Towards Non-Formal Education in Bangladesh: Policy and Challenges

Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar[*]

Abstract

Education is fundamental to the self consciousness and so to the social and economic development; but the formal education alone can neither break the cycle of low education nor make the learning opportunities available to drop out adolescents, adults and hard-to-reach groups in the society. This is why non-formal education would be essence to trigger the comprehensive aspects of human development to the vulnerable groups in the society. The NFE policy in Bangladesh aims to provide access to lifelong learning opportunities by providing basic and continuing educational programmes that deliver basic literacy, life skills, work skills and general cultural knowledge so as to improve poor people's earning capability as well as quality of life. The policy framework would also guide priorities and future activities in the Non-Formal Education sub-sector. Despite the fact that in general the policy would be excellent, there are a number of challenges ahead to the NFE sub-sector. For instance, the country does not have a comprehensive Non-Formal Education Management Information System. It also has lack of mechanisms for development of linkages. And there are escalating the needs for the Divisional Team to be reintroduced for ensuring the quality delivery of the Non-Formal Education and taking colossal NFE initiatives towards popular human development in Bangladesh. Unlike it would be rare cases for the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE) to demonstrate innovations for the development of the concerned sub-sector. The BNFE, however, formulated an excellent NFE policy and conducted a good study on the country map of the non-formal education activities. Furthermore, this write up focuses on how NFE would be well acknowledged in Bangladesh in spite of the fact that there are global policy debates on notions and quality impacts of the non-formal education.

Key words: Non-Formal, Education, Bangladesh, Policy, Challenges, Continuing-Education, Post-Literacy and Quality-Education.

---

[*] Mohammad Rafiqul Islam Talukdar is the Chairman of Centre for Decentralization and Governance Society (CDG), and MDM Candidate 2012 at Asian Institute of Management, Manila. Email: ritalukdar@yahoo.com

Introduction

Development process is in fact an educational process; or rather it should unfailingly be viewed as such. We cannot therefore conceive of development in the absence of education any more (McGivney and Murray, 1991 from Faundez, 1988). And of course, education is fundamental to the self consciousness and so to the social and economic development. More importantly, it is central to the human development which certainly calls for quality education. Basically the quality education denotes the effectiveness of education in terms of meeting its objectives so as to ensure cognitive, emotional and functional development towards citizen's sense, civic virtue and improved livelihood for decent standard of living convened to healthy and long life. Here the operational focus of the quality education is certainly to be the content of the curriculum, the nature of the teaching and the excellence of the faculty and their continued opportunity for receiving better training, and the quality of the learning environment.

Since education is a basic human right, all people have the right to receive education that equips them with the knowledge and skills for economic sufficiency, participation in civil society, and an understanding of and respect for their own human rights and those of others (see UNICEF and UNESCO, 2007). Nevertheless, can the formal education alone break the cycle of low education, and make the educational opportunities available to drop out adolescents and adults or hard-to-reach groups of the people? Does the formal education ensure the employment opportunity for the down trodden people? And can the formal education suffice to trigger the comprehensive aspects of human development to the vulnerable groups in the society? Obviously, responses to the concerns depend on particular country context. In Bangladesh, however, all responses would be no. This is why non-formal education would be essence to harness the pro-poor human development.

Non-Formal Education

Tight (1996:68) suggests that non-formal education is about acknowledging the importance of education, learning and training which takes place outside recognized educational institutions. Rahman (2003:129) notes that an education system that is out of formal educational rules and procedures and which is based on learners' demand as well as reality is known as non-formal education. Basically non-formal education for those who could not be involved with the formal education with due age or even the involvement was evident they would be dropped

the school out caused by some reasons. Here the rules are not as tide as those for the formal education and the curriculum is relatively attractive as well as life-oriented. Simkins (1977) contrasts non-formal education programme with formal educational programme in terms of purposes, timing, content delivery system and control.

However, non-formal education system is developed based on the nature of *informal and formal education*[1].Fordham (1993) suggests that in the 1970s, four characteristics came be associated with non-formal education:

- Relevance to the needs of disadvantaged groups.

- Concern with specific categories of person.

- A focus on clearly defined purposes.

- Flexibility in organization and methods.

It is a widely believed that NFE, a people-activated mode of education delivery[2], is able to address poverty reduction effectively. So far as is attributed by the Non-Formal Education (NFE) Policy in Bangladesh, adopted in 2006, key NFE related terminologies are as follows:

- *Non-Formal Education* (NFE) is purposeful and systematically organized form of learning that generally occurs outside the formal institutions. It is designed to meet the learning needs of educationally disadvantaged persons of different ages and backgrounds, flexible in terms of organization, time and place, and may cover basic and continuing educational programs to impart basic literacy, including life skills, work skills, general culture, and facilitates lifelong learning and enhancement of earning capabilities for poverty reduction. It ensures equity in access and human resource development; it may or may not follow a 'ladder' system, and may be of varying duration.

- *Literacy*[3] is the ability to read, understand, interpret, communicate and compute in verbal and written forms in varying contexts; it involves a

---

[1] Formal education is linked with schools and training institutions; non-formal with community groups and other organizations; and informal covers what is left, e.g. interactions with friends, family and work colleagues (see Coombs and Ahmed 1974).

[2] Fordham (1993) notes that non-formal education provided should be in the interests of the learners and that the organization and curriculum planning should preferably be undertaken by the learners themselves: that it should be bottom up.

[3] Graham-Brown (1991:74-77) argues in respect of literacy programmes that there are a number of dimensions that have proved to be crucial to effectiveness: • Training and

continuum of learning that enables individuals to develop their potentials and knowledge base and to participate fully in community affairs and wider social and developmental context.

- *Continuing Education* is the provision of opportunities for lifelong learning beyond basic education (literacy and primary education) in response to the needs of disadvantaged individuals and groups to enrich their socio-economic lives.

Non-Formal Education in Bangladesh

Historical Context

In fact, non-formal education came central to the international discussion on education policy between the late 1960s and early 1970s. Herein Bangladesh, since its independence from December 1971, non-formal education started basically by the non government organizations so as to concentrate on a group of destitute people who could not have the light of basic education. Afterward Non–Formal Basic Education (NFBE) program, with tailor-made basic literacy including numeric and life skills, was leaded by the government. From 2000 onward NFBE initiatives[4] incorporated livelihood skills with the realization that the basic education alone could not lead to sustainable poverty reduction. In February 2006, Non-Formal Education (NFE) Policy was adopted and NFE came to take up an imperative place in the national effort at development.[5]

And the NFE policy[6] states that the government recognizes non-formal education as an opportunity for expanding literacy and continuing

---

motivation of literacy workers ● The quality and relevance of materials ● The reinforcements of literacy

[4] Interventions have been undertaken by the government– the Post-Literacy and Continuing Education for Human Development Project 1, (PLCEHD 1), Post-Literacy and Continuing Education for Human Development Project 2 (PLCEHD 2), Post-Literacy and Continuing Education Project 3 (PLCE 3), and the Basic Education for Hard to Reach Urban Working Children (BEHTRUWC) Project. The government has also undertaken the Reaching Out of School Children (ROSC) Project, targeting the out-of school children with the aim to complement the PEDP II. Apart from these, various NGOs are providing non-formal education programs for various target groups – pre-school children, adolescents, adults. There are also many private institutions, which provide basic and continuing education services.

[5] This was certainly tailored by the pledges of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (the Article 17), the World Conference on Education for All (WCEFA) and the World Declaration on Education for All (EFA) adopted in Jomtien, Thailand in March 1990 and Dakar Framework for Action (DFA) in 2000.

[6] The legal provisions, policies and international commitments including MDGs have been translated into the national policy framework as the following goal: "To contribute to fulfilling EFA goals and alleviating poverty as spelled out in the

education, especially to disadvantaged groups in the society, so as to equip people with knowledge and skills to improve their lives and livelihoods and thus to meet the challenge of the 21st century. Unfortunately, however, Non-Formal Education in Bangladesh is up till now undemonstrative in terms of immense operation, quality, innovativeness, NFE-MIS[7] and management arrangement. Since the Post Literacy and Continuing Education for Human Development Project-1 ended up in December 2007 no further big initiative has been noticed here except the Post Literacy and Continuing Education for Human Development Project-2 which is being implemented with limited scope, technical expertise and innovation.

Organizational Arrangement

The Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE)) under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education is the central coordinator of NFE programs conducted at government level in Bangladesh. Certainly, partnership building among all who can contribute, especially the role of NGOs and CBOs has been well recognized (NFE Policy, 2006). For instance, establishing *contractual relationship with NGOs or CBOs*[8], provided responsibility to implement NFBE under a number of pre-determined guidelines and criteria given by the BNFE, would be continued to remain as the central strategy for implementation of PLCE (Post Literacy and Continuing Education) projects. However, in the NGO sector, the role of coordinating NGO initiatives for NFE activities is undertaken by the CAMPE.[9]

National Plan of Action II, 2004-2015 and the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), by creating a community-based network of learning centers, aimed at reducing illiteracy by at least 50% by 2015, extending opportunities for effective skill training and continuing education and creating lifelong learning opportunities".

[7] Non-Formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS)

[8] Known as Community Based Approach (CBA)

[9] So it is clear that government owned NFE projects are implemented with partnership approach through NGOs, whereas some NGOs have their own NFE programmes. And here around 700 NGOs are implementing the NFE activities (pre-primary, primary, adolescent and continuing education programs). As a single entity a particular NGO's contribution in the growth of NFE may not be significant enough but as a sector, basically under the umbrella of CAMPE, NGOs contribution is noteworthy in the development of NFE in Bangladesh, and in fact, they are the key actors herein the domain of NFE. And due to largeness of operations a number of big NGOs like BRAC, DAM (Dhaka Ahsania Mission) and FIVDB exert a considerable influence in the process of coordination in the NFBE activities of the NGO sector, under the umbrella of CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education).

Policy Analysis

The NFE policy in Bangladesh aims to provide access to lifelong learning opportunities by providing basic and continuing educational programmes that deliver basic literacy, life skills, work skills and general cultural knowledge so as to improve poor people's earning capability as well as quality of life and to create a robust learning society.[10] The target groups of NFE projects[11] include out-of-school children, school dropout adolescents and young adults as well as urban slum-dwelling working children and adolescents engaged in hazardous professions with age group between 8 and 45.

Table: Lessons Learnt, Good Practices and Target Relevant to this Policy

Lessons learnt from this policy	Good practices from this policy	Target related to this policy
NFE has proved to be an effective way of addressing the learning needs of a large number of disadvantaged groups. It has moved far ahead of just literacy campaigns and has significantly contributed to skill development, employment generation and poverty reduction.	Non-formal education specifically targeted at marginalized children, especially working children, children from minority communities and other poor children with limited access to formal education opportunities.	Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling
Although there had previously been a lack of coordination, lessons have been learned and the need for joint efforts by the government, NGOs and development partners is		

---

[10] Scope of NFE: NFE activities will accord priority to children, adolescents and young adults and reflect the need for special attention to various disadvantaged groups, including children and youth with physical and mental disabilities; ethnic minorities; people living in ecologically difficult locations such as haors, chars, and coastal areas; and marginalised groups, such as, street children, working children, and people otherwise disadvantaged or living in especially difficult circumstances. The NFE program areas will include: a) Early childhood care and education (ECCE), b) Alternative opportunities through non-formal channel for basic education of children not able to participate in formal primary schools for various reasons, c) Second-chance opportunities for non-formal basic education of adolescents and adults of 16-24 and 25+ age group, who never enrolled in or dropped-out from of primary schools, d) A full menu of continuing education programs for lifelong learning opportunities, and e) Training through non-formal channels in vocational, entrepreneurship, and employment related skills together with support for access to micro-credit or micro-finance (NFE Policy, 2006:5).

[11] See NFE Project Documents.

Lessons learnt from this policy	Good practices from this policy	Target related to this policy
recognized. Further success of NFE will depend on the degree of decentralization, community ownership and effective management of these initiatives.		
The challenge now is to bring together trained facilitators, committed and competent NGOs, village based community learning centers and above all the many lessons learned in the recent past.	Non-formal primary schools for adolescents who could not enter primary school at the right age	
Numerous studies have concluded that BRAC schools are more effective at enrolling more first generation learners than other schools.		
If the goal of education for all is to be achieved and if it is to contribute to the reduction of poverty and hunger, it is crucial that policies and strategies are formulated on the basis of realistic data, that programmes are properly resourced, and that initiatives are specifically targeted at marginalized children, especially working children, children from minority communities and other poor children with limited access to formal education opportunities.	Pre-primary schools to prepare children for formal education in primary schools.	
A network connecting NFEs across the country would better facilitate access to skilled trainers, resources and knowledge for sufficiently equipped and well managed learning centers in all communities.	Special schools for domestic child workers, garment workers and children involved in the worst forms of child labor	
The formal and non-formal education		

Lessons learnt from this policy	Good practices from this policy	Target related to this policy
curricula should be made more relevant to the lives and needs of children. Centre-based vocational training for wage employment often leads to migration to urban areas and may not be as effective as has been thought to generate employment in the rural sector.		
Families' priorities must be listened to. The objectives, target groups and activities of the programme should be oriented towards parents, together with municipal staff and local NGOs or community based organizations.	Special education programmes to encourage increased self-esteem in children of ethnic minorities.	
Linking education, especially NFE interventions, with skills training and income generating programmes provide effective results. There are no immediate links to help children enter the formal education system, find a relevant skills training programme or get assistance to set up an income generating venture.		
Promotion of livelihood activities is probably the best way to increase the incomes of the households of working children and those at risk. They can provide additional income which can help to keep them in school, provide food and nutrition and prevent them from working at an early age.	Post-primary and continuing non-formal education i.e. in the form of community based or mobile libraries offering training in i.e. livestock rearing, fish culture, electrical repair work and vegetable cultivation.	
Remedial teaching and after-school tutoring benefits working children enrolled at public schools and NFE courses. They require a personalized approach and will benefit from		

Lessons learnt from this policy	Good practices from this policy	Target related to this policy
flexibility in the course programme, individual learning plans, self-paced study options, study circles, use of non print instructional material, and self assessment activities. Remedial teaching and tutoring can help prevent the vulnerable student from completely falling out of the education system.		
Targeted social mobilization is required to seek the active support and participation of stakeholders. Mobilization of community leaders is particularly important, because they are in a position to positively influence their communities.	Community-run NFE centers can be further strengthened to make them self-sustaining institutions to serve each community according to its own needs and interests.	
Linkages between primary/non-formal basic education and technical/vocational training must be improved. Currently, only those that have completed Grade VIII are eligible for enrolment in technical and vocational training courses offered by most training institutes. The curriculum of these technical and vocational training institutes also needs to be reviewed and updated in line with employers' demands for specific skills.	Remedial teaching, visits to parents and after-school tutoring for vulnerable students to prevent them from dropping out of school.	

Source: Based on NFE Policy in Development Strategies that Work, Country Experiences Presented at the ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Review 2007

Challenges

The NFE Policy Framework, which would be expected to meet the constitutional and international commitment of the country to implement

Education For All (EFA), would guide priorities and future activities in the Non-Formal Education sub-sector (see NFE Policy, 2006:14), and in general the policy would be excellent; there are, however, number of challenges ahead to the NFE sub-sector.

NFE-MIS

To monitor formal education system, similar to many other countries, Educational Management Information System (EMIS) is evident here, but such a system is yet to be full-fledged for the non-formal sub-sector and there is a substantial absence of information available on Non-Formal Education despite the fact that Bangladesh joined to the global pilot programme of UNESCO easy-to-use methodology and database**12**, in 2006 since the NFE policy was adopted, for setting-up a Non-Formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS)[13]. However, there are increasing requirements for establishing a strong NFE-MIS for reliable information and data on this sub-sector.

Linkage

Currently primary/non-formal basic literates are not eligible to get enrolled in the technical and vocational training courses offered by the most training institutes in Bangladesh because only those have completed *grade viii* equivalent to formal education are entitled to join up in these courses. Unlike there is no equivalency framework in this country and so the presence of equivalency program is almost absent here. Studies, however, show that the equivalency of the NFE graduates with formal

---

[12] UNESCO has responded to this challenge by developing an easy-to-use methodology and database for setting-up a Non-Formal Education Management Information System (NFE-MIS). The NFE-MIS responds to the demand for a practical approach to NFE monitoring and evaluation which is adaptable to local contexts and information needs and can generate meaningful and reliable information and statistics for use by policy-makers and planners at both national and sub-national levels. This allows for informed decision making, better planning and delivery of NFE as well as for monitoring and evaluation of NFE development. The NFE-MIS also aims at improving the coordination of NFE programmes among NFE actors by offering a map of NFE provision in the country. The information available on NFE opportunities generated by the NFE-MIS can help raise interest and encourage participation in NFE programmes. The methodology has been piloted in Tanzania, India and Cambodia since 2001 and has been expanded to Morocco and Jordan in 2005. Bangladesh, Niger and Senegal joined in 2006 (see unesdoc, unesco).

[13] The NFE-MIS is a comprehensive system which brings together people, processes and technology to map, coordinate, and improve the delivery and management of NFE at sub-national level, by collecting, processing, and disseminating information on NFE providers, NFE programmes and courses, educators and learners (see unesdoc, unesco).

education accreditation is to date poor enough. Both research and anecdotal evidence support that it is between the grade iii and v, though some of the BRAC NFE graduates hold relatively higher grade. So, serious attention is required for development of the equivalency framework and improvement of the grade of NFE graduates. And the concern of linkage between primary/non-formal basic education and technical/vocational training is growing up, while the notion of linkage between skilled based non-formal continuing education and livelihoods is central to the NFE today.

Bureau of Non-Formal Education

It is certainly true that forming the NFE policy was a great achievement of the Bureau of Non- Formal Education (BNFE). Apart from this, it is unlike that only in rare cases BNFE would gain successes in the domain of NFE or could demonstrate innovations for the development of the concerned sub-sector. Since the NFE policy developed, it was expected that some comprehensive programmes as well as projects would be initiated by the BNFE for replication of the Post Literacy and Continuing Education for Human Development Project-1 (PLECHD-1) from 2006 onward, but really nothing could be done except conducting an important study on *Mapping of Non-Formal Education Activities in Bangladesh (see BNFE, 2009).* In fact, the Bureau has become incompetent to a great extent. Neither had BNFE developed non–formal basic literacy progammes as part of the *total literacy movement* nor could it replicate the lessons learnt and best practices from PLCEHD-1 to PLCEHD-2. And more importantly, the BNFE missed the Divisional Team of PLCEHD-1, a highly expert team as well as NFE think tank, out due to the Bureau's unpromising and feeble thinking. Considering these aspects, reshuffling the Bureau of Non-Formal Education with enlightened leadership and sensible authority is a requirement, and the Bureau must do extensive effort for the proper implementation of the NFE policy.

Essence of the Divisional Team

The initial thinkers and administrators of NFE introduced the *Divisional Team Concept* with a vision to develop a permanent NFE think tank, under the umbrella of government, which would be continued doing research and policy advocacy on NFE, providing management advisory services to the BNFE as well as Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, facilitating institutional capacity building initiatives for the NFE NGO sector, tailoring TORs for out sourcing, coordinating the work of

consultants, developing appropriate learning materials including curriculums and courses, establishing linkages and leading Non-Formal Education Management Information System. So, unquestionably, there are escalating the needs for the Divisional Team to be reintroduced for ensuring the quality delivery of the Non-Formal Education and taking colossal NFE initiatives towards popular human development in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Apart from the global policy debates on notions and quality impacts of non-formal education, it is well acknowledged in Bangladesh, at least in policy documents, that NFE has an important role in contribution to learning opportunities, livelihood skills development and relatively enlightened life options for the deprived people in the context of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education For All (EFA). For the strategic implementation of the NFE Policy Framework with quality, equity and sustainable pro-poor growth perspective, first of all, it is imperative to sketch out the need based substance, future opportunities and requirements, and the country map of the non-formal education activities. Secondly, it necessitates to identify the capacity of the state in terms of availability of competent human resources and technical, institutional as well as financial resources for tits intervention in the concerned domain, and then to determine who/which would provide what services countrywide and to put right people as well as institutions in right places. Thirdly, networking and partnership building between public and nongovernmental organizations and/or public and private organizations would be central to the implementation of the policy as well as programmes. Fourthly, developing a comprehensive Monitoring System as well as Non-Formal Education Management Information System is a must here. Finally, setting up a permanent NFE think tank like the Divisional Team of PLCEHD-1 project, under the umbrella of government, is a must.

Reference

Bureau of Non-Formal Education (2006), *Non-Formal Education (NFE) Policy,* Bangladesh Gazette (additional number), 9th February.

Bureau of Non-formal Education (2009), *Mapping of Non-Formal Education Activities in Bangladesh,* Final Report, April 2009.

Campaign for Popular Education (2005), *Sakhorota o Obbahoto Shikha Karjocrom Babostapona,* In Chawdhury Rasheda K. and Ahmed Shafi (eds), Dhaka: CAMPE.

Coombs, P. with Ahmed, M. (1974), *Attacking Rural Poverty,* Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.

Development Strategies that Work (2007), *NFE Policy in Bangaldesh.* In Country Experiences Presented at the ECOSOC, Annual Ministerial Review.

Fordham, P. E. (1993) 'Informal, non-formal and formal education programmes' in YMCA George Williams College *ICE301 Lifelong Learning Unit 2*, London: YMCA George Williams College.

Graham-Brown, S. (1991) *Education in the Developing World*, Harlow: Longman.

McGivney, V. and Murray, F. (1991) *Adult Education in Development. Methods and approaches from changing societies*, Leicester: NIACE.

Rahman, M.Habibur (chief ed.). (2003), *Shikhakosh (1st ed.),* Compendium of Education Project.

Simkins, T. (1977) *Non-Formal Education and Development. Some critical issues*, Manchester: Department of Adult and Higher Education, University of Manchester.

Tight, M. (1996), *Key Concepts in Adult Education and Training*, London: Routledge.

unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001588/158825e.pdf

UNICEF, UNESCO (2007), A Human Rights-Based Approach to Education for All.