

Conference on Governance in Education: Transparency, Accountability and Effectiveness

Inaugural Address by Honourable Chief Adviser Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed

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Bismillahir Rahmanir Rahim

Mr. Chairman,
Director of UNESCO in Dhaka,
Distinguished Educationists and Policymakers,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Assalamu Alaikum.

I am happy to be here at this gathering of educationists and professionals involved with the education sector of Bangladesh. The theme of this conference, "Governance in Education: Transparency, Accountability and Effectiveness" is quite timely and very relevant for our efforts to ensure good governance in all areas of the economy. We are all aware of instances where weaknesses in governance, including corruption, waste, mismanagement and inefficiency, undermine the initiatives for reform in education and prevent achievement of intended outcomes. This topic therefore deserves close scrutiny by both policy-makers and educationists of our country. I would like to thank and congratulate the UNESCO Dhaka Office as well as the Ministries of Education and Primary and Mass Education for taking the initiative to organize this conference in association with the Institute of Educational Development of BRAC University and Access to Information Programme of the Chief Adviser's Office. My best wishes for everybody present here.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have spoken many times about the need for grooming a knowledge-based society. Only citizens empowered with knowledge, skills and self-esteem that come from knowledge can help sustain democratic polity, overcome poverty and face the challenges of 21st century.

Much progress has been made in the country in recent years in expanding opportunities and overcoming disparities in the education sector. Proactive policies of the government to expand access as well as innovative initiatives by non-government organizations to serve those unable to take advantage of the formal system have led to this success.

However, children disadvantaged by extreme poverty or special needs often do not get education. Unacceptable inequities therefore persist alongside widening of quality gaps. National commitment to "offer free and compulsory education to all boys and girls" as stated in Article 17 of the Constitution as well as the goals set by MDG and Education for All will remain unrealized if the present rate of progress is maintained.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we look ahead to future prospects and challenges, some priorities clearly stand out. For example, we have to overcome segmentations and divisions in the education system

at primary and secondary levels that create a divided society. The emergence of undenyng difference in the quality of education between urban and rural schools is a serious problem and it needs serous attention. Over the last several decades, the problem has become worse widening the divide between the quality of schooling available to the urban and rural children and to the children of the rich and poor parents. We have to find a solution to this problems soonest possible. We have to ensure that a set of core knowledge and competencies is acquired by all students along with choices for additional or complementary learning. This would require a core curriculum irrespective of the type of institution and provider of services.

Weaknesses in capacity and professional skills, structures and custom of centralised decision-making, culture and mindset that undermine transparency and accountability, are obstacles to reform in governance of education programmes. To establish good governance in education, we need to harness all resources and capacities existing in the country. Well-known NGOs in Bangladesh which have pioneered internationally acclaimed innovations in pre-school, primary and secondary education constitute a major 'social capital' for the nation. Examples of excellence have sprung up through the efforts of communities, and sometimes around government schools.

We should devise an optimal arrangement now for all education-related service-providers in a geographic unit, such as an upazila, to function cohesively. They should work together through a mechanism of local coordination to ensure that every child can participate in an institution which meets the minimum agreed standards of instruction, whoever the service-provider may be. The mental barriers between government and non-government programmes must be bridged in order to fully utilise existing social capital and achieve educational goals.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Non-government and community organizations can serve as an intermediary between public education service providers and the community including parents for bringing all stakeholders together. Educational institutions can in this way be made truly responsive and fully answerable to the local community as well as the parents. Stronger local government institutions can play a more direct role than at present in this process.

Adequate support including an enabling environment should therefore be extended to voluntary and non-governmental organizations as well as the private sector to establish and manage community learning-centres, ICT centres and education programmes for youth and adults by treating them as building blocks of a 'learning society'.

It has been rightly emphasized that participation in skill development of youth who do not continue formal education should be raised manifold to prepare them for work. The purpose would be served best if new models of effective and high quality vocational and technical education are designed, which are responsive and adaptable to changing market demands. Successful experience elsewhere shows that the government should focus on policy-making, framing regulatory framework of standards, and overall planning to promote public-private collaboration in providing market-responsive vocational and technical education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you know, Bangladesh devotes a little over two-percent of GDP as public sector

allocation for education, which is quite low. This ratio needs to double within the next decade and the share of government budget for education needs to increase proportionately from the present level of under 15 percent. Our educational goals and development aspirations cannot be realized without such investments. But increased spending is not enough; good governance in education must ensure that the resources are used efficiently and effectively.

It is self evident that critical education policy decisions and choice of priorities should be made transparently with sufficient dialogue with the public and the opportunity for review by stakeholders. An institutional consultative mechanism mandated to review and provide policy directions on a regular basis, could be an effective vehicle for public scrutiny and continuity of policy.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Although computer and internet proliferation is still not widespread in the country, we must make good use of the electronic media for educational purposes. I believe, Bangladesh Television has the necessary infrastructure for setting up an educational channel. Such a channel can be used optimally and effectively for high priority purposes, such as teachers' training and support, literacy and continuing education, supplementing formal primary and secondary classroom instruction, Open University courses, English language instruction, and technical and vocational education. The content and delivery of different programmes can be the responsibility of concerned service providers including non-government ones. The Ministries of Information, Education and Primary and Mass Education should move expeditiously to examine the possibility of setting up such a facility.

Creation of a framework of action for better governance in education could energise and accelerate various initiatives underway in educational development programmes and other supportive activities by civil society bodies, academic and research institutions. We must face numerous challenges confronting the education sector together and seize every opportunity that comes in our way.

With this fond hope, I wish this conference on Governance in the education sector all success and hereby declare it open.

Allah Hafez.

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