

The Challenge of Primary Education in the Developing Countries

By A. K. M. Hedayetul Hug

1 For the average Japanese, to talk of the basics of primary education or adult literacy is like carrying coals to Newcastle or begging a question that was settled more than a century ago and is now only a question of fine tuning. The greatest endeavor and sacrifice in Japanese history has been to education which has served as the basis for the country's socio-economic-cultural structure. The 58,760 educational institutions are the powerhouses that keep the nation striving for excellence. But if one pauses for a moment and looks at the other side, the least developed countries (LDC), an entirely different picture emerges.

As the 20th century draws to a close, the world will have more than 1 billion people unable to read and write, shut out of the sunlight of life. Of these unfortunate people, 600 million are women, 98% of them are in the developing countries, and most of them in Asia. Asia is home to the world's poor where nearly one-third of its people are illiterate. In 1960 the world had 700 million illiterate people. This year it has nearly touched the 1 billion mark and in the remaining eight years of this century another 50 million will join their ranks.

2 It is not that there hasn't been any improvement in the situation in some countries. In the last 20 years literacy has increased by one-third, women's education has made a good beginning, and more students now attend school than ever. These redeeming features, however, have been eclipsed by the tremendous population growth which has, in turn, created a greater demand for education, stressed both internal and external resources, demanded more sacrifice from communities and governments, including international agencies and donors, only to mention a few repercussions. The ever widening gap between the haves and have-nots and the rising expectations of the times have compounded the situation so much that the concept, practices and realities of primary education in the developing world are almost at a breaking point.

3 Primary education, now regarded as a birthright, may not have the glamour of higher education but it pays more dividends and its contributions are solid. Recent World Bank studies have shown that a farmer with four years of schooling had a 10% edge on productivity over others who had no education. Investment in primary education is found to be 75% higher than investment in secondary education and nearly twice as high compared to university education. In Bangladesh, the largest of the least developed countries with about 90 million poor, or about 8.3% of the world's poor, and having a literacy rate of less than 30%, the cost of a university graduate could produce 100 primary school graduates who attended school for five years. Despite this patent advantage, primary education lacks in glamour and prestige compared to higher education. Political pressures in the past had led to diversion of funds from primary education to higher education until there was a sharp reaction when the situation had to be reversed.

This has happened in many developing countries where the elite control authority and resources and live mostly in urban areas. In a majority of the developing countries, 75% to 80% of the people live in rural areas. This fact alone shows that primary education is largely a problem of the rural poor, although the urban dwellers also are not immune from it. In Bangladesh, primary education is a state responsibility enshrined in the constitution. There are nearly 45,000 primary schools, mostly government run, and 200,000 teachers, 25% of them women. Each school has an average enrollment of 200 students and the teacher-student ratio is almost 1:40.

4 Using Bangladesh as an example of primary education in a least developed country, the following dimensions emerge.

(A) Planners are still struggling to get on their feet in understanding the concepts and curriculum of primary education. Even in nomenclature the objectives dif-

fer. Some like to call it "basic education for a better orientation to life," others prefer the term "fundamental education," and still others like the phrase "foundation education." It has been estimated that for a least developed country it would take a lifetime, if not more, to educate a nation's population in basic education, unless it is also supplemented by non-formal education to cover the out-of-school population. Primary education must be backed by non-formal education to make it meaningful.

Mass literacy and lifelong education for drop-outs is therefore a must for any developing country. Mass literacy was tried on a massive scale in Bangladesh, mainly due to government initiative with the active cooperation of Non-Government Organizations (NGO) and local bodies. Dovetailing this with formal primary education proved to be a difficult task. It was assumed that all primary schoolteachers would volunteer their services after school hours to act as catalytic agents in mass literacy work with the primary schools serving as focal points, but it didn't work that easily. Curriculum building of non-formal education posed a big issue and preparation and distribution of large-scale printed materials and the necessary follow-up was also a problem.

Client follow-up was also a time-consuming process. The solution is still not in sight, although sporadic success stories have emerged in some places due to individual efforts and leadership. Making the curriculum interesting to hold the clientele, creating economic prospects for them and finding suitable teachers to volunteer time and energy are the three biggest problems that remain to be solved.

(B) The dropout rate in primary schools is alarming. In Bangladesh, more than 60% of students in primary schools drop out after a year, the main reasons being poverty, uncertainty about future employment after primary education, unattractive school atmosphere, lack of proper schools and educational facilities. Universal pri-



Photo: JICA

The drive towards universal literacy taxes the resources of the least developed countries.

primary education in Bangladesh was introduced in 1980 and the target is to provide education for the 5 to 11 year age group. At a conservative estimate, it will take another 20 years to attain an 80% literacy rate in Bangladesh.

As a result of the universal primary education program, more students are now enrolled than ever before, more teachers have been added, teacher training programs have been arranged through cluster training and supervision of schools has started. A beginning has been made to improve the quality of primary education through trained teachers and free supply of books. Between 1981 to 1983, Bangladesh even tried to provide school uniforms free to girls to encourage them to come to school.

The results were encouraging but the experiment proved costly and had to be abandoned. Compared to 1965, the attendance of girls in primary schools registered a three-fold increase and of female student examination results over the years now compares favorably with males. Despite this progress, female literacy stands at hardly 18%.

(C) The quality of any education largely depends on the background and attitude of the teachers. For primary education it is difficult to get talented individuals to become teachers because they invariably leave their villages to seek out their future in the urban areas.

Evidence in Bangladesh has shown that the overwhelming number of teachers

have only a second division diploma and many take up this profession, not for the innate love it, but just to have a job. The recruitment of teachers is another nightmare. It was first thought that elected local representatives would be best fitted to judge the potential of teachers in their locality and ensure free and fair recruitment through written competitive examinations followed by viva-voice tests. But when they were given the authority to recruit teachers locally, charges of nepotism mounted in quite a few places. This system of recruitment had to be changed.

Primary schoolteachers did not like to work under the local governments and they objected to being recruited by local sub-district authorities (*upazillas*). The debate whether the administration of primary education should be entirely left to the local bodies heats up from time to time.

(D) Teacher absenteeism in the villages is common and in many areas, where illiteracy is widespread, the primary schoolteacher must also assume a leadership role in the community.

(E) The development and remodelling of primary teacher training on a massive scale has been taking place in Bangladesh for nearly a decade and some curriculum improvements have been made. More supervisors are being appointed to oversee teachers, and primary schoolteachers, who have a strong lobby, have seen to it that a sizeable number of posts in the educational hierarchy of supervisors and instructors in the training establishments are taken from their ranks. Strict enforcement of the education code in the outlying areas is still a problem and professional supervision of schools has just begun.

(F) The primary school establishment is perhaps the single largest establishment of any government department in Bangladesh and consumes most of the government's budget. The minimum salary for primary teachers is about 2,000 taka or ¥7,000 per month. The construction of a school for 200 students in a village costs about 350,000 taka or ¥1.2 million. The annual maintenance costs of a village school is at least 15,000 taka or ¥50,000. To maintain and provide for 45,000 primary schools, 200,000 teachers, 52 primary teacher training institutes, textbooks for

over 12 million students, not to mention the cost of supervision and inspection, is enough to tax the resources of any country, let alone a least developing country where survival for existence is a grim reality of everyday life.

The Bangladesh revenue budget for the current 1992-93 fiscal year totalled U.S.\$2.7 billion of which the highest allocation went to the education sector, 27% higher than last year. In the annual development plan of U.S.\$1 billion, the education sector received 7.8 billion taka (US\$1.00 = 38.50 taka), a significant increase over the previous year.

(G) The commitment of Bangladesh to universal primary education has attracted the World Bank and some countries to join hands in what is considered to be the single largest educational scheme in any of the LDCs and its outcome is eagerly awaited. The initial efforts have already indicated positive progress.

(H) International cooperation in primary education is a welcome departure from the heavier sectors that had so long been the dominant theme in the donor community. The modalities of donor cooperation are worked out by consultant kingpins who have a very strong voice. It is the selection and recruitment of these consultants, more than anything else, that the donors must reconsider. In Bangladesh the consultants were officially appointed with the consent of the government but in reality they were presented with a short list that was essentially a fait accompli.

None of the consultants could speak, read or write the language and it was only after a lot of clamor that a few local hands were engaged, temporarily, at one-fifth the salary of the expatriates. A few consultants, originally recruited under one plan for a two year duration, managed to prolong their stay for six to seven years by switching from their original projects to revised projects and then on to new projects. In some cases there was no coordination between the experts/consultants in various fields of education and in some instances there was overlapping or contradictory recommendations. In almost all cases they worked through local "counterparts" who acted as conduits for the consultants. I know of one situation where the consultant, hired to advise at a teacher

training academy in the interior, could not be persuaded to live there even though a new house was part of the agreement. The consultant wrote a fat report, from Dhaka, based on flying visits to the work place. It is not that the consultants, who were probably visiting the country for the first time, didn't do any commendable work. The basic problem was the lack of direct contact between the experts and the local people with whom they were supposed to consult. Their reports were prepared with the help of their counterparts through whom they worked and villagers do not always open up in front of officials lest some are displeased.

(I) The concept of state shouldering of primary education is of comparatively recent origin. It had always been the private sector, religious, charitable, public spirited and voluntary associations, which had spearheaded the cause of enlightenment and education of children. Many schools in developing countries owe their origin to the munificence of private donors and philanthropists. With the state coming into the picture, non-government efforts to manage and run schools on a voluntary basis, to a large extent, have dampened and many now think this is the government's problem. As I have said earlier it is beyond the capacity of existing formal educational structures to make any developing nation wholly literate without supplementary efforts from private education. It is here that private bodies and the NGOs can play an effective role. NGOs have gained prominence day by day and the 21st century will perhaps belong more to the NGOs until they acquire a bureaucratic character of their own.

Till then they have to shoulder the message of literacy and fill in formal education gaps in the developing countries.

Primary education has to contend with kindergartens which for some reason evokes mixed feelings. There is nothing wrong with kindergartens themselves—they provide excellent ground for development and care of children at an early age. But the hefty cost of kindergarten stands opposed to the universalization of primary education. The monthly fee for a good kindergarten in Dhaka is approximately the same as the monthly earnings of a village laborer and equal to

the cost of three years of honors graduate work at Dhaka University. Despite high fees good kindergarten are never short of pupils. The social prestige attached to these is too evident to be ignored.

5 The ailments of primary education are not new. They have been in the body politic far too long to be wished away in a year or two. The remedies sought or tried have been varied but the problems come back in new forms or shapes to plague the country and their communities. The work of educational commissions in various countries, from time to time, calls for reform, but "reforms" these days have many connotations. Few people want to change unless they see some immediate gains. There has hardly been an Educational Commission (Bangladesh had two in 20 years) that has not provoked reactions either from the students, the teachers or other interested parties and brought them out into the streets. Does this mean that there should be no progress in the most vital sector of a nation's life—primary education? These days there are repeated and compelling calls for all kinds of education, like environment, management, vocational, sports, religious, media, and science education, only to mention a few. Some have gone to the extent of urging us to have "sustainable education." In this cross-current of thinking, what will be the fate of education for our children?

6 It is a paradox that despite all rhetoric of support and cooperation, primary education has lagged behind in the least developed countries, where local resources by themselves are not enough to meet the needs. It is here that Japan can extend its years of experience and expertise in the development of this vital base of national life. Do Japanese people know that the cost of a lunch in a good restaurant in Tokyo can help a primary school student in Bangladesh with his educational supplies for four years? Or for that matter, the cost of a year-end party here can build a primary school for 200 students in Bangladesh?

It is true that Japanese ODA is largely based on the requests of the recipient countries and if they themselves do not ask for it, it cannot be imposed. But are developing countries, faced with compet-

ing demands on their limited resources and conditioned aid programs, always in a comfortable position to decide on the priorities in the pull and push for inter- and intra-sectoral pressures? Japan's long 124 years of continuous search for excellence, since the Meiji Restoration, has amply demonstrated that there is no short-cut to progress except through education, of which primary education is the base. The 1984 educational reforms in Japan had three basic objectives: a) switching to life-long learning, b) attaching importance to personality, and c) globalization and information technology.

As a part of her contribution to global exchange Japan also made plans to train an additional 100,000 students by the year 2000. This means she will have to provide for another 45,000 students in the next eight years to reach this target. Human resource development is the need of the times and by all accounts primary education is its foundation. Fortunately, there is a growing realization in Japan that human resource development, long neglected in the race for infrastructure development, should now have its rightful place in the ODA.

Primary education is, therefore, a logical case to qualify for such assistance in the developing countries. Unlike heavy industrial projects which produce for the export market, the resources transferred will remain in the recipient country and the investment would produce enduring results. It would also minimize or eliminate heavy overhead costs of consultants and advisers who eat up a chunk of this aid. This also complements the desire of the Japanese public to have their aid reach the "people."

7 It is frequently said that developing countries groan under the burden of debt-servicing. The real burden is the burden of illiteracy and we cannot bequeath this burden to the new century and our successors.

The sins of our omissions in developing primary education should not be visited upon our children and the sooner we learn to take this truth to heart, the better. ■

A.K.M. Hedayetul Hug is the former Bangladesh ambassador to Japan, serving from March 1988 to March 1991.