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EDUCATIONAL ACCESS IN BANGLADESH

COUNTRY POLICY BRIEF

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This Policy Brief describes and explains patterns of access to schooling in Bangladesh. 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. It is based on findings from the *Country Analytic Review on Access to Education in Bangladesh in Primary and Secondary Schools* (Ahmed et al 2007).

Why educational access is important in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has ratified a number of international treaties guaranteeing children the right to education, and is a keen supporter of 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 majority of children do receive some education, drop out rates from schooling are substantial. Quality problems mean many children remain 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 drop out rate in previous years means low numbers are accessing secondary.

Progress has been made, however. In particular, the gender gap in both primary and secondary school enrolments, while significant, has diminished rapidly over the last decade. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done.

The policy and educational context in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh education is compulsory for children aged six to ten years through a short 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 (grade 6-10) and two years of higher secondary (grades 11-12) education.

The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education controls primary education in Bangladesh. The PMED is involved in formulation of policies, whilst responsibility for implementation lies with the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). District and Upazilla (sub-district) level offices are responsible for management and supervision of primary education. The Ministry of Education deals with secondary education.

There are at least eleven types of primary school providers. The main forms of provision include government primary schools, registered non government primary schools, ibtidayee madrassas and NGO schools. The mainstream system caters for 85% of children enrolled in primary education under the PEDPII initiative.

At the secondary level 75% of children in school attended private secondary schools in 2005, around 14% attended madrassas and 6% were enrolled in government secondary schools.



What is educational access?

Meaningful access: requires high attendance rates, progression through grades with little or no repetition, and learning outcomes that confirm that basic skills are being mastered.

Zones of exclusion: educational access is described in terms of 7 zones of exclusion:

Zone 1 children include those who have never attended school.

Zone 2 consists of children who have dropped out before completing the primary grades.

Zone 3 relates to children enrolled at primary level at risk of exclusion and non-completion.

Zone 4 focuses on children below the age of 15 who fail to make the transition into lower secondary schooling or its alternatives.

Zone 5 contains those children who drop out of secondary grades and fail to complete the cycle.

Zone 6 includes those at risk in secondary schooling who attend irregularly, fail to learn at appropriate levels and who are at risk of drop out.

Zone 0 includes those who have no access to pre-school.

Analyses of educational funding show a picture of resource shortages and the need for strategic thinking to make optimal use of those available. Government spending on education stagnated in real terms in the first half of the 2000s, although it is showing signs of increase. 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 expenditures 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 school development programme (PEDPII) within a SWAP. The current system of educational financing is uneven and is failing to provide adequate resources to sustain universal enrolments and

serve the needs of the poor effectively.

Patterns of educational access in Bangladesh

Access to basic education in Bangladesh is improving, but areas of concern remain:

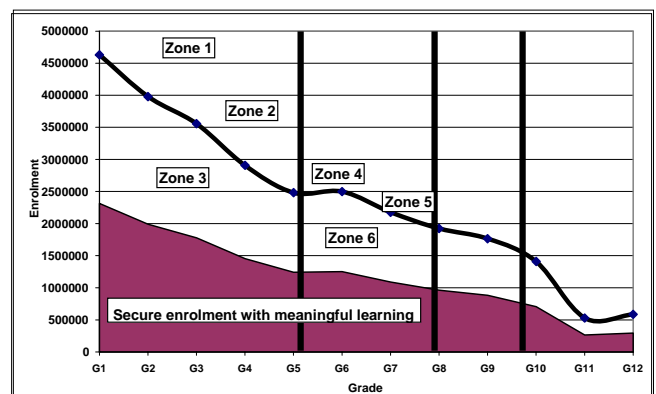
Overage enrolment: The official age for entry to primary education is six years of age. Department of Primary Education statistics from 2004 show:

77% of children in grade one were aged 6, with a further 20% aged 5 or 7. 3% of children in grade one were 8 years old or older.

Primary schooling: According to government EMIS data sources, Bangladesh had 101.6% gross enrolment rate (GER) for primary education in 2004 (98% for girls and 106% for boys). Net enrolment rates (NER) were lower with an overall total of 89.7%, with 84% for boys and 96% for girls. These include over age enrolment in the lower grades.

Promotion rates by grade at the primary level were between 75% and 92% in 2004. Promotion from grade one to two was at 79%, whilst between grades 4 and 5 it rose to 92%. Repetition of grades in primary school in 2004 were between 5.5% (grade 5) and 10.4% (grade 3). Repetition of grades one and two were around 7.5%.

In 2004 the average drop out rate per grade in primary was 12%, with 13% of children dropping out from grade one, 16% from grade four and 2.6% from grade five. Out of 100 students admitted to grade one in 2004 it was expected that 48 students would drop out before completion of grade five.



Official primary education statistics do not paint a comprehensive picture of access. They do not include over 30,000 one-room, one-teacher schools run by NGOs, serving more than a million children.

Very high dropout rates, both at the primary and secondary levels, and uncertainties about age in grade progression make high GER and NER rates unreliable indicators of access and participation.

Secondary schooling: Transition from primary to secondary level appeared to be around 83% in 2004.

High dropout from primary school means that the high transition rate does not indicate high enrolment ratios at the secondary stage.

There are currently no public examinations between grades five and six. However, an examination may be introduced and this may affect progression rates.

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 (EW, 2005)

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 drop out rates 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) are out of school. With boys more likely than girls to be out of school.

Gender: Bangladesh has made spectacular progress in closing the gender gap in primary and secondary enrolments. At primary there is little difference and at secondary girls' enrolment is ahead of boys'. However, girls still remain behind in the completion of secondary stage.

Out of school children: Estimates differ about the number of out of school children. However, at least 10% of children of school age in 2004 had never been enrolled, although some may do so in the future.

The large majority of out of school children are drop outs, and most have left before completing grade 5. Many children are **at risk of dropping out** from primary and secondary schooling.

Numbers of children who are **silently excluded** (i.e. those present, but under-achieving) from learning are large, and EW data on achievement suggests many are enrolled but not learning.

The causes behind exclusion

Education data do not provide information about those who remain outside the system and are excluded. Household data, however, gives some insights.

Large rural-urban disparities prevail in initial access and continued participation for both boys and girls. Participation in both primary and secondary education is strongly affected by the socio-economic status of the families of children.

25% of the eligible children from households with 'always in deficit' food security status attended secondary school compared to 59% in families with a 'surplus' status. At the primary level, children from families with a 'deficit' food security status have a more than five times higher chance of dropping out than children in the 'surplus' category.

The National Child Labour Survey (2002-3) estimated 5.05 million children aged 5-14 were involved in child labour. It is unclear to what extent this excludes these children from schooling. While some street children are able to access nonformal education facilities, the majority do not have access.

Schools themselves play a big role in encouraging or discouraging access. Many learners do not have meaningful access to quality education. Parents and guardians are not always able to provide the necessary background and knowledge of schooling to support their children, leading to potential failures and repetition.

Policy focus and research gaps

The Country Analytic Review for Bangladesh highlighted the need for research to focus on the following:

- An expanded notion of access which incorporates meaningful and sustained access to education.
- Patterns of access and factors affecting dropping out from school.
- Further understandings of children 'at risk' of dropping out, and those silently excluded within schools.
- A dynamic and longitudinal look at access, in particular through tracking of cohorts of children in different communities.
- A greater understanding of how multiple forms of provision interact to affect access.
- More insight into links between poverty and exclusion, why some children from the extremely poor category enrol and others do not; and how such children progress.
- The modalities of government education financing which may reinforce social divisions between rich and poor and urban and rural especially when linked to private expenditure patterns.
- Other issues include: decentralization and accountability; corruption; resource mobilization and utilization; teachers' remuneration and incentives; and educational management.
- More data is needed on educational access and: children with special needs; children in female-headed households; children of ethnic/language minorities; and children living in remote and inaccessible areas.

The Country Analytic Review also highlighted the following potential areas for policy focus:

- Reorientation of public sector service provision to address access and equity issues more effectively. Collaboration and partnership between government and other actors, especially NGOs and community-based organizations to enhance synergies and complementarity.
- Redirection of resource gains from falling population growth towards quality improvements. Development of quality standards and criteria for learning facilities and other provision.
- Area-based planning to ensure access to facilities of acceptable standards.

- Mandatory birth registration and provision of school facilities of acceptable quality within easy access for young children, and awareness-raising of primary education entry age-regulations.
- Multilateral and bilateral external donor modalities of support to both government and non government actors to increase aid effectiveness and support more universal access.

Research into these areas would further enhance policy initiatives around educational access.

This policy brief is based on:

Ahmed, M., Ahmed, K.S., Khan, N.I., Ahmed, R. (2007) *Access to Education in Bangladesh: Country Analytic Review of Primary and Secondary School*. Available at www.create-rpc.org.

It has been developed by the authors and the CREATE team.



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CREATE in Bangladesh is currently working on community / school studies as well as a thematic study on multiple providers of education.