

**Statement by Dr. Manzoor Ahmed at the Inaugural Session of the
Conference on Governance in Education, 2-4 March, 2008
Presentation of the Theme - I**

Mr Chairperson,
Honourable Chief Adviser,
Honourable Adviser for Primary and Mass Education,
Respected Director of UNESCO,
Excellencies,
Distinguished policy makers and educationists,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good Morning,
Assalamu Alaikum.

It is indeed an honour to have the opportunity to speak to this distinguished audience. I am especially grateful to the Honorable Chief Adviser for agreeing to address and inaugurate this conference.

This conference is about improving governance in education to achieve better outcomes at the pre-tertiary stage.

The educational system in Bangladesh consists of some 150,000 institutions, 34 million students and over 900,000 teachers. Primary and secondary level institutions naturally form the bulk of the system with about 20 million students in primary education including madrasas and non-formal programs and 11 million students at the secondary level including madrasas (BANBEIS 2006).

For the size and complexity of the system, the management and governance mechanisms and practices are one of the most centralized anywhere.

In 1973, a momentous decision was taken, with all good intentions, to nationalize all primary schools – i.e., to bring these under the central government control and make primary teachers employees of the central government. Unfortunately, the result was to snap the traditional relationship between the community and the village school.

In the 1980s, step by step, government subvention for salaries of individual teachers, rather than a grant to the school, brought the secondary schools also under government control. In theory, 98 percent of secondary schools

are community institutions run by a managing committee. But with all the compliance regulations and the normal practice of the heads of the district or upazila or their nominees chairing the managing committees, the community or parents have little say about the school.

A combination of the political culture and the bureaucratic mindset turned what could be a good model of public-private partnership into a demonstration of ineffective bureaucratic control and absence of accountability.

A critical systemic concern is how the education system as a whole and its sub-sectors function to make their contribution to meeting key social goals, including fighting poverty. With about half of the children not completing or coming into even primary education, the whole education system remains highly inequitable.

A vicious cycle has undermined quality in the mainstream education system. Poor provisions and outcomes at the tertiary level, especially in colleges under the National University, feed poorly qualified teaching personnel to primary and secondary schools. They in turn send out students not achieving the required competencies and learning objectives and not adequately prepared for tertiary education. Eighty percent of higher education students go to colleges under the National University and most teachers in the mainstream primary and secondary schools are National University graduates. Thus the cycle goes on.

There are three aspects of decentralization in education. The first is the distribution of authority, functions and capacities among the central entities - Ministries, directorates, and other support institutions. A need identified by researchers is to redefine the division of roles and responsibilities so that the Ministry can devote time and effort to the critical functions of strategic policy development, inter-sectoral and intra-sectoral coordination and general public interest watch, rather than to day-to-day operations.

Another aspect is about devolving responsibility, with authority and accountability, to the local level so that coordinated planning and management can be undertaken for a defined geographical unit, such as the upazila.

There is minimal planning and decision-making authority and capacity at the local level. This means no one in the upazila or the union is charged with

the job of ensuring access of all children and young people to quality education in one of the different types of institutions or that all institutions meet minimum acceptable standards.

The third aspect is about the individual school becoming the locus of action for planning and managing quality improvement. The school has to respond to specific circumstances of disadvantage of children and their families, and be accountable for performance to parents. The present structure and practices are particularly unhelpful for this form of devolution. Any significant amount of funds cannot be handed to a school under existing financial regulations for use according to the school's own plan and needs.

Career structure in primary and secondary education in the present system does not encourage professional development or professional staff to rise to management and decision-making level. Personnel recruitment and deployment policy and practice hinder development of professional and technical expertise in institutions such as the National Academy of Primary Education, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, the National Academy for Educational Management, the Education Boards and at the Directorates.

Non-government organizations have pioneered innovations to extend educational opportunities to those left out from the public system, for which they have earned international acclaim. They must become an integral part of the national plan and programme. Non-government research and academic institutions involved in education must be used to achieve the education and human resource development goals of the country. Initiatives are needed on both sides to change mind-set, perceptions and attitudes in order to foster the spirit of genuine partnership for working towards the common goals in education.

In the education system, more than in any other social enterprise, the participatory approach, transparency in decision-making and a high degree of accountability should become the norm. Openness and sharing of information and dialogue in public forums should be the norm at school, union parishad and upazila regarding objectives, plans and progress, and budgetary allocations.

To address the many and complex issues of policies and priorities in educational development and to consider the structural and operational

questions in education governance, a mechanism is needed. A permanent and statutory education commission particularly for pre-tertiary education can be such a mechanism. Continuity and consistency in policy development with public dialogue and participation would be the purpose of such a commission, unlike the numerous ad hoc Education Commissions, appointed by various regimes in the past and later their recommendations ignored.

I have given quite a list of problems. There are also assets and strengths in the system. There are dedicated teachers and headmasters and community leaders in the public system. I spoke about the great creative energy of the non-government organizations, more so than in most developing countries. I have confidence that we still can achieve the 2015 EFA goals and the education MDGs and do even more, only if all the assets and capacities we have are brought together in a synergistic way. Thank you for listening.

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