

# Quality Primary Education in Bangladesh

## KEY STATISTICS

	Total	Boys	Girls
Child population (aged 6 to 10)	16.4 million	7.9 million	8.5 million
Total enrolment Grade 1 – 5	16.0 million	7.9 million	8.1 million
Enrolment aged 6-10 year in Grade 1-5	14.9 million	7.5 million	7.4 million
Net enrolment rate in primary school	90.8%	87.9 %	94.0 %
Primary school children reaching Grade 5	55.0 %	53%	57%
Completion rate of the 5 year primary school cycle	50.7%		
Stipend recipients	4.8 million		
Average no. of years to complete primary school	8.6	8.7	8.5
Teacher : student ratio	1:49		
Number of schools with at least 900 contact hours per year	10%		
2008 public expenditure on education as % of GNP	2.14%		

Source: Directorate of Primary Education, 2008 Annual Sector Performance Report (published in 2009)

## BACKGROUND

Bangladesh has one of the largest primary education systems in the world with an estimated 16.4 million primary school aged children (6 to 10 years). There are 365,925 primary school teachers (approximately 53% of teachers and 23% of head teachers are women), working in more than 82,218 schools (with ten different types of schools, including Madrasahs)<sup>1</sup>. The Primary Education Compulsory Act passed in 1990 made primary education free and compulsory for all children up to Grade 5.<sup>2</sup>

The Government of Bangladesh recognises education as a means of reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for children. As a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Government of Bangladesh, with assistance from development partners, has made positive steps towards fulfilling children's rights to education, according to the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals. As a result, the country has made significant progress towards achieving universal primary education and gender parity in schools.

<sup>1</sup> 10 types of schools include: Government Primary Schools (GPS), Registered Non-Government Primary Schools (RNGPS), Experimental Schools, community Schools, Non-Registered Non Governmental Primary Schools, Kindergarten, NGO Schools, Primary sections of Secondary Schools, Ebtedayee Madrasahs, Primary sections of Dakhil, Alim, Fazil and Kamil Madrasahs.

<sup>2</sup> Although it only represents a small proportion of overall spending on education, nearly 90% of households make some kind of payment directly to schools. Some 80-93% of the total private expenditure incurred is on private tuition, stationery, fuel, tiffin (mid-day snacks), health care, and school dress. Private tuition makes up the largest portion of private expenditure with an estimated 43% of GPS students and 37-30 percent in other types of institutions taking part. [CAMPE 2006 Financing Primary and Secondary Education in Bangladesh]

## ISSUES

Despite many achievements during the past decade, major improvements are still needed in order for all children to receive the benefit of quality education. The major challenges include: poor quality of education; high drop out rates; promotion of equity and accessing education; decentralization of education administration; and special needs education.

In terms of access, the high enrolment rates achieved for both boys and girls do not yet equate to covering ALL the children in Bangladesh. It is currently estimated that there are more than 3.3 million out-of-school children throughout the country.<sup>3</sup> Schooling opportunities are also very limited for some specific groups such as working children, disabled children, indigenous children and those in remote areas or living in extreme poverty. The UNICEF 2006 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey reports that only about half of the children living in urban slums attend school compared to a national average of 81% net attendance ratio, and about 24% of slum girls never enrol in any form of formal or non-formal school.<sup>4</sup> Even for those who are enrolled, completion of the primary education cycle is a critical issue. Only 55% of children eventually reach Grade 5.<sup>5</sup>

Access of girls and boys to primary education is no longer an issue. However, equity is a major concern in the aspects of gender and inclusiveness for disadvantaged children. While more girls are currently enrolled in primary school compared to boys the number of girl students significantly decreases through secondary school.

The school environment is far from fully inclusive. Disadvantaged children (such as children with disabilities or from ethnic minorities) are particularly vulnerable to exclusion from educational opportunities. For example, it is estimated by the Bangladesh Bureau of the Census that approximately 10% of the children of preschool and primary-school age (3-10 years) are disabled. Currently 77,488 children with special needs of various types are enrolled in primary schools.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to the overall and general trend of girls' enrolment in schools being higher than that of boys, the enrolment of girls with special needs is significantly lower than boys.

There are many children who are not going to school but who could attend if schools were more inclusive using child-friendly.

The quality of the teaching-learning process, the school environment and children's learning achievements are also major challenges. Poor qualifications and lack of teacher motivation are major challenges. Approximately 24% of Government Primary Schools and Registered Non-Government Primary Schools teachers are untrained. The



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<sup>3</sup> Child Info 2008

<sup>4</sup> UNICEF MICS 2006 pg 91 (National Net Attendance ratio 81.3%, Slum net attendance ration 52.3%).

<sup>5</sup> 2009 Annual Sector Performance Report.

<sup>6</sup> 2009 Annual Sector Performance Report. Types of disability: physical handicap; poor eyesight; short of hearing, problem in speech; intellectual/mental disability, other.

traditional and dominant way of teaching in most schools tends to focus on memorizing facts. There is little emphasis on developing analytical, practical or vocational skills. This results in several issues such as low achievement rate, high drop out and high repetition rate. Currently, it takes an average of 8.6 years (8.7 for boys and 8.5 for girls) for a child to complete the five-year primary school cycle.

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Contact hours are an essential component of learning. Unfortunately, contact hours in Bangladesh average about half of the international standard of 900-1000 per year. 90% of schools are double shift, meaning that student in Grade 1 & 2 attend in the morning (2 hours) and Grade 3 to 5 in the afternoon (3.5 hours). Coupled with high student absenteeism rates of 19%, the actual average contact hours could be even lower.

Improved toilets and water supply are also a priority area for improvement in primary schools. Access to quality facilities is directly associated with quality of retention and attendance rates of students. The number of toilets in schools has been increasing however, an acute shortage remains. In 2008, 5% (4% GPS and 6% of RNGPS) of schools reported having no toilet and another 14%<sup>7</sup> of schools reported the use of only one toilet. On average, in primary schools, there are 150 pupils to each toilet. Similarly, poorly functioning tubewells and access to water, including water free from arsenic, continue to challenge schools and impact on the retention and drop out rates of children.

As a result of all these factors, children's achievement levels are far below the national targets. Only about half of the primary school graduates achieve the minimum national curriculum competencies.

## ACTION

UNICEF, with the Government of Bangladesh, is working to achieve quality education for all Bangladeshi children through the Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II), which began in 2004. PEDP-II is a six-year long coordinated and integrated sub-sector wide programme financed by the Government of Bangladesh along with 11 development partners including UNICEF. This programme, due to end in 2011, is being implemented in all 64 districts, covering 61,072 schools for a total cost of USD 1.8 billion.

PEDP II aims to ensure the quality of primary education for all eligible children in the country through (a) improving the quality of teaching and learning and raising student achievement (b) increasing access to primary school for the disadvantaged and (c) strengthening planning and management in primary education.

An important activity within PEDP II is decentralization of school management. The main mechanism for this in PEDP II is through and School Level Improvement Plans (SLIPs) supported by UNICEF. Through SLIPs, parents, teachers, school management committees

<sup>7</sup> 2007 School Census Survey Report

and local communities are working together to improve the quality of learning for children. SLIP activities are empowering headteachers and teachers, strengthening their professional motivation thereby enhancing their sense of ownership of the school. In addition, like many decentralization reforms, the SLIP activities are strengthening participation of teachers, SMC, parents and community involvement in the schools. By June 2009, PEDPII SLIPS has reached approximately 4.9 million children in 29,804 schools. Examples of use of SLIP funds in 2008 and 2009 include purchasing cleaning materials for toilets, books and bookshelves, musical instruments, clearing of the school playground, and small scale repairs to school benches or latrines. The success of the programme is highlighted by the Government's commitment to cover all government supported schools by June 2010.

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To support planning at local level, PEDPII also provides training to government officials at district, upazila school management committee members and head teachers.

To improve the quality of education, PEDPII focuses on in-service teacher training. Teachers are trained in interactive teaching approaches and also receive subject-based training. Head masters and local education officials benefit from professional development training. The Diploma of Education for new teachers will be fully revised in 2009 and 2010, focusing on new child-friendly teaching techniques and will include a 6-month teaching practice component. PEDP II also aims at increasing the number of single shift schools by at least 31% by the end of the programme to raise the number of hours between teachers and students.

An important part of equitable access to schooling is to contribute to improve the health of children. Through PEDPII, the 'better health for better education' training package will be provided for all primary school teachers

incorporating a number of elements of health into the classroom.

The teacher-student ratio has slightly improved during the past years. In 2008 it was estimated that 88% of school were meeting the minimum requirement of 46 students per teacher. However, it is important to note that the number of students per grade can vary significantly. For example, in 2007, the teacher-pupil ratio was 1:80 to 1:100 in 69 upazilas and more than 1:100 in 23 upazilas. This is an improvement from 2005 when 124 upazilas reported classrooms with more than 100 students. Shortage of teachers and school facilities explains that the teacher-student ratio is still not adequate. To address this problem, PEDPII has planned to construct 30,000 new classrooms. As of March 2008, 19,619 new classrooms had been constructed.

Another key intervention of the programme is social mobilization and community awareness. Awareness campaigns for quality education and girls' education are conducted through mass media, national and sub-national education events and social mobilization initiatives. These include the use of interactive popular theatre at community level, TV drama series about quality education, cartoons promoting UNICEF's animated girl-hero Meena and printed materials.

Outside of PEDPII, Bangladesh continues to strengthen their approach to respond to education in emergency situations. Restoring education and ensuring that the most vulnerable children are reached soon after an emergency is a priority. In 2008 12,600 children affected by Cyclone Sidr benefited from the construction of 42 transitional schools and 110,000 children received educational materials during and after the emergency. Similarly, 11,060 vulnerable children (3 to 10 years) in 2 Rohingya Refugee Camps (Kutupalong and Nayapara) in Cox's Bazar have improved access to education.

## IMPACT

During the past decade, Bangladesh has made great progress in improving the primary education situation. The number of enrolled students increased from 12 million in 1990 to over 16 million in 2008, and net enrolment rate was boosted from 60% in 1990 to 90.8% in 2008. Equality has also improved as girls' primary school enrolment has increased and surpassed boys in primary education. Similarly, the percentage of female teachers has been steadily increasing. In 2008 about 53% of teachers in GPS and RNGPS were female, up from 21% in 1990. The proportion of female head teachers, however, remains low with only 23% female posts in 2008 (up from 18% in 2005). Below is a summary of a range of improvements to the quality of teaching and learning in the classrooms:

- SLIPs are empowering head teachers and teachers and strengthening their professional motivation, thereby enhancing their sense of ownership of in schools. Like many decentralization reforms, the SLIP initiative is strengthening the participation of teachers, School Management Committees, parental and community involvement in schools.
- There is improved awareness of education among parents and teachers encouraging students to enrol and take part in and stay in school.
- School level planning processes are encouraging better links among teachers, parents and School Management Committees. The community and School Management Committees have become more involved in school management and supervision through school planning exercises.
- Decentralized management of the school calendar has brought improved school administration in rural areas where attendance ratios link directly to agricultural and storm seasons.
- 64 million free textbooks were provided to pupils. In 2008, 91% of primary students received their textbooks within the first two month of the academic year.
- A large number of training programmes have been carried out to improve the quality of education. In 2008, 74% of GPS and 77% of RNGPS of primary school teachers had the Certificate in Education, 41% of GPS and 45% of RNGPS teachers received subject based training to refresh and enrich their classroom teaching techniques and 25% of GPS and 28% of RNGPS teachers received basic in service training.

*Updated September 2009*