



# EDUCATION FOR THE URBAN POOR IN BANGLADESH

## CREATE BANGLADESH POLICY BRIEF 1

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### Education for the urban poor in Bangladesh

The urban poor, especially those who live in slums, are among the groups worst served by the education system in Bangladesh. They lack wealth, power and social connections are probably under-counted in national surveys and are often ignored in policy and programmes. Poverty is still seen as a rural issue by both government and non-government organisations. This policy brief concentrates on primary education for children aged 6-15, examines what education is on offer for the urban poor in Bangladesh, and asks what can be done to improve it. It is based on: Cameron, S. (2010) 'Access to and Exclusion from Primary Education in Slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh', CREATE Pathways to Access Monograph No. ... and other research conducted as part of the CREATE research programme.

### Slums and urban poverty

Bangladesh is still a predominantly rural country, but its urban population is rising fast. While the country's population has grown on average by about 2% per annum since independence, the rate for urban areas is 6%. As a result the urban population has increased six-fold. 12 million people live in the capital, Dhaka, a number that is projected to grow to 22 million by 2015 (World Bank, 2007). 35% of the population of Bangladesh's six main cities live in slums. The slum population of Dhaka is estimated to have doubled between 1996 and 2005 (CUS et al, 2006). By some measures, child poverty is now higher in urban than rural areas (UNICEF, 2010).

This pattern is in large part due to migration from rural areas, a process attributed to rural poverty and landlessness and large urban-rural wage differentials. However it is a mistake to see urban poverty as exclusively due to migration. There have always been poor people in urban areas, and many current slum dwellers have been there for a generation or more.

Conditions in slums are often appalling. In one

survey from 2005 (CUS et al, 2006), more than half had problems with flooding, some had no electricity, and many households had to share their latrines and water sources with more than ten other households. Employment options are limited. Men work as rickshaw pullers, other transport labourers, street vendors, petty traders, and construction workers; women as domestic servants, in garment factories, and in manual labour such as brick-breaking.

#### What is a slum?

Areas of concentrated urban poverty are variously called slums, 'bostis', or squatter settlements in Bangladesh. Exact definitions vary but are based on deprivations in terms of water, sanitation, services, building quality, security of tenure, population density, and poverty. CREATE used a working definition from the Centre for Urban Studies, according to which 35% of the residents of Bangladesh's six main cities live in slums.

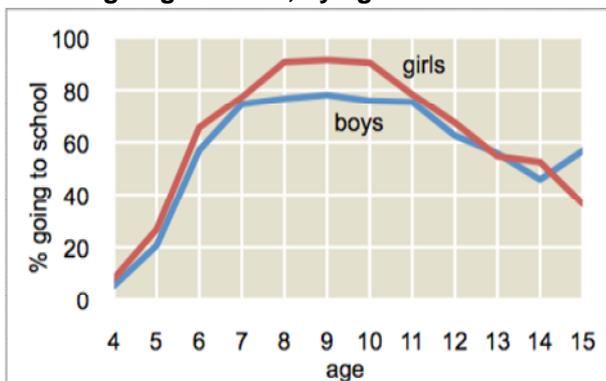
#### Who goes to school?

In the 2009 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey

(UNICEF, 2010), the primary net attendance rate in slums in Bangladesh's cities averaged 65%, compared to 81% nationally. Secondary attendance was only 18% in slums, and drop-out and repetition rates were higher than elsewhere.

CREATE's research confirms these results. Primary net enrolment rates in the slums were around 70% – 65% for boys and 73% for girls. Ignoring NGO schools and kindergartens, as most national data does, would reduce this rate to only 40% compared to the official national figure of 85%. 18% of children aged 6-11 had never been to school and 5% had been but had dropped out.

### School-going children, by age and sex



Girls are attending primary school in greater numbers than boys. Boys may have more opportunities on the labour market, or may have greater freedom to stop going to school if they are bored, abused, or unable to keep up with lessons. Girls, however, face discrimination and pressure to drop out further up the system, especially when they reach an age where they are expected to marry, as well as discrimination in job markets.

### What keeps 30% of children out of school?

**Availability of schools** is patchy. There are around 300 government primary schools in Dhaka to serve around 800,000 primary-aged children. Even with double shifting, the majority must be either out of school or in non-government schools of some kind.

NGOs such as BRAC and the Dhaka Ahsania Mission have traditionally had a rural focus but are increasing their presence in urban areas. A UNICEF-supported programme, Basic Education for Hard-to-Reach Urban Working Children

provides informal education via NGOs such as Friends in Village Development. But in general NGOs are still learning how to run programmes in slums with poor infrastructure, difficulty of access during the rainy season, and risk of buildings being destroyed during slum demolition.

The number and types of school nearby clearly affected what schools children ended up in. The effect of location was large and could not be explained away by differences between the slums in income, wealth, or parental education. Geographical barriers such as rivers and flood-prone streets prevented children from accessing schools. The slum with lowest enrolment was separated by a busy road from the nearest schools and had little NGO provision. Longer journeys are riskier, and children's security was a major concern for the parents we interviewed.

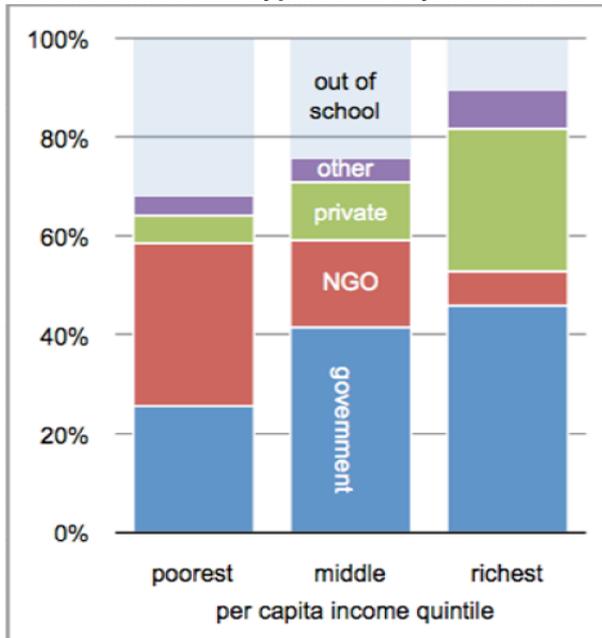
Low **incomes** were a barrier for some, and instrumental in school choice. Surveyed households were typically making 6,000 Bangladeshi Taka a month, or US\$0.74 a day per person. Incomes in slums in other cities may be even lower. Urban poor households spend the bulk of their incomes on food, leaving very little for health and education, making them vulnerable to food price rises such as the dramatic rise in 2008.

Even though government and NGO schools are notionally free, unaffordable **school expenses** were the main reason given by parents for children dropping out. On average households were spending 7.5% of their incomes for each child in primary school. The better-off families with children in private schools were spending more. But so (as a proportion of income) were the poorest. Some money was spent on fees, but most was for **private tuition** – widely seen as necessary for advancing through the school system. Lessons 'taught' in school had to be 'learned' at home, a task that children of uneducated and busy parents found difficult.

Children who were out of school, or in NGO schools, were from significantly poorer households than those in government or private schools. Government schools were attended by all, but dominated by the better off. Among the richest 20% of households, one in four were in private primary schools (often known as kindergarten), suggesting

dissatisfaction with the other options on offer.

**Income and school type for 6-11 year olds**



Slum households are also **time poor**. Households that were female-headed or had more children per working-age adult were more likely to keep children out of school. Earning a living, maintaining the household, queuing for subsidised food may take so much time for these households that parents are forced to take children out of school to help around the house, or are unable to spend the time needed to ensure their children enrol and stay in school.

**Child labour** is another cause of drop out. In some poor households in Dhaka, income from child labour represents around a third of household income. In CREATE’s survey, most children aged 11 or older who had dropped out were now working. For some girls, **marriage** is a more pressing consideration than school or work, and also results in drop out. One survey of married adolescent women in slums (Rashid, 2004) found their average age of marriage was 13½ years. The combined effects of poverty, crime, sexual harassment, and tradition provide powerful incentives for early marriage.

Bangladesh has officially aimed to increase enrolment and promote **quality** at the same time. In practice the focus has been on enrolment targets and quality has suffered, particularly in urban areas, leading to significant declines in reading and mathematics achievement during the 1990s.

Double-shifting – where classes 1 and 2 are taught in the morning and 3-5 in the afternoon, is used in 87% of government and registered non-government schools. The government plans to reduce this figure, but this is unlikely to improve quality without a dramatic increase in the number of teachers. Quality issues may have been reflected in drop out rates, which were higher in government than other types of primary school.

Poor environmental conditions and overcrowding were manifested in high levels of **ill health** among children. A quarter of 6-11 year old children had been sick in the past month, rising to 30% for those who were out of school. Children who were not in school were on average an inch shorter than school-going children of the same age and sex, pointing towards poor nutrition in early childhood. Poor health was particularly implicated in the non-enrolment of young children (6-8 years). This effect was significant even when related variables like income were accounted for, and suggests that child health is important in delaying entry to school, with the outcome that the child either never enrolls or enrolls late and is at higher risk of drop-out later on.

**Political issues.** Poverty is still seen as a rural issue. The urban poor are perceived as less ‘deserving’ than the rural poor, and there is a fear of encouraging rural-urban migration. Their tenuous legal status and vulnerability to political violence stop the urban poor from making their voices heard or demanding services at the local government level. The risk of eviction deters NGOs from investing in buildings that might be destroyed, or local teachers who might have to move away.

**Policy implications**

There are some 300,000 primary-school aged children living in slums in central Dhaka. If the situation in the CREATE study areas is typical, then tens of thousands of these children are out of school – perhaps enough to fill a hundred new schools. Despite a large classroom-building programme during 2004 - 2008, lack of physical access to government schools is still stopping children from enrolling. Some of this need – far from all of it – might be fulfilled by shifting the few remaining single shift schools to double shifts. But this would further reduce learning time, which is already low by international standards.

In official data, Bangladesh has achieved impressively high enrolment rates with very low government spending even by south Asian standards. Arguably, it is over-reliant on NGOs to reach disadvantaged groups. Studies of learning achievement have suggested that the quality of NGO schools is often higher than government schools. They are also more flexible, for instance in adapting school hours so that children can continue to work if they need to. But it is still difficult for children who complete a basic education in an NGO school to get a formal secondary education and formal qualifications. Government and private secondary schools need to recognise the validity of NGO primary education.

Research tends to examine education and poverty through a rural/urban lens, usually finding that urban residents are better off in every way, and obscuring the huge urban poverty issue that lies behind the averages. The lack of reliable information is a key constraint to providing education for children in slums. Supposedly representative household surveys and censuses do not always cover slums, although this may be changing. As better data become publicly available they need to be used to inform policy and planning in the absence of reliable administrative data.

Reducing costs is likely to be an effective intervention, especially for stopping children from dropping out after their families run into financial difficulties. Currently a stipend scheme operates only in rural areas. There are doubts about the effectiveness and targeting of this scheme. It takes a large proportion of the primary education budget and spreads it very thinly by giving small stipends – up to 100 Taka per pupil per month to 5.5 million students in government schools (Al-Samarrai, 2009; Baulch, 2010). Offering such a stipend to urban households when no government school places are available would only add insult to injury. Stipends need to keep pace with inflation, and the effects monitored. For the households sampled in this study, those in the bottom two income quintiles, earning less than US\$0.50 per person per day, are the ones who would particularly benefit from even a small stipend.

Schools need to shift towards curricula and teaching methodologies that do not incur the need for private tuition. This means changes to the exam

system, teacher training and curriculum, and in general to attitudes towards the relationship between schools and their students. In the mean time, NGOs can help children whose families cannot afford tuition to progress through the system by providing after-school assistance. This could come, for instance, in the form of 'homework clubs' where older children help the younger ones.

The government, NGOs and donors in Bangladesh need to attend to the right to education of children living in slums with greater urgency, as an end in itself, and additionally because it will not attain national goals such as universal primary education otherwise. The political case for a greater focus on the urban poor needs to be set out. There has always been poverty in urban areas, and slums have existed in Dhaka at least since colonial times. Most urban poor people are not about to 'return' to rural areas that their families may have left a generation or more ago, and where they own no land and face worsening environmental pressures. They are vital to Bangladesh's development prospects, especially through their role in the export garment industry, their productivity is key to the competitiveness of this industry. Thus there is a strong economic growth argument, as well as a social justice argument and a human rights argument, not to neglect education for the urban poor.

This policy brief is based on: Cameron, S. (2010) Access to and Exclusion from Primary Education in Slums of Dhaka, Bangladesh, CREATE Pathways to Access Monograph No. 45 available at [www.create-rpc.org](http://www.create-rpc.org). It has been developed by the author.

A full list of references can be found in the monograph.



**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)