

*A case study from*

Reducing Poverty, Sustaining Growth—What Works, What Doesn't, and Why  
A Global Exchange for Scaling Up Success

Scaling Up Poverty Reduction: A Global Learning Process and Conference  
Shanghai, May 25–27, 2004

# **Access to Education for the Poor and Girls: Educational Achievements in Bangladesh**

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The author is very grateful to Naila Kabeer and Ramya Subrahmanian, with whom a number of the arguments presented here were originally developed, and to Monami Latif, Samer Al-Samarrai, Elena Glinskaya and Ravi Kanbur for advice and comments on earlier drafts.

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## Executive Summary

In the 1990s, Bangladesh succeeded in the difficult task of expanding access to primary and, to some degree secondary, education for the poor and for girls. This success involved massive investment in schools, materials, teachers and administration, and was only possible because resources were mobilized from donors, the public purse, communities and households. Large-scale demand-side interventions helped attract girls and the poor, who needed the extra incentives to make school worth attending. By the end of the 1990s gross enrolment rates were over 100 percent and the gender gap at the primary level was eliminated. The demand for education had been growing through the past century, the result of dramatic social change. These changes have been most marked in gender relations, which coupled with strong signals from the state and other actors about the value of girls' education, have had an impact on public discourse and educational behavior.

Expanding mass education has been a government policy priority since independence. In 1973 the government nationalized all community-based primary schools. Primary enrolments registered a brief sharp rise, before settling down to their pre-nationalization levels where they stayed until the late 1980s. While universal primary education remained a political priority, the development budget allocation remained low through much of the 1980s. Public spending on education increased as a proportion of GDP from 0.9 percent (1973-80) to 2.2 percent (1997-8). Education was also increasingly high priority, rising from about 9 percent of total spending in 1973-80 to 16 per cent (1995-6)

Education in Bangladesh is now highly centralized in policy and planning, yet unusually pluralist in provision. Over the years, policies to permit non-state provision enabled government to capitalize on strong community support and NGO non-formal programs in the primary sector and to foster public-private partnerships in the secondary sector. Plural provision has meant not only more but more innovative policies and providers, although it has not in most cases resulted in effective choice for households. In 2003 there were at least eleven official types of primary schools. About half of all the officially recognized primary schools are managed and resourced directly by government, with much of the remainder highly subsidized and under the national curriculum as registered non-government (24 percent) and madrassah (Islamic religious) schools (5 percent). Around two million children (ten percent) attend NGO schools, which are not registered with the government. Primary education provision in Bangladesh is unusually diverse for a developing country, and this plurality of provision appears to have been critical in enabling the expansion and to reaching poor children and girls.

A critical factor in the success of Bangladesh has been the strength of political commitment to expanding access. The political will to expand education has cut across all political parties and administrations, in part reflecting the national elite consensus on the vital role of basic education for poverty reduction and development. Many of this elite had themselves recently risen from rural communities to positions of national authority and power, often through access to formal education. Educational charity also appears to be valued among this group. As a

result, the national elite had reasonably direct knowledge of the significance of education for social mobility, and were inclined to support expansion efforts. Politicians, senior civil servants, large NGOs and teachers' associations all had incentives to support the expansion. Communities' participation has led to different types of schools: community schools, revived in the 1980s, satellite schools in poorer areas, and private registered non-governmental schools. The variety of schools, particularly NGO-operated, yielded benefits in addition to increasing total access: innovative school design features and direct efforts ensured that BRAC (large domestic NGO) schools, in particular, enrolled mainly girls from poor families. The comparatively late arrival to the primary sector of foreign aid meant that the resources were available at the crucial moment, but that Government still owned the expansion.

Considerable social changes including in the structure of economic opportunities after Independence in 1971 also fuelled the demand for education. The increase in public sector employment opportunity encouraged investment in higher education. Population growth increased pressure on the land, leading to declining farm size and rising landlessness, providing strong incentives for households to invest in their children's education, particularly their sons'. Increased demand for girls' education came more gradually, reflecting the changing nature of patriarchal relations in the strained and crisis-struck economy and the challenge to traditional gender relations. The marked rise in divorce, dowry and desertion among the poor noted through the 1980s may also have reduced the prospect that marriage would ensure women's economic security. From the 1980s, micro-credit meant that poor women had more effect on educational decision-making. Also from the 1980s, women's economic opportunities increased dramatically with the export-oriented garment industry. The need for at least primary education to take advantage of new forms of employment opportunities is likely to have added weight to the incentive to educate girls.

Other factors influencing the increase in effective demand for education were large-scale classroom construction, which also decreased the distance to school for many rural students, teacher recruitment, and efforts to encourage community provision in under-served areas. From as early as 1981, efforts were also underway to increase the proportion of women teachers as a means of attracting more girl students.

Demand-side interventions were established in the early 1990s. The Food for Education (FFE) program, which gave children from selected poor families monthly wheat grants in return for regular school attendance, reached more than two million students by 1999. The Female Stipend programs give scholarships for girls to attend secondary school, providing an incentive for parents to send girls to the primary level. To date, less effort has been expended by the state in expanding access for geographically, ethnically and socially marginal groups—*chor* inhabitants, tribal minorities and urban slum children. There have been recent efforts to improve access for these marginalized groups through innovative forms of schooling mainly via NGOs. This appears to reflect a government preference for NGO school provision to focus more on socially and geographically marginal groups that the state system does not reach, rather than attempting to cover the wider population, which is viewed as more correctly the responsibility of the state.

These remarkable achievements in the expansion of the system cannot hide problems with the quality of the system. The terms of success in primary education in Bangladesh include expanded, near-universal access; success in attracting girls and students from poor families; raised resources going to primary; and in the mix of plural provision and centralized authority over the expansion. Problems of quality and pockets of exclusion persist, however. The quality of education suffers, as reflected in low learning achievements, low completion rates and high dropout rates. This is chiefly because of weakening management at all levels of the education system. The role teachers' play is complex as they are part of the highly centralized central administration and also function as community-level bureaucrats in poor rural areas. Teachers' collective political power has had clear negative impacts on quality, but may have contributed to the expansion of the system.

Recognizing that improving quality in the education sector is imperative in order to make substantial progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals and fulfilling the poverty reduction agenda, considerable attention is focused on this issue in the I-PRSP and the Government has launched several reform measures to address this issue.

## The Features of Educational Expansion in Bangladesh

This paper is an account of the expansion of education to reach the poor and girls in Bangladesh, focusing on the period of rapid expansion in the 1990s. The paper makes the case that the expansion was driven by the national elite in consensus on the priority of primary education for overall national development, and responding to the perceived needs of the poor. Partly through the expansion of the system as a whole, and partly through deliberate efforts to reduce gendered and poverty barriers to access, gender parity was achieved at primary and secondary levels by the turn of the century, and poor children were increasingly enrolled in school.

The key features of educational success in Bangladesh are as follows:

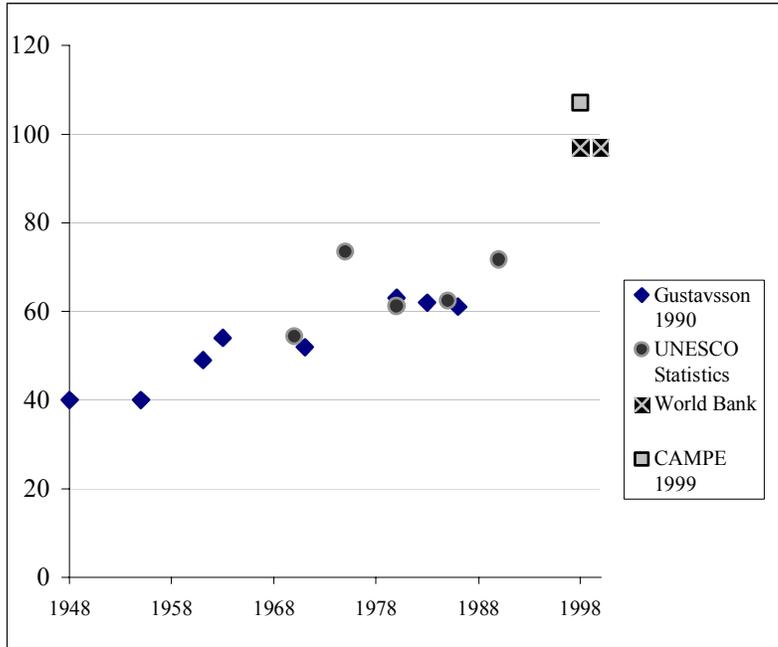
*The scale of the expansion of the system.* Primary enrolment rates rose gradually and intermittently over the century, accelerating from the 1990s, by the end of which gross enrolment rates were over 100 per cent (figure 1). In theory, at least, there were enough school places for every school-aged child in the country. At its peak, the primary school system had places for 18 million students,<sup>1</sup> and over a five-year period, a million new school places were created annually. The entire system expanded through the 1990s—more classrooms, teachers, teaching and learning materials, administrators and administration—so that Bangladesh now boasts one of the largest primary education systems in the world, one which is also universal in scope. Secondary enrolments have also considerably increased so that they more than doubled during the 1990s to about 8.5 million. Most impressive is the growth in girls' enrolments—from about 600,000 in 1980 to over four million by 2000.

*Reaching girls and the poor.* The significance of the Bangladesh achievement lies in having overcome the major obstacles of poverty and gender disadvantage. The gender gap at primary narrowed very slowly until the 1990s, by the end of which, disparities were eliminated (see figure 2). At the secondary level, enrolment of girls has risen rapidly—girls now constitute about 55 percent of total enrolment up from a third at the beginning of the 1990s.

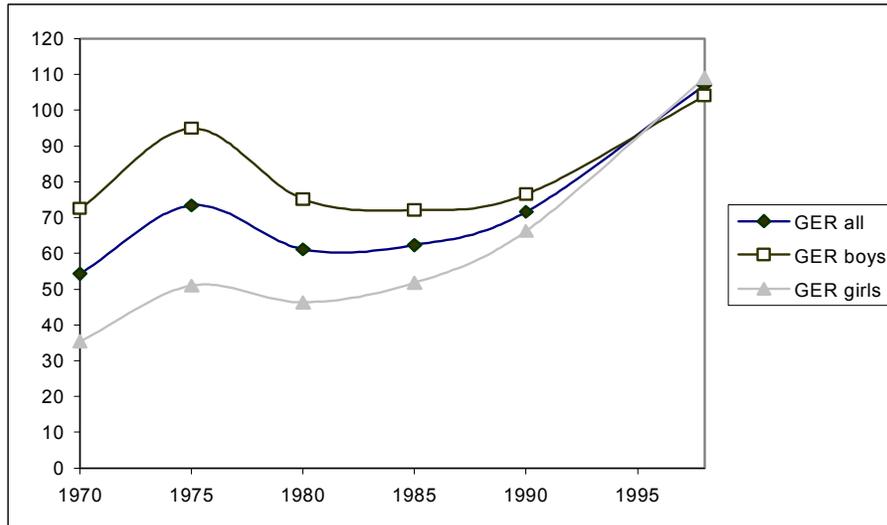
The expansion of the entire system made schools, especially at the primary level, more easily accessible to most, although this was not enough to draw in all of the poorest. Direct interventions to create effective demand for education for girls and children from poorer households helped to reduce the impact of severe poverty, gender disadvantage and reliance on the labour of children which had prevented many poorer households from investing in education. Currently the poor receive about 55 percent of government subsidies at the primary level. NGOs also played a role in attracting girls and the poor into non-formal schools at the primary level, enrolling more than one million students from the 1980s. Some of these (mainly poor girl) students enter the state system on graduation from NGO schools, so that in addition to their own

achievements, NGOs also supported the expansion of education for girls and the poor within the state system.

**Figure 1. Gross enrolment rates at primary level: 1948–2000 (various estimates)**



**Figure 2. Gross enrolment rates by gender at primary level, 1970–98**



Source: UNESCO Statistics, except 1998: Education Watch (CAMPE 1999)

<sup>1</sup> These official statistics do not include the two (check this figure) million children enrolled in non-registered NGO schools (Bureau of Bangladesh Statistics *Annual Yearbooks of Bangladesh Statistics*; CAMPE 2001).

*Raising resources.* The expansion of the system was possible because of the increasing concentration of resources on primary education from the late 1980s. A higher proportion of government public spending went to the social sectors through the 1990s, within which education in general and primary in particular were accorded a new priority. Although the administrative machinery for providing education has expanded over the decades, this was from a very low base. After the Jomtien conference in 1990, donors also invested more heavily, working with the state system to achieve primary education goals. Households and communities also invested more in education through this period, partly as a result of government and NGO attempts to involve communities in school provision, and partly because of the private costs of education.

*Effective use of education innovations (demand-side interventions).* The government's strategy to promote education for the poor and girls through demand side interventions has enhanced access. Two programs provide subsidies to selected students and their families. The massive Food for Education (FFE) program provided grain rations to disadvantaged families if they send their children to primary school (it has been recently replaced by a targeted direct cash-subsidy stipend program and over five million students are expected to receive the stipend annually). FFE reached more than two million students by 1999 (CAMPE 1999). The Female Secondary Stipends (FSS) program provides stipends and tuition waivers to females residing in non-municipal areas attending grades VI-X. Close to four million girls are receiving stipends annually. While there are leakages associated with these programs,<sup>2</sup> they have been effective in enhancing access. There is considerable evidence that FFE have improved the educational prospects of many girls and poor children (see Ravallion and Wodon 1999; Ahmed and del Ninno 2002). An additional year of the FSS is estimated to increased female secondary enrolment by as much as eight percent. The Female Stipend program is also understood to have helped delay girls' marriage (Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2000).

*Centralisation with plural provision.* The expansion was achieved through a marriage of the benefits of centralised policy-making with pluralist provision. While no significant devolution of power over education policy and planning took place, the state has been able to periodically encourage (or to refrain from discouraging) a diversity of providers. The diversity of education providers has not in most cases resulted in effective choice of provider, and the benefits of plural provision appear to have come through some learning across and (more controversially) competition between systems. In addition, groups not reached by the main system have been drawn in by more specialist providers, with some then being enabled to enter the mainstream state system. Non-state provision was countenanced without causing the state to lose apparent control of the overall direction and character of the expansion. While there are criticisms of the centralised nature of education policy and planning, the possibility of centralised control over education policy may have made it an attractive vehicle through which to meet political objectives with respect to the population. The high population density and unusual ethnic-linguistic homogeneity of Bangladesh may also have meant that centralised planning and provision made considerable policy sense during this phase.

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<sup>2</sup> To reduce leakages, in 2002 the FFE program was replaced by a cash stipend program.

*Declining quality.* Success has mainly been achieved in enhancing access, and the poor quality of the system at both the primary and secondary level remains a concern. The system is characterized by weak management at all levels. The highly centralized management of education inhibits district, upazila and school initiatives in providing quality education. There is also limited transparency in the allocation and use of resources. This is compounded by an ineffective system of accountability: of teachers to students, guardians and head teachers; of head teachers to supervisors and school management committees; and of school management to government. Finally, ineffective monitoring and evaluation provide little empirical basis for policy formulation and planning.

*Emerging challenges.* GoB recognizes these challenges and is attempting to address them—at the primary level, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) is implementing a Primary Education Development Program (PEDP II), a six-year program of support which aims to strengthen educational access, quality and efficiency. At the secondary and higher levels, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has finalized a medium-term framework for the secondary education sub-sector, which lays out targets to be achieved for quality improvements, policy measures and specific actions needed to achieve these targets. MOE is in the process of undertaking reforms which will help in the implementation of its framework.

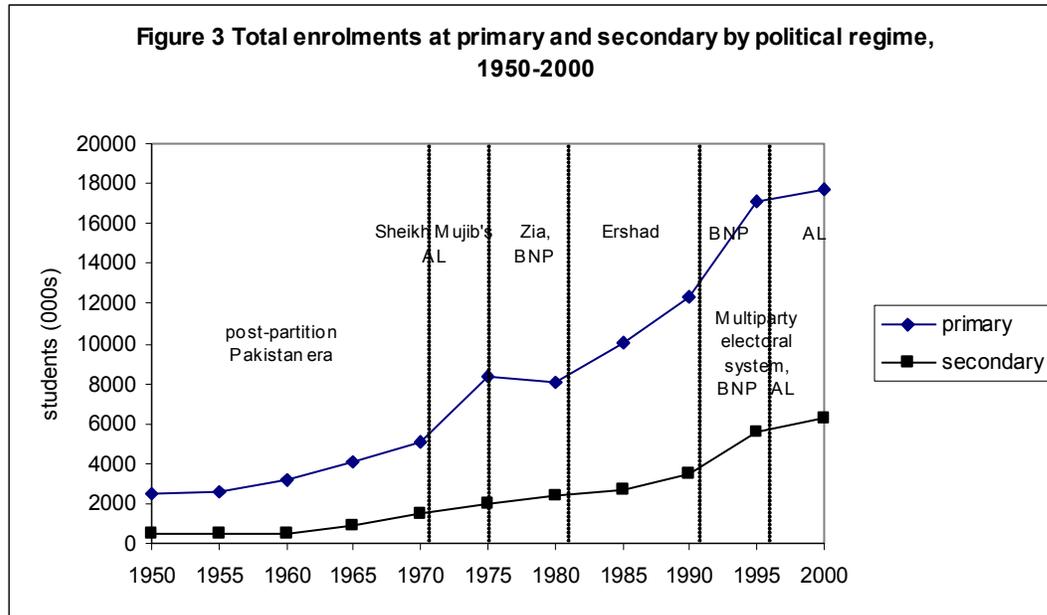
The next section presents a brief historical review of the evolution of education policy, looking in particular at resources, capacity, and the innovative policy arrangements and interventions which enabled effective access for girls and the poor, in response to latent demand among the population. Section 3 outlines the sources of the political will to expand the system, showing how the rise in resources to primary education reflected the strength of domestic and international commitment to expanding education. It looks at how social and economic changes, primarily increasing landlessness, impoverishment, disruption to customary gender relations, and changes in women's livelihood opportunities altered the incentives for households to educate their children. Section 4 looks at the role of actors beyond the government, and section 5 draws conclusions from the discussion, with lessons for other contexts of scaling up poverty reduction.

## **Factors Influencing Demand for Education, Interventions, and Innovations**

### **Education policy in Bangladesh, 1971–91**

Figure 3 charts educational expansion over time, using total enrolment figures to give a sense of the scale of the challenge facing policymakers. Primary education was neglected in the Eastern wing and growth was slow during the Pakistan era. Despite the importance accorded to education by the new governments of the post-liberation era, the first decade of independence also experienced limited progress on educational provision, after an initial blip in enrolment rates. During the first half of the 1970s, it appears to have been a struggle to manage the existing system, let alone developing it further (McLellan 1983, cited in ADB 1986: 50). The main

achievements during this period were symbolic, reflecting the unforgotten promises of the liberation movement. The constitution of the new nation stated its mandate to ensure mass-oriented, uniform and universal education, to be geared towards meeting the needs of society, including to ‘create enthusiasm to establish the cherished socialistic society’ (Prokaushali, cited in Gustavsson 1990: 19). The transmission of secular values was also a priority, and the first national education commission accordingly recommended that *madrassahs* be integrated within the mainstream (Muhith 1999).



Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 1985; 1995; 1999; Government of Bangladesh 2001

Note: ‘Primary’ excludes unregistered non-formal non-government schools

Until liberation, primary schooling had been an entirely local effort. The policy of nationalising the 36,000 largely community-based primary schools in 1973 marked a critical change, but one with at first little direct impact on the functioning of or financing for schools, although assets and management were taken over by the state and teachers became state employees and members of the civil bureaucracy. Although the policy was intended to signal attention to the needs of the masses and as a step towards fulfilling the constitutional mandate (ADB 1986; Muhith 1999), its consequences were to reduce local responsibility without replacing it with effective state authority (a problem that persists till present). Over night, schools which had been built through community effort became nominally under the authority of the central government, exercised through the fewer than 500 Thana Education Officers nationally, under an understaffed, minor directorate (Sattar 1982). Also over night, teachers stopped being employees of the local community, and became central government employees, as well as one of the largest and most powerful unions (Rahman 1993).

Despite its political significance, expanding mass education was an unlikely policy priority at this time in part because of the post-war shortage of educated administrative personnel

and the clout of student political groups, which together sustained the case for a continued focus on higher levels of education (Ahmad 1989; Maniruzzaman 1980; Ghosh 1990; see also World Bank 1999a: 3-4). Concerns about the impact of mass literacy and education programmes were also live at the time, as the new nationalist government was unnerved by widespread political volatility and by disaffected war veteran and leftist groups' attempts to mobilise the rural masses,<sup>3</sup> and at the time, mass education programmes elsewhere in Asia had been linked with social mobilisation campaigns (World Bank 1999a: 12).

Even the modest expansionary ambitions envisaged by the initial Five Year Plan (FYP) were abandoned under crisis conditions in the mid-1970s (ADB 1986). Aid flows declined, but education was not in any case the favoured donor sector over this period: World Bank staff of the 1970s were ambivalent about financing what they saw as 'nation-building rather than skill-building', and it was as late as 1980 that their first major primary education project got off the ground (World Bank 1999a: 12).

Activity on educational expansion during the latter half of the 1970s involved efforts to develop the administrative machinery which later drove the successful expansion, including upgrading the directorate responsible for primary education (see Sattar 1982). Administrative innovations and some efforts at decentralisation were proposed in a bid to achieve UPE and universal literacy and to decrease rural-urban differences (Ahmad 1989; CAMPE 1999). The drive for UPE was to be the government priority, on the same 'revolutionary' footing as food production and population control. However, other than some school building programmes, primary and mass educational objectives were by and large not met (ADB 1986; Muhith 1999). Again, symbolic politics were prominent in an attempt to reverse the secular principles of education in favour of a more Islamic curriculum, and the development budget allocation to primary education remained low (ADB 1986). This period also marked a rightward shift in economic policy orientation, possibly inspired by the fast-growing Asian 'tiger' countries, and by practical concerns such as the need to win donor support (Humphrey 1990; Kochanek 1993). Education policy may have been similarly inspired, and the Second FYP (1980-85) had a stronger focus on primary.

Progress on educational expansion continued erratically throughout the 1980s. A Directorate of Primary Education was established, the goals of Universal Primary Education and mass literacy were stressed in the Third Five Year Plan (1985-1990) and there was increasing emphasis on reducing gender disparities in enrolments at all levels (see Alam *et al* 2003). This meant that by the time of the Jomtien conference in 1990, Bangladesh was well-placed to invest in meeting commitments to educational expansion. The Fourth FYP (1990-1995) focused firmly on primary education, including introducing legislation to make attendance compulsory.

While all of the political leadership can be credited with some part of the achievements in educational expansion for girls and the poor, the period of the greatest progress also marked the return to democratic multiparty politics. Under the General Education Project (1991/2-7),

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<sup>3</sup> See Maniruzzaman (1980: 200-201); also, Arens and Van Beurden (1980: part IV) and Hartmann and Boyce (1983: 250-254) indicate that educational differences distanced middle class political activists from

educational opportunities expanded massively, in large part due to school construction and programmes of classroom-building. By 1997, more than 18 million children were enrolled in around 78,000 primary schools, GERs were over 100, NERs were about 85 per cent, and most remarkably, gender disparities in enrolment had been eliminated at primary (see Sedere 2000 for an overview). Similarly, the rapid expansion in enrolments at the secondary level can be linked to the emphasis that the government placed on implementing the female secondary stipend program in the early 1990s.

Observers have noted the enduring importance of strong political commitment to the achievement of the EFA goals, particularly during the democratic decade of the 1990s (see World Bank 2000b; World Bank/ADB 2003). Public spending on education increased as a proportion of GDP from 0.9 per cent (1973-80) to 2.2 per cent (1997-8). Education was also increasingly high priority, rising from about 9 per cent of total spending in the First FYP (1973-80) to 16 per cent (1995-6) (World Bank 2000a). Even within the social sectors, the share of development spending on education increased faster than on other sectors during the expansionary surge of the 1990s (table 1).

**Table 1. Public spending on primary education in the 1990s**

Year	Public expenditure in millions of taka		Public expenditure on primary education	
	On education	On primary education	As percentage of total public expenditure on education	As percentage of GDP
1990	13288	6180	47	0.8
1991	14944	7324	49	0.9
1992	19089	10150	53	1.1
1993	22674	11579	51	1.2
1994	37608	14765	39	1.4
1995	35263	17238	49	1.5
1996	35226	17400	49	1.3
1997	38473	18041	47	1.3
1998	41788	18296	44	1.2
1999	47190	20161	43	1.2*
2000	51450	22175	43	1.2*

We turn now to look more closely at the thrust and characteristics of education policy, particularly during the 1990s, the decade that saw the rapid expansion and outreach. We focus more closely on primary education in this section.

those they sought to mobilise.

### **From nationalisation to plural provision**

Diagnoses of the problems of the centralised nature of policy and planning, provision, by contrast, has been more plural than centrally-dominated, with communities, NGOs, charities, and private actors periodically being enabled to enter the sector. The variety of providers now in place reflects the range of policies and experiments with which Bangladesh moved towards UPE and increasing enrolments at the secondary level, as well as the tensions between control and expansion which have characterised that move. It seems clear that these policies were pursued in order to maximise the resources going towards increasing enrolments in education, in particular to tap into strong community support for local schools. But the state has also frequently attempted to intervene to control these from the centre, to achieve a universal and uniform primary education system. This was the purpose of the nationalisation of the community-based primary schools in 1973.

The situation in 2003 is far from uniform, with no fewer than eleven official types of primary school, and others unrecognised by the state. About half of all the officially recognised 79,000 primary schools are managed and resourced directly by government, with much of the remainder highly subsidised and under the national curriculum as registered non-government (24 per cent of enrolment) and madrassah schools (5 per cent of enrolment)(World Bank 2000b). Around two million children (ten per cent of enrolment) attend NGO schools which are not registered with the government.<sup>4</sup> Primary education provision in Bangladesh is unusually diverse for a developing country, and this plurality of provision appears to have been critical in enabling the expansion and to reaching poor children and girls.<sup>5</sup>

The first major change in primary provision came with the assertion of state control, through nationalisation of what had been community schools. These were funded substantially through private charity as well as through local efforts and contributions in kind. The state instantly acquired 36,000 schools, and enrolments registered a brief sharp rise, before settling down to their pre-nationalisation levels, where they stayed until the late 1980s. But other than to detach the community from the schools, nationalisation had little immediate impact on these new state schools until the administration was adapted to deal with this new situation in the late 1970s (Sattar 1982; Rahman 1993).

Community involvement in the provision of education has continued, taking different shapes according to the policies of different periods. The different ways in which communities have been invited to participate in primary provision have led to different types of schools: community schools, revived in the 1980s, satellite schools in poorer areas, and private registered non-governmental schools. The Government supports all of these to various degrees, paying teachers' salaries in full or part; making grants or building facilities; boosting enrolment through food or cash subsidies to households; providing teaching and learning materials.

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<sup>4</sup> At the time of writing, it is reported that the more than one million students in BRAC non-formal primary schools will now be eligible to take the public scholarship examinations to enter the formal secondary system, a policy shift towards some acceptance of NGO non-formal schools.

<sup>5</sup> At the secondary level, close to 95 percent of enrolments (close to eight million children) are in schools that are privately managed but heavily subsidized by the government.

Almost 10 per cent of revenue spending on primary is currently composed of contributions to non-state school teachers' salaries (World Bank 2000a). 25 per cent or 20,000 of all private primary institutions are registered with the government (World Bank 2000b). It is also worth noting that the proportion of non-state school teachers' salaries being paid by the state has been repeatedly revised upwards, from half in 1986 (ADB 1986), to 70 per cent in the early 1990s (Alam 1992; 1994), and between 80 and 90 per cent, plus allowances, by the end of the century (Masum 2001; World Bank 2000b). The subsidy to private institutions has tended to pass without much comment, on the grounds that it has permitted wider access at lower cost, and is therefore seen as a combination of contracting out and cost-sharing. But it is also recognised that subsidies to private schools are not an especially equitable or effective means of contracting out, as they tend to be set up in more affluent areas and are of lower quality (World Bank 2000b: 63-71). It seems that there may be some political capital to be gained by increasing state contributions to private school teachers' salaries: election manifestos for 2001 claimed policies of increasing the state contribution to non-state teachers' salaries to 100 per cent, as a means of illustrating the high priority accorded education.

Government has also permitted foreign-funded NGOs and non-mainstream religious schools to operate on a large-scale, while demonstrating its willingness to intervene in such institutions. Although Governments frequently demonstrate their willingness to assert overall control, recent tactics with respect to *madrassahs* have taken into account sensitivities around appearing 'anti-Islamic'. Although the vast majority of *madrassah* institutions are under private management, most formal religious schools receive state support, and at secondary equivalent are regulated and certified by the state *Madrassah* Board (Alam 1992). Little information is publicly available about the character and performance of religious-based schooling in Bangladesh (see CAMPE 1999).<sup>6</sup> But all the indications are that *madrassah* numbers and enrolments have grown significantly since the mid-1970s, with estimates of enrolment at 0.8 million for primary and 0.9 million for secondary equivalent by the late 1990s (see World Bank 2000b). Official statistics claimed 16,200 primary equivalent *madrassah* schools and 5,000 secondary equivalent in the mid-1990s (cited in Centre for Policy Dialogue 1995), although there is also evidence that many of these exist only on paper (*ibid.* 409).

There are, perhaps understandably, political pressures for all governments to show willing to control NGO activities, but the frequently-declared intention to nationalise NGO schools has not materialised. Actual oversight of NGOs included the now-defunct Directorate of Non-Formal Education (DNFE), which supervised and supported non-formal education activities (the sub-sector with most NGO involvement), as well as other modes of partnership between NGOs and the state in the education sector. A recent review found that about four out of five NGOs involved in education in Bangladesh were implementing programmes for the DNFE (World Bank 2000b), indicating that the DNFE resulted in a closer state-NGO relationship in the

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<sup>6</sup> The limited available documentation is also highly contradictory. World Bank (2000a) finds high unit costs for government *madrassahs*, which tallies with CAMPE's claims of high government spending on *madrassahs* (1999). Alam (1992), by contrast, claims that *madrassahs* have lower unit costs than general secondary, and that this was to be expected. Estimates of the numbers of *madrassah* institutions and enrolment rates also vary widely.

education sector (Miwa 2002). That NGOs were permitted to operate unregistered non-mainstream schools yielded benefits in addition to increasing total access: innovative school design features and direct efforts ensured that BRAC schools, in particular, enrolled mainly girls from poor families. Some of these poor girl students later graduated into the formal system (see Nath 2002 on the transition to the formal system). NGO school provision also has impacts on the administration of education, as is explored below.

### **Creating effective demand for education**

The primary enrolment rate was low through much of the century, rising slowly during the two decades in which Bangladesh formed the eastern wing of Pakistan (see figure 1). Independence in 1971 ushered in considerable social change including in the structure of economic opportunities. One such change was the increase in public sector employment opportunity, which encouraged investment in higher education. Other changes were less positive: population growth increased pressure on the land, leading to declining farm size and rising landlessness. These trends were intensified during the crisis years of the early-mid 1970s, and as agriculture increasingly could not support the population, all households had incentives to invest in their children's education, particularly their sons'.

Micro-level evidence from the late 1970s strongly suggests that aspirations to education were more widespread than enrolment figures indicated. It is likely that the fertility decline which started from the late 1970s reflected an emerging preference for investing in the 'quality' of children over the preference for 'quantity' which had characterised earlier eras (Kabeer 1985; 1986; see also Hossain and Kabeer, forthcoming).

Gender-segmented labour markets combined with the constraints on women's employment meant that the changing structure of economic opportunities did not initially impact on the demand for girls' education as it did for boys'. Instead, gradual changes in attitudes to girls' education may have reflected the changing nature of patriarchal relations in this strained and crisis-struck economy (see Sattar 1974), and the challenge to traditional gender relations. New patterns of public employment emerged among poorer women around this time (Chen and Ghuznavi 1977). The marked rise in divorce, dowry and desertion among the poor noted through the 1980s may also have reduced the prospect that marriage would ensure women's economic security. From the 1980s, micro-credit meant that poor women had more effect on educational decision-making (Hashemi and Schuler 1996). Also from the 1980s, women's economic opportunities increased dramatically with the export-oriented garment industry. The need for at least primary education to take advantage of new forms of employment opportunities is likely to have added weight to the incentive to educate girls (see Kabeer 1997; Siddiqui 1991; Kibria 1995).

Studies had repeatedly shown that the distance to school or the absence of a school in the village deterred many rural households. Large-scale classroom construction, teacher recruitment, and efforts to encourage community provision in under-served areas under the General Education Project of the first half of the 1990s meant that many households were now able to exercise

effective demand in this respect. From as early as 1981, efforts were also underway to increase the proportion of women teachers (Rahman 1993) as a means of attracting more girl students. These efforts continued into the 1990s, so that women now constitute almost one-third of all primary school teachers in the formal system, as well as more than 90 per cent of all BRAC school teachers.

Demand-side interventions to encourage enrolment by girls and the poor were first discussed in the late 1980s, but it was not until the early 1990s that these programmes were established on any scale. The massive FFE programme, in which children from selected poor families received monthly wheat grants in return for regular school attendance, reached more than two million students by 1999 (CAMPE 1999). The cash-based Primary Education Stipend Project (PESP) supplemented FFE in 1999, and both were replaced in 2002 by a modified version of PESP, which introduced school- and student-based conditions relating to attendance and performance. The modified PESP has streamlined and clarified procedures, in an apparent effort to reduce the problems of leakage associated with FFE.

Incentives for parents to educate girls to primary level also improved because of Female Stipend programmes which give scholarships for girls to attend secondary, making future investment in girls' education cheaper. There is considerable evidence that these have improved the educational prospects of many girls and poor children (see Ravallion and Wodon 1999; Ahmed and del Ninno 2002). The Female Stipend program is also understood to have helped delay girls' marriage (Arends-Kuenning and Amin 2000).

To date, less effort has been expended by the state in expanding access for geographically, ethnically and socially marginal groups—*chor* inhabitants, tribal minorities and urban slum children (CAMPE 1999; Masum 2001). However, there have been recent efforts to improve access for these marginalised groups through innovative forms of schooling (such as the Hard-to-Reach programme which targeted urban working children), mainly via NGOs contracted by the DNFE. Discussions with education officials indicate that the government preference is for NGO school provision to focus more on socially and geographically marginal groups that the state system does not reach, rather than attempting to cover the wider population, which is viewed as more correctly the responsibility of the state.

### **Signalling the value of girls' education**

The economy, the society, and in particular politicians had been sending out strong positive signals about the value of girls' education. While any direct attribution of changed attitudes to advocacy of this kind is risky, it is clear to observers of gender relations in Bangladesh that proponents of women's education have had an impact on public gender discourse. Strong rhetorical support was given to girls' education from long before the expansionary period. Successive political leaders took close personal interest in primary education for girls, in particular the two women Prime Ministers of the 1990s. Other signals about the value of girls' education which also appear to have had some effect include the UNICEF Meena campaign. It is possible that NGO women's credit groups have enabled a 'group effect' in terms of exposure to

new norms and ideas, including about the value of girls' education (see also Drèze and Kingdon 2001).

Policy innovations in delivery have helped this strong signal reach society. Just as the rise of the garment industry showed that educated women were valued in the economy, policies to increase the proportion of women primary teachers indicated that educated women were valued by the state and the society. A recent policy innovation of interest is that payment under the revised PESP programme is made to mothers, in the first instance, who are required to open bank accounts in order to receive the cash. This is designed to ensure mothers have more control over educational spending, as well as the additional benefits of increasing mobility and public interaction.

## **The Political Will to Expand Education**

Critics have regularly commented on the elitist, top-down and centralised process of education policymaking (see, for example, Gustavsson 1990; CPD 1998; Alam *et al* 2003). An alternative perspective on the centralised and elitist process of education policymaking is that the expansion of the system was substantially driven by strong political commitment to mass education at the centre, championed as a priority by the top political leadership across all major parties and factions. That is, strong political will at the highest levels powered the expansion of the system. This section dissects the 'political will' factor. It offers an analysis of the perceptions, pressures and incentives for different groups within the national elite to support and contribute to the overarching goal of a universal primary education system.

### **Bangladeshi elite attitudes to education**

Research among the Bangladeshi national elite found they supported mass education as a prerequisite for tackling poverty (Hossain 2003). In part, the elite's positive attitude to basic education—higher levels of education interested them less—was linked to the perception that poverty was substantially the result of the lack of modern attitudes and behaviour, which impinges on the ability of the uneducated poor to control or plan fertility or for the future. Schooling of any quality may provide some of these desired characteristics.<sup>7</sup> Support for mass education is also partly instrumental, justified as in the wider national interest (because, for example, women's education is understood to reduce fertility). Elite support for education also derived from their perception of the role of education in the development success in East and Southeast Asia, which they seek to emulate. Bangladeshis saw similarities between their own human resource endowments and those of their neighbours to the East, resemblances which may have been missing from the economic or political contexts. The Bangladeshi elite may also alight on educational achievement as a solution to poverty because it is the main social distinction

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<sup>7</sup> The belief that schooling breeds social transformation regardless of its quality has some support in 'anecdotal evidence' to show that schooling has an impact on people's attitudes and behaviour, independently of their literacy and numeracy achievements (cited in World Bank 2000a: 49).

between themselves and the rest of the population, in what is an otherwise comparatively unsegmented society. That many current members of the national elite enjoyed rapid social mobility as a result of education may convince them that formal schooling could do for the poor masses what it did for them. Arguments about meritocracy had some resonance here because of the nationalist emphasis on the lack of social distinction.

Elite consensus on the value of basic education for all is likely to have had a number of consequences for educational expansion. First, the small, multiply interconnected group that is the national elite includes senior civil and military bureaucrats, politicians, and key figures in the business community and civil society. In other words, the elite contains people in positions of direct power over education policy and provision. Second, the prevalence of the faith in basic education is likely to help explain why education policies have tended to enjoy some continuity, with successive governments usually building on rather than abandoning the achievements of their predecessors. While there is little faith in the capacity of the state to deliver good quality education, it is believed that the government can be pressured into doing so.

### **Political pressures**

All political parties have faced pressures to prioritise education and to expand its provision. These pressures have come from at least three sources.

Nationalist commitment to mass education was enshrined in the Liberation movement, when universal access became one of the promises of the liberation movement (see Maniruzzaman 1975). Efforts to expand access to education, to provide a 'school for every village', appear to be central to government efforts to sustain their legitimacy, perhaps particularly under un-elected regimes. In Bangladesh, as in other nations in the post-colonial era, economic developmental goals of education were early on coupled with other political projects: justifying social and economic inequality (on grounds of equal opportunity), and promoting social integration and/or linguistic harmony.<sup>8</sup> These political projects for education have been helped by characteristics of Bangladeshi society which make the education system particularly suitable for achieving such goals: a shared language and the possibility of centralised control enabled by small territory and high population density.

Popular demand for education has been articulated and transmitted through democratic representation. As constituency MPs, politicians are known to be under pressure to ensure school provision; as the chief patron of the constituency, the MP may also be expected to contribute to education personally, as well as through pressure on the local administration. Private charitable involvement in village schools appears to be reasonably common among politicians and other elites, as part of both Islamic charity and Bengali elite tradition. This creates the perhaps unique situation in which the very centre of policymaking is brought into direct contact with the lowest level of provision, the village school.

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<sup>8</sup> See Court 1976 and Cooksey *et al* 1994.

At national party level, parties have displayed healthy tendencies to compete politically on the issue of access, particularly during the 1990s. Political parties compete over the definition of national identity, which can be so effectively transmitted through the school curriculum. Different visions of nationalist identity and history enshrined in education policy and curriculum are matters for party political competition. That the content of the national history curriculum is an arena for party political conflict has been highlighted by the impressive speed with which incoming governments revise the curriculum, arousing the wrath of their opponents. The ability to transmit and define the specific model of national identity favoured by a particular political party helps explain the strength of the political stake in controlling education policy. Arguably, this competitive pressure may have resulted in a logic of expansion, as each incoming government naturally sought to extend its influence over a wider population than its predecessor (see also Alam *et al* 2002, and Hossain *et al* 2002 for a more detailed version of this argument).

A key political constituency is the powerful primary school teachers' association, which owes its political weight to the vast size of its membership, and to its members' roles as polling officers (Siddiqui 2000). Union activities benefited from the expansion in terms of an increasing membership pool: the four salary increases between 1992 and 1998 which grew teachers' salaries in nominal terms by nine per cent each year during the period (World Bank 2000a) may be taken as evidence of the growing strength of primary teacher organisations. As has been the case elsewhere, the positive or, at worst, neutral effects for teachers of expansion help to explain why these reforms met no organised resistance. Quality reforms, however, are more likely to be resisted by teachers to the extent that they are an organised group who stand to lose from closer monitoring and more accountability (see Corrales 1999).

### **The administration**

The high social status customarily enjoyed by the Bangladeshi senior civil service results from their academic merit, which brought many from modest rural backgrounds to positions of power and authority in a generation. A politician recalled that '[i]n our day, bright boys could come out of remote villages', as though this might be a basis on which to judge the present prospects of the poor (Hossain 2003). Faith among the civil service in the transforming powers of education makes sense in this context. Strong personal faith in such powers can create champions of change in critical positions. In primary education, one such champion has been the former Secretary to the Ministry of Education (1979-81), Kazi Fazlur Rahman. As Secretary and later as Advisor to different Governments of Bangladesh, he aimed to build a political constituency of support for primary. He argued the case for primary education in terms that would appeal to their interests, for example, by explaining the impact of girls' education on fertility control, an issue the elite about which the elite were concerned (personal communication; see also Sattar 1982).

Teachers have a particular significance for the central administration as they perform a number of additional administrative functions at village level: data collection, election administration, brokering between upazila and village. This significance may help to explain why the government consistently maintained the highly-centralised nature of teacher deployment and administration: in 1999, a quarter of a million teachers were being recruited, trained, disciplined

and compensated directly from Dhaka (Muhith 1999), while in the 1980s, 12,000 Ministry officers had direct access to the Director-General of the Primary and Mass Education Department (ADB 1986). The burdens on central ministry bureaucrats of exercising such direct control may be immense, but the benefits for state-building of maintaining a ‘village-level bureaucracy’ directly controlled from the centre may outweigh these. As they are centrally recruited and remunerated, the lines of authority and accountability to which teachers respond are towards the centre rather than to the village community. They are in effect ‘a multitude of centrally supervised permanent functionaries of the government’, who are difficult to discipline because ‘being under a centralised administrative structure [teachers] constitute a powerful and influential constituency, which no government would like to antagonise’ (Mahmud 2002: 21-2).

In service provision, and in particular with respect to provision for the poor, the role of the public administration has been marginalised and contrasted unfavourably—especially at the primary level—with that of the large domestic NGOs for which Bangladesh has become known. By the early 1990s, the largest NGO education provider alone had over one million students enrolled in 35,000 non-formal primary schools, employing almost 33,000 teachers (BRAC 1996). Although these are very basic non-formal schools, mainly for poor girls and presenting little competition to the state system, the presence of these foreign-funded institutions in such a high proportion of the villages of Bangladesh does appear to have added some drive or momentum to the expansion.

It seems unlikely that BRAC's school expansion programme of the late 1980s played no role in spurring public school construction and expansion from 1992. The impact of BRAC schools was also felt in schooling incentives programmes. Civil servants tend to believe that BRAC has an unhealthy hold over the rural poor population as a result of its credit programmes; some appear to believe that BRAC fills its schools with children who should properly be in state schools, by making credit conditional on BRAC school enrolment. Whether or not this claim has any truth, it indicates that the NGO presence helped the administration recognise that access for the poorest required extra support. With the stipends making formal schooling more attractive, public administrators may now feel that their schools are competing on a more equal footing with NGOs.<sup>9</sup>

Recent evidence from the World Bank shows that corruption in the education sector causes the most concern for the population of all forms of public sector corruption in Bangladesh. While this does not prove that leakage or misappropriation of funds is higher in education than in other sectors, it does show that public attention is more closely focused on corruption in education—a service used universally and routinely—than in others, perhaps also suggesting limits to the extent of corruption possible at the community level. The strength of public interest in corruption in the education sector may, for example, help to explain the recent revisions to the PESP, which are aimed at streamlining and clarifying procedures for receiving cash stipends, with the declared intention of reducing leakage. Whether or not education in fact suffers from more leakages than other sectors is not known. However, various features of the expansion

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<sup>9</sup> Such competitive pressures are similar to the ‘corporate competition’ between state and non-state schools which had expansionary effects in France and England (Archer 1979).

programme increased the scope for corruption at different times and across different levels of the system. These include the rapid increase in foreign aid to primary education, rapid, unmonitored increases in the numbers of teachers paid centrally, and school construction and improvement programmes. It is worth noting that other key elements of the expansionary programme—food and cash stipend programmes and subsidies for registered non-governmental schools—are interventions in which the expanded opportunities for corruption produce incentives to expand enrolments.

## **External Players**

### **Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)**

The role of the NGOs in enabling the expansion of primary education is more diverse and complex than that of most other actors. Most non-formal NGO schools are not registered with the government, do not adopt the national curriculum, and to date have received few resources from government. However, these schools between them enrol more than two million children with the dominant BRAC system absorbing more than half of that number, enrolments which the official statistics do not recognise. Motivations for NGOs to expand enrolments included the need to gain legitimacy as effective social service providers, and to ensure continued access to donor funding. However, in addition to their achievements in enrolment terms, school provision by unregistered non-formal NGOs also acted to 'feed' poor girl students into the formal system, as well as having signalled the value of education, and in particular girls' education to poor rural people.

It is worth noting the unusual role of NGOs in Bangladesh. By the 1990s, large domestic NGOs such as BRAC and Proshika occupied a political space more usually the domain of parties and organisations of the left—organising and working with and on behalf of the poor, and claiming to represent their interests (see White 1999). It is most useful to understand this group as representing the values of a non-party, pro-poor section of the elite: secular, progressive and focused on poverty reduction and gender equity outcomes (see White 1999; Hossain 2003). NGO education programmes originated in the conscientisation and mobilisation agendas of the 1970s, and at times their presence has threatened local and religious elites (see Hashemi and Hassan 1999). Overt opposition at the local level has now declined, and donor support during episodes of conflict gave NGOs some protection.

The state has displayed a tendency to move between giving NGOs latitude and support, to denying them a legitimate role and seeking to control them. Efforts to include NGOs within national policy and planning To some degree the fluctuating character of policy on engagement with NGOs reflects divisions within the large NGO community, and their impact on relations with government. Central government has in fact rarely interceded to impede the education programmes of NGOs, in particular of the largest, BRAC. This may be in large part due to the tact of BRAC in (accurately) stressing its role as complementary rather than in competition with the state system. Nevertheless, BRAC has tended to view its role as including that of a positive

model, demonstrating to government the possibility of reaching girls and the poor through innovative schooling.

The most notable recent development in the role of NGOs in primary education is the growing importance of civil society pressure on government to improve provision, including the Campaign for Popular Education, which produces the valuable Education Watch reports on the quality and provision of education. The high-profile nature of these reports, and the government's tolerance of their role in this process, suggest that primary education is an area in which pressure on government to perform is accepted as appropriate or necessary.

### **Development partners**

The convergence of development partners and government interest in investing in primary education in the early 1990s was the critical resourcing factor behind the expansion of both primary and secondary education. After the immediate post-independence reconstruction phase, aid flows to Bangladesh declined in the 1970s under conditions of acute economic and political crisis. Education had not, in any case, been the favoured donor sector over this period: World Bank staff in Bangladesh in the 1970s were ambivalent about financing what they saw as 'nation-building rather than skill-building', and it was as late as 1980 that the first major primary education project got off the ground (World Bank 1999a: 12). This ambivalence towards using aid to fund primary education was common to other aid donors, particularly bilaterals, and developing countries other than Bangladesh (see Bennell and Furlong 1998).

After Jomtien, donors began to invest heavily in education. Here, as elsewhere, donors proved increasingly willing to support government efforts after the Education For All conference focusing their efforts on assisting the government to implement programs aimed at enhancing access (especially for the poor and girls) and improving quality at the primary and secondary levels. Development partners provided half of total financing for primary education between 1990 and 1995 (see Sedere 2000 on Bangladesh, and Bennell and Furlong 1998 for a global overview of aid to education after Jomtien). Even in the 1990s, however, public financing for primary education consistently outstripped and increased faster than aid to state primary education, as development partners appeared to favour NGO education provision through this period (see table 2). Crucially, donors supported what was acknowledged to be a government-owned and -led expansion agenda. While some coordination of donor efforts during the 1992-7 period helped reduce the usually high transaction costs of aid, donors were not so well-coordinated that they were able to act as a break. Government has taken the lead, showing an uncharacteristically high degree of national ownership over policy in this historically aid-dependent country—culminating in the development of the multi-donor supported sub-sectoral Primary Education Development Program—PEDP II which commenced in 2003.

The precise impact of donor attention to education is difficult to quantify, as this is not confined to the direct impact on material resource flows. Donors have long championed domestic and international NGOs within Bangladesh, which they have seen as spearheading the provision of pro-poor and effective services (see Sanyal 1991; Hashemi 1996; White 1999). Bilateral

donors in particular have used their political influence within Bangladesh to carve out a protected space for NGO activities. Donors may also have helped sustain the focus on gender equity, as this has been an enduring concern.

**Table 2. Expenditure on primary and mass education by the Government and from Foreign Aid (in millions of taka)**

Year	Government of Bangladesh	Foreign aid*	Total
1990-1	5974	1397	7372
1991-2	7186	3134	10320
1992-3	8249	3401	11650
1993-4	11589	3375	14964
1994-5	14307	3281	17588
1995-6	14562	3156	17718
1996-7	15570	3073	18643
1997-8	17626	1687	19313
1998-9	19008	2763	21770

Source: Government of Bangladesh 1999

\* Excludes aid to NGO education projects, for which aggregate data are unavailable

## Conclusions and Lessons from Scaling Up

The terms of success in primary education in Bangladesh include expanded, near-universal access; success in attracting girls and students from poor families; raised resources going to primary; and in the mix of plural provision and centralised authority over the expansion. Problems of quality and pockets of exclusion persist, however. This paper has argued that the crucial ingredient in the overall expansionary success was political will at the centre: consensus among the national elite on the vital role of education in poverty reduction and economic development provided the political support. The expansion was driven by a succession of political and administrative leaders who pushed education policy reforms, including a series of national political leaders. In part this consensus among the elite appears to have responded to the perceived needs and aspirations of the poor. Critical factors in raising resources for primary included the convergence of donor and government interest in primary education, as well as policies encouraging community or private involvement. Although the relationship between NGOs and the government has occasionally been tense, that NGOs were permitted to operate schools on such a large scale contributed to the achievement of UPE. And the successes of NGOs in reaching girls and the poor may also have added weight to government efforts to overcome obstacles of poverty and gender disadvantage. NGOs at least showed that this was possible.

Not all contexts contain the political, economic or social features that enabled the expansion of primary education for girls and the poor. However, general lessons from the Bangladesh experience include the following:

Centralised authority over policy and planning may not necessarily impede the expansion of primary education. However, at least in the Bangladesh context centralisation has had detrimental consequences for quality. The political imperatives to expand schooling in Bangladesh rested in part on the vehicle of uniform state provision, controlled from the centre. This made a centrally-designed curriculum possible, and permitted political and administrative champions of educational reform to wield the considerable power concentrated at the top of the system. However, weak capacity to manage and limited accountability and autonomy in such a centralized system has been a major determinant of the poor quality of education being provided.

The Bangladesh case also demonstrates the significance of the proximity of service-provider to recipient, despite its highly centralised nature. This is because the link between central providers and village community schools is unusually direct. Through a number of roles—as constituency MPs, local landlords, respected community members, the charitable rich—policymakers, providers, and the national elite circles within which they move appreciate the vital significance of education for the poor. In part this comes from their own recent elevation from the ranks of the rural rich, and reflects the fact that they are not distinguished from the masses by important social distinctions, other than education.

The success lies substantially in the fit between the goals of the elite-driven expansion and the aspirations and needs of the masses. This fit meant in particular that Government was able to capitalise on strong community demand and support for primary schools. Again, the proximity of providers to recipients, at least with respect to education, may have helped keep policymakers' attention on achieving the expansion.

Teachers play a complex role in the expansionary success. Centrally administered teachers, as in Bangladesh, are always likely to have an important role as community-level bureaucrats with respect to weak states in poor rural societies. Teachers' collective political power has had clear negative impacts on quality, but may have contributed to the expansion of the system.

NGOs contributed directly to the overall expansion, but particularly in reaching excluded groups; there are also signs that NGO success in reaching girls and the poor spurred innovation and performance by the state. Given the highly political nature of primary education in most contexts, it is remarkable that successive Governments of Bangladesh refrained from intervening in these foreign-funded programmes, and a testament to consistent political commitment to increasing access to primary education, of whatever type. Where communities and other actors have shown commitment to educational provision, it is where governments refrain from acting, as well as where they act, that effective policies are made.

Education innovations and demand-side interventions in particular delivered results.

Many pro-poor and reform agendas in heavily-aided countries are acknowledged to suffer from insufficient national ownership. In the case of primary education in Bangladesh,

Government and key actors in the wider society were committed to expansion and universal access before donor resources were committed on any scale. In this case, donors supported a pro-poor government agenda, ensuring that there was at least the incentive to spend aid resources well.

Clearly recognizing that expanding the system without an attendant emphasis on quality is inefficient, the government is taking some key measures to address this issue at both the primary and secondary levels. Strategies are being put in place to improve the quality of education as well as enhancing access for the disadvantaged. Specific attention is being given to enhancing student achievement through improving the quality of teaching and learning; strengthen planning and management—including moving towards more decentralized systems of management; establishing effective monitoring and evaluation systems; and providing demand-side interventions that will target the hard to reach.

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