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Policy Brief 1: Building on our success for equitable education in Bangladesh



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This policy brief summarizes the discussion and recommendations from the webinar titled 'Building on our success for equitable education in Bangladesh.' The webinar is part of the integrated development dialogue campaign 'Bangladesh Miracle' organized by Innovision Consulting in association with The Department of Economics North South University and The Financial Express along with mPower as ICT partner and Windmill Advertising, Printagraphy, Sarabangla, Colors Fm 101.6 and Young Economists' Forum (YEF) as event partners. NexGenEdu is the exclusive thematic partner for education for Bangladesh Miracle.

CONTEXT

Innovision Consulting Private Limited in collaboration with NextGenEdu, The Financial Express, and Department of Economics, North South University organized a webinar on education as part of their integrated campaign, titled "Bangladesh Miracle." Bangladesh miracle aims to bring forward the factors contributing to Bangladesh's progress in key thematic issues and define the way forward. The first webinar of the series, "Building on Our Success for Equitable Education in Bangladesh" was held on Wednesday, 16th June 2021. The other partners of the Bangladesh Miracle event are Windmill advertising, Sarabangla.net, Colours 101.6 FM, North South University's YEF (Young Economist Forum), Printagraphy, CARE Bangladesh, ICCO Bangladesh, GAIN Bangladesh, WaterAid Bangladesh, Simprints Technology, BIID, and Pathao. mPower is the ICT partner for the event. The theme 'Equitable Education' was found pertinent, especially in the context of the development that Bangladesh has achieved in the education sector since its liberation in 1971, and from the point of view of development that is yet to be achieved.

Two years after victory in the liberation war, Bangladesh published its first education policy led by Khudrat-e-Khuda Commission in 1974, and the last one was published over a decade ago. The National Education Policy 2010 advocated for two years of pre-primary education, and in June 2020 the Honorable Prime Minister approved introducing two years of pre-primary classes starting under a pilot scheme, enrolling children at age 4; this promoted universal education in Bangladesh.

Other steps taken by the Governments such as providing stipend and dividing Technical and Madrasa education has improved the net enrollment rate and gender parity in the country's education sector. These major strides along with the strong partnership from the development sector and the international partners have contributed to the rise in participation of girls and increased female literacy rates and an overall literacy rate of 74.68% from 29.2% in 1981.

As we aim to build on the successes of the past, we must acknowledge that the quality of education still remains a concern. Additionally, the pandemic is threatening to reverse our achievements while 21st-century challenges are looming over us. During the webinar, the speakers called for reducing the digital divide urgently to ensure all students' equal access to education amid this pandemic. The speakers also emphasized the quality of early childhood education, stronger teacher-parent ties, and a need-based curriculum for making education more effective. A post-webinar discussion was facilitated as a Cafe - a forum for the participants to unpack and build on the ideas shared in the panel, moderated by Adam Sharpe from NextGenEdu.

In the webinar, the speakers were asked questions regarding equitable education, and the way forward for Bangladesh. The webinar integrated speakers from all concerning sectors so that they can hear each other's perspectives, and the future is planned in collaboration.

Masrura Oishi, Manager, Innovation Ecosystem and Partnerships, BRAC moderated the event. The keynote speech was delivered by Azwa Nayeem, Founder & Chairperson Alokito Hridoy Foundation. The esteemed panelists included: Md. Aminul Islam Khan, Secretary, Technical and Madrasah Education Division, Ministry of Education; Prof. Dr. Syed Md. Golam Faruk, DG, Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, Ministry of Education; Professor Dr. Asadul Islam, Centre for Development Economics and Sustainability (CDES) and Professor, Department of Economics, Faculty of Business and Economics, Monash University; Dr. Ananya Raihan, Ph.D., Chief Executive Officer, iSocial; Dr. Nazlee Siddiqui, Associate Professor, Department of Management, North South University; Shahidul Islam, Former Education Advisor, Bangladesh & Afghanistan, USAID.

CRITICAL SUCCESSES

Net enrolment and gender parity in primary education: The education system in Bangladesh comprises 40 million students, 200,000 institutions, and over a million teachers, making it one of the largest in the world. The National Education Policy 2010 advocated for two years of pre-primary education, and in June 2020 the Honorable Prime Minister approved the introduction of two years of pre-primary classes starting under a pilot scheme, enrolling children at age 4. At the primary level, stipends were nationalized in 2016 and have been transferred directly to the mobile banking accounts of the children's mothers since 2017. The stipend at the primary level and Nationwide Female Secondary Stipend Program (NFSSP) has dramatically improved the net enrollment rate and gender parity among the students.

Bridging the divide between Madrasah education and the mainstream: The Bangladesh government prioritizes every aspect of the education system present in the country. That is why the government is taking initiatives to transform the madrasa education system with the help of the Madrasa Education Board; 2.5 million students are studying under this board in the country. The government has established as many as 35 model madrasas, which can show pathways to the traditional ones.

Free distribution of textbooks; investments in teachers' training: To further facilitate the education sector of Bangladesh, the government has been distributing free textbooks and several educational materials to the students, providing language learning courses for Madrasa teachers, technical education providers, and general teachers, and also offering several online training courses to the teachers.

Investment in girls: The introduction of the stipend program for females at the secondary education level has drastically improved Bangladeshi females' participation in the labor market, and has made revolutionary changes in their social status as well. Many females who have received this stipend are giving back to society by choosing the noble career of teaching. The stipend program also encourages parents to send their girls to school. Such initiatives are lucrative for the poor population of Bangladesh and can ensure further inclusion of children in schools.

Prioritization of technical education: The government is also taking initiatives to improve technical education enrollment. At present, the enrollment rate stands at 17%, the government aims to make it 30% by 2030.

CHALLENGES

Poor emphasis on early childhood education: On the other hand, the country's early childhood education, which is the pillar of future education prospects for many children, is lagging far behind compared to the developed countries. More emphasis is vital for the primary & secondary education system in order to nurture the students' talents and prepare them for higher education in the universities. Additionally, emphasis is needed on teacher-parent relationships and discouraging teachers' from engaging in immoral activities.

COVID-19 induced disruption: As educational institutions stayed closed for the last one and half years, during the COVID-19 pandemic, this equity is being challenged. Educational institutions opted for online classes and Television classes during the COVID-19 situation to handle the setback in equitable education.

Digital divide widening gaps in the pandemic period: Digital divide refers to the gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern ICT products, including mobile devices, computers, and the internet. The government was very careful about equitable education in tune with sustainable development goals, but there have been some crucial setbacks. Lack of devices, interruptions in electric connections, unavailability of internet connections in several districts outside of the capital is hindering the process of online education for all.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The speakers provided some interesting and insightful recommendations for the future of Bangladesh. Their thoughts are listed below:

Investment in Foundational skills: Foundational skills like reading and problem-solving are crucial for children. Within the first few years of being introduced to education, a child must acquire these skills. Otherwise, they will grow up with learning deficiencies, and acquiring the foundational skills will be more difficult for them. The government is already providing free educational materials to primary and secondary school students. Here, the government has an opportunity to ensure that these students are developing the foundational skills required for their survival in the ever-changing world. The speakers also recommend that the students are kept under a common discipline up to SSC for ensuring equal distribution of knowledge.

Enhancing collaboration among stakeholders: Three main stakeholders in the education sector are academics, students, and industry personnel. The speakers recommended that there must be collaboration among the stakeholders to ensure quality education. Otherwise, the class difference will prevail in Bangladesh, and equitable education will be far from achievable. The speakers also think that the collaboration between the stakeholders will ensure the participation of different sectors in the education system. The inclusion of people is the linchpin to success.

Innovations to bridge the digital divide: Assignments as a means to assess student learning and learning gaps were adopted by the ministry of education. Data from the government says around 93% of the students successfully submitted their assignments. Fortunately, the students facing internet connection barriers managed to participate in the assignment submission process, so the gap of the digital divide was somewhat closed. Innovative solutions, such as assignments can help manage the challenges of the Digital Divide in the pandemic crisis if they are merged with the education system properly.

Bridging the gap between boys and girls: Dropout rates are expected to have an insurmountable surge given the Covid-19 situation has probably widened the gap between boys and girls in educational institutions. The latter are either staying behind to do household chores or getting married as the parents' view of them returning to school is not fit. Necessary measures have to be taken to address these inequality issues for ensuring that our girls are not being overlooked. A curriculum needs to be created that works for all and reduces the dropout rates to enhance the learning experiences. The world is already adapting to new technologies curated for the pandemic, Bangladesh needs to do so for its education sector as well.

Making devices available: In COVID-19, transformational changes will be essential for ensuring that every family or student has a device and a good quality Internet connection. The post-pandemic road map for the country includes ensuring good internet connections for all parts of the country and solving the lack of device issues for students.



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