



Consortium for Research on
Education, Access, Transitions & Equity
Funded by DFID

UKFIET 2009 Presentation

Access to Education in Bangladesh: Research, Policy Discourse and Action –Reducing the Disconnect

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15.09.2009



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- ***Some countries have done well and others have not. Why? Answers are not all that clear.***
 - ***Is research stuck in describing and elaborating exclusion and poor performance – ignoring why exclusion and disparity persist?***
 - ***Shall we not have more mileage from focusing on political economy of exclusion?***
 - ***Let's look at the case of Bangladesh.***
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Basic Education Access – the big picture is well-known

- Not dis-similar to the big picture in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa
- Good progress in nominal access (initial enrollment)
- Large gap between gross and net enrollment
 - high over-age for grade
- Gender gap eliminated in nominal access – an exceptional achievement

Big Picture...

- High dropout resulting in high non-completion of basic education
- High proportion of time-servers - not engaged in learning
- Extremely poor achievement of students and performance of schools from time and effort of students and teachers spent and public and family expenditure in basic education – poor value for money

Some key features of basic education in Bangladesh – not necessarily unique

Revealed or re-affirmed by CREATE country analytic review and collected field data -

- Multiple providers – state, quasi-state, and non-state – a persistent pattern;
- State dominance without full responsibility and accountability
- Diversity in provisions - a historic evolution, rather than a deliberate strategy and policy choice

Key features...

Critical weaknesses in education governance and management:

- Diverse/multiple providers + highly centralised public sector management prevent area-based planning/management of UPE and transparency
- Very weak school level authority, decision-making, control of resources and accountability
- Result–unreliable basic management information and weak planning and management (*and poor outcome!*)
- E.g., difficulty in reconciling household and school data on participation, dropout and completion; lack of systemic performance and outcome indicators.

Key features...

- Education financing – low total & per student expenditure - key obstacle to quality assurance.
- Financing pattern reinforces inequity – lack of rationale and criteria in supporting multiple provisions, or compensating household and private spending;
- Diversity in educational provisions without equity-enhancing regulatory and governance framework reinforces inequity and pre-existing socio-economic divisions in society.

Research agenda and process

- Much of research including CREATE focused on refining and sharpening known big picture.
- Strong points in CREATE Bangladesh studies:
 - Zones of exclusion framework allows a broader vision of access;
 - Child cohorts tracked and conditions for participation in sentinel sites explored;
 - Participatory research-partnership w/local NGOs
- Hindsight suggests – neglect of political economy of decision-making - how technically valid solutions are undermined by contextual conditions and dynamics of power and interests at national and local levels.

Limitations encountered

- A “technicist” approach - focus on technically valid solution in school and community– did not address higher order governance issues, political economy dynamics at national and regional level, macro-level financing issues.
- Multiple provisions and ambivalent relationship between state and other actors led to local education authorities’ reluctance to cooperate in CREATE field work.
- Focus on probing access at local level in itself insufficient basis for national policy discourse.

Opportunities for policy discourse that may make a difference

A pragmatic approach ?

- *Greater attention to analysis and advocacy strategy for policy discourse, focusing on*
- *Right balance of policy discourse **upstream** informed by understanding of determinants of policy implementation **downstream**, and*
- *Probing into motivation and interests of key constituencies/stakeholders at national and local levels; engaging them in dialogue.*

Opportunities ...

Opportunities for discourse & influencing policy arising from necessity and government interest in:

- Formulation of workable SWAPs in primary and secondary education in 2010
- Formulation of a five-year national development plan in 2010, moving away from PRSP
- New national education policy initiative based on political manifesto of the newly elected Government, 2009-10
- Rationalization of educational finance for basic education

THANK YOU

