

Report No. 40

**EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH:
COMMITMENTS AND CHALLENGES**

Centre for Policy Dialogue

House No 40/C, Road No 11, Dhanmondi R/A, GPO Box 2129, Dhaka-1205, Bangladesh

Tel: 8124770; Fax: 8130951 E-mail: cpd@bdonline.com

Website: www.cpd-bangladesh.org

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The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), established in 1993, is an innovative initiative to promote an ongoing process of dialogue between the principal partners in the decision making and implementing process. The dialogues are designed to address important policy issues and to seek constructive solutions to these problems. The Centre has already organised a series of such major dialogues at local, regional and national levels. These dialogues have brought together ministers, opposition frontbenchers, MPs, business leaders, NGOs, donors, professionals and other functional groups in civil society within a non-confrontational environment to promote focused discussions. The expectation of the CPD is to create a national policy consciousness where members of civil society will be made aware of critical policy issues affecting their lives and will come together in support of particular policy agendas which they feel are conducive to the well being of the country. The CPD has also organised a number of South Asian bilateral and regional dialogues as well as some international dialogues.

*In support of the dialogue process the Centre is engaged in research programmes, which are both, serviced by and are intended to serve as inputs for particular dialogues organised by the Centre throughout the year. Some of the major research programmes of CPD include **The Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD), Governance and Development. Population and Sustainable Development, Trade Policy Analysis and Multilateral Trading System and Leadership Programme for the Youth.** The CPD also carries out periodic public perception surveys on policy issues and developmental concerns.*

*As part of CPD's publication activities, a CPD Dialogue Report series is brought out in order to widely disseminate the summary of a discussions organised by the Centre. The present report contains the highlights of a dialogue held on April 7, 2001 at the CIRDAP Auditorium on the theme of **Education in Bangladesh: Commitments and Challenges.** The dialogue was organised in association with *Education Coalition, Bangladesh.**

Report prepared by: Mr. Asjadul Kibria, Ptothom Alo

Editorial Advisor: Professor Mustafizur Rahman, Research Director, CPD

Series Editor: Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, CPD

Dialogue on

Education in Bangladesh: Commitments & Challenges

Introduction

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), in association with the Education Coalition Bangladesh organized a dialogue on the theme of *Education in Bangladesh: Commitments and Challenges*, on April 7, 2001 at the CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka. Professor Rehman Sobhan, Executive Chairman, CPD, presided over the dialogue. Participants at the dialogue included prominent educationists and distinguished experts, representatives of the NGO community, professionals, and representatives of important stakeholder groups including donors. Mr. Ahmadullah Mia, Research Director, Dhaka Ahsania Mission was the keynote presenter.

In his address of welcome, Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, Executive Director, CPD, mentioned that the dialogue was a part of an ongoing effort of the CPD to conduct research and analysis on important public policy issues with a view to contributing towards policy making process in Bangladesh. From this perspective education remained a key area of concern for the CPD. Dr. Bhattacharya mentioned that the objective of the dialogue was to put under scrutiny public policy in the area of education, examine the efficacy of the policy and to identify modalities to raise the quality of the deliverables. Dr. Bhattacharya also informed the audience that as part of its civil society activism, CPD has recently initiated a number of Task forces to prepare policy briefs to stimulate pre-election debate in Bangladesh. One of the major issues to be taken up by the Task Forces was education. Dr. Bhattacharya underscored that education was perceived by every society to be a key to economic development. He stated that CPD was happy to collaborate with the Education Coalition, Bangladesh, which came up with the proposition to jointly organise a dialogue on the Bangladesh education policy. He informed the audience that the National Forum of Organisations working with Disabled (NFOWD), Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), Action-Aid, Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF), Save the Children and OXFAM were members of the Education Coalition, Bangladesh and as such were all party to this collaborative effort. Dr. Bhattacharya welcomed all the dialogue participants and requested them to briefly introduce themselves.

Taking the floor Ms. Rasheda K. Choudhury, Director, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) appreciated CPD's initiative in organising the dialogue. She also expressed her sincere gratitude to all participants for their readiness to contribute towards the dialogue. She said that the Education Coalition was a network of 400 NGOs in Bangladesh which were engaged in working and lobbying for Education-for-All (EFA). Ms. Choudhury stated that in 1990, the Government of Bangladesh has made certain commitments with regard to achieving education for all. It was a matter of regret that many of those commitments continued to remain unrealised till now. In 2000 the GOB's commitment was renewed, with focus having been put on *six goals* which were to be achieved within a stipulated period of time. With the Bangladesh National parliament passing the *National Education Policy* (NEP) in 2000, the country has *finally* got a national education policy after a span of three long decades, she observed. However, Ms Choudhury argued that the policy now needs *to be properly disseminated* amongst key stakeholders in order that they have a better understanding of what the policy actually *entails* and also in order to *identify the challenges* if the policy is to be adequately implemented. She argued that the policy in itself *was not enough*, created only a context and that there was an urgent need for *clear and pragmatic direction* if the objectives of the policy were to be attained.

Ms. Choudhury raised several queries as regards the education policy and urged the participants to focus their attention in order to address the attendant concerns. She specifically urged upon the dialogue participants to search for response to the following questions:

- Do the participants see a *clear direction* coming from the national education policy 2000?
- Does the policy reflect the concerns stemming from the six goals the GOB has *committed to* in Dakar last year?
- Does the policy give adequate indications as well as directions as regards *resource mobilisation*?
- Has the policy a forward-looking vision that *foresees* challenges which are likely to be encountered in the 21st century?
- Will the national education policy enable the country to attain targets which the government has committed itself:
 - *Achieve education for all, i.e., universal literacy within 2015*
 - *Have a National Action Plan ready by 2002*
 - *Achieve gender parity at all levels of basic education By 2006*

It needs to be re examined, she emphasised in this context, whether the policy adequately reflects the goals which the state has pledged to service. She was of the opinion that issues such as early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD), literacy, access, equity and gender parity and resource mobilisation were some of the key areas which required particular attention of the dialogue participants.

Initial Remarks by Chairperson

Moderating the dialogue Professor Rehman Sobhan welcomed all participants and emphasised that the entire exercise of discussion was designed to *reach out to* the various stakeholder groups involved with the country's education process. He hoped that the participants will interact with each other through constructive engagement on critical issues relating to the education sector of the country. He stated that the formulation of a good policy requires a proactive participation of all important partners, both in terms of *design* as well as *execution* of the relevant policy. He felt that the process of engagement should also include players who have a capacity to *reach out* to those who are the beneficiaries of the education policy. This concerned both public and private education. This was important since such an outreach allowed them to speak on behalf of the intended beneficiaries, in terms of both the *quality* of education the target groups are receiving and also with respect to their *expectations* as regards improvements in quality of education received. Professor Sobhan mentioned the fact that the government has indeed laid down an education policy which should be viewed as a significant development. This has, at any rate, given us a *point of reference*. Professor Sobhan was of the opinion that it was now the task of the stakeholders to evaluate the capacity of the education policy to attain the goal of ensuring education for all, to identify where the policy is being insufficiently or inadequately implemented and to come forward with concrete suggestions as regards the *design* and *mechanisms* for realising the set goals. He said that since they were major stakeholders in the process, the inputs from the dialogue participants would be particularly relevant and important. He informed the audience that the Pre-election Task Force for preparing the Policy Brief on Education set up by the CPD will make best use of the discussion and recommendations put forward during this particular dialogue. He further informed the audience that Prof. Muzaffar Ahmad was the convenor of the task force on education. He mentioned that the task force would *put before* the electorate during the run up to election 2001 and also before the new government and the parliament a *series of ideas* in the area of nation's education policy. These ideas will center on the *expected*

initiatives from the political parties which should get reflected in their election manifestos and their commitments to the electorate when they go to the polls.

Professor Sobhan then invited Mr. Ahmadullah Mia to make his keynote presentation which was to focus on a review of the GOB Education Policy 2000.

Resume of the paper on Review of Education Policy 2000

Dwelling on the background of the paper Mr. Ahmadullah Mia stated that the paper was expected to serve as a basis for subsequent discussion and that he welcomed critical comments on his presentation. He went on to say that the paper would mainly concentrate on the review of the salient features of the *education policy of 2000*. The paper has been prepared keeping in mind certain issues which Ms. Choudhury in her opening remarks has already pointed out. These included: ECCD, literacy, access, equity & gender parity and resource mobilisation.

Presenting his paper Mr. Ahmadullah observed that the GOB was a signatory to several international declarations pertaining to education for all and this has, to a certain degree, influenced the formulation of the education policy. He further stated that the Government has made certain *assumptions* while formulating the education policy. As a densely populated least developed country suffering from abject poverty and high illiteracy, Bangladesh would like to pursue policies for poverty alleviation with proper development of human resources. In effect this required development of a *literate* and *skilled* manpower base in the country. From this perspective, the *Education Policy* was expected to act as a powerful instrument of, and catalyst for development. He was of the opinion that the twin issue of illiteracy and poverty can be effectively addressed through a proper blending of basic education and basic needs.

Mr Ahmadullah argued that the education policy is premised on certain assumptions, both positive and negative. The policy has *attempted* to harness contributions from all existing streams of education and sought to establish a convergence for achieving *quality manpower*. It has also underscored the *value* of increased national spending on education, having called for raising the investment level to 4.5 per cent of GNP, as against the current level of 2.5 per cent.

Mr. Ahmadullah pointed out that a closer scrutiny of the policy would indicate that it is a revised version of the recommendations of the *Shamsul Haq Commission*. He, however, argued that the policy doesn't quite capture the essence of the recommendations made by the commission. On the downside, the policy reveals weaknesses that point towards the inadequate coverage of the S Haq Commission's recommendations; there are ambiguities in conceptualisation of issues and inconsistencies in the articulation of demands and responses to the demands, there is also a lack of proper guidelines for implementation of the policies. He pointed out that the policy was not revised through a participatory process. These were some of the major weakness which continue to inhibit the effectiveness of the policy.

Though the policy has referred to a *one year pre-primary* schooling, this is not what ECCD is all about in the *national or international contexts*. The policy therefore *fails to appreciate* the comprehensiveness of the concept and its integrated approach as outlined in the implementation mechanism of the ECCD. The policy also failed to properly strengthen family and community roles along with the school and, thus, undermined the value and scope of ECCD, observed Ahmadullah. The policy does not recognise reduction of education cost and social cost through ECCD and does not fully explore the scope for resource mobilisation for the purpose of education.

With regard to literacy, Mr. Ahmadullah stated that primary education has been regarded as the major approach to basic education in Bangladesh, while non formal education (NFE) is the approach designed *specifically* for dropouts. The education policy speaks about achieving the target of 100 percent adult literacy rate by the year 2006. Drawing attention to the fact that although the constitution makes room for a *uniform curriculum for all categories of children*, Mr. Ahmadullah pointed out that english medium schools/kindergartens are allowed to run their own curriculums which are different from the mainstream schools. Another point of both contention and confusion, he observed, is the policy's apparent *lack of clarity* on two streams of education, namely, mass education and non-formal education (NFE).

Though the policy has underscored the importance of *vocational and technical* training for the development of skilled manpower, it fails to clearly spell out its position on post-literacy and continuing education inspite of the fact that both the Government and the NGOs have pilot projects to address these particular areas. Mr. Ahmadullah pointed out that post-literacy and continuing education are useful models for basic education. He was of the opinion that

human resource development has not received its *due recognition* in the education policy. The policy makes no reference to the large population of the *new literates* graduating through the NFE system who need to be properly placed in the context of the emerging market economy. Mr. Ahmadullah pointed out that other limitations of the policy included failure to draw upon *past experiences* and *current thoughts* on *human resource development* which are relevant for Bangladesh, NGOs' role with respect to DNEF, prospect of *building up resource base with participation of* different stakeholders, proper recognition of the *role* of government in support of the NGO community and private sector participation with regard to training of trainers, setting standards, promotion of the *use and adaptation* of new technology, and training to *match the pattern of actual demand* etc. The education policy fails to adequately take into account any of these issues.

Mr. Ahmadullah argued that EFA goals essentially demand fulfillment of *certain* conditions that relate to access, equity and gender aspects reflecting both quantity and quality of programme performance. He thought that the current ECCD programmes were rather limited in *scope* and *coverage* of the population; he, however, thought that gender parity, at about 0.9, was acceptable. Again, the disparity between rural and urban areas and across socio-economic categories still remained considerable. According to the speaker, the policy *does not allow* for equal access to quality ECCD and suffers from lack of commitment to ECCD. While dealing with the various problems related to access, equality and gender dimensions, he stated that the policy gave no *clear directions* as regards *whether* or *how* these weaknesses of the existing situation and system could be overcome.

The aforementioned problems and oversights could be addressed in the following ways, Mr. Mia insisted:

- i) Clear recognition of the importance of ECCD and putting in place concrete guidelines for involving concerned institutions and agencies;
- ii) Statement of goals leading to multi-faceted programmes with integrated approach;
- iii) Putting in place a uniform pattern of delivery of primary level education;
- iv) Explicit proposition for a 8-year primary education program;
- v) Adequate provision of facilities for vocational education at upper levels (beyond the 8- year primary education program);
- vi) Equitable access to basic education and skills training for disadvantaged groups in society;

- vii) Steps to be taken for removing disparity between *rural and urban* areas and between *male and female* for accessing *quality education* and *skills training*;
- viii) NFE system to cover the large mass of neo-literate youths and adults with appropriate strategies for post-literacy and continuing education;
- ix) Ensuring quality education for all through the introduction of appropriate interventions within the education sector as well as outside;
- x) *Massive improvement* in the law and order situation;
- xi) Eradication of corruption and other aspects of mismanagement in education and other sectors and strong political and bureaucratic will to achieve it;
- xii) New initiatives based on proper analysis to attain improved and decentralized management of primary education; and
- xiii) Formulation of clear vision for building skilled manpower.

In conclusion Mr. Ahmadullah observed that although a number of measures had been taken towards achieving the goals of the EFA (Education for All), the present policy statement failed to give a clear picture *or* direction as to *how the weaknesses of the existing education system should be overcome*. Some of the important challenges or problems which remained to be addressed included:

- i) The ECCD program must be taken forward informed by a long term vision; all concerned institutions and stakeholders including family, school and community must be linked in a coherent effort in order to realise this vision;
- ii) To support the education program, birth registration should be institutionalised; proper record keeping will need to be maintained for this;
- iii) Improvement in the government education system was an essential prerequisite;
- iv) The education curriculum needed to be critically revised; better teachers' training programmes and more careful selection of NGO partners were required;
- v) External and internal efficiency was required to be raised;
- vi) Well designed continuing education program was needed;
- vii) The policy had to be properly implemented through institutions which were less bureaucratic;
- viii) There should be options for cost recovery and cost sharing;
- ix) There was need for social mobilisation through information networking.

Discussion by Participants

A policy devoid of vision

Initiating the open discussion Prof. Muzaffar Ahmad of the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), University of Dhaka questioned whether the education policy had a vision about the future of the education sector of the country. He thought this to be a major weakness of the policy and went on to say that it is unfortunate that despite the discussion by the committee which was supposed to frame the education policy a forward looking perspective was lacking in the policy. During the time when the policy was actually drafted, there was actually no consultation with the people, the very people who constituted the consumers as well as stakeholders of the education system. Prof. Ahmad thought that it was virtually impossible to envision how the future would unfold. However, there could be two schools of thought: one pessimistic, the other optimistic. Prof. Ahmad reiterated that education was not simply the *pursuit of knowledge* but that it is also meant to be *productive, creative, and re-creative* and these are elements that need to be *reflected* in the policy. Again, the question arises, whether the level of access *necessarily* mean *equity, quality and flexibility*. Unless these terms are taken into cognisance, Bangladesh will not be able to match the demands of global competitive environment. For formulating effective policies, it was important not only to *formulate the mission statement* but also identify *indicators for monitoring purposes*. These are not mentioned in the education policy. With globalisation, there is a general tendency worldwide towards a restructuring in the job market: Bangladesh was not isolated from this process. Thus, in order to stimulate productivity of the people in the country, there was a need to bring adequate changes in the skill endowment of the people and also to stimulate and give proper incentives to the self-employment sector. The current education policy is *totally oblivious* to this issue. The policy presented by the government may be termed archaic at best.

Professor Siddiqur Rahman of Institute of Education and Research (IER), Dhaka University lend his support to Prof. Ahmad's view saying that vision should be more than an amalgamation of objectives and that the education policy lacks a clarity of vision.

In this context, Professor Kazi Saleh Ahmad, former Vice-Chancellor of the Jahangirnagar University also thought that the policy lacked a clearly articulated vision. And because of this, it fails to come up with clear guidelines and directions as to how to achieve various targets as stated in the policy. Prof. Saleh Ahmed expressed his concern about the state of the

manpower planning process in the country and observed that education was *not considered as an essential part* of manpower planning in the policy. Thus, he concluded that the current policy was nothing but the outcome of an *excessively hurried effort*; he also thought that past education policies had not been properly consulted; rather these were given only a cursory glance.

Voicing concurrence, Professor A.N. Rasheda of Notre Dame College drew attention to the need for a long-term vision arguing that the national education policy should be informed by the urgent task of building up the educational backbone of the country. She referred to 1996 when the Ministry of Education declared that the education policy would be designed in light of the basic principles of the Kudrat-e-Khuda Education Commission, which amongst other things envisioned students as being the builders of the nation. However, according to her, on the contrary the current education policy has been framed in a manner which encourages students to end up by providing their services in foreign countries rather than serving the needs of their own country.

Mr. Kazi Rafiqul Alam, Executive Director, Dhaka Ahsania Mission, was of the view that today's world has become part of a global village where there are no limits to movement or communication, and hence, education too has become borderless. In this context, Mr. Alam pointed out that the idea and thought of any kind of limited knowledge, whether it is limited by institutions or by forms, should be discarded. According to him, an education policy should help us know how far we could go and what were our goals as a nation. The current policy does not project such a vision. He further added that the education policy did not come up with any explanation with regard to the objective of the mass-education and literacy.

Gradual deterioration in the quality of education

Mr. A N M Eusuf, Advisor, CAMPE and former Secretary, GOB observed that for attaining quality of education, decentralisation was an essential prerequisite. However, the education policy does not make any specific mention in this regard. Also, the policy fails to address the issue of community participation in the area of management of schools. Emphasising the quality aspect of education, Mr. Eusuf expressed his concern that practically the entire education budget focuses on development of infrastructure, i.e., construction of schools, classrooms, and so on. Without in any way undermining the need for physical infrastructure,

it could nevertheless be said that mere expansion of physical structures *does not necessarily* ensure quality. He thought that, in the policy little provision had been made for the *quality aspect* of education. He went on to state that the problems of access to education by special groups of children (e.g. the disabled) as was highlighted by Mr. Mia are very real. However, little had been mentioned in the policy in this regard.

Ms. Sharifa Khatun underscored the need for ensuring quality primary education at the local levels. She stated that there was an urgent need for a shift from the current practice of making decisions centrally. Local bodies and communities had to be given a hand in the management and administration of running the schools. Such a shift was bound to ensure quality of education in the long run. The policy has negated this concern and this was something which should arrest our attention.

The responsibility of management

Dr. Mahmudul Alam of BIDS raised a number of points as regards management aspects of education. He started by saying that the formulation of the education policy by the government *was in itself a positive development*. He went on to say that there was *no difference* between the current policy and the ones formulated in the 1980's. He argued that there was a need for revising the popular belief that the state will take *the full responsibility* of education from the metropolis Dhaka down to the village level. The current situation calls for the involvement of market forces, especially since state functionaries operate in a *rigid* environment where there is serious lack of accountability. The new management system called for decentralisation and community involvement in the running of the educational establishments in the locality. Referring to comments made earlier by Mr. Eusuf, Dr. Alam said that local bodies and communities need to get involved in the process of educating the populace. On a different note, Mr. Alam differed with Mr. Ahmadullah Mia who had placed greater importance on early child hood care. Mr. Alam stated that such a system was indeed taking shape in the country *but it needed to be modernised to meet existing requirements*. Further, Dr. Alam was of the opinion that both primary and secondary education was *under financed*. All these factors act as a direct impediment to the delivery of quality education.

At this point, Prof. Rehman Sobhan intervened and urged the participants to concentrate on (a) whether the education policy puts enough emphasis on *upgrading the quality of*

education, and (b) what was happening as regards implementation of the recommendations made by the education commission.

Quality of education

Dr. Kaniz Siddique, Associate Professor, North South University (NSU), was of the view that the policy makes *no provisions for incorporating any indicators* for measuring the quality of education. She suggested that there should be some method of assessment to measure quality, perhaps in the form of making assessment of proficiency levels. In this regard she mentioned that quality of the teachers, their perceptions and mindset were critical factors in ensuring the quality of education which children are imparted in the classroom. Giving his opinion on the policy, Prof. Mohammad Masum of Jahangirnagar University observed that with the decline in the allocation of resources for students from primary level to university the quality of education also suffered erosion.

Professor Kazi Saleh Ahmad pointed out that in effect the policy makers have failed to articulate the requirements of adequate manpower planning in the education sector. He stated the managing committees in the past were strong and this ensured that a reasonable quality of education was maintained at school level. The current situation indicates that the quality of these committees have suffered a secular decline. Maintaining the quality of education has also become problematic in view of the rising gross and net enrolment levels. This trend has also brought about a general deterioration in the achievement levels. The policy totally evades the issue of deteriorating quality, he commented. According to him, fall in quality has encouraged an increase in corruption in the education system. More importantly, although the question of decentralisation has been voiced in the policy, *no actual authority has been delegated to local level bodies which could be entrusted with an overall responsibility to oversee the state of education*. Delegation of responsibility was minimal in all matters including appointment of teachers, their transfers etc. Centrally taken decisions were the last words in matters of education administration. Consequently, management committees have in effect remained ineffective and can not function properly. This had negatively impacted the quality of education.

Ms. Hena Das, Chairperson, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad supported Professor Saleh's contention that quality of education has been decreasing over the recent past. She opined that

to ensure quality education for all, the state has to take responsibility for ensuring good and quality education for both the rich and the poor. The issue of good education ought to go beyond the simplistic solution of constructing buildings and classrooms.

Mr. M. Monwarul Islam, Vice Chancellor, East-West University, noted that in the existing education system which allows for appointment of unqualified teachers, where students are accustomed to copying, distribution of poor quality of text books are permitted, supervision and control is severely lacking and where education institutions have to operate within severe budgetary constraints, problems are not going to disappear overnight. Furthermore, introduction of an ill-conceived and badly formulated education policy on top of the already mismanaged and misgoverned education system would simply lead to compounding of problems.

Prof. Md. Shafiqul Alam, Former Director, BANBEIS was of the view that simply improving the quality of teachers was not going to improve the quality of education in the country either. He argued that it was not only the teachers but also other members of the society including politicians and professionals who were in deed of demonstrating their real commitment to the education sector of the country. He emphasised the need to improve the quality of the education policy before attempting to address the issue of improving quality of education.

The needs of the underachievers

Prof. Muzaffar Ahmad, criticised the policy for not mentioning anything about under performing students. Quoting statistics, he said that about three-fourths of total primary and secondary students were under performers, Prof. Ahmad said that there were no provisions in the policy to address the situation. According to him, democratic education meant mainstreaming of education for all substrata of students; unfortunately, our education system was creating separate quality of education systems according to class and creed.

The issue of inclusiveness in policy design

One common theme which repeatedly cropped up during the discussion was the manner in which policies were designed. The majority of participants concurred that the policy was formulated in an essentially non-participatory manner; process was not inclusive.

Prof. Muzaffar Ahmad was of the opinion that the policy was drafted without any prior consultation with the various stakeholders.

Mr. Ahmad Shah Habibur Rahman blamed government officials as well as policy makers for sticking to their own, often erroneous and outdated ideas notwithstanding the fact that many constructive suggestions were often put forward before the policy makers through seminars and dialogues. In spite of such suggestions which could provide valuable inputs to the policy makers the final document often did not reflect any of these recommendations. There is a general tendency to ignore peoples' opinions. Thus, the entire exercise to inform policy making often turns out to be a waste of time.

Mr. Jasim Uddin was of the opinion that the education policy should have been discussed in greater detail with the different stakeholders before it was finalised. Another sticking point was that even as the policy was being passed in the national parliament with the opposition party boycotting it, the members of the ruling party also did not bother to deal with about the various aspects of the education policy.

On a similar note, Prof. Md. Masum observed that as the policy has been passed in the parliament where opposition parties were absent, there was every chance that the policy would be discarded should there be a change of government in the next elections.

Education for all and uniformity of the curriculum: constitutional obligations

Ms. Rasheda K. Chowdhury was of the view that ensuring the right of *education for all* is the constitutional obligation of the government. She was skeptical, however, about the idea that the state alone would be successful in achieving the goal by itself. The tasks and goals set out in the policy are going to prove to be a monumental and uphill struggle, she cautioned.

Prof. Sharifa Khatun observed that though the present policy recommended uniform curriculum for all streams of education, it failed to set any direction either to combine or coordinate different types of education i.e formal, non-formal, madrassa etc. As a matter of fact the policy had made no provisions for uniform system of education, observed Prof. A.N. Rasheda. She also pointed out that often children were divided into classrooms on the basis of their religious beliefs.

One participant pointed out that existing education system produced much confusion as different forms and mediums were followed across kindergartens and madrassas. For the sake of preserving the mother tongue, the introduction of english language was resisted before Class III, whereas in the madrassas stream arabic language was taught from the word go though the language itself had not an iota of resemblance to any part of the Bengali culture. He made an appeal in support of the introduction of a non-discriminatory education policy.

Decentralisation and Community Participation

The issues of decentralisation of the education system and its management, and also that of community participation were underscored as important concerns by a number of participants:

Mr. A.N.M. Eusuf thought that the education policy has adequately dealt with the issue of decentralising the education. Identifying community participation as an important phenomenon, he observed that the policy clearly fails to articulate in what manner the community be involved in the decentralisation process.

Mentioning that primary education has a macro-level perspective to it, Ms. Sharifa Khatun maintained that the decision-making process as well as implementation was essentially dictated from above. She argued that local people, who were considered to be the consumers or end users of the education system should be empowered by appropriate laws to operate and control the primary education institutions. It was her considered opinion that this would lead to better management which in turn would result in improved quality and better standards in schools.

Supporting this line of argument, Prof. Saleh Ahmed observed that though there was much talk of decentralisation, it was only responsibility and not operational authority which was vested in the local level administration. Thus, duties appeared to be fulfilled locally, while in essence all the decisions ranging from staff transfer to appointment would remain with the centre, i.e., Dhaka. Professor Ahmed believed that local authority should be entrusted with adequate authority to exercise power and not only bear the burden of responsibilities. He pointed out that since local authorities did not have any financial power, no proper management system could be put in place.

Prof. Muzaffar Ahmad was of the opinion that the education policy appeared to be in a flux as regards the respective role of education bureaucracy and management of education. In his opinion the two roles were of entirely different nature. Elaborating the issue Prof. Masum said that decentralization of administration brought the education bureaucracy closer to primary schools where teachers eventually were transformed into low paid bureaucrats. While the management committee of primary schools had hardly any function to perform, at secondary level, black money and muscle power had virtually taken total control over management of the school. Consequently, quality of education, and monitoring of the performance of the education system failed at every level.

Gender Issue

A number of participants raised the issue of gender disparity in education.

Dr. Kaniz Siddique was of the opinion that madrasa education in Bangladesh was gender biased, and there was an urgent need to remove the disparity in the system. She argued that education policy had to incorporate a strategy for removing gender disparity and that the issue should be adequately reflected in the curriculum in order that both girls and boys could be properly educated as regards the attendant issues. It is simply not enough to enroll female teachers; rather the teachers themselves need to be inculcated with the proper mindset which inspire and stimulate them think in a gender sensitive and gender unbiased manner.

Ms. Hena Das put it very bluntly: madrasa education was totally against the spirit of educating the girls and emancipation of women. She wondered how such contradictory streams were allowed to coexist within the ambit of a national education policy.

Financing the education

The dialogue saw a lively debate on the issue of financing of the education system.

Mr. M. Monwarul Islam pointed out that financing of education was one of the major problems inhibiting the education system of Bangladesh in all levels. And this has been a perennial problem. He recalled that in the past, the traditional education system was organised by the private sector where 'tols', 'pathshalas', 'maktobs' played an important role. Subsequently, during the British era, the government had taken over the control of education through financing which resulted in gradual loss of interest and participation of the community. Mr. Islam was vocal in pointing out that offering free education at either primary or any other level could not be justified on any economic grounds. In this context he mentioned that public university students were enjoying nominal tuition fees whereas their counterparts were paying exceptionally high fees in the private universities. Mr. Monwar argued that many people were in a position to create endowments, establish and finance schools and they should be given tax waivers for this type of philanthropic activities. He stated that since education is expensive, poor people in the villages were often unable to bear the costs. He concluded his remarks on the question of whether we are, in effect, creating a highly skilled elitist labor force, based on wealth rather than merit.

Mr. Kazi Rafiqul Alam was of the view that formation of education policy required a common platform so that private investment could be generated to augment public allocations. This was more so since government alone would not be able to provide for all the resources required for educating the nation. Emphasising the government's role as a regulatory body to provide the basic framework, Kazi Rafiq argued that private investments was required to build up public institutions. He stated that the present education policy was silent on this pressing need.

Ms. Hena Das observed that the current policy actively encourages privatisation, especially in the area of higher education. She further mentioned that the government wanted to measure the quality of education on the basis of money that has been spent. Amount of money spent did not automatically guarantee quality of education, she pointed out.

In this context, Prof. Muzaffar Ahmad observed that the education policy failed to specifically address the concerns of budgetary and financial allocations required for education.

Science Education: A different stream?

Mr. Monwarul Islam criticised the current trend of producing more and more science graduates. He wondered whether there was any prospect of creating enough job opportunities for these graduates. He was of the view that although the importance given to science and technology was well intentioned, there was a need for the education policy to be logically linked to economic and industrial policies of the country so that the graduates could be properly placed in the job market.

Dr. Md. Ibrahim, Professor, University of Dhaka, contested the view of Mr. Monwarul Islam on science education. According to him, science learning was meant not only for catering to the job market; it was also a way of life. He stated that Mr. Monwar hasn't offered any workable alternatives. 'If science and technology were not needed, what did we really need?' - he asked Dr. Ibrahim was of the view that flexible technology oriented education should be introduced from as early as the primary level.

According to Prof. Muzaffar Ahmad, science education was not a separate stream. It was to be taken as an integral part of the education system. Science education helps create the right kind of mindset for the students - he observed.

Ms. Taleya Rahman, Executive Director, Democracy Watch, emphasised the need for encouraging science and technology education at primary level since a sound basic education in this respect was linked with rise in the nation's productivity and economic growth in the long run.

Who will implement the policy and how?

Dialogue participants held divergent views as regards modalities to implement the education policy.

Mr. Habubur Rahman enquired about the number of primary schools the government had planned to establish. He put forward the answer himself: the government declared to establish one primary school in each village of the country. He informed the audience that at the present there were between 80-85 thousand primary schools in the country of which, only about 40 thousand were owned by the state. Mr. Rahman argued that every village should have a primary school and that the control and management of the school should remain with the government. He complained that although the government made recommendations for post-literacy, till now precious little has been done in that direction.

Mr. Zaman raised the question as to whether the policy has made a clear statement as regards the resources required to deliver the expected services. He also enquired about the responsibility of implementing the policy. He believed that since the state had at best limited resources at its disposal, it would be impossible for the government to go it alone. In this regard, he pointed out that the state would require the assistance of NGOs, civil society organisations and similar other actors in implementing the education policy. He also pointed out that the quality of services offered by various NGOs in the area of education called for some degree of standardisation; however, the present policy offered no guidelines in this matter.

Ms. Taleya Rehman argued that class size in schools was a major problem constraining the quality of education; however, the policy was silent on this issue.

Prof. Md. Masum observed that donors were not enthusiastic in providing funds for the education sector because some of the NGOs such as UCEP were not being able to provide cost effective services. Prof. Masum emphasised the need for special education programmes for poor-working children. He argued that poor children should be given the opportunity to access quality education and that it was the responsibility of the state to ensure this.

Mr. Md. Mohsin welcomed the fact that the government has made primary education compulsory. He observed that over the last 10 years methods of teaching and curriculum at the primary education level have generally tended to improve, but the issue of quality and competence continued to remain a weak link. Mr. Mohsin was of the view that school education should be the focal point for human resource development in the country. However, it is unclear where the education policy stands on this issue.

Prof. Kazi Saleh observed that there was no clear definition of literacy. He called for specifying the scope of continued education, and proposed that a study on demand for skills should be undertaken. He was of the view that the scope for post-literacy programme should be expanded, specially in view of the fact that at present it is only those who have completed NFE were eligible for it.

Mr. Kazi Rafiqul Islam expressed his deep concern over the gradual disappearance of clerical and secretarial jobs in the context of the current restructuring going on in the employment sector and projected that within the next five years poor people would be further marginalised in the job market. He was of the opinion that there should be scope for life-long education so that these so called outdated and marginalised people could have a chance to once more productively participate in the economic life of the country.

Mr. Jasim Uddin thought that the national education policy at least appreciated the necessity of pre-primary education. He argued in favour of expanding the duration of pre-primary education from 6 months to 1 year.

Drawbacks of the policy and counter responses

Participants also drew attention to many other drawbacks of the education policy in addition to the ones mentioned above.

Mr. Siddiqur Rahman observed that a lot of inconsistencies existed in the policy and that many of the terms used were confusing.

Mr. A N M Eusuf observed that the policy did not encompass or attempt to chart out options for disabled children. This was perhaps because they are not considered to be part of the mainstream, he observed. He was of the opinion that a truncated education policy was not in the best interest of the country and that the country needed an integrated policy which would link education with health, food and nutrition and other related issues.

Prof. Nazrul Islam, Chairman, Education Policy Committee, focused on some of the comments and put forward his observations as regards those. He differed with many of the

observations put forward by a number of discussants. According to him, due appreciation should be given to the fact that the country has finally come up with an education policy and that it was better late than never. He observed that the draft policy was prepared in consultation with cross-sections of people and their suggestions were accordingly reflected in the draft policy.

Accordingly to Prof. Nazrul Islam Mr. Ahmadullah's paper was rather one sided. He also was of the opinion that complaints about rigidity in the policy was not entirely valid. For instance, the policy did provide an opportunity to a madrasa student to go on to study engineering, vocational education or business administration. With regard to financing, he observed that the education policy did indeed make realistic estimates as regards financing for education. Prof. Nazrul also informed the dialogue participants that unfortunately he himself has not yet received a copy of the final policy document!

Concluding Remarks by the Chairperson

Drawing the dialogue to its conclusion, Professor Rehman Sobhan sincerely thanked the participants for their valuable comments and for sharing experience and wisdom. He mentioned that many important issues had been raised in the course of the dialogue, though, he observed, it was not possible to reach satisfactory conclusion on a number of important issues. He hoped the *CPD Pre-election Task Force on Education* will be able to address a number of those issues. In this connection he invited the dialogue participants to be associated with the work of the taskforce. The taskforce will initiate an ongoing process of consultation on the draft which will be prepared by the drafting committee of the Task Force. He informed that the dialogue process of the Task Force will also be taken outside Dhaka in an effort to engage teachers, parents as well as students to solicit their input into the designing of a future education policy for the country.

Prof. Sobhan cautioned that the future of our developing society was going to critically hinge on how well we handle the education of the next generation. Prof. Sobhan reemphasised the need for making adequate investment in the education sector. However, his definition of investment was not confined delimited and to monetary investment but embraced investment in education entrepreneurship, in building community ownership and in mobilising a collective effort by the private sector, the NGOs as well as government. He underscored the

importance of both universal primary education and also quality aspect of such education as critical elements in democratising the opportunities for people throughout the country. Voicing his fears, Prof. Sobhan cautioned that as the nation moved forward, it might end up with a dual education system – one for the small elite and privileged class, and the other for the general masses. Such a dual system will effectively block the ordinary people from participating in the governance of the country because of the ever increasing disparity in quality and nature of access to education which they received. He emphasised the need to apply the collective wisdom of all stakeholders to ensure that there is a radical change in the mindset, which was the starting point for a truly democratic education system. He urged upon everyone to work homely towards democratisation of opportunity for all people in Bangladesh, in order that benefits of education is not confined to just the elite class of the society.

*List of Participants
(In Alphabetical Order)*

<i>Mr Al Amin</i>	Assistant Super, Ladies Hostel, Teacher's Training College
<i>Mr Jasim Uddin Ahmed</i>	Headmaster, Zigatola Primary School
<i>Mr Kafil Uddin Ahmed</i>	Consultant, ESTEEM Project, Directorate of Primary Education
<i>Professor Kazi Saleh Ahmed</i>	Former Vice Chancellor, Jahangirnagar University
<i>Professor Muzaffer Ahmed</i>	Institute of Business Administration Dhaka University
<i>Professor Shafi Ahmed</i>	Department of English, Jahangirnagar University
<i>Mr Kazi Rafiqul Alam</i>	Executive Director, Dhaka Ahsania Mission
<i>Mr Md. Shafiul Alam</i>	Former Director, BANBEIS, MOE
<i>Mr Mahmudul Alam</i>	Chief (HRD), BIDS
<i>Mr Muhammad Ali</i>	SPESP-NCTB
<i>Mr Ali Anwar</i>	Rajshahi University
<i>Ms Rasheda K Choudhury</i>	Director, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)
<i>Mr Ruhul Amin Choudhury</i>	Programme Manager, CAMPE
<i>Dr Bazlul M Chowdhury</i>	Vice Chancellor, Independent University, Bangladesh
<i>Ms Hena Das</i>	Chairperson, Bangladesh Mahila Paridhad
<i>Mr Tapon Das</i>	Programme Manager, CAMPE
<i>Mr A N M Eusuf</i>	Advisor, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)
<i>Ms Cornelius Hackins</i>	First Secretary (Education), Embassy of Netherlands

<i>Mr Sheikh A Halim</i>	Executive Director, VERC
<i>Mr Md Azizul Haque</i>	Director, BACE
<i>Mr Kamal Hossain</i>	Save the Children, USA
<i>Dr Hamidul Huq</i>	Executive Director, Unnayan Sahojogy Team (UST)
<i>Md. Anwarul Huq</i>	Director, NAPE
<i>Mr Syed Anwar Husain</i>	Former Director General, Bangla Academy
<i>Ms Syeda Shamse Ara Huseyn</i>	Principal, Siddheswari Girls' College
<i>Dr Muhammad Ibrahim</i>	Executive Director, Centre for Mass Education in Science (CMES)
<i>Mr M Ataharul Islam</i>	Department of Statistics, Dhaka University
<i>Dr Nazrul Islam</i>	Vice Chairman, Bangladesh Institute of Technology
<i>Mr Monwarul Islam Islam</i>	Vice Chancellor, East West University
<i>Mr Sayed-ul-Alam Kazal</i>	Programme Manager CAMPE
<i>Dr. Terri Kelly</i>	Senior Education Adviser DFID
<i>Professor Sharifa Khatun</i>	Institute of Education and Research Dhaka University
<i>Professor Abu Hamid Latif</i>	Institute of Education and Research, Dhaka University
<i>Ms Niloufer Manzur</i>	Chairperson, SUNBEAMS
<i>Dr M Masum</i>	Professor, Department of Economics, Jahangirnagar University
<i>Professor Ahmadullah Mia</i>	Research Director, Dhaka Ahsania Mission
<i>Ms Annamarie Minder</i>	Deputy Resident Coordinator, Embassy of Sweden
<i>Mr Noor Mohammad</i>	Manager, YARH, UNFPA

<i>Mr Mohammad Mohsin</i>	Education Advisor, PLAN International-Bangladesh
<i>Mr Ranjit Kumar Mondal</i>	Nizera Shikhi, A P O
<i>Ms Deepika Nair</i>	Save the Children
<i>Md. Shahjahan Prodhan</i>	Lecturer, Islamia College
<i>Mr A Rafique</i>	NPO
<i>Professor Siddiqur Rahman</i>	Institute of Education and Research, Dhaka University
<i>Mr A M S Habibur Rahman</i>	Deputy Director, PROSHIKA
<i>Ms A N Rasheda</i>	Senior Lecturer, Notre dame College
<i>Mr Abdur Rashid</i>	Director General, Compulsory Primary Education
<i>Ms Taleya Rehman</i>	Executive Director, Democracy Watch (HRD Unit)
<i>Ms Rezia Salam</i>	Executive Secretary, Nizera Shikhi
<i>Mr A M M Samsad</i>	Nizera Shikhi, SAPO
<i>Ms Tanuja Sharma</i>	A P O, CAMPE
<i>Dr Kaniz Siddique</i>	Associate Professor, Department of Economics, North South University
<i>Mr Tanbir ul Islam Siddiqui</i>	BSAF
<i>Ms Tahera Yasmin</i>	Regional Director, OXFAM
<i>Dr M B Zaman</i>	Executive Director, UCEP-Bangladesh

***List of Journalists
(In Alphabetical Order)***

<i>Mr Syed Ahmed</i>	ABAS
<i>Ms Arafat Ara</i>	News Network
<i>Mr Asif</i>	The Daily Arthaneeti
<i>Mr Salahuddin Bablu</i>	Daily Inqilab
<i>Mr Rezaul Karim Byron</i>	Sangbad
<i>Mr Liton Ekram</i>	Ajker Kagoz
<i>Mr Manash Ghosh</i>	Bhorer Kagoz
<i>Mr Md Abul Hosain</i>	Radio Bangladesh
<i>Mr Shafiqul Islam Jibon</i>	Daily Manabjamin
<i>Mr Moatafa Kamal</i>	Prothom Alo
<i>Mr Mannan</i>	Jugantar
<i>Mr S M Mizan</i>	The New Nation
<i>Mr Motahar</i>	Daily Rupali
<i>Mr Nipu</i>	The Daily Arthaneeti
<i>Mr Raziur Rahman</i>	The Daily Star
<i>Ms Rupa</i>	Daily Matribhumi
<i>Ms Munnis Saha</i>	Ekushey TV
<i>Mr Ajit Sarkar</i>	BSS
Mr Imran Shumon	Daily Muktakantha
Mr Zahid	Bhorer Kagoz