



skills be built at the lower levels of education. The priority should be to improve the quality of general education and promote early childhood education. Expanding the focus on developing behavioral skills valued by employers (such as responsibility, communication, problem solving, and team work) will also leave graduates better prepared.

At the tertiary level, creating a stronger platform for a smoother school-to-work transition can be mutually beneficial. Limited available information indicates that TVET and the higher education system in Bangladesh cannot respond to changes in demand in the labor market. Promoting communication and knowledge sharing between educational and training institutions and the labor market, and using tracer studies to check the relevance of skills and measure progress in the development of non-cognitive skills, are essential for a balanced education with greater relevance.

Skills development is incremental, cumulative, and transformational.

A good skills-development policy recognizes that skills are not built at a certain time in an individual's life—skills development is an incremental and lifelong process, acquired through formal and non-formal education, from pre-primary through higher education, networks, jobs, and other means.

Such an approach requires a more holistic consideration of the factors that profoundly affect the skills-development process—including aspects that are beyond the control of the education system, such as access to good nutrition early in life and job creation in the labor market. By promoting early childhood education and improving the standard of general education, some of these issues can be addressed early. Providing quality assurance and accreditation at the upper levels will earn public respect for higher education, and act as an incentive for formal and informal workers to go back to school for reskilling and up-skilling, eventually helping them acquire higher-skilled jobs.

Skills development will entail a different model of economic growth.

Making necessary changes in the economy, in the form of improving the investment climate and jobs-creation potential, promotes further incentives for up-skilling. Jobs and skills are closely interrelated and mutually supportive. “Jobs need skills, pull skills, and build skills.”

Conclusion

Bangladesh's current momentum in improving education can be harnessed and redirected for even greater advances.

Through agility, dedicated planning, and perseverance, Bangladesh has greatly expanded educational access. This approach will help the country cope with the remaining challenges. Understanding the complexity and interrelated nature of education quality, skills development, and the labor market will aid in policy planning.

By bringing together the diverse actors—working on nutrition outcomes or pre-primary education, or building and expanding TVET and higher education—the country can bring about multigenerational change, equipping Bangladeshi citizens with skills needed for work and for life. Coordinating efforts and dialogue are essential to mobilize comprehensive reforms, and translate good policies into long-lasting, meaningful outcomes.

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Seeding Fertile Ground: Education That Works for Bangladesh

A Summary Analysis

Showing great potential and determination, Bangladesh has made substantial strides in education.

With impressive speed, Bangladesh has made considerable headway in several areas of education in the past decade. Despite many daunting challenges, the country has pushed ahead with sustained economic growth and continuous investments in education. Taking such initiatives has resulted in the country meeting multiple Millennium Development Goals ahead of time and substantially reducing poverty.

Much of the country's economic growth has come through low-skill, low-wage manufacturing. The ready-made garment sector has played an important part, and women, who constitute 90 percent of this sector's employees, have played a key role in this onward march. The country can continue on this path of development, but there are many other options to consider that could move it into middle-income status. Forecasts show that Bangladesh will benefit from a demographic dividend in the next 10 years, with more working-aged citizens and fewer dependents. This is a great opportunity for the country to move ahead, with accelerated growth in the gross national income (GNI) per capita.

To maximize this opportunity and launch Bangladesh into the next stage of economic development, the economy must continue making necessary changes. Future planning will involve determining the best strategies to move away from low-skill, low-wage employment and transition to the creation of higher-skilled jobs with higher wages. To do

so, Bangladesh will need to pave the way for these jobs through improved education and skills development.

Enhancing Access, Ensuring Equity

Bangladesh has met with success on many fronts, improving access and completion at all levels.

Through planning, innovation, financing, and appropriate policies, Bangladesh has greatly enhanced access and equity in education. The country is nearing universal access to primary education. It has markedly reduced repetition and dropout rates, and reached reasonably high levels of completion in primary education. Bangladesh has already attained gender equity in primary and secondary education.

Future success hinges on shoring up the remaining issues.

The improvements in access have been significant, and eliminating the remaining educational inequities will require the country's same enterprising, relentless spirit. Increasing access to education (especially beyond the primary level) is still an issue for children from lower-income families. About five million children who should be in school are not, mostly due to poverty, and children whose families migrated recently to slums are more likely

to drop out. Children living in urban slums are dealing with demand-side constraints (poverty and learning difficulties) as well as supply-side limitations (without enough schools nearby).

Repetition and dropout rates have declined, but they are still high and need to be curbed. Transition rates from one grade to the next are low and will need improvement for all children to benefit from Bangladesh's achievements in educational access.

Delivering truly universal access is imminent.

By offering universal access to primary education and higher enrollments in secondary education, Bangladesh can prepare its citizens, society, and economy for attaining middle-income status. It is time to target the remaining out-of-school children (especially in the slums and among disadvantaged groups), focus on student retention, and increase early child development (ECD). Improving the quality and relevance of education and supporting disadvantaged children will increase student retention and lessen the negative impact of poverty and learning difficulties.

Part of pursuing ECD includes improving nutrition in the early years and providing pre-primary education. In Bangladesh, the remaining inequities—which start early and continue throughout a student's lifetime—are large. But ECD has internationally shown great promise in terms of improving learning outcomes among disadvantaged children. To increase the availability of ECD programs, attempts should be made to work closely with the private sector (since they principally provide these services), and facilitate quality ECD expansion through public financing.

Strengthening Quality

Improving quality has an even greater impact on economic and social development.

Bangladesh has seen strong returns on its investment in improving educational access. International experiences show that there are even greater returns from improving educational quality. Although the country has succeeded in providing greater educational access, learning is currently low and unequal, with students from poor households generally doing much worse than those from wealthier households. Only a limited number of students remain competent in their respective grades. For instance, an assessment of literacy and numeracy at grade 5 indicates that only 25 percent of grade 5 students master Bangla competencies, and only 33 percent master Mathematics. Students with low levels of learning at lower grades are most at risk for dropping out before completing primary school, and are most likely to join the informal labor market.

Most quality issues can be improved through public policy reform.

The factors that lead to improvement are mostly attributable to and well within the purview of public policy reform. For instance, the most important determinant of learning in Bangladesh is the school that one attends—larger performance disparities exist *among schools* rather than *among students* within a school.

Also, an important determinant of learning within the school is the quality of the teacher. Teachers are the system's principal resource, and they can be used more effectively. Many teachers do not have much training, and

have a poor morale due to their low prestige in society and limited career-progression opportunities. Lack of knowledge about the subjects they teach further affects students' learning, and teachers are not encouraged to be innovative with teaching practices or to learn from peers. The development of the Diploma in Education program (currently under piloting) and the policy to increase the minimum qualification level for school teachers are very positive developments and could contribute significantly to raising the quality of teaching in the country.

The current teaching style of lecturing and reading textbooks rewards rote learning rather than encouraging creative thinking and problem-solving skills. Curriculum and testing procedures also push for and reward rote learning rather than comprehension, further exacerbating the problem. In this context, introducing behavioral change through the "Each Child Learns" pilot, although very small, is a positive initiative that holds great potential.

Changing what is valued can generate higher learning and a stronger foundation of skills.

Focusing on building foundational competencies and skills at the lower grades will set the stage for improving students' learning. This involves changing what is valued in the examination system (literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills as opposed to memorizing textbook content), changing how this knowledge is tested, and rationalizing the number of examinations. It also involves developing a national center that sets and monitors national learning goals consistently; and uses results of high-quality assessments to enhance accountability and to inform policy. The ongoing developments in the grade 5 exam—incrementally improving it from a knowledge-based to a competency-based exam—as well as the regular administration of sample-based learning assessments (conducted in 2011 and planned for 2013), together with active dissemination of their findings and results for improving teaching and learning, are steps in the right direction.

Effective reforms of incentives and accountability can yield measurable improvements.

Bangladesh has a high-quality, merit-based primary teacher recruitment policy. However, the use of annually determined quotas, together with accepted criteria for determining merit, may lead to recruitment of candidates who score low on merit criteria.

The Monthly Pay Order (MPO) system is prevalent throughout Bangladesh, and while it is conditional on results, it is not rendering effective teaching and learning. Truly linking teacher performance with the MPO system is difficult, but it will be extremely worthwhile in changing outcomes and motivating teachers.

Further work can be done to devolve centralized authority and promote school-based management. Bangla-

desh has a good policy of involving communities in the oversight of secondary schools with school management committees (SMCs). This policy empowers communities to make management decisions at the local level, but this well-intended policy often translates into a bad practice, because of undue political influence over SMCs.

Improved coordination among the sector's ministries and other governing bodies is crucial and could be attained through inter-ministerial and/or interagency task forces with clearly specified responsibilities. Strategic areas for collaboration include teacher education and development, national assessments and examinations, and a curriculum framework for primary and secondary education.

Cultivating Skills

Education and behavioral skills triumph in the labor market; reskilling and up-skilling are key.

In both the formal and informal labor markets, possessing strong cognitive (numeracy and literacy) skills, along with positive behavioral skills, leads to greater job placement and career advancement. While international migration has become increasingly important for Bangladesh's economic growth and employment, most of the migrants remain in low-skill jobs. Improving skills and productivity are crucial to Bangladesh's quest for accelerating economic growth and creating more and better jobs in the formal sector for its expanding workforce.

Currently, most of the labor force is in informal sector and possesses low levels of education—96 percent of workers have up to a secondary education, and less than 5 percent of the workforce has a tertiary education. However, this is quickly changing, and another positive factor is that female education and employment continues to rise.

Inequities in skills-development opportunities are high, and they increase in post-formal education, because the available training opportunities largely benefit the wealthier and more educated. Implementing and enhancing programs that allow reskilling and up-skilling of current workers—especially the relatively low-educated and those in the informal sector—could bolster the economy. Reskilling the current labor force, particularly those in low-skill work, is crucial as they will contribute to the economy and society for several decades to come. Skills-development policies would need to support continuous and targeted skills building for workers in formal and informal employment.

Future prospects rely on shifting and strengthening the focus on education relevant to the labor market.

To overcome the education system's current dilemma, where students lack effective work skills due to the low quality of education and lack of quality standards, it is important that a more robust foundation of cognitive

