

Expanding Access to Education in Bangladesh¹

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Widespread poverty and biases against women and girls make Bangladesh an unlikely setting for groundbreaking achievements in education for girls and the poor. Yet Bangladesh has succeeded in dramatically expanding access to basic education in the last two decades, particularly among girls. Today there are 18 million primary school places - in theory enough for the entire school-aged population.² Gross enrolment ratios in primary schools have exceeded 100 per cent,³ and the once-stark gender disparity has been completely eliminated. Girls now constitute 55 per cent of Bangladesh's total primary school enrolment, up from a third in 1990. In just two decades, the number of girls enrolled in secondary school has increased by more than 600 per cent, from 600,000 in 1980 to 4 million in 2000. It is now one of the largest primary

It is not all good news in Bangladesh's primary education sector: low quality education presents a serious obstacle to children's learning achievements, although interventions are now in place to tackle some of the most acute constraints. There are also growing concerns about those left behind - the children of the urban slums and ethnic minority communities whom providers still find 'hard-to-reach'. Given the success with which the gender disadvantage of poor girls has been addressed, it is striking that the single largest disadvantaged group now seems to be boys from the poorest households: they are more likely to be in paid work from an early age than to be in school.

The expansion of access to primary education in Bangladesh shines a light on what can be accomplished when political will is strong, partnerships are effective, and funding is sufficient. The steadfast political commitment of the Bangladesh government to universal education has transcended partisan lines and even spanned successive administrations. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), an important provider of education services, have formed successful partnerships with the government, despite inherent tensions and problems with corruption. And donors, while providing needed financial assistance, have supported the largely national-driven programmes without compromising country ownership.

1 An Emerging National Consensus: Education as Key to Development

The rapid expansion of primary school coverage in Bangladesh in the 1990s was enabled by the strong political commitment of the Bangladesh government to the goal of universal primary education. A groundswell of support from elites, civil servants, and political parties finally paved the way for ambitious expansion efforts in the 1990s. This support was the result of a propitious convergence of economic, cultural, political, and personal factors that propelled education to the top of the political agenda.

During the 1950s and 1960s, when Bangladesh was still East Pakistan, primary education was neglected, and gross enrolment ratios hovered between 40 and 50 per cent. Following independence in 1971, the liberation movement made universal access to

education a central platform. However, early commitment was practical more than symbolic, and there was little progress towards achieving mass primary education in the 1970s and 1980s. Priority instead went to higher education, to educate much-needed administrative personnel. Political resolve was also dampened by fears that an educated rural populace might be susceptible to militant social mobilization, as had happened elsewhere in Asia. Support for basic education did grow later in the 1970s, but efforts were crippled by a series of political and economic crises. With funding and political attention in short supply, enrolment levels remained stagnant through the 1980s.

By the 1990s a surge of high-level support pushed education to the forefront of the political agenda. At the core of this movement was an emerging consensus – including among the country’s powerful national elites - that education was essential to the country’s development and poverty reduction goals. Elites perceived educational expansion as vital to the emulation of the ‘tiger’ development successes of East and Southeast Asia and as a route to upward social mobility, including among their own members. Elite champions of expansion also argued convincingly that education was a progressive means of engineering desirable social change, for example in fertility behaviour. Reasonably widespread private charitable involvement in schools has also helped, exposing powerful individuals to the demand for education among the poor, creating additional political pressures for public provision.

Party politics and pressures from influential teachers’ unions also created incentives for expansion. The two parties that alternated in power during the 1990s competed to expand educational access as a means of gaining wider influence over the construction of national identity and history through the national curriculum than their predecessor had enjoyed. Finally, the new resources for construction, staffing and food and cash subsidies may have boosted the prospects for corruption, thereby bolstering political support for school expansion. However, popular concerns about corruption in education are not necessarily backed up by evidence. Primary education does not appear to be particularly prone to ‘leakages’, although it is possible that such problems are more likely to be noticed because it is a public service that is almost universally and routinely used.

2. Expanding the sector

The government programmes of the 1980s reflected a shift in priorities towards education, including for girls. Initially, however, there was little material progress other than the establishment of a separate central implementing agency, the Directorate of Primary Education. Programmes in the 1990s began to translate priorities into action. The early 1990s saw legislation making primary education attendance compulsory, an act accompanied by a massive programme of expansion between 1991 and 1997. All aspects of the education system were expanded during this time: new schools and classrooms were constructed, teachers and administrators were hired, and additional teaching materials were supplied.

The expansion was backed by a large increase in government, household and donor funding. From the 1980s, government spending on education grew in absolute terms and as a proportion of social sector spending, rising from around 9 per cent of total spending

(1973–90) to 16 per cent in (1995–6). Households also invested a rising share of their own resources in their children’s education.

Donor financing also expanded dramatically in the 1990s, amounting to half of total financing for primary education in Bangladesh in the 1990–5 period. However, donor investment was concentrated on NGO education programmes, so government financing for state primary education remained critical, and was in fact larger and grew more rapidly than foreign aid to that sector in that period. The surge of foreign funding marked a positive change in donor attitudes towards education: until the 1980s, they had shown little interest in funding education, in part because this was viewed as ‘nation-building’ rather than as investment in human development. The comparatively late arrival of donor funding facilitated expansion at a critical moment, but also meant that Government led the process, ensuring that Bangladesh avoided the common pitfall of insufficient national ownership in the face of donor involvement. The benefits of donor involvement also included strong support for NGO services oriented towards the poor, and helped maintain the focus on gender equity.

3. Centralized planning with diverse provision

The primary school system in Bangladesh expanded under an unusual administrative arrangement: a marriage of highly centralized planning and administration with education provision by a diverse range of state and non-state schools. The government thus has been at once hands-on and hands-off. While not without its critics, this unusual arrangement has maximized resources and helped rapidly broaden education access to include under-enrolled populations. Groups of students not reached by the main system have been drawn in by more specialized providers, and some have later entered the mainstream system.

Before liberation, primary schooling was a local, private or charitable effort. The nationalization of the 36,000 community-based primary schools in 1973 gave the central government direct control over school assets, management and personnel. Overnight, teachers assumed a variety of administrative roles in addition to teaching, becoming a politically important group as the branch of the civil bureaucracy that reaches furthest into rural communities. Educational planning and policy making are conducted centrally, a fact which facilitated the implementation of the centrally-driven expansion reforms.

However, the centralization of education also stifles local initiative and contributes to weak management and the lack of transparency and accountability in the system. These are serious constraints to attaining genuinely universal access and to improving quality, but the Government recognises these problems, and in partnership with donors, has been making efforts to address these problems through the Primary Education Development Programmes (I and II) which have been working to strengthen access, and improve quality and efficiency over the 2000s.

Most unusual in the Bangladesh case is how tight central control over school administration and education policy has been maintained alongside a diverse array of providers. About half of all the officially-recognized 79,000 primary schools are

managed and resourced directly by the central government. The rest are run by communities, charities or religious groups, and other private providers. This plurality has had a number of advantages: it has fostered innovative school design, facilitated learning across systems, increased competition, and widened access to groups not reached by traditional forms of schooling. It has also allowed the government to maximize resources by tapping into strong community support for local schools.

The relationship between the government and non-state schools has fluctuated between efforts to control and latitude to operate freely; on the whole, however, they have been allowed to operate on a large scale. In the case of madrassahs, this reflects deference to the political risks of appearing anti-Islamic.

In the case of the vast network of non-formal NGO schools, this latitude in part reflects deference to strong donor support for NGOs in Bangladesh. It may also reflect reluctant recognition that non-formal NGO schools have played an important role by massively expanding services to the poor and girls. Some 1.5 million children, or 8 per cent of total enrolment, attend non-formal NGO schools that are not registered with the government. BRAC, the largest Bangladeshi NGO, educates 1.2 million poor children, mostly girls, in 34,000 one-classroom/one-teacher model schools. Their techniques are innovative and learner-centred, and they have enjoyed marked successes in reaching girls and the poor. These schools also 'feed' poor girl graduates into the official system.

Despite some ups and downs, central government has generally permitted NGO education programmes to operate freely, particularly where these have tactfully stressed their role as complements to the state system. There are some signs that the mainly foreign-funded NGO schools that are present in a high proportion of villages may have exerted some competitive pressure on government provision, serving as a catalyst for government to scale up provision, particularly for poor children.

4. Demand-side interventions: closing the gender gap

Boosting overall enrolment rates required a dual effort, requiring government to increase the capacity of schools while at the same time attracting new students to fill the seats. Expanding access to girls and the poor was critical to the goal of universal education and entailed a special emphasis on overcoming gender and poverty obstacles to their enrolment. A series of demand-side programmes implemented in the 1990s accelerated the rise in demand among girls for schooling, an interest that had been growing in the changing economic and social climate of the 1980s and 1990s.

The initial rise in demand for schooling that followed independence did not include a massive upsurge in demand for girls' schooling. New public sector employment opportunities in the 1970s encouraged affluent parents to invest in the education of their sons. But gender segmentation in the labour market coupled with sociocultural norms and practices restricting women's mobility limited women's paid employment prospects in the 1970s. The gender gap between girls' and boys' enrolment remained wide.

Social and economic changes in Bangladesh during the 1980s and 1990s, notably new economic opportunities for women in the export-oriented garment industry, helped to increase the perceived value of girls' education. Strong positive signals about girls'

education from business, social, and political leaders also impacted on public discourse and helped shift attitudes in favour of sending girls to school. Successive political leaders, including two female prime ministers during the 1990s, took a personal interest in primary education for girls. Women's economic opportunities were widened by other developments, including Bangladesh's well-known micro-credit services: programmes of this type have not only concentrated more resources in women's hands, making it more likely that they would be spent on educating children, but they also demonstrated directly to poor rural women the value of schooling. In part, the expansion of the educational system itself helped to generate demand for girls' education, as women now constitute a third of all formal primary school teachers and 90 per cent of teachers in BRAC schools.

To increase enrolment of girls and the poor, the government took specific steps to provide incentives and overcome barriers to enrolment. These included measures aimed at reducing households' reliance on the labour of children that had prevented poorer families from keeping children in school. The massive Food for Education (FFE) programme provided grain rations to students from disadvantaged families, reaching more than 2 million students by 1999. It was replaced in 2002 by the Primary Education Stipend Project (PESP), a targeted, cash-subsidy programme expected to reach 5 million students a year. At secondary, there are programmes providing stipends and tuition waivers to up to 4 million secondary girl students a year. Concerns about leakage led in 2002 to a series of modifications and reforms to improve adherence to the attendance and performance criteria required for receipt of the subsidy. The evidence suggests that these programmes have proven effective in enhancing access to girls and the poor.

The impact on gender equity has been remarkable. After narrowing slowly until the 1990s, the gender gap at the primary level was completely eliminated by the end of that decade. Enrolment of girls also rose rapidly at secondary, from 600,000 in 1980 to over 4 million by 2000. Girls now constitute about 55 per cent of total lower secondary enrolment, up from just a third at the beginning of the 1990s.

5. Lessons learned and future challenges

The rapid expansion of primary education in Bangladesh and the elimination of the gender gap in schooling is a clear development success story. A number of factors underpinned Bangladesh's successful primary education expansion: strong political will at the centre was vital, but perhaps most important was how elite support converged with the aspirations and needs of the masses. With such a fit between top-down and bottom-up perspectives, it was possible for the government to capitalize on strong community demand and support for primary schools. The success also turned on effective partnerships between the government and NGOs and other non-state providers. One surprise is that centralized authority over policy and planning did not necessarily impede the expansion of primary education. The case also demonstrates the potential for national ownership of key reform agendas despite significant input of external aid resources.

Serious problems remain in the Bangladesh education system. The government faces the difficult challenge of ensuring that improvements in the quality of education catch up with the improvements in access. Equally important, excluded groups must be brought

into the system in even larger numbers. In particular, efforts are needed to expand access to groups that are geographically, ethnically, and socially marginalized, such as minorities, urban slum children and working boys from the poorest households.

Progress has begun. The government is addressing quality issues at both primary and secondary levels, with particular attention to improving the quality of teaching and learning. It is moving towards decentralized systems of management and establishing effective monitoring and evaluation systems. Further demand-side interventions are targeting the families who are hardest to reach. The challenge for the future is whether the impressive gains in access can be matched with much-needed improvements in the quality of education in Bangladesh.

¹ This is a summary version of a paper prepared for the World Bank/Government of China Shanghai conference in 2002, now being edited for publication as a chapter in a book from that conference. That in turn drew on related work on the achievements of education in Bangladesh, including a paper published in the Economic and Political Weekly with Naila Kabeer in 2004, and IDS Working Paper 167, published with Ramya Subrahmanian and Naila Kabeer in 2002.

² These official statistics do not include the more than 2 million children enrolled in unregistered NGO schools.

³ The gross enrolment ratio (GER) is the ratio of total enrolment, regardless of age, to the population of the age group that officially corresponds to the level of education shown. The GER can be over 100 per cent due to the inclusion of overage and underage students. The net enrolment ratio is the ratio of the number of children of official school age (as defined by the education system) enrolled in school to the number of children of official school age in the population.