



# DIVERSE PROVIDERS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

CREATE BANGLADESH POLICY BRIEF 3

APRIL 2011



## DIVERSE PROVIDERS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

This policy brief on diverse providers of primary education in Bangladesh analyses the role of a range of different providers of education in the country. Drawing upon policy documents, literature as well as empirical research, it argues that official policies need to recognise the existing and potential future role of these diverse providers of education for achieving EFA. Sector Wide Approaches to Education and the next Primary Education Development Plan need to bring diverse providers of education into a coherent national policy framework. This policy brief is based on the CREATE Monograph “*Debating Diversity in Access to Primary Education in Bangladesh*” (Pathways to Access Series, No. 34) written by Zia-Us-Sabur and Manzoor Ahmed.

### A Brief History of Educational Provision in Bangladesh

Having made remarkable progress in terms of initial enrolment in primary education as well as gender equality (Ahmed et al. 2007), Bangladesh still faces enormous challenges in ensuring that all children complete primary education and achieve basic literacy and numeracy competencies. Diverse providers—state, quasi-state and non-state—have helped raise initial enrolments and improve the gender balance. The question now is how they can improve learning outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children.

In 1973, shortly after independence, the government took over existing general primary schools (other than *madrasas* and private schools) and all employees became national government employees. It abolished primary school management committees, giving the government management responsibility for the nationalised primary schools. The purpose of nationalisation was to improve the management of schools and thereby accelerate access. It can be argued with hindsight that the government action effectively

curbed centuries-old culture of community involvement in running primary schools. Many of the present problems of government-run or government-controlled primary schools can be traced back to the nationalisation of primary schools in 1973.

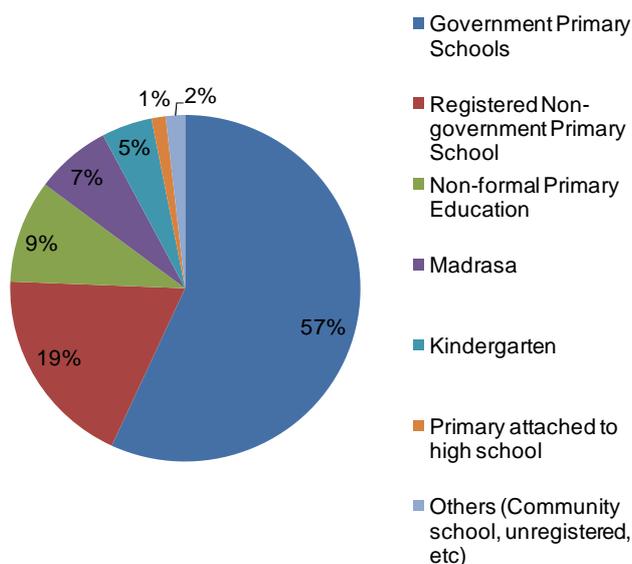
In 1990, a compulsory primary education law was adopted which required all children to be enrolled in primary school. The law, in the wake of the global EFA initiative of 1990, helped expansion of primary enrolment, but it was not implemented with sufficient vigour and was not backed up with adequate resources.

The Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II), initiated in 2004, was prepared with the involvement of the concerned ministries, directorates, and development partners. It was visualised as a sector-wide approach for primary education, but in the end dealt only with government schools (GPS) and RNGPS, excluding from its remit the significant number of children served by the *madrasas* and NGOs (Ahmed et al. 2007).

**Diverse Providers of Primary Education**

The number of primary-level institutions increased from 19,000 in 1947 to over 80,000 to date, including both government and non-government providers (Ahmed et al. 2007). Government primary schools (GPS) include all institutions directly managed by the government, almost half of the primary level institutions, serving about 60 percent of the enrolled children (Figure 1). Other primary institutions are non-government primary schools (RNGPS), non-registered non-government primary schools (NRNGPS), primary level *ebtedayee madrasas*, primary classes attached to high *madrasas*, kindergartens, formal NGO schools, community schools, and primary classes attached to high schools. *Madrasas* and RNGPS get financial support from the government and are subject to control over the curriculum, except for a category called the *quomi* (indigenous) *madrasas*, which are not subject to any government regulation.

**Figure 1. Providers of Primary Education in Bangladesh**



The Constitution of Bangladesh, adopted in 1972, provided for free and compulsory education as one of the “fundamental principles of state policy”. Article 17 of the Constitution says that the state shall adopt effective measures for the purpose of— establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such stage as may be determined by law - relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs; and

removing illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law.

The fundamental principle regarding ‘free and compulsory education,’ is by its very nature subject to interpretation. The phrase ‘uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education,’ has often been invoked to justify a state-provided common type of primary school for all children. At times, the words have been used as a political and populist argument to ban one or another type of non-state provision, such as, NGO-run, private (especially English medium) and *madrasa*-based primary education. At the very least, it has been argued that the constitution requires a standard national curriculum, common textbooks, and other regulatory measures to be applied to all primary education activities in Bangladesh. This argument finds its place in various education policy statements including the most recent education policy (2010).

The new education policy approved by the national parliament in December 2010 says: “The process of nationalisation of primary education should continue. The responsibility for primary education cannot be transferred to the private sector or NGOs.” However, the policy ambiguously agrees at the same time that a non-government organisation or an individual can run primary schools subject to approval of authorities and state regulations (Government of Bangladesh, National Education Policy, 2010:4-5).

In Bangladesh, non-government and quasi-government schools have flourished. Though it has not announced an official policy decision, the government’s long-standing position is apparently not to significantly increase the number of directly government-run schools, but to allow the quasi-government institutions to carry much of the burden of expanding primary education services to achieve universal primary education. An important consideration may be the limitations in the centralised financing and personnel management structures established under the 1974 Nationalisation of Primary Education Law, in which all primary teachers of government schools are employed by the central government. The result is that almost a quarter of the children, largely the poorer and disadvantaged populations, are served by non-government providers.

**Concerns About Equity and Inclusiveness**

Many alternative providers in Bangladesh serve population groups which have been marginalised or

disadvantaged for different reasons and may be better served by flexible and responsive approaches to service delivery. For example, both BRAC's non-formal primary education and the government and World Bank assisted ROSC (Reaching Out of School Children) project are flexible in their organisation and structure, in their recruitment and preparation of teachers, and in their involvement with the community. And neither has permanent school buildings. Such flexibility can be difficult to apply in a centralised government system.

The potential to supplement public financial resources and the capacity to use these resources effectively are strong justifications for harnessing multiple providers, including non-state providers, for primary education. In terms of responsiveness and flexibility, public systems find it difficult to change and innovate, often because of the inherent characteristics of bureaucracies and the tradition within which they operate. The programmes of non-government organisations have an advantage, because they “often have a grassroots reach that helps them to understand local contexts—what citizens want for their children; what the obstacles to education access, participation, and quality are; and how local institutions can be strengthened and decentralisation processes supported” (Aga Khan Foundation team, 2007:20).

### **SWAPs and Multiple Provision in Primary Education**

The government's ambivalence about multiple provisions constrained the design of PEDP II, limiting it to GPS and RNGPS, although it was called a sector-wide approach (SWAP) for developing primary education nationally. As PEDP II winds down, policy questions around the diversity of provision and the roles that government and donors play in it have surfaced again.

A position paper prepared by CAMPE (2008) outlined a “set of propositions about the status, situation, and an envisioned future of universal primary education in Bangladesh”. The CAMPE study pointed out several critical areas of concern which need to be addressed in a comprehensive programme to develop primary education in 2010–2015. A sector-wide approach has to justify its relevance and value by addressing effectively these concerns:

- Low quality, along with large variations between both geographic regions and different population groups, has resulted in serious inequity that must

be addressed. Realising the goals of quality with equity will require effective strategies both in terms of inputs and processes.

- Effective governance and management, at both central and school levels, will require meaningful decentralisation in planning and resource management.
- Building a unified (but not necessarily uniform) national system with a common core curriculum and core standards for provisions that allow a common educational experience for all children, irrespective of which school they attend, and
- Making use of the strengths of the diverse delivery mechanisms—and overcoming their weaknesses—given that up to 10 different types of primary schools now exist.

CAMPE's position regarding the need for a diversity of delivery mechanisms should be understood in the context of the PEDP II's limited scope and the reluctance to recognise the value of complementarity and mutually beneficial interaction between state and multiple providers in order to fulfil the right to education for all children. Few would disagree that for a new primary education sub-sectoral programme for the years 2010–2015, which is under consideration by the government, and for the longer-range development of primary and basic education, the concerns listed above must be taken into account seriously and systematically.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The significant role that multiple providers play in education in Bangladesh shows that the state does not have a monopoly on service provision. The overarching policy imperative is to develop a regulatory framework for universal primary education, one that reconciles the state's obligation to guarantee basic education of acceptable quality for all children with the reality of multiple providers who are able to reach certain groups of the population more effectively. With this in mind, we argue that the regulatory framework should contain the following elements:

- Articulation of the principles of multiple providers, recognising the reality of state, quasi-state and non-state providers, and their strengths and potentials.
- Criteria and principles for determining the relative size and role of different providers within a common national primary education system.

- Establishing common core standards regarding physical facilities, teachers, class sizes, financing, and management with accountability in all types of primary education institutions.
- Introduction of common curricular standards with core and flexible supplementary curricula, textbooks, and learning materials for all types of institutions.
- Assessing learning achievement and outcomes of all students based on the grade appropriate standards of competencies that students in all types of institutions should achieve.
- Introduction of area-based (for each *upazila*) mechanisms to coordinate and plan provision for primary education involving all actors and providers.
- Moving towards compulsory education up to grade eight with agreed roles and contributions by all providers.
- Financing criteria and principles that ensure adequate resources for basic education of acceptable quality for all children, regardless of geographical area and type of institution.
- Promoting greater authority and responsibility at the institutional level for organising teaching and learning, managing personnel, and using financial resources with accountability to parents and communities.
- Appropriate collaborative mechanisms to apply the regulatory framework to distinctly non-state providers.

One way to introduce an effective regulatory framework for universal primary education provisions would be to adopt a Right to Education Law, as adopted in India in 2009, which specifies the rights and the obligations of all parties and provides a legal framework for implementation of a rights-based programme.

### References

Aga Khan Foundation Team (2007) *Non-State Providers and Public – Private - Community Partnerships in Education*. Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2008. Paris: UNESCO.

Ahmed, M., Ahmed, K. S., Khan, N. I. and Ahmed, R. (2007) *Access to Education in Bangladesh*:

*Country Analytic Review of Primary and Secondary School*. CREATE Country Analytic Review. Brighton: University of Sussex.

Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) (2008) *Achieving Universal Primary Education in Bangladesh*. Position paper on formulating a National Programme for Primary Education Development in Bangladesh (2010-15) submitted to the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. Dhaka: Campaign for Popular Education.

Government of Bangladesh, (2010) *National Education Policy, 2010*, Ministry of Education, Dhaka

Us-Sabur, Z., and Ahmed, M., (2010) *Debating Diversity in Provision of Universal Primary Education in Bangladesh*, CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No. 34, BRAC University and University of Sussex, Dhaka and Brighton

This policy brief is based on Us-Sabur and Ahmed (2010) *Debating Diversity in Access to Primary Education in Bangladesh*, CREATE Pathways to Access, Research Monograph No 34. Brighton: University of Sussex, and was written by Manzoor Ahmed



**CREATE** is a DFID-funded research programme consortia exploring issues of educational access, transitions and equity in South Africa, India, Bangladesh and Ghana. For more information go to: [www.create-rpc.org](http://www.create-rpc.org)

