

Education Governance in Bangladesh: A Scenario of Inequality in Primary Education

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Abstract

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in increasing education access in the last two decades. However, substantial inequalities in educational attainment remain even though equity in education is a central government objective. The article argues that weaknesses in education sector governance are crucial to understanding these persistent inequalities. At the level of the budget, anti-poor biases in allocation decisions are shown to be the result of the budget's role in political management and the lack of effective accountability mechanisms. The spearhead of government attempts to address education inequality at the primary level has been the conditional cash transfer program for poor children. The article shows that the program has failed to target the poor and suggests that this has been due to the weaknesses and contradictions in the governance of the program. Strengthening the links between policy and implementation through improvements in the governance of the sector are crucial if inequality is to be addressed and national education goals achieved.

Keywords: Governance, Education budget, inequality, teaching learning process, decentralization

Introduction

Bangladesh enters the fifth decade of its independence with a huge population (158.13 million). The education system in Bangladesh is a large one comprising some 150,000 institutions, 40 million students and more than one million teachers. Primary and secondary level institutions naturally form the bulk of the system with approximately 19 million students in primary education and twelve million at the secondary level (including government recognized madrasahs).¹ Basic education development in the country is guided by Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990, EFA National Plan of Action (NPA) I and II, National Non-Formal Education

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¹ EFA 2015 National Review-Bangladesh, October 26, 2014, p– 1 (introduction chapter).

Policy 2006, National Education Policy 2010, National Skills Development Policy 2011, Seven Five Year Plan including Vision 2021/Perspective Plan 2011-21. Various initiatives in basic education like Primary Education Development Program (PEDP) 1 and PEDP 2 were implemented and PEDP 3 has been under implementation to fulfill the relevant EFA Goals and NPA II objectives.²

Methodology

In this paper both primary and secondary data have been collected. Primary data have been collected through open interviews. Secondary have been collected from concern books, journals, periodicals, daily newspapers, TV footage and other relevant materials.

Primary and secondary education provision in Bangladesh is largely financed by the government and delivered through a combination of government and regulated private schools. Therefore sector governance and government education policy in particular, are likely to have important consequences for educational access and quality. Given the greater reliance of poor households on government services it is also likely that poor governance will have a disproportionate effect on the poor and will be important in explaining levels of education inequality. Wider inequalities in society also impact on the school system and partly determine patterns of education inequality. For example, the direct and opportunity costs of school attendance as significant barriers for poor households (see for example, CAMPE 2000; 2001). However, as the case of Bangladesh shows it is possible for Education Policy to address these constraints by, for example, offering cash transfers for children's schooling. The extent to which these policies are successful will in part be based on governance issues around their design and implementation. Poor education sector governance and its subsequent impact on education inequality is driven by two main factors; capture and bias.³ Capture is closely related to corruption but includes pressure faced by public officials to act illegally even if they do not directly benefit. Bias relates to anti-poor decision making that leads to the exclusion or disadvantage of the poor and other marginalized groups.

In the education sector, capture has a large impact on inequality because it tends to be more detrimental to the poor than the non-poor. The three main areas where capture has a greater impact on the poor and may lead to widening inequality. Firstly, where corrupt practices lead to the diversion of resources, the poor are less likely to be in a position to substitute their own resources for misappropriated government resources. For example, non-poor

² BANBEIS (2014), Basic Education Statistic 2014, (<http://banbeis.gov.bd/webnew/images/pef.pdf>)

³ <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001800/180086e.pdf>, access on 17 September, 2015

households are more likely to be able to afford private tuition to substitute for unauthorized teacher absence compared to non-poor households. Secondly, the poor are in a weaker position in society as a whole compared to wealthier households and this makes it less likely that they will resist and expose corruption in the education sector. This lack of power also means they are more likely to face informal payments to access education services. Finally, capture strengthens the position of local elites because they are often the direct beneficiaries. On the other hand, Bias, is not the illegal use of office for private gain but allocative or regulatory directives that disadvantage particular groups within society. For example, government decisions can favor secondary over primary education resulting in an implicit resource bias favoring wealthier households due to their greater use of post-primary education services. The following table outlines examples of capture and bias common in the education sector.

Table: Examples of poor governance in the education sector

Process/inputs	Capture/corruption	Bias
Budgetary process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Reduces the overall resources available to education and likely to affect the poor more because they are less likely to be able to substitute these resources with private spending. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policies and resource allocations are biased in favor of the non-poor and there is no system to identify allocation inequalities. - Poor receive less government resources per capita than non-poor.
Construction and maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Direct misappropriation of resources as well as contractors using fewer or poorer quality materials for construction and maintenance. - Procurement anomalies. - Political influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allocation rules disadvantage poorer groups (e.g. government schools receive more support but poor more likely to attend non-government schools).
Teachers and teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ghost teachers and sub-contracting. - Teacher salary skimming. - Recruitment of unqualified teachers. - Unauthorized absenteeism - Private tuition and potential adverse incentives for teachers to teach full curriculum. - Informal payments for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examinations lead to a focus on students that perform well and often advantage wealthier students who are also more likely to receive private tuition. - Absence or limited training to address slow learners.

A Scenario of Inequality in Primary Education

Process/inputs	Capture/corruption	Bias
	appointment, transfer and promotion.	
Targeted conditional cash transfer programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ghost beneficiaries. - Skimming. - Receiving support despite not fulfilling criteria (both school and individual). - Pressure on stipend administrators by outsiders to enroll non-targeted students. - Informal payments to participate on program and receive stipend. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rules of receiving support biased towards non-poor (e.g. examination results, attendance etc.).
Other school inputs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Leakage of school inputs (e.g. teachers are involved in private tuition or coaching tread). - Informal payments to access education provision (e.g. admission procedures etc.). - Informal payments to access each individual school input (e.g. payments for textbooks, stipend etc.). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allocation rules disadvantage poorer groups.
Selection and examination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Examination fraud. - Leakage of exam question - Informal payments for examination pass or specific grades. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Absence of mechanisms to select poor students who may not perform as well.

Capture and bias occur to differing degrees across the whole of the education sector in Bangladesh. However, the education budget process and the primary stipends program are two areas which have large impacts on education inequality and are the focus of the remainder of this section. The budgetary process translates government education policy into resource allocations. Clearly capture and bias in this process is likely to have far reaching impacts on education inequality. Bangladesh has received worldwide attention for its innovative stipend programs designed specifically to address education inequality. At the primary level, the stipends program aims to improve education outcomes of the poor. Substantial resources are allocated to this program and is the largest program addressing education inequality directly.

Primary education stipends program

Conditional cash transfer programs have been a key strategy for tackling educational inequality. At the primary level, the main objectives of the stipend scheme are to increase enrolment and completion rates, establish equity in financial assistance for students and improve the overall quality of primary education (DPE 2012).⁴ The program covers 40-100% of rural students attending in government primary schools.

Children attending schools not recognized by government (e.g. NGO schools and some madrasahs) and those living in urban areas are excluded from the stipends scheme. Program selection is based on selecting the neediest amongst students with at least one pre-defined poverty attribute.⁵ The selection process is decentralized and undertaken by individual school managing committees with approval from the *upazila* head of government administration (*nirbahiofficer*) and the *upazila* education officer. To be eligible for a stipend payment, the card holder must achieve a minimum score of 40% in the end-of-year examination. With this condition satisfied payments are based on the number of months an individual achieves an attendance rate above 85%.⁶

A study conducted by World Bank shows that the girls attendance for stipend areas are 91 percent compared to 69 percent for non-stipend areas. For boys, attendance rates are 89 percent for stipend and 65 percent for non-stipend.⁷ While the impact this increase has had on inequality has not been explored the raw trends suggest a somewhat muted effect; inequalities in access between the poor and non-poor did not decline significantly between 2000 and 2012 (Al-Samarrai 2007a; World Bank 2008). An important reason for its rather limited impact on inequality rests with problems associated with targeting that are not uncommon to anti-poor programs more generally.

Exclusion of urban schools, NGO schools and most madrasah students implies that a substantial proportion of poor children are not covered by the

⁴ The primary stipends program was introduced in 2003 and replaced two earlier projects; the food for education (FFE) program which began in 1993 and the primary education stipends project introduced in 2000 in areas outside of the FFE program.

⁵ Poor households are defined in the project pro-forma as female-headed households, households of day labourers, households of insolvent professionals and households with less than 0.5 acres of land (DPE 2002).

⁶ There is also evidence to suggest that poor stipend holders spend more on education than poor non-stipend holders although these differences may be quite small (FMRP 2006a).

⁷ World Bank, An Assessment of the Revised PESP in Bangladesh (March 1, 2012 draft)

program.⁸ Despite relatively high levels of urban poverty it has been common for social security program in Bangladesh to focus on the rural population. This partly reflects a political consensus that poverty is mostly a rural issue and that the rural poor are more deserving of support than the urban poor (Hossain 2007; World Bank 2006). It also reflects a fear of encouraging rural-urban migration which led in the past to the withdrawal of other social security programs in urban areas as well as increased urban support for rural-only programs.

Official explanations for the exclusion of children attending NGO and private schools revolve around the lack of direct government control over these schools. However, their exclusion has also introduced incentives for households to shift their children into government recognized schools which serve wider government objectives related to their competition with NGOs to offer basic services. Although similar arguments could be made regarding excluded madrasah students, this seems more directly a result of a split in responsibility for education between primary and post-primary.⁹ Given the importance of both NGOs and madrasahs in providing education to poorer groups in rural areas these exclusions have a significant impact on the programs ability to narrow inequality.

That the selection of beneficiaries at the school level tends to result in miss-targeting. The FMRP study asked school managing committee chairpersons how they selected stipend participants. While it was common for official selection criteria to be used the study also found that 60% of school managing committees selected talented students to participate in the stipend scheme (FMRP 2006). Selecting talented students favors the more affluent and leads to the capture of substantial government resources. At the school level, however, this biased selection process is often seen as a practical response to stipend program rules.

The stipend program attempts to address these constraints by setting attendance criteria and establishing incentives for poor households to help their children pass annual examinations and progress to the next grade. However, stipend payments are often made even when these criteria are not met. In a detailed examination of the stipend program in 2005 it was found that attendance figures were exaggerated for a third of eligible stipend holders. This resulted in students receiving higher stipend payments than

⁸ Independent ebtadayee madrasahs that only offer primary grades are included in the program whereas Dakhil and higher level madrasahs are excluded even though they include ebtadayee sections. In 2005, independent ebtadayee madrasahs enrolled 850 thousand students compared to 1.1 million students in higher madrasahs (DPE 2006a).

⁹ The secondary school stipends program includes all madrasah students and suggests that primary students in these institutions are not being excluded for any other reason.

their true attendance record implied. In addition, 7% of beneficiaries received payments despite failing the last annual examination (FMRP 2006). This misreporting by schools not only resulted in the misallocation of government stipend spending but also eroded incentives for regular attendance and improved performance. While there is substantial misallocation of resources there appears to be relatively little evidence of direct misappropriation. The FMRP expenditure tracking survey found that less than 5% of stipend funds were unaccounted for when recorded payments were compared to amounts received by beneficiaries (FMRP 2006). Discrepancies arose because some beneficiaries reported that they had not received their full entitlement as well as payments to ‘ghost’ beneficiaries.¹⁰

The process of beneficiary selection, the SMC is responsible for verifying the attendance and examination performance data used to make payments to beneficiaries. There are potentially greater incentives for the SMC to maximize the total stipend payments for the school rather than limiting payments according to the criteria. Often SMC chairs are drawn from the local elite and in many cases their families were central to the establishment of the school. Their desire to improve services for the local community is unlikely to provide a strong incentive to limit payments on the stipend program. SMCs also do not have any formal powers to discipline school officials if discrepancies in stipend records are found. Their only recourse is to make complaints to the *upazila* education office which is also limited in its sanctioning power.

The ineffectiveness of these institutions lessens the program’s impact on inequality considerably. It results in a large proportion of stipend resources being captured by wealthier households and reduces the number of poor students benefiting from the program. Weak accountability mechanisms also result in stipend payments being made even when students do not satisfy performance and attendance criteria.

The budget process

In government budget there are no allocation rules or formulae that include specific allocations for the poor or other disadvantaged groups. In some countries, budgetary allocations are determined by a set of rules that include additional allocations for regions and schools that serve poor populations. For example, in South Africa, allocations to schools are based on student numbers and a poverty index which have resulted in more equitable resource allocations (Crouch and Winkler 2007). The absence of similar mechanisms in the budgetary process in Bangladesh makes it difficult to

¹⁰ Ghost beneficiaries were of two types; payments to students who did not have a stipend card and payments to beneficiaries who were not enrolled in the school making the payment.

direct additional resources to poorer students. It is also difficult to disaggregate the budget in a way that would allow a meaningful assessment of its targeting effectiveness. For example, allocations to different *upazilas* (sub-districts) which could be correlated with other *upazila* level information to assess the equity of public spending are not published despite being relatively easy to generate from government accounting systems.¹¹ The lack of clear rules and mechanisms to track funds therefore makes it impossible to hold government to account for policy aimed at addressing inequality.

The lack of clear and equitable allocation rules, results in the budget process being open to intense lobbying on the part of schools, teachers and parents. This often results in allocation decisions that favor the non-poor. Allocations to government secondary schools provide a good example. Out of the 13,500 institutions offering general secondary schooling, 317 (2%) are run directly by the government.

Funding at the primary level also varies widely depending on the type of school children attend.¹² The two main providers of primary schooling in Bangladesh are government schools and Newly Nationalized Primary School (NNPS) which is 58% and 22%. Before 2013, per student government spending in government primary schools was more than twice the amount provided by government to NNPS (that time it was registered non-government primary schools). While the evidence is fairly limited it does suggest that wealthier students are more concentrated in better funded government schools compared to their poorer counterparts and this skews public spending in favor of the non-poor.¹³

The weakness of the budgeting system to effectively priorities education inequality is further compounded by the weakness of accountability institutions. The lack of transparency in terms of government resource allocations weakens accountability considerably as it is impossible to ascertain whether government allocations are in line with stated policy goals. Parliament scrutinises the budget before it approves it but delays in expenditure reporting and the substantial reallocations that occur when the

¹¹ Al-Samarrai (2007b) showed that the correlation between district poverty rates and government allocations to education in 2005 were very weak. For example, the correlation coefficient at primary was 0.11.

¹² The incidence analysis reported in does not account for differences in school attachment because of data limitations. Some further work has been done which suggests that the distribution of public spending shifts further away from the poor when school attachment is taken account of. For full details of the limitations and this additional work see Al-Samarrai (2007b).

¹³ It should be noted that primary schools are not allowed to charge student fees with the exception of examination fees. This results in registered non-government primary schools relying heavily on government support and to a much lesser extent community contributions.

budget is revised in the middle of the financial year mean that its role is seriously circumscribed. Furthermore, the development budget which contains the thrust of government development policy, is not approved by Parliament and therefore seriously curtails its accountability role. A key institutional arrangement to ensure accountability is the Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee.¹⁴

In recent times the budgetary process in many countries has been opened up to increased scrutiny and debate by the media and civil society groups. The role that these groups play is often seen as a crucial component in improving government accountability as well as increasing the voice and influence of disadvantaged groups (e.g. poor, women, children etc.) in the budgetary process (Robinson 2013). Civil society groups rarely have a direct role in the process and mainly operate by publicizing and raising concerns about budget allocations and implementation directly to legislators, other formal accountability institutions (e.g. auditor general's office) as well as through the media. Despite these limitations Robinson (2013) demonstrates that in some countries they have had significant impacts on altering budgetary allocations in favor of the poor.

The impact of civil society and the media in monitoring the budget process in Bangladesh appears mixed.¹⁵ While the impact of civil society groups on the budget process has not been evaluated systematically they do appear to have had some success in raising awareness of the importance of the budget as a key vehicle for translating government policy into action.¹⁶ However, the lack of any significant changes in the proportion of the government budget devoted to education or its distribution suggests that the role of these groups in addressing education inequality remains relatively weak. This is mainly the result of a focus on overall budget allocations rather than specific interventions in any sector. However, even when education policy is a specific focus the analysis is often inadequate. For example, in the 2011-12 FY, the government increased the allocation for education for it. Another example was in 2008-09 budget the government introduced a secondary school stipends scheme for boys. In their post-budget analysis both the Centre for Policy Dialogue and *Shamunnay* have been supportive of this new project even though they have not assessed whether the scheme fits with government objectives in the education sector and its focus on inequality (Centre for Policy Dialogue 2008; Rahman 2008).

¹⁴ Since 1971/72 less than 20% of the 770 audit reports submitted to Parliament have been discussed.

¹⁵ A distinction is made between civil society groups using budget analysis for policy advocacy and those that campaign more generally for education (e.g. The Campaign for Popular Education). The former group are the focus in this section.

¹⁶ The Centre for Policy Dialogue and *Shamunnay* are two groups active in this area producing a post-budget analysis as well as organising roundtable discussions throughout Bangladesh.

The budgetary process clearly makes it difficult to effectively translate government policy into resource allocations. This is due in part to the use of incremental budgeting, the overlapping functions of the two education ministries and the limited information available to decision makers on levels of inequality. However, the allocations also result from implicit biases in the budget process that have the effect of concentrating resources towards particular parts of the country and to the non-poor (e.g. allocations to different types of schools etc.). The lack of transparency in the budgeting process and in particular the lack of timely information has also limited the impact civil society and the media has had on holding government to account.

Conclusions

The paper attempts to understand why inequalities in education can persist despite a stated commitment on the part of government to tackle them. The paper has demonstrated that despite being a central goal of government policy, public education expenditure has not prioritized the poor in recent times. Even the large primary stipend program that aims to address education inequality directly has had limited success at directing resources to the neediest groups.

The paper has shown that the link between government education policy objectives and budget allocations are weak. Many of the weaknesses associated with the budgetary process are being tackled as part of ongoing financial management reforms. Medium term expenditure frameworks and their associated budgetary procedures are being introduced to strengthen links between policy and allocations. Transparency in resource allocation and expenditure decisions are also being strengthened by improving accounting and reporting systems. However, whether these technical reforms will lead to real improvements in the resources devoted to the poor will depend on whether government accountability can also be improved. Strengthening the role of the legislature in the budgetary process and improving the capacity of civil society to utilize improved reporting will also be important if inequality in education is to be tackled effectively.

The discussion of the stipend program has shown that even where programs have been designed specifically for the poor local accountability institutions have proved largely ineffective in preventing the capture of these resources by the non-poor. Studies have repeatedly shown that targeting on the program is failing but changes to targeting mechanism have so far not been raised in policy debates. Rethinking targeting design is not hindered by a lack of knowledge on alternative targeting mechanisms. Bangladesh has had many examples of targeted social protection programs that have been more successful in reaching the poor. While technical solutions may exist, the politics of altering the targeting criteria are likely to

provide a much greater constraint. Improved targeting would require better geographical targeting, the inclusion of the urban poor, and a differentiation in the number of beneficiaries across schools. These are all highly contentious areas which would face considerable resistance from groups that would stand to lose their access to the program. Finding ways to overcome this resistance or ways to work within current constraints are crucial if the program is to improve equity.

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A Scenario of Inequality in Primary Education

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