

Education Watch 2001

**RENEWED HOPE
DAUNTING CHALLENGES**
State of Primary Education in Bangladesh

Overview of the Main Report

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Introduction

This is the third report of *Education Watch*. The previous two reports, which covered internal efficiency and quality of primary education in Bangladesh, received wide attention of stakeholders including policy makers, NGOs, academics, donors, media and the like. The importance that the government attaches to the initiative is borne out by the presence of Ministers of Education in the launching of the two reports.

It may be mentioned here that *Education Watch* was initiated in 1998 by a group of members of civil society to regularly monitor the primary education scenario of the country. An Advisory Board and a Working Group have been working for the successful implementation of the project. A team of education researchers did the actual study. The *Education Watch 2001* covers two areas critical to primary education: internal efficiency and finance for education. Under the finance sub-area household cost of schooling, and income, expenditure and asset of the schools were investigated. In addition, information on reported 'literacy' of household members was also collected.

Methodology

A total of eight strata were considered for the study and separate but similar surveys were carried out in each. Of the eight strata six are in six rural administrative divisions, one in metropolitan cities and the other is the municipalities. The national survey covered all 64 districts of the country. The data were collected from 30,051 households of 281 villages/mahallahs covering 150,028 households. The private cost of schooling survey covered 6,554 students from 5,612 households. The school survey, concentrated on four types of schools; government, private (registered and un-registered), madrasa and the non-formal school, covered 952 educational institutions.

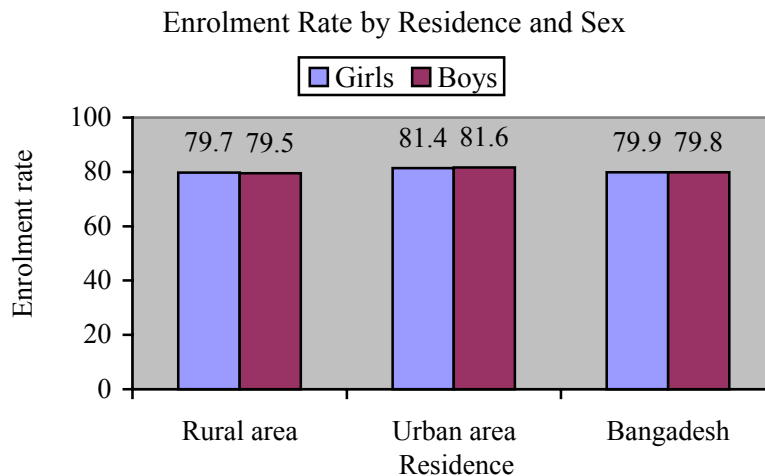
**This *Watch* covered 64 districts, 281 villages, 30,051 households and 150 thousand individuals.
School survey covered 952 educational institutions.**

The survey was conducted during October- November 2000. Three different questionnaires were used in the survey: Household survey questionnaire, School survey questionnaire, and Private cost for education survey checklist. Assessment of the data has revealed that they are of reasonably good quality.

Major Findings

Internal Efficiency

Current information on the enrolment status of children of primary school age (6–10 years) in Bangladesh shows a gross enrolment ratio of 108 and the net enrolment rate of 80 percent. This means that a large proportion of children attending primary schools is outside the designated age-span for primary school. No gender difference was observed in enrolment of the children in school.



Of the many providers of primary education in the country, the government is the most dominant with 61 percent of total enrolment. Others include private (registered and unregistered) (18.4 percent), non-formal (7.1 percent), madrassas (5.3 percent), English-medium (2.1 percent), and satellite/ community schools (2.7 percent). Rural Khulna Division has the highest net enrolment (91 percent) and Sylhet the lowest (75.7 percent). Enrolment rates in urban areas are significantly higher than those in rural areas (81.5% vs. 79.6%).

The non-enrolled children mostly belong to socio-economically-disadvantaged households and illiterate parents.

Equity emerges as an important issue. In enrolment, the socio-economically disadvantaged groups are trailing behind their advantaged counterparts, with most of the non-enrolled coming from the former group. Village level analysis identified disparities between villages as well; there were villages where the net enrolment rate was as low as 20 percent.

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The *Watch 2001* report also dealt with some additional dimensions of internal efficiency including promotion, dropout, repetition, attendance, teacher-student ratio, and school management. Using the UNESCO methodology, the completion rate for primary cycle was

found to be 75.7 percent, which implied a dropout rate of 24.3 percent. However, the system appeared less efficient than implied by this figure as it took 6.6 years for an average student to complete the 5-year cycle. Two-thirds of the graduates complete the cycle timely.

The primary cycle completion rate is 75.7%
Repetition rate is 39.9%
On average students take 6.6 years to complete
the five-year cycle

There were differences between different types of schools with respect to the efficiency indicators. The average attendance rate was found to be 61 percent and varied between gender, residence (urban/rural), and administrative divisions. About 40 percent of the teachers were female, with the percentage higher in urban areas than in rural and in non-formal schools than in formal schools. On average, there are 60 students per teacher but this varied widely between school type with the highest of 70 in government schools and the lowest 28 in madrassas. In non-formal schools there are 31 students per teacher. As reported by the head teachers, the school management committees are active in all schools but it demands further research to determine their effectiveness.

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Changes: 2000 vs. 1998

This year's *Watch* data allowed an appraisal of changes occurring with respect to various indicators of internal efficiency between 1998 and 2000. It found no measurable change in gross enrolment ratio (107 in 1998 to 108 in 2000) but improvement in net rate (77.1% in 1998 to 79.8% in 2000). Increase of three percentage points in the net enrolment rate and only one percentage point in gross rate indicate that the new enrollees came mostly from the primary school age group. It also found that among the new enrollees there were more boys than girls; this eliminated the significant edge that the girls were found to have in 1998. Rural Khulna Division has gained most and their net enrolment rate has now exceeded the 90 percent mark. Rural Sylhet Division documented deterioration in net rate.

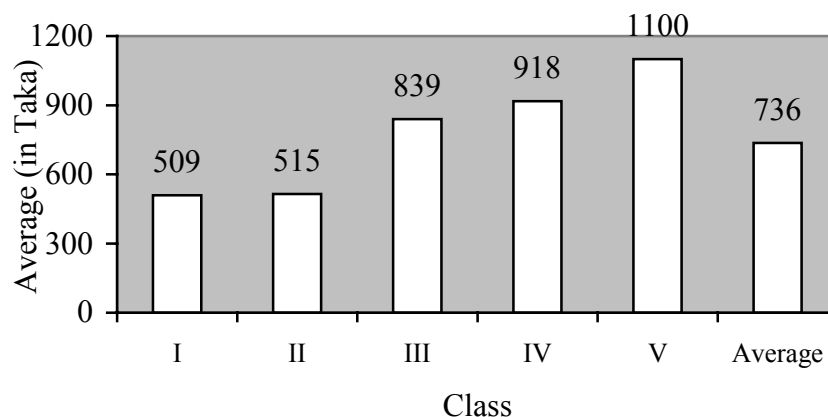
**The gross enrolment ratio increased only 1% over the last two years and the net enrolment 2.7%.
Highest increase was recorded in Khulna division and lowest in Sylhet division.**

The findings also showed that new enrolments increased more in villages where the net rate was already high. For the poorly served villages, there was no improvement. Proportion of children completing the 5-year cycle increased for the government schools and madrassas. However, there was no change in attendance rate, classroom capacity, or proportion of female teachers.

Private Expenditure for Education

This report also documented the various expenditures that the parents incur for their children's primary education. Although primary education in Bangladesh is theoretically free, 90 percent parents have reported incurring expenditures of some sort. The heads of expenditure ranged from tuition and examination fees to subscriptions for various school functions to private tutoring. Most frequently cited head of expenditure was 'stationery' (91 percent). The

Average Private Expenditure per Student by Class



expenditure pattern changed as the students climbed up to higher classes. On average, the parents spent Tk. 736 over a nine-month period (beginning of school year to the time of survey) or an annual amount of Tk. 1,000 per child in school. This is approximately two percent of average household income in Bangladesh. The survey findings on household spending for the nine-month period varied widely between urban (Tk. 2,181) and rural areas (Tk. 524) and

between classes (Tk. 509 in class I to Tk. 1,100 in class V). However, there was no difference between girls and boys in expenditures. There was also wide variation between school type with the students attending the secondary-attached schools spending the highest (Tk. 5,711) and non-formal the lowest (Tk. 290). Over a third of the money was spent in stationery and a quarter in private tutor. As expected, the well-to-do parents spent much more in absolute terms for their children's education than did the poorer groups.

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Income, Expenditure and Asset of Schools

Data on income, expenditure and fixed assets of schools were also collected. The schools had a diverse source of income which included government grants, donor funds, tuition and other fees from students, and use of fixed assets. There was variation between different types of schools. The government schools did not charge any tuition but over 90 percent of non-formal schools charged some tuition. Over 60% of the madrassas earned some income through selling agricultural products.

Income of the madrassas was higher than any other types. Income of the urban institutions was significantly higher than rural institutions in three types, viz., government and private schools and the madrassas. There was no area wise variation in case of non-formal schools. Major portion of the income of the government and private schools and the madrassas came from government grant; however, the non-formal schools receive money mostly from external donors. The private schools earn a fifth of their income from tuition fees of the students, this rate was 9.6% in non-formal schools.

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There are different heads of expenditure of the schools. Most of the educational institutions had to spend money for teacher's salary and stationery. Expenditure for construction work is nominal in case of non-formal schools, however, about half of the government and private schools and three-fourth of the madrassas had such expenditure in 2000. During first nine months of the year 2000 the government schools spent Tk. 679 per student, private schools Tk. 627, madrassas Tk. 981 and the non-formal Tk. 408. As in the case of income the schools in urban areas had higher expenditure than those of rural areas. Proportionate distribution of expenditure shows that the share of teachers' salary was 94.6% in government schools, 87.6%

in private schools and 93.9 percent in madrassas. This was 51.1% in non-formal schools. About 32% of non-formal schools' expenditure go for buying stationery for the students.

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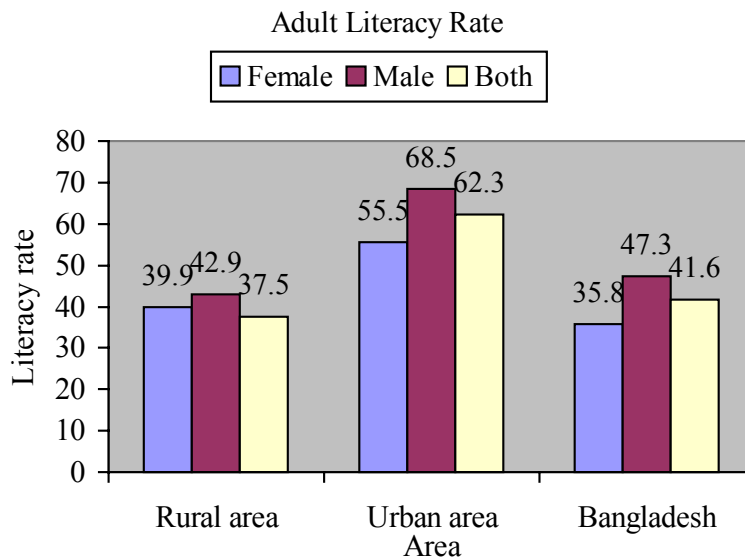
Fixed asset of the educational institutions included land and schoolhouse, furniture, educational materials, tube-well/trees, etc. The madrassas seemed well endowed with assets (such as land) and the non-formal schools just the opposite. On average, each madrassa has assets of Tk. 3.3 million and the non-formal schools three thousand only. The value of fixed assets of the government schools was Tk. 1.77 million and Tk. 2.07 million for private schools.

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Literacy

Following the definition¹ used in the decennial censuses the *Education Watch 2001* documented the literacy situation for two groups in the surveyed households: those aged 7 years and older and adults (15+ years). It found a literacy rate of 39 percent for the population 7 years or older and 41.6 percent for adults. Females and people living in rural areas were significantly lagging behind in literacy than males and those who live in urban areas.

¹ Capability of reading and writing a simple letter in any language.



People living in urban slums were more disadvantaged than those living in non-slum areas. Area-wise analysis shows that the literacy rate was highest in metropolitan areas and lowest in rural Rajshahi division. It documented a comparatively higher literacy rate for younger population (60% for those aged 15-24 years) suggesting an impact of the recent improvement in enrolment rates at the primary level. Sixty one percent households had at least one literate person. This means that 39 percent were 'isolated'. In about 6% of the households there was no literate person and eligible school-aged children were out of school. More research is needed in view of the apparent difference between the literacy rate found in this study and that mentioned in different government documents.

There is no literate person in 39% of the households; this is 42% in rural areas and 22% in urban areas.

Based on the 'success' of a massive literacy initiative called Total Literacy Movement (TLM) the government has declared six districts 'free from illiteracy'. No difference was found in adult literacy rates between districts declared free from illiteracy and others. However, the enrolment rate was significantly higher in the former districts.

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Action Recommendations

Drawing on the findings of *Education Watch 2001*, recommendations are made for action. Bangladesh has endorsed the goals and strategies as set out in the Dakar Framework for

Action 2000. There are six goals and twelve strategies laid out in the framework. In preparing the National Plan of Action for Education for All (EFA) up to year 2015, as required by the Dakar Framework, the following need to be given special attention²:

1. *Mobilise national political commitment for education for all, develop national action plan and enhance significantly investment in basic education.*

The government is now developing a new National Plan of Action and there seems to be a reiteration of national commitment. There is also a National Education Policy now. Unfortunately there is not much public discourse on the former nor any indication of whether there would be an increase in investment in education.

2. *Promote EFA policies within a sustainable and well-integrated sector framework clearly linked to poverty elimination and development strategies.*

Most development programmes in the country are vertical in nature with little horizontal connections. It is important that in EFA plans, an overall view of development priorities and programmes are taken and the links between education and other sectors are considered. All development sectors need to be mobilised for EFA as EFA's contribution to national development goals should be given attention.

The Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP), which is the donor-supported umbrella programme of the government on primary education, has 23 plus projects under it. The common impression that there is a lack of co-ordination between these projects needs to be explored seriously for improving synergy and overall impact.

3. *Ensure the engagement and participation of civil society in the formulation, implementation and monitoring of strategies for educational development.*

There is no strategy on how to involve the civil society. The government has, however, created space for NGOs to operate non-formal education programmes. Unfortunately there is no recognition of their contribution to primary and basic education. The participation of the civil society in the PEDP is hardly encouraged. *The Education Watch* is a civil society initiative for monitoring progress towards EFA. Although the Ministers and other policy makers participated in the launch of the reports, it has not yet received any formal participation or recognition from PMED.

4. *Develop responsive, participatory and accountable systems of educational governance and management.*

Primary education in Bangladesh is centrally managed. The Conference on Universal Primary Education in Bangladesh in 1996 had recommended for decentralisation of educational administration at least at the district level. Unfortunately, nothing of the sort has happened over the five years since the conference. Moreover, there is very little primary level experience of people who run the primary education sector in the country. Although the schools have school management committees or the parent teacher associations, their effectiveness is always debated. One recent study shows that only 15 percent of the SMCs were active.

5. *Meet the needs of education systems affected by conflict, natural calamities and instability, and conduct educational programmes in ways that promote mutual understanding, peace and tolerance and that help to prevent violence and conflict.*

The Chittagong Hill Tracts, which saw armed conflicts for about three decades, is relatively peaceful now. However, no special drive has been taken to restore the

² The statements in italic are strategies adopted in Dakar and endorsed by the government of Bangladesh (UNESCO 2000; Daily Star 22 April 2002).

confidence of the Hill people and no headway has yet been made in increasing access to education in the region. Moreover, the Regional Council, set up in the aftermath of the peace agreement, has so far allowed very limited participation of NGOs.

6. *Implement integrated strategies for gender equality in education that recognise the need for change in attitudes, values, and practices.*

Bangladesh has done quite well in removing the gender gap in enrolment, attendance and cycle completion, which was the result of several affirmative actions taken by the government and NGOs. We should not lose sight of this and continue to promote gender equality through such interventions until gender equality is established on a sustainable basis in all aspects including the learning outcome. It may be mentioned that girls are lagging behind boys in learning achievements as documented by *Education Watch 2000*.

7. *Implement education programmes and actions to combat the HIV/AIDS pandemic.*

Although HIV/AIDS is causing devastation in many developing countries, Bangladesh has fortunately been spared of this so far. However, many conditions that facilitate the spread of HIV/AIDS do exist in the country. The country has been indifferent to the seriousness of the problem and in implementing prevention programmes through educational institutions.

8. *Create safe, healthy, inclusive and equitably resourced educational environments conducive to excellence in learning, with clearly defined levels of achievement for all.*

As we have seen in this report and all previous *Watch* reports, the primary education system in Bangladesh is inequitable. Children belonging to poorer families and ethnic minorities, or those living in slums are particularly disadvantaged. There is hardly any opportunity available for disabled children to attend schools. Moreover, not all types of schools are equally resourced. The non-formal schools, for example are particularly resource-poor, as found in the present report. *Education Watch 2000* has clearly demonstrated that our primary school completers are poor in achieving the desired level of competencies (as set by NCTB). Quality should be the prime focus of our education policy and a revisit of the 53 terminal competencies is an imperative.

9. *Enhance the status, morale and professionalism of teachers.*

Quality of education cannot improve without a commitment to quality and effective performance by teachers. Measures to this end will include improving the effectiveness of teachers' professional preparation, creating the necessary conditions for teachers to do their job in the school, rewards and incentives that recognise teachers' role and responsibility, and enhancing social recognition of teachers in appropriate ways.

The government has recently started revising the curricula for the Certificate-in-Education (C-in-Ed) course for primary school teachers to make it more relevant vis-à-vis the 53 terminal competencies. While this is a welcome step it, however, has taken too long to happen given the fact that the terminal competency-based education was introduced in the country in 1992. In another move, the government has recently undertaken a revision and updating of the terminal competencies themselves. The C-in-Ed revision should take into consideration the latest revision in the competencies.

10. *Harness new information and communication technologies to help achieve EFA goals.*

Bangladesh is lagging behind in making the best out of information and communication technologies (ICT). Making this available to a vast majority of primary schools will be a formidable challenge. We should also try to make better use of conventional electronic

media such as radio and television in teachers' professional preparation and upgrading through distance education. The government should make these channels available for educational programmes at no or subsidised costs.

11. *Systematically monitor progress towards EFA goals and strategies.*

A recent project undertaken by the government through a commercial firm and funded by development partners has done some useful work in monitoring specific aspects of the primary education sector; such activities should continue on a regular basis. The government should also support and promote the *Watch* project which has provided useful and relevant information and review on the primary education sector.

12. *Build on existing mechanism, to accelerate progress towards Education for All.*

The previous *Watch* reports identified factors responsible for success in the primary education sector in terms of quantitative gains. The major contributing factors have been the increased government, NGO and donor commitment, affirmative actions to reach particular groups (such as girls and poorer children in rural areas), and expansion of non-formal education.

Concluding Remarks

Bangladesh has made steady progress in primary and basic education in the recent past. *Education Watch* has been documenting the status of primary education and its change since 1998 through the publication of annual assessments. A review of these reports and other studies done on the subject re-affirm one conclusion: there is hope but the challenges are daunting. The commendable progress that has been made in most quantitative indicators such as enrolment, attendance in class or completion of primary cycle raises hopes. But there is no reason to be complacent. Even in quantitative terms there is more to be achieved; there still remain wide disparities between different groups in the population with respect to access to schooling. The quantitative gain is undermined by the slow or little progress made in the quality of learning. Whether the assessment is based on a curriculum independent test (*Watch 1999*) or a curriculum-dependent test (*Watch 2000*) or a government commissioned monitoring study (PSPMP, 2002), the message is very clear: quality of teaching and learning is unacceptably poor. This is the biggest challenge in our struggle for education. There is hope but challenges are formidable.

Like most other countries in the developing world, Bangladesh is committed to the goals and strategies as formulated in the World Education Forum in Dakar in April 2000. It is essential that we approach the challenges ahead pragmatically and build on our successes. Bangladesh has joined the international community in setting a new goal to achieve education for all by 2015. Let us not postpone its fulfilment again.