4th Issue, April 2021

dBRIEF

Published by

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Foreword

Primary education a government priority

Bangladesh's literacy increased to 74.7% in 2020, from about 53% in 2005, which is a noteworthy achievement, especially when considered together with access and enrolment. Despite the progress, however, there is a long way to go before we attain satisfactory quality or parity. We are continuously initiating measures to address these issues. For instance, we try to develop teachers' skills to improve the quality of education, which is a work in progress, since training programmes have yet to cover all the teachers. In addition, we are reforming the primary education system and implementing a core curriculum for all primary-level institutions, regardless of their medium of instruction or socioeconomic condition, to ensure both quality and parity.

The distribution of free textbooks across the country has been a challenge which has been streamlined over time. We might have been able to boast many more achievements had it not been for the pandemic that brought forth unprecedented challenges, one of which is higher dropout.

Special measures for special times

It was important to respond with a measure which would ensure that our young learners sitting at home could continue their education. To that end, a special programme titled 'Ghore Boshe Shikhi' started producing content for primary-level students. Over 100 contents have been broadcasted through the state-run Sangsad TV and through social media platforms every week with support from UNICEF and a2i. The pre-recorded lessons are uploaded regularly on a government-initiated YouTube channel so that the students do not miss out on their lessons. The same programme is also broadcasted on Bangladesh Betar (state-owned radio) and 16 community radio stations to reach the maximum number of students.

In this regard, Bangladesh government's efforts are rather commendable especially considering that despite being the youngest nation in South Asia, we have outdone many of our neighbours in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as far as education is concerned.

Resumption of classroom lessons

We have prepared a comprehensive guideline for reopening primary schools. We plan to implement 35 core activities under seven directives. First, schools should reopen after analysing the condition and safety of the area. Schools in red zones will remain closed. Second, funds will be made available to schools before they reopen. Third, the schools will formulate a detailed protocol to educate children about distancing, cleanliness, health, and hygiene. Social media platforms, mass media and religious institutions will be used to raise awareness. The government will provide masks and other safety equipment to teachers, children and their parents. Fourth, schools will initiate and install safety measures at least a fortnight before reopening. They will ensure handwashing stations, running water, separate toilets for girls and boys, garbage containers and cleaning materials to disinfect classrooms. The class schedule will be planned in a manner that helps observe physical distancing. Fifth, the schools need to have non-contact thermometers to measure temperature at the entrance. Anyone with COVID-19 symptoms will be recommended to self-isolate. Sixth, schools will monitor health parameters on their premises and focus more on lessons rather than exams until the situation becomes normal. And seventh, communication and coordination shall be enhanced among all the stakeholders. Every sub-district education office will have an information centre.

we have outdone many of our neighbours in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as far as education is concerned

These measures, together, should help us from lagging behind in education, and contribute towards the attainment of the sustainable development goal for education (SDG 4) in Bangladesh.

Md Zakir Hossain
State Minister for Primary and Mass Education,
Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Editorial

We are happy to present the fourth issue of DBRIEF, which was initially slated to be published by the end of March 2020. Like the rest of Bangladesh, the global pandemic hit our plans like a tonne of brick at the final hours. We thought that the pandemic was a short-term problem and postponed the publication temporarily. But soon, as the reality set in, we had to reprioritise and redeploy resources for pressing issues.

We picked ourselves up towards the end of 2020 and realised that much of the content needed updating to reflect the changing landscape. Still intent on a quick production, we decided to update only a few articles and leave the rest untouched. Once again, just before pressing the proverbial ‘print’, we were awash with the second wave. Thanks to colleagues who showed impressive resilience in learning to live with COVID-19 that we were able to continue working on the fifth issue even while finalising the fourth that you now have in your hands.

In all three previous issues, the economic update section primarily presented a macroeconomic update of the country, but we are making an exception in this edition to highlight global and local impacts of the pandemic on economic and social reality. There are a few reasons. Many of the macroeconomic indicators for 2019-2020, including GDP, became less critical in the pandemic context. Instead, the distributive aspects of macroeconomic indicators appeared more attractive. However, the second wave and the possible subsequent waves made discussions about impact distribution premature. So, we limited our focus, pending a better understanding of impact transmission channels. Secondly, when the global economy is in flux, commenting on one country's macroeconomic indicators may confuse the reader. Hoping that the global economy would soon stabilise, we will try our best to offer a detailed reading of Bangladesh's macro picture.

In this edition, we have added a new indicator—Khichuri Index, which is our adaptation of the micro-level impact of the pandemic, which we hope will give a more helpful picture of the economy. We started using the index since March 2020 and continued to monitor the index. Hopefully, a long-term index will help us assess some critical trends of how the economy is dealing with the shock.

This edition's focus is education—a critical precondition and driver of the dream of a poverty-free world. BRAC's founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed noted, "Poverty is the outgrowth of a specific pattern of development and reflects a lack of certain values and priorities." He talked about poverty as a complex interplay of political, economic and cultural norms. How would a nation change these norms that perpetuate poverty? As the ex-president of South Africa and the Nobel laureate, Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world,"—dare we add, ‘and these norms’. Education is a critical input in enhancing the productive capacity of the people and a required ingredient of good governance and institutions. There are plenty of academic studies showing a significant relationship between education and development.

Interestingly, education seems to have a compound impact on a nation's progress. Since educated families tend to prioritise education for their children, the more people are educated, the more will be the supply of teachers and students. Investment in education also has significant positive externalities. For example, educated men and women tend to invest more in their health and their children's health. Some studies even claim that education is the single most important personal determinant of a person's health and life expectancy.

The good news is, there is wide-ranging agreement among all possible development stakeholders of Bangladesh about this critical role that education plays in the nation's development. It is hence customary to allocate the highest portion of the national budget to education. Starting from the country's constitution, all policy documents acknowledge and highlight the primacy of education among national goals and objectives. Due to this primacy, Bangladesh, under the government's leadership and supported by civil society groups, including NGOs, has essentially resolved the heretofore ‘lack of access’ to education. In other words, every Bangladeshi child, barring a few exceptions, can enrol in a primary school close to their home.

However, as it is with everything else, the one factor that increases people's income, role and ultimately position in society, is political will. Topics like education quality, assessment methods, skills or competencies covered in the curriculum, teachers’ qualifications to impart these skills, and their compensation are all but a few points of significant divergence among the educators, policymakers and citizens at large. After the country's success in ensuring affordable schools for every child, these issues need urgent resolution and progress.

Hence, dBRIEF's fourth edition was initially designed as a teaser—to introduce the readers to some of these issues. However, the plan was disrupted. I have already mentioned why. Instead, we have added a few articles that discuss the intersection of the pandemic and education access issue alongside some pieces looking into the emerging problems as planned initially. Maybe it will encourage us to revisit this issue soon and cover the remaining topics.

As you would notice, we tried to include several articles on the impact of pandemic induced closure of schools on education. Experience shows that prolonged school closure has severe and often intergenerational effect on a nation's potential. Schools are not only the place where children study their books. They are also a lab where children learn to grow as responsible human beings—the former may be replaced, but the latter cannot. Hence, we feel that we must innovate to mitigate both academic and life-skill learning losses and push for resumption of schools.

We are proud to have an interview with National Professor, Dr Anisuzzaman, one of the nation's most prominent educationists, in this edition. Professor Anisuzzaman, a winner of the Bangla Academy award (1970), Ekushey Padak (1983), and Sarojini Basu Medal (2008), was and still is one of the pre-eminent scholars that this nation has ever produced. His sudden demise is one of the most significant losses to the country and the dBRIEF team. When we reached out to him, he kindly listened to our plea and agreed to spend time with us with a smile despite his busy schedule. He was also so kind as to review the draft article—suggesting edits here and there. It is our failure without redemption that we could not present this journal with his interview to him in time. We lost our one last chance to thank him in person for his generosity.

Let me confess another failure caused by this delay. When we started working on this issue, Dr Safiqul Islam, who led BRAC's education intervention for many years, was still at its helm. I wanted to present him with this copy before his retirement. I hope that Safiq bhai, who is currently advising BRAC on education programming, would excuse me for letting him down.

I hope you will enjoy the articles by eminent development thought leaders like Rasheda K Chowdhury and Erum Mariam and upcoming development workers. Last but not least, I would like to convey my profound gratitude to his excellency Md Zakir Hossain, honourable State Minister for Primary and Mass Education, who has honoured us by writing a preface for this edition.

Finally, please feel free to write to us with your comments and opinions about this issue and the forthcoming issue, which will be on health.

During a global pandemic

With global leaders giving little more than lofty speeches and Bangladesh government acting too late in containing the Covid pandemic, Bangladesh's progress will certainly lose its momentum and may even see it rolled back. It was going to be an uphill battle on the path to development. It became steeper with pandemic, writes ***KAM Morshed.***

COVID-19 and how it shaped our world

Beginning as a health crisis, COVID-19 quickly turned into an economic crisis affecting both demand and supply. Subsequently, the challenges morphed into a development problem, affecting almost every aspect of our lives. Not every country was affected equally. Even within a country, the urban residents and the rural peasants, farmers and traders, women and men saw COVID-19 affect them differently.

Nature of the global impact

The Covid pandemic caught all the governments on the wrong foot. No country had sufficient knowledge of the disease. Nor did they have adequate testing facilities to test or provisions to isolate cases. As a result, they had to apply the blunt tool of lockdown to contain and prevent infection by limiting movement and economic activities. However, the financial hardship that came with the lockdown forced the poor to ignore the restriction rendering lockdowns less effective. This life versus livelihood debate pivoted on the central question of whether the cure should be worse than the disease. One year on, the debate rages on.

Global health impact

> The Covid pandemic created a deadly ripple effect on people's health, threatening to erode the significant gains in health and human development made since the turn of the millennium.

The pandemic substantially burdened national health systems, including the health care professionals as well as the health facilities. In developing countries, it meant diverting scarce resources to deal with the pandemic which were meant to address another disease or some other problem. Leading to sudden shortage of financial and human resources, compounded by the movement restriction, dealt a heavy blow to the health system.

The New York-based Guttmacher Institute estimates that the pandemic might cause a 10% reduction in reversible contraceptive use in low and middle-income countries and result in an additional 49 million women whose contraceptive needs are unmet, a further 15 million unintended pregnancies, 3.3 million unsafe abortions and additional 1,000 maternal deaths over the course of a year[1] . Similarly, as early as April 2020, DevEx reported that up to 10% of HIV/AIDS, TB and malaria medicine orders faced delays of more than 30 days[2] . TB testing facilities were closed in some countries as the technician or the equipment had been shifted to Covid facilities. Similar worries have been expressed about immunisation programmes and treatment of non-communicable diseases.

In addition to physical health, mental health impact was also substantial. The lockdown, movement restrictions, isolation, joblessness and childcare are but a few challenges that aggravated the emotional effect of losing a loved one, which severely affected people's mental well-being around the world.

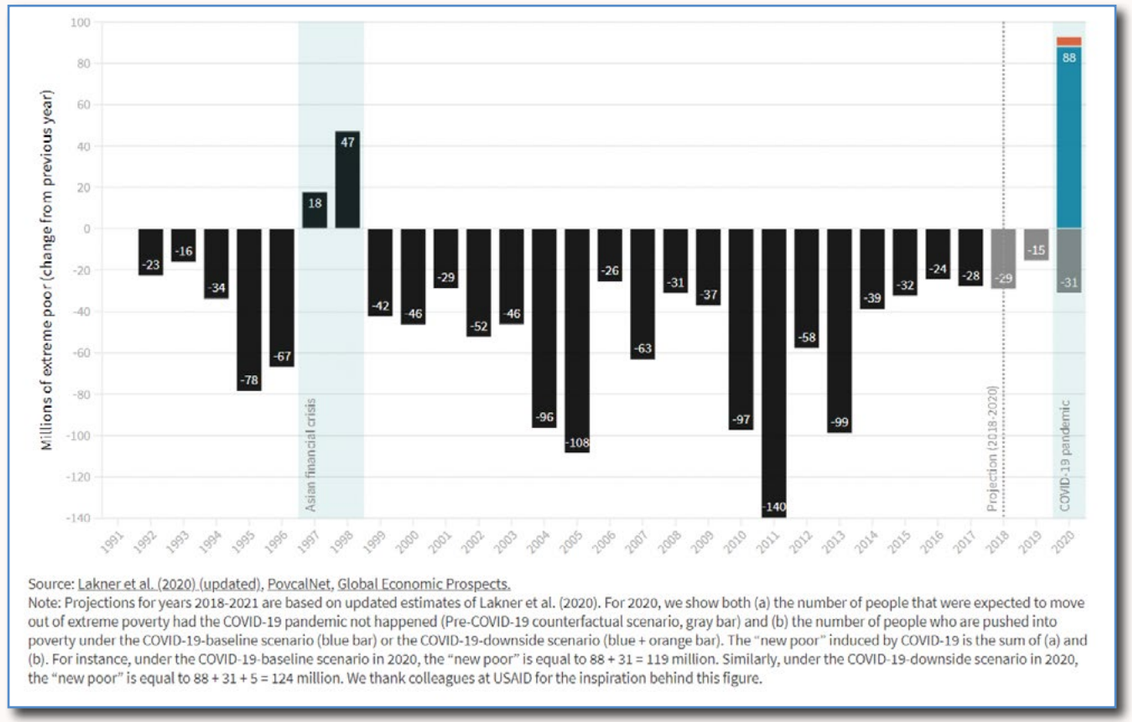
[1] Riley, T., Sully, E., Ahmed, Z., & Biddlecom, A. (2020). Estimates of the potential impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual and reproductive health in low-and middle-income countries. International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health, 46, 73-76.

[2] https://www.devex.com/news/how-is-covid-19-affecting-malaria-programs-96992

Impact on poverty and emergence of new poor

The world has seen its number of people trapped in poverty rise after the pandemic. That means the impressive global progress of reducing poverty, which has freed nearly 2 billion people from the poverty trap since 1999, will be reversed. At the start of the year, the world had hoped to free 31 million people from the clutches of extreme poverty through 2020. Instead, there was an additional 88-93 million more people falling into extreme poverty. We are now faced with the prospect of having between 119 and 124 million new poor worldwide.

Worryingly, the impact of this 'regress' may be felt in years to come. A recent article predicted that while some of the affected people will start graduating out of poverty in 2021 as economies recover, nearly half will remain poor for much longer. The article predicts that, "By 2030, the poverty numbers could still be higher than the baseline by 60 million people.[3]" However, not every country is expected to suffer this long-term setback—making the crisis worse for some than for others.



Source: Lakner et al. (2020) (updated), PovcalNet, Global Economic Prospects.
Note: Projections for years 2018-2021 are based on updated estimates of Lakner et al. (2020). For 2020, we show both (a) the number of people that were expected to move out of extreme poverty had the COVID-19 pandemic not happened (Pre-COVID-19 counterfactual scenario, gray bar) and (b) the number of people who are pushed into poverty under the COVID-19-baseline scenario (blue bar) or the COVID-19-downside scenario (blue + orange bar). The "new poor" induced by COVID-19 is the sum of (a) and (b). For instance, under the COVID-19-baseline scenario in 2020, the "new poor" is equal to 88 + 31 = 119 million. Similarly, under the COVID-19-downside scenario in 2020, the "new poor" is equal to 88 + 31 + 5 = 124 million. We thank colleagues at USAID for the inspiration behind this figure.

Complications from rising inequality

Not all the countries were affected the same. The poorer countries bore the brunt of COVID impacts. A BBC poll of June 2020 suggested that 69% people in non-OECD countries had their income affected by the pandemic, compared to 45% in OECD countries[4]. Given the low average income in non-OECD countries to begin with, a significant drop in income meant many in those countries were pushed below the subsistence level.

To make matters worse, and if the World Bank projections hold, the flow of remittance to low and middle-income countries would fall by 7% in 2020 and a further 7.5% in 2021. On the other hand, UNCTAD predicted a sharp 20% decline of remittance to south Asian countries in 2020 alone. Coupled with the falling remittance, decreased exports of poorer countries meant dwindling foreign reserves, which posed a serious challenge for importing essential items.

Even within a country, not everyone was equally affected. On a global scale, labour, especially those with less agency, suffered the most. During the first six months of 2020, as reported by the 2020-21 Global Wage report of the ILO[5], two-thirds of the countries for which data were available had an outright fall or a very slow rise of wages. For the remaining third that reported raising wages, the situation is even darker, as the report noted. It said, this raise "was largely as a result of substantial numbers of lower-paid workers losing their jobs and therefore skewing the average" and "increasing wage inequalities". The report warned that the pandemic was "likely to inflict massive downward pressure on wages in the near future". Elsewhere the report highlighted that "total wages have

[3] https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2020/10/21/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-global-extreme-poverty/

[4] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-54106474 5 https://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-wage-report/2020/lang--en/index.htm

[6] https://cn.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-who-vaccines-idUKL8N2IV50J

fallen differently for men and women, the latter being disproportionately affected".

A particularly susceptible group of labourers that may end up bearing the most significant burden are the estimated two billion people in the informal economy, including 724 million casual or salaried wage workers. While most governments around the world have extended safety nets to protect the jobless people during pandemic, in most cases, it was the informal nature of their work that this group of people still remained beyond reach of the safety nets.

Like most global pandemic such as Asiatic Cholera (1826-37) and Spanish Flu (1918-19), Covid had an urban face. A rather complicated set of preconditions such as high population density, high mobility, unhealthy living conditions, and migratory population not registered for public services, including safety nets, are linked to this higher burden on urban areas, especially the urban poor. Since urban areas recover faster than the rural, historical data suggests that this urban-rural inequality of impact, on average, will dissipate in the coming years except for people employed in the informal sector.

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Global response…anything but

The Covid pandemic affected all the countries in the world—history has not seen such a global disaster since World War II. However, unlike the World War II, the world, according to some assessments, failed miserably to respond in unison. From sharing information for global preparedness to ensuring fair distribution of vaccine, there was hardly any global consensus, making it a failure of multilateralism at an epic scale. We have seen how the more capable countries failed to look beyond their borders, resulting in a slowdown in regional and global cooperation, leaving the most vulnerable countries in a fragile state.

Global health response

In the face of the global pandemic, the world virtually failed to develop a unified response. But for the flowery speeches of the world leaders, there was nothing that remotely looked global. At the outset, countries held on to their masks and PPEs so that they were not exported, and now the rich countries are hoarding vaccines, much more than they would ever need, so much so, that the poorest countries cannot have it for their citizens. The COVAX—the global programme to get vaccines to the world's poorest, is still "struggling from a lack of funds, supply risks, and complex contractual arrangements which could make it impossible to achieve its goals".[6]

Additionally, there was a failure to agree on a global message prescribing masks or social distancing, ensuring safety at airports, which led to all sorts of misinformation. Beyond the rank hypocrisy of countries championing multilateralism, there was hardly anything concrete in the offing. Interestingly, these countries were and still are so short-sighted that they fail to understand a simple logic. If they only focus on their residents and allow the virus to spread unchecked everywhere else, then they run into a real risk of undoing their vaccination effort with the emergence of more potent variants.

Global economic response

The global economic response was not global at all. Poorer countries, many of which were heavily dependent on overseas assistance even before the pandemic, were largely left to take care of the pandemic by themselves. Having significantly eroded local capacity to respond to the crisis, the pandemic demands more external contribution and support for the poorer countries to respond effectively. Despite having economic and diplomatic ties, vulnerable countries are getting mixed signals from China, the European Union, and G20 countries as they are talking about cutting back on overseas aid to fund domestic relief projects.

Even before Covid-19, the need for financial assistance was hardly met. In 2019, the UN had just 63% of the USD 29 billion sought in various appeals. In 2020, the ratio came down to just 48%. Already the United Kingdom has decided to cut its aid from 0.7% to 0.5% of its Gross National Income, which many aid groups projected would have a devastating impact.

[6] *https://cn.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-who-vaccines-idUKL8N2IV50J*

Additionally, while the stage seems to be set for a perfect storm to destabilise global SDG ambitions, there is hardly any global interest to discuss reform in aid issues such as effectiveness, the need for development agencies to be rooted in the community which are now controlled from western capitals, and to trust and invest in the people they are supposed to help.

The best news for the global economy, especially for countries with significant export to the US market, came in the form of the US domestic stimulus package. A recent UNCTAD report predicted a more robust (4.7%) global economic growth than its earlier projection (4.3%), thanks partly to a more robust recovery in the United States fuelled by a fresh fiscal stimulus of $1.9 trillion[7]. Still, the report projects that despite the stimulus, the global economy will trail the pre-pandemic 2021 projection by over $10 trillion.

Covid in Bangladesh impact on public health

Bangladesh's public health system, in general, was entirely unprepared for the Covid pandemic. Many of the top decision-makers were hoping that the impact of this new virus will not be deadlier than SARS or Nipah virus and were content with mere lip service. Even during the early days, many experts peddled the theory of the magical capacity of Bangladeshi people to evade such viruses. However, when the virus caused the first death on 8 March 2020, it created a policy chaos, leading to haphazard moves and uncertainties.

Since the public health officials approached the coronavirus pandemic just as they had approached other virus threats like Nipah, they happily left it to IECDR, a research facility, to deal with the virus. It meant Bangladesh only had a limited number of testing facilities and were among the lowest countries in this region in terms of test per million people. Bangladesh's fledgling public health system failed to respond effectively in every aspect—development of treatment protocols, availability of personal protective equipment or management of patients.

Of course, our public health infrastructure was never prepared to handle something as challenging as a pandemic. A Dhaka Tribune article in March 2020 reported that for a population size of 163 million, the country only had 0.8 hospital bed for every 1000 people and 0.7 intensive care

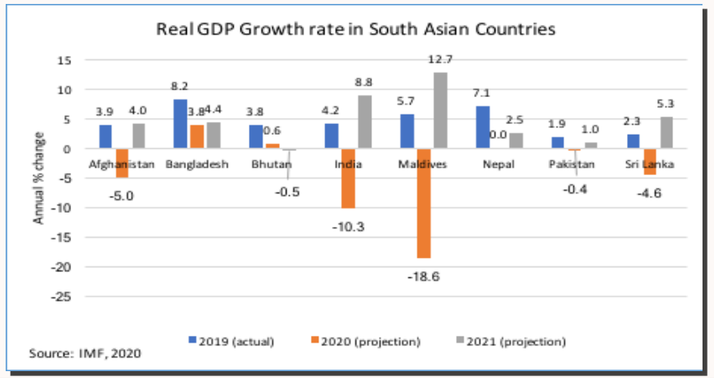
Development of treatment protocols, availability of personal protective equipment, management of patients—in every aspect, the countries fledgeling public health system failed to respond.

(ICU) beds for every 100,000. It was later reported that many of these ICU beds in government hospitals are not operational or never existed. The lack of transparency, accountability, and the resulting ineptitude of the public health officials, that many local and international watchdogs and media outlets wrote about, made it doubly difficult for Bangladesh to have a grip on the pandemic.

It was probably some of the early and painful political decisions such as the imposition of lockdown, closure of garments factories, and some of the community-led isolation systems in rural areas that could keep the official Covid death toll below 7,500 during 2020.

Economic impact

The painful decisions, however, had consequences. According to Bangladesh Bank, in 2020, Bangladesh's GDP growth came down to 5.2%, one of the lowest in three decades, although highest among South Asian neighbours (Figure).



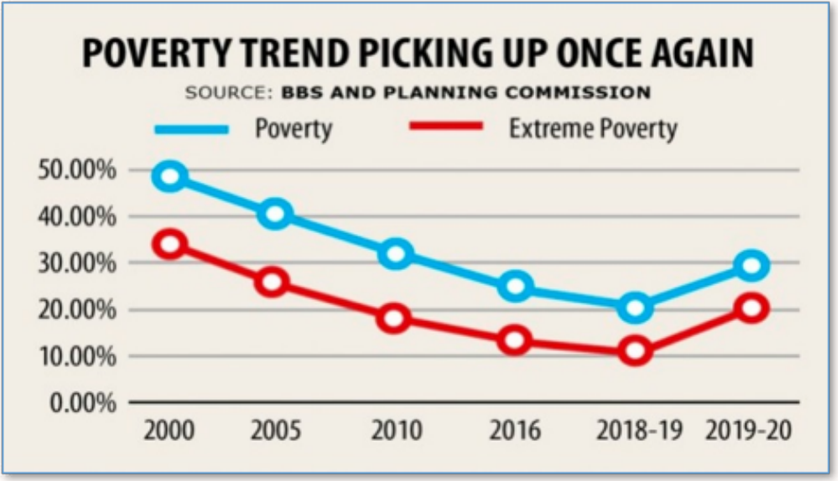
Bangladesh is the poster child for fighting poverty, but according to the Bangladesh Development Update of the World Bank, the trend was reversed in 2020, and the overall headcount rate increased by 7%.

People who have fallen into poverty during the pandemic, are now being termed as new poor. A study by PPRC and BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, estimates that 14.75% or nearly 25 million Bangladeshis can be classified as 'new poor'. Most of them are from the urban areas (59% of the urban pre-Covid vulnerable non-poor have fallen below the poverty line). The aforementioned World Bank report predicts that one out of every five earning individuals had either experienced a job loss (5%) or a prolonged absence from work (14%) since the onset of the pandemic.

According to the survey done by BRAC in December 2020, 34% of Bangladeshi households had at least one member who lost their job or income. It also suggested that the household income, on average, declined by 29% compared to the pre-pandemic level. Though there was a corresponding decrease in household expenditure (8.63%), it was far outweighed by the decrease in income. The households apparently attempted to cope by spending their savings and borrowing. As a result, household savings fell by 62%, and indebtedness increased by 31% in December 2020 compared to the pre-pandemic level. The increase of debt was higher in urban areas than in the rural areas (47% vs 22%).

According to the Probashi Kollyan Desk (PKD) at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA), 408,408 Bangladeshi migrant workers returned between April 1 and December 31, 2020. Since many of the returnees had migrated without

[7] *"Trade and Development Report Update: Out of Frying Pan…into the fire?", https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/gdsinf2021d1_en.pdf*



proper documentation or returned without the required documents, this estimate is expected to fall short of the actual figure. Moreover, if one considers that the country sends out nearly a million new migrants every year, the real shortfall is more significant. A BRAC study in December 2020 found that almost 77% of the returnees were struggling to find a job. One in four (25%) of returnee migrant households are concerned about repaying their outstanding migration loans averaging BDT 76,000. The surveyed households reported a 57.5% decrease in monthly remittance on average during the pandemic.

A large number of people employed in the non-agricultural sector are employed in the informal sector. A study by BRAC in August 2020 suggested that overall, the income of informal sector workers fell by 61% and 50% of them borrowed to survive.

The economic situation was especially difficult for women and women-led households. A BIGD study found out that between July 2020 and January 2021, unemployment among males engaged in micro and small enterprises increased from 16% to 40%, while for women it went from 15% to 54%. Several studies have also found that while the overall unemployment situation among youth has improved between the peak of the first wave and the end of the year, young women's recovery was much slower than their male counterparts. A study by BRAC shed light on the impact of pandemic on women-led CMSMEs in August 2020 and found that two-thirds (65%) of the entrepreneurs had no income, while 41% had to lay off workers.

Social impact

The economic misery, coupled with the movement restriction, closure of schools, and uncertainty, soon impacted society. Only second to the loss and suffering associated with losing thousands of family members, who were most often the sole bread earner of the family who had to risk of venturing out for earning, was the loss in learning.

Bangladesh decided to close all schools and educational/vocational institutes from March 17, 2020, to contain the spread of the virus and remain closed as of June 2021. Whilst in-person classes are suspended, schools, both private and public, have continued the learning process through electronic means, such as through public broadcasting and with online classes. Moreover, some of the public examinations have been cancelled during the closure.

However, as a World Bank study reveals, only 48% of the students have access to television, and 21% have access to internet. Another BRAC study shows that 56% of students did not participate in classes aired through TV or other mediums. A survey by CAMPE at the end of 2020, suggested that overall, 69.5% of students did not participate in the distant learning process as 57.9% of students lacked adequate access to the required devices. This phenomenon was even more severe among low-income families, as 80.5% of children from these families faced barriers to accessing education (Save the Children, 2020). Additionally, as a Plan International study found, distant learning was less effective for complex subjects such as math. A World Vision study from January 2021 suggested that 55% of children were unhappy to stay at home, 41.95% students said their life was becoming more problematic (Educo, 2020). A Save the Children study revealed that 52.1% were worried about the consequences of Covid. A survey by BRAC in May 2020 suggested that students living in urban areas (42%) do not study at home due to their poor mental health condition, including anxiety, depression, isolation etc.

Another worrying aspect of school closure is the increased chances of dropout. A World Bank (2015) survey conducted in Liberia after the Ebola outbreak shows that more than 25% students did not resume their education when schools reopened[8]. A Dhaka Tribune article expressed apprehension that as many as 45% of students may drop out once schools reopen[9]. CAMPE reported in January 2021 that 38% of primary school teachers, 41% high school teachers, 40% parents, 47% district education officers find dropout to be likely. Girls will be the most potential victims of dropout increasing the risk of child marriage (Stromme Foundation, 2020; Save the Children, 2020). Long-term school closure is also associated with a higher risk of dropout. Increased economic hardship during the lockdown has already forced a group of young adult students to enter the job market, many of whom are less likely to return to schools. The risk will increase with the extension of this closure. Additionally, reduced learning capacity induced by extended closure, income drop in families etc., can increase the tendency.

It is crucial to note the long-term effect of the closure of any school or the discontinuation of learning. A study on school closure by Jaume and Willen[10] (2019) suggests that for every additional ten days that primary schools remain closed, the proportion of students receiving a high school diploma fall by 0.3%. The reduction is higher amongst pupils from low-income households.

A third social impact, which is closely related to the second, is child marriage. A BRAC study conducted in December 2020 revealed that incidence of child marriage increased to 77%; higher in rural areas compared to urban areas (81% vs 70%).

Education in Bangladesh

Education is the backbone of any nation and the engine behind progress. It has the power to transform a country's population into human resources and improve its status holistically. Quality education is even more critical in the context of the economic transition of Bangladesh as becoming a developing country in 2024—intending to graduate to an Upper-Middle Income country by 2031 and a developed one by 2041. Such change would require quality human resources to power and steer the process.

Bangladesh recently completed the final assessment for graduation from the LDC list with flying colours. Performance in the education sector indicators has been significantly above the required level. However, the Covid pandemic seems to have thrown a spanner to the progress exposing several new vulnerabilities and making the existing ones more acute.

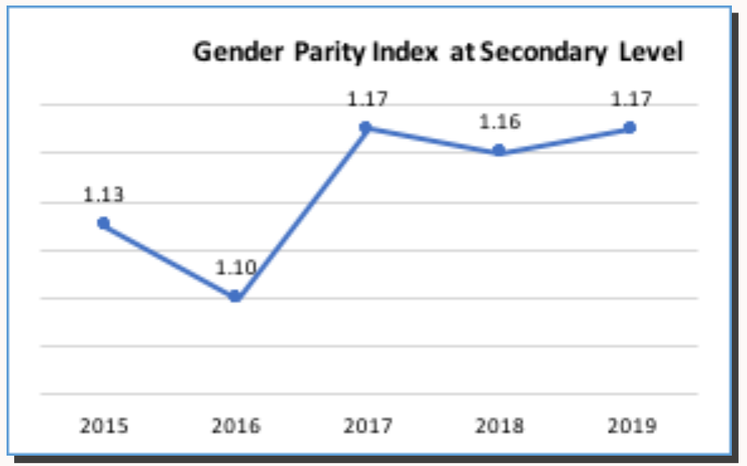
Literacy and enrolment

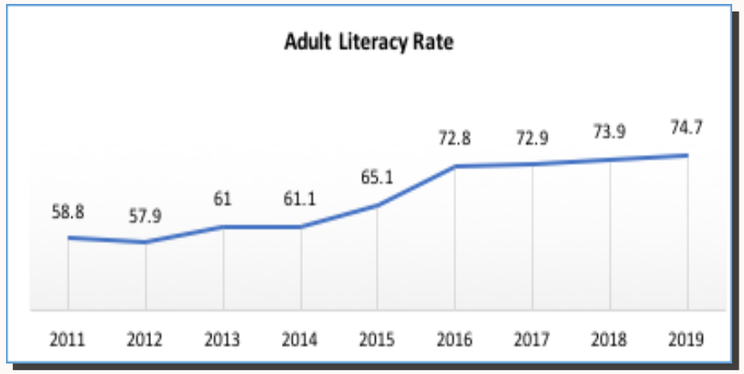
Adult literacy rates went as high as 74.7% in 2019 from 48.8% in 2011, and gaps in male and female literacy rates continued to narrow. Both gross primary and secondary enrolments show an increasing trend and now stand at 116% (2018)[11] and 72.56% (2019)[12]. Net primary enrolment is close to universal (98%), the country is far from achieving universal literacy. Compulsory and free primary education (for government schools) and stipends, scholarships and other incentives at the secondary level have made such progress possible.

Between 2009 and 2018, the enrolment rate in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) increased from 1% to 16.05%. Enrolment in tertiary level education has also improved from 11% in 2010 to 21% in 2018.

Gender parity

Women's empowerment being at the heart of Bangladesh economy has also kept the country's focus on girls' education. The Gender Parity Index at the primary and secondary level have reached above 1. Bangladesh also topped the primary and secondary education enrolment list in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020. Gender focused social safety net programmes in education, and the commitment of both the government and non-government stakeholders towards women's education have made Bangladesh stand out in this indicator.





[8] *Selbervik (2020) Impacts of school closures on children in developing countries: Can we learn something from the past?, CMI Brief, Number 5, May 2020*
[9] *https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/08/07/covid-19-over-45-secondary-school-students-may-drop-out#:~:text=According%20to%20a%202019%20report,36%25%20at%20the%20secondary%20level (Accessed on December 4, 2020)*
[10] *Jaume, D., and Willén, A. (2019). The long-run effects of teacher strikes: evidence from Argentina. Journal of Labor Economics, 37(4), 1097-1139*

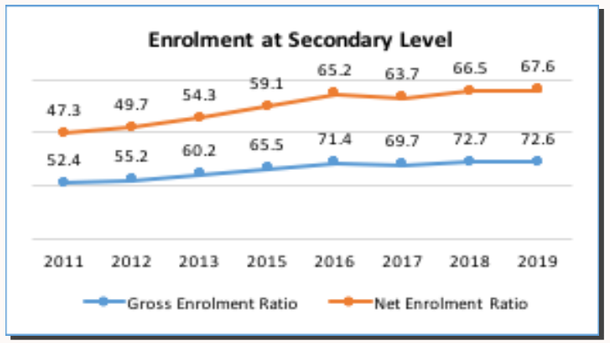
[11] *World Bank Data*
[12] *http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/bd*

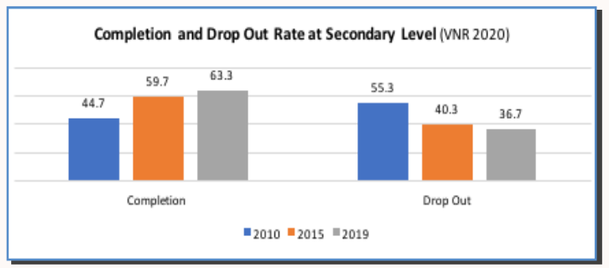
Retention and quality education for all

Like most LDC/developing countries, reducing the dropout rate is one of Bangladesh's significant areas of focus. Between 2010 and 2018, the primary dropout rate decreased by 50%. Consequently, school completion rate also improved. As per the Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey of 2019, primary school completion rate stood at 82.6%, and the upper secondary completion rate at 29.4%. The 2020 voluntary nation review suggested a second completion rate of 63.27%.

Bangladesh has made massive investments in school infrastructure. As cited in the VNR (2020), the Bangladesh education statistics, 2019 reports that 93.25% of the schools have electricity, 80.83% of schools have internet connectivity, and 76.72% use computer for educational purposes. In addition, 18.48% schools have ramps for the students with disabilities, 97.42% schools have drinking water facilities, and 95.93% have single-sex basic sanitation facilities.

Another noticeable achievement has been the decreased teacher-student ratio, which went to 30:1 in 2018 from 44:1 in 2008 (World Bank Data).





Vulnerable trends

The government, NGOs and the private sector have continued to focus on education indicators with targeted policies, interventions, and support programmes to improve the quality and quantity of education. However, the work is far from over.

The foremost challenge is ensuring inclusive and quality education at all levels. The gross enrolment ratio (GER) at the pre-primary level has been increasing slowly at a rate of 1.45% per year over the last seven years (SDG Progress Report, 2018). Enrolment at the primary level, both gross and net, have decreased slightly in 2019 compared to 2018. Around 4.3 million children between the ages of six and 15 remain out of school (UNICEF, 2020).

According to CAMPE[13], the proportion of fifth grade students was 25% efficiency in Bengali and 24% in Mathematics. For ninth graders attaining eighth grade competencies in Bengali, English, and Mathematics are 44%, 44%, and 35% respectively. It can be an outcome of low-level per child investment/expenditure and the pattern of investment in the education sector. World Bank report estimates that $249 is spent per primary student[14], which is the second-lowest in South Asia after Afghanistan. An analysis of the budget spending suggests that operating budgets have become double, or more in some case, that of the development budgets in all streams of education.

Though Bangladesh has made steady progress in reducing dropouts, it was still 18.8% in 2018, at the primary level. For higher education, the enrolment struggles at 18%, despite massive public and private investments. The high dropout rate is also a significant point of concern for secondary education. The Review Report on Goal 4: Quality Education by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs (2019) shows that less than half the students complete the full cycle of secondary education.

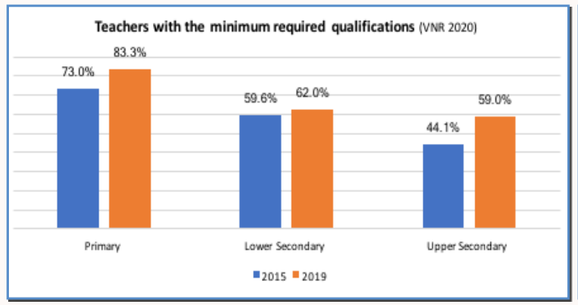
Access to education is still a concern too. Many vulnerable, marginalised, disadvantaged children, i.e. children with disabilities, children without a fixed address, children from hard to reach areas, children from ethnic communities, and children from challenging socio-economic backgrounds, still lag behind the promising national average. There is a striking disparity between poor and non-poor households where children's enrolment from low-income families is 76.8% compared to 86.9% for non-poor (Bangladesh VNR, 2020). The gap also prevails between rural (79%) and urban (68.1%) families. Gross and net enrolment ratios are 10 and 15 per cent lower in the slums than the national average, illustrating the challenges of poverty and marginalisation (World Bank, 2019[15]).

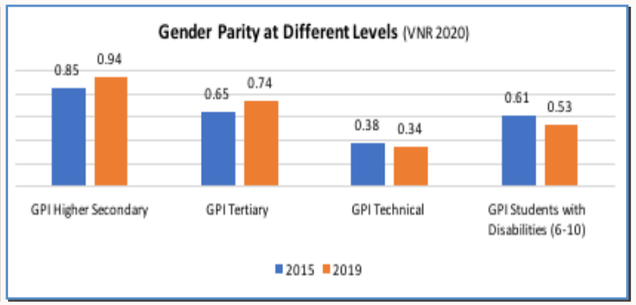
Although teachers training has been prioritised, they still lack both quality and motivation. As per ASPR 2019, a total of 83.3% of primary teachers had the professional qualifications (C-in-Ed [16]/ Dip-in-Ed[17], B.Ed.[18], M.Ed[19]). For upper secondary, it is much lower at 59.01%. The progress in the indicator for lower secondary level has been significantly low and increased by only about four percentage points.

While the Gender Parity Index (GPI) in some form of education is satisfactory, it has deteriorated from .038 (2015) to 0.34 (2019) although the global goal is to reach 0.70 by 2030 (VNR, 2020). Currently, female students at universities (both public and private) constitute only 26% of the total students.

Completion of secondary education also has a gender face. Only 43% of the girls complete the 5-year secondary education, compared to 51% for boys (Citizens' Platform for SDGs, 2019).
The sad picture clearly explains the disparity in the labour market that occurs due to discrepancy in higher and technical education. Women still lag in attaining employable skills as many are enrolled in madrasas (60.57%). Hence, just above 36% of the labour force are female.

As per Social Progress Index (2019) published by Social Progress Imperative, Bangladesh had deteriorating performances with a score of 16.25 compared to 17.78 in 2013 regarding access to advanced education. Performance in technical education is still considerably low.





[13] *CSO Spotlight: Key Message on SDG 4, 2020*

[14] *An Early-Warning Indicator for The Human Capital Project, World Bank, 2019*
[15] *https://blogs.worldbank.org/education/second-chances-giving-dhaka-s-slum-children-opportunity-go-back-school*
[16] *Certificate in Education*
[17] *Diploma in Education*
[18] *Bachelors in Education*
[19] *Masters in Education*

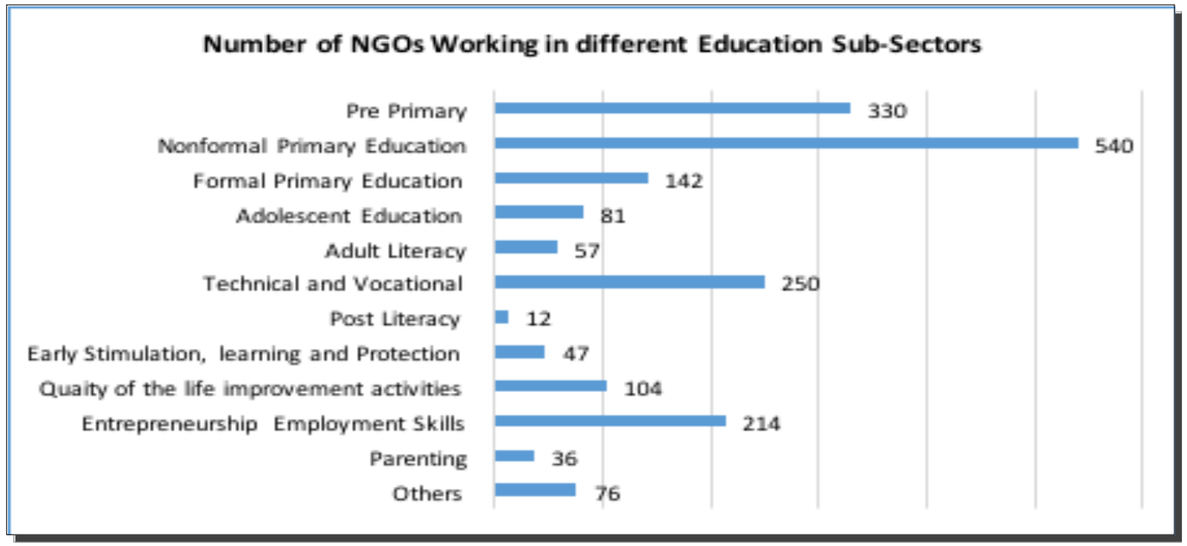
Contributions of non-government actors

The role of the private sector and NGOs in achieving the goals and targets of education cannot be overstated. Non-governmental educational institutions include government-funded private schools, independent private schools, schools and learning centres run by NGOs etc. Notably, 96% of secondary schools are run by private bodies with government support.

While NGOs are involved in all aspects of education, two primary foci of NGO-led education has been promoting equality and quality. Around a thousand NGOs in Bangladesh work in the education sector offering a wide variety of education and skills training programmes (Citizens' Platform for SDGs, 2019).

National-level NGOs in education, e.g. BRAC, Dhaka Ashania Mission, FIVDB, CMES, UCEP, and Nijarshikki, run large-scale education programmes at different levels. BRAC alone has 3.17 million students and members in their schools and centres (including adolescent centres and multipurpose community learning centres). Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) has over 1,300 non-governmental organisations (NGOs), 15 teachers' organisations in its network that work as a coalition and contributes to the policy landscape. The organisation also assesses the quality of education through its education watch platform.

Bangladesh devised such an institutional set-up under a public provision that enabled NGOs and other service providers in providing low-cost solutions in the education sector. Hence, integrating non-governmental actors in educational development appears to be a key instrument for Bangladesh, which could also be a lesson for other countries[20].



[20] https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/2017-cdp-policy.pdf

Development Update

Khichuri index

Impact on food security during the pandemic

Background

While COVID-19 affected the overall economic structure of the country, the heat was several notches higher for the economically vulnerable population working in informal settings. Restrictions on traffic movement, little or no demand for services and the overall economic standstill made the lives and livelihoods of the vulnerable population miserable. These groups were also among the first to feel the impact of the pandemic as they rely on daily income opportunities.

The Khichuri Index, although not a proper mathematical index, tried to illustrate how the economic sector behaved during the pandemic, how it could generate a subsistence livelihood and what has been the state of food security. By comparing prices of very basic commodities and the earnings of low-income groups over the past few months, the index provides a trend that reflects how affordability suffered during the peak of the pandemic and how the recovery went, when restrictions were eased.

BRAC began to construct the Khichuri Index from April on a monthly basis. This report summarises the findings from April, July, September, 2020 and January, 2021, and tries to illustrate how the condition has changed over the past few months.

Methodology

The Khichuri index is a similar exercise to the Financial Times' 'Breakfast Index', which is a weighted average cost of a plate of khichuri, a popular Bangladeshi dish with rice and lentils that would help people survive the pandemic. Affordability is then calculated using a person's daily wage/income and how many plates of khichuri they could purchase.

The very first Khichuri index constructed by BRAC in April included eight districts from different development regions and considered two common professions in rural and urban areas — agricultural worker and rickshaw puller. Later the scope of the index was expanded to 14 districts and three professions, adding construction workers to the previous two. The gender aspect was also incorporated later and wages for female agricultural workers and female construction workers were taken into consideration. The professions were chosen based on the likelihood of being affected in both rural and urban settings.

The chosen districts are as follows:

- Dhaka and Chattogram —large urban cities.
- Bogura, Kurigram and Dinajpur — areas in the northern region with high levels of poverty.
- Sunamganj and Brahmanbaria —haor (wetland) areas
- Gaibandha and Jamalpur — the shoal (river islands) areas
- Bandarban and Khagrachari —remote hill districts of Chattogram Hill Tracts
- Bhola, Patuakhali and Satkhira — cyclone-prone coastal areas

For the first few months, prices were recorded at sub-district (upazila) centres of the districts. Later during the flood in August, affected upazilas were also considered for drawing a comparison. From January 2021, the index started to cover all 64 districts (two upazilas from each district) and added factory workers (both male and female) to the existing three professions.

Data was collected from the field through BRAC District Co-ordinators. The baseline data (February 2020) was taken from the Department of Agricultural Marketing for ease of comparison between pre and post pandemic scenarios.

The index considered three types of khichuri platter — khichuri with eggs and vegetables, plain khichuri and khichuri with only vegetables. The platter roughly represents one meal for a family of four persons with very basic nutritional value. Calorie intake for the meals had not been considered while constructing the platter but some basic dietary requirements were considered.

The items in the platters include:

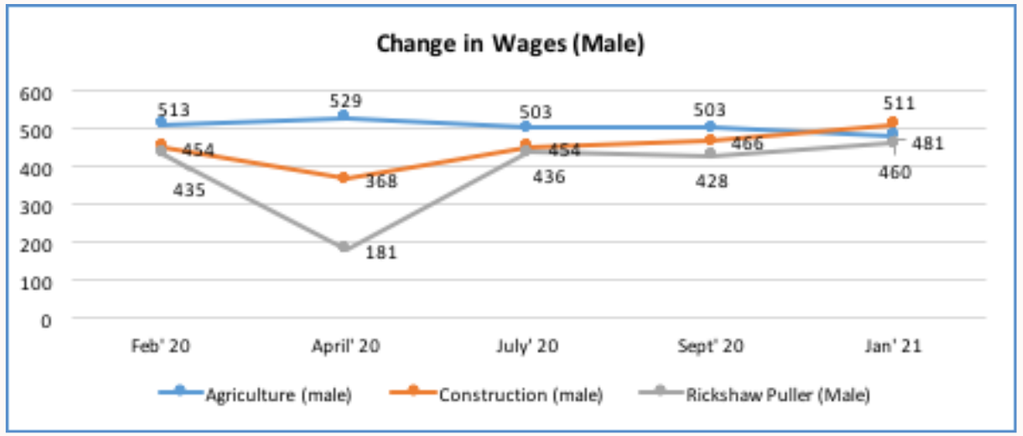
1. Plain Khichuri: Coarse rice (800gm), red lentil (300gm), imported onion (150gm), soybean oil (40ml), salt (100mg) and green chilli (10g)

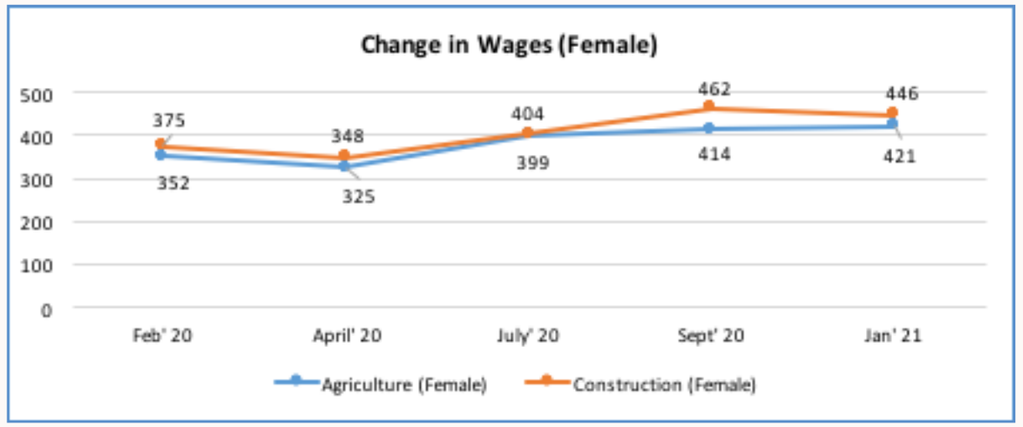
2. Vegetable Khichuri: Coarse rice (800gm[1]), red lentil (300gm), potato (100gm), imported onion (150 gm), soybean oil (40ml), salt (100mg), green chilli (10 gm) and pumpkin (150gm)

3. Egg and vegetable Khichuri: Coarse rice (800gm), red lentil (300gm), potato (100gm), imported onion (150 gm), soybean oil (40ml), salt (100mg), 2 farm eggs, green chilli (10gm) and pumpkin (150gm)

The transitions during pandemic

Change in wages reflected the economic downturn followed by rapid recovery.





The professions considered for the khichuri index portrays a brief picture of how economic activities are progressing. While the rickshaw puller represents mobility on roads, construction work can be used as proxy for development work going on in the economy. Agriculture on the other hand shows the picture of a large portion of the labour force in the rural areas and how their livelihood changed with the onset of the pandemic.

[1] *Per day requirement per person per day as per FAO: 270-450g rice, 100g pulse, 100g leafy and 200g non-leafy veg, 30g fat, 1 teaspoon salt*

The graphs above show the drastic fall in wages in April caused by the economic lockdown. Non-agricultural labour faced the impact more as demand for agricultural labour for harvesting in some districts pulled the average agricultural wages up in April. For instance, agricultural wages increased significantly (56%) in haor districts like Sunamganj where the Boro harvest season had just begun. But wages dropped in districts where harvesting began in May.

Rickshaw pullers on the other hand started to feel the heat of the pandemic immediately after movement restrictions were imposed. On average, daily income of a rickshaw puller declined by 58% in April, compared to pre pandemic February. Predictably, Dhaka (86%) and Chattogram (67%) had the highest levels of decline.

The scenario was similar for construction workers. While the country went through general holidays as part of pandemic measures, infrastructure development work came to a standstill and demand for day labourers dropped. The result is visible in the 19% decline of construction wages on average for males and 7% for females. Again, Dhaka had the highest decline (40%).

The situation started to improve once restrictions were eased in June and a ray of hope towards recovery was visible from July. During July, the average daily net income for rickshaw pullers drastically increased by 141% in July compared to April, owing to the opening of businesses. Improvements were also visible for construction workers with increases of 23% on for males and 16% for females. A slight decline in agricultural wages (6%) was seen in July because Boro harvest season had ended.

As discussed by experts worldwide, Bangladesh had shown a rapid economic recovery and outperformed many of the neighbouring countries. The rapid recovery, visible from July, continued till September through January. Demand for construction labour and consequently wages for male workers improved by 3% in September from July and by 10% more in January. Growth was also seen for female workers where their wages improved by 15% between July and September. The trend is similar to a 'swoosh' (Nike logo) shaped recovery.

Costlier basic food aggravated challenges

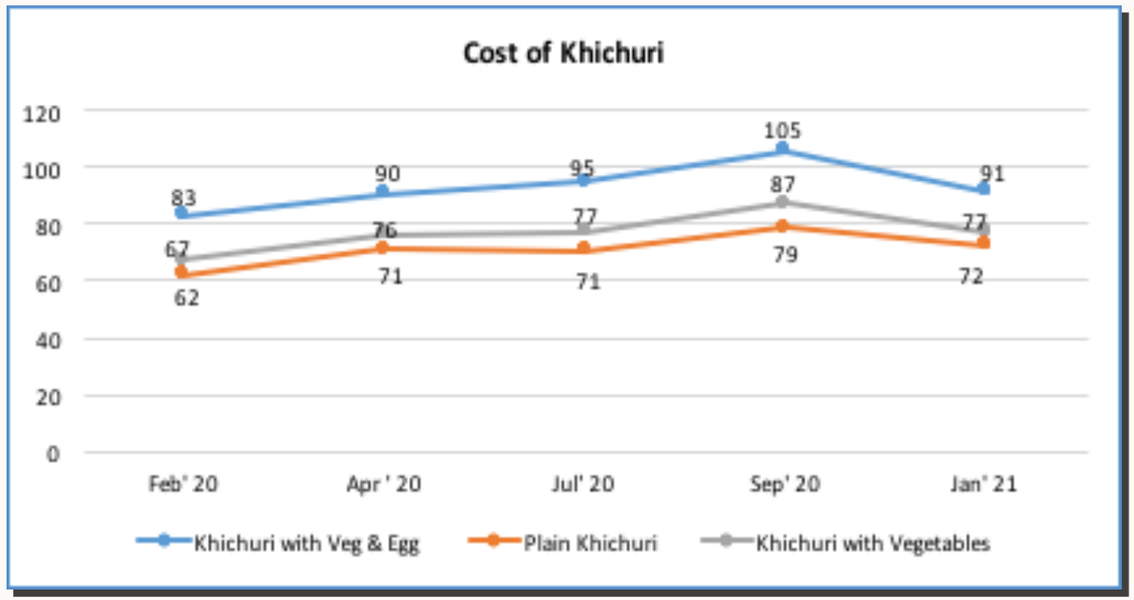
Between February and April, the cost of basic food items, reflected in the khichuri platter, showed a steep rise owing to the distorted supply chain, panic buying and high demand spiked by the impending Ramadan. The average cost increase in the selected 14 districts was 9% for khichuri with vegetables and egg, 14% for plain khichuri and 13% for khichuri with vegetables. The rise was the highest in Gaibandha (24%), owing to high price of red lentils and imported onions. In April, a plate of khichuri with vegetables

and egg cost BDT 90 up from BDT 83 in February.

Price rise continued in July and September as well. The average cost of khichuri with eggs and vegetables went up as much as BDT 105 in September from BDT 95 in July. Compared to February, the prices rose by 27%-29% for all three khichuri platters in September when khichuri was costliest in Patuakhali (BDT 112.75) boosted by a whopping 100% increase of onion prices.

It is also worth mentioning that prices of coarse rice went up significantly, from BDT 34/kg in February to BDT 46/kg in September. Prices of green chilli also started to shoot up in July. A rising trend in imported onion prices was visible from August despite efforts to contain it.

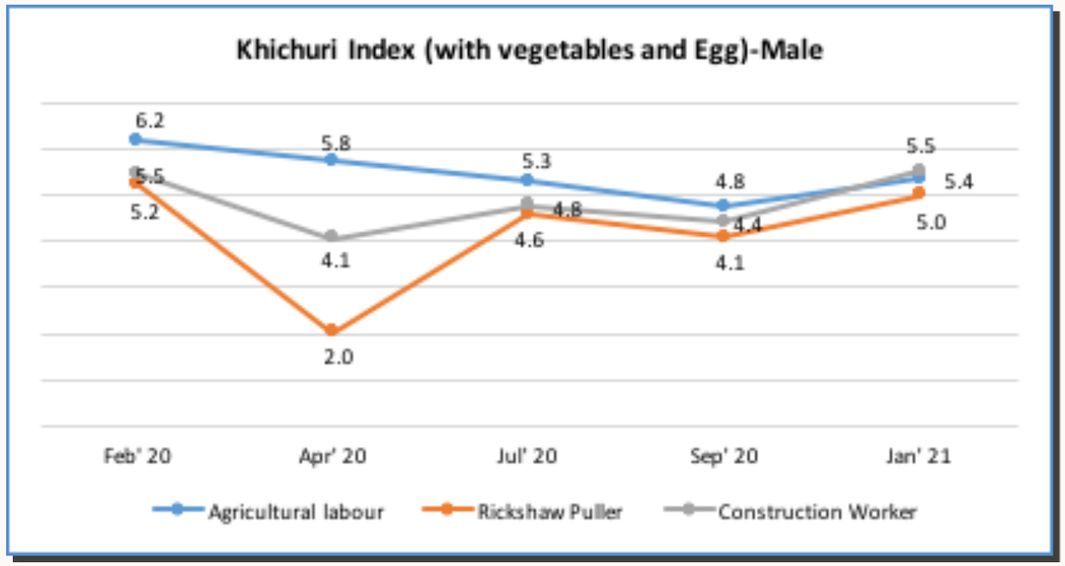
There was some relief in January 2021 as prices of all three khichuri platters declined. The cost for each plate of khichuri with vegetables and egg declined by 13% followed by 8% and 11% decline for plain khichuri and vegetable khichuri respectively. The most drastic fall was again registered in Patuakhali, where prices of almost all items declined, especially onion prices. In January, prices of imported onions in almost all districts fell from the high of September. Price of coarse rice, however, still remains high.

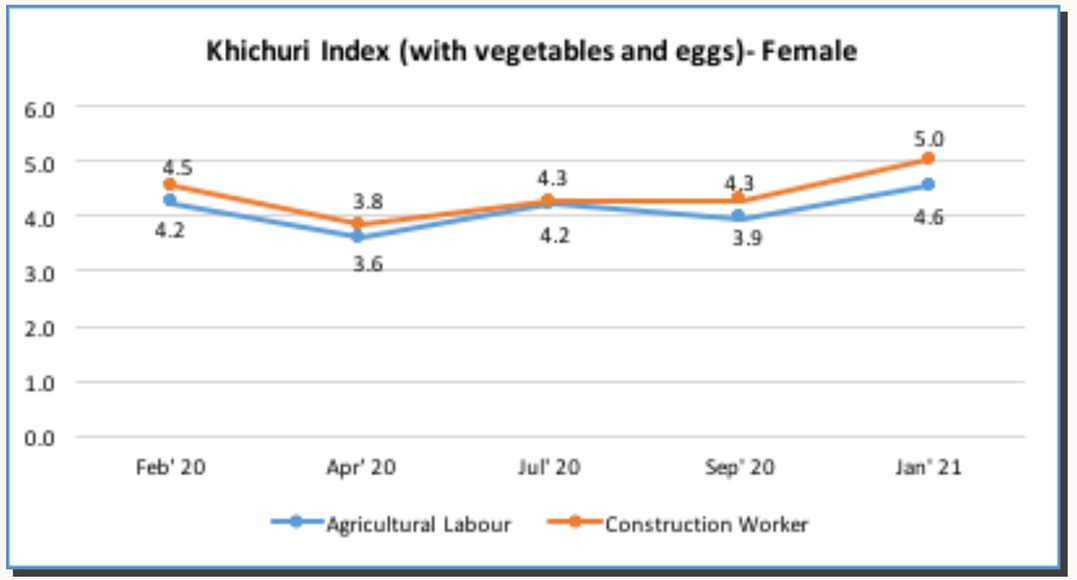


Improvement in affordability gave hint of recovery

When the first round of Khichuri index was published, it reflected the misery of the selected informal sector labourers. In April, the khichuri index value, which basically is the affordability of the number of plates of the khichuri a wage earner from his/her daily income, fell drastically. For agricultural labour, the fall in affordability — meaning the Khichuri index value — fell the least (10%) and the most (62%) for rickshaw pullers. They could afford only two plates of khichuri with vegetable and eggs in April given their lower level of income. Construction workers' affordability fell by 26% in April compared to February.

For females, the khichuri including basic protein fell by 15% for both agricultural labour and construction workers. During April, female labour from Dinajpur (construction) and Gaibandha (agricultural) could afford the least number of plates of khichuri with vegetables and protein, with their





income. For males, the least performing districts were Gaibandha for agriculture, and Dhaka for rickshaw pullers and construction workers. For rickshaw pullers in Dhaka, affordability went below one plate for their daily income.

The situation improved for construction workers and rickshaw pullers in July compared to April but fell, although insignificantly, for agri-labour due to the agricultural lean season and rising cost of khichuri. However, it was still better for agricultural workers than non-farm labour. Affordability for agri-labour in July stood at 5.3, which was 4.8 and 4.6 for construction workers and rickshaw pullers respectively. For females, the affordability of both the professions rose in July.

Due to the price increase in September, affordability fell for almost all sectors. The drop was 10% for farm labour and rickshaw pullers and around 8% for male construction workers. For female farm labour affordability dropped by 6% to 3.9 plates per day. District wise, lowest affordability was in Gaibandha and Dinajpur for females and Dinajpur and Kurigram for males.

January was satisfactory for workers from all the professions as affordability rose. The positive trend was highest for male (25%) and female (18%) construction workers. District-wise, agricultural workers and construction workers in Chattogram outperformed others.

Evidence and the simple affordability calculation bear testimony to the on-going discussion about Bangladesh's rapid recovery. The first phase of recovery, from April to July was 'V' shaped giving a big push on people's livelihoods. Given that the government initiatives, programmes and stimulus packages are implemented efficiently, Bangladesh will come out of the fallout in no time. Along with the macro-economic base of RMG and remittance, the informal workers like those of the selected professions will also contribute to the rapid recovery.

KAM Morshed is the senior director of BRAC Advocacy, Innovation and Migration

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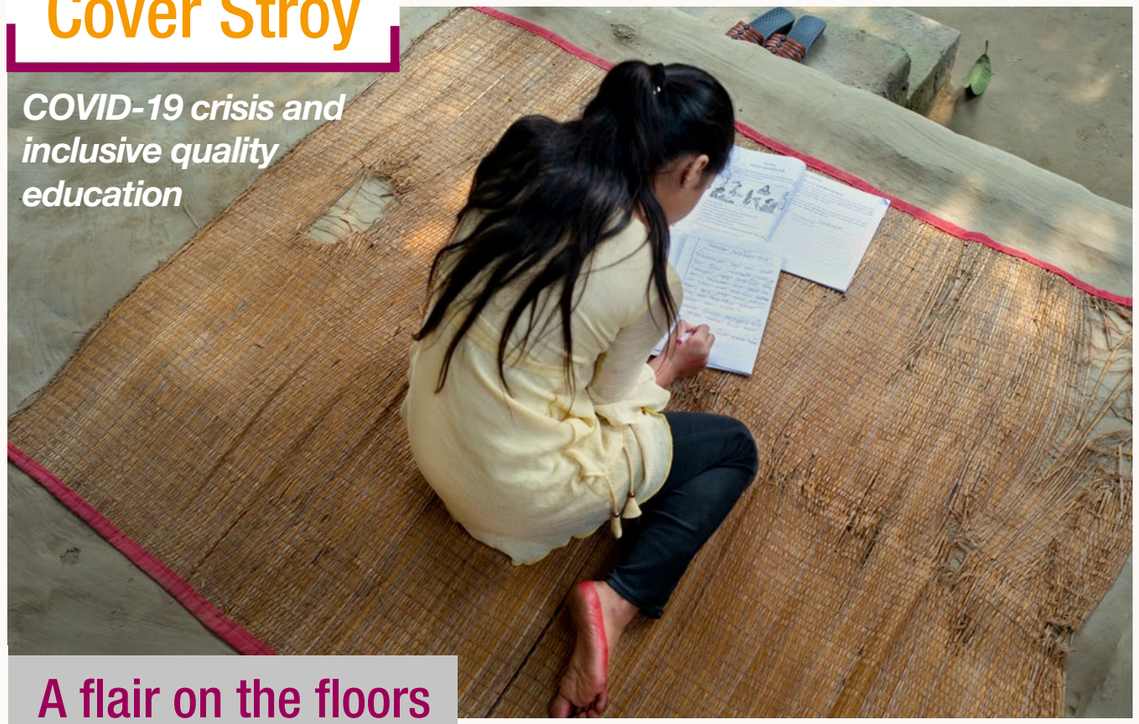
COVID-19 crisis and inclusive quality education



A flair on the floors

Anika Mahzabin

What started as a pastime for a four-year-old has turned out to be her lifeline now. This is the story of Medha Rani Barman, one of the many talents that BRAC's Tarae Tarae Dipshikha can claim to have plucked out of obscurity.

Little Medha loved to dance. But for a poor four-year-old, growing up in Kurigram's Harikesh in the remote north of Bangladesh, she had no means of formal training. Her father Sharan Kumar's wages as a driver were barely enough to make ends meet at home. There was never much left after food and necessities. Dance lessons were simply out of the question. Medha used to watch videos on her uncle's mobile phone and mimic their moves. "That is the earliest memory I have of dancing. It was fun," says Medha Rani Barman who has been burning the floor for quite a few years now.

What started as mere entertainment, turned out to be Medha's means to success and stardom, not just in Kurigram but across Bangladesh and beyond. Dance has also become a means to her livelihood. It began with the aarti at the worship of Mother Durga in her neighbourhood. Little Medha had volunteered for a role at the ritual that required sophistication and finesse. Her mother thought she was too young for that. "You are not old enough," she had said. But Medha insisted and prevailed. She was right, for everyone was all praise after her performance at the puja. That was the first time Medha danced in public and has not stopped since. She fondly remembers the time, "My parents' eyes glimmered with pride – nothing can ever match that moment."

Both Medha's parents are culturally inclined. Her father is into folk songs and her mother, Sweety Rani, is also a good singer. For little Medha, dancing was not too far off. Perhaps it was in her blood. What they did not have was resources, Medha's father and mother were made up with unwavering support for their daughter to realise her dreams and theirs.

Medha was in her first grade in 2016 in a BRAC school when her teacher Zakir Hossain Babu asked her to take part in Tarae Tarae Dipshikha contest, which is a BRAC initiative to nurture and groom children with cultural talent like singing

and dancing. Medha came first at the regional level and moved up to the divisional level where she also secured the top spot. During this time Zakir Hossain, provided free lessons from his own cultural troupe called Jal Taranga. Later, Fahin Tamanna Srabanti, another BRAC teacher, helped with further training and guidance. Medha says the training really helped her with her craft and with her temperament too. “It gave me confidence that I could perform at the same level as others.”

Medha Rani became the national Dipshikha champion when she performed in Dhaka. “It was really a turning point in my pursuit to become a dancer.” That same year Medha took part in the national cultural competition, Bangabandhu Shishu Kishor Mela, marking the Children’s Day where she won the gold medal in general dance. Medha says this hardly did anything to make her content. She craved to soar higher. “I kept practising regularly with sincere dedication.”

Then in 2017, Medha participated in country-wide dance competition which required participants to perform various genres including folk dance, creative dance and classical styles like Bharat Natyam. Once again, proving to be a prodigy, Medha was first in her category. Only in her second grade, Medha was included in dance groups that performed on the state-run TV’s flagship dance competition. Her performances were aired on other TV stations like NTV. Her lessons continued with Fahin Tamanna, as did her education at the BRAC school.

The next year, in 2018, Medha entered a competition organised by the Bangladesh Nrityashilpi Sangstha in Rangpur marking the International Dance Day. There too, Medha won the top prize. She had performed folk dance, creative dance and classical dances. This recognition was rather special for her. “I could not believe my ears when they announced my name as the first prize winner!” The following year Medha secured a spot in the top ten in a national dance competition marking the Child Rights Week in 2019. “I think it was then that I thought I was getting closer to my dream of becoming a performer at the international stage.” It seemed only the dates and venues changed but Medha remained the best no matter where she went. This also brought another opportunity, which really expanded her horizon. Medha was selected for a month-long training session at the Shishu Academy in Dhaka. At this point Medha was among 120 children trying to qualify and participate in an international children’s festival organised by Turkish Radio and Television.

Medha’s experience at the academy was at the same time overwhelming and novel. “I had never seen anything like this before,” she says. In contrast to her sleepy town, Dhaka was a humming and noidy place. “It seemed to be full of strangers.” But Medha and her parents coped. The instructors at the academy were helpful and arranged for them to stay in Dhaka for free. “But we had to pay for the other expenses.” Medha made the best out of her time in Dhaka. But the demanding dance routines were not the only thing she had to cope with.

“Most of the participants were well off. You could tell from their fancy clothes. But mine were practically rags. Some of them did not want socialise with me,” says Medha looking back. She had to learn to take it in stride though. There were other things like food that would be on her mind. Some days there would not be enough. “So my mother would eat little so I could have more. She practically starved herself. And some days we just had puffed rice for supper.” Medha, however, soon received generous assistance from former deputy minister Asadul Habib Dulu, who was elected from Lalmonirhat where cultural troupe Jaltaranga was based. “That really eased things.”

Of the 120 children, only 16 qualified for the festival in Turkey. Medha was one of them. “But we did not have any money for all the paperwork and other formalities. I did not even have a passport.” The BRAC resource teacher Fahin Tamanna, who Medha fondly calls Srabanti madam, arranged for her passport through a friend. “It was just in the nick of time. I got the passport only a few days before we were scheduled to fly.”

On the day of the flight, Medha was nervous but put on a brave face. “I told myself I would not say goodbye to my mother with tears. So, I smiled. I wanted to make her proud.” This was the first time that Medha had ever been on an aeroplane. She was so nervous she could not speak to any of the other participants. Everything was new to her.

Her time in Turkey was much more pleasant. Each participant was assigned to a host family. “My host family greeted me with a bouquet of flowers. They made me feel at home.”

Medha always thought of her parents and remembered that she had to make them proud. “They were not with me, but I felt like I carried their dreams with me — they were always there.” Medha had to do everything by herself — getting dressed, putting on make-up. “I missed my mother very much.”

Medha continued to burn the stage and mesmerise her audience from Samsun on the northern coast to the very heart of Ankara in Turkey.

Anika Mahzabin is the lead of internal communications of BRAC Education Programme

Whether it is at an international stage or at home in Kurigram, Medha says she feels free when she dances.

“As if I have wings. As if I could fly away.”

Nigar Sultana: New cricket sensation!

Nourin Rahman

Keeper-batsman Nigar Sultana is a name that exemplifies struggle, pride and passion. Every successful person has a story behind them and Nigar's story shows how resolve can help realise one's dreams.

Bangladesh women's cricket team became the champion of the Asia Cup T20 tournament, beating India in 2018. That was the first time that the Bangladesh women's team won a tournament, and that too by beating the six-time champions India by three wickets. Nigar played a crucial role behind Bangladesh's victory, scoring a whirlwind 27 runs from 24 balls with three fours in a row off an over with the seasoned Jhulan Goswami.

Nigar's story takes us back to Bangladesh's rural countryside, beginning in the remote northern district of Sherpur where she was born. This Bangladeshi cricket sensation was good at playing the game since childhood. "Our backyard was the place where I started playing cricket with my elder brothers. At that time people could not even imagine girls playing cricket in the field.

> "I was the only girl in the whole village who used to play with boys, says Nigar. She remembers how her brothers thought she had a future in cricket even before she did. "I got the inspiration from my family, especially from my brothers."

However, it became difficult for her to devote much time to cricket as she grew older, with an increasing amount of study load from school. But opportunity came knocking in the seventh grade when she heard about a trial at BKSP, the national sports institute of Bangladesh, where qualifiers would have to go to the sports camp for one or two months. "I had never played cricket formally before. So, at first my performance was not as good as others. Still, I qualified for a camp in Dinajpur. That was the first time I stayed without my parents." But Nigar did not become a member of the BKSP right away.

Much later, she saw girls of BRAC's kishori club (adolescent club) playing cricket one day. They told her that she would have to become a member of the BRAC Adolescent Development Programme (ADP) Club to be on the team. This adolescent programme had begun in 1993, as part of BRAC's education initiatives to retain literacy and teach life skills. The clubs offer girls an opportunity to regularly socialise, play, sing, dance and exchange views and experiences in safe and supportive spaces.

Nigar quickly took permission from her parents to join the club in Nouhata, and started her training soon afterwards. That was in 2011. Later, she participated in district level competitions using the club platform and it was for her outstanding performance in 2014, that she got a call from Bangladesh women's cricket team in 2015. Nigar made her international debut in a T20 match against Pakistan. She was named in the Bangladesh squad for the 2018 ICC Women's World Twenty20 Qualifiers.

Needless to mention, this journey was not an easy one for Nigar. "Women face obstacles everywhere in life. If a girl wants to take up sport as a career, it becomes a big deal for everyone. But I got full support from my family. My mother used to accompany me to my practices and sit there all day till it ended. And of course, our neighbours and acquaintances made all kinds of comments."

In fact, Nigar's entire family was riddled with advice, remarks and sometimes admonishments for letting a girl play. Neighbours and elders told them how religion forbade women to partake in sports and how it was unhealthy for her to engage in physical exertion or why it was not the right thing to do given the social values. But her mother's words used to keep her strong and focused. She would say, "Cricket is your love and you should play. When you do well for the district, people will praise you. Those detractors will become ardent admirers and won't stop singing your praise."

Although typically boys are given priority in sports, it is gradually becoming easier for girls to become professionals with Bangladesh performing well internationally in football as well as in cricket. "Those who want to take up cricket as a profession, need to keep working hard to perform at the top level. Some of the girls need to focus more on the mental aspect and worry less about what people are saying. There is always pressure in sports, both on the field and off it. Girls, especially, have to learn to deal with it," advises Nigar.

Her strength, determination and persistence show that she will go a long way. She wants to play for at least ten more years for Bangladesh, and bring glory and honour for the country. "As for my future plan, I would say I want to see myself as the captain of the team."

Nigar says she is just thankful that she received so much support and cooperation from her family and her friends that gave her the strength to finally make it to where she is today.

> If a girl wants to take up sports as a career, it becomes a big deal for everyone. But I got full support from my family. My mother used to accompany me to my practices and sit there all day till it ended. And of course, our neighbours and acquaintances made all kinds of comments.

Personal Information (National side: 2015-present)	
Full Name	Nigar Sultana Joty
Nick Name	Joty
Born	Nabinagar, Sherpur, 1 August 1997 (Age 23)
Father's Name	Md Shirajul Haque
Mother's Name	Salma Haque
Club	Nouhata
Date of admission in club	27 Dec 2010
Batting	Right-hand bat
Role	Wicketkeeper, Bastman

International information	
National side	Bangladesh (2015-present)
ODI debut (cap 24)	6 October 2015 v Pakistan
Last ODI	4 November 2019 v Pakistan
T20I debut (cap 25)	30 September 2015 v Pakistan
Last T20I	2 March 2020 v Sri Lanka

Career statistics		
Competition	WODI	WT20I
Matches	18	27
Runs scored	302	370
Batting average	23.23	20.55
100s/50s	0/1	0/0
Top score	59*	46
Catches/ stumpings	6/5	6/10

"Education is the best friend. An educated person is respected everywhere. Education beats the beauty and the youth." – *Chanakya*

Nourin Rahman is the partnership analyst of Advocacy for Social Change, BRAC

Child development amid COVID-19 pandemic

Dr Erum Mariam

The early childhood development scene in Bangladesh is extremely vibrant. To start with, the evolving and engaging partnership between non-profits, government agencies and academic institutions have shown tremendous potential in the last 15 years. There has been significant progress in pre-primary education and early years; and there is a roadmap in place for more systemic changes.

With about one in three Bangladeshis being under 18, it has become increasingly necessary to prepare our youth to thrive in a world characterised by globalisation, rapid technological change, and shifting demographics. The multi-sectoral Bangladesh ECD Network (BEN) — including the likes of Shishu Academy, BRAC IED, Plan, Save the Children, icddr,b, Ahsania Mission, CAMPE, IER-Dhaka University, Phulki and World Vision — has been playing an active role in recent years advocating policy development and change, building capacity of stakeholders, generating new knowledge and establishing partnerships.

BRAC Institute of Educational Development (IED) of BRAC University, is a host and executive member of this network, where we have been working together relentlessly to reimagine how schools, families, and communities work together to foster a holistic set of cognitive and socio-emotional skills in children, including critical thinking, cognitive flexibility, creativity, and empathy.

Support during COVID-19 pandemic

The coronavirus outbreak has been a pivotal moment for those of us who work with and for children. We experienced the need to be able to adapt to the crises while staying relevant to the communities from different contexts and realities.

Keeping children at the centre of our efforts, we have been providing support to parents and caregivers, who will be in immediate contact with children at home, by addressing wellbeing and communication skills. We addressed these issues through tele-counselling services to ensure a healthy parent-child interaction while providing opportunities for stimulation. This also resulted in launching a nationwide tele-counselling helpline called 'Moner Jotno Mobile-e' (in partnership with PHWC and Kaan Pete Roi) for access to a wider group of parents, caregivers and families.

This drive to continue education for children during the pandemic helped develop 'Pashe Achhi', a telecommunication programmatic model. The model supports children and caregivers through weekly doses of play-based learning and psychosocial support, and has so far reached out to 60,484 children through a total of 16 calls.

We have further provided psychosocial support to 3,022 BRAC health workers, while also catering to teachers in the government primary schools. These teachers were trained via phone on how to engage with children and stimulate learning through play during these changing times.

Radio school programme

The radio programme has possibilities to provide increased access during the pandemic or similar crises since internet access is still not available to many communities. Modalities like radio and phone can provide a new face to learning, in low-resourced economies such as ours.

We need to, however, be open to understanding the needs of those we are trying to cater to. Exploring different demographics and client profiles, and conducting relevant market research will enable us to provide content that are engaging and appealing to children.

Post-COVID-19 recovery

Reopening childcare centres and pre-schools require a thorough understanding and maintaining of all public health safety protocols. These need to be in place while developing a plan to reopen these facilities keeping the safety of children and the front-liners at the core.

Learning can perhaps continue in smaller cohorts simultaneously with the telecommunication models — resulting in a blend of modalities in a suitable combination. This would help a smooth transition into the 'new normal' that this world is entering without compromising our children's access to learning in safe and engaging spaces.

Yidan prize fund

BRAC founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed had been a champion for developing scalable solutions throughout his life. His work and philosophy have been our guiding inspiration and principle towards realising the potential of play-based education models.

The highly prestigious Yidan Prize fund will be used for opening our globally-recognised Humanitarian Play Labs in Uganda and establishing new play labs in Tanzania in collaboration with the government primary schools. These funds will be used to continue the development of play labs in Bangladesh through increased partnership, and establish home-based childcare services. Those funds have also contributed to the development of Pashe Achhi, catering to the children and caregivers during the pandemic.

Dr Erum Mariam is the executive director of BRAC Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University

Girls' education, a fundamental right

Rasheda K Chowdhury

A dedicated education activist, Rasheda K Chowdhury highlights the cracks and weakness of Bangladesh's education system that the coronavirus pandemic has brought to the fore like never before and discusses how girls' dropout may be reduced.

Impressive improvement

Bangladesh boasts of a remarkable history of educational development. Effective policies and programmes toward gender parity were put in place and implemented in earnest from the early 1990s as a democratic government took over. Those policies had a visible positive impact on girls' education and enrolment in both formal and non-formal institutions. Private organisations like BRAC and other NGOs started developing models for non-formal education. Government efforts, together with that of the private organisations, set off girls' education on an upward trajectory.

Looking back, this has been one of the areas that enjoyed sustained support from successive regimes regardless of their political identity. Beginning in the early 1990s, a democratically elected government made girls' education free up to the fifth grade. The next government, the previous opposition party, extended it till the eighth grade. This was gradually extended up to the 12th grade. These policies helped increase the state of girls' education significantly.

Civil society organisations also have had a significant contribution in this area focusing particularly on dropouts or those who have been left out. BRAC's initiative to provide non-formal education has become a successful complementary model ensuring a girl-friendly and child-friendly environment. This supportive stream of non-formal education and its accommodation of the dropouts and those left out worked well in our socioeconomic context.

As a result, Bangladesh not only improved gender parity in school enrolment and education but became a global success story in this regard. Now there are more girls than boys, which poses a different kind of disparity. That is why our government has extended the stipend facility to both girls and boys under a social safety net programme, specifically focusing on underprivileged children in socioeconomically deprived areas. These government interventions, in combination with the NGO efforts, are bringing positive results.

Investment imperative

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government and NGOs started to focus on improving primary and secondary education with quality service delivery. There were a significant number of challenges at the secondary level even before the pandemic. One of them was to retain girls through the secondary level. In 2009, primary level dropouts amounted to more than 40% which was reduced to 18% in 2018. Reaching out to this 18% was very difficult but we have tried to reach this through non-formal education so that they are not completely deprived of the light of education.

Time has come for the non-government organisations to identify what type of research and advocacy will be required for further development. Although the government has approved a number of well-intended policies besides the national education policy, their implementation leaves much to be desired.

Another major area which needs attention is investment. Education allocation in the national budget has been around 11% for the last few years which is, sadly, the lowest in South Asia. We need to have more investment — at least 15% of the budget — for targeted interventions to increase education coverage in the remote and marginalised communities.

COVID-19 shows the cracks

The pandemic has immensely affected development across the world and Bangladesh has been no exception. It is like we are looking at the cracks and weaknesses in the system through a magnifying glass, especially in regards to health and education. In this context, I would like to quote the UN Secretary General who said in August 2020, "the existing learning crisis is heading towards a learning catastrophe".

It could not be truer for Bangladesh. Being a developing country, we have been forced to prioritise economic recovery over other developmental needs, particularly education. Girls have become particularly vulnerable during the pandemic especially given that there have been few government interventions specifically for women and girls. The pandemic saw more girls dropping out of school than boys.

Dropout challenge

We have conducted a rapid response survey with support from BRAC which identifies four major challenges arising out of the pandemic. The first one is dropout. To be more particular, girls' dropout rate will increase. They are expected to be home and take care of the household, siblings, etc. Given the economic hardship, some families may choose to marry off girls at an early age. This threatens to increase the rate of child marriage and, consequently, child labour.

Malnutrition may also increase due to increasing poverty and it is likely to affect the girl children disproportionately. The government has thankfully taken note of the findings in preparing and developing a forward looking COVID-19 response and recovery plan.

The government is currently using four platforms — television, radio, mobile phones, and the internet — to continue mass education and mitigate the learning loss. However, all the students cannot be reached through these platforms, and girls are, perhaps, suffering more than the boys. Although students' stipends continue to be paid out with messages to mothers to be ready to send their children to schools when they reopen, we require authentic and scientific data and information to ascertain the actual scenario and plan accordingly. These efforts can and should include the civil society besides government initiatives to be able to effectively address the impending challenges.

Closing the gender gap

Let me begin with a story.

I was visiting this village, Khaliajuri, between Sunamganj and Kishoreganj. I was trying to motivate parents to send their daughters to school. They told me about this rather sad incident. The village is in a haor and students need to go to school by boat. But one of these boats carrying girls to the local school capsized, drowning a number of girls. It was a sad day for the entire village. Such accidents make parents in rural areas apprehensive about sending their children to school.

There are several other factors impeding school enrolment, especially that of girls. Parents are not comfortable with sending their children to schools that require a daily commute of 2-3km. Sometimes that commute must be made on foot if other transports are not available. But such commuting often means a daily expenditure for the ride whether by bus, rickshaws or boats. Poor parents sometimes choose not to spend that amount on their daughters. Also, parents are not comfortable sending their daughters to schools where most of the teachers are male.

On top of that, secondary education has become costly. Sending your daughters to schools means uniforms, books and private tuition which are an investment that many poor parents simply cannot afford. They must also pay school fees where the government schools are not accessible. To make matters worse, the pervading cases of stalking, assault and rape are a nagging concern for parents as well as their daughters. Many parents prefer to marry off their girls and rid themselves of the responsibility rather than bear the burden of educating the girls.

Other socioeconomic problems include parental involvement as almost a third of our students is first-generation learners. Their parents cannot be expected to adequately aid and assist their children with school or even to prioritise schooling over household chores or income opportunities.

The government has been putting a lot of effort into reducing girls' dropout rate at the secondary level. Initiatives like fee waivers and stipends for girls and sanitation facilities on the school premises have had some positive impacts but the dropout rate has not improved satisfactorily. We need to dig deep into the problems and identify the underlying causes to address the issue effectively.

We need more female teachers and ensure adequate transport facilities for both learners and teachers, ensure safety and security for girls, and a friendly environment for them to stay in school and learn. It is of paramount importance for the government to reduce girls' dropout to fulfil its commitment to achieve the SDGs.

Education is increasingly becoming a commodity but we must stress repeatedly that it is a fundamental human right and everyone has a right to quality education. All of us must perform our responsibilities to help all stakeholders to ensure that right.

Rasheda K Chowdhury is an educationist and social activist. She is the executive director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)

Boon and bane of a coronavirus pandemic

The pandemic induced global lockdown affected education like it did other spheres of life. But this also brought forward glimpses of new opportunities to improve the system in the new normal post-COVID-19 phase. **Dr Safiqul Islam** takes a look at how education in Bangladesh progressed over the decades and how the lessons of the pandemic could be used to change for the better

How has education evolved over the past decades?

I write this article as the coronavirus pandemic rages on, reshaping the world. This new phenomenon undoubtedly raises an important question: are we resilient to a calamity of this nature? That question will be answered in the latter portion of this article, since I would first like to reflect on how our education system has evolved over time, which has been a tremendous achievement for our country.

The evolution of education over the years has not been any less than a roller coaster ride. If we look back, the scenario of basic education a few decades ago was quite different in Bangladesh. The situation changed after independence of Bangladesh in 1971, with primary education becoming compulsory by constitution and with the nationalisation of 28,106 primary schools in 1973 that later increased to 36,165 in 1974. Teachers became regular employees of the government, and so their status as teachers changed with the recognition of their profession. However, the face of the classrooms in the 1970s and 1980s did not fail to portray the country's widespread poverty, and was seen as a space where mostly boys prevailed, and that too boys who were from a comparatively privileged socioeconomic background. Typical perception of common people on girls' education was, 'What is the point of educating girls? They will, after all, be married off and end up becoming housewives.'

> ***"Education is not the piling on of learning, information, data, facts, skills, or abilities – that's training or instruction – but is rather making visible what is hidden as a seed."***
>
> ***– Thomas Moore***

Changes started taking place in the 1990s both in terms of enrolment and investment. Bangladesh made its choices clear, emphasising the need for human development. This was reflected in institutional arrangements and increased allocation for education. A separate ministry was created — Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) — with a separate directorate for non-formal education. In order to

address the needs of the poor, it took special measures and initiatives such as the 'food for education' project, which evolved over time, and a stipend scheme for girls to encourage their enrolment. At present, stipends are being provided to about 10.06 million children (out of 16.3 million children who are enrolled in grades 1-5, which is more than 50%.) It is important to mention that in 1990, global leaders met in Jomtien in Thailand to discuss education and agreed to coordinated efforts to expedite enrolment along with equity globally.

BRAC's innovation and contribution

Well known for its work on adult education in the 1970s, BRAC shifted its focus to primary education in the middle of 1980s. It developed a pro-poor and pro-girls primary school approach, known as Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE), targeting dropouts and children who were not enrolled. The formula was simple, 'one room, one teacher, 30 children with no less than half of them girls'. Teachers are recruited from the community and the one room that houses the school is rented from the same community. BRAC's work demonstrated that female and male children, even from poor economic backgrounds, could attend school and complete their course in due time. BRAC also showed that its schools are inclusive, by enrolling children with disabilities and engaging each child in the teaching-learning process. Experiences of BRAC on reaching the unreached, proved that women are good in teaching and sensitive to the changing requirements, and community can be mobilised to further children's education. BRAC developed a system for teachers' professional development, supervision and monitoring that helps keep the dropout rate low. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of BRAC, who considered education as holistic and aspirational, emphasised that all of BRAC's schools follow these principles by applying it in practice.

Soft skill development is a part of the daily class routine in BRAC schools, and is just like any other regular subject such as mathematics and language. Innovation and changes in the process of teaching-learning, and delivery, represent an integral part of BRAC's education intervention. It has been constantly evolving. To many educationists, besides NFPE, boat school and, later on, bridge school are outliers in BRAC innovation. BRAC's approaches in primary and pre-primary school were scaled up nationally, and internationally.

BRAC has been reaching a million children in Bangladesh each academic year for almost four decades since the 1990s. Not to forget, it partnered with a large number of local NGOs in scaling up schools. Currently, there are around 24,648 BRAC operated schools (from Early Childhood Development to secondary).

Education momentum

It was amazing to see the government constructing new schools, new classrooms, new institutes for training teachers, initiating new projects with an emphasis on primary education and strongly campaigning to increase school enrolment. NGOs, private businesses and entrepreneurs joined the campaign too. As a result, the scenario changed within two decades. The total number of nationalised schools is 65,557 in 2020 with 39,241 government primary schools (GPS) and 26,316 newly nationalised primary schools (NNPS). Nowadays, more girls are going to school than boys. Girls account for 51.50% of GPS enrolment.

Bangladesh demonstrated that despite being a poor country, it could make significant changes in primary and, to some extent, in secondary education with gender equity — a great achievement indeed. The campaign for primary and secondary education helped create demand for basic education across the country irrespective of socioeconomic status and geographic location. The positive momentum is that we saw an increased number of female teachers (currently at 64.52% in public primary schools and 28.68% in public secondary schools), teachers' training institutes, and a larger number of children attending schools. Further, the student body has become more inclusive with children — both girls and boys — from diverse backgrounds (wider range of income groups) irrespective of their parents' educational background (first, second and third generation learners). Over the years, the classrooms have become hugely diverse, a state that most teachers had not experienced before. The enrolment surge sustained but unfortunately it has not kept up with the emerging needs.

Existing barriers and limitations investment

Public investment in education had typically been lower than needed which had many implications hindering the quality of teaching-learning, extent of children's involvement in learning activities, quality of co-curricular activities, quality of learning outcome assessment, integration of new methods and technology, and teachers' professional development. On top of all that is the dropout rate, which, although down significantly, still remains high at around 18.2% at the primary level and an even higher 36.73% at the secondary level. The progress is not evenly distributed among the different population groups and geographical locations. Problems exist particularly in the urban slums and remote areas like hill tracts, haors, chars and coastal belts to name a few.

Quality of education

The new education policy of 2010 made Early Childhood Development (ECD) and pre-primary education important streams under basic education such that they were subsequently scaled up. However, the case was not the same in terms of quality. The 2010 policy clearly meant that Bangladesh had reached a stage where primary education needed to be extended to eight years of schooling followed by four years of secondary education with the 12 years leading to tertiary education. The education policy also rightly emphasised the need for technical and vocational education. If one critically looks into the implementation of the 2010 education policy, changes were taking place but at a slow pace. Many of the important things have not yet been dealt with. Our pre-primary schooling has yet to become universal, secondary education enrolment is low with high dropout, and the overall quality is not good. Examination results are not reflected in skills and competencies.

Technology integration

Overall, society has changed for good and for the better. Noteworthy changes were taking place in Bangladesh — huge changes in agriculture, in the garment sector, emergence of migrant labour, effects of globalisation, and most importantly the emergence of technology. Although technology became a part of people's lives in both the rural and urban setting, somehow its presence and use were not felt in the classrooms.

Tenacious learning divide

The learning divide that we have been experiencing since the pre-pandemic period has been further amplified by the pandemic. What is this 'learning divide'? It is a divide of quality of learning, which is measured through learning outcomes. Thus, it is important in terms of what does the learning outcome assess, and what does it 'not assess' and how it is being assessed. The national student assessment results indicated that quality of primary education has not yet been adjusted to reflect policy, e.g. what strategy is needed to improve. The shortcomings also include the absence of assessment of performing arts and fine arts that do not receive proper acknowledgement, although they are significant to development.

When a child gets out of school and enters work or higher studies, performing and fine arts skills matter as much as other skills, if not more. The divide has gotten deeply rooted. Another significant trend is that most well-off children go for science stream but not the poor students or those in the rural areas.

COVID-19 — a drive for change

The coronavirus pandemic isn't just a public health story but also an education story. The pandemic has enabled us to not only consider the present education scenario but to also look back at the past. I contemplate the coronavirus pandemic as a boon, not only a complete disaster. The narrative of education in the present context is no longer the same as it was during the pre-pandemic era. It is important for us to realise that the picture of post-COVID-19 new normal is not going to be the same as the pre-COVID-19 normal.

The worldwide outbreak caught most educationists unprepared. It has been a huge shock to the education sector because the setbacks of the pre-pandemic period aggravated the situation further. It became apparent that children who are better acquainted with soft skills (sports, music) knew better how to deal with school closure particularly in terms of spending time at home. They are also

fortunate to get parental support/private tutor for their studies, besides books and computers. On the contrary, poor people are unable to build a home library and most of our schools, or neighbourhoods neither have a library nor computers.

However, in light of the overall circumstance in the pre-pandemic phase, I most certainly believe that the COVID pandemic is a drive for change in the education sector as it will help generate new pathways. One thing that COVID has helped us comprehend is our ability to adapt. Another realisation is that the teaching-learning system in the pre-pandemic time depended largely on the past and not on the present, and for that matter, very little on the future. Although important, technology is not the only aspect here. The pandemic has taught us that we live in a world where climate change is real and a significant factor, and where unexpected events can knock on our doors uninvited at any time. For instance, the influx of Rohingya refugees, other local conflicts in Syria and Yemen, severe cyclones and wildfires ravaging different parts of the world. Hence, the education system has to be prepared for a much more uncertain and volatile world, and that is where COVID plays the role of a trigger heralding change in education.

Despite taking us by surprise, COVID-19 has taught us a few fundamental things. Firstly, it has taught us how to act quickly. An example, beyond any doubt, is our prompt national education response, where within 15 days of the closure of all educational institutions, the education ministry decided to initiate TV-based remote/distance learning. Secondly, COVID-19 was successful in bringing all the education stakeholders together. A collective and collaborative effort was shown through the telecast of 'Amar Ghore Amar School' and 'Ghore Boshe Shikhi' on Sangsad TV and subsequently on the state-run radio. Thirdly, the initiatives were not just limited to television. Upon realisation that TV does not reach as many students as anticipated, different organisations came forward with other interventions corresponding with device accessibility of their target group.

Organisations like BRAC were quick to initiate a cheap solution through its home school intervention using feature phones and since 95% of the households of Bangladesh have a feature phone, it was not difficult to ensure coverage. Although previously limited to just voice calls, feature phones turned into powerful mediums especially because their operation did not require additional skills. Before the pandemic, not many people were aware of the radio option or conference call option on feature phones, hence those were barely used. But, during the pandemic, people got accustomed to those features very quickly to turn them into effective learning tools. Both children and teachers are happy to get connected through a conference call and had never thought they could use this simple device for a number of purposes including education. Parents are happy to see their children get connected and learn. Besides home school, BRAC also started radio school targeting pre-schoolers who do not have much distance learning opportunities other than the state-run Sangsad TV. The radio-based preschool programme allows public and private school children to benefit from its lessons too.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt about the challenges. Internet access is one, and so is the quality of education as the teaching-learning experience through internet, radio and feature phones is not the same as face-to-face lessons. Cost is another factor, especially for the disadvantaged who may not be able to afford internet and mobile bills.

These are some important factors that the government needs to address when designing future models for the new normal phase. The new models need to be designed for everyone and tested carefully so that no future pandemic stops education or pushes the disadvantaged even further back. Teachers will also have to be up to the task and be conversant with technology.

Post-COVID-19 new normal: need to assess loss

Learning losses due to the pandemic could be substantial, far exceeding the short-term losses experienced during school closures triggered by other calamities like floods and cyclones. It is very important for educationists to understand the extent of 'learning loss' in light of the impacts of past crises around the world.

A study on the impact of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, that led to a three-month school closure, found that students living near the fault line demonstrated 1.5 grades' worth of learning loss compared to students who were 40km away where learning was not disrupted. This was mostly because the students were already behind the curriculum when they re-entered school. The example of Pakistan thus implies that children are likely to have a learning loss equivalent to more than a year due to the current pandemic as losses are expected to continue even after children return to school.

At the same time, preparing teachers for classroom lessons after a prolonged break would be challenging but crucial during the transition phase. Many teachers do not necessarily know what percentage of their children had the opportunity to follow the TV-based lessons. There will predictably be a notable difference between children who followed the lessons and those who did not, particularly in the rural areas. In other words, the learning gap among children will further deteriorate compared to pre-COVID levels. The challenges would be steeper at the early grade levels, as with hardly any classes during pre-COVID, children will have an eight-month learning gap to mitigate, that is if classes resume from November or December, which seems unlikely considering the second wave of COVID. In that case, how will children be able to complete this academic year and move on to the next grade? Even if we consider that some kind of remedial classes would be required to address the loss, will such a measure work for children in the early grades, or would it be effective only in the higher grades?

Relevant government departments and agencies can provide appropriate guidance to develop a customised response plan for each grade with a combination of short, medium and a long-term plan. A decision-making role for teachers and school management would be crucial to encourage them and provide them some incentive for the additional work. It is important to remember that teachers have a critical role in harnessing technology and turning it into an effective classroom resource.

Takeaways

There will have to be a whole gamut of change in curriculum, including class routine, pedagogy, students' engagement, and learning outcome assessment. All major components have to be carefully revisited if we want to make education truly resilient to future calamities. More emphasis has to be put on empathy, tolerance and respect like never before.

In summarising the lessons learned of the pandemic, what we need to understand is that the pandemic is not over yet. We need to learn to live with it because without a vaccine we are not immune. We need to get accustomed to safety measures like masks, hand washing and safe distance. Simultaneously, we need to prepare for the post-COVID phase. The entire global community, including Bangladesh education community led by the ministries, have started planning the safe reopening of schools.

Alarmingly, it is anticipated that there will be a high number of dropouts once schools resume classroom lessons because the difference between those who had been able to follow remote lessons and those who could not will become more apparent. As a result, there will presumably be one group of children who will not enrol to begin with and another group that will very likely drop out soon afterwards unless the system is adequately modified to address the loss of education properly and effectively. We also know from global studies that there will be an accumulated learning loss that will take years to make up.

Therefore, attention will have to be given to each and every child accommodating special needs when necessary. The face of the new normal classroom will be more inclusive, more gender friendly, more technology friendly with better parental engagement and community engagement in teaching-learning,

particularly through Children Learning Groups (CLGs) since community knowledge will be useful for assignments outside the classroom.

BRAC's response

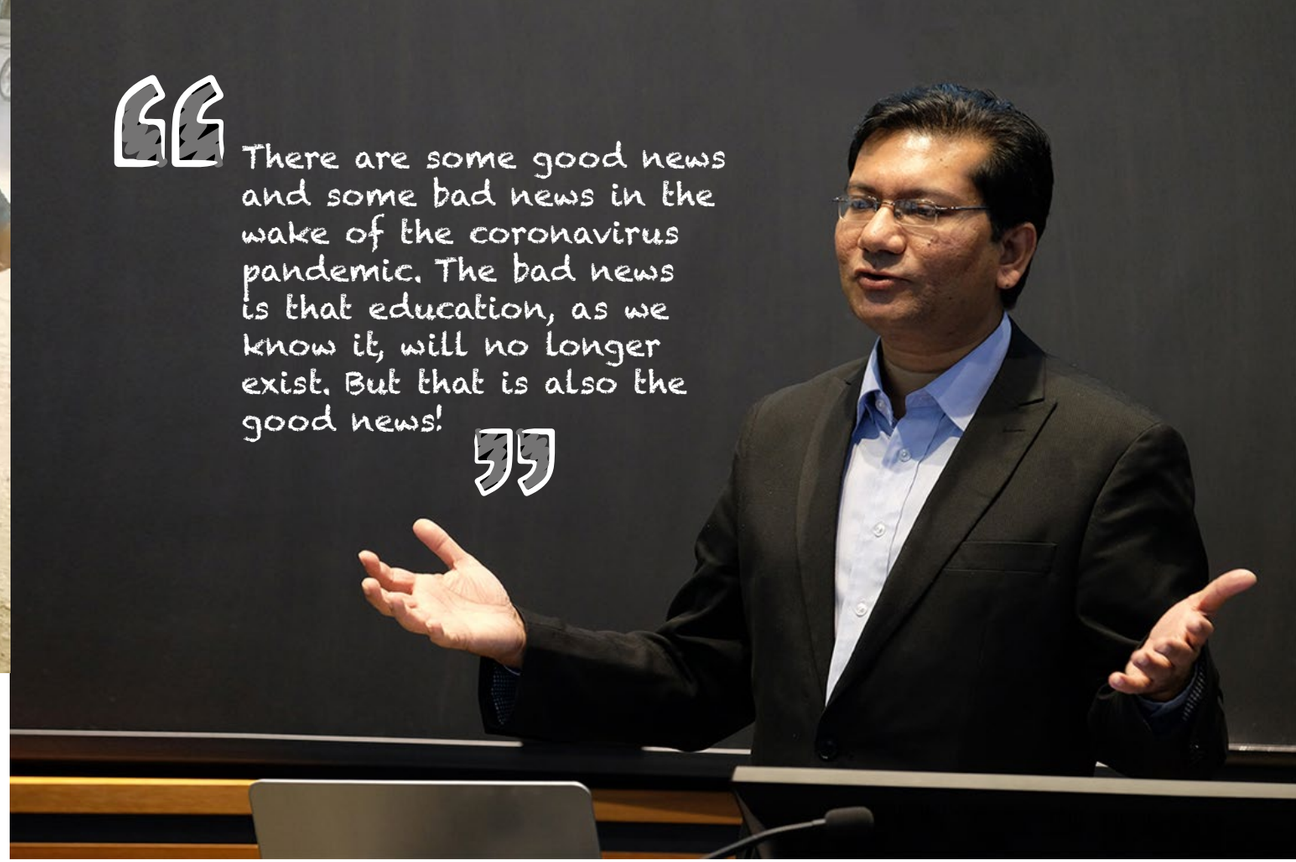
BRAC has been persistently working to develop a transition strategy for the

post-pandemic phase. In comparison to the pre-pandemic phase, where face-to-face learning was the only mechanism, the new normal phase will see a blended learning approach emerge gradually. In order to make learning enjoyable and empower children with the right skills, we in BRAC, are considering to revisit our pre-existing CLGs experiences. CLGs will operate in smaller group activities in the new normal with well thought out syllabus, project-based learning, and post-school assignments with peers under teachers' guidance. Subsequently, there will be a new pedagogy, a new classroom environment, a new combination of inside and outside learning that will require new assessment that will be formative and will also bring in summative elements towards a comprehensive learning exercise. We are already planning how to assess the skills previously outside the purview of regular assessment systems, both formative and summative.

I personally want our country's school children and communities to understand the contribution of education in realising Bangladesh's goal to become a developed economy by 2041. The 8th Five Year Plan can set the direction for change, including the need for higher investment in education, better management of resources, and careful monitoring and research. I have utmost faith that the global movement that began in 1990 in Jomtien and has been evolving ever since through Education For All (EFA), Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), will continue to address the emerging education needs in order to make it resilient and inclusive.

"Education breeds confidence. Confidence breeds hope. Hope breeds peace."—Confucius

Dr Safiqul Islam is the director of BRAC Education Programme



Relearning learning:

Educating beyond schools and promoting beyond exams

Anir Chowdhury

The conventional perception of education is tied to going to school physically. Not going to school, or no school is synonymous to no education. Similarly, no exam means no promotion. Given that schools have been closed since March, this perception means almost no education in 2020 for all 50 million of our students.

Most parents share the same sentiments. I can understand their despair, their sense of helplessness, as their children are forced to stay away from schools and colleges, deprived of education, wasting days, weeks and months just watching TV, listening to radio or browsing on the internet. No doubt, these parents feel that these are hardly the means to gain a meaningful education.

I urge them to have hope – all is not lost.

Let me tell you the story of a sixth-grade student who, because of being stuck at home, went from a disinterested student in the classroom to an education leader. No doubt an avid TV watcher, he followed the daily lessons being aired on Sangsad TV by the education ministry and a2i, enthralled by this new and exciting method of receiving lessons. He then went online to find his assignments, finished them, and submitted them. But that is not all! He also created a Whatsapp group with his friends, where he checked up on them and ensured that they too followed through. He made sure that they too watched the TV lessons and completed assignments on the internet.

How did this student get the opportunity to transform his attitude from nonchalance to passion regarding education?

Tradition versus disruption

Imagine the future of learning. Now imagine the future of education. If you visualise these two futures, do they look the same or different?

This was a thought experiment that was presented at a workshop in Bangladesh conducted by a2i in 2018. The exercise identified two groups of people – education traditionalists and education disruptors – and asked them to draw these two futures.

Both groups drew very similar pictures for the future of learning: open learning spaces where the source of learning included the school, TV, social media, family, community, the bazaar and everyday interactions with people and with technology.

For the future of education, the two pictures from the two groups could not be more different. The disruptors drew something very similar to their picture of the future of learning. The traditionalists drew only a brick-and-mortar school.

What does this mean? The traditionalists who consisted of experienced government and non-government education specialists, whose daily job was to set teaching-learning targets, design curriculum and teacher training, frame assessment techniques, and implement our education policy, could not think beyond the physical classroom as the only viable education delivery mechanism. Education to them was not the same as learning.

Alternatives save the day

The pandemic has forced closure of all educational institutions in Bangladesh for months and, leaving 50 million students with no access to formal education.

Crisis brings innovation

You must make do with what you have. Alternatives emerge.

COVID-19 has forced the traditionalists to adopt the disruptors' picture of the future of education.

Now with children at home, we had to think of the means to bring the lessons to them. Online classes were an obvious first choice, and thankfully, Bangladesh already had platforms such as Konnect for the teenagers, the teachers' portal for the primary and secondary school teachers, the skills portal for vocational education, and Facebook for live lessons. Between the platforms, tens of thousands of live classes have been shared, and millions of learners have benefited from them.

However, given that an estimated one-fourth of the secondary school students and less than a sixth of the primary school students have affordable access to high-speed internet, TV was envisioned as an effective education delivery mechanism. What an idea! An idea that was put forward several years ago, based on the largely underutilised infrastructure of Sangsad TV, to the prime minister, speaker of the parliament and the education minister with all of them endorsing the idea. Even with this powerful set of endorsements, we couldn't execute it. Why? Because the influential traditionalists were determined on preserving the sanctity of the education system inside the consecrated school buildings.

The coronavirus pandemic gave traditionalists new courage, and Sangsad TV started broadcasting thousands of lessons for primary, secondary, madrassa and vocational education, this time reaching students in tens of millions. An alternative, using old technology, was born.

Economic divide creates digital divide and education divide

Unfortunately, these new ways of learning are not without shortcomings. Here's a scenario: Think of two students — one from a wealthy family, and the other from an impoverished background — who attend say, BRAC University. When classes are held on campus, they receive the same lessons, the same learning environment, and have access to the same facilities the university offers. Now, with classes online, that is no longer the case. While the wealthy student has a separate room, steady internet connection, and an overall positive learning environment, the other student lacks all of those amenities, while simultaneously being worried about the family's ability to sustain themselves during the pandemic.

This is an extremely important lesson that education practitioners must address. Yes, technology is a great enabler, and has allowed us to devise alternatives and find solutions to the most incredible challenges. Yet it must be remembered that technology, particularly for a country like Bangladesh, undoubtedly exacerbates pre-existing inequalities that plague our society, as the example above demonstrates, creating a wider digital and subsequently education divide.

In our pledge for sustainable and equitable growth as a nation, and with an eye on successfully fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, we must remember target 4a — build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all. To that end, as we innovate to transform our education, let it not marginalise our marginalised even further.

It is important to remember that while the use of alternative means of education increased manifold due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we were already beginning to witness a shift from the traditionally linear and generic brick-and-mortar classroom, to more disruptive forms of learning, which is no longer linear but dynamic, where learning occurs across multiple platforms and pathways, each reinforcing the other to ultimately aid the learner achieve learning goals. However, as the thought experiment demonstrates, we have some ways to go before everyone is on board.

Rethinking assessment

Our students, parents, teachers, education administrators and policy makers are in a serious dilemma about our examinations this year. We have not had the HSC exam and will not have the PEC and JSC either. How do we promote our students to the next grade? This seriously questions the prevailing assessment system.

What are we assessing?

When a student is labelled as a 'good student', what is the assessment process? Almost never is it one's willingness to learn or desire to use the learnings practically or ingenuity in thinking and applying knowledge to solve problems. It is deemed to be quite literally the grade, the GPA, the percentage points. This emphasis on a uniform assessment fails to understand the unique traits of each student and simultaneously promotes a culture of rote learning, which research has shown to be detrimental to actual learning time and again. The problem with assessment extends to teachers as well, who are often assessed once again on the scores obtained by their students.

How does our assessment system deal with Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences? How does it treat visual-spatial intelligence which creates a Zainul Abedin, or linguistic-verbal intelligence which produces a Nazrul Islam, or bodily-kinesthetic intelligence which makes a Shakib Al Hasan, or musical intelligence which gives rise to a Lalon, or intrapersonal intelligence which shapes an Aroj Ali Matubbar?

Were they good students? We can google these names to find out, but frankly speaking, no one cares!

How does our assessment system deals with the vital concept of 21st Century Skills recently popularised by the World Economic Forum which emphasises critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, communication, and collaboration? They are seen as the cornerstones of skills necessary today, not only to thrive in life but also to merely survive. The future of work is not about individual work. Rather, it's all about solving real life problems in teams. This is true of both blue-collar and white-collar jobs. In fact, the collars are merging. The Pathao driver is wearing the traditional blue collar while driving the taxi, but a white collar when driving the app. A Pathao driver has to have sufficient 21st century skills to be good at the job.

The definite answer for the question of how our current education system assesses multiple intelligences or 21st century skills is that — it does not.

A complete overhaul of our assessment system is thus extremely necessary. In keeping with the spirit of understanding every child's uniqueness, identifying the student's strengths and weaknesses, and using feedback in the process of formative assessments — rather than hundred per cent summative assessment, which is what we have now — is the way to go.

It is heartening to know that this formative assessment has already been piloted through a collaboration of the ministries of education and, primary and mass education, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board and Bangladesh Examination Development Unit, supported by a technology-enabled continuous assessment framework developed by a2i. It will require adoption of another disruptive approach by the traditionalists. The good news is that they are now prepared, thanks to the rather robust nudge by the coronavirus pandemic.

Widespread implementation of formative assessment will require a different form of teachers' professional development and motivation, which the teachers' portal has already initiated. This evolved in a very organic manner rather than the heavy-handed outmoded teacher training process. The teachers are transforming themselves from a sage-on-the-stage to a guide-on-the-side. If we are to fulfil target 4c of the SDGs – substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries – we cannot ignore this.

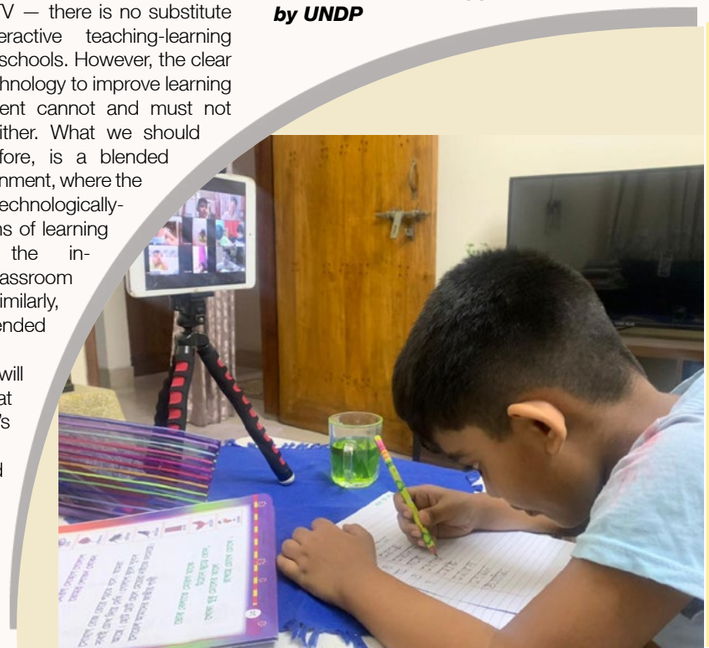
Leveraging lessons learned during the pandemic

One thing has been made abundantly clear in the wake of offering lessons across the internet and TV — there is no substitute for the interactive teaching-learning experience in schools. However, the clear benefits of technology to improve learning and assessment cannot and must not be ignored either. What we should design, therefore, is a blended learning environment, where the alternative technologically-enabled means of learning supplement the in-person classroom learning. Similarly, a blended assessment environment will ensure that each student's unique strengths and weaknesses are assessed and feedback is provided for improvement, thereby creating a personal learning journey of contribution and fulfilment.

This blended learning and assessment environment will be the future of education. It is an undisputed fact that technology will accelerate its role in all facets of life. The pandemic has already fast-tracked our scope of creating a digital infrastructure within our education system, while simultaneously increasing our capacity to think differently, beyond the traditional and into the disruptive, which will become the new tradition at some point.

Bangladesh has great ambitions for being positioned as a model of equitable national development in the short-term and the long-term. As such, this is the perfect opportunity to leverage the lessons learned from the response to the pandemic, and reimagine our education system to be future-ready. This reimagined blended environment for learning and assessment will turn the common saying 'talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not' on its head and match the unique strengths of every person to tailored opportunities to build a developed Bangladesh by 2041.

Anir Chowdhury is a US techpreneur turned Bangladeshi govpreneur serving as the policy advisor of the government's flagship digital transformation programme a2i in ICT Division and Cabinet Division supported by UNDP



An evaluation of online education during COVID-19 pandemic

Chiraranjan Sarker and Shahrin Ahsan

The very first COVID-19 case in Bangladesh was detected on 8 March 2020, followed by a general demand to close down educational institutions. The government seemed to agree and all kinds of educational institutions have remained closed since 17 March. The Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations were also called off due to the increase in coronavirus infection. However, students continued to learn from home through a variety of platforms.

Context

All educational institutions remained closed with no classes or lessons for the initial 2-3 months. Gradually they started to experiment with online lessons through popular platforms. A few institutions started online classes on a limited scale while some embraced it. Some teachers conducted their lessons from the school premises and some from home. Students, teachers and respective schools are slowly adapting to and coping with the new normal, which itself continues to evolve. It is a relatively new situation and experience for not only the students, but also for the teachers, parents and other stakeholders.

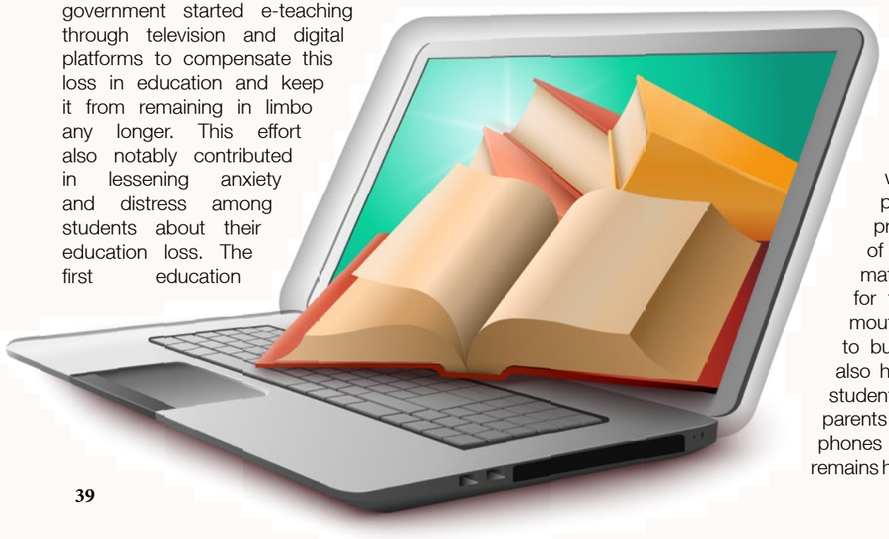
But given Bangladesh's limited internet penetration, the online platforms could not reach all students or cater to their education requirements effectively. Many institutions simply could not adopt online platforms because of geographic location or the economic condition of the students. With approximately 64,000 primary schools, 17,000 government and non-government high schools and about 2,500 colleges, Bangladesh has some five crore (50 million) students, of whom a rather small portion have access to internet and thus, online education. The bright side, however, is that the government is concerned about educating the youth and is trying hard to bring all those students under a digital network.

Government effort

While it was not possible to follow the curriculum at a regular pace, the government started e-teaching through television and digital platforms to compensate this loss in education and keep it from remaining in limbo any longer. This effort also notably contributed in lessening anxiety and distress among students about their education loss. The first education programme titled 'Ghore Boshe Shikhi' — roughly translating to 'learning from home' in English — targeting schools, was aired from Bangladesh Sangsad Television. The programme soon included college and university curricula. Educational programmes covering up to fifth grade started being aired on radio as well from 12 August 2020.

This public programme was not limited to students only. A one-and-half-year programme for primary school teachers in 68 teachers' training institutes (PTI) is also being conducted on digital platforms. Some teachers are holding online classes using social media like Facebook and YouTube. School teachers living close by visit their students at home and conduct lessons. In some cases, they teach via mobile phones and provide health tips as well.

Weekly school meetings are held online where teachers suggest alternative means to continue education and lessen the impact of school closure. In a bid to make their efforts more effective, these meetings invite parents to discuss their plans and courses of action in light of their feedback and suggestions. This scenario appears to have been taken out of a manual illustrating Bangladesh's transition into a complete digital education system. In short, the education system has become almost fully technology driven.

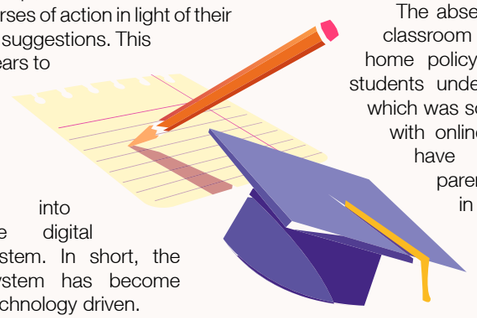


Some benefits

In primary and secondary schools, teachers have been using laptops, multimedia projectors and digital content for the last few years. Teachers have received ICT training to develop digital content and their enthusiasm in this regard is quite evident as is the active participation of students in online classes. During the COVID-19 lockdown, TV, laptops, smartphones and computers have completely replaced traditional classrooms. Students are seeing, learning and reading from home. It has also increased the participation of parents. The college and university students were familiar to online platforms but it is undoubtedly a new experience for school children.

Young students considered TV, mobile phones, computers or tablets as means of entertainment and communication — a perception that has changed considerably since the pandemic induced school closure.

Online classes have brought drastic changes to old practices and norms. The absence of traditional classroom setting and stay home policy had put many students under mental stress, which was somewhat relieved with online classes, which have also increased parental involvement in learning activities.



Digital divide

Prolonged lockdown and other COVID-19 safety measures leading to substantial contraction of the economy have resulted in a financial crisis for millions of families. Millions of informal sector workers have become jobless. The poorer families are under immense pressure of coping with rising prices of daily necessities and hygiene materials. Online education is a luxury for these people living from hand to mouth. A father has had to sell his cow to buy a laptop for his son. We have also heard of heart-wrenching stories of students committing suicide because their parents could not afford to buy them mobile phones to continue classes. The question remains how much value online education can add considering the socioeconomic condition of Bangladesh.

Most students belong to middle and lower middle-class families who do not have affordable internet access. Students living in remote areas don't have access to TV or cable connection either. People in remote areas face frequent mobile phone network disruption and poor internet connection. They are unable to join online classes uninterruptedly or learn from online video content. Moreover, prices of internet packages vary greatly depending on the geographic location, affecting those in remote areas more adversely. Another challenge is that students cannot avail their unused data after expiry date. College and university students often pay for their educational expenses with part-time jobs or tutoring. But the lockdown and financial hardship have almost eliminated those opportunities. Now, they have to depend solely on family income. This deprives a majority of the students.

Many students depend on their parents' phones and in case of siblings, they have to wait for a device, which also means only one can attend online classes. There are yet some others who, despite having the opportunities, cannot take advantage of the online lessons due to their lack of technical knowledge. There is another section of students who are not interested and lack enthusiasm about online education.

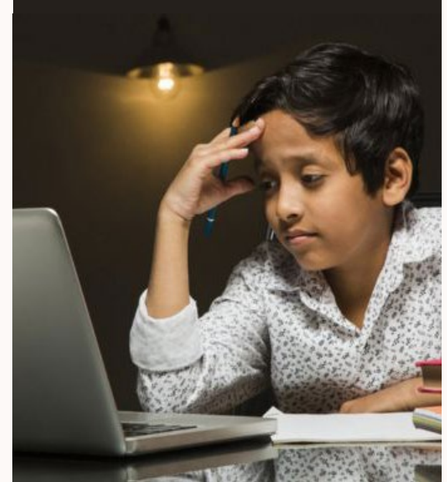
Systemic limitations

In the traditional classroom setting, the teachers and students both have to be active. Each student has a unique way of learning and if they are not allowed to interact, ask questions or use educational materials, their learning remains incomplete. Both on TV and radio, there is no scope of interaction. Even during online classes, students cannot ask questions due to time constraint. It is very rare that everyone joins on time and has time to clarify confusions. Teachers finish their lessons in 20 minutes on TV and in 10 minutes on radio. Students are reduced to being a passive audience. The classes on TV air in morning and on radio in the afternoons, which is typically considered ideal for children's recreational activities. In that regard, neither the class timings nor lesson durations benefit the students effectively.

Besides, online classes are only effective for theoretical lessons. There is no way of conducting practical lessons for which students need laboratory resources. Students in sciences or those in engineering, theoretical and practical lessons complement each other. So due to lack of these facilities, education remains incomplete for many. Such an alternative to the traditional education system will surely be detrimental to the development of students.

Physical activity

Many children cannot enjoy much of their childhood due to academic pressure. There is hardly any playground in the urban areas and the only time they have an opportunity to play and run around is at school with their friends. Most of them will be deprived of such relaxation if online education continues. They will turn into machines using mobile phones and laptops all day long sitting indoors with unhealthily long screen time. They end up using their devices with earphones plugged in for their classes and assignments which is bound to have a negative impact on their health in the long term. Health experts are already anticipating substantial health hazards for these children.



Some recommendations

Online education is comparatively new which was not much in practice in Bangladesh before. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has created this opportunity which is, at least partially if not fully, helping students continue their learning.

Considering the present situation, students, teachers and parents cannot but depend on online classes. Yet the question remains whether it can really substitute traditional education in classrooms. Many teachers see it as `something is better than nothing`. But online education has also highlighted the need for interaction between teachers and students; it has highlighted the importance of eye contact, body language and non-verbal cues. But since we must cope with the changing times, we must accept what is necessary to help continue education remotely.

Learning is considered a two-way communication process which is difficult with online classes. We need to make sure that the whole process is enjoyable, as well as effective, for students and teachers. At the same time, we must also experiment and test other alternatives to overcome the challenges. We need to learn from the experiences and methods of successful institutions in light of expert opinions.

All educational institutions should be brought under online platforms and the government needs to subsidise these initiatives. If need be, there should be a provision for free laptops or smartphones for families that cannot afford them. Some families can be provided loans with easy instalments. We do not know exactly for how long we have to continue with remote learning, which urgently calls for further investment in digitalising education.

To continue online learning, we must ensure all students get access to education. It is true that we have electricity in most places now and the situation is improving, but to introduce students to the digital world, we need markedly better internet connectivity. We have to take data security and privacy into consideration as well. If we all become technologically

dependent, then data privacy will also become a major concern.

We can certainly use TV as a medium of teaching, but it needs to be handled professionally from a central point. We need separate channels for each class. So, in each language there needs to be at least 12 channels for students from classes 1to12. In higher secondary level, there is sub section of science, arts and commerce. They have individual subjects as well. We might need different channels for each sub group as well. We can never conduct practical classes through TV which means we need to think for alternatives and use lessons from developed countries.

Technology can be both a blessing and a curse. It depends on how we use it. However, online education is one of the revolutionary additions to our education system. With so many limitations and challenges, it is a great achievement that we are being able to continue the learning process. If we can increase the class duration and continue to broadcast through stateowned TV, then many more students could attend the classes and benefit from them.

In short, to continue this online education system, we need to create more online platforms for primary and secondary levels. Otherwise, students from solvent families will only get the benefits and rural poor students will remain deprived. Only the government's enthusiasm and the teachers' efforts cannot solve the problems. We cannot just blame the government, teachers or parents and expect positive outcomes. Mobile operators should reduce internet prices and improve connectivity with longer expiry dates to benefit students. Moreover, the price of technological devices like laptops and smartphones should be affordable for most. We need to keep health risks in mind and work towards reducing that as well, to maximise the impact. We need a strategy in keeping up with the demands of these strange times and public-private joint initiatives to achieve the dream of 'Digital Bangladesh'.

Chiraranjan Sarker is an advocacy analyst and Shahrin Ahsan is an engagement manager at BRAC Advocacy for Social Change

"The aim of education is the knowledge, not of facts, but of values."

—William S. Burroughs

COVID crisis offers opportunities for quality education

"Even as the world reels from a global pandemic shutting down schools across continents, the crisis also offers significant opportunities"

Masum Billah

Quality education indicates a set of complex benchmarks that, together, give an impression and sense of satisfaction. Education always brings about the question, how it is being provided and whether it is different from the traditional means. Keeping in mind that innovation is closely correlated with quality, it may be noted that BRAC's education programme for marginalised and poor children is evidently different and holds up to assessment for academic standards which links to the term that might be called quality.

The impact of COVID-19 restrictions have gone beyond the classroom as school closures have limited children's interaction, movement, sport and the general enjoyment derived from a vibrant school environment. Lockdowns and subsequent closures exert serious influence on young minds and bodies leading to anxiety. Psychologists and teachers suggest that guardians should ensure enough sleep for their wards, make arrangements for indoor games, reading story books and watching TV programmes to relieve children of their stress. Many educational institutions in cities have started online classes but the quality of this sort of learning heavily depends on digital access. Only around 60% of the global population is online and in Bangladesh it would be an even smaller proportion, which illustrates why internet-based education would have serious limitations in covering the poorer students. Online lessons and lectures would mean that almost half the students are missing out on the benefits of education for as long as schools remain closed.

This brings about an obvious imperative. Unless internet costs decrease and its quality increases, the education gap will widen further which will eventually exacerbate socioeconomic disparity. This also highlights stark contrasts not just between who have or don't have the devices, but also between those who have the skills and technical knowledge and those who don't, between those who have parents that can help with education and those who don't.

Bangladesh is fourth in the list of countries with more than 40 million students confined to homes while China stands first with more than 230-million. Indonesia and Pakistan occupy second and third positions. Online and/or televised classes come across as easy options to engage these children in learning. However, in their current form, online classes hardly relieve children's mental stress, which should be

an integral indicator of education quality and a pre-requisite for online classes.

Many countries have already started temporary 'home-schooling'. Vietnamese students have turned to televised lessons. Nigerian schools started using google classrooms to distribute reading materials and simultaneous face-to-face video instruction to compensate school closures. Traditional classroom lessons are being complemented with new methods — from live broadcasts to virtual reality which embraces the philosophy 'learning anywhere, anytime'.

The Youth Survey 2018 found a direct correlation of education and internet access. Commissioned by the BRAC University and BRAC's Advocacy Social Change unit, this study found that among people with classes 1 to 4 education, 13% had access to internet. Among those with classes 5 to 9 education, this proportion went up to 30%. The survey also found that 56% families have no access to television at home. That would mean the TV broadcasts would hardly serve marginalised communities, that are particularly served by BRAC's education programme. That was how the idea of 'phone school' emerged.

Learning has been disrupted for some 41.9 million students in Bangladesh and it became a point of concern how BRAC could respond to this crisis, by itself and in partnership with the government. BRAC was one of the organisations that provided support in developing lesson plans and content, provided trainers to conduct classes and groom teachers for primary and secondary schools.

A recent virtual summit of G-20 leaders underscored the needs of the changing times. The pandemic has affected education systems around the world, forcing more than 1.5 billion students to stay home. The world is adjusting to a new reality that was unimaginable even several months ago. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the face of education. At the same time, this crisis offers an opportunity for reflection among education leaders. It offers an opportunity to question the status quo and explore new approaches to education delivery and education quality. It offers an opportunity to explore how to meet the demands of the future.

A global nonprofit working in education, HundrED, has launched a website and a summary report, Quality Education for All during COVID-19, in partnership with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), expanding on the opportunities and challenges in education during these unprecedented times. The pandemic has impacted 1.54 billion children and youth, said the report. In a span of ten days, HundrED documented, packaged and released 30 simple, yet effective, solutions that help parents, teachers and children navigate through the plethora of challenges in education during the pandemic. These solutions include such packages that provide an opportunity for teachers to form stronger connection with parents and students to challenges of untrained teachers and lack of access to digital learning resources.

Bangladeshi teachers need exposure to such innovative insights and resources.

Every country is facing a common threat, and there is much we can learn from each other about how to minimise the negative impact on education.

Several potential systems have already emerged. UNESCO created a number of robust distance-learning solutions for parents and educators; the World Bank has shared practical tips and guidance; the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies (INEE) has created an online repository of blogs, webinars, and other helpful resources to support its members. The network of Real-time Scaling Labs used Microsoft Teams and WhatsApp to remain in close touch virtually and shared stories to learn from each other about how to move forward despite the new challenges.

Coronavirus has posed a potential threat to humanity and even the developed nations have become helpless to this lethal virus. Still, they manage to continue education programmes from home, because of the availability of digital devices and easily accessible high-speed internet. We cannot, however, pursue the same path but there is no doubt that high-quality education and technology have the power to change the world by developing the human resources. Education transformation facilitates collaboration, accommodates different learning styles, increases engagement and excitement among students, helps maximise institutional resources, and improves learning outcomes. It is now up to us to responsibly adopt technology for distance learning and guide students on how to best utilise them and contribute to the development of the appropriate skill sets that will help them fulfil their role as global citizens. Finally, those who still remain outside this network must be brought under an inclusive and equitable education through individual, social, institutional and especially national initiatives.

Masum Billah is a programme manager at BRAC Education Programme

Interview

'Education should be seen as a means to develop human resources'

Interview with an eminent scholar and an educationist
Dr Anisuzzaman

Dr Anisuzzaman

An eminent scholar and an educationist, Dr Anisuzzaman was a leading authority in Bengali literature. He received the Ekushey Padak for his contribution to education in 1985. In 2014, he was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the Government of India, and in 2015, he received the Swadhinata Padak (Independence Award), the highest honour in Bangladesh, for literature. Besides his long and distinguished career teaching Bengali literature at the University of Dhaka, and as visiting professor at other universities, Dr Anisuzzaman also served as chairman of Bangla Academy. He served on Bangladesh's national planning commission during the war in 1971, and was a member of the National Education Commission. Dr Anisuzzaman was inducted as the country's National Professor in 2018. He was an activist in the language movement of the 1940's and 50's, and was deeply involved with the Liberation War. This interview was conducted before he passed away on 14 May 2020, after falling ill with Covid-19.

He spoke to dBrief sharing his thoughts about values, entrepreneurship, tolerance and technology through the lens of education. Here are the excerpts.

Q: What do you think of the current education system?

A: The main problem is the presence of multiple systems that are not cohesive. The English medium, Bengali medium, the general and qawmi madrasah, etc. There have been no concrete attempts to address or streamline the different systems and their curricula in our country.

After the Liberation War, people became more interested in education and many schools were built. Despite that, we have failed to produce quality teachers for this large body of students. This is more evident when we look at the language competence of our youth. Our students lack sufficient expertise in both English and Bengali. The situation is dire at the higher levels of education as well. As we cannot provide quality education in those levels, students with high potential choose to go abroad which creates a void in the country. Today, our education system is mostly profit-driven. In most of the universities, students only aim to pass and teachers do not have much inspiration to change the situation. The system is not equipped with the means to foster patriotism and social values among the students. As a result, they do not grow up to become assets of the country.

Q: Does our education system provide sufficient moral learning?

A: Collectively nurturing certain values is imperative for a united nation. But since that is not being done for our students, it is taking the nation towards moral degradation. The Qudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission envisaged moral values as a separate subject. The madrasah system was not viewed as a distinct medium from mainstream education where religion and moral values were considered one subject. The idea was to teach religion in terms of moral values. But learning moral values as a discipline is no longer an objective and has lost its attention. As we have become confined to teaching religions separately, we need to provide students with proper understanding of other religions and make them tolerant so that they will not turn to extremism.

Q: Do we need to change the system? And if so where do we start?

A: Our education system still focuses on quantity rather than quality. The student-teacher ratio is far from being standard. As students do not get proper attention from the teachers, they are not being able to reap the dividends of proper education. Memorisation is the common method to learn lessons and pass exams. Needless to say, it stifles the true potential and imagination of students. Everyone realises that this situation needs to change but nobody knows where to start. The change should start from the primary level and its curriculum.

Q: Research shows that poor quality of teachers is the main barrier to quality education. What can be done about that?

A: That is right. It is high time we incentivised teaching. Although it is a noble profession, lack of benefits, incentives and low perception of the profession prevent smarter graduates from becoming teachers.

We have many marginalised people who cannot go to schools and the government is building new schools in remote areas to provide them education too. But the challenge remains in recruiting good teachers. We need to have a well-designed mechanism from training to recruitment.

The main problem is the presence of multiple systems that are not cohesive. The English medium, Bengali medium, the general and qawmi madrasah, etc. There have been no concrete attempts to address or streamline the different systems and their curricula in our country.

Q: Does our education help students realise their true potential?

A: Real education is supposed to bring out the potential of individuals and prepare them to implement their knowledge and create an impact. Every student comes to school with immense possibilities to grow. However, our education system is not innovation-friendly and doesn't allow students to flourish with their uniqueness. Our teachers do not allow students to write something on their own using their imagination and encourage memorisation from textbooks, which sidetracks the main goal of education. Hence, we are failing to produce good researchers as a nation.

Q: We are progressing economically and falling behind morally. How do you react to that?

A: There is no direct connection of economic growth with values and humanity. Economic growth will not ensure values since we do not practise them.

Q: What kind of change is needed to increase moral values among students?

A: We need the families, educational institutions, and the society to come together and preach the importance of values and ethics in our lives. Teachers should prioritise practising values, along with providing theoretical knowledge, and adopt innovative learning tools to create appetite for knowledge among students. Parents should also monitor whether their children are learning moral values or not.

Q: Is higher education fulfilling our dreams and wishes?

A: Our system does not encourage independent learning. The demand for higher education is increasing every day. There are hundreds of public and private universities in Bangladesh. However, the quality of these universities is questionable. Most of the universities are not sufficiently equipped to provide a proper learning environment. There is no environment for healthy or constructive student politics which seriously impedes the quest for knowledge. Every educational institution should offer a space where there is respectful exchange of views, ideas and knowledge. Otherwise, the mental horizon of individual knowledge will hardly broaden. It is also a responsibility of the students to utilise their time and energy to develop their knowledge and potential. Higher education shouldn't be considered merely a means to employment rather it should be a means to produce skilled human resources.

Q: We have entered into the demographic dividend. What can be done to ensure the employment of this huge population?

A: Employment is a different topic, altogether. In our country, graduates far outnumber the number of jobs and the gap is increasing every year. Without generating entrepreneurs, it will be impossible to create jobs for this huge number of graduates. We need emphasis on vocational training to equip students with the skills needed for different industries. Besides, easy access to finance is also important to encourage the youth to start their own business. There should be a course or chapter in our curriculum from secondary level on entrepreneurship.

Q: How can we create a bridge to a technology-based future through education?

A: We need to put in place a more tech-friendly education system to keep up with the rest of the world. Our vision and mission should be to spread the truth of science to eradicate prejudice. Rationality should be built around knowledge. Education should foster the quest for knowledge and embrace the beauty of science. It needs to create the bridge between the blessing of science and human behaviour.

Although it is not possible to create a uniform and ideal education system, we still need to aspire for a high standard.

We need the families, educational institutions, and the society to come together and preach the importance of values and ethics in our lives. Teachers should prioritise practising values, along with providing theoretical knowledge, and adopt innovative learning tools to create appetite for knowledge among students. Parents should also monitor whether their children are learning moral values or not.

Interviewer:
Chiraranjan Sarker and Ezzat Tanzila Evana

Nasrin: Proud to light up lives

Anika Mahzabin

Nasrin Khanom had always wanted to be a government school teacher, but she was married off right after her Secondary School Certificate examinations. Despite all the household work at her new home, Nasrin ensured to complete her higher secondary level studies before quitting school altogether. But things were not smooth at home. Her husband Khairul worked as a driver and his meagre wages were not enough to make ends meet. Eventually, they fell on hard times.

At one point, almost out of desperation, Nasrin left her hometown Bagerhat to find work in Dhaka, where she and Khairul started living in a one-room shanty in the Duaripara slum. Life was not easy here either, but at least Khairul could find some work and they managed to barely scratch out a living.

"It was just a few years after we started living in Dhaka, when there was a survey being conducted at the slum", said Nasrin about how she met BRAC officials who told her about the possibility of a job at BRAC's Shishu Bikash Kendra (early childhood development centres). "I showed up for an interview there but I did not really think they would give me the job. I was elated when I found out that I was actually hired as a teacher."

In a strange turn of events, Nasrin became a BRAC pre-primary school teacher. Even though it is not a government

school, Nasrin is nonetheless happy to be a part of the children's lives at the school, where she has been teaching since 2014.

However, teaching preschoolers is different from teaching kids in higher grades, which Nasrin soon found out. "It was not easy to connect with the children at first," she said, "Not until I became their playmate." But once she did, the children started to open up to her. The last seven years have been a fulfilling experience for her to watch these kids learn valuable life skills and tell their parents about what they had learned at school.

"When the children begin school for the first time, they hardly want to be anywhere without their parents. But of course, that changes over time as they gradually learn to accept me, first as a playmate, and then as a teacher", says Nasrin.

At present, Nasrin has 30 pupils in her class. Her classroom is a nicely-decorated room, designed for a healthy learning environment. She explains that there is a material development day every year when parents are invited to use locally available materials to make toys and decorate the classrooms. That is also a day when the children can show off their scrap books that they had been putting together the whole year with the help of the teacher. "It is a big day for the children where they can show off their own work and when their parents also get to contribute to their school, which is a rare opportunity for these marginalised people", says Nasrin. She makes the most out of these materials, since she has an affinity for art, having been an avid embroiderer herself. "I still do it on and off but not commercially." But she does use her knack to decorate the classroom and turn it into a lively place with pictures, toys and study materials.

"It is simply a delight to watch the children erupt in joy when I tell them the toys are for them to play with." Nasrin says the toys become an attraction for the children to want to come to school. "Amid all the fun and play, the children also learn to sing, dance, tell stories and act." BRAC's schools also have a set of guidelines for behaviour change among children, that includes respecting elders, crossing the streets, brushing teeth and washing hands. Children's progress is always strictly monitored to ensure that each batch of students come out learning what they were supposed to. "A lot of that behaviour change comes gradually and needs repeated reminding. In some cases, the guardians need to be reminded too." Nasrin tells her children to brush their teeth every day, wear sandals in the toilet and wash hands after using the washroom.

Regular parent-teacher meetings are conducted in the schools as well, where the children perform cultural activities for their teachers and parents. "I cannot put in words how enthusiastic they are to sing and dance in front of their parents." But the days are also important, says Nasrin because that is one of the occasions she gets to talk to the parents and discuss the development and progress of her pupils. "Sometimes we discuss developmental difficulties at these meetings that parents had not yet noticed, and sometimes parents tell us about something that had happened at home that explains why a certain child had been anxious or stressed."

"Looking back at my time at the Shishu Bikash Kendra, I would say I feel proud." She explains that this pride is not for being able to do something with her life and independently earning for herself. "It is because here with this job, I can actually set children on a path to enlightenment. They begin their first steps towards education and knowledge, literally holding my hands. That makes me proud."

Anika Mahzabin is the lead of internal communications at BRAC Education Programme

Path to brighter future

Syeda Tasnima Tasnin

BRAC's approach to developing an education package for Rohingya children proves successful enough to be replicated and implemented in similar scenarios

For many of us, the earliest memories are from school, learning from our teachers and playing with our friends. But for most of the children who were among the 700,000 Rohingyas that crossed into Bangladesh seeking shelter from persecution, the earliest memories are of unimaginable trauma and distress. The recent exodus of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh increased the Rohingya population in Cox's Bazar to 900,000, of whom about 58% are children, making it the fourth largest refugee concentration in the world.

The Bangladesh government, along with various INGOs and NGOs, is attempting to provide education to these children so that they keep learning while remaining safe and protected. Immediate efforts included setting up safe child friendly spaces to ensure protection and psychosocial care with a priority on hygiene, health and sanitation. Having been out of school for more than two years, there was a pressing need for education for these children.

One of the largest responders to this crisis, BRAC formed a small committee with education specialists. They went and stayed in Cox's Bazar for three months to implement an education curriculum they had developed in the temporary learning centres. This curriculum focused on basic literacy, numeracy, arts and crafts for children in pre-primary and grade 1 levels. They developed teacher's guides, training manuals and basic early learning materials like posters and workbooks. All these materials had to be in Myanmar language and in the Rohingya context, which was one of the biggest challenges. The government had decided not to use Bengali for any of the materials. So, the materials had to be translated to English first and then Rohingya volunteers translated them into Burmese.

The other language related challenge was that the children spoke in their local Rohingya dialect and were not familiar with Burmese. Two teachers had to work together, one from the host community, familiar with the Rohingya dialect and another

“The Bangladesh government, along with various INGOs and NGOs, is attempting to provide education to these children so that they keep learning while remaining safe and protected. Immediate efforts included setting up safe child friendly spaces to ensure protection and psychosocial care with a priority on hygiene, health and sanitation. Having been out of school for more than two years, there was a pressing need for education for these children.”

teacher from the Rohingya community for support. This was informal education.

The complexities of delivering quality learning to the Rohingya children cannot be underestimated. A key challenge for quality learning has been the lack of a harmonised and government approved framework to guide education of Rohingya children. In 2018, UNICEF and BRAC together with the actors in education in Cox's Bazar, came up with the Learning Competency Framework and Approach (LCFA) as a starting point for delivering standardised education that is sequenced, well-resourced and assessed by learning outcomes.

The LCFA was developed and validated through a participatory and transparent process. A series of workshops and meetings with critical stakeholders was organised involving UN agencies, INGOs, NGOs, institutes and relevant government agencies. The intent was to draw on wide ranging inputs and experiences on one hand and on the other create an ownership within the stakeholders from national to sub-national levels. The Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) was kept in the loop during the process. The vision of LCFA is to facilitate a systematic pathway for holistic development and life-long learning of Rohingya children. The project formed and employed a small team with 12 Rohingya participants to work out of the Ukhiya field office. They helped the head office team with translation of the teaching-learning materials. Currently, there are four learning levels that have mapped competencies.

- Level I equivalent to pre-primary (one year)
- Level II equivalent to grades 1-2 (one year)
- Level III equivalent to grade 3-5 (two years)
- Level IV equivalent to grade 6-8 (two years)

LCFA Levels I and II include language (English and Burmese), math and life skills. Levels III and IV include language (English and Burmese), math, science and life skills.

All of BRAC's education initiatives closely adhere to its core principle of inclusion, which stipulates prioritisation of girls, marginalised children, children with disabilities and children from minority communities. All teaching-learning materials promote the principles of gender sensitivity, equity and sustainability in the lesson plans and accompanying student materials.

Gender

All teacher's guides, student workbooks and teacher training manuals address gender-related issues, and portray the role of parents/caregivers and communities accordingly. All materials display a gender balanced scenario in terms of interest, likings, preferences of both boys and girls of all ages in teaching instructions, assessments, teaching-learning activities, illustrations, etc.

Equity

Equity has been addressed particularly in the life skills area, but also integrated throughout the teaching and learning materials. The teacher training manual conforms to the principle of equity and inclusive learning in the teaching and learning process. The training manual discusses means to identify children experiencing disabilities, inclusive learning strategies and how to refer children to experts.

Sustainability

The concept of sustainable living is included in the LCFA Levels III and IV, especially in the application of science in daily life. Moreover, the LCFA endeavours to equip children with knowledge and skills that would help build sustainable lives. The teachers' guide instructs how to sustainably use materials and resources found in the natural environment for teaching.

Preservation of culture and heritage

Culture and heritage are reflected in all materials since they draw from the Rohingya context and lifestyle. Reflection of Rohingya culture and heritage have been incorporated in the materials through traditional Rohingya kabbyas (rhymes), stories, games, songs, etc. These cultural and indigenous Rohingya traditions were factored into texts, illustrations, activities, teaching and learning approaches and assessment of children.

LCFA is considered a unique education model. The curriculum focuses on need-based and situation sensitive learning. The topics are tailored to suit the needs of the displaced children in Rohingya context. The teaching-learning materials are designed keeping in mind the trauma and hardship they had to go through. LCFA actively avoids any topic or image that might induce trauma, for instance such terms as 'fire' and 'police' are avoided as these may cause trauma and remind the children of their past. All the teaching-learning materials are done in three languages — Burmese, English and Bengali, using simple and lucid language. Even though the curriculum and materials were developed as an emergency response, LCFA made sure all the materials went through rigorous editing after extensive feedback from various stakeholders.

As should already be evident, LCFA has four levels with each level corresponding to multiple grades in formal education. The children are divided into four levels — each level comprising of multiple grades — gradually building children's abilities as they progress. LCFA also caters to children with disabilities in the same classroom. LCFA introduced life skills as a formal subject for all levels. Topics include coping with stress, self-awareness, interpersonal skills, etc. LCFA is now being implemented in about 5,475 learning centres with 9,263 teachers and reaching over 304,005 children, of which 49.3% are girls.

The LCFA curriculum and materials were developed and implemented very quickly. The teams faced daunting challenges in the process, language being the biggest. It was later decided that the teaching-learning process will have to be multi-lingual. While the materials were in Burmese, the teaching and explaining was done in their local dialect. All materials had to be developed in the right context, which was difficult for the material developers since the Rohingyas themselves were not fully aware of their own culture. Other challenges included poor quality of teachers, limited time for material development and high expenses.

Almost a year after implementation, LCFA has been able to overcome the obstacles and is moving forward stronger than ever. LCFA entered its second phase of reviewing all Level 3 materials in 2020 before the pandemic broke out. The countrywide lockdown (restricting movement and halting regular work) set back the process significantly. The local authorities of Cox's Bazar banned movement to and from the camps from March 2020. In line with government directives, BRAC also adopted a 'work from home' policy. Even though it was not the same as coming to office, the whole team worked hard to meet the deadlines. The project also went so far as to include lessons on educating children about coronavirus, on how to spread awareness and how to protect themselves, their families and friends.

The materials produced under LCFA have much potential to be replicated in other humanitarian assistance or emergency refugee response initiatives across the world. LCFA has created an opportunity for young Rohingyas to work towards a future that is more hopeful and brighter, where they can dream and have memories just like the rest of us.

Syeda Tasnima Tasnin is working as a translator, language team, LCFA at BRAC Education Programme

Innovation at BRAC Education Programme

Albaab Habib

Throughout the years, BRAC's education programme has blazed the trail for many more to follow. This has been due to unrelenting efforts of a formidable workforce efficiently implementing smart innovations of a motivated team. Here are a few of them.

The correlation between invention and innovation is often misunderstood, but they are both similar in one aspect — solving a given problem. And one of the greatest problems faced by any rapidly developing nation is inequality in education. The problems are amplified as education and the knowledge of innovation complement each other. Keeping this in mind, BRAC started with the basics of primary education, working its way down to pre-primary and early childhood education, and upwards to secondary education and lifelong learning activities. The biggest challenge, by far, has been to bring quality education to the grassroots and marginalised communities. Innovation was the only way forward to engage the community.

The fine line that is quality education and economies of scale, honed over years with first hand field experience, challenges the limits of cost efficiency while demanding an increase in quality and inclusiveness.

The innovation here was to address the problem at hand with available resources. Insufficiency of teachers in rural Bangladesh meant that BRAC had to forego the traditional means to run a school. The solution came in the form of 'one room, one teacher' model, where a local educated female teacher is recruited, trained and empowered to teach 30 children in her community throughout their primary years. BRAC's approach to providing education was to take schools to the heart of the community, rather than asking parents to send their children to far off schools.

Using the 'one room, one teacher' model, an ever-increasing number of children were successfully provided primary education. At its peak in 2009, over 60,000 schools were being run nationwide using this model. However, BRAC realised that certain pockets of children were still left out — one of which were the wetlands and floodplains that remain inundated during monsoon. The inhabitants of these parts make do with little to no dry land at the height of monsoon which limits the possibility of a schoolhouse. Thus, with the help from friends at Education Above All Foundation, BRAC solved the problem with Boat Schools. In 2013, 400 boat classrooms were launched not only as classrooms but also as means of transport when the communities remain waterlogged. The boats remain stationary in the *haors* during the dry season but start functioning as

schools as waters rise in the monsoons. In 2017, the Boat School project was recognised as one of the top 100 global innovations by HundrED.org — a not-for-profit organisation, which seeks and shares inspiring innovations in K12 education.

Having found tentative solutions for 'never-been-enrolled' and 'hard-to-reach' children, BRAC turned its focus towards children who have dropped out of their primary schools. The question was how to make it work for children who have dropped out? Whereas other BRAC students start their journey at BRAC with a blank slate, here they know the basics. So how can BRAC reprogramme itself to capitalise on the existing knowledge base? The solution came in the form of 'Bridge Schools' where dropout children are first assessed for their existing competencies, nurtured through a 'bridge' course for four months to rebuild their confidence, and placed in the appropriate grade without further loss in time or resources. A solution unique to primary dropout students, yet replicable nationwide through pre-existing 'one room, one teacher' schools or boat schools. BRAC currently runs 2,498 bridge schools all over Bangladesh.

Ensuring access for every child left behind has been at the forefront of BRAC's efforts. That effort also comes hand in hand with the need to upgrade teaching-learning curriculum and pedagogy. The in-house curriculum team, with support from BRAC University's Institute of Educational Development, is constantly pushing the boundaries of knowledge in teaching-learning, while remaining attentive towards cultural and national sensitivities. Working hand in hand with relevant government agencies, BRAC has been able to synergise the impact of these changes for not only its own schools, but every school following the national curriculum from Early Childhood Development to primary schools. BRAC also substituted government efforts in digitising the updated curriculum for the primary education sector through a partnership with the ICT ministry in 2013. This was a follow-up on BRAC's previous work in secondary education in 2005.

BRAC's true recognition comes in the form of governments accepting it's tried and tested models (or a slight variant of it) for their own use, as can be said about the second chance intervention of the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE).

BRAC's education efforts started with its founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's vision for education equality without compromising quality, for which he received the prestigious WISE prize for Education in 2011, and Yidan Prize in 2019. Over the years, BRAC has gained a formidable reputation by dint of the support from its partners and a team that never stops trying out new ideas, spawning innovation in both strategy and operations. And in the process, they also spawn future innovators and leaders.

Bangladesh, and many others like it, are far from achieving quality universal primary education. BRAC's pursuit of innovation in education has been one of the practical solutions. BRAC does not want to reinvent the wheel, but rather innovates through changes and adaptation of best practices from around the world and from its extensive field experiences that positively impact education in Bangladesh and beyond.

Albaab Habib is the head of fundraising and grant management at BRAC Education Programme

Distance learning in BEP

Radio School: Inspiring children to connect with learning

Syeda Siddiqua Akhtari

BRAC's education programme typically targets students who have been left behind or dropped out of the formal education system. It delivers education to the marginalised and remote communities in Bangladesh. But the Covid-19 pandemic brought forth new challenges which forced both students and teachers to remain at home. They needed to be connected innovatively for their education to continue.

Many countries, and in fact many schools in Bangladesh, made a relatively smooth transition to online education as a means for alternative distance learning. But it was not possible for BRAC since most of the students do not have smartphones or a viable internet connection. It was from a crucial necessity that the idea of home school emerged.

It was a form of distance learning where children could be connected with their teacher through their mobile phones. Home school changed the scenario almost overnight. It had an incredible effect on the community and the response was overwhelming to say the least. However, it was noted that children between four and six years were not used to mobile phones and it was difficult for them to remain attentive for long periods. Child development happens at a very early stage and it is as important as any basic need of a person. BRAC could not ignore that and it required a comprehensive plan that would be effective as well as viable with the existing resources.

Then towards the middle of June 2020, the idea of radio school created another opportunity for the children. BRAC started this project as a pilot programme in July 2020, in Moulvibazar through Radio Pollikontho – a community radio station run by BRAC Community Empowerment Programme. Before launching the programme, technology, data management,

content selection, inclusion and supervision were deliberated upon very methodically to make sure that the programme reached its intended audience effectively. BRAC began with a survey of the community and analysed the demands. In addition, the appropriate pedagogical methods and strategies were devised since radio school would have a distinctly different setting compared to the regular classroom setting. For this to succeed, BRAC reviewed the national curriculum and selected suitable content that would be doable on radio. They were then packaged for radio in consultation with experts. The lessons also addressed issues such as child safety, well-being, Covid-19 awareness, and parental engagement. The pilot programme received a very good response from children and their parents. The children were ecstatic that they could hear the voice of their teachers from home. There was no need for wearing a mask or social distancing, while at the same time the parents were at hand to help with school work. Data shows that 90-93% of children listen to radio programmes daily and it lifts their spirits. All the episodes are designed in such a manner that children remain attentive to the lessons and at the same time enjoy them. Together with the lively participation of a teacher, a few students, and a radio host, the radio programmes become lively and interactive, attractive not only to children of BRAC schools but children of other institutions as well.

A month after the pilot programme was launched, BRAC's education personnel met with experts to review and modify the radio school programme in light of their experience. The BRAC Education Programme also approached the Bangladesh Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) to urge them to launch this intervention across Bangladesh. By that time, BRAC had scaled up its own programme to 11 community radio stations, reaching 1,902 schools with 57,782 children.

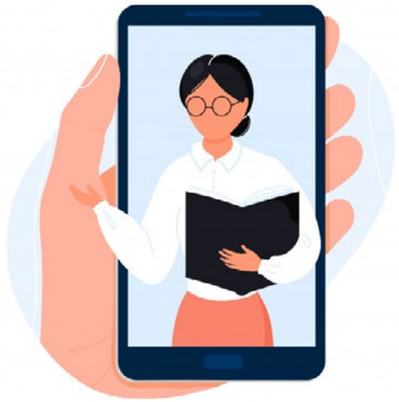
The next major task was to train teachers who had never had such experience. The BRAC pilot phase had trained just one teacher whose voice went live on air. She received much praise and appreciation from parents and affection from children. But with the radio programme scaling up, there was a need for more teachers in a very short time and it called for intensive training. Selected teachers were sent to Sylhet for a two-week residential training which included individual sessions for voice and tone. These training sessions helped the teachers with opportunities to practice at a radio station and hear their voices replayed to them. It was finally possible to record 36 episodes with three teachers who worked day and night so that children could continue their lessons on radio.

Only 60% countries were able to launch learning interventions for pre-primary children as they needed different kinds of intervention (UNESCO, Aug 2020) compared to the higher grade levels. The Bangladesh government has also started radio school programmes for primary school children but it still overlooked the pre-primary children. BEP has taken a lead in this regard as a strong advocate to cater to the youngest learners hoping that national programmes will include them too in 2021.

Syeda Siddiqua Akhtari is a manager at BRAC Education Programme

Home School:

An innovation to continue education



Md Masum Billah

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected educational systems across the globe, leading to worldwide closure of schools and universities. Children and the youth turned out to be the most affected demographics during this crisis. Just after the school closure in March 2020, the Government of Bangladesh took a quick and timely initiative telecasting lessons on national television and developing an internet-based educational content hub involving all stakeholders. BRAC contributed to both initiatives.

However, BEP noticed from the findings of different sources, including a2i and DPE, that televised lessons and digital content were not reaching all students, particularly from the marginalised communities, including the great majority of BRAC's school children. Around 56% of households have access to television while only 37.6% of households have access to the internet in Bangladesh. A study conducted by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) shows that only 25% students watch the televised classes among those who have access to television. On the other hand, data from similar sources show that 95% of households have access to a low-cost feature phone, which is the best delivery channel during the Covid-19 lockdown.

The BEP team took feature phones as a delivery channel and started exploring how to deliver lessons through them. Feature phone-based conference calls were found to be the most viable option. All mobile operators offer a voice call conference service, which can connect up to five or six people without using the internet. This became suitable for reaching the maximum number of students, which could be deployed quickly. This went on to become the BRAC home school.

Home school is a virtual class conducted by BRAC's teachers where the teacher connects four students (Children Learning Group or CLG) using a feature

phone. It enables two-way interaction between a teacher and her students. The added advantage is the group learning opportunity, particularly in urban areas, where students are locked inside their homes. This way, students get a chance to talk to their friends and learn together. It helps improve their mental and emotional wellbeing as well.

In home school, parents are also involved with the lessons as they connect their children and the teacher through their mobile phones at a specified time. The teacher conducts a 20 to 25-minute virtual class with a group of three to four students, which is called the Children Learning Group (CLG). The CLG ensures effective school operation without any disruption as per the convenience of the students and teachers. No special assignments are given to the home school groups. No fixed criteria were set for the group formation. However, BRAC officials tried to adhere to the same criteria as those applied to pre-Covid-19 groups as much as possible. For groups where students with disabilities are included, it is ensured that there is a student who is well ahead in studies so that they can help the disadvantaged students with peer guidance.

The BEP curriculum and material development team selected and modified the lessons in a way that could be delivered through mobile phones in three of the main subjects — Bengali, English and mathematics. The health and wellbeing of the children were considered a priority and teachers advised a list of tasks that would address mental health issues and engage them in relaxing activities. These helped students get used to virtual classes and get engaged with textbook contents. In the second phase, revision classes were conducted so that the children got more time to be involved and feel more comfortable with the lessons that they had already learned in their classrooms before the school closure. After a while, new content was introduced in appropriate doses so as to ensure that the students were able to learn them. The curriculum team provides an instruction guideline for teachers and the field staff. Teachers were responsible for designing their lesson plans for content that is familiar to them. The curriculum team maintains close links with the teachers' lesson plans and delivery. Field level supervisors were aware about the lessons and also remained in close touch with home school operations.

BRAC home school was a source of excitement among the students, parents and even the community. Students watching TV broadcasts could also attend home school as they provided an option for two-way communication and peer interaction.

Some common challenges of the home school include limitation of reaching a large number of students and availability of phones since class hours coincided with a time when parents also needed their devices. Other problems include loss of time while trying to reconnect with a student who might get disconnected in between classes, and problems with sound quality — mostly in remote areas like *haors* (low-lying wetlands) and hilly areas. From the teachers' point of view, 20 minutes is not enough time for phone-based lessons. Teaching maths via mobile also becomes a challenging issue as there is no blackboard. Home schools become expensive because they use mobile phones, which is another challenge. While some problems have been resolved others have proven more difficult to mitigate. It has become evident that home school may only be a temporary alternative and certainly not a permanent solution since there are too many drawbacks to ensure optimum content delivery.

Despite the challenges, BRAC home school has received positive feedback. Students and their parents mentioned that it is a great opportunity to continue education. The students feel happy to be able to interact with peers and teachers. Furthermore, the learners have the benefit of a two-way communication, unlike radio or TV lessons. Most parents mentioned that their children were able to follow instructions. They think it is a great opportunity for children to continue education. People in the communities were surprised to see how the teachers use a simple mobile phone to connect with students and conduct remote classes.

Home school is an eye opener. It shows how a small and cheap device may be used for a purpose for which it was not intended.

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

—Nelson Mandela

Md Masum Billah is a senior manager of innovation in education and ICT at BRAC Education Programme

Stories of dedication

I am BRAC: How to stop child marriage

Zaian Chowdhury

"The change has happened slowly but surely"

Konika's dream of a beautiful world began when she was a child. She grew up in a lively home with six brothers and sisters, under the supportive guidance of her mother and father. She saw her father's face and heard his voice every time a person came to her for help. Konika did everything in her power to help people from the youngest age, even if it meant giving her meals to others.

My father taught me early on about the importance of gender equality. He would always say:

"I have three daughters–I can never experience sadness. It would be even more impossible if I had three more daughters instead of sons!"

"The root of much abuse is child marriage. It has taken a considerable amount of time for people to understand that, and many souls have suffered unimaginably as a result. There is definitely greater awareness now, but it did not happen easily. We must continue to make sure no one allows it to happen."

Rukhsana Zaman Konika speaks in a calming, confident voice.

Konika's father passed away years ago, but she keeps his values close to her heart. Her family, in-laws and the entire community continues to support her, and takes great pride in her work. She has stood up for countless young women in the fight against child marriage.

Konika is a field officer working for BRAC's community empowerment programme. She is currently posted in Shahjadpur in Sirajganj, northern Bangladesh. Her husband also works for an NGO.

She was first stationed in Raiganj, another sub-district of Sirajganj. There were mixed emotions – she was both excited and tense about her first job. Her father-in-law accompanied Konika on her first day. He inspected the office, and assured that his daughter-in-law was in a safe, reliable place.

Konika was entirely devoted to her work from the beginning. She facilitated polli somaj (women-led grassroots institutions) meetings. She made routine visits to other field offices. She travelled to many remote villages to stop child marriages and incidents of violence. She collected data from these incidents, and sent reports to the head office. She made decisions on how to assist survivors.

Konika is now an organiser of popular theatre shows in the regions with the highest number of early marriages and violent incidents.

One of the incidents that Konika remembers most vividly from all her years of working with BRAC happened when she first joined. She met an elderly woman during a field visit who told Konika that her daughter had gotten divorced four years ago. She was entitled to BDT 35,000 (USD 420) after the arbitration, but she was yet to receive it. The worker in charge of giving her the money had left his job for unknown reasons, and had taken the money with him.

What a story to hear, that too about a colleague of her own! This shocked her, and offended her values. Her father and father-in-law were both teachers, and they taught her to always stay on a righteous path, and never turn away anyone in need.

She set out immediately to find him. She found his mobile number, called and explained the situation very politely to him. She gave her office address, and requested that he send the money because it would greatly help a struggling family.

An envelope arrived at her office after two weeks, addressed to Konika. Surprise, and then pure happiness, fled across her face as she opened the envelope, revealing exactly BDT 35,000.

It was then that she realised that politeness and patience can help bring people to do the right thing, even if they had been dishonest before.

Another story that remains clear in her memory is an unfortunate event that unfolded in her family many years ago.

Loud, angry voices were heard coming from her brother's home. Her brother was known for his temper, but today, he seemed to have gone off the rails. In a fit of rage, he attacked his wife with a broomstick. Konika broke into a fit of tears, and told him repeatedly that he could never behave this way again. Her brother listened, and never hurt his wife again.

She has been a witness to many incidents like these, both directly and indirectly.

A young woman once joined a polli somaj meeting, only to go back to her home to be verbally abused by her husband for attending. Konika visited their home and spoke to her husband, explaining that he was also welcome to attend the meetings. He calmed down soon after, and started attending the meetings on a regular basis.

Raiganj, being her first workplace, is filled with many memories. It has been eight years since she has left, but she is constantly in touch with all the people she met. She is known as Ain Apa, or Law Lady, and a 'journalist', wherever she goes.

She walks without fear. From walking into her in-laws' neighbours' homes to stop someone from violently acting out, to walking into the homes and offices of local chairmen and police officers to get help, Konika never backs out of a difficult situation.

Konika is leading the way for our vision of a world free of discrimination, fighting against child marriage and violence against women. She is also actively getting men involved– encouraging them to be supportive of the girls in their lives to pursue education, and taking a stand against other men from eve-teasing and committing acts of violence.

Konika, and the countless other men and women, are the everyday heroes all around us who continue to give us hope for a better world.

Zaian Chowdhury is a communications specialist at BRAC Communications

Inside story

Helping children reach full potential in Uganda

Tanzina Quddus Dina and Rafiath Rashid Mithila

The article six of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises that every child has the right to develop to 'the maximum extent possible'. Yet, approximately 249.4 million children in the world are still at risk of not reaching their fullest potential. The highest prevalence of children at risk are in the sub-Saharan Africa[1] region. Uganda, demographically one of the youngest countries in this continent[2], has an under-5 population of 3.7 million[3]. Although Uganda recognises early childhood care and education as prerequisites for national development, the 'ecological system of human development' as coined by German development psychologist Uri Bronfenbrenner is still at a nascent stage in Uganda. This system brings the child to the centre of a multi-layered environment of family, community, wider society, state, culture and values, and emphasises the role of each layer in child development.

[1]*Chunling L, Maureen M B, Linda M R (December , 2016). Risk of poor development in young children in low-income and middle-income countries: an estimation and analysis at the global, regional, and country level. Lancet Glob Health (4: e916–22)*

[2]*World Economic Forum (May, 2016). The world's 10 youngest populations are all in Africa. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/the-world-s-10-youngest-countries-are-all-in-africa/*

[3]*Unicef (December, 2016) National Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy of Uganda launched. Retrieved from https://www.unicef.org/uganda/stories/national-integrated-early-childhood-development-policy-uganda-launched*

Early childhood development

In terms of getting learning support at home, children in Uganda are highly deprived. Uganda's demographic and health survey of 2016, revealed that only 4% children between three and five years were engaged in over four learning activities with their father, while 22% of the children were engaged in learning activities with their mother. Only 2% living with their mother had at least three books at home. It also revealed that 85% of the children experienced violent punishment during the previous month of the survey at least for once, and 50% of the parents believe corporal punishment is needed to raise and educate children properly[4]. The net enrolment ratio (NER) at pre-primary levels for three to five-year-olds is only 17% with significant variation between urban (30%) and rural (14%) areas[5]. Ensuring access to quality early learning opportunity has also been a major challenge for the government of Uganda[6], due to a lack of capacity and resources.

Therefore, Uganda is one of the countries in East Africa where BRAC is trying to create an ecosystem for early childhood development through a play-based early learning model. Since 2016, this model has been adapted to serve children living in different contexts and communities across Uganda, Tanzania and Bangladesh. Key components of this approach are, play-based curriculum, play spaces, locally made low-cost playing materials, trained play leaders, parenting education, community involvement and evidence-based advocacy.

Creating an ecosystem

To create a supportive and sustainable ecosystem for children's optimal development in Uganda, BRAC is contributing at every layer of the system - from the immediate environment of the child, to the overarching environment of culture, values and principles - that has a cascading influence on children's development. BRAC goes beyond the classroom to support and sustain the ecosystem engaging parents, communities, school authorities, the local and central government for a ripple effect in every layer.

The diagram below illustrates the ecosystem of play-based learning created by BRAC Play Labs in Uganda where every stakeholder has been engaged through key activities that helped build ownership of the ECD centres and promote play-based learning across classrooms, schools, communities and homes.

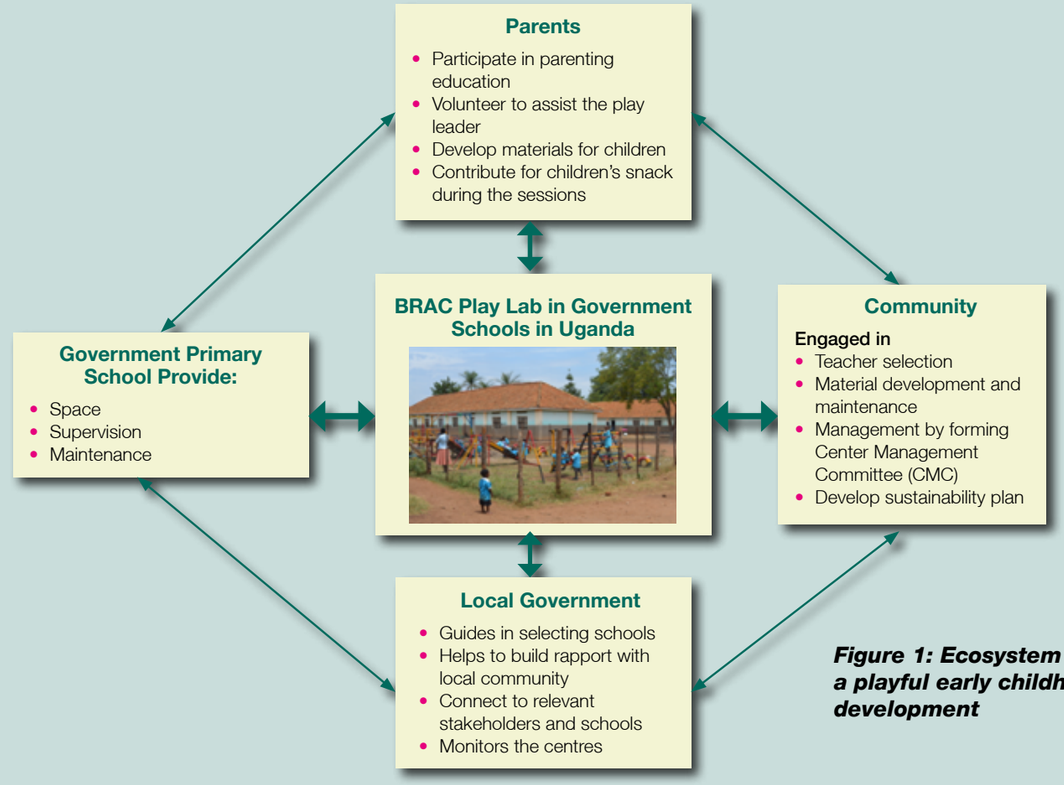


Figure 1: Ecosystem of a playful early childhood development

[4]*Uganda Bureau of Statistics (January, 2018). Uganda Demographic and health Survey 2016. Retrieved from https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR333/FR333.pdf*

[5]*Uganda Bureau of Statistics (November 2017). Education: A Means for Population transformation. Retrieved from https://www.ubos.org/wp-content/uploads/publications/03_2018Education_Monograph_Report_Final_08-12-2017.pdf*

Play Lab creates a difference

Family engagement is the first step towards a healthy developmental ecosystem for a child. In BRAC Play Labs, parents and families are engaged through volunteering opportunities where they rotate as play leader assistants and learn how to support children's learning through a playful approach. Kakooza Moses, a father, says, "It was a great opportunity to see my child learn as he experimented. A child who plays with others is always happy, creative and friendly."

Parents are given responsibilities to develop playing materials which empowers them to create resources on their own. Parents also take on the responsibility of providing snacks for children. Most importantly, BRAC provides parenting education to make the transition between the Play Labs and home environments smoother, that further empower parents. Parents not only learn about child rearing practices but they also learn to care for themselves. A Play Lab parent, Lwanga Yoronim said, "I was anxious to see my child start writing immediately after she joined school. But I came to learn from parenting sessions that it is a gradual process, that she needed to develop her fine motor skills through play and other activities before starting to write."

Parenting education is also changing parents' behaviour and practices with their children as a centre management committee member Bagirina Robinah confirms, "I really appreciate BRAC for bringing some notable changes to our communities, especially through parenting sessions where we as parents have learnt a lot about family responsibilities, how to handle children and how to behave in the community. This has improved our behaviour towards children."

Community-led child friendly environment

BRAC recognises the importance of having the community endorsement when it comes to creating a sustainable, child friendly environment. In every Play Lab, there is a centre management committee (CMC) comprising of different groups, including parents, teachers and local leaders. This CMC works as the first point of reference when it comes to the selection of play leaders. The CMC members contribute to material development and maintenance of the Play Labs. They are oriented with the importance of play-based learning for children at home and school. Additionally, they are also trained on the management and sustainability of the model. One CMC chair, Mwajuma Rashidi, also a grandmother, acknowledged the BRAC Play Lab contribution. "Years ago, when my children were young, I never cared about going to their school even to drop them off or pick them up, let alone helping teachers with their activities. But now I do all these things. So, this Play Lab has made me aware of my responsibilities to participate in the educational activities of my grandchildren."

Teachers' participation

Of the 150 BRAC Play Labs in Uganda, 106 are co-located with government primary schools where schools provide a classroom to be renovated as a Play Lab. The school also supervises the Play leader regularly and supports proper maintenance of the classroom. On the other hand, BRAC builds the capacity of the head teachers so that they can adopt play-based learning for the early grades. The Play spaces inside and outside the classroom create a joyful and playful environment for other young children in the schools as well. Eventually, locals begin to advocate for playful learning as is evident from the head teacher Mr Bakulumpagi Ayub's opinion, "Many children are able to access play spaces and materials through Play Labs, which has greatly improved their social skills. I will always advocate for play-based learning even after the project phases out. I would like BRAC to influence the policymakers of our country so that all children get the opportunity to have such a beautiful learning experience."

Local government engagement and ownership

The local government is involved in selecting schools for intervention, building rapport with the local communities, getting connected with relevant stakeholders and schools, and monitoring the Play Lab performance. Through joint monitoring activities, BRAC ensures that their opinion and feedback are incorporated into operations. BRAC also builds the capacity of the local government through training, workshops, and exposure visits for sustainability of the approach beyond BRAC's years of operation.

The ecosystem of playful learning approaches for early childhood development could not be established overnight. BRAC had to convince and win the trust of the families, communities and schools. Gradual and notable changes in children's behaviour helped BRAC win people's trust and create local advocates. Namayanja Milly's, a mother, is one such advocate. "I doubted the project's intentions since I have always believed that children go to school to study and not to play. I was also not comfortable with the limited writing and so many play activities that my son did at the Play Lab. But at this moment I am really proud of the decision I made to keep him in the school. I always find him busy with something like moulding, designing things from different objects, drawing different things nicely on the ground with a stick and so on."

With such support from parents, communities and government, BRAC is working to scale up the model across countries in East and West Africa to reach the most marginalised children where they need support to develop to their fullest potential.

Tanzina Quddus Dina is a manager of early childhood development programme at BRAC International

Rafiath Rashid Mithila is the head of early childhood development programme at BRAC International

Education in Bangladesh: At a glance

Infographic

Drop rate at primary school %

	class i	class ii	class iii	class iv	class v
Boys	3	4.2	4.6	7.4	2.8
Girls	1.4	1.5	1.2	7.8	3.8

Pre-primary
- Students: 37, 86,241 (17, 92, 559 / 17, 85, 825)

Primary
- Institutions: 1, 34,117
- Teachers: 6, 85, 400
- Students: 1, 73, 38, 1000 (85, 39, 067 / 87, 99, 033)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 25

Secondary
- Institutions: 20, 564
- Teachers: 23, 41, 165
- Students: 1, 04, 75, 100 (48, 19, 719 / 56, 55, 381)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 45

Higher Secondary
- Institution: 4, 495
- Teachers: 1, 23, 518
- Students: 42, 78. 441 (22, 31, 962 / 20, 46, 479)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 35

Madrasa
- Institutions: 9, 294
- Teachers: 1,0,9, 918
- Students: 24, 77, 962 (11, 08, 762 / 13, 69, 200)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 23

English Medium
- Institutions: 146
- Teachers: 8, 589
- Students: 78, 667 (48, 240 / 30, 427)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 45

Data: bbs/banbeis/ugc 2018 Infograph: dataful

University

General Science & technology
- Institutions: 25
- Teachers: 10, 639
- Students: 2, 41. 882 (1, 56, 891 / 85, 192)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 23

Agriculture
- Institutions: 4
- Teachers: 1, 367
- Students: 15, 286 (8, 705 / 6, 582)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 11

Technical & engineering
- Institutions: 5
- Teachers: 1, 814
- Students: 24, 607 (20, 153 / 4, 454)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 14

University College
- Teachers: 10, 639
- Students: 27, 88, 787 (14, 37, 592 / 13, 51, 195)

Medical College
- Institutions: 111
- Teachers: 5, 070
- Students: 45, 388 (19, 834 / 25, 558)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 9

Technical & Vocational
- Institutions: 6, 865
- Teachers: 50, 931
- Students: 10, 67, 484 (8, 03, 222 / 2, 64, 262)
- Teacher-students ratio: 1: 21

Data: bbs/banbeis/ugc 2018 Infograph: dataful

Next issue of dBRIEF

The next issue of dBRIEF will be on 'Health (COVID-19)'. We expect to cover interesting stories, initiatives/events taken on national/international/organisational levels, ground-breaking researches, and other relevant topics around the subject.

Moreover, we are planning to introduce a new section "Dear editor" from the next issue. The section will contain readers' reviews and constructive feedback on the current issue. In this regard, we are calling for your thoughtful insights, reviews and comments on this issue. Please submit your suggestions to **dbrief@brac.net** before 15 August 2021.

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