

Kalene Ardt, Chas Hastings, Katie Hopkins, Robin Knebel, Jun Loh, Rodney Woods

Report on Primary Education in Bangladesh: Challenges and Successes

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Introduction: *An overview of Bangladesh's education system past and present*

In the words of Dr. A.M.R. Chowdhury, deputy executive director of BRAC, Bangladesh's leading institution for non-formal education: "Education is the backbone of sustainable development. Education stimulates and empowers people to participate in their own development" (Chowdhury et al, 1). A plan for sustainable development must address the issue of education because it plays a critical role not only in expanding further educational opportunities, but also in fostering basic intellectual abilities such as literacy that are crucial to success in a world where power is closely linked with knowledge. Primary education must receive a great amount of attention in developing nations for this reason.

In Bangladesh the expansion of primary education is crucial, just as it is in other developing nations within South Asia and beyond. Bangladesh's low literacy rate of 39% (Chowdhury et al, 47) is one of the many low development indicators that remind us how far our nation has yet to go in its pursuit of sustainable development. Primary education has been a priority in Bangladeshi politics since independence from Pakistan in 1971: basic measures to implement universal primary education were taken from the outset. However up until recent times, enrollment, as well as government spending on the education sector, has remained very low; little progress was seen in the primary education sector throughout the 1970s and 80s. Additionally there have been problems of inequity and access. The 70s and the 80s saw a marked gender disparity in enrollment levels as well as attendance, completion, literacy rates and achievement levels. Marginalized and disadvantaged groups in general—particularly the rural and urban poor—have had significantly less access to education than other groups.

The Bangladesh government is proud that its education programs dramatically improved in the 1990s, especially during the latter half of the decade. The 90s saw a rekindled dedication to the expansion of primary education, and as a consequence the Bangladeshi primary education

system experienced significant enhancement during this period. A large part of this renewed commitment was a direct result of the 1990 World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA), which encouraged all participating nations to expand their vision to meet goals in the education sector, especially the goal of making primary education universal. Following this conference, donors in Bangladesh invested in the education sector much more heavily and NGOs increased their involvement in assisting the Bangladeshi government in meeting its primary education goals. The Government of Bangladesh itself took many initiatives in the years following the WCEFA, including: the 1993 Compulsory Primary Education Act, which made the five-year primary education program free in all government schools and declared education for girls in rural areas free through grade eight; the establishment of the ministry for Primary and Mass Education in 1992, which set as its objective the universalization of primary education as well as the elimination of the gender- and poverty-gaps; demand-side interventions such as the Female Stipend program, the Food for Education (FFE) program; and most recently the Primary Education Development Program (PEDP II), a six-year program beginning in the year 2000 which aims to increase access, quality and efficiency across the board in the primary education sector .

These measures have resulted in impressive gains in the achievement of Bangladesh's primary education goals. Nationwide enrollment rates have sharply increased, dropout rates have gone down, significant progress has been made in raising equality of access between different geographic and socioeconomic groups, and the gender gap has literally been removed at the primary level. Girls have actually *overtaken* boys in rates of enrollment, completion, and attendance in primary schools (Kabeer et al, 292).

However, Bangladesh still faces obstacles towards the long-term success of its education system. For example:

- Government expenditure on education in Bangladesh is currently the lowest in South

Asia (2.3 of GNP, compared to 3.5 regional average [“MGD Issues”]).

- Net enrollment rate is still only 80% (Chowdhury et al 16). This means that about three million children 6-10 years old are currently not enrolled in school (Dhar).
- At least 15% of primary school age children never enter the educational system. Most of these children are poor. When this figure is combined with the 25% primary school dropout rate, it is seen that 40% of Bangladeshi children never receive a full primary education (USAID).
- Bangladesh is over-reliant on NGOs to reach the disadvantaged groups.

We have reduce these problems to two main concerns:

- ***Equity and access issues***: this includes male/female success rates, enrollment rates in rural vs. urban areas, and poverty-related access restrictions. Large indigenous populations living largely in the Chittagong region as well as Sylhet and remote parts in the north of the country have not yet been reach by primary school expansion.
 - ***Quality issues***: disparities in the quality of education is by far the biggest problem Bangladesh faces in the primary education sector. Most important is the stark contrast in the quality of education received in a government school as opposed to a NGO-run school.
- By addressing these problems Bangladesh will be much more likely to succeed in providing its population with high-quality, universal primary education. This will provide the basis for sustainable economic and social development in the nation. In this report we will outline these problems in-depth, then discuss potential reforms and how we believe SAARC can help.

Problems of Equity and Access

Much has been written recently regarding the successes Bangladesh has experienced in increasing access to primary education among disadvantaged groups such as girls, those who live in rural areas, and the urban poor. While these achievements should not be underestimated, it is imperative to recognize that there are still many challenges that must be met in enhancing equity and access in the primary education sector. The national net enrollment rate is 80%, which means that 20% of all primary school age children in Bangladesh are for one reason or another inhibited from attending school. The majority of these children are either living in isolated rural communities, homeless, or from marginalized tribal minorities. The Asian Development Bank's Summary Poverty Reduction and Social Strategy states that there is a large indigenous population living in the Chittagong and Sylhet regions as well as remote northern parts that have yet to be supplied with access to primary education (Asian Development Bank). Additionally, gender inequities in primary education have not been totally eradicated, even though primary enrollment levels now have achieved gender parity. Bangladesh has set the goal of reaching 95% enrollment rate by the year 2015, and through its PEDP II program has expressed the desire to drastically increase the equality of access to primary education among all populations. Much work is still to be done if these goals are to be achieved.

Gender Inequity

The gains in enrollment for girls have been seen to the greatest degree at the primary level. The rate of female enrollment at the secondary level is still significantly lower than that of male enrollment. This is due to low achievement rates for girls at the primary level which put them at a disadvantage when entering secondary school. Girls are more likely than boys to drop out of secondary school, and their achievement scores tend to be significantly lower, especially in rural areas and among the urban poor (UNICEF). The principle reasons for this are the following:

- *Gender discrimination*: The perceived inferiority of women and girls is deeply embedded in Bangladeshi society. Discrimination starts from birth—female infanticide is widely practiced—and persists throughout life. Many families still keep their girls from school simply because they don't believe a girl needs or should have an education. Many girls are married at very young ages, eliminating any chance they had to receive an education beyond the primary level. Especially in rural areas, girls are also frequently kept in the home to work, further exacerbating the problems of access they already face. There are currently 1.5 million primary school age girls un-enrolled in primary education (UNICEF); it will take concerted effort on the part of the Government of Bangladesh as well as its partnering NGOs through mass media, community outreach, construction of community-based schools, and incentive programs to reach out to these children.
- *Access for girls*: Gender parity has been achieved in primary school enrollments, and in many cases girls have higher enrollment levels than boys. This does not mean, however, that access to education is equal for girls. Studies have shown that although girls have been targeted for primary school enrollments in rural areas, their attendance rates are considerably lower than the rates for boys since girls are often kept at home to work and take care of younger siblings. This puts them at an immediate disadvantage in the learning process. The same holds true, although to a lesser degree, in urban areas. In both urban and rural areas, the problem is worst for girls of poor families.
- *Quality of primary education*: The biggest problem Bangladesh seems to face in the pursuit of its educational goals is the lingering poor quality of primary education. Achievement and competency levels of most children are very low. This doubly disadvantages girls since they already face overwhelming gender discrimination in other arenas. Thus when girls enter the secondary school system many of them drop out before completion because,

when the inadequacy of their preparation for secondary school is combined with all the other societal forces already stacked up against them, they are set up for failure.

Urban Poverty and Child Labor

Urban poverty deserves special treatment in this section because it has traditionally been almost entirely ignored by the government and has received considerably less attention from NGOs than rural poverty has. This is because the rural population in Bangladesh has always been so much greater than the urban population, and consequently the majority of educationally deprived children have historically lived in rural areas. In recent times urban poverty has been exponentially increasing; urbanization is currently growing in Bangladesh at well over double the annual rate of population growth (UNICEF). This is largely due to Bangladesh's increasing exposure to the forces of globalization, decreases in the agricultural sector, a lack of adequate rural infrastructure to support population growth, and the widespread rural poverty and unemployment. Bangladesh's cities have not been able to support the massive influx of people and as a result slum communities have sharply risen in number and size.

Though primary school enrollment is higher in urban areas than it is in rural areas, this is largely because the majority of wealthy and middle-class Bangladeshis live in cities. The enrollment rate is very low for the urban poor, in some cases even lower than that of rural populations. It is estimated that only 9.4 percent of slums have primary schools within their reach (Sharafuddin); the problem therefore is one of both financial and geographical access. Many children are also prohibited from enrolling in government schools because they do not have an official address.

Even among those children that do have geographic access to primary schools and whose housing status allows them to enroll in formal schools, incentives to attend are low due to the reliance of families on their children's labor. Forty-five percent of the population in Bangladesh

lives below the poverty line (CIA World Factbook); this means that they don't make enough money to meet their basic needs. Children are thus needed to help make ends meet. This problem is one of the biggest hindrances in the growth of primary school enrollment. The same is true in rural areas. Urban child labor has received comparatively little attention, and it is growing at a much higher rate. According to a recent report by the NGO Arise, "three out of 10 urban children live in difficult circumstances and are involved in dangerous jobs (Lawson)." Even though primary education is free and even if a school is nearby, many poor children cannot attend school because of the vital income their family would lose if they did.

Homeless children comprise a substantial population of children who are also restricted from public education. Not only are these children forced to work, many in hazardous jobs such as garbage dump scavenging, but they face the additional burden of living on the street, often with their families. Going to school is the last priority for children such as these. Additionally these children could not enter the government schools even if they wanted to, as they lack an address. The estimated number of street children in Bangladesh is almost 450,000 (Consortium for Street Children).

As these issues are relatively recent phenomena, at least to the degree that they are currently being experienced, the government and the NGO community are only beginning to really focus on increasing access to the urban poor. An NGO known as Gano Shahajyo Sangstha, or GSS, has begun to implement informal education programs in slums (Sharafuddin). This program has been very successful, with an over 90 percent attendance rate, less than a 5 percent dropout rate, and very high achievement levels (ibid). Another NGO focusing on urban children is ASD, or Assistance for Slum Dwellers. The government also has expressed a renewed commitment to the integration of these children into the primary education sector through its PEDP II program which aims to vastly improve quality of education and equity of access. The

PEDP II has recently initiated a new project called Basic Education for Urban Working Children in conjunction with several local NGOs which aims to “provide nonformal education and life skills for 200,000 children (60 percent girls), impart livelihood skills training...and undertake social mobilization activities to raise awareness of child labor issues and to advocate for the elimination of the worse forms of child labor” (UNICEF). These are positive steps but many more drastic measures need to be taken to combat the exponentially increasing problems urban children are facing.

Problems of Quality: *Government Schools versus NGO Schools*

The education system in Bangladesh is comprised of four separate systems: government-run schools, private schools, Madrassas (Islamic religious schools), and schools run by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Government schools support the vast majority of Bangladesh’s students. According to the Education Watch Survey 2001, access to and quality of education has been increasing steadily since the early 90s. For example:

- Enrollment rates and gender equity has increased, especially since 1999.
- Dropout rates have declined and more students are completing the entire five year primary education program.
- Management committees have been implemented in most schools.

The Bangladesh government has not been fully responsible for this improvement and there are still areas of the country with little or no access to public schooling (Chowdhury, 53). While the government has focused on building and maintaining schools, it has not been focusing other important aspects of education, such as teacher quality, location of schools, relevance of material taught, class size and management/supervision of schools (Kabeer, 292). The improvements that are taking place are thus not across the board. To name a few ongoing problems:

- Many villages and rural areas continue to lack formal education institutions. 4.5% of villages

have only a 50% education rate.

- Children from low socioeconomic families and children with uneducated parents are 24% less likely to receive education than other children from wealthier families and who have educated parents. This number grew between the 1998 and 2001 surveys.
- Education opportunities for children in urban slums and children from ethnic minorities who do not speak Bengali as a first language have decreased (Chowdhury, 54).

What we notice most is that there is a major disparity between the quality of education received by students in NGO-operated schools compared to government institutions. We feel that it is important to get an understanding of why this is, in order to see what lessons we may have to learn from these organizations. What follows is a comparison between the current government system of education and the system used by BRAC, or Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee.

Government Schools: an Overview

There are currently 37,000 government schools in Bangladesh being attended by 12 million students. Primary education is the first priority; the government also runs secondary schools and universities for specialized learning. The government has prioritized high level education in engineering and science, as these areas are most critical to Bangladesh's development.

- *Spending on Education*: Half of Bangladesh's entire education budget goes towards primary education. However the total budget for education in Bangladesh is only two percent of the GDP. This is lower than any other country in South Asia (Chowdhury, 57).

Furthermore, 96% of revenue for education in government schools goes towards teachers' salaries; this leaves little money to train and supervise new teachers (Kabeer, 293).

Primary government schools are meant to be free to all citizens, yet hidden uniform and supply costs can reach up to Taka 1,000 per year. A large portion of this money is often

spent hiring private tutors to help students with the homework they are assigned. These costs make public education impossible for many poor families.

- *School Facilities*: Even though the building and improvement of new facilities are two of the main focuses for governmental education, most schools are far from having adequate facilities. Classrooms are not clean or safe; they lack basic necessities such as textbooks, blackboards and working toilets (Chowdhury, 54).
- *Access to Education*: Government schools are concentrated mostly in urban centers, resulting in a lack of educational access to the majority of children in the country. There are also no schools in the undeveloped periphery of urban centers. Even with the high numbers of people moving to cities, the majority of people in Bangladesh live in rural areas. Many of the government schools are too far away or too crowded, discouraging parents from sending their children to school. Parents are especially protective of girls and rather than making them travel long distances to school they tend to keep them at home (Alochona, 2). Girls, children from rural areas and urban periphery areas, children from socioeconomically backwards families and ethnic minorities are often denied access to the governmental education system (Kabeer, 293).
- *Class Size and Attendance*: Government schools do not prioritize small classes; often student to teacher ratios are as high as 60 to 1 (Kabeer, 295). Classrooms are unable to properly accommodate or seat all students. Overcrowded classrooms and lack of facilities are contributing factors to the 60% attendance rate of children able to attend school (Chowdhury, 54).
- *Curriculum*: Rote-learning is the main style of curriculum. Textbooks in government schools often fail to interest students or are not considered relevant to their lives. Few supplemental materials are provided. Government schools also lack extracurricular

activities. Students are given large amounts of homework to be completed at home, and parents who are illiterate or uneducated are not able to help their children. Children from poor families who do not have the money to hire tutors often fail to complete their work which leads to child and teacher frustration, failure and high drop out rates (Kabeer, 296).

- *Teacher Training and Supervision:* In order to teach at a government school in Bangladesh, teachers have to attend a yearlong training at a Primary Teacher Institute (PTI). This training period is significant compared to the 15 day teacher training required by BRAC, and it is meant to assure a high standard of teacher competency. However, teachers often do not use most of what they learn and there is little supervision and few refresher training sessions after the initial year training (Kabeer, 296). Teachers in government schools have been found to be passive and interact little with students.

Government education is centrally managed. Because of our focus on primary education, Bangladesh requires a larger number of people experienced with the requirements of a successful primary education system. The centralized management system makes it hard to manage and watch schools properly: supervision of teachers in government schools is minimal with visits from Upazila Education Officers (UEOs) yearly. Few of the UEOs have had actual classroom experience and their training and backgrounds do not always make them qualified supervisors. There is a lack of accountability in the management and supervision sectors. This creates a problem with corruption and plundering of public money which we feel needs address (Chowdhury, 57).

NGO/BRAC Education: an Overview

There are over 400 NGOs in Bangladesh today involved with providing basic education (Sharafuddin). The number of NGO schools has increased four times since the early 1990s and now comprised 8.5% of the educational system in Bangladesh; most of these NGO schools are

widely considered to be more effective than government schools. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee is one of the largest NGOs in the country working on primary education. BRAC schools make up 76% of all NGO primary schools (Kabeer, 293). BRAC was started in 1972 to help relocate refugees in the Sylhet district after Bangladesh's independence in 1971. Their focus was, and still is, poverty elimination. The Non-Formal Primary Education Program started in 1984 after adults in a literacy class asked about their children, wondering why their children should have to wait until they were adults before they would be able to learn how to read. The education program started with just 22 pilot schools. Today there are more than 40,000 BRAC schools attended by 1 million children (eenet). (Note that there are more BRAC schools than there are government schools in Bangladesh, despite the disparity in children served by these institutions.)

BRAC's education program began in rural areas where there were no alternative education options. In 1992 BRAC began making schools in urban slums after realizing that government schools were not accessible to slum children (education, 2). Because of discrimination and unequal educational opportunities for girls, BRAC favors girls in their schools and pushes for female attendance. 70 percent of children attending BRAC schools are female. If parents were not pressured to enroll their daughters in schools, many of the parents would only enroll boys.

Curriculum in BRAC schools is interactive and meant to be interesting and fun for the children. They often sit in circles on mats with their teacher to create an even more interactive informal environment (education, 1). School schedules are flexible to make school an option for all children. BRAC pushes for community and parental involvement in the schools (Kabeer, 296). There are two types of BRAC schools: one for children who have never attended school, and another for children who have dropped out of government or other schools (eenet).

- *Spending on Education:* It costs about \$20 US for a year of schooling in a BRAC school.

This cost is paid for by the school rather than the family. This is considerably less expensive when compared to government schools which also require private costs.

Everything is paid for by BRAC except for the maintenance of the classroom, which is the responsibility of the community. BRAC schools are much more cost efficient than government programs (Haiplik, 14).

- *School Facilities*: BRAC schools are usually one room mud or bamboo buildings with tin roofs that are rented for a small fee. The school building is a minimal expense (education). Communities are involved in deciding locations and schedules of schools as well as providing labor and materials to build schools (eenet).
- *Access to Education*: BRAC is flexible and accommodating to make it possible for as many children as possible to have the opportunity to attend school. Children in rural villages are needed to plant and harvest crops during certain parts of the year. By making the school schedule work around the schedule of the community, more students are able to attend school. Classes might start at 6 in the morning or 10 at night. Some schools have two shifts of classes to accommodate for more students. Schools are often located in the center of villages so they are easily accessible (eenet). Furthermore, BRAC has an excellent program for children working in Garment Factories. Working children are offered a ...
- *Class Sizes*: Class sizes in BRAC schools are limited to 33 students. This allows for teacher/student interaction and bonding. Rather than admit more students and have large classes, new schools are started (Haiplik, 9).
- *Curriculum*: The Curriculum for BRAC schools has been adjusted to meet the needs of children from rural lifestyles. More recently schools have been built in urban slums and curriculum is adjusted there to meet the needs of the slum children. It takes five years for a child to complete the BRAC primary education schooling. 90% of students who complete

their primary schooling though BRAC continue into secondary education (education, 10).

The curriculum is student focused and meant to be fun and interactive so that kids will want to come to school. Students are encouraged to participate and work in groups.

Dancing and singing are regular parts of each class. Books and materials used are relevant and rote-learning which is common in government schools is discouraged.

- *Teacher Training and Supervision:* 97% of teachers in BRAC schools are women who are married. Most teachers in BRAC schools come from the village that the school is in. They are required to have completed nine years of schooling and attend a 15 day teacher training before they are allowed to teach in a BRAC school. There is also an annual training and day long refresher training sessions are offered monthly. More extensive training sessions are required for teachers teaching higher grade levels (education, 1) Teachers frequently meet with local managers and supervisors who are able to help and guide them.

The government has established satellite schools in rural areas but NGO schools have been the primary vehicles used to reach geographically, ethnically, and economically marginalized children, especially female children. The government schools in the rural areas have had comparatively little success. Some of the reasons for this are as follows:

- Location of schools. By building schools in isolated communities, NGOs have not only encouraged enrollment but it have improved the quality of education since community-based education facilitates active involvement of parents and other child-raising figures. Many of the hard-to-reach communities are ethnic minorities, and community-based education also ensures that the particular values and culture of each community will be integrated into the curriculum of their children, an added incentive to send children to school. So far BRAC has built schools in 50,000 out of 84,000 villages (Kabeer et al, 294) reaching far more students than formal satellite schools.

- Flexible hours. Government-run schools have fixed hours of operation. However, children in rural areas are often needed by their parents for labor purposes, especially during peak harvesting seasons. This is a major factor in low enrollment rates as well as dropout rates in rural areas.
- Incentives. Most NGOs offer some sort of incentive for children to come to school every day. Often cultural, sporting, entertainment, and other extracurricular activities are organized. Additionally food is often used as an incentive—some NGOs distribute food to students daily; others use it as a surprise or a treat. Other strategies used by NGOs to attract students are awarding pupils for good scores and attendance, providing basic necessities such as clothing and shoes, and offering health care services (Kabeer et al, 254). Government schools have also offered incentives in the form of demand-side interventions such as the Food for Education program and the Female Stipend program, but these have not been nearly as far-reaching or effective as the NGO programs (Hossain, 2).

Relatively little effort or expenditure has actually been undertaken by the government to improve access for marginalized children. The notable exception to this is the case of girls, in which both the government and the informal sector actively recruited girls for their schools through such methods as stipends, media outreach, satellite and village-based schools, and recruitment of female teachers. The fruit of their efforts has been seen, as we have already noted, in the elimination of the gender gap in enrollment levels. Other disadvantaged children, however, have not received quite so much attention from the government of Bangladesh. In the words of Naomi Hossain, author of a recent report for the World Bank on access to education for girls and the poor:

“This appears to reflect a government preference for NGO school provision to focus

more on socially and geographically marginal groups that the state system does not reach, rather than attempting to cover the wider population, which is viewed as more correctly the responsibility of the state” (Hossain, 2).

The relationship between the government and the NGOs in regard to education may be seen as symbiotic, with the state managing urban education and the NGOs serving rural communities. While this system may work, it is evident that the state should be taking the initiative to educate everyone and not just certain demographics. But when compared to the system used by BRAC, government-institutions seem less prepared to take on the task of educating rural or disadvantaged children. Government-run schools remain less accessible, more costly, less flexible to the needs and schedules of its students, and sometimes less useful to their everyday lives. The BRAC model makes the deficiencies in the state education system quite obvious. It is clear that the state needs to be providing even more incentives to get students to enroll, to reduce or eliminate the existing education fees, to make its programs more flexible, and to expand its reach to rural communities. By doing so it can free up the NGOs to expand their own programs into still-marginalized communities.

The victories made by the state in expanding education should not be dismissed in this dialogue. The successes cannot be attributed to organizations like BRAC alone. But it must not be forgotten that the success of education programs cannot be measured on statistics like literacy rates alone. Likewise, simply providing the opportunity for education is not enough. Education needs to be encouraged for all children regardless of their place in life.

Conclusion: *Possible Reforms and How SAARC can Help*

The top priorities of BANBEIS and MCWA are to assure universal primary education in Bangladesh, and to encourage students to continue the education process. It may be possible to measure the success of primary education systems by inspecting how many students go on to

higher education. Consider the fact that gender disparities remain at the secondary level. It is important to make sure that children enjoy learning if they are to be inspired to continue their education later. Schools should also be treated as a model for society: if girls and women are respected in Bangladesh's schools, then these institutions may serve as the basis for societal change on a larger scale as children grow and learn.

Bangladesh has some advantages when it comes to providing education. We are lucky enough to have a remarkably homogeneous culture: 98% of our citizens speak Bengali as a first language (CIA World Factbook). Bangladesh is also geographically relatively small, which makes the administrative aspect simpler. If government schools are to simply retain their current sphere of influence—educating mostly children in urban areas whose families are able to afford their education—reforms will be necessary to assure a good educational experience for the child. The reforms this committee proposes are these:

- To increase the absolute number of teachers in Bangladesh until class sizes can be limited to approximately 30 students, rather than 60 or even 100 students as is seen today.
- To change the form of the educational system to one that it is more enjoyable for students and that can be tailored to the needs of different communities. The fact that many parents are uneducated, as well as a relative lack of teacher-student interaction, should be taken into account when deciding the type and amount of homework expected of students.
- To improve school facilities and to provide incentives for families to educate their sons and daughters: most importantly free food, the elimination of all school fees, and stipends for working children.

Such changes will require a greater expenditure on education by the Bangladesh government. An increase from approximately 2% of the GDP to 5% would allow the education system to implement numerous reforms. However, the government should look into ways of making its

education programs less expensive without sacrificing effectiveness. Overall, the goal should be the improvement of quality, not necessarily quantity. The number of children receiving education right now is a big success, even if it isn't universal. It's our belief that a stronger education program will have better results in the long run compared to a larger program providing poorer quality education.

Today NGOs play a significant role in education in Bangladesh. It would be to the advantage of the Bangladesh to increase their role wherever possible, for the reasons that have been outlined above: their ability to reach into communities the government cannot, the flexibility of their programs, and the quality of the education they are providing. There is nothing in their agendas with which the Government of Bangladesh disagrees.

BANBEIS and MCWA realize that Bangladesh's problems with education are an internal affair with internal solutions. It is up to us to decide how best to educate our people successfully. However, we wish to offer three ways in which we feel SAARC can contribute to education programs in Bangladesh and throughout South Asia.

1. Declare 2010-2020 the "Decade of Education." We must, as a region, realize that education is likely the single most important factor in improving our countries both economically and socially. Universal, high-quality education is a distinguishing factor of all developed countries, and it is the right of our citizens to have an education. Education should become the region-wide priority in terms of international aid and the focus of NGOs operating in Bangladesh and elsewhere. The reason that education is a priority among NGOs in Bangladesh today is because they realized it was critical to any attempt to eradicate poverty.
2. Begin a new region-wide program: Association for Regional Reconciliation through Education (ARRE). It is clear that there are barriers between us as nations that may never be worked out within our own generations. By organizing a panel of intellectuals to compile a history of South

Asia that contributes to mutual understanding and reconciliation between our peoples and nations, we may very well be able to increase the potential for peace in the future. This would also be the first step towards a regional standardization of education.

3. Create a region-wide fund for women's empowerment through education. The purpose of this fund would not simply be to help young girls through primary education, but to support them in pursuing higher education as well. This would be a major step in improving the position of women in South Asian societies.

Our proposals are not internal in scope. Rather, we see SAARC's contribution to education as being on a wider scale. Educational obstacles are not unique to Bangladesh, and we realize that we cannot turn all eyes towards us. Therefore our vision is for SAARC to help Bangladesh and all of South Asia by setting priorities and making these priorities clear not just within our own region but to the world at large. By doing so, SAARC will be providing an atmosphere conducive to the improvement of education in Bangladesh and throughout South Asia. We hope that our recommendations be considered by SAARC and all of Bangladesh's neighbors.

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