



# EQUITY AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

## CREATE BANGLADESH POLICY BRIEF 2

NOVEMBER 2010



### EQUITY AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

CREATE's nationwide community and school survey (ComSS) confirms that poverty remains a key barrier to access to education in Bangladesh. ComSS data show a series of overlapping correlations between poverty, poor health, lack of school materials and exclusion from education. Policies that have been introduced to enable the poor to attend school include free schooling, subsidised schoolbooks, and stipends for the poor to attend school. However these are not accurately targeted or effective. Targeted assistance for social groups who are denied access to education is needed which reach the excluded and provide more equal opportunities to participate and subsidies to contribute to greater social justice for children who fail to complete basic education. This policy brief is based on the CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph, *Poverty and Equity: Access to Education in Bangladesh* (Hossain and Zeitlyn, 2010) and the research it presents.

#### Background

Discussion of equitable access to education in Bangladesh often focuses on poor children's physical access to school rather than on broader visions of access that include meaningful learning in an appropriate environment. For this reason, many policy interventions are targeted at meeting the needs of households to support the costs associated with education - food, cash subsidies for uniforms, transport etc – rather than to support children's actual learning. The precise types of support needed for poor children at school are neither identified nor provided.

According to Lewin (2007) access to education is not meaningful unless it results in:

1. Secure enrolment and regular attendance;
2. Progression through grades at appropriate ages;
3. Meaningful learning which has utility;
4. Reasonable chances of transition to lower secondary grades, especially where these are within the basic education cycle.
5. More rather than less equitable opportunities to learn for children from poorer households, especially girls, with less variation in quality between schools (Lewin, 2007:21)

'Meaningful access' is central to CREATE's broad view of access and conceptual model. To measure equitable access to education, indicators of access to education that relate to CREATE's conceptual model of 'zones of exclusion' were used. Access to pre-school (zone 0), levels of children never enrolled (zone 1), children who drop out of school (zones 2 and 5) and children who are at risk of exclusion or 'silently excluded' (zones 3 and 6). Children at risk of exclusion are assessed through their levels of attendance, attainment and the extent to which they are the correct age for their grade (Lewin, 2007).

This policy brief is based on data from the 2007 and 2009 rounds of the CREATE Community and School Survey (ComSS). The ComSS was based in six locations, one in each administrative division of Bangladesh. The survey included 6,696 households and 36 schools, and a total of 9,045 children aged between 4 and 15. This data was disaggregated by gender, disability, income, food security and type of school. While for all these indicators significant relationships can be established, the indicators relating to poverty, income, and food security had the biggest, most cross cutting and significant effects

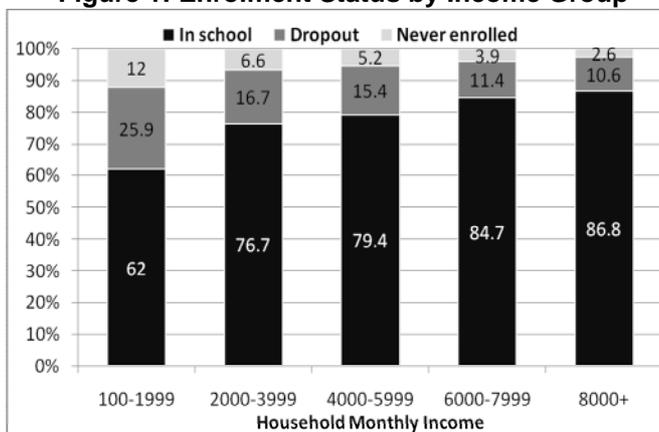
**Income and Access to education In Bangladesh**

Evidence from many studies shows that educational access is strongly determined by household income (Lewin, 2007, Al-Samarrai, 2009:168). Although primary education is free and compulsory in Bangladesh, there are substantial private and opportunity costs that parents must meet for their children’s schooling (Ahmed et al, 2005). These costs include examination fees, private tuition, uniforms, and paying for notebooks in the upper grades of primary school, and for some foregone earnings from employment.

ComSS data reveal the average cost per child per year of attending primary school to be Tk. 3,812, (about \$55). The average yearly income per person is Tk. 14,315.18 (around \$207) in this sample. Bearing in mind that these are averages, and that within this poor sample there is considerable variation, it is not hard to see why the poor struggle to pay the costs of educating their children.

Figure 1 shows the unequal participation of children in education from different income groups. Households which have less than Tk. 2,000 income per month (\$29) send almost 25% fewer of their children to school than those who are in the Tk. 8,000 (\$115) and above income group.

**Figure 1: Enrolment Status by Income Group**



Rates of dropout and proportions of children who have never been enrolled are inversely correlated to the increase of family income. 12% of children from households living on incomes below Tk. 2,000 per month had never been enrolled in school at all, while a quarter had started school but dropped out. In families earning more than Tk. 8,000 per month, 2.6% of children had never been enrolled and 10.6% had dropped out of school. The fact that income is such a strong determinant of access to education indicates that policies making education

free and compulsory, free schoolbooks, along with other policy interventions are not enough to bring about universal access to primary education.

**Poverty, Nutrition, Health and Exclusion**

12% of the households in the sample suffered from constant food insecurity, while around one third of the households suffered from intermittent food insecurity. A little over a third were found to have enough to meet their food security needs, while only 18.8% were in the surplus food security category.

Poor nutrition and health are associated with poverty. The data show that poorer children were more likely to be in the category of children with health problems (correlation is significant at  $p < 0.01$ ). Malnutrition, micro nutrient deficiency (specifically, iron, vitamin A and iodine deficiency), undernutrition, diarrhoea, malaria and worms are common health problems which can affect children’s cognitive development and/or access to education in developing countries (Pridmore, 2007:21).

3.2% of the children were suffering from either severe or occasional health problems. Out of them, 74.3% were enrolled and 25.7% were out of school (11.4% had dropped out and 14.3% had never enrolled). Among not-sick children in the same age group 12.2% were out of school. This indicates that poor health is associated with exclusion from basic education. **Children suffering from health problems were twice as likely as others to be in zones of exclusion 1 and 2 – never enrolled or dropped out of primary school.** Children with poor health have low achievement and high repetition compared to children with good health (the difference is significant at  $p < 0.01$ ) and are therefore more likely to be in a category defined as ‘silently excluded’ or at risk of exclusion.

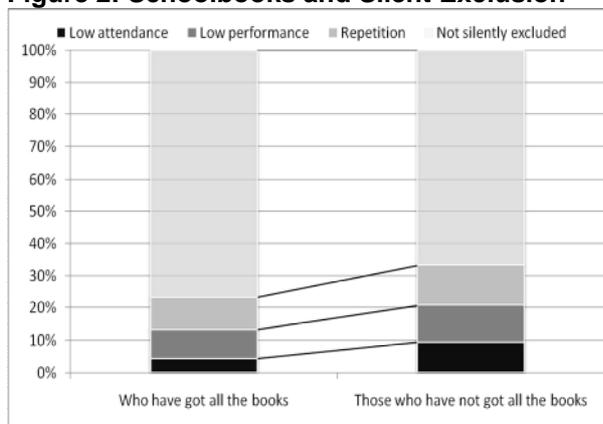
**School Books**

Primary school books are supplied by the Government of Bangladesh. For austerity reasons, schools collect and reuse 25% of the books. Teachers collect books from the previous year’s children and distribute them among 25% of children of the school.

In the lower grades (Grades 1 and 2) textbooks include activities designed to be written into the books during classes. Children who use the books for the first time, can complete those activities in their books. However, when these books are distributed to children for a second year, the

exercises are already filled in and this may compromise learning for at least 25% of children. Many of the books are illegible, with printing worn off the pages completely after 4-5 months. They are not suitable for reuse. Trying to determine who the 25% who receive the second hand books are is not hard. A good hypothesis would be that they are the poorest, who could not afford to pay for books or private tutoring from teachers or other unauthorised school fees. It seems that policy on learning materials is short sighted, unlikely to be value for money and pedagogically poorly conceived.

**Figure 2: Schoolbooks and Silent Exclusion**



There is a clear relationship between children who did not have all the books for their grade and poor attendance, achievement and repetition compared to the children those who had all the books.

**The Primary Education Stipend Project (PESP)**

The aim of the PESP is to increase the enrolment, attendance, progression, and performance of primary school-aged children from poor families throughout Bangladesh by providing cash payments to targeted households.

40% of the poorest families with children enrolled in primary schools should receive a monthly stipend of Tk. 100 if their children attended primary school regularly (over 80% of time and achieve more than 45% in tests). The PESP uses indicators of poverty that are determined at the school level. These are: children of distressed female-headed households; day labourers; insolvent artisans/mechanics; landless families (owning less than 0.5 acres of land) and sharecroppers (Tietjen, 2003:13).

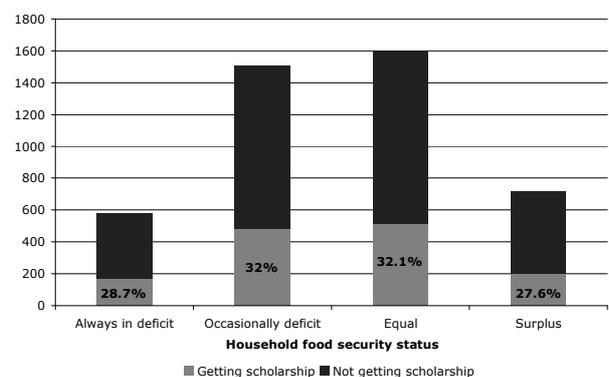
The distribution of the stipend to families in terms of their food security status can be analysed. Surprisingly those in the categories of food security of always having a food deficit and those who always have a food surplus receive the stipend in

almost equal proportions. The targeting system used by the PESP gives equal weighting to richer and poorer *upazilas* meaning that it is the relatively poor in each administrative area that get the stipend, not the poorest in absolute terms (Tietjen, 2003:16). Due to the targeting problems, less than a third of children from households that are always in food deficit received the stipend (Figure 3).

Further, the conditions of the stipend prevent many poor children from receiving it. Maintaining over 80% attendance amid demand for their labour time from their families, and securing 45% marks on tests are nearly impossible. This is especially true when it is taken into account that they attend schools and take part in an examination system where teachers assume that much of the children’s learning should take place at home with the help of private tutors.

The average costs of primary education in 2009 were Tk. 3,812 per year, per child. This is more than three times the value of the stipend, which is Tk. 1,200 per year per child. Even if they do receive the stipend, many households are unable to afford to send their children to school since the costs can be more than 20% of average per capita income of the ComSS sample.

**Figure 3: Number and proportion of primary school children who receive the stipend by food security status of their household**



The US \$600 million spent on the PESP from 2002-2008 represented at least 60% of the development budget for primary education (excluding donor inputs) (Tietjen, 2003:31). This money was spent on a scheme designed to target the poor in which only 28.7% of those in households always in food deficit received the stipend, while roughly the same proportion (27.6%) and more in absolute terms of those in households always in surplus also received the stipend. Such expensive and inefficient policy must be reconsidered.

### Policy Recommendations

To combat the effects on access to education of poverty, instead of stipend schemes, which are regressive rather than redistributive, expensive and inefficient, various practical interventions could help to improve access to education for the poor:

- Raising awareness of poverty related exclusion and training teachers to identify children at risk of exclusion due to poverty would be a way of identifying at risk children early and helping with targeting of interventions. Teachers could be trained to watch out for signs of malnutrition (such as under height and weight), identify children who do not have proper school learning materials, who have to work, or are from landless families. Concepts of equity should be built into education policies and into the ethos of the curriculum and methods of teaching.
- Pedagogically the curriculum should be designed to be sufficient for meaningful learning rather than needing supplementary teaching in the form private tuition. Where private tuition is needed in the short term NGO's could run 'homework clubs' for poor children staffed by teachers at low cost.
- A school health programme would help to reduce health inequity. Visits by doctors or local health workers to schools to check on children, and monitor indicators of their development such as height and weight should help to identify problems and poverty related ill health. This would also help with the identification of poor families who qualify for free school meals, schoolbooks and equipment.
- A school feeding programme along the lines of the mid day meals programme in parts of India, instead of cash for education, might help to incentivise attendance at school for the poorest. If run properly, it would help to avoid undernourishment, malnourishment, micro nutrient deficiencies and related problems among children of poor families who were in school.
- School feeding programmes may prove too late to help the irreversible damage done by childhood malnutrition and undernutrition. Nutrient supplements for mothers and babies from conception to a child's second birthday would help to give children the best start in life and avoid complicated and expensive health problems in later life.
- Extending the scheme for providing free school books to pupils to include pens/pencils, note books, geometry boxes and school bags is essential to provide more equal access to education in schools, and to tackle silent exclusion. Reusable textbooks rather than

worksheet-based readers would avoid the problem of used books being worthless to those who have to use them. Such books need to be durable so that they last several years.

To mitigate the costs of these interventions, and to ensure they are progressive in terms of equity, they must be means tested and/or limited in other ways to benefit the poorest 40% of households who are most likely to be excluded from basic education. Identification of the poor may prove difficult, but may be less difficult than mobilising political will at national and local levels to make a reality of commitments to enhance equity in access to education.

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This policy brief is based on Hossain and Zeitlyn, (2010) *Poverty and Equity: Access to Education in Bangladesh*, CREATE Pathways to Access, Research Monograph No 51. Brighton: University of Sussex, and was written by Benjamin Zeitlyn.



**CREATE** is a DFID-funded research programme consortia exploring issues of educational access, transitions and equity in South Africa, India, Bangladesh and Ghana. For more information go to: [www.create-rpc.org](http://www.create-rpc.org)

