

## **Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) in Bangladesh: A case study on BRAC's role.**

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### **Abstract:**

In the second five-year development plan, Bangladesh had introduced universal primary education, for year 1980-1985. Now 7<sup>th</sup> five-year development plan is running from year 2016 to 2020. In between years 2016 to 2018, the population living below the national poverty line dropped from 21.8% to 24.3%. The proportion of employed population below \$1.90 purchasing power parity a day also dropped from 14.8% in 2016 to 9.2% in 2019.

Moreover, there is obstinate rural-urban and socio-economic disparities for entry and participation in a primary school in Bangladesh. In the mid-1990s, the government used food ration and feeding programs to boost attendance in already overcrowded government schools (EQUIP 2 Case study). Even though entree to education increased, the quality of education slowly declined.

In this setting, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) began to discover ways to help children under its rural development program gain access to value-added education. BRAC was already one of the largest aboriginal development and assistance non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Bangladesh by the mid-1980s. By 1984, it had introduced 22 experimental, one-room, non-formal primary education (NFPE) centers for children of the rural poor.

In this study, we will see the functioning, role, and contribution of BRAC in providing NFPE in Bangladesh to meet EFA (Education for All). The study is expected to be advantageous to donors, NGOs, governments, and students of education interested in using non-formal models to promptly amplify access to primary education, particularly for girls, in developing countries.

These groups might also use the study findings to develop donor-NGO-government-community partnerships to improve school quality and to inaugurate decentralized management systems that ensure low-cost, high-quality human services delivery.

**Key Words:** Universal primary education, Non-governmental organizations, Non-formal primary education (NFPE), Education for All (EFA)

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### **I. BACKGROUND**

Bangladesh is a densely populated country with 1,115.62 people living per square kilometer which ranks 10th in the world. And also a developing country in Asia.

Although situated on one of the largest, most fertile deltas in the world, the country is categorized by persistent poverty, a rural-based economy, high levels of under- and unemployment, rapid population growth, frequently occurring natural disasters and generally low status for girls and women. Bangladesh is also characterized by linguistic, ethnic, and cultural homogeneity, as a relatively stable political environment in recent years, and a fairly well-developed, although not well-funded or service-oriented, a system of public administration. (Prather, Cynthia J.)

National and international voluntary social welfare and development agencies are involved extensively in developmental and poverty alleviation work. Apart from its land, water, and natural gas, Bangladesh's greatest potential for economic development lies in its human resources. Low investments to date in primary education, however, have resulted in limited access to schools for the majority of the rural population, literacy rates among the lowest in the world, and low levels of efficiency in all sectors of the economy in the mid 1980s.

In 1990 the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) passed compulsory primary education legislation and began implementing that legislation in 68 of the country's Thanas (sub-districts) in 1992. The Government strategies to enroll all six-year-old children in first grade, increase their retention significantly up to fifth grade and do the same for successive groups of six-year-olds.

Other efforts, including the establishment of a National Committee on Basic Education for All, a social mobilization program, a five-year General Education Project named General Education Plan (GEP) from the

year 1990-1995, and a Government-run Program for Integrated Non-formal Education also have been initiated. Despite these ambitious plans, Bangladesh's primary education system still enrolled about 60 percent of the suitable age group.

About half of those enrolled attend school with some regularity, and only about 20 percent of those enrolled complete the full five-year cycle of primary education. (Education Watch report, 2008) The GOB<sup>1</sup> has recognized the vital role NGOs can play in supplementing government efforts to expand the social conditions of the disadvantaged population. Collectively, NGOs already played a national role in health and family planning service delivery and the expansion of rural credit in Bangladesh.

Although NGO work in the education sector has been modest to date, increased NGO involvement appears promising.

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Provision of primary level education is the major responsibility of the government. This is not only because there are market failures in the provision of basic education but also the fact that education is considered a basic human right that has to be guaranteed by the state.

In the last two decades, a concerted effort has been undertaken in the public sector to reach the goal of universal primary education and reducing gender disparity. In addition to this, the private sector plays an important role. While the private sector (for-profit) serves the children from well-off families, the NGO sector caters to the needs of the poor.

According to Education Watch 2008, the shares of government and non-government schools, non-formal schools run by NGOs, and madrasas in terms of students enrolled in 2008 are 56.9%, 20.5%, 9.6%, and 7% respectively (Nath and Chowdhury 2009, Annex 5.3 p168). Because of the interference by non-government providers in recent years, the share of government primary school decreased from 68.3% in 1998 to around 57% in 2008 (Nath and Chowdhury 2009, p14).

National statistics record lower figures for government and non-formal schools but a higher figure for primary madrasas. Primary education is officially free in Bangladesh. However, a recent study showed that the parents paid about half of the total educational expenses of the primary school students (Chowdhury et al., 2002).

Quality of education is frustrating. Less than two percent of the primary school leavers can achieve all the terminal proficiencies determined by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (Nath and Chowdhury, 2001). Studies have shown that the students of non-formal schools are doing better than those of other types of schools (Nath et al. 1999; Nath and Chowdhury, 2001).

## III. INTRODUCTION

According to the International Monetary Fund, Bangladesh's economy was the second-fastest-growing major economy of 2016, with a growth rate of 7.1% included in N-11<sup>1</sup>. Bangladesh had become a developing country from the Least Developed Country with a growing population of 161.4 million (2018). Then, the annual national poverty rate and extreme poverty rate in our country was respectively 23.2% and 12.9% (HIES-2016)<sup>2</sup>.

In 2010, the national poverty rate was 31.5% and the extreme poverty rate was 18.5%. From the year 2010-2016, the national poverty rate and the extreme poverty rate has decreased by 8.3% and 5.6% respectively. The positive news is that the poverty rate is decreasing in our country. (Rahman M.R, 2017) However, our labor force is largely unskilled and uneducated which despite the large population keeps human resource development low (EFA global monitoring report, 2008). In 2015, the adult literacy rate for Bangladesh was 61.5%. The adult literacy rate of Bangladesh increased from 29.2% in 1981 to 61.5% in 2015 growing at an average annual rate of 21.09% (BBS)<sup>3</sup>. The Government of Bangladesh distinguishes education as a means of reducing poverty and improving the quality of life for children. As a participant to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Government of Bangladesh, with support from development partners, has made progressive steps towards fulfilling children's rights to education, according to the Education for All and Millennium Development Goals.

As a result, the country has made substantial progress towards accomplishing universal primary education and gender equality in schools. The net enrolment rate in primary school is 116.47 percent in 2018. Bangladesh has one of the largest primary education systems in the world with an estimated 16.4 million

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<sup>1</sup>N11 countries or the Next 11 countries refers to a group of eleven countries—specifically Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Turkey, South Korea, and Vietnam—which have emerging markets that could potentially become some of the world's largest economies

<sup>2</sup> HIES- Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2016-2017

<sup>3</sup> BBS- Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

primary school-aged children (6 to 10 years) (Quality Primary Education in Bangladesh, UNICEF). In terms of access, the high enrolment rates reached for both boys and girls do not yet associate to covering all the children in Bangladesh.

It is currently projected that there are more than 4.3 million out-of-school children throughout the country. Schooling prospects are also very limited for some particular groups such as working children, disabled children, indigenous children, and those in remote areas or living in extreme poverty. (EFA, Global Monitoring Report)

#### **IV. OBJECTIVE**

This study has one purpose. It aims to: Ensure the program to be acknowledged further by national and international policymakers, by offering evidence of its scope and impact in accompanying their drive to achieve EFA and its SDGs on schedule and assist valuable practical learning for national and international development partners inconsiderate the dynamics of a perspective specific capacity development process.

#### **V. METHODOLOGY**

I have used secondary data using a "desk study" approach. I have also interviewed and discussed with some key people at BRAC and NFPE. The desk study covers BRAC's reports and publications, NFPE program reports, various external review reports on NFPE, and other international documents on sustainable development, NGO dynamics, capacity building, and donor policies regarding the capacity building.

#### **VI. WHAT IS BRAC'S NFPE PROGRAM AND ITS ACHIEVEMENT?**

##### ***The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC)***

BRAC is a non-governmental development organization aiming for poverty alleviation and the empowerment of the poor. Micro-finance, health, and education are the three major fields of BRAC exercise development activities in Bangladesh. Women are the most deprived section in Bangladesh. Bangladesh was ranked 139 out of 187 countries on the Human Development Index and 47 out of 144 countries surveyed on the Gender Inequality Index in 2017.

BRAC programs are targeted to uplift poor women and girls (BRAC, 1997). BRAC is the largest southern NGO employing 120,000 people, the majority of whom are women, and reaches more than 110 million people with development interventions in Asia and Africa (BRAC, 2009). BRAC, the largest NGO in Bangladesh, is recognized throughout the world for its rural development, credit, and health programs.

In 1985, in response to requests from participants in its rural development programs, BRAC initiated the NFPE program for eight- to ten-year-olds in 22 villages. The unique objective of the program was to develop a primary education model that could provide, in three years, basic literacy and numeracy to the poorest rural children - the children who remain unreached by the formal school system. Girls were given special emphasis.

By late 1991, the program had expanded to 6,003 schools, serving 11- to 14-year-olds as well as eight- to ten-year-olds. Over 8,000 schools were operating in 1992. BRAC calls its program "Non-formal Primary Education." (Prather, Cynthia J) This is consistent with the use of the terms formal and non-formal education in Bangladeshi government documents and education literature in Bangladesh. In the past few years, BRAC's NFPE program has received considerable attention from the Education for All (EFA) community.

BRAC considers education as a key to upward social mobility. A non-formal way of primary education has been adopted in this regard. The BRAC Education Program was started in 1985 aiming enrolment of the children who never enrolled in schools or dropped out of the formal education system. There are two types of BRAC schools.

The Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) is for children aged 8-10 years, and the Basic Education for Older Children (BEOC) is for children aged 11-14 years. The former is a four-year program and the latter is a three-year course. However, both cater to five academic years from grade I to V. Covering the national proficiencies for primary education BRAC developed its textbooks for the first three grades of primary education (Ghosh, 1999).

During the first three academic years, the schools use the textbooks prepared by BRAC. Textbooks prepared by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) are used during the fourth and fifth academic years. ( Samir R Nath). International organizations, particularly UNICEF and USAID, had begun examining the NFPE program's role in achieving universal primary education in Bangladesh and its potential contribution to the achievement of universal primary education in other less developed countries with similar "gaps" in their education systems.

Although BRAC officials developed the NFPE program to be a model education program for other communities in Bangladesh, they do not consider this model "replicable" in or "exportable" to other countries.

(Prather, Cynthia J.,). Nath and & Chowdhury (2009) report that in 2008, non-formal schools accounted for 9.6% of total primary enrollments.

These schools are managed by NGOs (rather than individuals) and are funded by the NGOs themselves or by international donors through the NGOs. Across Bangladesh, BRAC (formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) runs more than 24,000 one-room, single grade, single teacher non-formal primary schools serving 750,000 students (BRAC 2011a). More than 4.5 million children have graduated out of BRAC schools since the start of the program in 1985.

The program receives no government financial support and is primarily funded by largely international donors. It targets poor students who have dropped out of government-funded schools, ethnic minorities, students in rural areas who would not otherwise have education access, and students who are vulnerable, marginalized, or excluded due to special needs or other reasons. (Christine Sommers, 2011).

## VII. THE NFPE PROGRAM OF BRAC

BRAC's NFPE program is by far the largest single non-government primary education program in Bangladesh. It is one of the most encouraging programs. More than 90 percent of the children who start BRAC schools graduate and a large proportion of the NFPE program graduates are admitted into Class IV or higher of the Government school system.

The NFPE program has the same elements as more traditional educational programs: students, teachers, parents, schedules, and instructional sites, an instructional approach, and a specified curriculum. (Prather, Cynthia J.,) The conformation of these elements, however, is what makes the NFPE program distinctive. The NFPE program entails the following:

***Involvement of the community:*** Before setting up every school, BRAC staff has to survey the community to estimate the necessity for the school. So naturally, a good relationship is built up even before setting up the school. The room is generally selected by some people from the community. The teacher is also employed from the local community. So from the very beginning, a strong relationship with the local community is preserved in BRAC schools. (TOUFIQ HASAN, 2012).

BRAC schools avoid many of the problems that government schools face by setting up an annual school calendar in association with local communities, working to create school hours and an annual calendar that appropriately responds to families' needs to have their children helping around the house and in the fields, especially during harvest time. (Christine Sommers).

***School:*** Long distances between students' homes and school are one of the crucial reasons for the high dropout rate or even a low enrolment rate in primary schools.

In rural and hilly areas, it is really hard for school going children to reach the school by walking. BRAC started to set up the schools inside the community so that the dropped out or left out children from conventional formal education can easily get access to a new type of school. (TOUFIQ HASAN, 2012).

***Classroom:*** There is only one classroom for every BRAC school. The classroom itself is the school. It is very dissimilar to typical and formal classrooms. The size of the classroom is 336 square feet. There is no chair or benches for the students or teachers. Students sit on the mat floor. Students sit in a U-shape line having the teacher in front. The room has enough space to split the students into five small groups for group and project activities.

All the classrooms are decorated with drawings by the students, colorful posters of common flowers, animals, and fishes. (TOUFIQ HASAN, 2012).

***Students:*** A school consists of 30 children, 60-70 percent of whom are girls, who live in rural areas, within about a two-kilometer radius of the school. For the most part, students come from relatively disadvantaged homes. Their families generally are landless or own only their homesteads and the family members survive on less than US\$70 per capita annually. (Prather, Cynthia J., Ed., 1993)

***Teachers:*** Teachers are generally married adults, 60-70 percent of whom are women, who have completed nine or more years of education and live within easy walking distance of the school. These teachers are hired on a temporary, part-time basis and are paid modest wages. There is one teacher for each 30 students.

Teacher training includes 15 days of preliminary training at a residential BRAC training center and one- or two-day refresher training sessions each month conducted by BRAC staff at a BRAC office near the teacher's school. Weekly visits from BRAC field workers provide regular feedback. (Prather, Cynthia J., Ed., 1993).

***Parents:*** The parents of most BR AC school students are illiterate and are usually the most socio-economically disadvantaged in their villages. Parents make no monetary contribution to the school, apart from replacing broken slate boards and worn mats; BRAC provides all student and teachers supplies-pencils, notebooks,

textbooks, teacher manuals, slate boards, chalk, etc. Parents are anticipated to support the program in other ways, however.

Before a new school opening, parents and BRAC staff meet several times. Parents also must pledge to attend monthly parent meetings and to send their children to school each day. (Prather, Cynthia J., Ed, 1993).

**Curriculum:** The curriculum for BRAC schools is very inventive and practical.

As most of the children in BRAC schools come from socially and economically deprived groups, BRAC specially designs its primary education curriculum. BRAC primary education is four years long whereas the conventional formal primary school curriculum is designed for five years in Bangladesh. At the end of these four years, all the students of BRAC primary schools are expected to achieve all the terminal proficiencies set up by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). (TOUFIQ HASAN , 2012)

**Pedagogic focus:** The teaching style in BRAC schools is very different from formal primary schools. Student's participation in the teaching and learning process is guaranteed through a range of different activities. Students are kept involved in different types of activities in small groups or individually. Rhymes and songs are an obligatory part of the daily school routine. A joyful learning environment is ensured in the classroom.

Lots of low-cost, spontaneous, and locally available materials are used to enhance the concrete learning of the children. (TOUFIQ HASAN, 2012)

**Assessment:** Unlike formal schools, there is no formal assessment through examination after every term in each grade in BRAC schools. Rather continuous assessment is being done by the teacher throughout the year using small size tests and giving formative feedback.

But recently the government enforces to take part in the primary completion test for every student. So at the end of grade V, all students must take part in the primary completion test which is overseen by the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). Currently, existing evidence suggests that students from BRAC schools do very well in this test. (TOUFIQ HASAN, 2012)

### **Cost Efficiency and Cost Effectiveness**

Cost efficiency and cost-effectiveness were evaluated by comparing costs and student performance in BRAC schools and formal primary schools. Independent cost studies confirmed BRAC costs for schooling at roughly equal to that of the Government's formal schooling, without seeing the extra private costs that make the formal schools more expensive and lead to high dropout and low enrollment rates in the formal schools.

Also, unlike the formal school system, which assigns the enormous majority of its resources to teacher salaries and school facilities, BRAC allots almost 30 percent of the NFPE program budget to management and supervision. Only 29 percent is allocated to teacher salaries, and 6 percent are used to rent school space. Prather, Cynthia J., Ed. 1993) BRAC teachers are almost entirely women, and almost every one of them will be jobless if they were not teaching for BRAC.

Many of these women who are interviewed stated that they felt empowered in their position as teachers, gaining a role and a power of speech within their communities. Their classroom hours were limited to mornings and they still had time to attend to their households during the day, and they had no expectation of the salary or benefits of a government employee.

The cost-effectiveness of the BPS (BRAC Primary Schooling) program can be evaluated in terms of its average cost to produce a primary school completer. According to EQUIP 2 research, the completion rate for the BPS-equivalent of first through fifth grade was approximately 94 percent in 2003, compared to GPS's 67 percent in 2001. Based on the unit costs, the cost per BPS completer was \$84 per student in 2003, compared to \$246 per student in the GPS (Govt. Primary Schooling) program in 2001. The transformation partially stems from lower BPS per student costs and the fact that students can complete the program in four years, matched to five years in the traditional system. BPS's higher completion rate also contributes to the lower cost per completer.

Lower teacher salaries, higher teacher quality, proximity to the community, better teacher and student attendance rates, and low-cost materials also contribute to BPS's cost-effectiveness. According to the Assessment of Basic Competencies tool administered to a sample of BPS and GPS students in 1992 and 1999, BPS students performed better in both years.

In 1999, BPS students averaged a 70 percent pass rate, reflecting a cost of \$122 per student achieving a required level of learning. GPS students averaged only a 27 percent pass rate, reflecting a \$929 cost per student. (Written for EQUIP 2 by Colette Chabbott and edited by Audrey-Marie Schuh Moore (FHI 360), 2006)

### **Description of BRAC's Potential Roles:**

BRAC appears well-positioned to contribute to the universal primary education effort in Bangladesh in at least six ways: expanding its NFPE program; expanding its support to other NGOs; improving community participation in local primary education planning and management; coordinating local primary education

planning and management; monitoring and assessing progress in basic education; and developing a post-primary non-formal education model.

The last four roles are illustrative of what BRAC, or an NGO in a similar position in another country, could do. The degree to which BRAC assumes these roles will depend to a large degree on Government interest and on the time constraints of its mid and senior-level staff. The NFPE model has been able to prove itself as a successful Non-formal Education system in Bangladesh, capable of bringing inaccessible children into the educational environment.

Having been vastly enriched with the in-country experience of catering to the educational needs of poor rural children and adolescents for the last 20 years, the BRAC NFPE model is now being adopted in other developing countries, i.e., Afghanistan, Sudan, and Uganda. (M. Aldeen, 2009 ).

### **VIII. ISSUES TO CONSIDER FOR NFPE PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT**

Some issues related to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the existing NFPE program are as follows:

**Classroom environment:** BRAC classrooms are more child-centered than those of Bangladeshi formal schools, but narrow classroom space restricts the range of child-centered activities. Making schools more child-centered would require the use of larger rooms, which might require higher rental fees and in turn, might increase the per-child cost of the program. According to all sources, the BRAC classrooms are much more "child friendly" than traditional formal schools.

Although it is unclear whether child-centered instruction prepares students for the formal school environment, this type of instruction does promote liberated thinking and problem-solving. One of the more common ways to promote child-centered instruction is through learning centers or activity areas in classrooms. (Prather, Cynthia J., Ed., 1993).

**Curriculum:** Most NFPE program graduates who enter Class IV in the formal system drop out before they complete Class V.

It is difficult to develop a two- or three-year curriculum that prepares some children to enter the Government educational system and others to function effectively in rural Bangladesh. A more diverse curriculum would affect a variety of program elements, including the instructional schedule and teacher training. (Prather, Cynthia J., Ed., 1993)

**The pedagogic approach:** The need to trust teachers with limited formal education and no professional training, the limited hours in a school day and the bare-bones provisions for physical facilities and learning materials have headed to a simplified curricular content and a structured and well-defined sequence of classroom activities.

While this approach has been successful, there may be room to progress the classroom practices, use of instructional time, and the creativity and spontaneity of teachers and students. Master teachers, more supportive materials, and innovative training strategies might increase instructional effectiveness.

**Teacher supervision:** BRAC's decentralized management model provides effective administrative and logistical support for the NFPE program but very little technical expertise in education at the school level.

**Gender Equity in Program Management:** Even though the NFPE program points female students, initiates female educators, and is upheld essentially by mothers, most administration and organizing positions are held by men. To a substantial degree, this absence of ladies in administration and basic leadership positions reflects procuring rehearses that have inattentively rejected ladies. Starting advances have been taken to address this issue.

**Parent attitudes:** The guardians of most NFPE program understudies are uneducated and do not see the NFPE program as far as learning targets. Among the rural poor in Bangladesh, the most security guardians can give their girls is a decent marriage; a touch of tutoring makes a young lady a more looked for after lady of the hour, while too much schooling may drive away prospective husbands with less education.

In some cases, non-formal education does reduce the amount of dowry the girl's parents must pay to the new husband's parents.

### **IX. FURTHER RECOMMENDATION**

Implementation of BRAC's NFPE program expansion and other primary education activities will depend on the availability of external financing. Two questions are often asked about external financing.

First, should a basic education program, especially one run by an NGO, depend almost entirely on external funding, since basic education is a fundamental responsibility of the Government and is a basic right? Second, what would happen to the program if external financing dried up? On the question of dependence on external assistance, the reality is that over 80 percent of total development expenditure in all sectors in Bangladesh at present is financed by external assistance.

There is no justification for subjecting only primary education to the principle of self-sufficiency. More-over, the BRAC program, even at the peak of its anticipated expansion, will serve no more than 15

percent of the children of primary school age. At the same time, it has the potential to influence significantly, though not determined, the national primary education policies and strategies.

All these are arguments for international assistance for the program. The second question can be put another way: How long will external support on a substantial scale be available for the non-formal primary education program? It is difficult to answer this question definitively, it should be noted that external donors seriously interested in assisting basic education in Bangladesh should not anticipate terminating their assistance at the end of a three-year commitment.

External assistance for the government's formal education efforts has grown in recent years and all probability will grow further in the future. The question for donors, then, is whether a part of this assistance would not be better utilized through NGO-managed basic education activities. By the same token, if a new partnership of Government, NGOs, and community becomes a key element in the strategy for UPE (Universal Primary Education), a part of the regular Government budget for primary education could support non-formal programs of NGOs.

Policy dialogue with the Government on the part of external donors in negotiating assistance programs for education could encourage a move in this direction.

## X. CONCLUSIONS

BRAC considers itself to be a learning association. It has established the education system through its long experiences and practical work in the field. Different innovations and effective strategies that BRAC introduced and implemented in its education program have made BRAC primary education one of the most successful and effective primary education schemes in Bangladesh.

The state-owned formal primary education system can take some of the examples from BRAC primary education's strategy such as maintaining low teacher-student ratio, similarities of every school in terms of physical structures and facilities, close involvement with the local community, regular parents meeting, strong support, and development mechanism for teachers, supportive supervision system.

BRAC has made its education program successful with very low operating costs with these effective strategies. So it can be expected that the adaptation of some of the effective strategies from BRAC primary education would also make the government primary education to raise its standard. (Prather, Cynthia J., Ed. 1993).

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