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Cover Story: Education

Promises and Challenges

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The grand coalition led by Awami League that swept the general election in December 2008, following a two year interregnum of military-backed care-taker government, had presented a political manifesto containing a "vision for change." It offered Vision 2021, which outlined national development goals envisaged for 2021- the 50th anniversary of independent Bangladesh, which also is the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Founding Father, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The Political Manifesto

The sketchy Vision 2021 has still to be fleshed out, but the headline items related to education and human resource development can be listed.

* Achievement of universal primary education, extending this stage to grade 8; elimination of illiteracy; creating a new generation skilled in and equipped with technical and scientific knowledge; better remunerations for teachers; and overall improvement in quality of education. It also promised the formulation of an education policy fit for the contemporary age.



Bold and creative measures are
to young people to teaching.

* There are other Vision 2021 goals pertinent for educational development – building Digital Bangladesh through extensive use and capacity development in digital technology; creating growth employment opportunities for at least 90 million skilled workers; and ensuring equal status for women in all spheres of society and the state.

* A key item relevant for education governance and management is the idea that local government bodies would be at the centre of planning and management of development activities. With this end, local government authorities at the district and upazila levels would be empowered to become self-reliant and autonomous.

* In addition, the five-year election pledge undertook to continue stipends for girls, removing criminal violence and session-jam from education institutions, building new secondary schools and improving existing ones in the capital city, districts and upazilas in phases; and making IT instruction compulsory in secondary schools by 2013 and in primary schools by 2021.

The Education Policy 2009 (Draft)

The 18-member National Education Policy Formulation Committee chaired by National Professor Kabir Chowdhury and co-chaired by Q K Ahmed, Chairman of Bangladesh Economic Association, presented their report to the Minister of Education on 2nd September, 2009.

The main education policy recommendations (regarded as draft, until the government formally adopts it) on the whole have been well-received by academics, researchers and major educational stakeholders. The policy recommendations are in the form of normative goals or preferences expressed mostly in general terms. One can agree with these or propose modifications as they

implemented.

The normative goals and preferences stated in the policy beg two related questions:

a. How can the broad statements of purpose and some hints of strategy be analyzed, elaborated, possible points of controversy resolved and phasing and sequential steps decided and all of the transformed into an operational plan?

b. What should be the organisational and institutional mechanism for implementing the operational plan? This is where past education commission recommendations faltered.

The decision of the government to abandon the ad hoc approach of PRSP – “poverty reduction strategy paper,” which was made by international financial institutions a condition for granting concessionary loan - and to go back to the five-year development planning mode provides a new opportunity. The five year plan can be an institutional mechanism for resource provisions, coordination, monitoring and placing all reform and development efforts in education within an agreed policy framework – always a challenge in a complex and multi-faceted endeavor which the national education system.

Sixth Plan – Opportunity for Realistic Action

A set of propositions regarding major priorities and strategies for the education sector in the sixth plan are indicated below, based on recent professional and stakeholders’ discourse, and in the context of the draft education policy priorities.

1. Universalisation up to grade 8.

Eight-year universal primary education, an idea under discussion at least since Kudrat-e-Khuda Commission report of 1974, is achievable and must be achieved in a decade. A coordinated upazila-wise assessment and planning is essential for this purpose. A majority of primary schools may continue as 5-grade feeders to selected 8-grade schools or to 5 or 7 year middle-cum-secondary schools operating through necessary local and national level coordination. The key concern is to ensure that the present quality deficits of primary education are not extended to grade 8.

2. Equity with quality in primary and secondary education.

A key plank of the education policy is to introduce a common core curriculum, and facilities and teaching personnel standards in the various types of primary and secondary institutions, including madrasas - recognising that multiple provisioning is a reality that cannot be and need not be wished away. Historically evolved multiple provisions in primary and secondary education have served specific needs. Enforcement of common quality standards and core curricula across the diverse provisions can best serve the quality-with-equity principle, which should be the focus of the sixth plan. Governance and financing strategies must support this principle. Involvement of the local government and communities and mid-day meal for children in primary school should be part of these strategies.

3. Teachers as key to quality

The teacher has to be seen as central in the strategy to improve educational quality. Bold and creative measures are needed to attract talented and inspired young people to teaching, keep them in the profession and create a critical mass of talented teachers in the education system. A ten-year plan involving a hundred degree colleges for enrolling bright young people in a degree program with education as a subject can be a pre-service program for future teachers. A national education teaching service corps can thus be created with stipends and promise of better remunerations on condition of at least five-years of service in the public system. Quality of provisions and pedagogy in the selected colleges also has to be ensured.

4. Common core contents in primary and secondary education

It is not enough to prescribe, as done in the draft policy, a core curriculum of Bangla and English, math and science, "Bangladesh studies" and IT for the diverse providers in primary and secondary education.

A qualitative transformation in teaching the core skills and competencies in all categories of primary and secondary institutions should be a priority. Short term measures such as contractual appointments and extra incentives for capable instructors in math, science, English and IT should be introduced; longer term measures would include special pre-service programs (as mentioned above). Strong bilingual competency in Bangla and English for all students completing the secondary stage should be a core objective – building the foundation of Bangla competency by fifth grade and similar English skills at the secondary stage. Mobile phone operators, IT multinationals, Internet service providers and other businesses should be persuaded and given incentives to "adopt" schools to support IT instruction and IT-based improvement in pedagogy. Transforming Vocational and Technical Education

Addressing the paradox – employers' complaint about shortage of skilled workers and unfilled places in vocational institutions and sometimes unemployed graduates – have to be addressed. This will entail redesigning the role of the public sector in vocational/technical education and training through new modes of collaboration that involves employers and NGOs in public institutions' operation and management. Government encouragement and incentives will be needed for private sector training institutions, apprenticeship and on-the job training. Particular attention is needed to making training responsive to market demands, locally and overseas; skill upgrading for the informal economy where the large majority of workers are employed; and overall attention to quality of training by applying "external efficiency" criteria.

6. Two aspects of decentralisation

Two key aspects of decentralisation of management in education are: a) authority and responsibility with accountability including budget and resource management at the level of institutions and b) devolution of planning, management, and monitoring at district and upazila levels.

Decentralisation through empowered local government is a key political commitment of the government. But decentralisation is no panacea in a corrosive political culture of patronage and corruption. A substantial pilot program should be launched under the sixth plan at selected districts, upazilas and institutions to create effective local education authorities and institutional models with greater academic, management and budgetary responsibility with accountability. The goal will be to learn about decentralisation that works and that can be widely applied.

7. Literacy and NFE in a life-long learning perspective

Literacy and non-formal education must be conceptualized as integral components of widely available life-long learning opportunities. A nationwide network of community learning centers under local government auspices with active involvement of NGOs and community organizations should be the vehicle for life-long learning, complementing formal education. Promoting functional skills and meeting genuine learning needs, rather than mechanistic literacy targets, should be the aim, and programmes should be designed and objectives defined accordingly. The goal and the political pledge should be defined in terms of bringing youth and adults into a sustainable learning process and the creation of permanent institutional structures for this purpose.

8. Consolidating Quality in Tertiary Education

Although participation in tertiary education remains low, more harm than good will result from expanding tertiary education, unless acceptable quality can be ensured. A moratorium in principle

should be applied on establishment of new institutions until acceptable standards are achieved on existing ones. The sixth plan's focus should be on applying rigorously already established quality standards and consolidating and rationalizing existing institutions, before investment is made on expansion and new institutions.

9. Financing strategy to support quality with equity

A goal of 4 to 4.5 percent of GDP as public education expenditure should be the target by the end of the sixth plan. Financing criteria and principles should be established and applied to support the objectives of quality-with-equity, such as capitation formula and institutional control of resources. Substantial new resources should be directed to teacher incentives and raising status of teaching as a profession and other quality improvement inputs.

Unfortunately there are no magic bullets for improving educational systems. There is no alternative to patient and system-based work simultaneously on several fronts. The critical concern is that these efforts should result in cumulative progress rather than periodic regression. The Sixth Plan is an opportunity that should not be lost.

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