



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

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Access to Education in Bangladesh  
Country Analytic Review of Primary  
and Secondary Education**

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**June 2007**



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## Executive Summary

### Background

The country analytic review (CAR) is an inception phase activity of CREATE (Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity). The CARs are expected to chart the evolution of access over time, undertake analysis of developments over the last 10 years, review recent empirical studies of different aspects of access to identify what is known about key issues including poverty, gender and other forms of disadvantage, identify policy implementation constraints, locate subsequent empirical studies, and generate conclusions which prioritise key issues and frame research activity in the next phases of CREATE.

### Methodology

The present study, an attempt to construct a baseline of information and analysis for further research on access, equity and participation in education, is based entirely on secondary sources – published and unpublished research reports and analyses, government documents, and database and information with education authorities, which have been made available to the research team for this report.

The research team, headed by the coordinator of CREATE in the Bangladesh partner institution, consists of people who have been involved in research and analysis of aspects of access issues in Bangladesh. They are well-informed about the data and information that are available and have access to the relevant sources. The team initially prepared an outline for Bangladesh CAR, identifying the key components of the report and formulating a structure for it, based on CREATE generic guidelines for the CAR.

The draft outline was reviewed by a National Reference Group whose members represented key stakeholders in basic education and are respected education professionals in their own right. The research team members took responsibility for different components of the study and prepared and submitted their drafts to the coordinator. The pieces were integrated into a unified text by the coordinator who added missing elements and missing links among the pieces to shape a complete draft. This draft was reviewed by team members and by the reference group. A final draft incorporated the comments from the review. A group of younger researchers from BU-IED assisted the coordinator.

### Key Findings:

The overarching findings about the state of access is three-fold:

- a) Very high dropout, both at the primary and secondary levels, makes high gross and net enrollment rates and even higher initial intake rates virtually meaningless as indicators of access and participation;
- b) Virtual or silent exclusion from engagement in learning of those who continue to be enrolled nominally is as serious a problem as open exclusion, but this phenomenon remains largely un-investigated and un-quantified;

c) Spectacular progress has been recorded since the beginning of the decade of the 1990s in closing the gender gap in primary and secondary school enrollment. At the secondary level, girls' enrollment has surged ahead of boys'. The significance of this progress cannot be underestimated, even though girls still remain behind in completing the secondary stage.

Key findings from the analysis of the state of access in primary and secondary education are presented below.

*Access in Primary Education*

- EMIS data collected by DPE for primary education indicate that cohort dropout between grade one and five was 48 percent in 2004. This is substantially higher than 33 percent dropout in primary education reported for the last several years and has been taken as the basis for planning major interventions, such as PEDP II, and setting targets, such as those for the MDGs. This suggests a systemic problem with collecting, analysing and reporting relevant data and using these for planning and policy-making.
- Official primary education statistics do not include over 30,000 one-room, one-teacher schools run by NGOs, serving more than a million children. Exclusion of these numbers introduces distortions in officially reported gross and net enrollment ratios.
- Population data and projection show that the growth of the primary school age population has slowed down. The total fertility rate is projected to come down to the replacement level within the next decade. Resources, therefore, can be redirected to quality improvement rather than expansion of facilities to cater to additional new students.
- The gap between gross and net intake rate has been narrowing, but remained at 14 percentage points in 2004. Achieving universal primary education by ensuring access to all require that measures be taken to ensure entry at the specified age. Mandatory birth registration, provisions for school facilities of acceptable quality within easy access for young children, and awareness raising about primary education age regulations are necessary measures for increasing participation of children in primary education within the designated age-range.
- The existence of at least 11 types of primary education institutions, besides non-formal primary education, makes the definition and conditions of access – access to what – a critical issue. Development of quality standards and criteria for learning facilities and other provision, and area-based planning to ensure access to facilities of acceptable standards, constitute the major access challenges in primary education in Bangladesh. These should apply regardless of where children live, what socio-economic circumstances they come from, and what types of institutions they go to.

*Transition to and Participation in the Secondary Level*

- Transition from primary to secondary level (defined as proportion of grade 5 students enrolled in grade 6 in the following year) appears to be around 83 percent in 2004. High cohort dropout in primary school implies that the high transition rate does not mean a high enrollment ratio at the secondary stage. Recent initiatives to introduce public examinations at the end of grade five and requirement of an admission test in secondary schools are likely to affect transition in a positive way.
- There is a large gap of 20 percentage points between gross and net enrollment ratios (65 and 45 percent respectively) at the secondary level (grades six to ten) suggesting much overage enrollment.
- Internal efficiency at the secondary level is very low even by comparison to the low record in primary education. Only 20 percent of those enrolled in grade six are able to complete grade ten and pass the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination.
- Participation in both primary and secondary education is strongly affected by socio-economic status of the families of children. On a net basis, 25 percent of the eligible children from households with "always in deficit" staple food security status attended secondary school compared to 59 percent in families with a "surplus" food security status. At the primary level, children from families with a "deficit" food security status are five times more likely to drop out than children in the "surplus" category.
- Enrollment of girls has surged ahead of boys by 11 percentage points; however, this initial gain is not sustained till the end of the secondary cycle, since boys surpass girls by 11 percentage points in completing the secondary stage. Large rural-urban disparity and disparity by socio-economic category of households prevails, both in initial entry and continuing participation for both boys and girls.

*Categories of Exclusion and Vulnerability*

- *The identity and characteristics of the excluded* - By definition, routine education data do not provide information about those who remain outside the system and are excluded. Although overall proportions or ratios of enrollment and non-enrollment can be estimated from education statistics, the identity, characteristics and distribution of the excluded are not usually available or are not investigated systematically. Available information from various sources suggests overlapping categories and characteristics of the excluded groups in terms of socio-economic and other attributes, as noted below.
- *The extreme poor* – This constitutes the largest category of those excluded from primary and secondary education, because of the large proportion of the population falling below the "poverty line." The number of children from families in this category far exceeds children never enrolled in primary education.

The pertinent questions then are: i) To what extent is there an overlap between non-enrolled and children from families in the extremely poor category? ii) Why do some children from the extremely poor category enroll and others do not, and what happens to the children who enroll in respect of their participation and progress in school?

- *Participation beyond initial entry* –Both school-related factors and household and socio-economic circumstances of children affect continuation in school and dropout. Government statistics and EMIS do not provide data on the socio-economic background of students. Only specific studies such as the *Education Watch* (2003/4 and 2005) shed light on vulnerability to dropping out. Evidently, better understanding of the factors influencing participation beyond initial access, as well as a systematic process of reflecting this understanding in effective measures, is necessary to deal with the massive problem of dropout both at the primary and the secondary level.
- *Virtual/silent dropout* - Children physically present in class but psychologically and intellectually absent, and therefore not participating and engaging in learning, is a phenomenon that affects a large proportion of children, both at primary and secondary levels. Although precise quantitative estimates do not exist, in magnitude this issue is next to open dropout, but definitely much larger than non-enrollment and non-transition from primary to secondary level. Yet this area has not been given specific attention in programmes and strategies and its quantitative and qualitative dimensions are not well understood.

### *Interventions to Address Access and Participation*

A brief account of major interventions in the public sector and by non-government providers of education services shows a wide variety of interventions by the government and non-government actors. A few preliminary comments can be made based on the summary description of the interventions.

- The sub-sector programme (PEDP II), although labeled as a sector-wide approach, is confined to formal primary education in the public sector. It does not deal with the madrasa stream, which is also supported by the government, non-formal approaches of NGOs, and private sector provisions. Although the mainstream public sector caters to 85 percent of the children enrolled in primary education, the non-government providers and the madrassas attempt to reach the groups who are at the margin and the most difficult to reach. These are most critical from the point of view of widening access and participation.
- The present pattern of parallel and separate development activities, covering the mainstream schools in the public sector and the rest in the hands of NGOs, precludes the possibility of synergy, complementarity and mutual support that could benefit all and promote creative and imaginative actions and approaches.

- Experience from the past regarding major public sector assistance projects, the overall poor results from predecessor projects, the basic limitations in design and strategy of the current projects, and the record of progress so far suggest that major re-orientation and redesigning in the current public sector activities are needed to respond effectively to access, equity and participation problems in the education system. Such a re-orientation needs to be accompanied by change in perceptions and attitudes about collaboration and partnership between government and other actors, especially NGOs and community-based organizations.
- External donors, both multilateral and bilateral, are involved as substantial financial contributors to both public and NGO programmes and in influencing policies such as the adoption of SWAP. This situation bestows a good measure of responsibility on the external development partners for both success and failure of the national effort. It requires them to examine critically the effectiveness of their assistance including their interaction with government and non-government actors, the premises underlying strategies such as SWAP and the scope and targets of assistance, and coordination within their collective efforts to support national education development.

#### *Financing of Primary and Secondary Education*

A brief overview of public sector funding of primary and secondary education and household contributions shows a picture of overall inadequacy of resources on the one hand and, on the other hand, the need for strategic thinking about making optimal use of the available resources to support access, equity and quality goals in education.

Government spending on education stagnated in real terms in the first half of the 2000s, although it is now showing signs of increase. The budget share allocated to primary education has declined, which is particularly true for the recurrent budget. Conversely, the share devoted to secondary education has increased. These findings reflect in part recent declines in primary school enrollment and continued enrollment growth at the secondary level.

Government funding varies enormously across different providers of education services and these differences are generally reinforced by private expenditures on education. The current modality of government education financing gives rise to a segregated education system that is not serving the needs of the poor effectively. The facts regarding availability of resources from public and other sources, how they interact and what the effects are with respect to education participation, equity and performance of students, need to be examined further.

#### **Research Issues and Priorities**

The conclusions regarding research needs and priorities can be noted under five headings.

##### *Narrow Conceptualization of Access and Inadequate Monitoring of Access*

- Conceptualization of access which includes its various dimensions and nuances remains a major issue. The simple perception of access as initial enrollment

gives insufficient attention to the progress of children in school and the programming and planning actions in the education sector needed to ensure completion and learning. This defeats the purposes and objectives of EFA.

- EMIS and routine monitoring and reporting in public education systems remain inadequate in methodology, capacities, human resources and the will to provide and make use of relevant information and data related to key dimensions of access.

*The Four Zones of Exclusion: A Strong Analytical Framework*

- The "four zones of exclusion" serve as a powerful conceptual framework for investigating and analysing different aspects of access, participation, equity and transition. In the context of Bangladesh, while the problems of the first zone are far from being resolved, the second and third zones are critical, both in respect of the size and their complexity.
- While conceptually and analytically it is useful to separate the zones and look at them as distinct categories, it is necessary to be alert to and probe the interactions between zones in respect of programme interventions. An integrated approach is likely to be essential in most situations.

*Lack of a Dynamic and Longitudinal Perspective*

- The understanding of the dynamics of participation and exclusion in education that can be derived from tracking cohorts of children in a community and in their social context does not exist.
- Cohorts of children in sentinel communities through household and school surveys should be a major focus of CREATE research, taking advantage of a time-frame that extends to at least four years.

*Feasibility and Necessity of a Participatory Research Approach*

- There is a richness of non-governmental organizations which are addressing problems of exclusion and disparity in education in Bangladesh. They can be partners in research at the field sites - within a common framework of design and methodology with technical support and supervision from the CREATE partner institution.
- The partner organizations can also be partners in communication, dissemination, and policy dialogue arising from the research activities and incorporation of research conclusions and insights into policies and programmes. They will also be the beneficiaries of capacity-building.

*Sustainable Intervention Strategies as a Guide to Prioritization of Research*

- Understanding and extracting lessons from a spectrum of intervention strategies through a range of formal and alternative institutional models should be included in the research design. This should include preschools, madrassas, post-primary non-formal programmes, and second chance recovery approaches.

- Case studies of intervention packages, especially of NGOs, which reflect a distinct approach and rationale in a particular context, but can provide insight into generic issues, can be considered as a complement to the structured cohort and sentinel site tracking and analysis.
- Cross-national thematic studies may include issues which are of high relevance as policy questions, but may not be captured in cohort tracking. These could include decentralization and accountability, dealing with corruption, resource mobilization and utilization, teachers' remuneration and incentives, professionalizing educational management, and conceptualizing education-poverty reduction linkages.