Legacies and Lessons from two decades of Bangladesh Primary Education Programmes

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Abstract

The numbers of children involved, and the amount of funds applied, place Bangladesh's successive Primary Education Development Programmes amongst the world's most significant donor-supported interventions. This paper explores how the four PEDPs, each incorporating lessons learned from its predecessor, have evolved from the initial 'Twenty-seven projects in search of a Programme' situation through to the well-organised and determined approach to the 'middle-income country by 2021' current destination. Based upon that exploration, particular attention is given to specific issues such as enhancing relationships between Development Partners and Government, achieving efficacious financing modalities, factors associated with effective Sector-Wide Approaches, making best use of experts, the second-phase gender challenge, pre-primary provision and purpose, the overloaded and under-motivated teacher, double shifts and inclusive education in a fluctuating environment. The paper concludes by tentatively suggesting some implications of Bangladesh's four PEDPs for more general considerations of Education and Development.

Keywords: Bangladesh, primary education, sector-wide approaches, inclusive education, development partners

1. Introduction: Primary Education in Bangladesh

Just two decades ago, as the first Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP1) was commencing, only 35% of Bangladesh's adult population were literate, and this capability was heavily skewed between males and females (44% versus 22%) as well as between urban and rural areas. The primary gross enrolment rate was only 68%, and the dropout rate around 60%: in other words, fewer than one in four boys and one in nine girls completed the five primary school grades. By 2018, as PEDP4 was getting under way, over 90% of primary age children were in school and 82% will complete grade 5. Moreover, a third of young children are attending pre-school, over half of the age group now attend secondary schools and, in all educational phases, the gender gap has been closed (data drawn by the authors from BANBEIS, 2017 and MoPME, 2014).

This represents a substantial achievement – a quantitative transformation with clear qualitative implications. It is upon the latter that this paper concentrates, avoiding the meticulous statistical and the detailed financial, in favour of the 'story' of the four-phased intervention, along with the 'messages' in terms of the challenges faced, the methodologies applied, with various levels of success, and the lessons to be learned.

The extent to which the programme approach contributed to this major advance is not easy to disentangle – what, for example, would have happened had individual development partners confined their support to their own specific projects instead of coming together with the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) in increasingly coordinated interventions? Similarly, determining the sustainable impact of applying a (primary sub-) Sector-Wide Approach (SWAp), and of the particular modalities involved, are challenging to extricate, there being many other factors of relevance, including both natural and 'manmade' disturbances (of which Bangladesh has had, and continues to have, somewhat more than its share).

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Proceeding further, the paper addresses other specific lessons that might be learned and applied more generally based upon the experiences of PEDPs One through Four. The present authors have, between them, been familiar with Bangladesh's primary education development programmes since the origins in the mid-1990s of what became PEDP1 through to the present. This paper is based upon their direct experiences and insights, supported by the literature referenced below, particularly the basic programme documents, notably those reports, reviews and evaluations which were produced and acted upon as the interventions unfolded.

2. Primary Education Development Programme One (1998-2004)

The GOB's commitment to improving basic education was reflected in its adoption of the Education for All (EFA) agenda in the early 1990s, providing the basis for assistance from various Development Partners (DP) – EFA was upgraded to a national action plan in 2003. During the 1980s and 1990s there were numerous but largely disconnected donor-supported projects related to primary education, including the General Education Project in the mid-90s. An evaluation of the IDEAL Project (Schaetezel, 2000), whose main intervention had been teacher upgrading in 'Multiple Ways of Teaching and Learning', depicts the situation prevailing at that time. It notes that 'Project management requirements at the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) are confusing because (it) is managing different projects, with different management requirements, simultaneously… approvals must follow the vertical chain of command and this is slow… there are inadequate project staff at the central and field levels… poor coordination among DPE, UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund) and other agencies slows implementation'. As the new millennium arrived, the primary education system was inadequate in terms of meeting its well-intentioned commitments.

The first Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP1) was, in effect, a set of some 27 discrete projects, each financed separately by one of the eight participating DPs and/or GoB and each with its own implementation unit running parallel to the government system. There were ten programme objectives, covering between them the themes of strengthening enrolment, increasing primary completion, providing quality inputs and enhancing monitoring. While a coordinated approach had been intended, as a result of 'delayed budget approval, under-procurement, and the lack of institutional diagnosis of EFA capacity' (ADB, 2008), arrangements fell back to the use of the project-type modality instead of the programmatic approach originally planned. Indeed, these projects were referred to as 'PEDP1 post factum' during the preparation of PEDP 2.

With the development budget being implemented through these stand-alone – often related but practically disconnected – projects, GoB was unable to develop and sequence initiatives within a long-term vision. As PEDP1 drew to a close, there seemed to be a sincere desire on the part of most agencies to coordinate their work more coherently with one another, and with GoB, in order to avoid duplication and to maximise benefits. Recognising also that project-based approaches of this kind did not lead to the sustainable institutionalisation of achievements, several (but not all) of the Development Partners were committed globally to a SWAp modality for their support of primary education. As discussed below, GoB was somewhat sceptical about taking on another SWAp due to problems then being experienced within the health sector (Ahsan *et al*, 2016) and, during PEDP2, the Planning Commission required the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) to show how the Approach would overcome the (actual and perceived) difficulties encountered by the embryonic Health and Population Sector Programme (HPSP).

While some of the PEDP1 projects were successful in achieving their targets and intended outputs, it was generally recognised that their overall effect had been limited as they were unable to address policy and systemic issues which were crucial to quality improvement. Many DPs were concerned that the continuation of the project approach would not lead to the dramatic changes needed to increase access and improve the quality of primary education as required to fulfil Education For All and the Millennium Development Goals. They had started working increasingly in a cooperative and mutually affirming way through the Education Local Consultative sub-Group (ELCG), made up of all the Development Partners involved in primary education, in order to rationalise their support. Although the ELCG had been virtually dormant in the mid-1990s, 'through the active chairing role of a DFID educationalist' (as reported informally to the authors by a 'reliable source') it became very active and was the only educational DPs' group working with Government until the establishment of the PEDP2 consortium a decade later.

3. Primary Education Development Programme Two (2004-2011)

Throughout the process of PEDP2 preparation, there was intense dialogue amongst DPs and with GoB, on both approach and content.

A series of official meetings, missions and documentation exercises eventually led to the finalisation of a comprehensive programme. This has been described as 'a long process stretching over a period of more than three years with many obstacles encountered along the way but overall a positive experience with a tangible outcome and a tremendous learning process for all concerned' (Jennings, 2007). Some of the lessons learned included the need to 'work cooperatively with Government leadership and ownership, and involving Government at various levels, and also working cooperatively as development partners with open and transparent dialogue and a commitment to keep all parties on board' (Jennings, 2007).

PEDP2 experienced considerable delays at the start of implementation resulting in an eventual two-year extension to the programme period (these delays resulted in many of the originally identified consultants becoming unavailable). As with any process, there were also some aspects and lessons learned that were not so positive, including 'the inadequacy of a project document as the procedural guide for a SWAp, unrealistic donor expectations, insufficient recognition of the complexity of implementing a massive programme to expand outreach and improve effectiveness while at the same time managing the routine functions of the primary education system, failure to plan for adequate capacity building within the implementing agency, inappropriate structures for developing permanent capacity within the implementing agency and insufficient attention to improvement of quality in the classroom, along with insufficient effort to maintain an institutional memory' (Jennings, 2007). These farsighted observations guided subsequent planning arrangements and became part of the on-going PEDP planning process.

PEDP2 embodied a more holistic perspective of sector development than had its predecessor, by adopting a programmatic SWAp to implementation and development outcomes. The evolving PEDP2 was an integrated sub-sector programme coordinated by ADB as lead agency, PEDP2 was financed by the Government and eleven DPs through a management and financing structure implemented in parallel with GoB's existing mechanisms.

PEDP2 focussed on improving the quality of primary education and promoting the organisational and institutional development to support coordination, subsector planning, management, and monitoring. It embraced the Millennium Development Goals through the overall objective of 'reduced poverty through universal primary education and sustainable socioeconomic development and equity in Bangladeshi society', the intended outcome being one of providing 'primary education to all eligible children in Bangladesh' (GoB, 2004). PEDP2's outputs comprised (i) quality improvement through organizational development and capacity building; (ii) quality improvement in schools and classrooms; (iii) quality improvement through infrastructure development; (iv) improved access for the poorest and socially excluded; and (v) programme management, monitoring, and evaluation.

In 2006, the PEDP2–funded programme coordination unit (PCU) was phased out and the programme management unit (PMU), headed by a DPE-funded programme director, became responsible for managing and coordinating consultant support to the programme. Following the midterm review (GoB, 2007), undertaken after Cyclone Sidr, there was a significant change in resource allocation with school construction and rehabilitation getting a large increase at the expense of the capacity-development and teacher-training activities as planned.

The donor intervention had sought to secure over 50 'assurances' detailing the suite of regulatory, policy, and administrative measures to create the enabling environment for the investment initiatives to succeed. Many were very ambitious and beyond the control of the implementing agency. For example, in a highly centralized system and with very low willingness among the political leadership to devolve responsibilities to local level, rolling out universal primary education proved to be unattainable. Similarly, while PEDP2 required that the current public expenditure on education be 2.8% of gross national product, it averaged around 2% throughout the programme period and, of course, this was beyond the control of the relevant Ministries, let alone of the implementing agency DPE. Fewer than half of the assurances were complied with (World Bank, 2011) and, as with some unachieved outputs, many of those unfulfilled PEDP2 assurances were carried over into PEDP3.

Harmonisation proved difficult to achieve but, with goodwill, it eventually occurred. For example, the project financing systems of WB and ADB require the implementing agency to open a foreign currency bank account in the Programme's name; the banks then determine an "initial advance" and send the amount to the Programme account at the request of the Project Director who then spends from that advance and requests WB/ADB to replenish the spent amount. Suppose the initial advance is 40 million dollars: after spending, say, 10 million, the project can request WB/ADB to replenish that amount, by means of a withdrawal application (along with proof of spending). ADB and WB usually use different forms and procedures but for PEDP 2, they harmonized these into a single PEDP 2 withdrawal application.

Another challenge related to the financial year which, in Bangladesh, is July to June. UNICEF, for instance, followed the calendar year while the United Kingdom observed April through March. For PEDP2, all agreed to coincide with the GoB practice.

Overall, there were some significant PEDP2 achievements including the attainment of planned enrolment rates and absenteeism reduction targets, along with reduced dropout and repetition. There was a consensus that the programme had enhanced GOB leadership and ownership and had opened up many priority areas (such as inclusive education and decentralisation) that had for long been barriers to improving quality, institutional capacity, and equity in access. But, while school construction was substantial, there were concerns regarding, for example, the sustainability of the infrastructure in the absence of any operation and maintenance strategy, and a recognition of a need for decentralisation to the *Upazilla* (there are around 500 of these sub-district local government areas) and devolution to the school and local community level.

Moreover, given the fresh approach, with which managers at all levels had little experience, PEDP2 was too big a programme ($1.815 billion) in relation to existing capacities. This resulted in difficulties in managing and harmonizing diverse expectations and requirements (notably financial management and procurement procedures) and hence high transaction costs among DPs. Overall, the sheer number of targets, the lack of hierarchy between them, and their limited potential in relation to the required quality of outputs, forced a rethinking of how the development and recurrent budgets would be utilized. Furthermore, PEDP 2 included only DP funds and GoB matching funds for the Programme and did not cover any 'non-development expenditures' such as the salaries of the mainstream staff and other recurring expenditure. It also did not include the cost of other development stand-alone projects outside PEDP 2.

These and similar PEDP2 experiences pointed to lessons regarding the modality of mobilising resources, managing the programme and building management capacity. There was a general recognition that the continuation programme should have a pragmatic and flexible approach, conforming to the new education policy (GoB, 2010) as the guide to strategy and action, and with clear and participatory mechanism for key decisions and oversight. One assessment of PEDP2 (Ahmed, 2011) recommended 'that the next PEDP should be more flexible, encompassing more types of education providers under a unified national plan and be extended to a greater age range, with significantly increased resources to bring Bangladesh up to parity with comparable countries' primary education expenditure'.

4. Primary Education Development Programme Three (2011-2018)

Taking full account of the experiences of its predecessor, consultative planning was taken forward by the publication of a Concept Paper by DPE (GoB, 2009b), its final version taking full account of comments and suggestions made by DPs on the draft. This Concept Paper arrangement reversed the process of preparing development Projects/Programmes in Bangladesh from a Development Partner-led practice to one that was genuinely GoB-driven.

PEDP3 commenced soon after PEDP2 concluded and was led and administered by GoB line agencies: its components were embedded in DPE's work programme, ensuring continued support and increased likelihood of sustainability. Acknowledging the weakness of the DPE's M&E capacity, results-based management as a management and reporting tool was introduced and adopted to improve efficiency. Strong Bangladesh ownership was reflected in the significant GoB share (84.5percent) of total financing and by the fact that two important sub-components – Stipends; and School Health and Feeding – were fully financed by GoB. [Unlike its predecessor, PEDP3 included all expenditure (both development and non-development) in the Primary education sub-sector.] Its overall objective was 'to establish an efficient, inclusive and equitable primary education system delivering effective and relevant child-friendly learning to all Bangladesh's children from pre-primary education (PPE) through Grade 5'. PEDP3's specific objectives were to: (a) increase participation and reduce social disparities in primary education; (b) increase the number of children completing primary education and improve the quality of the learning environment and measurement of student learning; and (c) improve effectiveness of resource use for primary education.

All eligible interventions under PEDP3 were grouped under three components, aligned with the three project development objectives: (a) Improving the Quality of the Learning Environment and the Measurement of Student Learning; (b) Improving Access and Reducing Social Disparities; and (c) Improving Programme Planning and Management, and Strengthening Institutions.

Results in these areas were to be achieved through activities in twenty-nine sub-components. Most activities would benefit all primary schools in Bangladesh while some activities also covered primary school age children participating in non-formaleducation.PEDP3 continued many of the quality improvement, institutional, and systemic reforms introduced under PEDP2, with an increased focus on how the inputs were to be used at the school level to improve learning outcomes in the classroom and raise primary school completion rates.

As well as establishing Pre-Primary Education (PPE – see 8.7, below) nationwide, PEDP3 was successful in providing free textbooks to children on time each year, making it easier for the poor to attend and benefit from school. Other contributing activities that showed reasonable progress include needs-based infrastructure development, and mainstreaming inclusive education. Policy decisions that had proved problematical earlier, such as third party verification of DLIs and results-based management and disbursement, were incorporated in PEDP3 with reasonable success.

PEDP3 financed the strengthening of an evidence-based decision-making environment by: (i) improving information systems; and (ii) establishing an adequately staffed evaluation unit in the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Division of DPE significantly improving the speed and accuracy of statistical reporting. PEDP3 effectively supported school community mobilisation and citizen's engagement through the School Management Committees: about 90 per cent of all the primary schools receiving grants prepared School-Level Improvement Plans (SLIP): another reportedly sustainable PEDP3 accomplishment.

More generally, PEDP3 demonstrated an enhanced focus on achieving results as a consequence of tying the bulk of DP financing to the DLIs; sufficient political will to deliver results; and the installing of institutional capacity acquired through the two previous PEDPs. The close collaboration and harmonisation amongst the DPs and GoB, established during the long planning period, prevailed throughout PEDP3 implementation. While some interventions did not perform well because of lack of political support (e.g. public-private partnerships to enable the additional delivery of PPE and teacher training), capacity constraints in undertaking the envisaged tasks (e.g. second chance education), or the inclination of DPE, given the large number of tasks they needed to handle, to focus primarily on perceived higher priority areas to the detriment of other responsibilities (e.g. communication and social mobilisation).

Lessons learned from implementation related to institutional capacities and the need for system strengthening, in that 'PEDP3 was ambitious relative to DPE capacity and underestimated the impact of the primary education system's size (over 100,000 schools, 450,000 teachers, and 16.5 million students), the centralised nature of its operation system, and inherent geographic and communications challenges' (ADB, 2015). It was felt that there had been an 'oversupply of in-service teacher training' (see 8.6, below) and that DPE's mission has become overstretched in that 'it executes functions that might be better undertaken by specialised institutions' (WB, 2018a). Moreover, DPE's ability to steer PEDP3's activities effectively was hindered by inadequate capacities in some of its partner implementing agencies such as the National Academy for Primary Education (whose staff are on deputation with a high turnover) and the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (which is under MoE).

It was concluded that PEDP3 demonstrated that 'results-based financing does help deliver outcomes, especially when there is good harmonization among development partners (and that) community mobilization efforts encouraging bottom-up citizen's engagement are important for advancing education reforms' (WB, 2018a). The need to focus more precisely on ensuring foundational numeracy and literacy, especially in the first three grades of primary education, was also cited as an essential requirement within the ongoing education reform in Bangladesh and, based upon the PEDP3 experience, a call for better-planned and more effective capacity building was made, along with 'more effective horizontal articulation among its key activities and timely vertical coordination across all the implementing entities at all levels of decision-making' (WB, 2018a). Each of these observations was attended to in PEDP4 preparation.

5. Primary Education Development Programme Four (2018-2023)

PEDP4 represents GoB's determination to implement a second-generation, results-based programme in accord with the National Education Policy (MoE, 2010) and focussing on improving learning outcomes, and to ensure that Out of School Children (OOSC) complete their primary education. Its development objective is to improve the quality of and enhance equitable access to education to all children of Bangladesh from pre-primary up to Grade 5 through an efficient, inclusive and equitable education system.

It is intended that PEDP4 will further facilitate crucial reforms in the primary education sector and continue to be the main instrument bringing disadvantaged children into pre-primary and primary education and improve learning quality. Taking forward a major assessment of 'Programme Environmental and Social Impacts and Risks' (GoB, 2018b), PEDP4 will 'promote the concept of the Green School through the construction of new infrastructure, hygiene promotion, and education awareness program'.

PEDP4 is clustered around three results areas or components:

• The Quality component is to enable children to acquire the essential grade-level competencies stipulated in the curriculum by implementing quality teaching-learning practices in all schools;
• The Equitable Access and Participation component aims to provide all communities with learning environments that support participation of all children and ensure continuity of education; and
• The Management, Governance and Financing component seeks to ensure strong governance, adequate and equitable financing, and good management of the primary education system.

PEDP4's direct beneficiaries are '13.5 million children enrolled in the MoPME/DPE pre-primary and primary education system… a further approximately 5.1 million children enrolled in other types of primary schools… and two million out-of-school children. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) cover, for instance, the 'Percentage of children who completed one year of PPE, who mastered the school readiness competencies; the percentage of Grade 3/Grade 5 students achieving… competencies in Bangla and Mathematics… Primary Cycle Completion Rate… Contact hours… percentage of OOSC aged 8-14 years… (and) composite performance index – top and bottom 10% of *upazillas*'.

PEDP4 commenced in mid-2018 and it includes reforms that, when implemented, will result in a marked improvement in learning', increasing the importance attached by the general public nationwide to formal education at the primary level. But, in addition, PEDP4 explicitly aims to 'strengthen the foundations for Bangladesh's emergence as a middle-income country by 2021' (GoB, 2018a), with the education and relevant skills development of its coming generations regarded as the best route forward. With that as its goal, the current PEDP4 creates a clear economic destination towards which primary education should be directed.

6. Development Partners And Government

Two decades of PEDPs have seen a transformation from isolation, suspicion and what might have been described as 'the clash of the bureaucracies' to a positive and mutually respectful working relationship between GoB and its development partners. During PEDP1 and, to a lesser extent, PEDP2 each donor had its own regulations and requirements, while the government's own procedures and conventions appeared to outsider as inflexible and impenetrable.

While the situation has improved very significantly, some difficulties persist. Inevitable changes in key staff amongst the DPs are challenges to institutional consistency. Similarly, frequent staff turnover at DPE have led to implementation delays in some cases. GoB's practice (bequeathed by the British in the time of the Raj) of restricting the most senior civil service positions to top administrative generalists prevents managers experienced in primary education services design and delivery playing such roles. Delays in Ministry of Public Administration (MoPA) approval of the career path proposal for teachers, recruitment rules for filling vacancies for new posts created, and the transfer of officials from development to revenue positions, all proved bureaucratically problematic as the programmes unfolded.

Despite many development partners being and remaining involved with successive PEDPs (as tabulated), most persisted with their own interventions alongside their participation in the wider programmes. For instance, taking account of an identification mission (Skaaret and Bourgeois, 1997), the European Union choose to 'continue with the existing education projects in Bangladesh' rather than joining in PEDP1, noting that 'two member states – Sweden and the United Kingdom – were already involved'. While the EU became a major player from PEDP2 onwards, it continued to support other primary sector interventions, as did most of the bilateral agencies. This funding and technical support extended to major basic education programmes by BRAC and other non-government organisations: with donors often observing [for instance in conversations with this paper's international co-author] that it was 'much easier to work with flexible NGOs than with the government's laborious bureaucracy' (Douse *et al*, 2006).

Conversely, many NGO sector leaders reported that, because of PEDP2 and PEDP3, they had difficulty in getting development partner educational funding. They were, apparently, told by some donors that 'since we are supporting a sector-wide programme, we cannot separately support through another window'. Ideally, an education SWAP should embrace all children, all relevant government and non-government agencies and all interventions of all involved Development Partners. The perfect is the enemy of the good; the unrealistic the opponent of the acceptable.

Development Partner	PEDP1	PEDP2	PEDP3	PEDP4
Asian Development Bank	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved
World Bank	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved
Islamic Development Bank	Fully involved			
European Union		Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved
UNESCO				Fully involved
UNICEF	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved
UNFPA	Fully involved			
Australia	Involved indirectly	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved
Canada		Fully involved	Fully involved	Dialogue ongoing
Germany	Fully involved			
Japan	Involved indirectly	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved
Netherlands	Involved indirectly	Fully involved		
Norway	Fully involved	Fully involved		
Sweden	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved	
United Kingdom	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved
United States of America				Dialogue ongoing
Bangladesh	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved	Fully involved

Figure 1: Development Partner Involvement, PEDP1 through PEDP4[3]

Australia had invested in PEDP3 from 2011 onwards noting that 'Pooling funding through a sector wide approach has enabled us to achieve sustainable results at scale. Central to the modality was policy dialogue to influence government reform decisions. While Australia was effective in influencing the Government's reform agenda in PEDP3, including in setting the agenda and supporting its implementation, our policy dialogue in the design process for PEDP4 was less effective in securing government agreement to build on these reforms in Australia's priority areas' (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018). As a result, Australia decided not to invest directly in PEDP4 but will 'explore new opportunities to engage in education and skills development in a more targeted way, focusing on gaps where we can influence and make a difference… continue to complement the Government's education initiatives through our support to the non-formal primary education sector through BRAC to support children who face challenges accessing government schools' (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2018).

A consideration of Bangladesh's experience of development partnerships (Rahman & Mujeri, 2018), noting that Bangladesh was designated a low middle-income country in 2014, emphasised that 'for external donors, the use of only low-income country instruments like targeted poverty reduction will no longer be appropriate' calling for a move towards 'innovative and knowledge-based initiatives to share best practices, skills and expertise'. This does seem to have occurred within the education sector and, indeed, the increasing confidence within DPE contributed to making it happen.

A key questions is that of who, in actuality, 'owned' the PEDPs and who, in practice, decided their contents, priorities and oversight arrangements – and did this evolve with successive interventions? Under PEDP1, the contents of the Projects and their priorities were decided by the concerned DPs, as had been the customary practice. For PEDP2, a Macro Plan was prepared through a consultative process and the Program Document was based upon that agreed document. However, when the Government Project Proposal (PP) for PEDP2 was prepared and ratified, many items in the DP-approved project documents were withdrawn. PEDP3 revised that process: the core areas were defined by GoB in a concept paper (GoB, 2009b) and then the DP's input were then agreed upon, and from then onwards, the design process, contents and priorities have been determined by DPE and then supported by the DPs.

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[3] During PEDP1, Australia and Japan supported the IDEAL Project through UNICEF and the Netherlands were in the General Education Project. For PEDP4, DFID (UK) is not participating in the investment part but considering the provision of TA. Canada had not yet (March 2019) made a commitment and the USA was still in discussions with MOPME on their possible involvement.

A related issue is whether certain activities (such as school construction and the supply of equipment) have been focussed upon and accomplished more successfully than others (such as teacher morale and classroom pedagogy, for instance). Infrastructure projects are usually implemented successfully as these activities are relatively straightforward and there is a win-win situation for contractors and suppliers, engineers and the school authority. Some areas (such as inclusion and ethnic minorities) of more interest to (particular) DPs than to GoB, and this is addressed below. In contrast, the *madrasas* (religious schools, attended by some 15 per cent of in-school primary age children: BANBEIS, 2017) are only involved to a very limited extent in donor-supported interventions. [An orthodox stream of madrasa education, known as *Qoumi madrasa* operates without any support from the government and does not follow any government defined curriculum: their certificates have no equivalence with the mainstream certificates.] Because of the sensitivity, GoB neither runs the risk of attempting to reform *madrasa* education nor to exclude it from its development programmes; DPs provide only lukewarm support as it is not easy to influence the curriculum, or to ensure gender parity, or promote universal moral values within them.

7. The Sector-Wide Approach

Increasingly, the merits of a co-ordinated methodology won recognition: SWAps were gaining ground all over South Asia and, as the PEDP1 projects were drawing to a close, there was, as described above, renewed interest amongst Development Partners in coordinating their support and working with Government in a more coherent way. One commentator (Ahmed, 2011) observed that the PEDP2 SWAp 'evolved as a natural step, in the early 2000s, based on the DPs' long-term experience of having close coordination in primary education, starting from the first investment cycle in 1990 through the project-type modality, and then in PEDP1 from the late 1990s through the project-type modality within the GOB common policy framework'.

As already noted, GoB was sceptical and there was initially 'great reluctance on the part of MoPME to introduce a SWAp, related to a failed attempt by donors to impose a programme based approach at the end of the General Education Project in the mid-90s' (Jennings, 2007). However, during PEDP2 preparation, some of those government officials involved saw the merits of strengthening the alignment of external assistance with national priorities and objectives through the pooling of donor financing to fund a sector-wide programme although, as already noted, problems then being experienced in relation to the health sector SWAp raised some concerns.

Inevitably, this change in attitude involved significantly improved coordination between the government and development partners on policy and procedures and, most importantly, a reorientation of government thinking regarding sector management with respect to understanding how to prepare for such a SWAp arrangement, and how to design and sequence the interventions. PEDP2 sought to pursue uncharted territory and, clearly, there were teething problems with GoB recognising its own weak capacity in results-based management, performance-based financing, monitoring and reporting. The design of the EMIS and monitoring system had been weak and the high transaction costs associated with complicated implementation arrangements, especially through the big SWAp introduced in PEDP2 at a time when GoB's capacity was insufficient to handle it and when the initial necessary conditions for harmonisation were not in place.

In effect, a 'Primary' Educational Development Programme involves a 'sub-sector' as opposed to a 'sector' approach – even when, as from PEDP3, 'All Our Children' had become the beneficiary entity (GoB, 2009a). As noted, the lack of a comprehensive analysis for improving the entire education sector, linking different subsectors in an integrated manner and suggesting effective mechanisms for close coordination between the two ministries handling primary and secondary education respectively, has been a concern over the two PEDP decades and, to some extent, remains unresolved. As one review put it, it is necessary but not always easy to take 'a comprehensive view of educational needs and how external assistance can be made relevant and appropriate in the country context, and can be integrated into the institutional system of the country… moreover, external assistance is limited in scope and purpose by its very nature, compared to total needs in a developing country; thus the pressure has been always there to look for ways of maximising the impact of assistance' (Create, 2011).

Some consideration was given during the PEDP4 preparation process to including grades 6 to 8, there having been a policy-level decision to transfer those 'upper primary' classes to MoPME/DPE (MoE, 2010). However, given that these were (and still are) under the responsibility of another government entity – the Ministry of Education – a decision against their inclusion was 'appropriately taken, thus ensuring a more focused targeting of the beneficiary population and avoiding adding more complexity to the design and implementation process (GoB, 2018a).

That having been recognised, the unusual – on the international stage – arrangement of having just five years of primary education might be cited as administrative imperatives triumphing over educational principles. The National Education Policy (MoE, 2010) stipulates that the duration of primary education will be eight years. According to this decision, while grades 6 to 8 were added in a few hundred primary schools, there were no formal arrangements to extend primary education up to grade 8 on a nationwide basis. After 2016, the issue came to the forefront and, in a meeting held between MOE and MOPME, it was decided to implement the Policy and transfer everything related to grade 6-8 to MoPME. However, the Cabinet of Ministers did not approve this proposal and asked the two Ministries to examine the implications further. A committee was formed but it has failed (by March 2019) to reach consensus and it appears that the nationwide extension of primary to grade 8 is very unlikely to happen within the foreseeable future.

8. Some Specific Issues

8.1 Technical Assistance: the Use of Consultants

Getting the best value – from a Bangladesh educational perspective – from the many experts who have come and gone over the last two decades has proved an on-going challenge. A review of PEDP2 noted that 'more flexibility is needed in the use of consultants, particularly when combining Bangladesh and international institutions to develop capacity in the DPE' (ADB, 2008). It has already been noted that, due to the delay in launching PEDP2, many of the identified consultants were unavailable and there is some feeling that some of those substituted were less useful to Bangladesh than would the original experts have been. In relation to PEDP3, it was observed that 'the planning, management, oversight, effective utilization, and evaluation of TA suffered from the weak capacity of DPE and its partner implementing agencies to effectively plan, prepare the ToR, manage, oversee and evaluate the technical assistance' (ADB, 2015). For PEDP4 it was stated that 'Technical assistance needs to be more effectively planned, recruited and managed… there is a significant likelihood the managing of TA, especially the major TA packages might not be effective nor timely' (GoB, 2018a).

One factor has been the awarding of contracts to consultancy companies that specify, for example, '80 person-days of Technical Assistance' – giving the commercial organisation concerned a strong incentive to deliver consultants whether or not they were needed in that particular area at that specific time. Another challenge, only gradually overcome, was the inexperience of Bangladesh officers in confidently making the best use of such expertise, and understanding the actual skills and limitations of each individual. And a third consideration arises from the nature of the 'consultancy culture' generally: what may be described as the 'expert as hero' syndrome where, in order to survive and thrive in a competitive field, every TA feels a need to bring fresh approaches and individual solutions, rather than stressing continuity or participating with experienced national officers in developing appropriate solutions that may be genuinely 'owned' in-country.

8.2 Financing Modalities

Under PEDP1, the development budget was implemented through stand-alone projects by various DPs with their multifarious mechanisms. By contrast, PEDP2 was financed by the GoB and ten DPs through a management and financing structure implemented in parallel with GoB's existing mechanisms. It covered only DP funds and GoB matching funds for the Programme and did not include any 'non-development expenditures' such as the salaries of the mainstream staff and other recurring spending, nor did it cover the cost of other development stand-alone projects outside PEDP 2. However, GoB's revenue expenditure for the sub-sector was included in PEDP3 and, indeed, in PEDP4 and the first Secondary Education Development Programme (SEDP), and this is seen as an important step towards a 'real SWAP'.

During PEDP2, cost-sharing was complex, as was maintaining the 2:1 DP:GoB ratio, creating many accounting and reporting difficulties. For instance, if 10,000 taka was spent on stationery, the vendor received a 6,700 taka cheque from the Project Director (PD) and another of 3,300 taka from the government accounts office, just as program employees received two salary cheques. Moreover, the DPs' two-thirds share was not equally distributed amongst them: different donors were charged on a pro-rata basis. Yet again, some expenditure was carried entirely by one DP (for instance, the import of paper for printing textbooks was paid for by the World Bank). The procedure for channelling donor funds for PEDP 3 was an innovative departure from the standard practice for donor-supported projects, with donor funds being sent to the consolidated account of the Bangladesh Bank.

During each financial year, the Government allocated the budgeted amount in the name of PEDP3 and then, and once the work had been completed or the goods supplied, at the request of the PD, the Chief Accounts officer of MoPME would issue a cheque to the contractors or suppliers. Directing all funds through one government channel improved the government's accounting system significantly and ensured better financial discipline.

Not everything was perfect. For instance, while in PEDP 2 the PD could give an advance from the programme account for such activities as training and workshops, during PEDP3, the PD, having no access to any such funds, had to go through a complicated bureaucratic process to obtain funds in order to make an advance. Indeed, PEDP 3 suffered significantly because of the complicated system of getting advances from the government exchequer. Nevertheless, PEDP3's Disbursement Linked Indicators (DLI), ensuring that some funds were to be reimbursed after their results had been achieved, proved more workable than had the previous system of reimbursement of funds against mere proof of expenditure.

A very detailed Project Document proved to be a stumbling block in PEDP2. From that experience, Development Project Pro-forma (DPP), allowing block allocations under broad activity headings, enabling adequate flexibility during PEDP3 implementation. For example, a definite amount was available for 'equipment' without specifying how many computers or printers could be obtained: the details were put in each year's Annual Operational Plan which was approved by a high level steering committee. This had never happened before in Bangladesh and the flexible DPP became an effective foundation for programme implementation.

Thus, over time, the experiences of PEDP2 enabled significant streamlining and harmonisation of procedures, forms and processes, from both the DPs' and the government's sides, making possible the design of a results-based modality for PEDP3 which used the SWAp effectively in matters of financial management, donor harmonisation, and programme scope. However, there was no happy ending. During PEDP4 preparation, MOPME agreed to the Planning Commission's decision to drop this flexible DPP arrangement – a decision which was regarded by many of those who had been involved with these programmes as a retrograde step. Striking and maintaining an agreeable balance between, on the one hand, allowing PDs sensible flexibility and, on the other, transparently controlling the application of public (including donor-originating) funds, is never straightforward.

8.3 'Each Child Learns'

Shikhbe Protiti Shishu (Each Child Learns), was PEDP3's flagship activity, part of that programme's drive to fundamentally change methods of teaching – indeed, to base pedagogy directly upon each child being able to demonstrate that which has been learned. PEDP3's Mid-Term Review assessed whether reforms and other 'quality' interventions were being implemented and 'on track for ground breaking and sustainable approaches for better learning' (GoB, 2015). However, while noting that 'by mid-term, PEDP3 is already contributing to major changes in areas including the Diploma in Primary Education; the (Grade 5) Primary Education Completion Exam; the introduction of one year of publicly funded pre-primary education; and a sample-based National Student Assessment', *Shikhbe Protiti Shishu*'s progress was not documented. A subsequent review (WB, 2018a), noted that 'Standalone initiatives did not always gain traction under PEDP3, e.g. Each Child Learns' and it is hard to trace it – or even the idea – being followed through in PEDP4.

The disappearance of PEDP3's first-listed activity offers a useful example of how something that is not straightforward (in comparison with building schools or recruiting teachers), that came from the beneficiary country rather than from the donors, and that needed a particular level of understanding and commitment, was not followed through. Perhaps DP representatives, consultants and evaluators, unless they are really familiar with a country, play safe by adopting a conventional internationally-tested approach, embodying an un-readiness to recognise particular country-specific needs and fresh in-country generated approaches.

8.4 Gender

The educational attainment of women in Bangladesh in the early 1990s was one of the lowest in the world and a 2003 study (Mushtaque *et al*) found that 'girls are still far behind boys in terms of learning achievement'. This has been successfully responded to by the first three PEDPs.

For example, over the PEDP2 plan period, the primary completion rate for girls rose from 57.5 per cent to 83.9 per cent, exceeding the target of 82 per cent. Gender parity in enrolment was maintained throughout the PEDP3 programme period rising to 1.02in2016 (i.e. 102 in-school girls compared to 100 boys). Moreover, women's participation in the primary teaching force had also improved significantly by 2016: the percentage of female teachers (head and assistant) increased from 58% (in 2009) to 66% in Government and from 35% to 52% in Non-Government Primary Schools (BANBEIS, 2017).

Building upon the successes of PEDP3, a revised Gender and Inclusive Education Action Plan is included in PEDP4 in order to ensure that these positive gender-related outcomes are sustained. From gender equality-focused elements in the PPE and primary curriculum, including positive gender messaging in textbooks, through mainstream gender equality in all teacher education and professional development activities, to ensuring that there are separate toilets for male and female students, clear intentions and impressive performances in terms of gender are amongst the PEDPs' significant achievements.

Essentially, female students are now performing much better than are males. The examination success rate of girls exceeds that of boys, right through to upper secondary and beyond – and they drop out less frequently. Which means that, while one gender battle has been won, decisively, another has emerged, internationally as well as in Bangladesh, in that, educationally, girls are tending to perform better than boys. This worldwide trend might be linked with the feminisation of the teaching profession, as noted above in respect of Bangladesh – or even a perception of academic success as a 'feminine attribute' and, indeed, schooling as a 'feminine ritual. In such matters, the PEDP experience may do no more than suggest hypotheses.

8.5 Inclusive Education

Inclusive education is a relatively new concept in Bangladesh and, as with the SWAp, was introduced by the DPs and incorporated into the mainstream policy thinking for the first time during PEDP2. The concept requires a mind-set change not only of policy makers but also of teachers, parents and, indeed, students. The additional funding which is required for inclusive education is not available at the school level while, because of the huge challenges involved in handling, often in huge classes, the children who are already in school, bringing in even more children (for example, those with special needs) may be a burden rather than a priority for schools and teachers. For the education of the children from ethnic minority group, particularly those living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, some special types of interventions are required, including primary teachers who speak the native language, and this too creates major difficulties.

Mushtaque *et al*, in their 2003 study (see above), had, in addition to their observations on gender, noted that 'Children belonging to poorer families and ethnic minority groups lag behind the respective dominant groups in terms of both enrolment and learning achievement'. As a more recent study (Begum *et al*, 2018) observed that the '…challenges of promoting inclusive education in geographically isolated rural communities in Bangladesh are linked to poverty, gender inequality, ethnicity, remoteness, language barriers, issues for children with disabilities, and the negative impact of climate (e.g. monsoonal flooding, landslides, and other natural calamities that beset Bangladesh on a regular basis) as well as the current humanitarian crisis with the Rohingya children'. While PEDPs 2 through 4 have taken inclusive primary education seriously, it is questionable whether its value has been fully recognised at either the government policy, the family or the classroom levels, especially in rural Bangladeshi communities.

8.6 Teachers

Programmes may very easily overload teachers, head teachers and educational administrators at all levels with, as the PEDP4 programme document put it '…the introduction of School-and Classroom-Based Assessment, compounded with the requirements of home visits, raising awareness of hygiene and monitoring and providing basic maintenance to the WASH blocks and water tube well and practice safety drills under the Education in Emergencies sub-component' (GoB, 2018a). Additional demands, when unaccompanied by remunerative, status or participative enhancements, may exacerbate already negative situations. There is high teacher absenteeism, sometimes due to training or other official duties. Motivation is low – teaching is not the first occupational choice and the career path is limited. Teacher-student ratios are unworkably low in some areas and, in many cases, female teachers cannot work in remote schools if their husbands are employed in towns. The monitoring system is ineffective, format-based, and demotivating for teachers, while poor governance also demoralises them.

In terms of number, the provision of teacher training and upgrading has been impressive through the PEDPs. However, the quality of that capacity building is too poor to make any effective impact in teaching and learning. Pedagogy is taught in the Primary Training Institutes (PTI) by inadequate numbers of mostly inefficient instructors. The PTI teaching method is typically old-fashioned and fails to encourage trainees to follow the pedagogical lessons in the classroom. The interventions of School Management Committees sometimes provides further problems for teachers, particularly within non-government schools. The PEDPs have had many successes – or partial successes – but the quality of teaching and the morale of teachers remains a major impediment to effective education.

One recent study (Roy and Miah, 2018) suggests that open school data initiatives in primary schools may play significant positive roles in reducing the risks of corruption, which remains widespread. The authors report that '…where parents, school management committee members, teachers, and education officials are supplied with school data, they thereby act properly to ensure transparency and accountability in schools'. Involving teachers, alongside parents and local community representatives in, for example, developing and implementing the School-Level Improvement Plan, may improve morale, leading to positive impacts in quality primary education. This is paralleled by the need for information-driven educational planning at local government and national levels, in which teachers' representatives may usefully be involved.

8.7 Pre-Primary Education

Responding to a concern regarding low student readiness at Grade 1 entry, an emphasis on early childhood education was included in PEDPs 2 and 3. The GoB instruction to open pre-primary in all schools was issued towards the end of PEDP2 and many GPS opened pre-primary sections around that time, along with commencing teacher recruitment and learning materials preparation. However, PPE was properly institutionalized in GPS during PEDP3 and, over that programme period, there was impressive progress in providing access. Some 34,000newpre-primaryassistantteacherswererecruited, over22,000ofthose received two week of training; appropriate teaching learning materials were developed, and all Government Primary Schools received funds for purchasing PPE teaching and learning materials.PPE is yet to be opened in all newly nationalised primary schools and Pre-primary assistant teachers are yet to be recruited for those former Registered Non-Government Primary Schools (RNGPS). Nevertheless, introducing PPE was an undoubted PEDP3 achievement, now being extended within the continuation programme. What remains to be established is whether or not the intended emphasis on learning readiness through play is maintained or if, as has happened elsewhere, the general consequence is merely one of commencing Grade 1 a year earlier, with damaging educational consequences.

8.8 Double and Single Shifts

The key PEDP2 target of increasing student/teacher contact time by reducing double shifts was unmet as only 14% of schools were operating on a single shift basis in2009. The latest available information (GoB, 2018a) is that the use of double shifts still affects over three-quarters of Bangladesh's primary schools, typically resulting in fewer lesson hours than prescribed. The infrastructure development component of PEDP2 and PEDP3 was aimed at building new classrooms with a view to reducing the number of schools with double-shift (in actuality it is a 'staggering shift' with the first shift for grades 1 & 2, the second for grades 3 & 4, with Grade 5 students staying throughout). However, this did not work out as planned as, in many cases during PEDP 2, new classrooms were built after demolishing old school buildings, thus keeping the number of classrooms unchanged. In many cases, due to political and other influences, the distribution of school construction was neither demand-based nor equitable, resulting in the continuation of double shifts and the consequent restriction of learning.

9. Education And Development

An interesting consideration of the relationship between knowledge production and primary education policy making (Unterhalter, Ross and Alam, 2003), emerged out of discussions within the research committee of the DPE and the Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED), and involved researchers from Bangladesh's universities and DfID consultants. They concluded that '…except for an early period after the War of Independence, there has been little open dialogue between researchers and policy makers… research and education policy development have been the preserve of elite groups closely connected to central government.

Very little research has been undertaken independent of government or commissions from large NGOs'. From PEDP2 onwards, the involvement of educational researchers, from universities and organisations such as CAMPE, have played an increasingly significant role in informing policy-making, with sharing sessions with civil societies during each Joint Annual Review. In many respects, PEDP3 benefitted by the 'planning based upon research' momentum created by PEDP 2 – a positive consequence of a genuine SWAp. This effort was supported by government officials within the educational ministries who, whether from working alongside international and local experts or pursuing their own academic studies, became increasingly aware of theoretical issues, state-of-the-art educational approaches and the linkages between education and socio-economic development.

McGrath (2010) offers an educationalist's response to developments in development economics, observing that 'a widespread belief that education is an important contributor to development… helps us earn consultancy income… (and) is undergirded theoretically by the continued power of human capital theory and its adaptations to the era of the global knowledge economy'. Having noted earlier that 'Economics still retains pre-eminence, not least because of its dominant place in the dominant development institution: the World Bank' (King and McGrath 2004), McGrath concludes that the relative 'marginalisation of educational accounts in mainstream development thinking is a major challenge to which international and comparative education needs to respond'.

Not until PEDP4's programme documentation do we find an explicit harnessing of programme objectives to clear economic goals ('…Bangladesh's emergence as a middle-income country by 2021' – GoB, 2018a). In contrast, the justifications for educational investment on the basis of economic development characterise virtually all development partners' own documents although, in some but not all cases, their vision of development extends beyond the economic, embracing for example, social, health and demographic aspirations (such as the reduction of early marriage) and environmental goals. Indeed, an undue alignment of educational objectives to economic imperatives, no matter how genuinely allied with poverty alleviation, runs the risk of jeopardising the broad, humane and fulfilling range of experiences that characterise an open, equitable and liberal education.

Certainly, a belief (by parents as well as planners) that education offer a route out of poverty can, as McGrath (2010) observes, generate educational inflation and (in Dore's words which he quotes) engender 'the drive to succeed in the labour market (that) leads to learners completing ever-higher levels of education to such an extent that the supply of labour at any one qualification level tends to outweigh demand' (Dore, 1976). Families certainly perceive education as a route out of poverty at the individual level, just as well-intentioned decision-makers in donor countries regard it as a road to economic development socially. But those involved in education, across Bangladesh and beyond, regard education as valuable of itself, welcoming the huge leap in adult literacy levels and the rising ratio of female-to-male graduates as worthy ends in themselves, along with applauding, for example:

- reduced maternal and under five mortality rates;
- reduced fertility rates; and
- massively increased child immunisation,

in each of which education, particularly girls' education, has been a 'silent catalyst'. Indeed, education is development, irrespective of whether or not such significant Bangladesh achievements over the two PEDP decades translate explicitly into increases in earnings.

10. Some Concluding Observations

It is reasonable to ask (but impossible to determine) whether the PEDPs have, to date, succeeded. Officially, whether a programme is reported as a 'success' or a 'failure' is decided by the DPs through Review Missions, comparing actual against planned achievements, carried out in conjunction with government, and in Project Completion Reports (PCR), supplemented by mid-term and final evaluations. From the GoB side, after every financial year the concerned Ministry makes an informal progress evaluation of each project or programme, measuring progress against physical and financial targets. With the PEDPs, the Ministry of Planning's Implementation, Monitoring & Evaluation Division (IMED) prepares a PCR and rates the intervention.

While all such documents are useful, and bureaucratically necessary, few if any address the overall long-term consequences or attempt programme/non-programme comparisons, let alone trace the developmental impact of educational interventions. And this present paper is no exception.

Since PEDP1 commenced, Bangladesh has advanced substantially in economic terms and has made remarkable progress in some (but by no means all) social and other dimensions. It may well be that the advances in primary education have contributed, as well as responded, to these developments: precisely how and to what extent will not be established here.

What may be offered are some thoughts on the implications of PEDP experiences to date. Some of these, covering for example, the use of consultants, the second-phase gender challenge, pre-primary provision and purpose, the overloaded and under-motivated teacher and double shifts, have already been suggested or implied. Underlying those particular illustrations are these more general observations:

- **Moving into a SWAp is best seen as an ongoing process** as opposed to a one-off event, to be characterised by open and well-informed dialogue between DPs, government at all levels, academics, civil society and other parties with legitimate interests (such as teachers' representatives and the media);
- **The success or otherwise of educational interventions depends most upon the least easily measurable factors** (such as the morale of teachers, the well-informed understanding and support of local communities, sensitive quality assurance and the politico-bureaucratic understanding and flexibility of managers at all levels); and
- While those involved in education sector SWAps, or contemplating their introduction, should critically review experiences from elsewhere, they should then, through genuine, well-informed and widespread consultation, **determine the objectives, arrangements and procedures best-suited to their particular circumstances, challenges and aspirations**, allowing for flexible evolution as demands and situations change and as understanding increases.

Shikhbe Protiti Shishu was intended to focus on each individual child being able to demonstrate that which has been learned. In a similar manner, the consequences of all interventions, of all SWAps, should be evaluated objectively in terms of verifiable and sustainable impact. An effective education programme – a successful SWAp – is likely to be ever-evolving, flexible, tailor-made and focussed on understanding, sensitively responding to and ingeniously measuring, reporting and contemplating developments regarding the most complex and intractable of challenges. Increasingly, Bangladesh's successive PEDPs have met more and more of those criteria.

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