

Bangladesh Education Sector Review

Report No.1: Overview of the Basic Education Sector

BEPS

Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity

CREATIVE ASSOCIATES INTERNATIONAL

In collaboration with

CARE, THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, AND GROUNDWORK



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The views expressed in this report are those of the technical advisory team and do not necessarily represent those of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) or any of the organizations associated with the Basic Education and Policy Support (BEPS) Activity.

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Report No. 1

Overview of the Basic Education Sector

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Acronyms

| | |
|---------|---|
| ADB | Asian Development Bank |
| AUEO | Assistant Upazila Education Officer |
| BANBEIS | Bangladesh Bureau of Education Information and Statistics |
| BRAC | (formerly) Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee |
| CAMPE | Campaign for Primary Education |
| CHT | Chittagong Hills Tracts |
| DfID | Department for International Development |
| DNFE | Directorate of Non-formal Education |
| DPE | Directorate of Primary Education |
| ECCD | Early Childhood Care and Development |
| ECD | Early Childhood Development |
| EFA | Education for All |
| EMIS | Education Management Information System |
| ESTEEM | Effective Schools Through Enhanced Education Management |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| GEP | General Education Project |
| GER | Gross Enrollment Ratio |
| GSS | Gono Shahajjada Sangstha |
| HRD | Human Resources Development |
| IDEAL | Intensive District Approach to Education for All |
| IER | Institute for Education and Research |
| NAPE | National Academy for Primary Education |
| NCTB | National Curriculum and Textbook Board |
| NEP | National Education Policy |
| NER | Net Enrollment Ratio |
| NGO | Non-government organization |
| NORAD | Norwegian International Development Agency |
| PEDP | Primary Education Development Project |
| PEDPQI | Primary Education Development Project Quality Improvement |
| PIU | Project Implementation Unit |
| PMED | Primary and Mass Education Division |
| PSPMP | Primary School Performance Monitoring Project |
| PTI | Primary Teacher Training Institute |
| SMC | School Management Committee |
| SPESP | Second Primary Education Sector Project |
| SSC | Secondary School Certificate |
| UNICEF | United Nations Children's Fund |
| URC | Upazila Resource Center |
| USAID | United States Agency for International Development |

Executive Summary

Basic education in Bangladesh has undergone systemic reforms since 1992. It now has a good-quality curriculum, good textbooks, and a set of institutions for training teachers. The main weaknesses in its instructional system are the many poorly trained teachers and the absence of any functioning assessment system. Both the governance and management systems of primary education need improvement. Stakeholders have little voice in guiding policy and practice, and management is extremely top-down, depriving even mid-level officials of authority to make decisions.

As a result of reforms, enrollment levels are high and gender equity has been reached, but attendance and efficiency levels are mediocre, and many disadvantaged children still do not attend school. The quality of primary education needs improvement. When measured by well-designed tests of achievement, students, in general, do not perform well. This poor performance can be attributed to the weaknesses in instruction, governance, and management described above. Underlying these barriers to good-quality education is a primary school system that suffers from three critical constraints: its institutional culture, the thinness of its teacher training and support system, and its lack of transparency.

Bangladesh has made great strides in building an infrastructure for universal primary education. It needs to introduce reforms that make that infrastructure work.

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I. Introduction

Basic education in Bangladesh has undergone a series of reforms during the past decade that has resulted in impressive gains in enrollment and important strides toward improving the quality of schooling. The purpose of this report is to inform the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) about the history and present status of basic education at the primary, pre-primary, and early secondary levels in Bangladesh so that the agency can begin to determine how to invest effectively in basic education.¹ This report also makes use of information and opinions collected through many interviews with stakeholders in the education sector. The report has five sections:

- Key Reforms in Basic Education: 1990-2001
- The delivery of Primary, Pre-primary, and Post-primary Education
- How the Primary Education System Functions
- Indicators of the System's Effectiveness
- Constraints to Improving the System.

Because the government and donor agencies have paid more attention to primary education than to either pre-primary or post-primary education, most of the report concerns the primary education sector. This report is also limited largely to a description of the government's school system. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a strong role in the primary education sector of Bangladesh; this role is described in Report No. 3 on NGOs.

II. History of Key Reforms in Basic Education: 1990-2001

Bangladesh's primary education system has grown and undergone significant changes since 1971.² In recent history, the worldwide Education for All movement has had a profound impact on the system. In Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, Bangladesh, along with most governments, signed the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA). Signatories pledged to enroll at least 90

¹ This is the first of six reports covering various aspects of basic education. The other reports cover NGOs in education, gender equity, teachers, working with the government, and alternative strategies for USAID investment. Acknowledging the number of thorough reports that have been recently published or are in draft form on the subject of basic education, this report does not attempt to repeat or add to them. Instead, it gleans the information that USAID needs to move toward its investment strategy. To help USAID make good use of other reports, we frequently refer the reader to those that contain more detailed information. The key reports are (1) *Education for All: National Plan of Action II*, first draft, (2) *Institutional Capacity Building through Human Resource Development for Quality Improvement* (DPE Training Division), December 2000, *Hope Not Complacency* (CAMPE), 1999, *A Question of Quality* (CAMPE), 2001, *Primary Education in Bangladesh: Findings of PSPMP:2000* (Primary School Performance Monitoring Project), draft December 2001, and *Bangladesh Education Sector Review* (World Bank).

² For information on the history of the education sector, see the *Education for All: National Plan of Action II*, first draft, pp. 3-6, *Institutional Capacity Building*, December 2000, p. 8, and *Hope Not Complacency*, p. 6.

percent of their primary school-aged children by 2000. While the declaration aimed at improving access, equity, and quality in schooling, in fact, over the 1990s, the push by the international education community, particularly the UN agencies and the World Bank, was for increasing access. One decade later, a worldwide conference in Dakar, Senegal, urged signatories to aim for universal education by 2015 and asked them to focus on improving the quality of education as well.³

1992-1997: General Education Project (GEP)

At the time of the Jomtien conference, Bangladesh was already in the process of designing a General Education Project (GEP), which was to institute the kinds of reforms envisioned by the EFA movement. Designed with support from the World Bank, the project was financed by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and a number of bilateral aid agencies, as well as the government. The GEP supported the government's fifth five-year plan, which resulted in free and compulsory primary education, increased enrollment and gender equity, free enrollment for girls up to grade 8, and the establishment in 1992 of the Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED). The PMED, which reports directly to the Prime Minister, took responsibility for primary education and adult and youth literacy.⁴

The GEP built new schools, rehabilitated old ones, introduced a new curriculum and produced new textbooks, among other reform activities. Communication and cooperation among the ministry and its partners was productive, resulting in good progress.

1997- 2003: Primary Education Development Project (PEDP)

In 1997, the World Bank attempted to change the primary modality of support to the primary education sector by introducing sector-wide programming. The Bank had been channeling its funds through a Project Implementation Unit (PIU); and other lenders and donors had their own PIUs in the ministry or other mechanisms to administer its funds. The World Bank proposed that in GEP 2 donors and lenders channel funds directly through the PMED structures (the Directorate of Primary Education, for example, would manage all funds for primary education). Both the PMED and other donors resisted this so-called "basket funding." The ministry of education said it did not have the capacity to manage this kind of funding, and other donors, along with the ministry, did not thoroughly understand what the World Bank was proposing.

As a result, GEP 2 was renamed PEDP. Instead of a government-coordinated program with donor support, PEDP became an uncoordinated collection of lender and donor projects under one umbrella. The government manages the PEDP through monthly reviews of each of the 25

³ See *Hope Not Complacency*, Annex 1.2 for details on international agreements.

⁴ In 1992, in line with Bangladesh's commitment to Education for All goals, basic education (primary school and adult literacy) were taken out of the ministry of education and put in direct line to the Prime Minister. This signified the importance of government's commitment to basic education.

projects that comprise it; donors do not participate. Donors meet monthly to exchange information about their activities, but ministry representatives do not participate. Since 1997, relationships among donors have slowly improved (and there has been the normal amount of staff turnover within most donors and lenders). By and large, however, PEDP is not coordinated effectively by either government or donors.

The goals and activities of PEDP projects continue along the same lines as GEP projects—increasing access and improving quality and equity of primary education.⁵

2003: PEDP 2

Most lender and donor projects are on more or less the same five-year project cycle, meaning that most projects will end by 2003, and donors will decide how to renew them. An effort is underway to improve the coordination of projects under PEDP 2. The government has asked the Asia Development Bank (ADB) to design a project that encompasses not only ADB funding but other donor and lender funding as well. The ADB has recently released the Terms of Reference for this design, and the design team is expected to begin work in April or May 2002. It is far from clear how all donors will participate in this design (some donors have been asked to field consultants as adjuncts to the design team) or what the design of the project will be. It seems that sector-wide programming may be one option (see Report 5 on Working with Government Agencies in Education).

III. The Delivery of Primary, Pre-Primary, and Lower Secondary Education

Basic education is provided by the formal system at three levels: pre-primary (ages 3 to 5), primary (ages 6 to 10), and junior secondary (ages 11 to 13).⁶ The reforms of the 1990s have been directed mainly at the primary sector of the formal school system. Following the Dakar EFA Framework for Action, pre-primary education has received increased attention and is discussed at some length in the National Plan of Action II. Post-primary education, which is labeled Junior Secondary in the government system, receives relatively much less attention.

In this section of the paper, we will briefly describe the primary sector, which is discussed further in subsequent sections. We will also present our complete description of the pre-primary and post-primary systems.

⁵ See Report No. 5 on Working with Government for more information about PEDP projects.

⁶Beyond junior secondary, the system provides secondary education (ages 14 to 15) and higher secondary education (ages 16 to 17). At the tertiary level, it offers bachelors degree programs of two and three years and masters degree programs of one and two years in general education. It also offers bachelors degree programs of four to five years in agriculture, engineering, and medicine, and M.Phil and Ph.D courses at universities (see the National Plan of Action, pp. 21-25 for more information on the formal school system).

Primary

Primary education in Bangladesh has grown from a scattering of private schools in 1971 serving 2 million children to a complex system of different types of schools serving roughly 19 million children. Overall, the school-age population is beginning to shrink, due in part to the country's effective family planning programs and in part to the absorption by now of overage students in primary school (see the National Plan of Action, pp. 14-20 and p. 47 for demographic and economic descriptors of the school-age population).

There are now eight types of primary schools. Six of these are "mainstream" schools, which implement the government's National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) curriculum and textbooks⁷:

- State-owned primary schools (37,710): schools are created and fully managed by the government through its administrative system. School Management Committees (SMCs) are supposed to be responsible for day-to-day management.
- Registered non-government primary schools (19,658): these privately managed schools have been started by communities, many before the government's own system was in place. In 1991, government encouraged more of these schools, and many were opened by young people who saw an opportunity to become employed as teachers. By 1995, there were enough schools, and the government added the additional criteria that a new school could not qualify if there was already another school in a 2-mile radius. To become registered, these privately founded schools must meet several criteria for pre-qualification, including a minimum size student body, number of teachers, acquisition of a plot of land, and provision of service for at least two years. Once registered, they must follow the PMED curriculum. The government provides 80 percent of teachers' salaries, plus textbooks.
- Non-registered non-government primary schools (3,177): these privately managed schools follow the government curriculum; teachers are not subsidized by the government.
- Satellite schools (2,742): a feeder school to help disadvantaged children, especially girls, enter the government system. Satellite schools began as a UNICEF-supported attempt to "bring the school to the girl child." UNICEF paid the teachers' salaries (500 taka per month). The project began with one school (Bhaluka). GEP then expanded it to 200 schools. Government now has 2000 schools (and pays the teachers), and intends to open more. Schools go through grade 2 or 3, when students move into regular schools. Local School Management Committees select a female teacher to manage the school.

⁷ These numbers come from CAMPE's report, *Hope Not Complacency*. The numbers presented in the National Plan of Action II (pp. 49-50) are close, but not the same.

- Community schools (2,989): the government has set up these schools in remote areas where there are no schools. It pays 500 taka per month per teacher for up to four teachers.
- Primary attached to secondary schools (1, 582): These may be private or government-managed; they are attached to junior secondary or secondary schools; teachers receive 80 percent of salary from the government.

There are two types of schools that use their own curricula:

- Non-formal primary schools run by NGOs
- Ebtedayee (primary-level) Madrassahs⁸ (7,173).

Pre-Primary

Pre-primary education is not new in Bangladesh, but it has yet to take hold on a large scale, and the PMED has no official policies in this sub-sector.⁹ The draft *National Plan of Action* reports that government first became involved in 1981, when the NCTB developed two small books for schools to learn in the “baby classes.” Baby classes emerged soon after independence, as pre-school age children began coming to school, usually in the care of their older siblings. Community members and teachers organized baby classes for them, assigning classroom teachers to watch out for the children when they were not teaching. This model was quasi-formalized—though not funded—by the PMED in 1998; the World Bank estimates that 70 percent of government primary schools had baby classes that year (*Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, p. 25).

History

In the past two decades, there have been several other initiatives to advance early childhood education as part of the education sector. Community Learning Centers were introduced in the 1980s to help parents prepare their children for school, but they were not supported by the government and soon failed. In 1987, when UNICEF introduced satellite schools, they included a pre-primary program. But this program did not succeed, because communities did not support the salaries of pre-primary teachers, as had been planned. In 1991, the PMED, with UNICEF support, introduced a baby-class curriculum as part of its first non-formal education project (INFEP), but that program terminated in 1997 when INFEP ended.

At present, several pre-primary initiatives are underway. The PMED, which in 1998 formally recognized pre-primary education in primary schools, estimates that 25 percent of pre-primary age children (ages 3 to 5) are enrolled in some form of schooling. Recently, the NCTB has

⁸ See Annex 4 for information on Madrassahs.

⁹ Report No. 3 on NGOs also discusses activities in ECD.

developed a new primer for baby classes, as part of the PEDP project (and World Bank support). In 1998 the government distributed 100 thousand primers and 10 thousand teacher's guides to the primary schools on a pilot basis (*Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, p. 25).

Current Initiatives

Having an interest in supporting pre-primary education through the PEDP, the World Bank published a table describing 12 early childhood care and development (ECCD) initiatives (*Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, pp. 24-25). Three of these are school models, run by the government, NGOs, or private schools. The other nine, while they may include education components—especially if they are holistic models—focus primarily on the health and nutritional needs of the children.

The three school-type initiatives are:

- Baby classes, provided by the government (through PEDP) and private schools. An estimated 42,000 schools serve about 1.05 million children, ages 4 to 5.
- Play groups or nursery classes, provided by private kindergarten schools. About 8,960 schools serve 483,600 children, ages 3 to 4. (These are expensive, with monthly fees between 500 and 2500 taka.)
- Early childhood centers, provided by NGOs. Twenty-one NGOs serve about 33,800 children, ages 4 to 5.

Five international NGOs (Save/USA, Save/Sweden, Save/UK, UNICEF, and Plan International) have ECD programs. A number of local NGOs, including GSS and BRAC work in ECD. SAVE/USA and Plan International have a major focus on early childhood development (ECD). Each NGO has an ECD training center and integrate ECD activities into its programs. SAVE/USA has recently decided to add to its ECD program a component for supporting children in their transition to primary school. SAVE/USA plans to work with parents of six-to-eight year-olds as their children begin school.

For a time, SAVE/USA and Plan International cooperated to support an organization called the ECD Unit. This was an attempt at collaboration between the two NGOs to support ECD. A change in staff of SAVE, however, reduced the support to the ECD Unit, which has recently halted activities (though it may be revived).

Future Plans

The National Action Plan II (January 2002 draft) indicates a growing commitment of government to ECD. Its objective is not to universalize ECD but to “expand and improve” it, particularly for vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The plan proposes a budget of roughly 52 billion taka (\$870 million) between 2002 and 2015, a thirteen-year period. (Over that same period, the proposed budget for primary education is roughly 251 billion taka (\$4,184 million).

Thus, the proposed ECD budget is just over 20 percent of the proposed primary education budget. Relative to the investment of other countries in ECD, this is a significant amount.

Post-Primary

Our interest in post-primary education is limited to opportunities for the 11- to 14-year age range. This includes young people who have completed primary school, those who have dropped out, and those who never attended primary school. An estimated 70 percent of those who leave primary school have not acquired basic literacy skills. Even most of those who complete primary and lower secondary education do not have employable or marketable skills. Opportunities in Bangladesh for these children and youth, especially boys, to continue their education are few. The National Education Policy (2001,) approved by Parliament, extends the primary phase of education to grade 8, and if this were to be implemented, lower secondary school would be considered part of the primary education phase.

Formal Lower Secondary Schools

In the Bangladesh system, lower secondary comprises grades 6 to 8. As at the primary level, there are different kinds of lower secondary schools. Approximately 85 percent are privately owned, though government subsidizes most of these at a rate of about 80 percent and regulates the curriculum and teacher qualifications. Non-government (private) lower secondary schools (including the lower level of comprehensive secondary schools) enrolled approximately 4,255.7 thousand students in 1997; government schools enrolled approximately 157.6 thousand students—3.1 percent of students at that level. The parallel secondary-level Madrassah system, also managed by government and called Dakhils, enrolled approximately 600 thousand students—12 percent at the lower secondary level (*Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, v. 2, pp. 57 and 61).¹⁰

The number of students enrolling in lower secondary school is growing rapidly. Grade 6 enrollment more than doubled between 1991 and 1997 (from 710 thousand to 1.732 million), and the enrollment of girls almost tripled (from 276 thousand to 830 thousand), due largely to a stipends program for girls. In 1997 44 percent of 11- to 13-year olds were enrolled in lower secondary schools, 27 percent of 14- to 15-year olds were enrolled in secondary, and 16 percent of 16- to 17-year olds were enrolled in higher secondary schools. Enrollment rates at the lower secondary level increased from 32 percent in 1991 to 44 percent in 1997. This means that a larger percentage of primary school students are “transitioning” to lower secondary school. Calculated transition rates from primary to lower secondary grew from approximately 55 percent in the early 1990s to approximately 75 percent by 1997. The transition rate for girls was even more dramatic, from about 45 percent in the early 1990s to about 75 percent in 1997 (*Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, v. 2, pp. 57 and 61).

¹⁰ For a more detailed description of lower secondary schooling, see the World Bank’s *Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, v. 2, and publications resulting from the ADB’s Post-primary Education Sector Strategy Review.

Lower secondary schools benefit from a high degree of private ownership; parents play a more active role, and schools are able to hire and fire teachers. They also benefit from an excess of qualified teachers searching for jobs, and textbooks of reasonable quality published by the NCTB. The secondary system suffers, however, from gross inequities: poor children cannot afford the high fees, and schools are generally limited to areas in which enough families can pay for enrollment. The content of the curriculum is directed strictly toward advancement to higher levels of the system, so students acquire no practical knowledge or skills. Students who persist throughout secondary school learn through rote memorization, and are required to pass the high school certificate exam at the end of grade 12. Only about 15 percent of those who enter lower secondary complete grade 12, and only about 6 percent pass the exam.

The ADB has been investing in secondary education, and the ADB and the World Bank have focused on girls in secondary school, by providing them with stipends.¹¹

Nonformal Education

Apart from lower secondary school, the government's formal education system offers nothing to children or youth who have completed less than grade 8 (and would be roughly 13 to 14 years old). The ministry of education's vocational courses require a junior secondary certificate. The Directorate of Nonformal Education (DNFE) offers literacy courses, but in these, youth and adults (ages 11 to 45) are lumped together. The DNFE manages a complex program of literacy, some through the government's own administrative services and some through NGOs. Basic literacy has been offered since 1991, but not in all parts of the country. The DNFE is now launching post-literacy and continuing education courses. Few of these, however, are of good quality or provide genuine opportunities for youth to acquire basic or marketable skills, beyond rudimentary literacy.¹²

The DNFE's program for Hard-to-Reach Children (NFE-3) targets working children in the urban slums. It provides two years of schooling for 11- to 14-year olds. The two years take students to a literacy level of grade 3. Under DNFE management, NGOs implement this program in 11,600 centers in the largest cities of the six divisions of the country, reaching approximately 0.35 million children and youth.

NGO programs targeting youth offer the best opportunities for 11- to 14-year olds, but these are small scale and reach only a small portion of those who could benefit from them. The Campaign for Primary Education (CAMPE) says that 108 NGOs (of 410 surveyed) offer NFE programs for Adolescents and that NGOs have about 10,000 NFE centers (beyond those under DNFE management) for 0.34 million adolescents. The actual number of adolescents covered by these

¹¹ Academy for Educational Development and Pathmark Associates (1998). This is a series of six documents on secondary education, produced for the ADB and catalogued as TA No. 2908-BAN.

¹² The DNFE's literacy program is described in Annex 1 of Report #3 on NGOs.

programs, however, is probably much lower, as many younger-aged children are enrolled as well.¹³

The ministries of Labor and Manpower, Youth and Sports, Women and Children's Affairs, Social Welfare, and Livestock and Fishery also offer vocational training. Annex 5 provides a detailed list of the programs offered by the government—their objectives, strategies, enrollment capacity, course content, duration, and venue.

Summary

Education in Bangladesh is delivered through a complex system of public, public-private, private, and NGO schools and other centers of learning. During the 1990s the government invested heavily in primary education. More recently it has planned to increase its investment in pre-primary education. Enrollment in schools at the lower secondary level has risen dramatically during the 1990s, and the government is faced with the need to improve access, quality, equity, internal and external efficiency at that level.

IV. How the Primary Education System Functions

We analyze the functioning of the primary school system by looking at its three key sub-systems: (1) the policy framework and governance structure, (2) the instructional system, and (3) the management system. In this analysis, we are looking only at government-owned schools, which constitute the largest part of the system.

Policy Framework and Governance

Two government documents officially guide the direction of primary education. These are the National Education Policy and the National Plan of Action.

National Education Policy

The National Education Policy was approved by the government in September 2000.¹⁴ The NEP, which covers all of education, not just primary, was written by a commission appointed by the ministry, with little input from stakeholders, even ministry staff. As a result, the NEP seems to have little legitimacy. For example, the NEP calls for the extension of primary education through grade 8, but the current Prime Minister has said that government has no expectation of implementing this policy within the next five years.

¹³ For more information on NGO programs for out-of-school youth, see Report #3 on NGOs.

¹⁴ See the Human Resources Development Plan, p. 15 for more information on the NEP.

National Plan of Action

The *National Plan of Action* (2002) covers the years 2002-2015. This plan, though it is still a draft document, has more authority than the NEP. It states the constraints to a well-functioning education system, recommends measures for continuing to improve the system, and proposes budgets. (These recommendations are presented on pp. 104-110 of the draft Plan.) The current Plan is still in draft form; it was drafted by a Task Force, including consultants funded by DFID and distributed to donors for comment in early February 2002.

Little Ongoing Input into Policy by Stakeholders

A critical feature of the formal school system—at least at the primary level—is the lack of input from the broad education sector, including parents, community leaders, and students, as well as teachers and administrators, at every level of the system. On paper there are two bodies that should function as forums for stakeholders, the National Council for Primary and Mass Education, which is convened by the Prime Minister, and the Project Coordinating Committee, under the direction of the PMED. In fact, each of these bodies has met only once, in 1996 and 1997. This means that the government staff who make decisions about the education system are held accountable only to the Prime Minister.

School-level Governance

Government has directed that schools form School Management Committees, and about 99 percent of government primary schools have such SMCs. According to reports of school headmasters to CAMPE researchers, SMCs met on average 7.7 times during the 1997-98 school year; approximately three-quarters of the members were present at the meetings. CAMPE researchers determined, however, that roughly 20 percent of these meetings were falsely recorded and never held (*Hope Not Complacency*, pp. 51-54). The Primary School Performance Monitoring Project (PSPMP) researchers looked more closely at SMCs. They found that about 15 percent of the SMCs in their sample were active, with members taking part in enrollment drives, and other service projects. “However, the majority of SMCs confined themselves to attending SMC meetings and discussing some school-related issues. They did not take major initiatives” (*Primary Education in Bangladesh*, p. 1.11).

Less than half the schools (44.2 percent) reported having PTAs, which met on average 3.5 times per year. These reports, like those on SMCs, appear to be inflated (*Hope Not Complacency*, pp. 53-54).

Thus, we conclude that SMCs do not generally play an active role in the governance of their schools and that schools are not held accountable to communities. Schools report only through the chain of command to the PMED.

Instructional System

Assessment

The heart of an education system is its instructional system. The instructional system includes the curriculum; the textbooks, in which much of the curriculum is embodied; the teachers, who are responsible for imparting the content of the curriculum; and assessment mechanisms, through which the achievements of students and schools are measured. We begin the description of the instructional system with a look at assessment mechanisms, since exams “convey powerful messages to teachers, parents, and students about what knowledge and skills are important to learn and the way they should be taught”.¹⁵

In Bangladesh, the only standardized national exam is given at the end of secondary school. At the primary level, exams are school-based. This means that the teachers write the exams, though exams at the primary level are typically written by the teachers unions and sometimes sold to teachers, who then sometimes charge a fee to students to take the exam.¹⁶ This is not the policy of the government. The textbooks and the teachers’ guides provide for continuous assessment, but in practice teachers do not use it.

Not using standardized exams in primary school has advantages and disadvantages. In a good-quality school, with teachers who have some training in writing exams, school-based exams allow teachers and schools to match the test with what they have taught. They can test students on the material they have taught—material that, while it should be based on national goals and standards, leaves room for the abilities and interests of particular children in particular schools and classrooms. On the other hand, when teachers are not well-trained in testing, which is likely to be the case most of the time in Bangladesh, the exams they write do not generally provide objective, accurate data on what students have learned.

At the end of grade 5, the government also administers a scholarship examination, but only nominated students appear for the test. Students who can afford to pay school fees are not required to pass this exam to enter secondary school. In recent years, stipends given to girls in lower secondary school have obviated their need to take the exam. For those boys who do wish to qualify for scholarships, the exam should not be difficult to pass. (The SSC exam, given at the end of grade 10, is based entirely on an item bank, the questions of which have not been changed for 30 years and are available on the open market.)

There are three negative effects of this weak assessment system. First, students’ achievements are not likely to be fairly or accurately judged when it comes time to decide upon promotion. Second, students get little feedback on how well they are mastering their studies, and teachers

¹⁵ See Joanne Capper, *Testing to Learn, Learning to Test*, 1996, International Reading Association and Academy for Educational Development.

¹⁶ See Transparency International Bangladesh (2001), *Corruption in Primary Education: A Report Card Survey*, p. vii.

know little about how well they are teaching. Third, the DPE knows little about what students learn. They have no data for improving the curriculum, learning, materials, or teaching methods.

The ministry, with help from ADB, under its Second Primary Education Sector Project (SPESP), has also begun to create a national assessment system. The purpose of this system is not to test individual students but to use a sample of students at selected grade levels for getting a picture of how the system is performing. Until that system is in place, the PMED has only rough indicators of its performance.

Curriculum

Development of a new primary curriculum was begun in 1986 and supported under the GEP project between 1992 and 1997. Consequently, the new curriculum, which is based on 53 competencies that students should master, is of acceptable quality. It covers five subject areas: Bangla (language and literature), math, science and environment, social studies, and English (language). *Hope Not Complacency* says the following about the curriculum:

The new curriculum is claimed to have gone through all the necessary rigorous tests....[It] is being considered as more inspiring, imaginative and expected to carry/sustain the interests of young minds vis-à-vis the old curriculum, which was criticized for being content-based. The new curriculum defines an ‘Essential Learning Continuum’ from grade 1 to grade 5, and a learner is expected to achieve the terminal competencies at the end of the primary cycle. If we go through the list of the terminal competencies, we find that the current curriculum is a good combination of ideological, historical, and cognitive aspects comparable with developed societies in the world and some knowledge of a foreign language” (p. 7).¹⁷

Teaching Materials

Teaching materials consist of textbooks and supplementary readers, writing materials, globes, maps, science equipment, and other kinds of pedagogical support materials. In the Bangladesh formal school system, teaching materials are generally limited to textbooks, and even these are often scarce.

Textbooks are produced by the NCTB Primary Wing, also a benefactor of the GEP project. The textbooks, which are based on the curriculum, are periodically revised. Educators judge the content of the textbooks to be satisfactory, though the books themselves are not very durable and require frequent replacement.

¹⁷ For a more detailed description of the curriculum and textbooks, see the *National Plan of Action*, pp. 60-65, p. 7. For an assessment of the quality of the curriculum and textbooks, see the Draft *PEDP Assessment* (December 2001).

Textbooks are free for students to use, although there is evidence that students must sometimes pay a fee to use them.¹⁸ But when do students get books? Distributing textbooks from Dhaka to schools is no easy matter, as the infrastructure for such delivery is poor, and books sometimes get lost in the hands of government officers. *Hope Not Complacency* reports that only one-third of the students received books in January 1998, the first month of the school year. Over three-quarters had received them by February, and about 4 percent never received them. The PSPMP researchers found that more than half the schools sampled did not receive textbooks on time, and many did not receive enough.

Many schools do not have any books other than textbooks, and the vast majority does not possess teaching aids (PSPMP report, p. 5.3). The World Bank and NORAD projects supply teaching materials (school bags, pencils, etc.) to low-performing schools in the districts they serve.

Teachers

The most critical weakness of the instructional system is teaching.¹⁹ Many teachers have not mastered the subject matter they are teaching, and most have not been well trained in how to teach. In Bangladesh, as in many former colonies, the persona and role of a teacher has changed dramatically over the past several decades. In early years, teachers were relatively well-educated, respected members of the community who taught those few elite children and youth who attended school. After Independence, and particularly after the push by EFA for universal enrollment, the teaching force could not keep up with enrollment. In Bangladesh, between 1990 and 1994 the number of primary teachers grew at a rate of 16.2 percent a year (*Hope Not Complacency*, p. 9). The capacity of the institutions for training these teachers has not paralleled this growth. With support from external agencies, government has intensified its teacher-training efforts. Over 95 percent of the teachers in government primary schools have been trained, though over 75 percent of the teachers in the Registered Non-Governmental Primary Schools remain untrained.

Primary school teachers are trained at Primary Teacher Training Institutes (PTIs), where, after a ten-month course, they receive a Certificate in Education (C-in-Ed). Teachers do not enter a PTI for pre-service training; instead, they take leave for a year after they have been on-the-job for two or three years. Prior to their teaching service, some primary teachers receive a Bachelor of Education, Diploma in Education, or even Master of Education, though these courses are designed for secondary school teachers. Once they are on-the-job, teachers receive in-service training six days a year from their district education officers through “sub-cluster” training. The general consensus is that the quality of teacher training—at every institution—is poor.

¹⁸ Transparency International Bangladesh (2001), *Corruption in Primary Education: A Report Card Survey*, p. vii.

¹⁹ Teachers are the subject of Report No. 3. Thus, this Report, No. 1, only touches on teachers.

The payment that primary school teachers receive is, in rural areas, high relative to most other occupations. In urban areas, however, it is relatively low.

In spite of responses to the contrary from head teachers, Primary School Performance Monitoring Project (PSPMP) researchers seemed to suspect that teachers are often absent or tardy (PSPMP, p. 5.1). They found that the majority of schools start late by an hour or more. Teachers in over one-third of the schools do not keep students occupied on learning activities throughout the class period. This aggravates the very low amount of time that students spend with the teacher, as primary schools in Bangladesh give relatively few hours of instruction per year. In 1996, students in grades 1 and 2 attended school two hours per day, and those in grades 3 and 4, four hours per day. Taking into account frequent absences and tardiness of teachers, students are left with few “contact hours” each week.

Facilities

Since a big push of both the GEP and the PEDP has been building schools, the number of classrooms available is no longer a binding constraint to increasing access. Nonetheless, because of the growth in enrollment, many schools are crowded—or would be if attendance rates were not so low. *Hope Not Complacency* reports that government schools have an average of 3.8 rooms per school. Some schools that were built for grades 1-3, now serve grades 4 and 5 as well, with inadequate space. The PSPMP researchers observed that because student attendance is poor, the availability of classroom space is not a problem in two-thirds of the schools, but it will be if attendance picks up.

Limited numbers of classrooms often mean high teacher-to-student ratios. The average ratio in government schools is one teacher for every 73 students. Only 12.9 of the government schools had fewer than 40 students per teacher, while 61.2 had over 60 students per teacher. (The average teacher-to-student ratio in South Asia is one to 63; in Indonesia it is one to 23; in China, one to 24; and in Sri Lanka, one to seventeen).²⁰

Clean drinking water, well maintained toilets, and adequate-sized playgrounds are critical to the quality of a school. Many schools lack these facilities.

- CAMPE researchers found that over 90 percent of schools have water available at the school or nearby; over 60 percent of urban schools have drinking water facilities, and 42 percent of rural schools do so. PSPMP reports that 78 percent of schools have sources of such facilities, but one-fourth are not functioning.
- CAMPE found that over one-third of schools have no toilet facilities. Just under half have toilet facilities shared by girls and boys, and the rest have separate facilities for girls and

²⁰*Bangladesh Education Sector Review*. For more information on facilities and teacher-to-student ratios, see *Hope Not Complacency*, pp. 29-33, and the PSPMP report, pp. 5.1-5.3.

boys. PSPMP researchers saw that though 49 percent of schools had toilets, their maintenance was poor in at least half of these schools

- According to CAMPE data, about half the schools have playgrounds—rural schools more so than urban schools. In the PMPSP sample, 76 percent of the schools had playgrounds.

Management System

As mentioned earlier, the government primary education is managed by the PMED. The Secretary of the division reports not to the Minister of Education but directly to the Minister of Primary and Mass Education, who is also the Prime Minister. Here we describe the organization of the PMED and its primary education directorate, the DPE. In particular, we look at the functions of planning, finance, administration, training, and information management.

Organization of the PMED

PMED. The PMED consists of two directorates (Directorate of Primary Education and Directorate of Nonformal Education) and the PMED staff that sit above these directorates. The Secretary of Primary and Mass Education heads the division. As described earlier, he or she is not accountable to any policy-making or oversight bodies, only to the Prime Minister. The Secretary's immediate subordinate is the Joint Secretary. The Prime Minister has also recently placed an Advisor in the PMED, who is said to have executive powers and a strong voice in decisions. The Planning Deputy Chief in the PMED is also a critical voice and a gateway to the Secretary.

DPE. The Director General of the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) manages six wings: Administration, Planning, Training, Policy, Monitoring, and the National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE). Each wing is managed by a Director, who is assisted by a Deputy Director and an Assistant Director.²¹

Those who hold the Director General and Director positions are likely to come from the administrative cadre of the government, and they are rotated in and out of education posts for stays that may be a few months or as long as a few years. The deputies and assistants are more likely, though not necessarily, to be from the education cadre. Their permanent institutional home is at a college or university, where they rank as assistant professor. They are seconded to the DPE for indefinite periods. They cannot be promoted within the DPE without returning to their college for a length of time. The net effect of these assignments and rotations is frequent turnover among high-level posts, short institutional memory, little training or expertise in educational administration, and low levels of commitment to the long-term improvement of primary education.

²¹ The HRD Plan, pp. 8-4, and the Bangladesh Education Sector Review, v. II, pp. 17-21, gives a more detailed description of the DPE's organization.

DPE Functions

Financial Management. The DPE manages the financial and other resources that flow through the huge and growing primary education system. Funds come from two sources: those allocated from the national budget to the recurrent budget of PMED and those allocated to its development budget. The revenue allocations are from the internal revenue earnings of the government. The development budget comes from two sources: (a) internal government funds and (b) external aid, loans, and grants, which account for more than 50 percent of the education development budget.²²

For the financial year 2001/2002 the budgeted primary education development expenditure is 8 percent of the total budgeted government development expenditure. For the same period, revenue expenditure on primary education is budgeted at 6.4 percent of total government revenue budget. The expenditure on primary education in 1997-98 was 46 percent of the development budget for education and 42.6 percent of the total revenue budget for education. Education expenditures at all levels represent 2.2 percent of GDP, up from a 0.9 percent average between 1973 and 1980 and 1.2 percent in 1991.²³

Well over 90 percent of the recurrent budget goes to teachers' salaries; in 1991-92, an estimated 98 percent did so. The remainder goes into facilities maintenance and recurrent expenditures on textbooks, though these are generally under-funded. The scarcity of discretionary funds leaves education officers with little decision-making authority where budgets are concerned. Moreover, the amount of money that an officer at even a director level can spend without approval of his or her superior is so small that his or her managerial authority is very limited.

The development budget funds capital expenditures and project activities of lenders and donors who operate through the government budget (for more information about how various donors fund activities, see Report #5 on Working with Government Agencies in Education). Much of the development budget also goes to salaries—of staff who are not part of the government's recurrent budget for salaries but are seconded to their post for the duration of their service on the project.

Policy and Planning. The Education Wing of the Planning Commission in the Ministry of Planning prepares five-year plans and annual plans, with assistance from PMED.²⁴ At the PMED, policy and planning functions are shared with DPE. These include projecting future requirements of schools, teachers, and other resources. DPE has a Policy wing and a Planning wing. The Policy wing is relatively new and does not seem active. The main task of the Planning wing seems to be managing the inception, review, renewal, and termination of projects funded

²² See the *National Plan of Action II*, p. 137, and *Hope Not Complacency*, p. 10 and Annexes 2.8-2.11)

²³ For more information on financing and levels of expenditure, see the National Action Plan II, pp. 137-140.

²⁴ The organization and work of the Planning Department are described in more detail on pp. 131-132 of the *National Plan of Action II*.

by the development budget. In this task, the planning departments of PMED and DPE work together, with PMED having ultimate authority. Since a large portion of the development budget comes from donor funding of projects, planning officials spend much of their time on these projects. They do not directly manage the projects, however. Each project has its own PIU, which is staffed by government officials who are seconded to the project for as long as they please both government and donor officials.

Administration. The operations of schools are managed by the administrative wing of DPE. The education system has officers at every administrative level: division, district, upazila, and union/village (or school). As planning and management are very top-down, however, officers below the level of PMED have little decision-making authority at division, district, or even school level. While on paper, it appears that funding and administrative responsibilities are decentralizing, it is not happening. Administrators also lack management expertise. While they may well, over time, acquire this expertise, especially since it is a focus of donor assistance,²⁵ technical assistance is unlikely to change the regulations and practices that keep the system so authoritarian.

Institutional Capacity Building, the DPE's human resources development plan, cites a 1993 UNDP report on the status of decentralization, which holds true today:

Although authority is delegated, the unwritten directives...require consultation with high ups before implementation of decisions. In compliance with these invisible requirements, files have to travel the whole length of the hierarchy. In this process it generates more queries and marginal issues, sidetracking the process. Files move up and down, back and forth, and cause serious delays. Not only the vertical layers, going all the way up to the secretary, but also multiple horizontal layers, contributing to the paper chase (p. 20).

The Draft PEDP Assessment (December 2001) reports that

decentralization of spending authority to school levels has been a target in some of the projects designed for donor assistance and in one case is a condition of funding. These targets and conditions will require changes to existing rules that cannot be achieved in the short term. The inclusion of such conditions in agreements are therefore unrealistic and greater consideration of what is possible within existing rules and regulations should be given when conditions are proposed.²⁶

²⁵ The DFID ESTEEM project has been developing this capacity at each level of the system. For more information about the ESTEEM project, see Report #5 on Working with Government Agencies in Education.

²⁶ See the Draft *PEDP Assessment* for additional evaluative information on management practices.

Training.²⁷ The Training wing, which was created under the GEP, has a broader mandate than its name implies. Not only is it responsible for training teachers but also for human resource development of the DPE. While the primary system has expanded dramatically over the past 20 years, the human resource development (HRD) infrastructure has not. By design, the primary teacher training and support system has three institutional mechanisms. The most critical are the PTIs, where teachers receive a ten-month training course. Another is the National Academy of Primary Education (NAPE), intended to provide academic support to the PTIs. The third is the administrative sub-system of DPE, particularly Assistant Upazila Education Officers (AUEOs), who provide in-service “sub-cluster” training through Upazila Resource Centers (URCs).²⁸ At present, each of these training institutions is very weak. They are receiving support from DFID’s ESTEEM project, NORAD’s Primary Education Development Project Quality Improvement (PEDPQI) project, and the IDEAL project funded by UNICEF and bilateral donors.²⁹

The HRD plan (*Institutional Capacity Building through Human Resource Development for Quality Improvement*) is a big step forward for DPE. It provides for training, including some overseas, of staff at every level of the hierarchy. It also describes a career path for each position. Importantly, it adopts the policies of recruiting education cadres, retaining them in their posts for a useful length of time, and providing overseas training only to those who will not be rotated out of the PMED.

Information Management (EMIS). The primary education system, unlike almost any other government bureaucracy, is supposed to reach nearly every family, even in remote parts of the country, on practically a daily basis for much of the year. Managing this system well requires a constant flow of accurate information in both directions—to and from schools—with collection and analysis points along the way at upazilas, districts, and divisions. The EMIS in Bangladesh is far from capable of meeting the needs of planners, managers, teachers, or communities.

Formerly, the education sector’s MIS, called the Bangladesh Bureau of Education and Information Statistics (BANBEIS), managed statistical data. When the PMED was separated from the Ministry of Education, BANBEIS also was split into two offices, both supported by the GEP. In the intervening years, BANBEIS has been given a boost several times by externally supported projects.

BANBEIS continues to suffer, however, not only from insufficient capacity. Another problem is the quality of the data on which it depends for good information. The data sent by schools is, in short, not credible. School directors have incentives to distort accurate counts. They receive some funds based on their enrollment, they understand that they are to increase enrollment, especially of girls, and they know that regular attendance and promotion goes to their credit. As a

²⁷ In this report, we touch only briefly on training and HRD. These topics are covered in more depth in Report #4 on Teachers.

²⁸ See *Institutional Capacity Building*, pp. 14-18 for more detail on these institutions.

²⁹ For additional information, see Reports #4 on Teachers and #5 on Working with Government in Education.

consequence, the PMED cannot say with accuracy how many students are enrolled nationwide or in any one part of the country. It cannot keep track of teachers, and has no systematic way of knowing whether its strategies and investments are efficient and effective.

At present, DFID's ESTEEM project supports BANBEIS as part of its overall assistance to DPE's management system. Improvement of the EMIS has begun at the district level and is progressing both upward, toward the PMED, and downward, toward upazilas. The quality of data entry at the district level has markedly improved., demonstrating increasing computer culture that contributes to information support.³⁰

Highlights of the System's Functioning

The PMED has managed a rapidly growing system that now serves a large portion of children with a basic education in primary school. The system is complex, entailing not only the schools owned and operated by government but also others with different kinds of relationships to the government. The government's primary education curriculum, which most schools use, is of good quality, as is the content of textbooks. The system has officers posted at every administrative level, managing day-to-day operations.

The system suffers however, from myriad weaknesses. Most important, a highly centralized top-down administration does not favor strong management, especially when mechanisms for holding central administrators accountable to the public are nearly non-existent. Another severe weakness in the system is the capacity of teachers to teach and the ineffectiveness of teacher training and support institutions.

V. Indicators of the System's Effectiveness

Having described the efforts made in recent years to reform primary education, and the current status of the primary education system, we turn to look at indicators of the system's effectiveness. Standard indicators are access, efficiency, equity, and quality. Access is measured largely by enrollment rates (we also look at attendance), efficiency by drop-out and repetition rates. Equity is the access to those groups that have been left out of school. Quality is judged by inputs and measured by achievement.

Access, Efficiency, Equity

More than 80,000 primary schools, employing over 300,000 teachers and other staff, serve approximately 19 million students (HRD Plan). The government's goal is to achieve universal access, that is, to have every child in school. A second goal is to make the system efficient, so that pupils pass through without repeating grades and without dropping out before completing grade 5. Achieving both access and efficiency goals require special efforts toward making the

³⁰ Draft *PEDP Assessment* (December 2001), p. 26.

system equitable, that is, enrolling children who are less likely to attend school, namely, girls and those from remote and disadvantaged communities. What has Bangladesh achieved to date in access, efficiency, and equity?

The most recent comprehensive data on the education system come from the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and the National Plan of Action II.³¹ CAMPE has published two assessments of the primary system. The first, *Hope Not Complacency*, published in 1999, focused on access, efficiency, and achievement. Using a rigorously selected sample of schools throughout the country, the researchers measured these dimensions using the following indicators: enrollment, attendance, achievement, physical facilities, teachers' training and qualifications, community/parental participation, mobility to higher levels, logistics, and supervision. It disaggregated data according to gender, socio-economic status, ethnic composition, and geographic reach. *Hope Not Complacency* provides a thorough report on the findings of this research. The data, however, published in 1999, do not extend beyond 1998. The government has not yet published data beyond 1998.³²

Enrollment

According to CAMPE data, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) was 107 percent in 1998, which is commendable.³³ That is, the portion of children enrolled in primary school is 107 percent of the children of primary age (6 to 10). This means that many of those enrolled are older (or younger) than the official age. The GER of girls was 109 percent and of boys, 104 percent.

The net enrollment ratio (NER) was 77 percent for all children. This means that 77 percent of all children of primary school age are enrolled in primary school: 78.6 percent for girls and 75.5 for boys.³⁴

How do enrollment rates in Bangladesh compare to those in other Asian countries? The following table (taken from Annex 1) displays data from the U.S. Congressional Report, 2001. It is only a rough indicator of comparative data, particularly as the figures given here for GER in Bangladesh in 2001 are different from what the PMED reported for 2000 (96.6 percent) and from what CAMPE reported for 1998 (107 percent).

³¹ The *National Plan of Action* cites the Division of Primary Education (DPE) and the government of Bangladesh (GOB) as the sources of its data. As discussed below, these data are to be taken with a grain of salt.

³² The figures presented below on access, efficiency, and equity come from the CAMPE report, *Hope Not Complacency*, which provides more details on these indicators.

³³ The PMED reports a primary school Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 96.6 percent in 2000.

³⁴ For additional data on enrollment, see the *National Plan of Action II, Hope Not Complacency, Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, v. 2.

Table 1. Percent Primary School-Age Children Enrolled in School (GER)

| | |
|------------|------|
| Bangladesh | 75.1 |
| Egypt | 95.2 |
| India | 77.2 |
| Morocco | 76.6 |
| Nepal | 78.4 |

Source: U.S. Congressional Report, 2001

Attendance

Although enrollment rates are high, it appears that many children who are enrolled in school do not actually attend. The PSPMP study found attendance rates to be alarmingly low. On the days of visits, attendance rates were 58 percent of enrollment rates in government schools and 48 percent in registered non-government schools. In many schools, they discovered, teachers mark more students present than the actual number. On the days of visits, actual attendance rates were 6 percent lower on average than attendance records indicated for the previous day. Such low attendance rates raise serious concerns about the meaning of enrollment rates, because they might indicate that many children who are enrolled in school do not actually attend. Plausible explanations for the discrepancies between enrollment and attendance are (1) inaccuracies in enrollment data, and (2) incentives for parents to enroll their children, such as programs that give food to school children.

Efficiency

The dropout rate of girls over the course of primary school is 26.6 percent. This means that approximately three-quarters of the girls who enter primary school complete grade 5. The dropout rate of boys is slightly higher, 28 percent. The rate at which girls repeat a grade is 7.6 percent; this rate for boys is 8.3 percent.

Equity (Gender, Geographic, Socio-economic Variables)

The record on equity is mixed. The disadvantaged groups, which have had lower rates of enrollment and completion in primary school, include girls, the poor, ethnic minorities, and street and working children.

In terms of gender, Bangladesh, through both the government and the NGOs, has made remarkable strides. The gender gap in enrollment was reported to have disappeared, with girls having higher completion rates and lower dropout rates than boys. Initial findings, however, of a

new CAMPE (2002 Draft) study³⁵ shows a troubling change. Between 1998 and 2000, the gross enrollment ratio increased marginally by one percent. The striking difference is that the gross enrollment ratio increased by four percentage points for boys and decreased by two percentage points for girls. Girls still do not keep up with boys in achievement.

Nevertheless, the progress in gender equity over the last decade can be attributed directly to government policies and the efforts of NGOs to reach girls. In particular, government awards stipends to girls at the junior secondary level, which serves as a strong incentive to girls to complete primary school. BRAC and other NGOs have designed education centers that take into consideration girls' roles and limitations in their homes and societies. Seventy percent of BRAC's 1.2 million students are girls.³⁶

In spite of notable efforts, the government and NGOs have not fared as well in attracting and retaining poor children in school. The government has had a large food distribution program, Food for Education, to attract children to school. Also, through the DNFE, government, with support from UNICEF and several bilateral agencies, has initiated a "Hard-to-Reach Children" project for street children. Yet, according to CAMPE, "children coming from socio-economically worse-off families enroll in schools less in numbers, attend school less frequently, drop out more, and perform worse in achievement tests" (*Hope Not Complacency*, p. 61).

Geographic variables tend to confound socio-economic ones, as many children who are poor also live in less accessible parts of the country. This is particularly true in the Chittagong Hills Tracts and the northern plain. (Annex 3 this report describes some interventions in basic education in the CHT. Report No. 3 on NGOs also discusses this issue.)

It is not surprising that children of poor families and remote areas receive less education than others. The barriers to enrolling these children in school go beyond simply building accessible schools. They include—on the school's side—finding and keeping teachers who can work with children who are less healthy and less motivated to study and—on the household side—parents who value education and have the means to pay unofficial fees and opportunity costs. For many of these families, the benefits to them of sending their children to school are not so obvious; sometimes the benefits are indeed less than for families with better access to economic opportunities.

Enrollment, Efficiency, and Equity Data are not Reliable

CAMPE points out that while the data its own researchers collected in their household survey are reliable, statistics on enrollment, dropout, and attendance are suspect. For example, some sources

³⁵ Preliminary finding of draft CAMPE Education Watch Study. *State of Primary Education in Bangladesh*. Second Draft, May 2002.

³⁶ For additional information on gender equity, see Report #2 on that subject, as well as *Hope Not Complacency*, p.61, and *Bangladesh Education Sector Review*, p. 12.

put total enrollment in primary at 19.4 million, while others have it at 17.2 million. These data are recorded by the schools, which have incentives not to report them accurately. CAMPE says that in 1996, the Prime Minister “expressed her dissatisfaction at the ‘tendency to exaggerate the figures’....Data also indicate that 92 percent of the children of school-going age are enrolled, while a visit to the village clearly shows that a large number of children do not go to school at all.”

Quality

The quality of education is usually assessed by two kinds of criteria. One is an “output”: the learning achievement of students, as measured by test scores. The other is a set of “inputs.” Inputs include material inputs such as facilities, textbooks, and trained teachers. Inputs also include the teaching-learning process and other processes such as school governance, management, parent participation, and community support. Each of these processes is recognized to improve the quality of education. In the absence of credible test data (and as supplements to test data), these inputs serve as reasonable proxy measures of quality, if we assume that high-quality inputs lead to high-quality outputs.

Those who wish to help improve the quality of primary education in Bangladesh can take advantage of two recent and rigorous studies of school quality. These are *A Question of Quality: State of Primary Education in Bangladesh*, and the Education Watch 2000 report of CAMPE,³⁷ and *Primary Education in Bangladesh: Findings of PSPMP 2000*, funded by the ADB.³⁸ In this section, we briefly summarize the findings of these two reports.

Findings of Studies on Quality

The CAMPE study and the PSPMP study both looked at achievement of students in terms of terminal competencies (there are 53 in the curriculum) at the end of the primary cycle. Each study devised its own achievement tests based on the primary curriculum. These are the main findings of the study³⁹:

- Less than 2 percent of the students competing for five years of primary education acquired all 27 competencies tested (CAMPE).
- Achievement in subject matter varied as follows: on the Bangla language test, 36.5 percent of students achieved the competency; in social studies, 19.2 percent; in general science, 17.3 percent; in math, 11.6 percent; in English, 9.4 percent; and in all 27 competencies, 1.6

³⁷ Published by The University Press Limited.

³⁸ Based on a research project, Primary School Performance Monitoring Project (PSPMP), conducted by the Academy for Educational Development (Washington, DC) and Data International (Dhaka).

³⁹ The CAMPE researchers also investigated teacher training, a subject which is presented in detail in Paper #4 on Teachers.

percent (CAMPE). PSPMP found subject achievements to be as follows: Bangla, 41 percent mastered, science 40 percent, social science 33 percent, math 18 percent, combined 33 percent.

- Students did better in those competencies that depend on recall and do not involve much thinking and reasoning. They did better on items that can be described as acquisition of knowledge rather than gaining understanding and applying knowledge and skills (CAMPE).⁴⁰
- On average, students achieved 16.1 competencies (or 60 percent of all competencies tested), which varies between school type, residence, and gender of students. Students in non-formal (NGO) schools, urban students, and boys achieved higher averages than their respective counterparts in other categories (CAMPE). Government primary schools are “uniformly superior to registered non-government primary schools” in achievement outcomes, except in math, where they are equally poor (PSPMP).
- School level analysis shows a wide intra-school variation in performance. The highest variation was observed in rural non-formal institutions and lowest in urban government schools (CAMPE).⁴¹
- Within each administrative division there is a wide range in the achievement of schools in each subject. The exception is math, for which all divisions performed poorly (PSPMP).
- Rural schools have lower levels of achievement than urban schools in every subject (PSPMP).
- “With nearly 80 percent enrollment, 72.2 percent completing the primary cycle, and 1.6 percent attaining all the competencies, less than one percent of the children leave their primary school age with the nationally determined competency. In 2001-02 budget terms, the country will be spending 14.3 billion taka (\$250 million) in the primary and mass education sector. If the above statistics hold true, 99 percent of this resource may be going nowhere” (CAMPE).⁴²

Student and School Variables

CAMPE found that achievement is influenced to a considerable extent by family background, support from families, and the school environment. Achievement increased with the following

⁴⁰ This is not peculiar to Bangladesh.

⁴¹ One interpretation is that students learn more in urban government schools; in schools where the variation is wider, students scores reflect knowledge acquired outside of school (or, some might say, raw intelligence).

⁴² This conclusion seems like an exaggeration. Even those students who do not master all competencies master some and learn something.

student variables: years of parental education, self-perceived food security status, access to mass media, access to a private tutor, low rate of participation in co-curricular activities. Achievement increased with the following *school* variables: 40 or fewer students per teacher, greater educational qualifications of the teacher, greater length of service of the teacher, lesser distance between school and the local education authority, greater number of visits made by such authorities.

The PSPMP researchers looked closely at four school variables they devised. These are: teaching and learning processes, school learning climate, enabling conditions, and supporting inputs from outside the school. They found that these four variables “relate well” to students’ achievement.

M. Alam reported on data that he had collected in 1993 on the relative efficiency of the four major types of primary schools.⁴³ He compared achievement scores in language and math of students in grades 1 and 4. He found that students in the NFE centers run by NGOs performed the best, non-state schools followed; third were the state schools, and lowest, the Ebtedayee Madrassahs. Contact hours were highest in the NFE schools and lowest in the state schools.

External Efficiency

Does basic education lead to opportunities for work or productive life? Generally, external efficiency (or the rate at which school leavers are absorbed into the economy) is not assessed at the end of the primary or even lower-secondary level, because most students are expected to continue in school before entering the job market. We did not come across any reports that examine this dimension of the primary system. We raise the issue here, however, because so few students in Bangladesh complete secondary school. About 70 percent of the eligible age group enter lower secondary school, according to PMED.⁴⁴ For children who drop out of primary school or those who complete it but do not move on, there are few job opportunities in the formal sector. Moreover, there are no additional formal education opportunities for any student who completes less than grade 8 (and thus becomes eligible for vocational schools).

The poor external efficiency of the primary school system is largely a fault of Bangladesh’s political economy and its lack of capacity to provide sufficient jobs to many people, at any age and level of educational achievement. Yet it is also a result of the school system’s failure to educate children well—to impart the curriculum and teach children how to master basic skills.

Summary

Over the past decade, Bangladesh has raised its enrollment rates dramatically. Low attendance rates, however, throw into question how many students are attending school regularly. Gender

⁴³ M. Alam (1997). *Basic Education Achievement in Rural Bangladesh: Level, Pattern and Socio-economic Determinants*. Research Report No 1553: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

⁴⁴ *National Plan of Action II*, p. 6.

equity has also improved remarkably, though children living in disadvantaged geographic areas and poor children still do not enroll at acceptable levels. Quality indicators point to a system that is not teaching children the official curriculum, in large part, it seems, because the inputs that lead to quality, especially trained teachers, are not widespread.

VI. Constraints to Improving the System

Constraints to improving the primary education system can be described in a number of ways. The World Bank, for example, looks initially at financial constraints—projected revenues and the likely availability of funds needed to develop and maintain the system. The National Action Plan II lists the following constraints:

- Inadequacy of physical facilities (classrooms, libraries, toilet facilities, water supply, playgrounds)
- Location; distance of schools from homes
- Weakness in delivery of curriculum content, conducting classes and, thus, quality of education
- Internal efficiency
- Supervision and management
- Poverty of parents
- Inadequate appreciation of and, thus, limited demand for education.

All of these are indeed constraints to more children receiving a better education. Reducing these constraints requires the introduction and constant flow of systemic reforms. Thus, our approach to analyzing constraints looks at a deeper level: the barriers to introducing changes to the system that will improve its functioning. These are the constraints that external agencies, which cannot change policy and cannot deliver inputs directly, must consider.

We have identified three main constraints: the institutional culture, the thin capacity of the DPE staff, and corruption within the DPE.

Institutional Culture

Much is said these days about “learning organizations” and their benefits to employees and shareholders. A learning organization is one in which participants continually test responses to a changing environment and take risks with new ideas and better ways to do things. They think, and the organization pays attention to and rewards thinking. Leaders in a learning organization model throughout the system thinking and learning. More than any other kind of system, an

education system should be a learning system, because its fundamental purpose is to encourage learning.

The PMED is not a learning organization. Quite the contrary, it rewards obedience rather than questioning, punishes risking new ideas, and prohibits innovative change. Staff below the level of Secretary and his or her close advisors have no real authority to make decisions. The Director General of the DPE is an implementer. His or her assignment is to implement policy, not to make policy or even contribute to policy-making. Few individuals in high-level positions in the PMED or DPE stay long enough to invest much thought or concern for the education system. Few are trained or experienced in education. Those at lower levels, who could detect problems and try new ways of addressing them are trained not to do so. There are no incentives to innovate and no support for change.

As a result of its myriad rules and unofficial practices of rewarding and punishing, the education system “is left with an extremely centralized, non-participatory, non-transparent and bureaucratic educational administration, management and planning system” (M. Hossain, 1997).

Thin Capacity of the Teacher Corps

The move from a small, elitist education system to one that supports universal education has been rapid, taking off during the past ten years. As a result, not only are many teachers under-trained, but those who would train the teachers (at PTIs) lack the necessary skills, as do those who would train the trainers (at NAPE). Because of the administrative procedures and problems described above, NAPE has floundered, and PTIs and teachers have been left without strong direction or support. This is a binding constraint to improving the quality of education: teachers are at the heart of the instructional system, which, ultimately, delivers good-quality or poor-quality instruction.

We can be cautiously optimistic that the capacity of the teacher corps will improve. The HRD plan adopted in 2000 by DPE has the potential to bring more education cadres into the system, train them in primary education, give them an attractive career path, and retain them. The looming question is the extent to which PMED will support the plan and DPE will implement it.

Transparency

In the huge, centrally controlled primary education system, there are bound to be rules broken and resources leaked. In fact, this appears to happen frequently at every level of the system. CAMPE researchers found that “over 80 percent of families in their sample paid some fees for events such as examination and games, nearly everyone reported they needed to pay for textbooks. In 2000 Transparency International Bangladesh conducted a “Report Card Survey” of eight upazilas of the greater Mymensingh district. They found that “various primary schools require students to pay” for services that are supposed to be free, including admission fees, books, sports, examinations, and promotion to a higher class. Families received less food from the Food for Education program than they were entitled to, and ineligible families received food. While the amounts extracted are small on an individual basis, they add up. TBI estimates, for

example, that the market value of missing food grain disbursed to the eight upazilas in 2000 was over 24 million taka (roughly \$400 thousand).

At best, the effect of such corruption on the education system is higher transaction costs. At worst, it is a strong disincentive to invest time, effort, or money in a system that leaks so massively.

Result

Who suffers? Ultimately, schools, teachers, and students suffer. Also, those who would introduce change face powerful forces that can frustrate their efforts. Systemic changes, particularly improvement of teaching, are difficult to introduce and to sustain. Idea-generating institutions are blocked from participating in the system.

Ironically, Bangladesh has experienced many innovations in education and has a number of schools providing relatively good quality education. BRAC, for example, is world famous for its program that allows disadvantaged girls, in particular, to attend primary school. Other NGOs have a wide range of programs targeting particular audiences for particular purposes. Private schools, though their cost restricts them to wealthier families, make use of up-to-date notions of good teaching. While it is true that bringing an innovation to scale in a large school system is a challenge, this challenge is secondary to the DPE, which hardly allows innovation in the door.

Bangladesh also has the Institute for Education and Research (IER), a wing of Dhaka University.⁴⁵ In recent years the institute has languished. While individual faculty members are allowed by the PMED to participate in government studies and studies of external agencies, the institute itself seems to sit on the other side of a “glass wall.” The common explanation of this phenomenon is that PMED does not want to authorize the institute to engage in government functions. Yet this attitude locks out the traditional source of new thinking in education systems: academic institutions.

VII. Summary

Primary education in Bangladesh has been undertaking systemic reforms since 1992. It now has a good-quality curriculum, good textbooks, and a set of institutions for training teachers. The main weaknesses in its instructional system are the many poorly trained teachers and the absence of any functioning assessment system. Both the governance and management systems of primary education need improvement. Stakeholders have little voice in guiding policy and practice, and management is extremely top-down, depriving even mid-level officials of authority to make decisions.

⁴⁵ The IER was supported for many years in the 1980s by faculty of Colorado State and Northern Colorado University, with funds from USAID.

As a result of reforms, enrollment levels are high and gender equity has been reached, but attendance and efficiency levels are mediocre, and many disadvantaged children still do not attend school. The quality of primary education needs improvement. When measured by well-designed tests of achievement, students, in general, do not perform well. This poor performance can be attributed to the weaknesses in instruction, governance, and management described above. Underlying these barriers to good-quality education is a primary school system that suffers from three critical constraints: its institutional culture, the thinness of its teacher training and support system, and its lack of transparency.

Bangladesh has made great strides in building an infrastructure for universal primary education. It needs to introduce reforms that make that infrastructure work.

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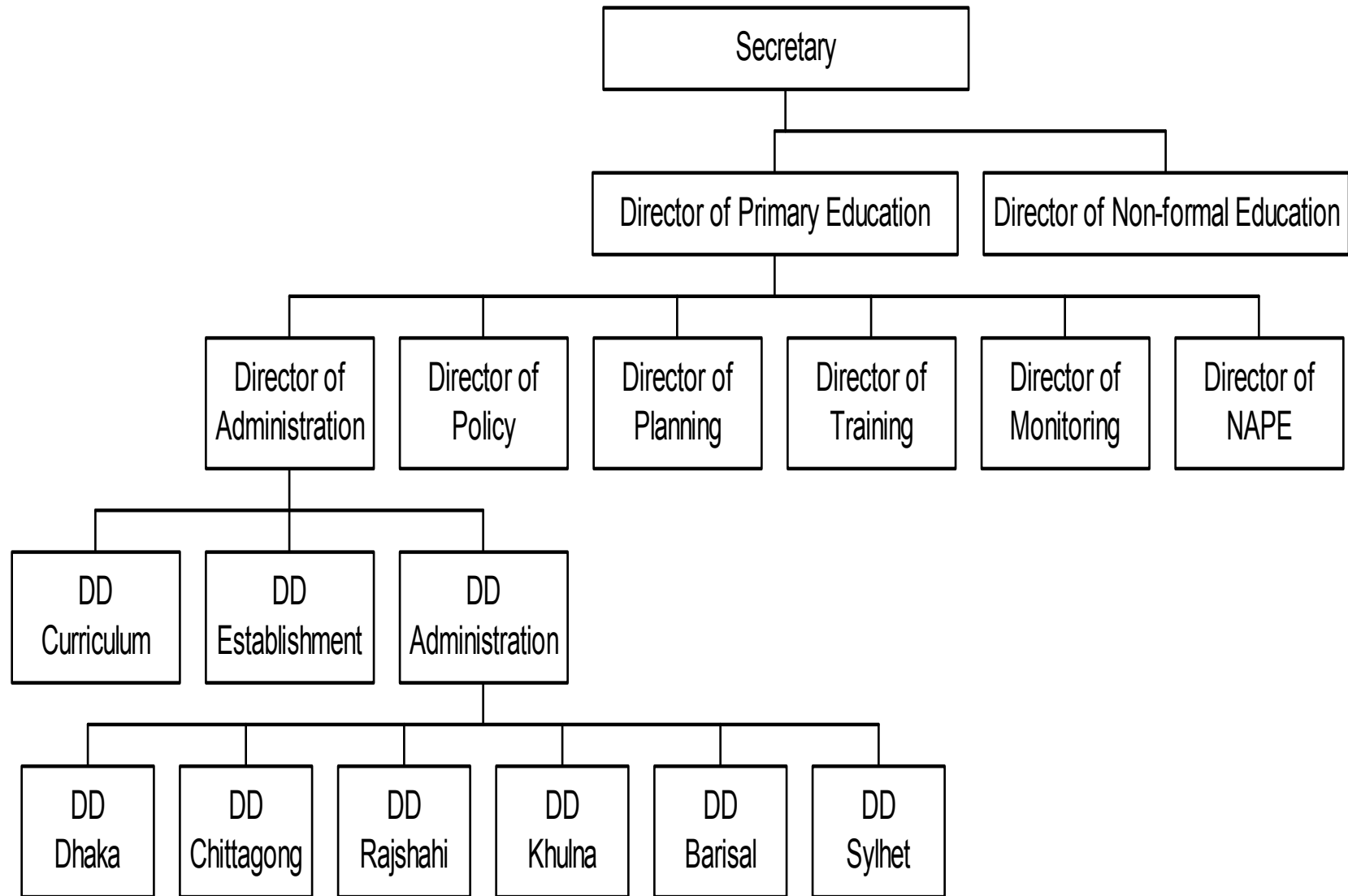
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ANNEX 2 . PRIMARY AND MASS EDUCATION DIVISION: ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



Annex 3: Basic Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

In 1997 the PMED operated a total of 1,486 primary schools in the three districts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Table 1). The official enrollment figures totaled 205, 983 students.⁴⁶ In the CHT there are also 200 secondary schools (enrollment 70,665), and 19 colleges (enrollment at 6800).⁴⁷

Table 1. PMED institutions, teachers, and enrollment in CHT districts

| | Khagrachhari | Rangamati | Bandarban |
|---------------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|
| Total schools | 476 | 626 | 384 |
| Government schools | 320 | 390 | 219 |
| RNGP schools | 96 | 123 | 83 |
| Teachers | 1587 | 2091 | 1083 |
| Enrollment | 75,735 | 87,230 | 43,018 |
| Girls enrollment | 34,485 | 39,852 | 19,062 |

Source: PMED, Monitoring report on primary education, Vol 1, 1997.

These enrollment levels are low. According to CARE,⁴⁸ an average of 57.5 percent of the people in these three districts had no education. Only 22.4 percent had completed primary school. Many children who do attend school drop out at early ages, and others attend irregularly. Schools are not accessible to many, and where there are schools, the facilities are poor and the quality of instruction is low. There are fewer teachers than the norm, and turnover among teachers is high. Teachers come to school irregularly, and teachers hired by the PMED often pay a local, unqualified teacher to take their place for most days of the school year. Villagers do not participate in the management of the school.

The high cost to families of schooling also depresses demand. Although school should be free, parents have trouble paying for clothing and supplies that children need. CARE heard some reports of schools discriminating against indigenous children (the number of Bengalis—who are not indigenous to the CHT—is growing and reported to be about 50 percent by now⁴⁹).

Conditions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts make it more difficult for the PMED to introduce reforms through the same channels and procedures used in the rest of the country. In contrast to

⁴⁶ Sutter, Phil (2000), *Livelihood security in the Chittagong Hill Tracts*. Dhaka: CARE.

⁴⁷ Asian Development Bank, *Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Final Report*. Dhaka: ADB TA NO. 3328.

⁴⁸ Sutter, Phil (2000), *work cited*.

⁴⁹ Asian Development Bank, *work cited*.

the mono-lingual culture that pervades most of Bangladesh, there are 13 indigenous languages in the CHT. Though the government recognizes these languages, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has produced textbooks only in the Bangla language. There is little to read, with a consequence that the literacy rate a few years ago was as low as 5 percent, though it has improved since then. Moreover, a large majority of officials are Bengali, not indigenous people, which lowers their credibility in the eyes of those who live in the CHT. Though each upazila has a secondary school, these are attended mainly by youth who live in those towns. Primary schools are widely scattered and, due to the mountainous territory, not easily accessible to many children.

According to the draft PEDP Assessment, the PEDP includes several initiatives intended to increase school participation among the tribal communities in the CHT. The World Bank, through its PEDP, started some satellite schools, which continue to function. The SPESP project of the ADB consortium was to provide new school facilities and free supplementary materials to 12 thousand children. It was to support a Tribal Development Plan, which would include workshops at the local level to involve community leaders in developing materials. It would also include social awareness and mobilization programs to strengthen communities' understanding of and commitment to education. These workshops would engage representatives of local government councils of CHT and the Special Affairs Division, in order to ensure that tribal strategies were properly included. The ADB also agreed to collect ethnic-sensitive data and develop indicators for measuring ethnic group benefits as a result of the program. "However, due to a range of political and other factors, little of this program has been translated into action" (draft PEDP Assessment, p. 55).

In 2000 CARE started a project in the CHT—a pilot project of 25 schools in two districts, covering five of 17 upazilas. Some of these schools are government schools that have buildings but no teachers. Others are community schools, not attached to the government system. Community schools are generally in remote areas in the forest. CARE does not try to link schools to the system; it helps them become functional, using local resources and those supplied by CARE.

CARE aims to get communities involved in change, of which education is a big element. Its strategy is not to extend the reforms introduced by the government but to respond to what communities express as their own needs in basic education. CARE does not use a particular model of schooling. Instead, it employs participatory methods common to CARE's general strategy to help communities define their needs and develop strategies for getting resources. CARE has helped communities create school management committees, PTAs, and mothers' groups, which have also become a rallying point for other projects. Now in its third year, CARE has spent about \$125 thousand each year. It employs indigenous people on the project staff and works through six local NGOs (Greenhill, Taungya, CIPD, Graus, Mrochet, and Toymu).

