blocks, which mainly consist of toilet facilities. Hand washing facilities with running water and soap as a means for disinfection hardly existed.
- **Gendered impact on children:** Girls are more likely to have fallen behind in their schooling than boys, especially in disadvantaged families, during the crisis. They are more likely than boys to be involved in household activities including taking care of siblings and sick relatives, and they are much less likely to have access to technology such as mobile phones. During school closure, girls are likely to be at increased risk of gender-based violence including sexual abuse and being subjected to child marriage.
- **Children in rural areas and from the poorest households:** Children in rural areas and from the poorest households are much less likely to have access to television, Internet or computers. Only 44% and 3% of 5-11 year old children in rural areas respectively have access to TV and a computer at home. The numbers for the same age-group for the poorest wealth quintile are 6% and 0% respectively. There is almost universal access to mobile phone – 92% of families with 5-11 year-old children – but these are likely to be with very limited internet capacity.
- **Children with disabilities:** Children with disabilities are disproportionately represented among those living in poverty. They are more likely to have underlying health conditions which put them at increased risk of serious complications from the infection. They are also likely to be excluded from distance learning programs due to lack of assistive

devices, greater difficulties in using technology, and learning modalities not accessible for those with vision or hearing impairments.

- Safety and psychosocial issues: With the closure of schools, children may be more exposed to gender-based and other types of violence at home. Stress and trauma caused by unprecedented uncertainty due to the pandemic are likely to affect the mental health of students, parents and teachers. The lack of a system of basic health checkups and for maintaining health information of school children increases risks in the post pandemic period.
- Uncertainty in non-formal education: The non-formal learning centers; prevocational, vocational and technical training centers; and other non-formal mode of education and skills training have been shut down – with greater loss and disruption for the disadvantaged youth. Already resource constrained non-formal education with weak institutional capacity, and limited scope of distant learning, now interrupted or disrupted, will have a negative impact on the desired outcomes for the demographic dividend.
- Child labor and youth unemployment: The loss or disruption of the academic year will especially affect disadvantaged youth from poor socio-economic households due to the increase in opportunity cost of education. For boys, those in poor families are more likely to be under pressure to support their families' livelihoods and may discontinue school by taking up daily labor and risk future under-employment, unemployment and poor earning. (MoPME, 2020, pp. 5-7)

The MoPME document is comprehensive in spelling out the impact of the crisis both short term and longer term. It echoes the concerns expressed by the education NGOs, teachers' organizations, and child survey noted above. What are the plans and strategies to respond to these diagnostics? The on-going quick response and plans indicated in the proposal to GPE for funding provide some clues. The education component of the first national budget since the onset of the pandemic presented to the national parliament in June, 2020 for the financial year July 2020 to June 2021, and dubbed as an economic recovery budget, also provides clues to government thinking.

#### **4. Government's early education response to COVID-19**

The government's early response to the crisis and school closure has been the attempt to maintain continuity of some learning activities by distance mode. Four working groups have been formed by the government to work on content and lessons for four remote learning platforms: Electronic Media (TV), Mobile Phone, Radio and the Internet. At present, only the TV platform is operational through broadcasting of pre-recorded lessons for preprimary to grade 10. The state-run 'Shangshad Bangladesh Television' started broadcasting this content from 29 March for secondary and from April 7 for primary. Primary grade lessons are delivered on various subjects for 20 minutes each lesson from 2pm to 4pm every day. At the secondary level, 10 classes per day are televised on secondary general education,



again 20 minutes for each lesson. Similar classes have also started in technical and Madrasa education.

The broadcast lessons so far are essentially one-way communication without an opportunity for remote interaction between TV instructor and students. Assessment of student's learning and homework for students are issues still under discussion. The current thinking is to engage with students on these questions when school reopens and face-to-face interaction is possible. The more basic problems, however, are two-fold. First, about half of the student's home are not reached by TV broadcast. Even when a TV is available, whether the student is motivated enough to attend the lesson with necessary concentration of mind and whether an environment exists at the child's home to do so are debatable. Secondly, even in a regular classroom, it is a challenge to hold the attention and create receptivity of the student for the lesson; it is doubly so with a one-way communication mode when the opportunity to directly interact with the student is lacking (Ahmed, 2020d).

To extend the reach of remote learning, other platforms such as radio (national, FM and community), mobile phone, and on-line and off-line lessons through Internet are being explored with technical support of "Access to Information" (a2i) of the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, and development partners. No assessment has become available yet about the efficacy and results of the ad hoc TV lessons. Not even the numbers reached, or the regularity of attendance are known, not to speak of learning results.

The challenges faced by the ad hoc initiatives are noted in the government response plan. It is mentioned that around 56 percent households of the country have access to television; only 5.6 percent households have access to a computer and 37.6 percent households have access to Internet, mostly through ordinary mobile phone with limited functions. In the case of the younger children, at pre-primary and primary level, remote learning is more complex, requiring appropriate hardware, content and adult guidance. For secondary level also, low-tech environment with connectivity, hardware, and language and customized curricular-linked content problems call for major development and trial initiatives. Preparing and motivating teachers to become the mediator and facilitator for the student in using educational technology remains a major task. Monitoring and assessment of remote learning initiatives is also noted as an area of challenge (MoPME, 2020, 9-10)

Besides the TV lessons, other ways and means of reaching out to children, teachers and parents have not been possible in mainstream schools for reasons noted above. Working with all stakeholders, such as the education NGOs, civil society, and local government, as indicated in the CAMPE survey, both in the time of the crisis and in preparing for a wind-down phase also have not figured prominently in the immediate government response.



## 5. Recovery and Transformation of Education

Besides the ad hoc actions initiated as described above, the overall aim of the proposed response and recovery plan for school education is to minimize learning loss and protect vulnerable groups during the emergency and to strengthen the system for the post-pandemic phase. Three broad results in the short-, medium- and long-term are expected to be achieved within a 24-month time-frame. These are:

- a) Children's safety and learning continuity;
- b) Readiness and support for recovery and re-opening in the post-emergency period; and,
- c) Building system resilience through learning from the COVID-19 response and sustaining good practices.

The key elements of the three phase program includes:

### Short Term (Immediate to 6 months)

Output 1: Children remain safe and continue to learn and the education system is ready to support the safe re-opening of schools.

The aim is to ensure children remain engaged in learning activities, as much as feasible. The focus will be placed on needs and interests of the most marginalized, especially girls, out-of-school children, and children with disabilities. Interventions will also be implemented in ways that ensure that the COVID-19 crisis does not exacerbate the pre-existing learning crisis. This first phase would focus on the shutdown period to minimize learning loss and promote awareness for students' safety.

The activities will aim at maximizing content availability and reach through four remote learning platforms using TV, radio, mobile and online modalities; messaging to parents and students to minimize potential drop-out; targeted financial and counseling support; raising awareness on health and safety issues; capacity building of teachers and education officials' through remote learning; and better coordination for monitoring effectiveness of distant learning.

### Medium Term (Immediate – 12 months)

Output 2: All girls and boys, especially the most marginalized, return to institution-based learning as soon as possible, once schools re-open, applying the joint global framework by UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank and WFP, for re-opening schools. This phase will focus on the immediate post-pandemic recovery to ensure swift transition to regular school routine.

The activities will include assessing the readiness of local education officers and school management to re-open school; implementing a phase wise school re-opening plan; training teachers, head teachers and education officials on 'blended learning'; health, safety, hygiene and school cleanliness; better monitoring and tracking to bring children

back to school and prevent dropout; and assessing student learning status and their mental health. The list of activities also include professional support for teachers for a smooth transition to school activities; financial and other incentives to disadvantaged students to prevent early marriage and child labor; improving school feeding. A review of the syllabus and high stake examinations is anticipated to adjust to the Covid-19 impacts on student learning including a contingency plan for the worst case scenario if examinations cannot be held.

### **Long Term (Immediate-24 months)**

Output 3: Education system develops sustainable systems for risk informed planning and supporting learning This phase will focus on building system resilience and readiness for future recurrence of similar situations and natural calamities, as well as building on technology supported learning modalities put in place.

The activities envisaged are developing a crisis and recovery plan as part of regular education planning; review of Education and Disaster Risk Recovery Framework approved by MoPME in 2015; and integrating remote learning into regular school education through a blended learning approach. capacity development and research are to be carried out in respect of sustainability of remote learning platforms; low cost learning packages for school education and non-formal education; sustainability mechanism for remote teacher professional development; on-line learning assessment system and tools; and an online student health tracking tool.

### **Comments on the plan**

The plan does emphasize coordination with different levels of government moving “in a synchronized and complementary way.” It is recognized that the district and upazila levels would be “crucial in implementation and scaling up the strategies that work;” that those involved in local service delivery (district and upazila officials, head teachers, teachers, parents and students) “would provide feedback on what works and where there are obstacles.” The geography-based and population group vulnerabilities also call for “decentralized planning, management and response mechanisms for education programs within an overall policy and strategy framework.” (MoPME, 2020, p. 9)

The implementation approach, mechanism and actions need to be specified further; particularly, how the field level personnel’s crucial role would be performed effectively, and what may be done for “decentralised planning, management and response mechanisms.” It is interesting that mention is made of the field level personnel role to “provide feedback on what works and where there are obstacles” rather than responsibility being given to them for “decentralised planning, management and response mechanisms.” More importantly, the narrow and short-term scope of the actions planned do not fully reflect the situation and the context described above as part of the proposal.

It can be seen that the time-frame for the three phase response plan is 24 months, which really comprise immediate/short-term to medium-term actions, rather than any longer term

perspective. The three outputs for the plan are about reopening the school, bringing all children back into schooling/learning and ensuring sustainability of the actions taken in case of future emergencies.

The narrow scope and focus of action and the time-frame are not quite consistent with the situation analysis and context mentioned above in this paper. Apart from the cessation and loss of learning, all other issues noted in the situation analysis above – from learning outcomes and assessment, inequality, dropout and out-of-school children, children with disabilities, teacher engagement and development, and so on—relate to pre-existing conditions in the system. The approach to dealing with the effects of the pandemic logically calls for a broader and longer term scope of action and strategies than the narrow and short horizon approach taken in the proposal to GPE. In fact the success of the short-term and narrowly focused actions, quite relevant as elements of the total response, depended on a broader and longer term perspective to address the prevailing deficiencies of the system.

The narrow and short-term perspective appears to be prompted by the guideline provided by GPE for funding support from the Covid-response window. This by itself need not have prevented the government education authorities to frame the strategy and action taking a broader and longer term view of the problems and the solutions, placing the narrow and short-term actions within a longer term national plan. In any case, GPE funding was likely to finance a small proportion of the total plan estimated with a time-line of two years.

The education part of the FY20-21 budget shows that a narrow view of the problem and short-term perspective, premised on the idea of a temporary disruption in the education system and the aim of going back to the old normal as soon as possible dominate government thinking, as can be seen below.

## **6. Covid-19 response in the FY 20-21 Education Budget**

The proposed total education budget for FY20-21 is Tk 66,000 crore or 11.6 percent of the national budget. The development part of the budget is Tk 23,379 crore or 11% of the development budget. The nominal increase from the current year's education budget of Tk 61,000 crore total and Tk 19,500 crore for development, barely offsets the annual inflation rate of 5.6%.

The percentages have remained about the same as for last year at just over 11% of total budget and about 2% of GDP. The largest education sector allocation is Tk. 5,040 crore for the Fourth Primary Education Development Program which began in 2018; the bulk of it going to infrastructures. Secondary education has the largest sub-sectoral allocation at Tk 33,117 crore, followed by Primary and Mass Education with Tk 24,138 crore, and Madrasa and Technical Education Division with Tk 8,345 crore.

There is an upbeat official narrative as heard in the Finance Minister's Budget speech. "Bangladesh is now a role model for the developing countries in terms of increasing the literacy rate and eradicating gender gaps in education," he said. The Finance Minister

admitted that due to the pandemic, "...the loss to the overall education sector has been enormous." He went on, "Our most important task in education for the next fiscal year would be to bring back continuity in the curriculum and cover this loss from long study break." (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

The only nod to the education impact of the crisis in the education budget is increased allocations for the social safety net elements – increase of coverage in stipends for primary and high school students. Expansion of the total social safety-net is a key aspect of the budget and seen as a way of mitigating the pandemic's effect on the population. The total allocation under this heading is Tk. 95, 574 crore, which amounts to 16.8% of the budget and 3.1% of GDP. The revised estimate for FY2019-20 was Tk 81,865 crore. A small part of this will benefit education in the form of stipends for students and school meals. The stipends for secondary and higher secondary students have seen an increase in the number of potential recipients, doubling the number to 7 million from 3.5 million currently. The cost would be Tk. 3,964 crore. Stipends for primary students saw a small increase from Tk. 722 crore to Tk. 900 crore. Various stipends including girls in college would cost Tk. 4,090 crore, almost double of the current year's Tk. 2,084 crore. The stipend allocations were to increase the coverage rather than raise the amount of individual stipends, which was demanded by civil society advocates in the present circumstances.

The education budget ten years ago, in FY 2010, was Tk 18, 277 crore taka (including Tk 400 crore for the science and technology ministry). Proportionately, this was 13.9 percent of national budget. The proportions have gone down every year since then except for a spike in 2016, due to a large external assistance disbursement for primary education that year. The low education allocation trend continues, despite the call for protecting and raising education investments in the face of the pandemic's immediate and longer term impact. (Ahmed, 2020b). CAMPE had urged in an open appeal to the Prime Minister to allocate at least 15% of the national budget and initiate a three-year education recovery plan. This appeal was not heeded.

A paramount question is why the education budget has not proposed special initiatives or show a sense of urgency to offset the pandemic's impact which various rapid surveys and studies have warned about and a recovery and rescue plan has been urged (Ahmed, 2020a). Any new initiative or creative idea has to emerge from and designed and proposed by the education authorities. There are three Divisions under the two ministries of education and various directorates. They apparently have not come forward with new initiatives to confront the crisis.

The education budget follows the usual pattern of expenditures of maintaining and operating the current system. The opportunity has not been taken to initiate a move towards a "new normal," addressing the weaknesses of inequality and quality in the system which has been aggravated by the effects of the pandemic (Ahmed, 2020a).

CAMPE recommended expansion of the scope of school meal, stipends going beyond current services. Health check and mentoring of students, and counselling for students and

parents were proposed. Investments were urged for making online and ICT-based learning a regular feature in schools. ICT infrastructure, connectivity, broad-band access, availability of devices such as tablets, educational technology support and training for teachers were suggested as necessary components.

Going beyond the allocation numbers, a continuing concern is proper use of the funds allocated. The combination of inefficiency, corruption and lack of accountability is a deadly virus that kills imperceptibly and slowly. The special initiatives proposed by civil society call for responsive and flexible action at the school and community level that is challenging for the usual bureaucratic ways and practices. The decision-makers are generally averse to entertaining the idea that effective implementation of responsive measures requires decentralized planning and management of total primary and secondary education in each upazila involving local administration and close collaboration with NGOs and CSOs.

One suggestion, not considered by authorities, that came up in CAMPE-organized webinar on 19 May, 2020 was to make a special allocation of Tk 5,000 crore to be used to engage education NGOs actively at the upazila level to support measures responsive to specific circumstances of students, families and communities. These could be designed at school level to prevent dropout and irregular attendance, offer extra lessons and counselling for lagging students and incentives for teachers to take on these tasks. Tk ten crore on average for each upazila, pro-rated by student population, could be allocated to support students through school-based plans. These plans could be reviewed and approved at upazila level by an education recovery committee involving local government, education authorities and NGOs and implemented with the help of the education NGOs (Ahmed, 2020a).

## 7. Conclusion

The education budget follows the usual pattern of expenditures of maintaining and keeping the current system running. The opportunity has not been taken to initiate a move towards a “new normal” It has been essentially the same for the Covid-response plan formulated by the government, more specifically, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, which has focused narrowly on the direct and visible impact manifested in disruption and cessation of schooling rather than the deeper and pre-existing problems of the system which have been aggravated by the crisis. It is not that the authorities are unaware of the deeper problems of the system, which have been broadly recognized in the situation and context analysis included in the response plan. But the response plan itself has reverted to a narrow and short-horizon view of the problems and indicated solutions. The irony is that the specific steps to mitigate the symptoms would have a greater chance of success if these were made part of much needed systemic change and reform.

Under the circumstances, a set of short term and longer term measures worth considering, in view of the current situation and its ripple effects for the next months and years, and based on on-going education discourse, may be considered (Ahmed, 2020c, Ahmed 2020e, BRAC, 2020)

In the short term, for 2020-21, the following four steps are suggested.

- a) Announcement should be made now that the 2020 Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and equivalent examinations would be held when the emergency is lifted, but in an abridged form. The exam timetable would be shortened by having tests with one 100 marks combined paper for each of the languages and math papers and also one combined paper for each of the science, social science and business subjects.
- b) A similar shortened timetable and simplified testing should be announced for the next round of Secondary School Certificate after grade 10 (SSC), Junior School Certificate after grade 8 (JSC) and Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) and equivalent examinations.
- c) The terminal examinations in schools should be canceled for this year and the time should be used instead for lost teaching time when the schools re-open.
- d) The education directorates and boards should initiate a program to work with schools to communicate with and counsel grade 9 to 12 students about their academic, health, safety and personal concerns and anxieties. Similar communication with parents and children should be undertaken by DPE at the primary level.

For the longer term, beyond 2020-21, the following suggestions are made for consideration.

- a) The shortened and simplified public examinations should be made permanent and complemented by school-based evaluation both at primary and secondary level.
- b) A major initiative should be taken for using distance, digital and internet-based learning through a 'blended' approach with attention to connectivity, hardware and software availability, accessibility, and affordability in all institutions for all students and teachers. The government should work with the telecommunication regulating commission (BTRC), major mobile phone providers, multi-national high-tech companies and a2i (Access to Information) office of the Ministry of Science and Technology to undertake a major initiative for bringing and supporting IT services to all educational institutions. All educational institutions should become free wi-fi hotspots with adequate broadband capacity and subsidized tablet computers should be widely available to students.
- c) Redesigning curricula, textbooks, and supplementary learning material, now characterized by factual information and rote learning, should aim at enabling students to engage in thinking, reasoning, understanding and creativity – supported by teacher preparation, change in learning assessment and use of relevant digital learning content by students and teachers.

Not knowing how long the pandemic will continue, how it will wind down and how extensive and deep the after-effects will be, the present situation may be described as a state of “radical uncertainty” It is a concept put forward by John Kay, Director of Sai’d Business School at Oxford University and Mervyn King, former Governor of Bank of England and professor at London School of Economics. There are situations when parameters are not known, there is no basis for assigning statistical probability to variables and reasonable models of scenarios cannot be constructed. The choice then may be to do nothing or have various contingency plans and be prepared to adapt and adjust these as we go along (Kay and King, 2020).

The corona pandemic have placed us in the realm of radical uncertainty. In the education sector, the strategy seems to do the minimum by putting the bandaid on some of the visible wounds and wait to go back to the old normal over time. The success of the contingency plan under consideration seems to be uncertain because of low system capacity, inefficiency, and corruption. Arguably, the proposed response plan, though narrowly focused on symptoms rather than underlying causes, can contribute to addressing deeper problems, if the plan is implemented effectively. The contingency planning, elements of which are suggested above, needs to be built into the response and implemented with an acceptable degree of efficiency and adapted and adjusted judiciously as we move forward.

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