

EDUCATION WATCH 2003/4



Quality with Equity:
The Primary Education Agenda

Overview

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**QUALITY WITH EQUITY:
THE PRIMARY EDUCATION AGENDA**

Overview of the Main Report

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Foreword

The fifth annual *Education Watch* report focuses on quality with equity in primary education. It probes into inter-connected factors bearing on performance of schools and children in 10 upazilas. A micro (children, teachers, parents and the school) and meso (role of the upazila education authority and local administration) perspective, complementing a macro and national view, the focus of the previous *Education Watch* studies, is provided in the present report.

The big picture of primary education deprivation is well-known. Despite commendable progress in the last fifteen years in expanding enrolment, the large majority of children, as many as two out of three, mostly poor and disadvantaged in other ways, are growing up without basic skills and preparation for life.

It is not one or another cause, but *a syndrome of poverty and disadvantage*, that causes deprivation in primary education. Contributing significantly to non-enrolment and dropout are child labour, the phenomenon of private tutoring, school and home factors related to low class attendance, and problems of the first generation learners. Almost half of primary school children have mothers who are illiterate and both parents are without literacy for one-third of the children. Without the capacity of school and willingness or ability of teachers to help the child to catch up when needed, any disruption in schooling sets in motion a slippery slope of further lag, more absences, and eventual dropping out.

Ambitious goals have been set for PEDP II, the umbrella development programme of the government in primary education for the period 2003/4 to 2008/9, on which much hope is pinned. But it has been already late by more than a year in getting off the ground. There has to be a much greater sense of urgency, greater determination to cut through inertia and bureaucratic obstacles on both national and external donor fronts. There has to be a stronger will to resist extraneous vested interests than has been seen so far. The slow and halting pace of progress witnessed in the five years since the 2015 EFA goals were adopted must shift to a different cadence.

It is our sincere hope that the findings about the problems and the needs in the classroom and the school will prompt a greater sense of urgency about shaping reform initiatives and implementing them. It will be necessary to look, in the light of the findings, at what have been planned and how these can be implemented effectively and professionally. All organisations and institutions in the country willing and able to contribute to this effort should be involved. We also hope that the seven point agenda for primary education with quality and equity recommended by the *Education Watch* research team will receive the backing of the policy-makers so that these can serve as a guideline.

Dhaka
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Fazle Hasan Abed
Chair
Campaign for Popular Education

Introduction

Primary education is the foundation on which the nation's edifice of education has to be built and the ground laid for the individual's pursuit of further learning and fulfillment of life's potentials. Progress in primary education in Bangladesh in the last fifteen years, despite its many deficiencies, is characterised by strengths, which truly can be regarded as points of shining light.

A major achievement of the last decade was to attain gender parity in primary school enrolment. Other accomplishments are improvement in gross and net enrolment in primary education and reduction in dropout and improvement in completion of the cycle, encouraged by provision for free textbooks to all students, food for education and lately stipends for poor children as well as stipends and tuition waiver for rural girls at the secondary level. To improve quality of education, competency-based primary education curriculum has been introduced. NGOs have pioneered and successfully implemented on a large scale programmes to reach out of school children. National budgets have been increased and substantial external assistance has been mobilised for primary education development activities.

Bangladesh is committed to EFA and Dakar Framework and U.N. Millennium Development Goals for 2015. Its national development objectives and plans are guided by a strategy of poverty reduction and human development in which education, especially at the basic level, has a critical role.

The national goals and commitment in respect of primary education are reflected in the Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II), described as a sub-sectoral programme of the government supported by external development partners. It aims to address the primary education access, participation and quality problems with "a guarantee of essential primary school quality levels (PSQL)" for all children. Establishment of non-formal learning centers to serve two million out of school children through the Reaching Out of School Children (ROSC) project is expected to complement PEDP II, which is confined to formal public sector primary education. The ROSC project signifies the recognition by the government of the need and legitimacy of non-formal

approaches, so far supported only by NGOs, as essential complement to formal schools.

Despite the accomplishments, as past *Education Watch* reports and national education data show, primary education remains plagued by serious problems in respect of access and participation. Taking into account the current enrolment and completion rate, it can be said that over 40 percent of the children cross their primary schooling age without the benefit of a full cycle of primary education. When the findings about learning achievement and competencies are also considered, it becomes obvious that the large majority of children of Bangladesh, as many as two out of three, are growing up into adulthood without basic literacy and numeracy skills and preparation for life.

The 2005 monitoring report on progress towards Dakar goals released by UNESCO in November, 2004 has applied an Education Development Index to countries based on values for net primary education enrolment, adult literacy rate, gender parity indices, and survival of children to grade five in the primary school. Of the 127 countries rated, Bangladesh ranked as number 107, just behind India (106) and ahead of Pakistan (123) and Nepal (110). It is projected that all of these countries will fail to meet the 2015 Dakar Framework targets unless their rate of progress accelerates substantially. It is vitally important that the government strategies and programmes including the umbrella programme PEDP II and the ROSC project, aimed especially at the disadvantaged children, succeed.

Research Questions and Methodology

Quality of teaching and learning and equitable access are clearly the dominant concerns in primary education in Bangladesh which are reflected in national plans and commitments including EFA Plan, PRSP, PEDP II and ROSC.

Education Watch 2003/4 focuses on quality with equity in primary education. In doing so, it draws on the findings and outcomes of earlier *Watch* reports, attempts to probe deeper into inter-connected effects of factors bearing on schools and children in specific locations in 10 upazilas, and attempts to present a summative perspective with regard to policy and action implications. A micro (children, teachers, parents and the school)

and a meso (upazila education authority and local administration at the upazila and the union) perspective, in contrast to a macro and national view, the focus of the previous *Education Watch* studies, is the focus of the present report.

The main research questions in the present study are:

1. Why is a large proportion of the children deprived of quality primary education?
2. Why don't the schools function better?
3. What can be done to ensure quality primary education for all children?

Table 1

Upazilas selected in the study and their characteristics

Division	District	Upazila	Characteristics
Dhaka	Tangail	Madhupur	Ethnic minority
			High food deficit area
Rajshahi	Kurigram	Nageshwari	Very high food deficit area
			High density of ultra poor
Chittagong	Rajshahi	Tanor	Very high food deficit area
	Chittagong	Lohagara	Low food deficit area
Khulna	Jessore	Jessore Sadar	Municipality
			Moderate food deficit area
Barisal	Satkhira	Tala	Moderate food deficit area
			WFP Biscuit project area
Sylhet	Barguna	Patharghata	High food deficit area
	Barisal	Bakerganj	Low food deficit area
	Sylhet	Golapganj	Moderate food deficit area

A combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques was used in this research - in-depth interview and focus group discussion; observation of school and classroom; survey of selected school

catchment areas and schools; and review of relevant documents. Pertinent findings were drawn upon from previous *Education Watch* reports and other studies. A participatory approach was followed in discussion with children, the dialogue mediated by other children with varied experience.

Table 2

Respondents and research techniques

Respondent groups	Technique used	No. of respondents
Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO)	In-depth interview	9
Upazila Education Officer (UEO)	In-depth interview	10
Assistant Upazila Education Officer (AUEO)	FGD and In-depth interview	41 (8)
Public representative	FGD and In-depth interview	57 (7)
URC instructor	Interview and documentation	7
Head teacher	In-depth interview	10
Assistant teacher	FGD	31 (9)
School Managing Committee member	FGD	55 (8)
Students	FGD	94 (9)
Non-enrolled children	FGD	92 (11)
Good student	Case study	6
Disabled student	Case study	5
Never enrolled children	Case study	5
Dropout students	Case study	6
Parents of students	FGD	101 (10)
Parents of non-enrolled children	FGD	79 (11)

Figures in parentheses indicate the number of FGDs held

Twelve upazilas from six administrative divisions in the country were intended to be selected for the study on the basis of the World Food Programme (WFP) classification of upazilas according to food security status. The purpose was to have diversity in

socio-economic condition among the selected upazilas. Disruption in communication and school activities due to massive flooding in July and August, 2004, when field work was undertaken, prevented data collection from two upazilas. Field work, in the end, was done in 10 upazilas as shown in Table 1.

A special feature of the study was the household survey that covered every second household in the catchment areas of two GPS and one RNGPS in each upazila - a total of 8,212 households in catchment areas of 30 primary schools. The survey questions covered education of the household members, socio-economic information, currently enrolled students in primary schools, dropout and never enrolled children, use of private tutors, and child labour.

Three survey questionnaires and 22 checklists were prepared and used in the fieldwork. A piloting of the instruments and methodology was undertaken. Field investigators, all with experience in social science field survey, were given training in the use of the instruments. The 36 investigators were divided into 6 research teams, each guided by an experienced researcher.

Various respondent groups at the different levels, research techniques used and number of respondents are shown in Table 2.

Key Findings and Conclusions

A. Education provisions

The ten upazilas selected from all six divisions of the country had a total population of 3,200,000 with a primary school age population of 514,000. There were 2,452 primary education institutions in the 10 upazilas, according to data from upazila education offices, which probably underestimated NGO and private provisions. Of the listed numbers, just under 1,000 schools were run by the government (GPS), 600 were registered non-government primary schools (RNGPS), and 400 were ebtedayee madrasas or classes attached to high madrasas.

According to the upazila education office data derived from catchment area child surveys undertaken by schools, 75.3 percent of the children in the eligible age group were enrolled in primary

schools. However, based on household survey conducted in school catchment areas under the present study, the net enrolment rate found was 90.4 percent.

UEOs data show 57 percent of students were enrolled in GPS, 24 percent in RNGPS, 9 percent in all types of madrasas, 2.5 percent, in kindergartens and 1.1 percent in NFE schools. Again, non-formal school enrolment appears to have been underestimated.

Key points regarding primary school provisions in the upazilas were:

First, there is a serious insufficiency of provisions, creating a deficit of the order of 50 to 60 percent in terms of schools, classrooms and teachers, if criteria for acceptable quality of provisions, such as a classroom with no more than 40 children with a qualified teacher, are applied.

Second, schools, especially GPS and RNGPS, which served over 80 percent of the children, were not distributed according to set criteria and were not related to child population or area of the upazila. Nor was the ratio between GPS and RNGPS based on criteria or a discernible pattern.

Third, there was no effort to develop complementarity between GPS and RNGPS, on the one hand, and the other types of institutions, such as madrasas and non-formal schools, to ensure adequate provisions for all children.

Fourth, The GPSs had on an average one more teacher than the RNGPSs, (average of 4.5 and 3.8 teachers respectively), but both had teaching personnel to run schools only in two shifts; the gender imbalance in teaching positions remained high (39 percent female teachers) in spite of the policy of affirmative action in recruitment.

Fifth, with the number of GPS essentially remaining unchanged, the share of total enrolment in RNGPS has been rising. Generally poorer provisions for teachers, and physical facilities in these schools, compared to GPS, have meant that the overall quality of provisions for primary education has deteriorated.

Sixth, the data for the upazilas suggest an increase in net enrolment and a narrowing of gap between net and gross enrolment, which indicates a maturity of the system with a culture of sending children to school at the designated entry age taking

root. Whether this indicates a wider national trend needs to be established with accurate and up-to-date national data.

Finally, a systematic and planned effort is needed to develop understanding and awareness about the criteria and concept of quality in education, performance standards of schools, and how accountability of schools and education personnel to communities and parents can be established and demanded.

There was a lack of common understanding regarding quality of education and how a school's performance should be judged. The concept of accountability of schools and education personnel including teachers, head teachers and supervisors at the upazila level, all of whom received public funds to provide public service, appeared to be lacking. Absence of models or knowledge about effective schools, and high quality teaching-learning practices also may have led to the acceptance and tolerance of the familiar.

B. Education resources in schools

Data on education resources - physical facilities, human resources, and financial resources disposable at the school level - in the 10 upazilas under study show that:

1. The major categories of schools, GPS, RNGPS and madrasas, did not have sufficient classroom space for all the enrolled children. Applying a modest standard of the upazila education office of just permitting students to sit in rows of benches with little elbow room, it was found that there was no space for a quarter of the enrolled students in GPS and 40 percent of the students in madrasas. By these standards, RNGPSs in the ten upazilas could accommodate 97 percent of their enrolled students.
2. Despite major government investments in primary school facilities since 1990, these remained far from satisfactory, both in number of classrooms and schools and in their quality. Fifteen percent of the schools in the 10 upazilas were rated by the research team as "good" - with safe, sturdy and clean roof, walls and floors. About half were "fair" and 35 percent were rated as "poor," - judged by very basic criteria applied. Hazardous and definitely unsafe conditions were observed in some GPS and madrasas.

3. Insufficiency of teachers was a common problem. Eighty percent of the schools had four or less teachers, 21 percent three or less. On an average, 30 percent schools had more than 60 students per teacher; over two-thirds had more than 40 students per teacher.
4. The average teacher-student ratio in the ten upazilas was 1:53 -somewhat better than the national average of 1:61. There was a substantial variation in this ratio among the upazilas. The range was 37 to 90 students per teacher for GPS and 34 to 95 students per teacher for RNGPS. Approved posts of teachers remained vacant for a year or more in 19 percent of GP schools and 7 percent RNGP schools.
5. Overall, GP and RNGP schools had very little fund available to be used at the school's discretion for essential expenses related to school's activities. Some primary schools raised funds for small repair, purchase of stationery and entertainment of visitors with contribution made by themselves, collected from the community and by charging students "unofficial" fees. Madrasas were more active in raising their own resources and appealed for contribution as a religious obligation. A few formal schools received contribution from NGOs.

C. Nature of deprivation

The large picture of primary education deprivation has been noted. The good news is that a broad-based gender parity has been observed across the board among catchment areas, upazilas, school types, and socio-economic groups. This accomplishment needs to be deepened to improve learning outcome for both girls and boys, and extended to include all who still remain left out. Moreover:

1. The most pronounced differences were among socio economic categories in respect of enrolment, repetition, dropout, and participation in primary education, which delineated the magnitude and nature of the problem of deprivation in primary education. Self-rated food security status of households was taken as the proxy for socio-economic grouping.
 - In the surveyed upazilas, a child from an "always in deficit" family had a 30 percent less chance of being enrolled in a

- school and five times more chance of dropping out from school compared to a child from a “surplus” family.
- A quarter of the non-enrolled children cited poverty as the reason for non-enrolment. Over forty percent who dropped out indicated poverty as the reason for dropping out.
 - Refusal of the school authority to admit the child was cited as the second most important reason (21 percent of the respondents) for non-enrolment. This appears to be a new phenomenon arising from increased interest in schooling generated by offer of stipends and parents’ preference for certain schools – close to home or with a “good name.”
 - Children not “liking school” was an important cause for not enrolling and the most important reason for dropping out. This indicates problems about how the school functions.
 - The interaction between factors related to school and family and society need to be investigated further. Social and economic disadvantage of the child and the child’s background and the school’s response to this are key elements in this interaction.
2. It was not one or another cause that could be identified and fixed, but a *syndrome of poverty and disadvantage* including child labour, first generation learner, inability to afford private tutors, and causes related to children’s absenteeism that need to be addressed.
- In the 6-14 age group of the poorest economic category, one-third of the children were non students and at work or unemployed, and 30 percent were students and working at the same time. In the “surplus” group, about the same proportion was both students and at work, but only 7.5 percent of the children were non-students, either working or without any work.
 - Forty-seven percent of the mothers and 43 percent of the fathers of primary school children in the upazilas were without any schooling. Both parents were without education for a third of the children. These children can be regarded as “first generation learners”. Inability of parents to guide and support their children, and the likely economic disadvantage of these families, affect how the first generation learners perform in school.

- Private tutors for primary school children have become a norm. Forty three percent of the children had private tutors; they paid an average of Tk 152 per month for eight months in a year. Children who needed extra help with their studies most, first generation learners, could afford it the least.
 - Low average school attendance, about 60 percent, was linked with factors related to both the operation of the school and the family situation of the child. Causes identified were children’s need to help at home either regularly or for seasonal farm work, ill health or sickness of child or a parent, acute family economic problems, and falling behind in lessons with no help to catch up from teacher or at home. Any interruption in schooling set in motion for the poor a vicious spiral of further lag, more absences, and eventual dropping out.
 - Children with special needs, especially those with disabilities, and children of ethnic minorities whose mother tongue is not Bangla, are special dimensions in the picture of deprivation in primary education.
 - Studies of the category labelled as ultra poor, which consists of 20 percent to one-third of the population depending on criteria, showed net enrolment of 65 percent compared to around 80 percent nationally.
3. Three kinds of actions observed could be regarded as elements of the effort to address deprivation. These are free distribution of textbooks, scholarship examinations in primary schools, and stipend for primary school children from poor families; but these have not worked optimally for the poor.
- GPS, RNGPS and ebtedayee madrasas are supposed to receive free textbooks, while others can buy these. However, students in all categories of schools had to make a payment to receive the books. Survey data showed that 27 percent of the children made a payment to receive books which was, on average, Tk 14 per child in GPS and RNGPS and Tk 32 in madrasas.
 - The extra time and attention given to 20 percent of the class 5 scholarship nominees often meant that 80 percent in class 5 and all in the rest of the schools paid a price in a very common situation of teacher shortage in the school. A measure intended to encourage good performance and

benefit students has become counter-productive for those vulnerable to deprivation.

- Stipend recipients were roughly evenly divided between four socio-economic categories (based on food security criteria used in this study). Over two-thirds of the children from the poorest category were not selected to be recipients of stipend; but 27 percent of children from affluent households received the stipend.
- Household survey revealed that forty percent of the recipients were paid Tk 200 or less instead of Tk 300 as a quarterly payment. Students from “rich” households received on average Tk 260 and those from “poor” households were paid Tk 225.
- Targeting the poor, the principal rationale of the stipend programme, does not appear to be working, at least in the upazilas under study. There are also major problems in the management and administration of the programme, one manifestation of which is “cuts” taken from stipend. A basic dilemma of the programme is: Are there ways of spending scarce money to help the disadvantaged children perform better in school and attend school regularly rather than subject them to criteria which they find difficult to meet. Non-formal education programmes run by NGOs have attracted and held poor children in school and helped them to perform well without stipend as an inducement.

D. Quality in the classroom

A look at school level academic management based on information gathered from schools, interviews, discussion with stakeholders, and classroom observation revealed:

1. Schools mostly do not have the academic and management leadership needed to perform effectively. The head teachers' key role in ensuring effective functioning of school is mentioned in government directives. In practice, the head teacher essentially worked as another teacher. The way head teachers were selected, time available to them, their training and degree of freedom granted did not support or encourage a leadership role for the head teacher. When this happened, this was due to exceptional individual initiative.
2. An inflexible and uniform centrally imposed daily school timetable fragmented the school day in very short blocks of time for up to eight separate school subjects every day, with little time for anything other than a mechanical routine in the class, even for children of grades one and two. In two shift schools, over 90 percent of all schools, this meant no more than 20 to 25 minutes of learning time in a class period. Short staffing in schools often made the uniform central time table impractical. Schools made their own adjustments, but this often meant “convenient” arrangements for reducing teacher load by combining sections, making large classes even larger, but the fragmentation remained intact. There appears to be no awareness of this as a problem among teachers or supervisors and few examples were found, except in non-formal schools, of efforts to apply learner-centred and active teaching-learning with flexibility in the class routine.
3. Competency-based curriculum with the formulation of the essential learning continuum and listing of competencies to be acquired by children through primary education was introduced a decade ago. This was an important government primary education initiative which had the potential of bringing about very significant improvement in learning outcome. After a decade since this initiative began, teachers and head teachers did not have sufficient understanding of the concept and its implications for their work. The teacher's guide book distributed several years ago is rarely consulted by teachers and has not been followed up with sufficient in-service training and orientation of teachers and supervisors.
4. Primary schools (GPS and RNGPS) were graded into four categories applying a ten point checklist related to school facilities and management, but not learning performance except scholarship examination results. Fifteen percent of the schools were found to meet the criteria for grade A and over a quarter had serious deficiencies. Annual school plans for supervision and support from upazila education offices did not indicate any planning to bring the weak schools up to a satisfactory level. This initiative has the potential of making school supervision focus on overall performance of schools and make supervision purposeful.
5. Classroom observations carried out by the research team in 10 schools illustrated the common weaknesses in teaching-learning, especially in GPS, RNGPS and madrasas, which

served over 90 percent of the children. There were serious deficiencies in subject knowledge in such subjects as Mathematics, English and Bangla that caused students to be subjected to wrong information, explanation, examples and pronunciation. Teaching was based, with rare exceptions, on one-way communication in often large and crowded classrooms with a class time-table that did not permit carrying out a complete lesson sequence. Few learning aids were used, but a stick as a tool for discipline was seen in many classes. There was little effort or opportunity to help children who lagged behind. Home tasks were assigned but teachers failed to provide sufficient feedback to students. Classes in non-formal schools with smaller classes, strong supervisory support and supply of essential learning aids were a clear contrast to an average class in GPS, RNGPS and madrasas.

E. Management at school and local level

Critical issues regarding the management at school and support to school were identified on the basis of school survey, focus group discussion, interviews, and school and classroom observation.

1. The process of teacher recruitment was seen by stakeholders at the local level as a major impediment to improvement of quality in primary education. SMC members, parents, teachers, AUEOs and UEOs all expressed concern about infractions and manipulation of rules and regulations regarding the recruitment of both GPS and RNGPS teachers leading to recruitment of teachers who were not qualified to be teachers. In the case of GPS the violation of rules was caused at the district level by increasing the weight of oral interviews in selection, thus making the process vulnerable to improper influence. For RNGPS, where SMCs were responsible, the system was seen as dominated by cronyism instead of application of criteria.
2. Most GPS teachers are trained but most RNGPS teachers are not. With an annual capacity of 6,000 in PTIs and at least 100,000 primary school teachers in need of training, the demand cannot be met by current training approaches. Moreover major overhaul is needed in PTI training to make it more effective, since studies have shown no significant impact of this training in student performance.

3. Two main initiatives for in-service training-sub-cluster training and URC subject-based training - are not working well in the 10 upazilas. Lack of professional support in planning and designing the content and method, professional deficiency of AUEOs who are the trainers for this event, and inadequate follow-up of outcomes of training at the school level rendered the sub-cluster training into a monthly social gathering of teachers presided over by the AUEO. URC's are not living up to their potential as resource and training centres for teachers in the upazila. URCs nominally exist in the ten upazilas but four are not functional yet and three had stopped due to lack of fund (since the development project funding ran out). The morale is low in URCs and the short subject training offered is yet to be assessed for their impact in classroom.
4. AUEOs are the frontline supervisors for primary schools with the charge of giving teachers professional support and advice to do their job properly. Most informants in focus groups and interviews thought this promise is far from being fulfilled. Large number of schools, counting only GPS, RNGPS and community schools, in the charge of an AUEO (average of 41 and a range of 16 to 212 in the ten upazilas), no budget for mobility, lack of training for offering professional supervisory support to teachers, and filling out long inspection forms about compliance with rules rather than advising on effective teaching were identified as the problems. In addition, complaints were rampant that extorting payments and favours from teachers on threat of punishment was a common practice.
5. With most schools running in two shifts and total contact hours one of the lowest by international comparison, using the available time of students and teachers in school optimally is important for effective learning. The stakeholders were in favour of the ideal solution of a longer school day in single shift schools. This must be the aim, but this has major implications for teachers, classrooms and budgets. A strong argument can be made for giving priority to reducing class size to a maximum of 40 children under one teacher who is properly trained and has strong supervisory support in a double shift school, if a single shift means having a larger class under an ill-trained teacher with no supervision.

6. Union Parishad- the only local government tier existing at present, has almost no role in primary education. Chairpersons and members mostly said they did not know of any significant role in primary education that has been assigned to them, although many were willing to be involved. The local education committees at union and ward levels set up after compulsory primary education programme was started a decade ago have become dormant.
7. SMCs have been given a broad and sweeping role in primary school management, but with little real authority. Nonetheless, active and engaged SMCs can make a difference in the school, as it has been demonstrated in some cases. Political control - now institutionalised by giving the local MP a role, and cronyism of head teachers in the case of GPS and of the founding group in the case of RNGPS, have led to formation of SMCs with mostly the wrong people for such a committee. Unclear and vague ideas about the role and duty of the SMC, among the members themselves and among school authorities and parents, and absence of any disposable fund with the managing committee are other reasons for their ineffectiveness. The potential of SMC as the vehicle for accountability and community involvement in school thus cannot be realised.
8. There is miscommunication or confusion about the relative roles of PTAs and SMCs. The apprehension was expressed by some that there would be an overlap and conflicts if both the bodies were active in a school and that with active SMCs no PTA is needed. Non-formal schools have demonstrated that parents, especially mothers, want to be involved and can be partners with teachers and the school in helping children learn and grow.
9. No one has the responsibility and authority to maintain an oversight of primary education in the upazila. There was no common or comprehensive source of information about education in the upazila, nor was there any focal point for promoting or planning for compulsory primary education or EFA goals in the upazila. The madrasas, for example, remained virtually without any supervision although they enrolled 9 percent of the students in the upazila. The proprietary kindergartens are growing in number and are

- popular with the upcoming middle class even in small towns and some villages, but they remain outside any regulatory framework. In fact, there is no focal point of responsibility to protect and uphold public interest in the sphere of education in the upazila.
10. Most stakeholders at the school and upazila level were in favour of much greater and meaningful decentralisation of education management. They were, at the same time, apprehensive that local pressures of vested interests would increase; and that resources were scarce at the local level, which had to come from the central authorities. On balance, however, they favoured a genuine shift towards devolution of authority and decisions to district, upazila and school levels. This would require, according to them, defining power, authority and control over resources at different levels and trying out ways of making this work. It was not clear to all stakeholders what form decentralisation should take and how it was to be achieved; hence the importance of trying out approaches in selected locations.

Policy and Action Implications

The micro and meso view of primary education provided by the information from the upazilas points to major challenges and potentials in primary education. We have a better understanding of how the large picture of deprivation is formed with elements provided by each deprived child in his or her home, school, community and upazila. Despite progress, provisions for schools, classrooms and teachers remain insufficient for equitable access; equally inadequate are the condition and environment in schools and classrooms and the availability of learning resources for ensuring acceptable quality of education. A holistic and multi-pronged approach is needed to address the syndrome of poverty and disadvantage that characterises deprivation. It is shaped by how the school functions and the home and family circumstances of the child and the mutual re-inforcement of each other.

As cautioned by UNESCO's latest EFA Monitoring Report, Bangladesh will not reach its EFA goals for 2015 with a "business as

usual” approach. Ambitious goals have been set for PEDP II, the umbrella development programme of the government in primary education for the period 2003/4 to 2008/9, on which much hope is pinned. But it has been already late by more than a year in getting off the ground. There has to be a much greater sense of urgency, greater determination to cut through inertia and bureaucratic obstacles on both national and external donor fronts, and a stronger will to resist extraneous vested interests than has been seen so far. The slow and halting pace of progress witnessed in the five years since the 2015 EFA goals were adopted must shift to a different cadence.

A good number of technical recommendations could be offered based on the information collected, analysed and presented above. The research team has decided instead to recommend seven action priorities aimed at moving from the business-as-usual approach and injecting a renewed sense of urgency about fulfilling the promise of quality primary education for all children.

Quality with equity: Seven action priorities in primary education

1. *Recognition of inequity and deprivation in primary education as a serious problem and a commitment to deal with it.* The first step to effective action has to be an understanding and recognition on the part of policy makers at the political level and in the education establishment that primary education remains unequal with large-scale deprivation of access and participation in the system, as shown in this report. It can be seen even by analysing official data. A genuine commitment to removing deprivation and inequity has to be reflected in:
 - Allocation of resources and budgets for education programmes with equity and affirmative action in favour of the disadvantaged as key criteria,
 - Subjecting education policy and programme decisions as well as resource allocation and budgets to poverty impact analysis,
 - Applying poverty impact and consequences as a component in education programme assessment and evaluation,

- Supporting research, experimentation and analysis of experience about how the poor can be effectively served and the programme outcomes enhanced, and
- Adopting the rights perspective to fulfill the education rights and entitlements of all children.

This commitment at the national level has to be communicated forcefully and with conviction to donors and international partners, policy implementers, local bodies, SMCs, teachers, parents and even students. As key stakeholders, their role and commitment in helping achieve educational goals is paramount.

2. *Addressing at the school level the syndrome of poverty and disadvantage affecting student performance.* As noted in this report, a syndrome consisting of factors at home and in school causes children’s deprivation from education, which has to be addressed holistically. The locus of action for this effort has to be the school where the education authorities can reach the child, the parents and the teachers and work out appropriate measures responding to specific circumstances of disadvantage. The elements of this response would be:
 - Identifying the disadvantaged children and their particular difficulties,
 - Extra help in studies in class or out of class to first generation and “slow” learners,
 - Providing learning materials (notebooks, workbooks, pencil, paper etc.) and elimination of all cash costs to children from the poor families.
 - Regular communication of school with the parents of the disadvantaged, designating a teacher for a group of these parents for maintaining contact.
 - Orientation of managing committee, teachers, and community about the special effort.
 - Provision of budget to be managed by school for this purpose - perhaps redirecting stipend funds for this purpose.
3. *Effective implementation of competency-based primary education.* The promise and potential of curricula and teaching-learning based on essential learning continuum and

competencies, even after a decade, have not been fulfilled. The concept remains sound and valid. A concerted effort needs to be made to implement competency-based curriculum, classroom work, and learning assessment. The components of this effort will include:

- Critical review of “terminal” and intermediate competencies to separate out beliefs and values, which may be important but are not measurable competencies, and their sequence and gradation.
 - Using time and resources optimally to ensure student achievement in basic skills; a case in point is wasting scarce student and teacher time in the attempt to teach English from grade 1, when most teachers cannot speak English.
 - Plan and support for continuing technical work on translating competencies into classroom activities, lesson plans, learning aids and continuing assessment methods in classroom, and pre-service and in-service training of teachers.
 - Continuing professional work on competency-based curriculum development, textbooks and learning materials,
 - Development and introduction of valid grade-wise and end-of-primary-level assessment
 - Support for coordinated action research on this subject.
4. *Decentralisation, local planning and management trial.* The absence of any oversight responsibility and planning of primary education involving all service providers at the local level and lack of management authority with accountability at school level have been identified as impediment to quality and equity in primary education. At the same time, there is apprehension about the problems decentralisation may cause and the capacity and resources at the school and local level. The appropriate way to deal with this dilemma is to initiate development and trial of decentralised planning and management including personnel, resources and academic programme in six districts in six divisions. The components of the trial can include:
- Defining tasks, responsibilities, capacities and accountability process at district, upazila and school levels,

- Developing upazila primary education planning and school improvement plans, as anticipated in PEDP II, including technical and professional support for these,
- Working towards a unified approach to ensure core quality standards for all primary education provisions for all children,
- Scope and method for devolving greater authority and responsibility and fund management to school managing committee and head teacher including accountability of school to community and education authorities.
- Managing at school level learning time and calendar, academic programme, and teacher’s performance of duties.
- Capacity-building at district, upazila and school level including capacity to manage and use information.

Implementation of PEDP II programme in a decentralised mode in the selected upazilas and districts with trial and demonstration of effective implementation of the programme should be a key objective of the trial.

5. *Supporting development and use of professional capacity.* The management structure and decision-making process at present allow little room for development and effective use of professional capacity in primary education. Career structure in primary education does not encourage professional development and professional staff to rise to management and decision-making level. Personnel recruitment and deployment policy and practice hinder development of centres for professional and technical expertise in the sector in institutions such as NAPE and NCTB and at central and field levels of DPE. Institutions including IER of Dhaka University, IED of BRAC University, NAPE and NCTB should be supported to work together on developing strategy and plan for professionalisation and professional capacity development in primary education. This effort should be linked to and complemented by measures anticipated under PEDP II. The elements of this activity would be:
- Undertaking institutional and organisational analysis of primary education management required in PEDP II.

- Establishment of a primary education cadre - a condition of PEDP II donor support.
 - Development of need-based short and longer specialised training and professional development courses,
 - Rethinking and redesigning pre-service and in-service teacher training and action research to cope with huge needs in terms of quality and quantity.
6. *A greater voice of stakeholders at all levels.* In the education system, more than in all other social enterprises, the participatory approach, transparency in decision-making and a high degree of accountability should become the norm. Openness and sharing of information and dialogue in public forums should be the norm at school, union parishad and upazila regarding objectives, plans and progress, and budgetary allocations in the school, and for the upazila. The process of transparency and participation of all stakeholders should include:
- Periodic sharing of information and plans, and monitoring of progress of, e.g., school's annual work plan, upazila primary education plan and use of funds received from government and other sources, performance evaluation of schools in public forums organised for this purpose.
 - Parent Teacher Association.
 - Transparent and public selection/election of school managing committee and upazila education committee members.
7. *Addressing governance issues.* Political interference and undue involvement of politicians, institutionalised by government regulations about managing committees, have been identified as a major contributor to corruption, mismanagement, waste and obstacle to good management practices in general. Support is needed from the Prime Minister, in her capacity as the Minister in charge of Primary and Mass Education, to develop a consensus and adopt and abide by a policy decision to make education, especially primary education, free from political interference, which will help reduce mismanagement and corruption. Support and encouragement from the highest political level is also essential for implementation of this seven point agenda.

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Map. The location of sample upazilas

