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A Dialogue on
**Political Economy of Education Decisions -
Current and Longer-term Challenges for
Bangladesh**

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Background

- ❑ With common historical and colonial legacy, South Asia is home to one-fifth of humanity. Also it has the largest concentration of the world's adult illiterates, out-of-school children, and poor people.
- ❑ The region is not on track to achieve SDG4 2030 goals of universal, quality and inclusive secondary education and a major expansion of lifelong learning - including early childhood development and functional literacy.
- ❑ Undertaking a technical analysis of education backwardness of the region - why the system was failing, how it could be put back on track -- we discovered that educational deficits persisted for not lack of technical solutions; absence of political settlements prevented implementation of good solutions.
- ❑ Technical merits of policy and strategy choices were important, but the political dynamics determined if these would be implemented and to what extent.

Education is highly political, often in a destructive way.

What is proposed to be done today

- ❑ Drawing on the South Asia analysis undertaken of status, causes and consequences of basic (school) education and policy and strategy options, we try to zoom down on Bangladesh.
- ❑ We trace briefly the historical evolution of education in the post-colonial period , post-independence Bangladesh and identify some relevant features.
- ❑ We highlight key provisions of the 2010 Education Policy and its implementation deficits in relation to SDG4 goals.
- ❑ We highlight key problem areas in general school education, TVET/Lifelong learning, tertiary education, and madrasa education.
- ❑ Looking to the way forward, we focus on teachers as the pivot of change, and a paradigm shift in education governance and education financing.
- ❑ In conclusion, we identify the elements of a political settlement that has to be forged to build a social compact in support of the transformative change needed.

The aim is to generate a public discourse -- helping to move towards a consensus and a social compact. A balance has been tried between the large picture and probing deeper into subsectors and across-sector issues.

Post-liberation evolution of education

- ❑ In post-colonial period up to 1971 the colonial education pattern continued -- restrictive and inequitable access, without basic change in quality and objectives;
- ❑ East Bengal began losing its relative advantage in education due to disparity between East and West Pakistan in expansion of school and tertiary education.
- ❑ ***Post-liberation, the 1974 Qudrate-e-Khuda Commission, as guide to re-shaping education, looked to the fundamental state principles of Nationalism, Democracy, Socialism and Secularism*** It proposed state obligation of 8-years' universal quality education with unified core curriculum for all and Bangla as medium (and English as a compulsory language).
- ❑ Education beyond basic was to be within a State regulatory framework; madrasa stream, quite limited at that point, was seen as vocational education for faith-related occupations, not a parallel stream of education.
- ❑ ***1975 assassination of the Founding Father and the political turmoil marked a wrong turn in our national history on many fronts for the next 15 years -- including the shelving of the Khuda Commission report. We are still living with the consequences.***

2010 Policy features and its non-implementation

- ❑ Military-backed rulers up to 1990 and the next two decades of ‘democracy restoration’ saw at least 8 education commissions and committees/policy recommendations; but none came up with basic reform; and none were followed up with seriousness.
- ❑ 2010 Policy, adopted by the Parliament, was comprehensive with distinctive features harkening back to Khuda Commission: ***8 years of schooling as universal primary education with common core curriculum and quality standards for all school education and all children foreseen.***
- ❑ It strayed from Khuda Commission in accepting madrasa education as a parallel system from pre-school to tertiary (mention of ‘secularism’ was carefully avoided); three-way division of education accepted, and compromise made on Bangla as medium of instruction.
- ❑ ***The fragmented policy implementation effort was no better than previous abortive policy initiatives; no implementation and follow-up plan/mechanism set up.***
- ❑ In over a decade, with SDG4 2030 as benchmark, the gaps, deficits and non-implementation of Policy 2010 have become more glaring - e.g. in universal quality secondary education, ECD for young children, major lifelong learning expansion. No time-bound plan exists for these key SDG4 targets.
- ❑ Easy response to social demand and a coalition of interest of education establishment, bureaucrats, organized teachers, and short-sighted politicians in ‘not rocking the boat’ have led to ***quantitative expansion; but lack of plan or progress on key quality and inclusion objectives.***

A continuation of the lack of political consensus, commitment and will to make hard choices is clearly evident.

School Education Challenges

- ❑ A divided system - mainstream Bangla, English medium and madrasas- reinforces the division in the nation, defying policy declaration.
- ❑ Neglect of learning outcome - pedagogy and student assessment focused on mechanical 'covering' the syllabus, frequent exams, and securing 'grades' that say little about what is learned.
- ❑ ***Two-thirds or more of students cannot read and count after primary school. As they move to secondary, majority do not perform at grade-level.***
- ❑ School education uniquely divided between two Ministries, impeding holistic steps for curriculum continuity, quality improvement, and overall planning.
- ❑ Policy-makers, politicians, bureaucrats and education establishment including teachers are comfortable with status quo - no incentive to change, and all are keen to offer a rosy narrative.
- ❑ ***This preexisting condition is magnified by two years of learning loss - risking a generational crisis - because authorities are in denial, fixed on going back to routine, without a learning recovery plan. Alarm raised by UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, Nobel Laureate Abhijit Banerjee.***

TVET/Lifelong learning, skills for jobs

- ❑ Some 2 million youth entering job-market annually, about a half million get some training, short or long; about half million, mostly without training, tries their luck abroad; most of the remainder finds livelihood in the informal economy (85% of all workers).
- ❑ ***It's mostly low-skill, low-productivity and low-earning work that does not provide a decent livelihood for the majority. This is the large challenge.***
- ❑ The popular solution/govt. strategy is to increase ratio of secondary/higher secondary vocational enrolment from some 15% to ideally 50%. Main approach is to have vocational technical courses in high schools and madrasas and, for a smaller number, polytechnics and technical schools and colleges, one in each Upazila.
- ❑ ***Our own and international lesson is that vocational courses in general schools don't work well. Best job preparation general schools can offer is to teach well basic general skills.*** More direct skill training (in polytechnics /technical schools) complemented by internship/apprenticeship collaboration with industries/employers work better.
- ❑ ***We also need a wide range of flexible, varying duration, local market responsive skill formation for the informal economy through a network of lifelong learning centers (including libraries/internet-connected reading centers), better run by NGOs with govt. regulatory framework.*** This largely does not exist.
- ❑ A skill development policy was adopted in 2011. A *Technical Education Board, a Directorate and a National Skill Development Council* existed. 23 Ministries and Agencies are engaged in skill training. But policy coordination and implementation remained a major obstacle.
- ❑ In 2018 A skill Development Authority with Prime Minister as the Chair and Finance and other Ministers as members set up by an Act replacing the Skill Development Council. After four years significant results are not visible.

Inertia and inefficiency which is seen in many public sectors? A failure of political will to align stakeholders behind a consensus with a clear mission?

Tertiary Education

- ❑ A complex area comprising general and professional higher education, general and specialized universities (public and private), affiliated colleges, open university, and Islamic higher education.
- ❑ Universities attract the most attention, but 85% of students are in non-university higher education. ***National University Colleges with 70% of tertiary students provide most workers demanding tertiary credentials including school teachers.*** Mainstream universities have 15% students - private ones have surpassed public enrolment.
- ❑ Strategic Plan for Higher Education (SPHE) 2018-30 anticipates a gamut of reforms. It can be debated if the plan is realistic, if catchy institutional infrastructure (E. g., a flagship world-class university, a national research laboratory, a national teacher training academy) is given prominence at the cost of basic improvement of the system including colleges.
- ❑ ***The critical point is that conditions do not exist to implement and derive the results from the strategic plan because of student and teacher politics on campus, aided and abetted by the national political culture, amply reported in media.*** (E.g., vice-chancellors implicated in various forms of corruption, abdication of control and discipline in residence halls, abandoning elected student union bodies, and mafia-Godfather style conduct of the student wing bosses of the party in power.)
- ❑ This is clearly a political failure; ***the situation can change dramatically if a political choice is made that the academic environment in educational institutions must be restored*** and heads of institutions supported and held accountable to protect this environment.

Madrasa Education

- ❑ Alia and Deoband-style madrasas were few at liberation. It was not a major issue for Khuda Commission; it was seen as a vocational option for a small number.
- ❑ Post-1975, Both Alia and Quawmi streams saw a dramatic growth with active encouragement of the regime. No statistics kept on Quawmi; *Abul Barakat estimates by 1990, one-third of secondary level students were in the two madrasa types, Quawmi numbers surpassing Alia by 1990. The trend continued post-1990, stabilizing by 2000.*
- ❑ There are now two parallel madrasa streams, rivalling the mainstream, from pre-school to tertiary. *These created a huge dilemma about how large proportions of youth prepare for life and livelihood studying with archaic curricula and in poorly resourced institutions.*
- ❑ 2010 Policy recognised the parallel status of the Alia Madrasa and proposed modernizing the system; did not have much to say about Quomi. In 2017 – Dawra degree of Qawmi madrasa was announced to be equivalent to general Islamic studies master's degree, though its significance remains unclear.
- ❑ In 2019, a new division in Ministry of Education was created lumping madrasa and Technical Education together, seen as a step to reforming government supported madrasas. *A clear strategy is not evident and there is reluctance to address how government financing for faith-based education squares with the secular state principle or how the relative levels of public support for madrasa and general education can be decided.*
- ❑ History cannot be re-written; social demand for madrasa education has to be accommodated; *but could quality general school education that is accessible and affordable in every locality the way to resolve the madrasa dilemma for the state?* This depends on the political choice to be made.

Education governance and financing - a new paradigm

- ❑ Bangladesh 2010 Policy anticipated major decentralization with substantial authority at institutional level, state obligation of quality basic education up to grade 8, and supporting and promoting 'public good' function of all levels of education applying government regulatory framework.
- ❑ Much of it fell by the wayside without a proper follow-up and implementation of the policy. ***Public funding for education remained at the lowest level in the region and among developing countries (A very low Tax-GDP ratio did not help.)*** With over 200,000 institutions, close to 50 million students and 1.5 million teachers, it remains the most centralized education management in the world for its size.
- ❑ An equitable, inclusive, quality school education requires area-wise planning and management- a form of district education authority - as seen in advanced systems, to reach and serve all.
- ❑ ***Interestingly, articles 59 and 60 of the constitution calls for elected local bodies to prepare and implement plans relating to public services and economic development and impose taxes, prepare budgets and maintain funds for this purpose.***
- ❑ An education financing dilemma is that substantially more public education funding cannot be spent effectively in the current structure without decentralized planning and budgeting.
- ❑ ***Our South Asia study suggests the need for separation of powers in education governance for policy- making, execution of policies and adjudication of disputes within a decentralized governance structure.***
- ❑ Can we move towards this new governance and financing paradigm? ***Political dynamics remain a formidable barrier. A lead has to be given by like-minded citizens and other stakeholders interested in change.***

Teachers as the pivot of change

- ❑ Research shows, ‘accident of birth’ - familial circumstances of students - are the most important determinants of student performance in school, but education policy cannot change these conditions. The next most important factor is ‘teacher quality,’ which is a subject of education intervention.
- ❑ ***It is necessary to reimagine the role, tasks, preparation, support, motivation, performance standards and social esteem of education workers.*** The objectives and structure of teacher preparation in South Asia, including Bangladesh, contrast sharply to those in high performing countries in East Asia and Europe.
- ❑ ***We do not have pre-service teacher training. The approach of pedagogy training after graduates are appointed as teachers fails to attract intellectually capable people to school teaching. Post-recruitment teacher training cannot compensate for basic deficiencies in subject knowledge and general basic competencies***
- ❑ A genuine pre-service teacher preparation model of four-year degree that integrates professional preparation for teaching can work if adequate remuneration, a career path and enhanced social status are ensured by creating a national education service corps for school education.
- ❑ This would be the way to have skilled professional teachers who can be the role model for their students. ***All of the quality and equity enhancing measures have a central role for teachers. The barriers to change can be overcome if teachers who touch directly the lives of millions of students can play their positive role. Reforms cannot succeed if teachers fail.***

Way Forward

Six Imperatives

- ❑ Recognise the central role of the education system in building a progressive and democratic polity in Sonar Bangla; that GDP growth and mega projects are not enough; and that education must be protected from short-sighted politics.
- ❑ A comprehensive education sector plan should be designed for 2030 with a 2041 perspective; some work has been done with hesitant govt. participation; a Permanent Education Commission, anticipated in 2010 policy, should guide the process as the guardian of the education system.
- ❑ All school education should come under one Ministry within a decentralized governance structure.
- ❑ Education governance should be decentralized with regulatory frameworks covering state, private and hybrid institutions, all upholding 'public good.'
- ❑ A new state initiative is needed to attract the best talents in education profession, creating a national teaching service corps.
- ❑ The state should take the lead in building a social compact for education guided by the four pillars of the constitution -- democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism -- giving these contested concepts a progressive, humane, and liberal interpretation.

Like-minded citizens, political and social activists, professionals and human rights promoters should unite to move forward an inclusive, equitable and quality education agenda. Fazle Hasan Abed said in his foreword - the idea of human progress itself is under challenge even from the education system. The role of education in promoting human progress must be reclaimed.