



**Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access,  
Transitions and Equity**

## **Educational Access in Bangladesh**

### **Country Research Summary**

**Manzoor Ahmed  
Altaf Hossain**

**November 2010**



**Institute of Education and Development,  
BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh**



Consortium for Research on  
Educational Access, Transitions & Equity

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The Consortium for Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) is a Research Programme Consortium supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID). Its purpose is to undertake research designed to improve access to basic education in developing countries. It seeks to achieve this through generating new knowledge and encouraging its application through effective communication and dissemination to national and international development agencies, national governments, education and development professionals, non-government organisations and other interested stakeholders.

Access to basic education lies at the heart of development. Lack of educational access, and securely acquired knowledge and skill, is both a part of the definition of poverty, and a means for its diminution. Sustained access to meaningful learning that has value is critical to long term improvements in productivity, the reduction of inter-generational cycles of poverty, demographic transition, preventive health care, the empowerment of women, and reductions in inequality.

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## Foreword

This Country Research Summary (CRS) provides an overview of recent research findings from CREATE research in Bangladesh. Its scope is selective and needs to be considered alongside the portfolio of research outputs CREATE has published which cover other aspects of the programme of research. This CRS brings up to date a process that we began in 2007 in the inception phase of CREATE with the publication of a series of Country Analytic Reviews and the initiation of the Pathways to Access Research Monographs (PTA) that now include over 60 contributions. The Bangladesh Country Analytic Review (Ahmed et al. 2007) collated recent research, developed a baseline analysis of access to education, located pressing policy issues, generated conceptual tools, and identified key research gaps. The PTAs embrace review studies, analysis of large scale secondary data sets, empirical findings from household and school level data, and evidenced based thematic and conceptual discourses. Interim publications including earlier country level policy briefs have maintained the momentum of the impact of the CREATE research on policy and practice and made research results available in a timely way.

The CREATE team in Bangladesh, along with CREATE research students and associates have published a collection of monographs and policy briefs along with a portfolio of journal articles and other research outputs with particular relevance to Bangladesh. These are catalogued on the CREATE website ([www.create-rpc.org](http://www.create-rpc.org)). These extended the knowledge base we constructed in 2006/7 and contributed to building more understanding of the causes, consequences and capacity to reduce educational exclusion. They complement the generic outputs from CREATE which extend the range of insights into the opportunities that exist to enhance access to basic education consistent with the aspirations of national governments and internationally agreed goals.

CREATE seeks to inform policy dialogue at national level and international level. It depends on its networks of researchers and research associates, and its close relationships with national and local governments and with development agencies, to project its insights and ideas into evidenced based discussions. This CRS, and the associated portfolio of research products, provide a toolkit of ideas and insights to this end.

Keith Lewin  
Director of CREATE  
Centre for International Education  
University of Sussex





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# **EDUCATIONAL ACCESS IN BANGLADESH**

## **COUNTRY RESEARCH SUMMARY**

### **NOVEMBER 2010**

This research summary describes and explains patterns of access to schooling in Bangladesh. It draws on empirical data from the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE) as well as existing literature and statistical analysis. It outlines types of educational provision and provides some basic statistics on access, vulnerability and exclusion, as well as insights into the characteristics of those denied access. The research summary introduces key findings from CREATE research and offers recommendations which, it is hoped, will be useful to policy makers and academics working in this field.

Manzoor Ahmed and Altaf Hossain

## **1. Why *effective* educational access is important in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has ratified a number of international treaties guaranteeing children the right to education, and is committed to achieve the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals. Yet many children in Bangladesh continue to be excluded from both primary and secondary education in a variety of ways. Statistics show that while the large majority of children enter school and receive some education, dropout rates from schooling remain high. Quality problems mean many children are silently excluded from meaningful access, with low rates of achievement and high risks of dropping out. While transition rates to secondary are relatively high, the high dropout rate means low numbers are accessing secondary. Progress has been made, however. In particular, the gender gap in both primary and secondary school enrolments has diminished rapidly over the last decade (Ahmed et al, 2007).

## **2. Policy and educational contexts in Bangladesh**

The critical questions at this time in Bangladesh, as the Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II) winds down by mid-2011, are: how the next phase of primary education development in the country up to 2015 and beyond will be shaped; how the government is positioned to design and implement a relatively comprehensive sub-sector programme; how development partners can support the national effort; and what lessons have been learned in this respect. These questions have to be considered in relation to the new education policy that has been announced by the government recently and is at a final stage of adoption. The sixth five-year national development plan (2011-2015) is under preparation and will provide a framework for resource allocation and implementation of development activities including those in education.

In Bangladesh education is compulsory for children aged six to ten through a five year primary cycle defined as basic education (Grades 1-5). Article 17 of the Bangladesh Constitution states that all children between the ages of six and ten are to be provided with free basic education. There are five years of secondary (Grades 6-10) and two years of higher secondary (Grades 11-12) education.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) is responsible for primary education in Bangladesh. MoPME is involved in formulation of policies, and oversees implementation carried out by the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). District and Upazilla (sub-district) level offices provide management and supervision support to primary education on behalf of DPE. A separate Ministry of Education deals with secondary education.

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There are at least eleven types of primary school providers. The main forms of provision include government primary schools, registered non government primary schools, *ebtedayee madrasas*<sup>1</sup> and formal NGO schools. A special feature of primary education in Bangladesh is a strong and sizeable 'second-chance' non-formal primary education programme (NFPE) run by NGOs for children over the age of 8, who have dropped out from or have never enrolled in primary school. On average, over a million children are served by this programme. Enrolment numbers and proportions served by different types of institutions differ somewhat from official statistics when NFPE figures are included (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Percentage distribution of primary school students by school type, 2008 (including non-formal primary education programmes)**

School type	Enrolment Percentage	Number of institutions (rounded numbers)
Government Primary Schools	56.9	37,700
Registered Non-Government Primary Schools	18.7	20,100
Non-Formal Primary Education	9.6	> 30,000
<i>Madrasa</i>	7.0	16,000
Kindergarten	4.7	2,700
Primary attached to high school	1.3	1,000
Others (Community school, unregistered, etc)	1.8	3,900
Total	100.0	81,400 +>30,000 NFPE

Source: Campaign for Popular Education, 2009:63; DPE School Census 2009 and BANBEIS 2008

The current system of educational financing is uneven and is failing to provide adequate resources to sustain universal enrolment and serve the needs of the poor effectively. Government spending on education stagnated in real terms in the first half of the 2000s. Although it is showing signs of increase, it was still only around 2.4% of GDP in 2009. The budget share allocated to primary education has declined (particularly the recurrent budget), while the share devoted to secondary education has increased. Government funding varies enormously across different providers of education services and these differences are often reinforced by private expenditure on education. External donors, both multilateral and bilateral, are involved as substantial financial contributors to both public and NGO programmes and support the major Primary Education Development Programme (PEDPII) within a SWAP (Ahmed et al, 2007).

### 3. Overview of educational access in Bangladesh

This section highlights some findings from existing research and data sets on educational access in Bangladesh based on CREATE research in Bangladesh, especially the ComSS study. Access to basic education in Bangladesh is improving, but major areas of concern remain.

#### 3.1 Primary schooling

According to a DPE survey, Bangladesh had 102.2% gross enrolment rate (GER) for primary education in 2008 (107.3% for girls and 107.5% for boys). Net enrolment rates (NER) were lower with an overall total of 91.9%. In 2008 the average dropout rate per grade in primary was 10%, with 11% of children dropping out from Grade 1, 12% from Grade 4 and 8% from Grade 5. Out of 100 students admitted to Grade 1 five years earlier, 52 completed the five primary grades in by 2008 (DPE, 2009). Enrolments of boys and girls are similar (Table 2).

<sup>1</sup> *Ebtedayee madrasas* are religious schools that receive government funding for teacher's salaries and follow the national curriculum as well as providing religious education.

**Table 2: Completion rates in different types of primary schools, 2008 (percentages based on reconstructed cohort analysis)**

Type of school	Rural	Urban
Government schools (GPS)	50.6	67.4
Regd. Non-govt. schools (RNGPS)	39.4	41.1
Entedayee madrasa	31.4	30.6
Primary classes in high schools	72.0	85.5
Primary classes in high madrasas	65.3	66.3
Total completion rate for formal schools (urban and rural)	50.1*	
Non-formal primary (NFPE) (rural)	>95	

Source: CAMPE, 2009:87

\*This number based on EW survey is 2% lower than the government statistics shown in Table 4

### 3.1.1 Progress in access and learning outcomes

Available data show (see Tables 2 and 4) good progress in enrolment in primary education for both girls and boys; but there have been only small improvements in completion of the five-year primary cycle and only limited progress in learning outcomes – two main indicators of efficiency and effectiveness of the system. These recent data from independent studies are consistent with data for 2005 presented in the CREATE Country Analytical Report, based on official statistics, which showed a completion rate of around 50% (Ahmed et al, 2007).

Regarding learning outcomes, the ultimate measure of the success or failure of PEDP II, a comparison of the situation in 2000 and 2008 is available from Education Watch (CAMPE, 2008). The Education Watch test covered basic competencies based on the curricular objectives in languages (Bangla and English), mathematics, and life skills (environment, health, nutrition, and safety) as shown in Table 3. The tests were designed at a simple level of difficulty and a passing grade was expected to be scored by students in all 27 prescribed competencies in the four subject areas to indicate that the required primary education curricular objectives were being achieved. There was progress in the “number of competencies achieved by Grade 5 students” in all types of institutions. On average, two-thirds of the basic competencies were achieved, and one-third not achieved. This must be interpreted keeping in mind that the tests were designed with the assumption that a student completing primary education was expected to score passing marks in all the competencies. These results are consistent with DPE’s own recent assessment (Table 4).

**Table 3: Mean numbers of competencies achieved by Grade 5 students, 2008 (out of 27 tested competencies)**

Type of school	2000	2008
Government school (GPS)	16.1	19.0
Regd. non-govt. pry. school (RNGPS)	15.2	18.0
<i>Ebtedayee madrasas</i>	n/a	15.2
Non-formal (NFPE)	17.2	20.0
Primary classes in high schools	n/a	20.8
Primary classes in high <i>madrasas</i>	n/a	17.0
Total for all types	16.1	18.7

Source: CAMPE, 2008:98

### 3.1.2 DPE Assessment

DPE’s own recent assessment summarised in a background paper for formulating the post-PEDP II primary education development plan (DPE, 2009) provides basic information regarding progress on key indicators in PEDP II (Table 4). It can be seen that the targets set for efficiency of the system (dropout and completion rates) were modest, and even if the 2009 targets were reached during the extended period of PEDP II implementation up to 2011, there will still be much more to be done to achieve an acceptable standard of basic education.

In respect of learning outcomes, the key quality criterion, the targets for basic competencies in literacy and numeracy, cannot be regarded as ambitious. Even if the targets were reached, a quarter of primary education completers would still be without acceptable literacy skills and one-third of all the completing students would be without essential numeracy skills. For student-teacher ratio, an

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important determinant of quality in the teaching-learning process and classroom activities, again the target has been modest. This is especially significant because of the comparatively low classroom time (contact hours) in Bangladesh, with 90% of the primary schools run in two daily shifts. On average, the specified learning time is around 500 hours, about half of the international standard.

**Table 4: PEDP II progress on selected indicators**

Indicators	2005 Baseline	2009 Target	Latest Year
Gross Enrolment Rate	93.7	98.0	97.9 (2008)
Net Enrolment Rate	87.2	90.0	90.8 (2008)
Repetition Rates	No significant improvement reported over the 2005 baseline rates.		
Dropout Rates	Target was reduction by 2% every year since 2005 in all grades. No improvement reported.		
Student Completion Rate to Grade 5 (% of Grade 1 entrants)	52	55	52 (2008)
Expenditure on education as % of GNP	1.93	2.80	2.28 (2007)
Expenditure on primary as % of total education	37.1	45	41.0 (2008)
Pupil-Teacher Ratio	54:1	48:1	50:1 (2008)
% of students achieving literacy / numeracy in Grade 5 *	44/66 (2006)	65/75	63/69 (2008)

Source: DPE, 2009. Table prepared by author.

\* DPE (2009) cautions that these numbers on achievement may not be fully reliable and "should be handled with care"

The high student-teacher ratio and low contact hours can be explained by the low overall public sector allocation for education and low allocation for primary education, which has remained at less than 1% of GDP, one of the lowest in the world. The PEDP II target again projects a modest increase.

### 3.2 Secondary schooling

Transition from primary (Grade 5) to secondary (Grades 6-10) level appeared to be around 83% in 2004. CREATE data from surveys in six locations in 2007 and 2009 show a transition of about three quarters of the primary completers who themselves were about half of the age group. High dropout from primary school means that the high transition rate does not indicate high enrolment ratios at the secondary stage. A public exam at the end of the primary education cycle called the *Shomaponi* exam was introduced in selected districts in 2008 and nationwide in 2009. This exam is now the gateway into the secondary stage.

According to Education Watch (EW) statistics from 2005, Bangladesh had a GER of 65% at the secondary level, and NER of 45%. This gap suggests significant overage enrolments. Indeed: almost a quarter of secondary school aged children are in primary school (Ahmed et al., 2006). There are higher enrolment rates for girls over boys at secondary, and for urban over rural children. Cohort completion rates at Grade 10 in secondary schools are very low, at 17%. Male completion rates are higher than female completions (20%, as compared to 14%). This means a total dropout of 83% at secondary level, which rises to 86% for girls. Indeed EW 2005 data shows 28% of children aged 11-15 years (from an overall sample of almost 15,000 children) were out of any kind of (primary or secondary) school, with boys more likely than girls to be out of school (Ahmed et al., 2006).

## 4. Insights from the Community and Schools Study (ComSS)

Studies of communities and schools in six locations, one from each administrative division in Bangladesh, were conducted over a three year period with two rounds of data collected in 2007 and 2009 from households and schools in order to gain insights into the dynamics of participation and exclusion of children in schooling. The study covered 6,696 households with 9,045 children age 4-15 years from 18 school catchment areas (12 government primary schools and 6 registered non-government primary schools). The survey was designed to understand the overall access to basic education situation in these districts using CREATE's conceptual model of 'zones of exclusion' (Lewin, 2007). As a part of this Community and Schools Study (ComSS) study, a baseline survey was

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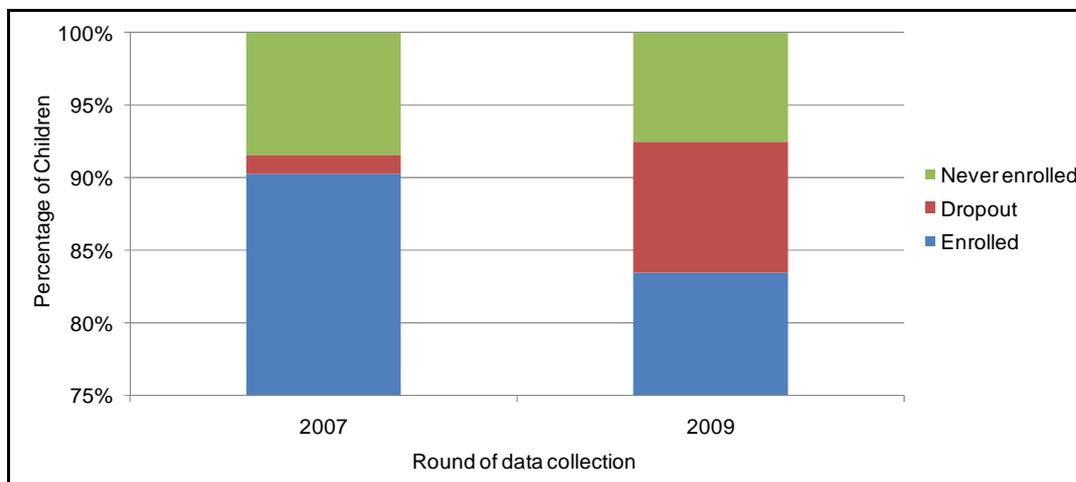
conducted in 2007 and after two years, in 2009, a follow up survey was done with the same households. The survey identified children who have been excluded from education in both 2007 and 2009 who are in 'zone 1' – never enrolled. We also identified children who dropped out from primary school (zone 2), and those who were enrolled in 2009 but not in 2007. Those enrolled but attending irregularly, being over age and learning little (zone 3) were also identified as were those not transitioning to lower secondary level after completing primary schooling (zone 4).

Some key findings include that those who dropped out were on average older, had repeated more school grades, came from lower income families, had parents with lower levels of education, had more household responsibilities, and significantly received less support from parents for their school work. Poverty, low levels of parental education, and unskilled parental occupations are factors related to late entry into education which increases the probability of drop out. Children who start school late are more at risk of dropping out than those enrolled at the appropriate age. Inadequate health and nutrition also played a role in drop out. Children who were permanently excluded from education and did not enrol at all were more likely to be disabled and less likely to play normally than children in school and those who dropped out. These excluded children were from poorer families, both economically and educationally, than families of children who dropped out.

#### 4.1 Exclusion Zone 1

The ComSS study confirms that non-enrolment of school-age children (exclusion zone 1) remains a serious problem. While official national statistics indicate a non-enrolment rate of under 10%, it was difficult to establish this proportion definitively for a particular time in specific communities. An increase in non-enrolment is recorded between two rounds of data collection at an interval of two years, showing an increase in dropout from primary grades and a decrease in the never-enrolled category (Figure 1). This appears to be more a matter of recognising and recording the status of children, rather than an actual change (discussed below). This itself signifies the problem of diagnosing different dimensions of exclusion and is indicative of the complexities in applying remedial strategies. It is also likely that the household survey underestimates those out of school since it depends on self reporting by households.

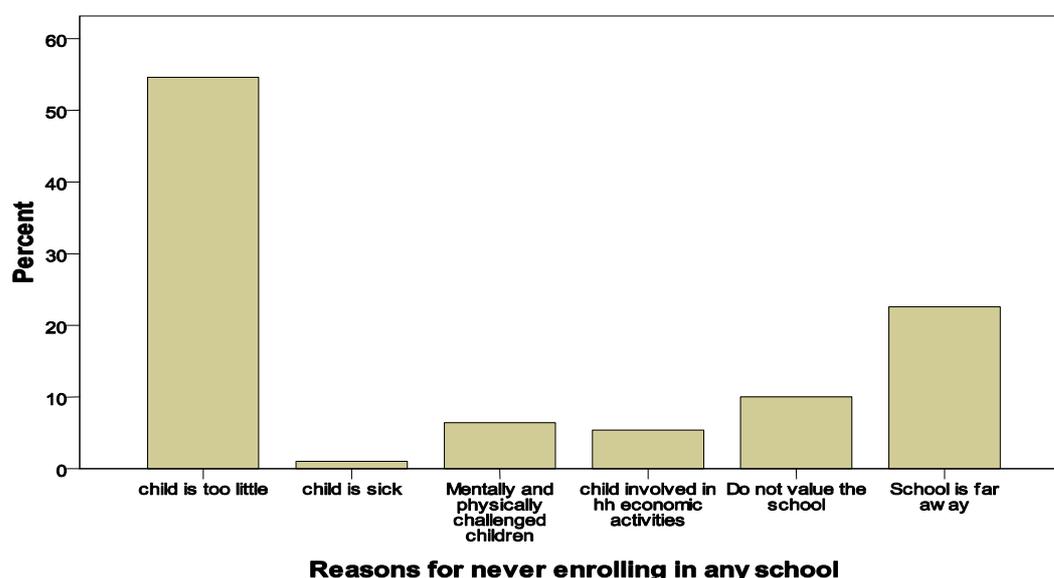
**Figure 1: Education status of primary school age (6-10) 2007 (round1) and 2009 (round 2)**



Source: Community and School Study (ComSS); Household Survey, 2009

The ComSS study shows that the perception of parents that the child was not old enough to start schooling was an important factor in non-enrolment of children at the designated age of 6. Distance of school from home and doubts of parents about the “value” of what is offered in primary school also influenced decisions about enrolling children in school (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Reasons for non-enrolment**



Source: ComSS, 2009

There was a clear association between the socio-economic circumstances of families and children's participation in schooling. As might be expected, occupation as a day labourer of the head of family (indicating low earning), not owning land, not having electricity in the house, not owning a radio or a television, or not possessing basic furniture such as a desk, increased the likelihood of children not being enrolled in school. Being a member of the religious or ethnic minority also reduced the chance of being in school (Table 5).

**Table 5: Socioeconomic indicators for households of never-enrolled and other children**

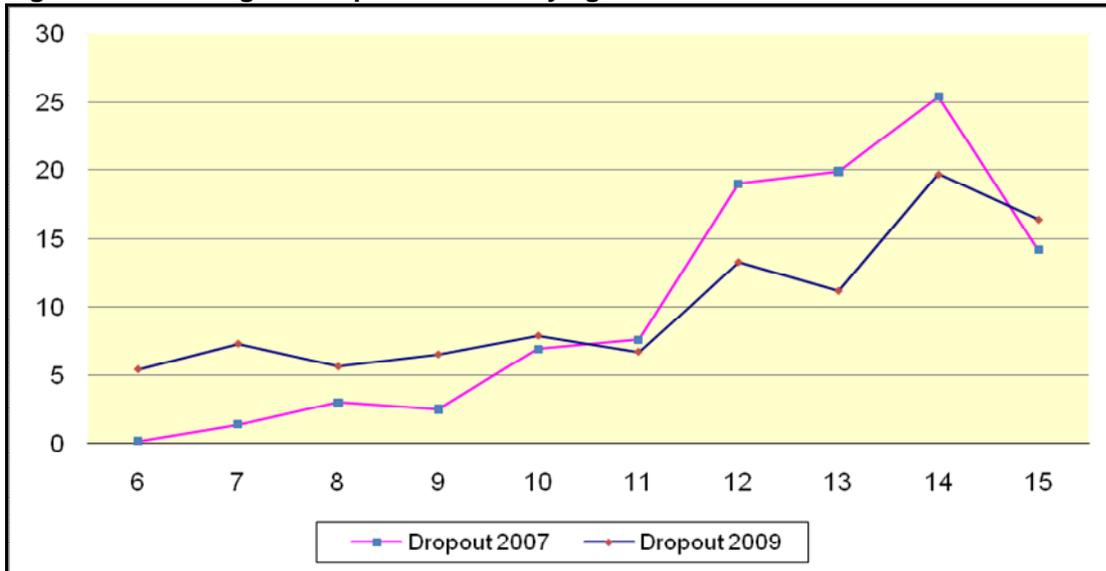
Indicators	Others	Never enrolled	Level of significance
Proportion of Hindus+	8%	17%	p<0.01
Proportion of 'tribal' people+	2%	16%	p<0.01
Average land owned by the household+	120 decimals	49 decimals	p<0.001
Proportion of landless households+	9%	23%	p<0.01
Own a desk+	65%	31%	
Has electricity+	36%	18%	p<0.001
Poor ventilation	24%	32%	ns
Daily newspaper	3.1%	1.4%	p<0.04
Has a radio	12.4%	7.2%	p<0.001
Has a television	21.9%	10.0%	p<0.000
Has a mobile phone	45.3%	31.9%	p<0.000

'ns.' indicates not significant at p<0.1 (two-sided test), + Household survey data 2007  
 Source: Community and School Study (ComSS); Household Survey, 2007 and 2009

#### 4.2 Exclusion Zone 2

The high level of dropout (exclusion zone 2) remains a critical problem at primary as well as secondary level. There is a nexus of inter-connected problems of family poverty, child migration, and various school factors including the assessment methods that becomes a push-out mechanism from schools. Drop outs rise rapidly for children over 10 years of age though many of these have not completed primary school as a result of late enrolment and repetition.

**Figure 3: Percentage of dropout children by age and data round**

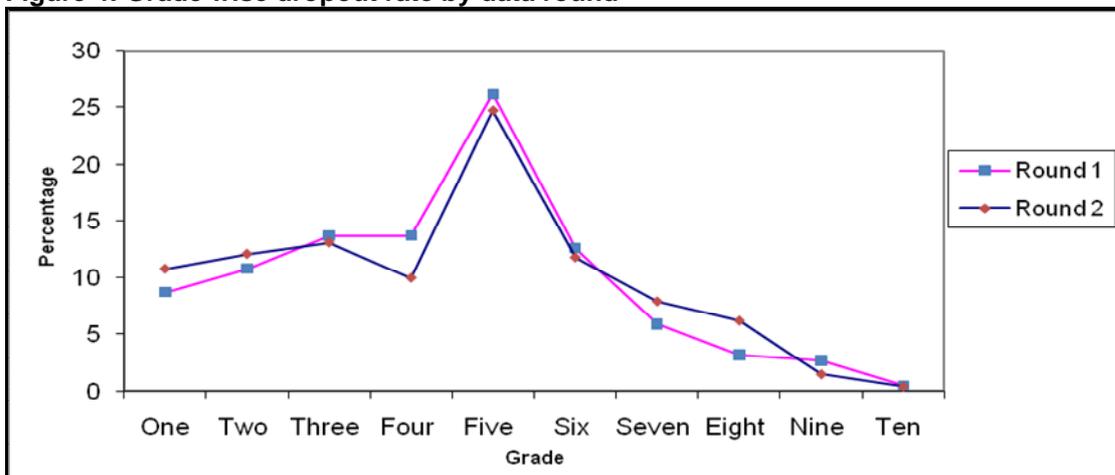


Source: Community and School Study (ComSS); Household Survey, 2007 and 2009

According to household data, dropout rates are high for the first grade, standing at more than 8% in 2007, increasing to 10% in the second round in 2009. For both rounds, the rate of exclusion rises with each grade, peaking at Grade 5 at about a quarter of the enrolled children. The pattern of higher rates of dropout among older and higher primary grade level children (Figures 3 and 4) is consistent with late initial enrolment mentioned above. The peaking at ages 12-14 corresponds to high dropout in Grade 5.

At the secondary stage, the rate of dropout gradually goes down every year (Figure 4), with dropout decreasing at the higher grades. The high dropout at Grade 5 and screening-out of children at and before the transition to secondary phase may have affected this pattern.

**Figure 4: Grade wise dropout rate by data round**



Source: Community and School Study (ComSS); Household Survey, 2007 and 2009

### 4.3 Exclusion Zone 3

The category of silent exclusion or 'zone 3' is an important conceptual construct that focuses attention on the large proportion of children who are enrolled in school, but not effectively engaged in learning. The characteristics of these students include poor attendance, grade repetition, and poor performance in class activities and examinations, all of which make them vulnerable to dropping out. Since this phenomenon describes potential for and vulnerability to dropping out, rather than actual

exclusion, it is difficult to quantify this situation with precision. ComSS studies suggest that this category, at a minimum, comprises a fifth to a quarter of all primary students who are enrolled.

The ComSS underscores the socio-economic correlates of silent exclusion (Table 6). Taking low attendance of students in school, their low performance in school and repetition of a year as markers of silent exclusion, it was found that these characteristics were associated with such factors as low family earning, occupation of family-head as a day labourer, family food insecurity, and not owning radio, TV or a desk (Table 6).

**Table 6: Household characteristics of silently excluded and other enrolled children**

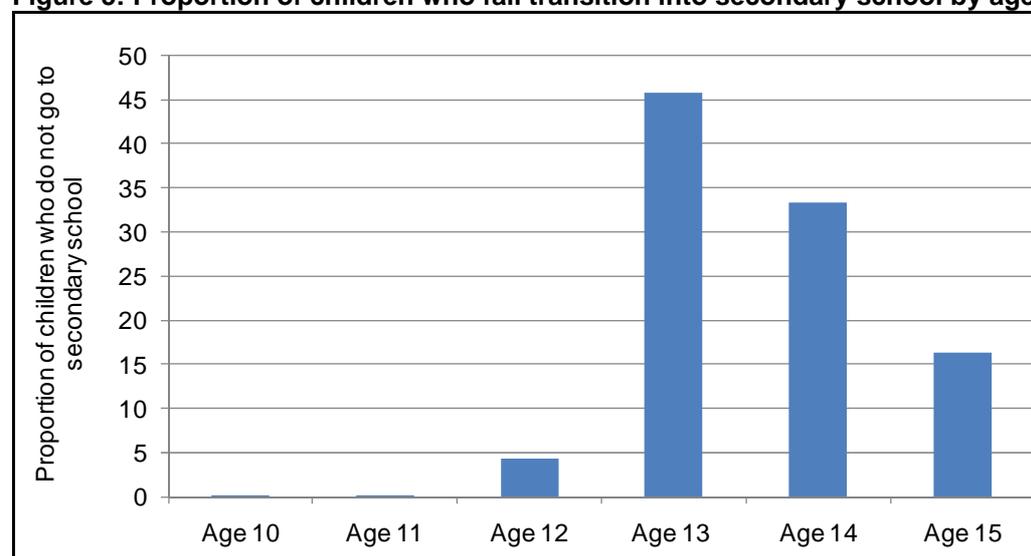
Indicators	Zone 3a (Low attendance)	Zone 3b (Low achiever)	Zone 3c (Repeaters)	Any zone	Not zone 3 (Other enrolled children)
Monthly HH income (Taka)	4,980	4,309	3,940	4,571	5,191
% of food security status is "always in need"	12.7	11.4	14.9	14.0	11.0
HHH works as a day labourer	32.2	30.9	30.8	29.8	24.6
Daily newspaper	4.7	1.9	1.4	2.4	3.3
Has a radio	12.7	13.3	10.7	12.1	12.5
Has a television	18.5	18.4	14.4	17.6	23.7
Has a mobile phone	44.0	36.5	36.7	39.1	48.2

Source: ComSS 2009

#### 4.4 Exclusion zone 4

The ComSS 2009 indicates that about 24% of the children who completed the Grade 5 did not enrol in Grade 6, the first year of the secondary stage. This number, however, underestimated the zone 4 problem. The peaking of dropout in Grade 5 (a quarter of total dropout), implies a high level of non-transition to secondary schools, especially when it is remembered that nearly half of all children do not complete Grade 5 successfully. Age-grade incongruence again shows up as a negative influence with a lower proportion of the older children not moving into the secondary stage (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Proportion of children who fail transition into secondary school by age**



Source: Community and School Study (ComSS); Household Survey, 2009

School participation is negatively influenced by ill health, but there are no school health programmes. Zone 4 children are over-represented amongst the always sick children by almost double the proportion of other children. More of them suffer from sickness than others who continue in school. Poor health of children has been observed among children irrespective of their school participation

status. However, ill health, when it is added to other socio-economic disadvantages, can be a serious impediment to children's schooling.

## 5. Implications of some key findings

Some key points from the findings of the ComSS studies which throw light on issues regarding progress made or not made in PEDP II are discussed below.

### 5.1 Deconstructing dropout

DPE data, cited above, provided the cumulative dropout for the primary stage. ComSS data, as noted above, showed an apparent decrease in school-going rate of about 7% for the designated primary age group (6-10 years) between 2007 and 2009. Not being ever enrolled (zone 1) remained about the same, but drop-out (zone 2) increased by about 8% (See Table 7).

**Table 7: Status of school participation 2007 and 2009 in 6 selected locations**

Eligible children	School participation % of age-group		Never enrolled %		Dropout %	
	2007	2009	2007	2009	2007	2009
4-15 years	79.3	78.3	15.9	4.8	4.8	16.9
6-10 years	90.3	83.5	8.4	7.5	1.3	9.0
11-15 years	84.0	77.9	3.7	2.4	12.3	19.7

Source: ComSS Household Surveys 2007 and 2009

The overall picture that emerges from the data is that the proportion of school-age children (6-15 years) going to any school and any grade went down by a substantial proportion, mainly due to a recorded increase in dropout rates. Research such as Hunt (2008) shows that dropping out is a process rather than an event, and may be due to a complex series of interconnected factors. There is a possibility of misrecognition of dropouts (if children have left the school or the locality to move to another school or locality; see below). There are different reasons why children drop out and different things they do when they drop out, which mean that the category of dropouts may itself be too broad and existing research instruments inadequate to measure it. Analysis of the data on dropout point to other issues about children's participation in education and pose questions about the extent of actual change in dropout rates, as discussed below.

The ComSS surveys showed that the rate of dropout rose from lower to higher grades in primary school, peaking in Grade 5 to around 25% of children enrolled at the beginning of the year. This may be due to the introduction of the end-of-primary public examination, for 40% of students in 2008 and for all students in 2009. There is an incentive for schools to screen out those who are considered not adequately prepared for the public test. A high rate of failure in the public examination, the results of which are widely publicised, would show the school in bad light. For more analysis of dropout in Bangladesh see Sabates and Hossain, (2010).

### 5.2 Child migration

The high proportion of children dropping out of school and the high proportion of these children migrating (about half of the recorded dropout) were interesting discoveries of the 2009 round of data collection. From the data collected it was not possible to establish how many of these migrant children re-enrolled at other locations. Conversations in the communities studied in the ComSS 2009 suggested that most children migrated away from the villages to urban centres, mostly to be engaged in paid or unpaid work (in exchange for food and shelter) and informal apprenticeship in crafts and trades, but a small proportion also moved to go to school in other places. (All these children were recorded as dropout, since the children did not attend school in the village any longer).

The suggestion of the pattern of child migration of the indicated scale is of considerable significance and has important implications for policy and strategy regarding access, continuation in school, completion of the primary stage and transition into secondary education.

### 5.3 A shift in school choice?

Data from 2007 and 2009 indicate that there was substantial reduction (by 18%) in the proportion of children attending government primary schools, with more children going to NGO schools, community schools and private kindergartens in 2009. The proportions in government-assisted schools (RNGPS) remained about the same. The reasons are not clear, but it appears that a proportion of children who relied in the past on government schools were walking away from government institutions, indicating a preference for NGO schools and even private kindergartens. Education Watch 2008 recorded a general overall shift in enrolment from government schools to kindergartens, *madrastas* and registered non-government schools between 1998 and 2008 (Nath and Chowdhury, 2009; see also Table 1 above). In any event, this situation complicates the task of monitoring, recording and analysing dropout. It also raises questions about effectiveness and perception of effectiveness by parents of different types of institutions.

There is a notional catchment area for GPS and RNGPS, but children are not required to be enrolled in the neighbourhood school, nor, it appears, are schools obliged to enrol all children from the neighbourhood who seek admission. There is no rigorous or systematic planning for geographical distribution of schools although there is a general guideline regarding not setting up a GPS or RNGPS within a radius of 2 kilometres of an existing school. According to the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, there are approximately 2,000 villages (out of a total of about 80,000) which do not have a primary school. For more information on the diversity of education providers in Bangladesh see Sabur and Ahmed (2010).

### 5.4 Late enrolment.

About 60% of the not enrolled children were from the 6-8 years age group. There is no gender difference in this respect. The culture of enrolling children in school consistently at age 6 has not caught on. A major reason for children of school age not being enrolled in school given by parents is that "the child is too small to go to school". Health and nutritional factors result in growth stunting and less than average weight for height make children look small for their age. The absence of birth registration and birth records leads to a casual approach to age for starting school.

The consequences of late enrolment are manifested in dropout in later years. In the case of males, the opportunity cost for school attendance becomes high when they are seen as ready for being engaged in paid or unpaid work. For girls, soon after the onset of puberty, there is family and community pressure to marry; there is also increased concern among parents about safety and security of older girls walking to school or within the school. For more information on problems relating to age in grade in Bangladesh see Hossain (2010).

### 5.5 Inadequacy in basic data regarding access, continuation and completion in basic education.

Inadequacy in basic access and participation data identified in the Country Analytical Review in 2007 persisted. Different data sources continued to provide different gross and net enrolment, dropout and completion rates for primary education. For example, for 2008, the Directorate of Primary Education data for gross enrolment was 5% lower and net enrolment rate was 5% higher than those of Education Watch. The former relied on EMIS data, whereas the latter was based on a representative national sample of 15,000 primary level children from 24,000 households (Table 8). A key difference was that DPE statistics were collected from schools, whereas EW data were collected through household surveys. Actual net enrolment (children of 6-10years old actually enrolled in primary grades, rather than in any school grade), according to EW, was even lower by another 10% in 2008. ComSS data for this indicator, based on a more limited sample from six locations was higher than the EW number in 2007 and lower in 2009 (See Table 8).

For the key indicator of the completion rate in primary education: the percentage of children in Grade 5 who had started Grade 1 five years earlier, there are varying numbers. There was no formal end-of-primary general examination (except one for awarding scholarship) until 2009. The completion rate reported by DPE was 52.0% and 50.1% by EW for 2008. Both numbers were based on school data (Table 8).

**Table 8: Participation indicators based on different data sources**

Indicators	EW 2008	DPE 2008	ComSS 2007	ComSS 2009
Gross primary enrolment %	103.0	97.9	103.5	96.5
6-10 age Enrolment %	86.4	90.8	90.3	83.5
6-10 enrolment in primary grades %	75.7	--	82.5	71.7
Completion of primary grades %	50.1	52.0	--	--

Sources: ComSS, 2007; ComSS, 2009; DPE, 2009; Nath and Chowdhury, 2009

Three significant points stand out from this discussion. A substantial discrepancy shows up repeatedly in respect of gross and net primary enrolment rates between data derived from household and school. The gross rate based on household data is higher and the net rate is lower than from data based on school records. Both household-provided information and school records are affected by the lack of birth registration and birth records. Whether there is a systematic bias in the information provided or recorded needs to be examined. The solution of course is to enforce birth registration regulations, and require parents and schools to use these documents.

The second point is that dropout statistics are usually based on school records, because these involve a cohort analysis (actual or reconstructed) using school data. Informed observers suggest that there is incentive for inflating intake records and student rolls for various reasons, such as distribution of stipends; therefore, accurate calculation of dropout and attrition of students using school records becomes difficult. This problem remains to be resolved and deserves due attention.

Thirdly, the decrease in net enrolment (6-10 years) between 2007 and 2009 seen in ComSS data appears, at least in part, to be a function of how dropout of school-age children from household-provided information was recorded with possible mis-recognition of the migration of children as dropout. An accurate and total picture of children's participation in and completion of primary education calls for a unified collection, recording and analysis of information for an upazila that covers all children and all types of schools.

### **5.6 Economic status and enrolment/continuation in school**

The economic situation of families determined by their self-rated food-security status is as expected, related to enrolment and continuation of children in school. Two-thirds of the never-enrolled children were from families with "always in deficit" (ultra-poor) and "sometimes in deficit" (poor) status. In the case of dropouts, 55% of the children came from households with food-deficit, though 45% of the population were in this category. The distribution of families in respect of food-security (always food-deficit, occasionally deficit, adequate, and surplus in family's supply of staple grains.) was respectively 12%, 33%, 34% and 20%. As for the lowest group, always in deficit, it accounted for 20% of all dropouts, while it comprised just 12% of the families. It is evident that lack of food-security, a proxy for general poverty, affected enrolment and continuation in school adversely. For more analysis of poverty, equity and access to education see Hossain and Zeitlyn, (2010).

### **5.7 Children in urban slums**

The children of the growing urban slum population appear to be at a greater disadvantage than rural children. A CREATE investigation found around three-quarters of primary school-age children (6-10) in Dhaka slums enrolled in school compared to over 90% national net enrolment. About 42% of the enrolled children were in government schools compared to double that percentage in public institutions nationally. But even in public schools in urban areas there were substantial family costs for transportation, food, learning material, and private tutoring outside school, which amounted on average to around 10% of household income per school-going child. Children's earnings represented a substantial proportion of household income for many families – on average 9% per working child. For more analysis of access to education in urban slums in Bangladesh see Cameron, (2008, 2010).

### **5.8 Effects of NGO-led programme interventions**

A "natural experiment" situation arose in the six ComSS study locations, because in three of the areas the anticipated NGO programme interventions did not materialise during the study period. This situation made it possible to look comparatively at the effects of NGO interventions that already existed in three locations and three other locations without significant NGO interventions.

The NGO interventions included dialogue with the community regarding the education situation and how the community and parents could contribute to improving school performance, organising “tutoring” for students outside school hours, assisting in recruiting volunteer teacher’s assistants, and running non-formal primary centres for those who have not enrolled in primary school or have dropped out. In three of the locations these NGO interventions had existed during the first round of survey in 2007 and continued afterwards. In the other three locations, similar interventions were at an early stage or were under planning during the study period, but were not fully implemented.

Between 2007 and 2009, the proportion of never enrolled children in the age-group 6-15 for the three programme locations decreased from 7.6% to 4.3%. The proportion remained the same at 5.3% in non-programme areas. This worked out to be a difference of 17% between programme and non-programme areas, indicating the positive effects of programme interventions as revealed by the second round data. In respect of primary school dropout (zone 2), the effects of programme intervention present no substantial difference among the locations between the two rounds of data. The relatively short time of two years may not have been a sufficient time for the effects to be manifest.

## 6. Conclusions: Progress towards access with equity and quality

Having made remarkable progress in terms of initial enrolment in primary education as well as gender equality, Bangladesh still faces enormous challenges in ensuring completion of primary education and acceptable learning achievement. Current informed judgment is that Bangladesh, along with other large-population South Asian countries, will fall significantly short of reaching the 2015 goal of universal primary education interpreted as completion of the full cycle of primary education by virtually all in the eligible age group. (Ahmed and Govinda, 2010; UNESCO, 2010). The key points regarding progress towards access with equity and quality are re-capitulated below.

1. The large majority of children in Bangladesh do enrol in some form of education. Progress has been made in enrolment in primary education for both girls and boys; but there have been small improvements in completion of the five-year primary cycle and only limited progress in meeting learning outcomes – two main indicators of efficiency and effectiveness of the system.
2. Children attend a variety of school types in Bangladesh (e.g. government schools, NGO schools, *madrasas* etc.). These vary in terms of teacher education, building and facilities and teacher-pupil ratio. Overall, performance of all types of schools (with the exception of NGO run non formal primary education) are problematic and less than acceptable in terms of meaningful participation and available evidence about learning outcome. Fieldwork data suggests that *madrasas* in particular at both primary and secondary levels are less well-endowed in terms of physical facilities and teachers, and student attendance, continuation, and completion rates are lower than those of other education providers.
3. PEDP II targets set for efficiency of the system (dropout and completion rates) were modest, and even if the 2009 targets were reached during the extended period of PEDP II implementation up to 2011, which would improve completion only to 55%, there will still be much more to be done to achieve an acceptable standard.
4. There was some progress in the “number of competencies achieved by Grade 5 students” in all types of institutions. On average, two-thirds of the basic competencies were achieved, and one-third not achieved, though the tests were designed with the assumption that a student completing primary education would score passing marks in all competencies. The Education Watch findings are consistent with DPE’s recent assessment.
5. In respect of learning outcome, the key quality criterion, the PEDP II targets for basic competencies in literacy and numeracy cannot be regarded as ambitious. Even if the targets were reached, a quarter of primary education completers would still be without acceptable literacy skills and one-third of the students would be without essential numeracy skills. (DPE, 2009:10)
6. The high student-teacher ratio and low contact hours are a major factor in poor student performance. These deficits can be explained by the low overall public sector allocation for education and low allocation for primary education, which has remained less than 1% of GDP, one of the lowest in the world. The PEDP II target again projects only a modest increase.

7. The ComSS study confirms that non-enrolment of school-age children (exclusion zone 1) remains a significant problem. While official national statistics indicate a non-enrolment rate of around 10%, it was difficult to establish this proportion definitively for a particular time in specific communities, which itself is indicative of the complexities in applying remedial strategies.
8. The ComSS confirms a high level of dropout (exclusion zone 2) as a critical problem both at primary and secondary level caused by a nexus of poverty, reflected in the food-security status of families, parental education and how education is delivered (school-related factors). By implication, there is a lack of capacity in families to support and guide their children through schooling – a lack that schools are failing to compensate or remedy.
9. The dropout problem is compounded by a phenomenon revealed by ComSS that young children were participating in rural-urban migration, as a livelihood strategy for families, which appears to be a contributing factor to about half of the apparent dropout in primary and secondary levels. The suggestion of the pattern of child migration of the indicated scale has important implications for policy and strategy regarding access, continuation in school, completion of the primary stage and transition into the secondary.
10. The category of silent exclusion or zone 3 is an important conceptual construct that focuses attention on the large proportions of children who are enrolled in school, but not effectively engaged in learning. The characteristics of these students include poor attendance, grade repetition, and poor performance in class activities and examinations, all of which make them vulnerable to dropping out. It is difficult to quantify this situation with precision. ComSS studies indicate that this category, at a minimum, comprises a fifth to a quarter of all primary students.
11. The ComSS 2009 survey indicates that about 24% of the children who completed Grade 5 did not enrol in Grade 6, the first year of the secondary stage. This number, however, underestimated the zone 4 problem. The peaking of dropout from Grade 5 (a quarter of total dropout), which implies a high level of non-transition to secondary schools.
12. Data from 2007 and 2009 ComSS suggest that a proportion of children were leaving government institutions, indicating a preference for NGO schools and even private kindergartens. Education Watch recorded a general overall shift in enrolment from government to other schools between 1998 and 2008. (Nath and Chowdhury, 2009). This situation complicates the task of recording and analysing access and participation. It also raises questions about effectiveness and perception of effectiveness by parents of different types of institutions and points to the importance of coordinated and comprehensive planning and oversight mechanisms for the multiple providers of education at the local (upazila or subdistrict) level (see below).
13. ComSS revealed that about 60% of the not enrolled children were from the 6-8 years age group. The culture of enrolling children in school consistently at age 6 has not caught on. The absence of birth registration and birth records also supports a casual approach to age for starting school. The consequences of late enrolment are manifested in dropout in later years, and high opportunity costs for school attendance as children are seen as ready for being engaged in paid or unpaid work. For girls, there is also increased concern among parents about safety and security of older girls walking to school, and family and community pressure to marry.
14. ComSS revealed clear relationships between non-enrolment, dropout, non-transition and socio-economic variables, represented by the food-security status of families, household income, and parent's education, as might be expected. Two-thirds of the never-enrolled children were from families with "always in deficit" (ultra-poor) and "sometimes in deficit" (poor) status in respect of staple grains supply for family. In the case of dropouts, 55% of the children came from households with food-deficit, though 45% of the population were in this category.
15. A large proportion of school age children suffer from health problems (about a quarter of children of school age, in and out of schools, sampled were sick in the previous 30 days). When ill health or episodes of sickness are combined with other disadvantages of children prone to be in exclusion zones, their chances of effective participation in education are further diminished. Their quality of educational experience ultimately suffers as children with health problems often enrol in school late, have high rates of absenteeism, lower cognitive development and increased risk of drop out.
16. Household perception of reasons for non enrolment and dropout suggested supply-side constraints: schools are located too far from homes, and school education is perceived as of little value to children. Stipends to poor students (conditional cash transfer) in primary school remains a government strategy to promote equity in educational access. The supply-side constraints perceived by parents suggest that the funds spent for stipends could be better used in providing

essential quality-enhancing inputs in schools. This question needs to be examined rigorously, especially because of the major budget implications of choices made (Hossain and Zeitlyn, 2010).

17. Whilst urban people in general are better off than their rural counterparts in respect of educational services, the rapidly growing poor slum dwellers have been under-served by both governments and NGOs. There is a subset of households who are extremely poor (roughly, the poorest quintile) and for whom the costs of even the cheapest private education are prohibitive. Expanding services for the urban poor, including subsidies and other support would be essential to maintain high primary enrolments and to reach the UPE goal (Cameron, 2008; 2010).

## 7. Policy messages

A long list of problems and concerns has emerged from CREATE research and analysis. Obviously, each of these cannot be addressed in isolation, especially because they are interconnected in various ways. They need to be tackled in a coordinated manner with policy interventions and strategic actions that recognise the connectedness among the specific concerns. The policy messages and areas for action or further research indicated are based on this premise.

**Birth registration:** Absence of birth registration is a source of confusing and conflicting statistics regarding enrolment, completion and dropout data necessary for proper planning and management of the system. Measures should be taken through local government agencies to enforce registration of new births required by health and local government regulations, but not enforced rigorously. Retro-active birth registration of 5-6 year olds should be undertaken as part of the government plan to bring all 6-year old children into school by school-year 2011. A campaign of awareness-raising and registration drives should be launched at the local and national levels jointly by education, health, local government, NGOs and civil society organisations.

**Child migration:** The phenomenon of child migration, identified as an important dimension of school dropout, needs further research to understand the reasons for migration and the activities of migrants as well as investigating the scale of the phenomenon. There is a very limited amount of research on the implications for access and participation in basic education of children arising from the phenomenon of rural-urban migration in Bangladesh (exceptions are Giani, 2007 and Heissler, 2008). Further qualitative research could trace these children and find out more about their migration and activities.

**Development and trial of upazila-based universal primary education planning and management:** A rigorous trial should be designed involving local government and all service providers in selected upazilas as a key feature of government educational development strategy in order to rationalise provisions for quality basic education for all children with greater authority and accountability of schools and local authorities. School and community-based actions to support the poor, the silently excluded, and overcoming mis-perception and resistance to the role of non-governmental and community organisations in education should be a part of the development and trial.

**Assessment of learning achievement and the un-intended consequences:** The peaking of dropout in Grade 5 and the lowering effects on completion of primary education and the newly introduced public examinations need serious attention. Remedial strategies in teaching-learning, formative assessment throughout the school duration, and making the public examinations a genuine assessment of basic competencies taught in school rather than tests of text-book contents should be systematically pursued. In the absence of a systematically applied method of assessing learning achievement at the primary level, the introduction of the end-of primary examination is regarded as a positive move. Work has to continue on issues regarding the 'backwash' effects on student participation and effects on classroom practices and making it a genuine and valid assessment of essential competencies prescribed in the curriculum.

**Silent exclusion:** Silent exclusion is clearly a serious problem affecting a large proportion of children, probably more than around a quarter of the students in primary schools identified in this study. It

needs to be probed further in order to analyse the different types and reasons for silent exclusion. Given the difficulties in identifying the silently excluded, research could focus on ways of identification and quantification of this phenomenon. Longer term qualitative and ethnographic research in classrooms would reveal much more about the nature and prevalence of silent exclusion. Responses to address this situation would entail specific attention to this phenomenon in school and community-based actions indicated under recommendation for upazila-based planning and management above.

**Responding to poverty of families:** Clear relationships have been found between non-enrolment and socio-economic variables, represented by the food-security status of families, household income, and parent's education, as might be expected. Household perception of reasons for non enrolment suggested supply-side constraints: school located too far from home, and school education perceived as of little value to children.

Stipends to poor students (conditional cash transfer) in primary school was a government-funded activity linked to PEDP II and remains a government strategy to promote equity in educational access. The supply-side constraints perceived by parents (also indicated by various EW reports) suggest that the funds spent for stipends could be better used in providing essential quality-enhancing inputs in schools, including school meal. This question needs to be examined rigorously, especially because of the major budget implications of choices made (Hossain and Zeitlyn, 2010).

**Urban poor children:** While the urban people in general are better off than their rural counterparts in respect of educational services, the rapidly growing poor slum dwellers have been under-served by both governments and NGOs. There is a subset of households who are extremely poor (roughly, the poorest quintile) and for whom even low private education costs are prohibitive. Expanding services for the urban poor, including subsidies and other support would be essential to maintain high primary enrolments and to reach the UPE goal (Cameron, 2008, 2010).

**Common quality standards:** The critical policy challenge in primary and secondary education is to set and enforce common quality standards for all types of schools and ensure acceptable learning outcomes from them, recognising the role and contribution of diverse provisions for educational delivery. The relative strengths of each type of education provider and its potential for contributing to improved outcomes by children in specific circumstances need to be identified and assessed and best use made of their strengths and potentials (Sabur and Ahmed, 2010).

**Making multiple provisions a source of strength:** Different types of schools (government managed schools, government-assisted and controlled schools, government-assisted *madrasas*, NGO-run complementary or alternative institutions, and private sector institutions) serve learners in different circumstances and conditions and, therefore, are not fully substitutable with each other. Quality constraints in each category have to be assessed and solutions found. At the same time, a coordinated approach to providing services through multiple provision, and the willingness of schools to learn and adapt, will help improve the performance of the system overall (Sabur and Ahmed, 2010).

**Greater authority and responsibility at school level:** Along with area-based coordination and planning, it is important to move towards greater authority and responsibility at the institutional level for organising teaching-learning, managing personnel, giving due attention to under-performing children and their specific difficult circumstances, and using financial resources with accountability to parents and community.

**Harnessing NGO contribution:** NGOs, given their record in providing complementary and alternative educational opportunities, should be supported to target educationally disadvantaged areas and groups, and to design and offer inclusive and responsive approaches to under-served populations within the framework of area-based and coordinated programmes.

**A major increase in public resources:** Substantially greater public resources should be committed within the framework of the sixth five-year plan and the new education policy in order to assure minimum necessary levels of quality with equity. Equally important is the effective use of resources, through, for example, upazila-based capitation formulas, decentralised management of resources, and assessing optimal use of scarce resources, a case in point being the spending on stipends. More

resources are needed at the school level along with greater discretion with accountability in their use. The question of affordability must be turned around to ask – can we afford not to make the necessary investment in education with quality and equity?

**A pragmatic and flexible programme approach:** In designing the new modality of programme management and cooperation with donors, a pragmatic programme approach for primary education development should be adopted. It should be based on the principle of a comprehensive programme that includes all forms and modes of primary education, including second chance or non-formal provisions, and all children including those with various special needs, going beyond the domain of DPE. The structure of the programme and its components, and the implementation mechanism, have to be appropriately flexible.

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