Chapter 3
Analysing Bottlenecks to Equal Participation in Primary Education in Bangladesh: An Equity Perspective

Laila Farhana Apnan Banu, Goutam Roy, and Md. Shahriar Shafiq

Abstract Bangladesh has made significant progress in expanding access to primary education, presumably in terms of enrolment, after it became signatory to the 1990 Education for All goals. However, the quantitative gains in enrolment have been counterbalanced by poor-quality education, making the system largely ineffective in ensuring learning for all. Furthermore, gains in the access and quality axis captured in national averages often mask disparities in school participation of children coming from different segments of the society. Drawing from literature available in the public domain and analysing secondary data related to measures of access and participation, this study analysed key participation gaps. The analysis found manifold layers of inequality that a child is likely to experience during schooling based on her/his age, gender, readiness, ability/disability, ethnicity, geographical location, socioeconomic background and parental awareness. Identification of children remaining out-of-school has been further explained by analyses of socio-cultural, economic and pedagogical determinants. The study highlights policy and programmatic choices that may lead to more equal educational participation by reducing equity gaps.

Keywords Equity · Access · Social justice · Educational participation

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R. Chowdhury et al. (eds.), *Engaging in Educational Research*,
Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects 44,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-0708-9_3

Introduction

The World Education Forum 2015 took stock of achievements and shortfalls in the implementation of Education for All (EFA) and education-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and agreed on the joint Framework for Action on Education 2030 (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015a). Later a bold new set of global goals—the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—were adopted replacing the MDGs, calling for action by all countries for all people over the next 15 years in five areas of critical importance: people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership (United Nations, 2015). Covering 17 key areas, these 2030 development agendas include three goals related to education and inequality, signalling the crucial importance of reducing inequality for achieving sustainable development for all. In particular, Goal 4 calls for ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education, and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for everyone irrespective of their socioeconomic conditions.

Following this, phenomenal successes were reported with primary school net enrolment rates in the developing countries, reaching 91% in 2015, up from 83% in 2000 (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2015), and for the first time in recorded history, the number of boys and girls enrolled were almost equal. The number of out-of-school children of primary school age worldwide fell by almost half, to an estimated 59 million in 2015, from 100 million in 2000 (Brown, 2015). Yet large disparities remain, and children from the poorest households are four times more likely to be out-of-school than the richest (UNDP, 2015).

The hardest to reach and the most marginalised were girls married off as children, children forced into work for survival, children living with a disability or an ethnic minority background and the many caught in the aftermath of conflict—these are the 59 million children that the MDG did not reach (Brown, 2015). While simply expanding education systems left behind these children, 38% of the world's 650 million primary school-age children either fail to make it to the fourth grade or are not learning the basics of literacy and numeracy (UNESCO, 2014).

In Bangladesh, according to the South Asia Regional Study on Out-of-School Children (United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF] & UNESCO Institute for Statistics [UIS], 2014), around one third of preschool-age children are still not in school. The rate of exclusion is lower for primary school-age children at 16.2% but rises sharply for lower secondary at 30.7%. Boys are more likely to be excluded in both primary and lower secondary levels, while slum children are 2.5 times more vulnerable to exclusion. Repetition is a major cause of overage attendance and a risk factor for dropping out. Late enrolment and repetition are phenomena that demonstrate low efficiency of the system. Survival rates are alarmingly low, such that 40% children drop out before they reach the final grade (UNICEF & UIS, 2014).

As the world enters the SDG era, there are renewed commitments to start afresh and guide the development actions for the next 15 years to achieve targets set out by the SDGs. If Bangladesh is to achieve the ambitious education targets, its policies and programmes have to be based on solid evidences guided by an in-depth analysis

of equity gaps, so that the educational rights of the still unreached children can be realised. Aspiring to be a middle-income country by 2021, Bangladesh cannot afford to miss its 6.7 million out-of-school children (Antoninis & Mia, 2012) for another 15 years, as ignoring the human development and social change aspects would only have diminishing effects on its fast-paced economic development.

It is in this context that this chapter aims to review the participation trends in primary education in Bangladesh to identify excluded children and the causes behind their exclusion. Such analysis has the potential to answer queries such as (a) what policy and programmatic actions have so far been taken in Bangladesh to ensure EFA and education-related MDGs; (b) what results they have yielded to date; (c) which groups of children continue to be excluded and why; and (d) what are the most pragmatic, doable strategies to include these traditionally excluded children's groups in primary education within a resource-poor setting?

The next section presents a conceptual framework by defining 'Access', 'Equality' and 'Equity' to benefit from an agreed understanding of these interrelated, but not synonymous constructs. Situating the problem within the broader socioeconomic milieu of Bangladesh, the paper moves onto discussing what policies and programmes Bangladesh has taken so far to ensure primary education for all. It then analyses who falls into the cracks of data, policies and actions and why significant gaps still persist, despite sustained efforts. Based on the analysis, the study concludes with a set of equity-informed strategies that, if implemented in a progressive manner in conjunction with other actions, likely lead to truly equalising the implementation of educational rights for all.

Methodology

This chapter is developed based on a detailed review of scholarly literature as well as on the first-hand empirical experience of the authors. Combining quantitative and qualitative analyses of existing literature, the paper attempts to find answers to 'what' (current status), 'why' (determinants) and 'how' (ways forwards) questions in relation to children's unequal participation in primary education in Bangladesh. A systematic literature review of relevant academic, programmatic and grey literature was carried out to generate qualitative evidences. Grey literature refers to research outputs produced by professional associations, research institutes and government departments, which are not available through conventional academic or commercial publishing and distribution channels but are accepted in almost every scientific field (Alberani, Pietrangeli, & Mazza, 1990). While the academic literature has provided the necessary conceptual framework for explaining causalities, programmatic literature has provided data that can explain trends. Grey literature was used as an alternative to these 'orthodox' sources of information that are often not available in the public domain. In this way triangulation of data sources was achieved.

The key sources of data were Annual Sector Performance Reports [ASPR] (Directorate of Primary Education [DPE], 2015a), Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys [MICS] (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS] and UNICEF, 2007, 2015) and Education Watch reports published by Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)—a coalition of civil society organisations (CAMPE, 2011, 2015). The Annual Sector Performance Reports are published annually by the Directorate of Primary Education—the key government agency implementing primary education activities and are the most reliable data source on a set of school- and system-level indicators. Based on large-scale surveys on a triennial basis, each round of Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys provides data on a broad set of child development indicators, which is also a credible data source. The Education Watch reports provide civil society's reality check to government claims in education development through large-scale surveys.

Data gathered from these sources were analysed thematically to understand trends and causalities, such as how geographical location or poverty influences children's school participation. The equity analysis—based on conventional measures of education development, such as enrolment, retention and completion rates—was further reinforced by the conceptual framework of the 'Five Dimensions of Exclusion (5DE)' model developed by the Consortium for Research on Educational Access, Transitions and Equity (CREATE; for a report on this project, see Ahmed, Chap. 2, this volume). In addition, to a limited extent, the authors have drawn from their experiences and observations from their progressively responsible work in the field of education in Bangladesh as academics, researchers and practitioners, to add qualitative and retrospective insights, largely taking the stance of phenomenologists. A phenomenological orientation towards educational research is 'a methodological endeavour that requires an anthropological onto-epistemological interest in the meaning of educational events, where a basic concern is how to keep the unspoken, or tacit qualities of educational situations open to further questioning', rather than aiming to solve problems and provide definite answers (Saevi, 2015, pp. 13–14).

Access, Equality and Equity: Theoretical Perspectives

According to the 1990 World Declaration on Education for All (WDEFA) and the MDG2, 'enrolment' on its own is not an adequate measure of access; rather it needs to be complemented by a focus on actual learning acquisition (UNESCO, 1990). Therefore, effective access can be defined as the successful combination of enrolment in progression through and completion of the full cycle of primary education with learning achievement. However, in Bangladesh the term 'access' generally denotes children's physical access to school and seldom refers to meaningful learning (Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010).

The CREATE project developed an expanded vision of access which reconceptualises exclusion as a gradual process rather than a one-off event, requiring not

only looking at children who have already dropped out but also at those at risk of dropping out and not completing the full cycle—children who are 'silently excluded' within school, whose attendance is irregular and often sit at the back receiving little attention from teachers (CREATE, 2008, p. 3). CREATE's five dimensions of exclusion model, presented in Fig. 3.1 below, offers a framework to measure meaningful access, where the first three dimensions capture the out-of-school population of pre-primary (Dimension 1), primary (Dimension 2) and lower secondary school age (Dimension 3). Additionally the model includes two more dimensions that focus on children who are in school but are at risk of dropping out in primary (Dimension 4) and lower secondary schools (Dimension 5). In summary, the Five Dimensions of Exclusion, through both 'out-of-school' and 'at-risk' dimensions, describe children who are not participating in the intended level for the intended duration at the intended age (UNICEF & UIS, 2014). This framework has been applied in this chapter to understand some of the data.

The 1990 WDEFA further emphasised removing all forms of 'discrimination and disparities' in participation in basic/primary education. The declaration stressed that all children should be able to benefit from opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs (UNESCO, 1990). This means 'access to education' should equate with 'access to equal opportunities' in education, such as to qualified and trained teachers, and safe, protective and enabling learning environments, etc. To ensure equal opportunity and outcomes for all, equitable distribution of resources must be in place to address discrimination faced by certain groups, such as girls or language minorities, and to some extent, reversed by affirmative actions, often referred to as positive discrimination (Noon, 2010). This involves issues of equity and equality.

While the terms equity and equality are often used interchangeably, they essentially stand for two different concepts (Espinoza, 2007). The concept of equality indicates similar treatment for all persons by asserting their fundamental equal worth, which is reflected in different UN declarations on human and child rights (United Nations, 1949, 1979, 1989). For equity, however, there are many factors

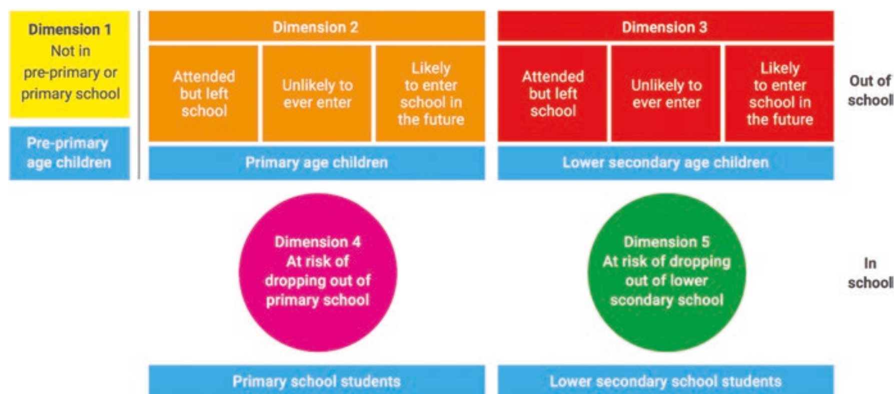

Fig. 3.1 The conceptual framework of five dimensions of exclusion. (Source: Global Initiative on Out of School Children, UNICEF and UIS, 2014, with permission from UNICEF Bangladesh)

including gender, socioeconomic status, history, geographical location, language, ethnicity, religion and disability, which often influence unequal outcomes in education (Wood, Levinson, Postlethwaite, & Black, 2011). Thus the concept of equity is linked with fairness and justice in the provision of education or other benefits that consider individual circumstances and implies a controlled form of equal treatment (Wood et al., 2011). In summary, equality is the goal, and equity is the means to address gaps in achieving equality of opportunities and outcomes.

The Socioeconomic Context of Bangladesh and Its Children

In 2014, Bangladesh ranked 142 out of 187 least developed countries (United Nations, 2014).With the vision to become a middle-income country by 2021, the pace of poverty reduction has been accelerated with significant progress in economic growth (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2011). However, around one third of its households are still poor and one fifth extremely poor (BBS & World Bank, 2011). Around half of its children live in poverty and are typically deprived of four out of seven basic services: water, sanitation, nutrition, education, health, information and shelter (UNICEF, 2009a).

Undernutrition rates are significantly high in Bangladesh, with 42% of children under five stunted, 32% underweight and 10% wasted (BBS & UNICEF, 2015). Child malnutrition is twice as high in the poorest quintile than the wealthiest (UNICEF, 2009a). There is strong evidence that malnutrition causes irreversible damage during children's early formative years, a critical period for brain development (ICF International, 2013). Nutritional deficits harm education prospects, and children stunted in their early years typically register lower levels of learning achievement and are more likely to drop out (The Lancet, 2011). Around half of Bangladesh's children suffer from mild or moderate anaemia, which is also associated with diminished cognitive development and learning.

Prevalence of harmful social practices such as child labour and corporal punishment is also high. According to the most recent Child Labour Force Survey (BBS, 2013), there are 3.45 million working children, mostly boys, 71.5% of whom are from rural areas. The largest proportion of working children, 45.7%, belongs to the official school age of 6–11 years. To support family income, 30% of working children have never attended school, and another 28.9% could not attend school because parents failed to afford related expenses (BBS, 2013).

A Children's Opinion Poll conducted by UNICEF found 91% of Bangladeshi children experiencing physical punishment, with one quarter reporting having experienced this almost every day (UNICEF, 2009b). With the omnipresence of widespread corporal punishment, schooling does not guarantee a safe environment for children (Rahman & Tareque, 2013). A widely held social norm of accepting violent disciplining marginalises children suffering at the hands of their parents, teachers and caregivers. In 2011, the High Court declared corporal punishment in schools

illegal. However, enforcement of such laws is seldom observed. As a result, the promise of schooling remains undermined.

Bangladesh is one of the world's countries most vulnerable to climate change. Climate change impacts including sea level rise, frequent floods and cyclones threaten to erode gains in poverty reduction (ADB, 2011). Bangladesh's education system is not well-prepared to face climate change-induced vulnerabilities. Flooding and cyclones destroy school infrastructure and materials and result in short- and long-term closures and disruption. In a 2007 cyclone, over 18,000 schools were damaged (for a report on Cyclone Sidr, see Rahman & Missingham, Chap. 4, this volume). More than 13,000 schools were affected by a combination of cyclone and flooding in the following year in 2008, and nearly 3000 were affected in 2009 (Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs [MoWCA], 2010). Such emergencies have serious implications for inclusiveness because of the unequal distribution of risk and coping capacity of families, which often results in parents withdrawing children from school and sending them to work irreversibly.

Despite much progress, governance challenges continue to impede socioeconomic development (ADB, 2011). Government structures are centralised, limiting flexibility to adapt local circumstances and demands in national policies. National development masks wide regional disparities across urban slums, disaster-prone areas, geographically remote and isolated places such as *char* (river islands), *haor* (wet lands) and ethnic minority-inhabited regions, which are later discussed in greater detail.

Achievements in Primary Education

On a national level, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in primary education, especially in increasing and achieving gender parity in enrolment (Government of Bangladesh [GoB], 2015). The rate of expansion accelerated sharply when Bangladesh became signatory to the EFA and MDG goals in 1990 and 2000. In line with the 1990 Compulsory Primary Education Act and the 2010 National Education Policy, the government has taken many steps to improve the subsector, including the formulation of law for Universal Primary Education, providing free textbooks, abolishing school fees, providing stipends for rural and poor students and for girls up to secondary level, offering second chance education to out-of-school children and expanding pre-primary education (GoB, 2015). An increasingly pro-poor policy environment and subsequent actions have ensured the steady decline of out-of-school children. See Chap. 1 for statistics indicating some improvements in primary education over years.

Currently the primary education development activities are being implemented under an integrated sector-wide program named 'Third Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-3)' which sets out the framework for an equitable delivery of quality primary education. It includes strategies for 1 year pre-primary,

universal primary and expanded non-formal education provision for reducing disparities. Equity-based targets include narrowing access and learning differentials between children from wealthier and poorer homes and best- and worst-performing regions (DPE, 2011a). The interventions undertaken to reduce disparity under PEDP-3 are discussed briefly below.

In recognition of many children failing to achieve basic learning competencies, the *Each Child Learns* intervention was initiated in 2011, aiming to reduce learning disparity and allow all children a fair chance to learn through activity based teaching-learning methodology (DPE, 2011a). The *second chance education* interventions now cater for an estimated 5.5 million learners in a range of activities from early childhood through basic and continuing education. These non-formal, accelerated learning programmes offer an alternative route to those who missed formal schooling. Parallel to this, the World Bank financed *Reaching Out-of-School Children* project is aimed at supporting 750,000 disadvantaged children aged 7–14 years in 90 less developed sub-districts (DPE, 2011a).

The *Mainstreaming of Inclusive Education* initiative aims at designing appropriate policies and strategies to address the needs of four specific groups of disadvantaged children: girls, ethnic minorities, the poor and children with disabilities. An inclusive education framework is in place, although specific program interventions are yet to reach children (DPE, 2011a; see Malak & Tasnuba, Chap. 7, this volume, for more).

In addition, a well-established *Targeted Stipend* program continues, providing cash payments to 7.8 million children from poor families to offset school-related costs (DPE, Power and Participation Research Centre [PPRC] & UNICEF, 2013). To address marked differences in infrastructure, PEDP-3 introduces *needs-based infrastructure development* in areas facing acute problems, such as impoverished rural areas, *chars*, *haors* and urban slums (DPE, 2011a). Multiple disasters and use of schools as shelters reduce learning hours. PEDP-3 envisages an expansion of *Education in Emergencies* programmes (see Rahman and Missingham, Chap. 4, this volume, as an example of NGO initiatives) aimed at strengthening disaster preparedness to continue education during and after emergencies.

Despite espousing a conspicuous equity focus, most of these interventions are in their infancy and are yet to produce meaningful evidence of reducing inequality. In most cases, the interventions are top-down, without much capacity and consensus building on the ground. As a result, when these interventions travel through the dissemination ladder, many of their true intentions evaporate along the way. In addition, the omnipresence of a culture that values administrative issues over pedagogic components affects the relevance and efficiency of such inputs (White, Cooper & Mackey, 2014). For example, a joint study conducted in 2013 by the Directorate of Primary Education, Power and Participation Research Centre and UNICEF indicated that although the problem of targeting stipends was improved by replacing the uniform coverage of 40% of the poorest by geographical targeting, the stipend amount (Taka 100 per child per month) has not changed since its introduction. This amount is not sufficient to offset real and opportunity costs. Furthermore, the study revealed four types of transaction burdens: disbursement delays, opportunity cost of

1 day's lost labour and/or travel/food costs for guardians, loss of teaching time on payment paperwork and booth assistance and lapse of payment for mothers who miss collection on the appointed day (DPE, PPRC & UNICEF, 2013).

The issues outlined above suggest there is indeed room for improving the efficiency of stipend distribution; however, there is also a need to critically look into how much this has been successful in achieving its goal. Here the classic example of 'validity' and 'reliability' can be cited, where the interventions are producing reliable, quantifiable results, such as the number of students who received stipends, or for training programmes, and the number of teachers trained. Nevertheless, the outcomes are often of little validity, as they mostly fail to produce commensurate qualitative results—little positive change in teacher behaviour or little impact on student learning. As the interventions reach schools in forms of 'grants', 'supplies' or 'capacities', it is time to look into their relevance and validity in serving the core purpose of creating equitable access to meaningful learning, no matter how reliable they are. The following section discusses this at greater extent.

Key Challenges and Persisting Inequalities: An Equity Analysis

Although the headway Bangladesh has already made in universalising primary education has been commendable (World Bank, 2013), there are still a number of formidable challenges that need urgent attention, such as bringing *all* children to school, reducing drop-out rates and improving the quality of education.

Due to EFA and MDG targets, the government emphasised bringing more children to school, without much attention to preparing the schools with conducive learning environments. The consequence of such a purely quantitative expansion meant unprecedented increases in enrolment rates. However the quantitative gains in enrolment were counterbalanced by a strikingly poor-quality education, which is attributed to a complex set of elements, including low coverage of early childhood development (ECD) services, low contact hours, understaffed schools and crowded classrooms with high teacher-student ratios, lack of child-friendly infrastructure and water-sanitation facilities, memorisation-based teaching methods, a dated assessment system, pressure of a high-stakes examination inciting poor motivation and a persistent use of corporal punishment (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2013; DPE, PPRC & UNICEF, 2013). The system-level factors include intake of low-quality human resources, absence of preservice teacher training and a career development path, a highly centralised decision-making process, low government spending and a poorly governed system with low accountability at every level. All these affect parental decisions to utilise primary education services.

The two most important indicators of quality education are learning achievement and rates of transition to the next level (Scheerens, 2004). In addition to teaching the basic skills of literacy and numeracy, quality education also refers to encouraging critical thinking and a desire for lifelong learning (UNESCO, 2015a) to be able to

respond to the individual and societal needs. Only 25% of Grade 5 children in Bangladesh can read, write and do simple math (DPE, 2015b). Around 55.84% children are enrolled in secondary level schools, with net enrolment coming down to 50.21% (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics [BANBEIS], 2015). For the children who do not complete primary education and/or do not enter into secondary, primary education remains as the terminal education; many of these children enter formal or informal employment markets with only a minimum ability to read or write.

While the enrolled children struggle to remain in school and learn, an estimated 5.6 million still remain out-of-school (UNICEF & UIS, 2014)—roughly 10% of the global share. Drop-out and survival rates are alarming, with a worse situation for children with multiple disadvantages. The following section examines inequality patterns prevailing in primary education with profiles of excluded children and the determinants of their exclusion.

Wealth Disparity

Poverty emerges as the main cause for pushing children out-of-school, followed by child labour which of course is often the by-product of poverty. Poverty is associated with socioeconomic conditions that are caused by and lead to more deprivations, which in turn reinforce disadvantage and deepen inequality. Age-wise analysis shows poverty-related issues become much more determining for school participation at age 9; around 40% of this age group remain out of school (Nath & Chowdhury, 2009). Child labour is widely practised as a survival strategy by low-income families and remains a major obstacle to the achievement of EFA goals.

Educational access and learning performance have strong positive correlation with household income strength (Hossain & Zeitlyn, 2010). Poverty and inability to afford education is cited by low-income parents of Bangladesh as the major reason for children dropping out (Sabates, Hossain & Lewin, 2010).

Yet, in a review of 50 countries, one quarter of households reported spending more on education than governments (UNESCO, 2015b). Although primary education is free by law in Bangladesh, there are shadow expenses that include examination fees, private tuition, paying for uniforms and supplies. Schools also charge for registration and coaching fees for the Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE), while model tests, private tutoring and guidebooks cause additional costs. Private expenditure has tripled from 2000 to 2010 (CAMPE, 2015). In most cases low-income families are unable to bear these additional costs. Opportunity costs, the potential income that the child could earn during the time of schooling and the forgone income opportunity in the time the child is involved in education (Palmer & Raftery, 1999; Stevenson & Lindberg, 2010), is another factor forcing poor families to withdraw children from school. As mentioned previously the monthly stipend of Taka 100 cannot offset the opportunity cost for working children.

Table 3.1 Wealth quintile differentials on child development and education indicators

Indicator Percentage of children –	Poorest quintile	Richest quintile
Of 3–5 years attending early childhood education	11.7	17.5
With whom biological fathers have engaged in four or more activities	4.9	21.7
With whom biological mothers have engaged in four or more activities	25.5	64.1
Living in households that have three or more children's books	2.4	22.7
Of 3–5 years developmentally on track in at least three of the four development domains: literacy-numeracy, physical, social-emotional and learning	56.7	77.1
Attending first grade of primary school, who attended preschool the previous year (school readiness)	42.8	52.3
Of primary school-entry age entering Grade 1 (net intake rate)	26.2	44.4
Of primary school age attending primary or secondary school (net attendance ratio)	64.5	81.4
Of primary school age out-of-school	35.5	18.6
Reaching last grade of primary school (survival rate)	94.1	96.9
Primary school completion rate	57.1	86.0
Transition rate to secondary school	92.0	95.2
Of secondary school age out-of-school	33.8	10.9

Source: Multiple indicator cluster survey (2012–2013), BBS & UNICEF (2015)

Table 3.1 presents the wealth quintile differences for key child development and education indicators, highlighting that children from the poorest quintile are subject to serious deprivation of development and educational rights than their richest counterparts.

Gender Disparity

Bangladesh has achieved gender parity in primary enrolment, with no marked difference in performance between boys and girls as found in the estimates in National Student Assessments (NSA), competency-based assessment of literacy and numeracy skills conducted by the Directorate of Primary Education every 2 years to measure system efficiency, and in Primary Education Completion Examination results—the terminal exam that each child has to pass to get the certification of completion at the end of the primary cycle (CAMPE, 2015; DPE, 2015a, 2015b). Nonetheless, disparities widen higher up the system with very low female participation in higher education, and retention remains an issue from secondary level onwards. At the official primary entry age, more boys (37%) remain out-of-school than girls (26%) (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade [DFAT], 2015). However, school participation is at its highest for girls at age 8 and declines thereafter as they hit puberty. At age 15, more girls (46%) remain out-of-school than boys (43%) (DFAT, 2015). The reason behind declining girls' participation can be explained by

the widespread practice of child marriage, where 65% of girls in Bangladesh are married off before they are 18 years old (BBS & UNICEF, 2015). Almost 90% of girls aged 10–18 are victims of public sexual harassment according to Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association; therefore parents, fearing their daughters' security, withdraw them from school and try to marry them off as soon as they hit puberty (Akhter, 2013, pp. 2–3).

Bangladesh has one of the world's highest rates of child marriage. In 2013, approximately one in three women aged 15–19 years was currently married, while close to one in four women aged 15–49 years had married before age 15 (BBS, BIDS & UNICEF, 2013). Early marriage and threats triggered by this, such as dowry practices, early pregnancy and domestic violence, compel girls to discontinue education beyond the primary level. Girls' progression to secondary level is halted by situations where occupational and life choices for girls and boys are streamed based on stereotypes, not actual ability (DFAT, 2015). Early marriage and education are inversely correlated, where women are more likely to be subject to child marriage if they had no education (73.1%) as compared to those having secondary or higher level of education (31.7%) (BBS & UNICEF, 2015).

Girls' meaningful participation in learning, decision-making, taking leadership roles in school and community and aspiring for further education and work still remain significantly low. Unsafe school environment, lack of separate toilets and menstrual hygiene facilities, and biases in teacher behaviour and textbooks are the factors that affect girls' chances of staying in school (DFAT, 2015). Sexual harassment and gender-based violence still act as significant barriers but are seldom reported, making it difficult to provide valid statistics. Discriminatory social norms contribute to gender inequality, including early marriage and early motherhood, traditional seclusion practices, and the gendered division of labour (UNESCO, 2015b). Because of girls' low-income prospects, family investments in girls' education remain lower. Boys received more support from family members (49.9%) compared to girls (45%) during their Primary Education Completion Examination (CAMPE, 2015). Direct or hidden costs for education can disadvantage girls where family resources are limited (UNESCO, 2015b).

Geographical Disparity

While national averages indicate homogenous development across the country, smaller-area estimates confirm the existence of significant disparities. After poverty, geographical isolation emerges as the strongest determinant for the marginalisation of children and their communities. Distribution of out-of-school children remains highly uneven (Nath & Chowdhury, 2009). Figure 3.2 illustrates which parts of the country host most of the out-of-school children. The actual concentration points become clearer when estimates are taken from district further down to sub-district levels. The mapping makes it clear that averaging at the district level can mask presence of high number of out-of-school children in certain sub-districts, highlighting

the need for availability of data down to smaller area units to be able to better understand the geographical disparity.

For example, tea gardens are home to impoverished ethnic minority communities who work for the tea industry at a minimum wage. A study found 27.4% of primary and 56% of secondary school-age children living in tea gardens remained out of school (Nath, 2009) in a case where poverty was reported as the main reason. The opportunity cost was higher for boys for their likelihood to be involved in the tea industry, however, girls were affected differently, as they were required to work at home.

In Bangladesh a high proportion of rural households remain functionally landless, forcing people to live in marginal areas, such as *chars* and *haors*. The *char/haor* dwellers are marginalised by lack of services, poor communication networks,

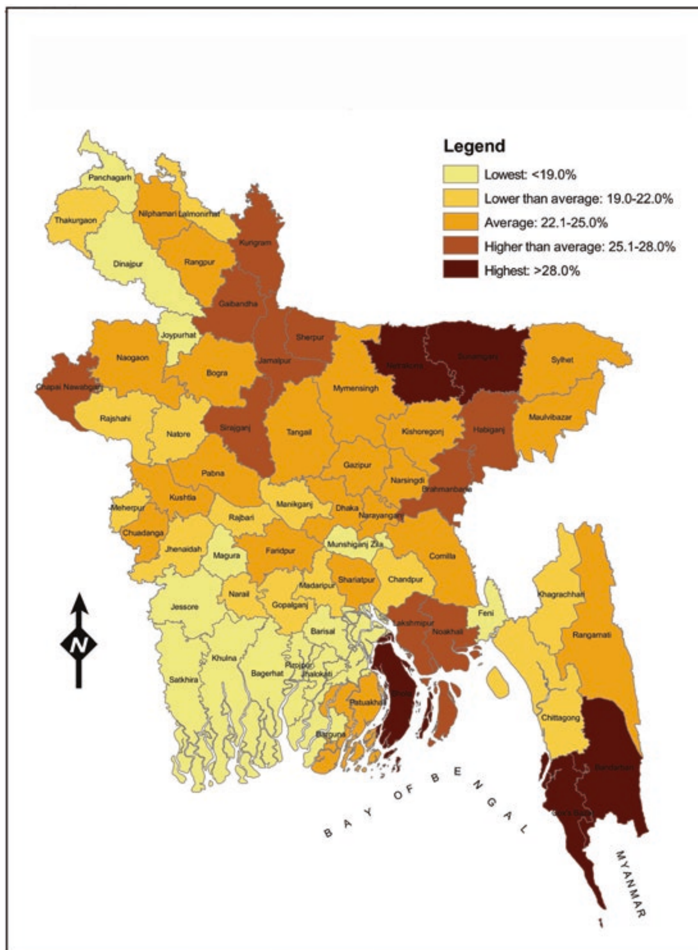

Fig. 3.2 Geographic distribution of out-of-school children aged 6–10 years. (Source: Child Equity Atlas; BBS, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies [BIDS] & UNICEF, 2013)

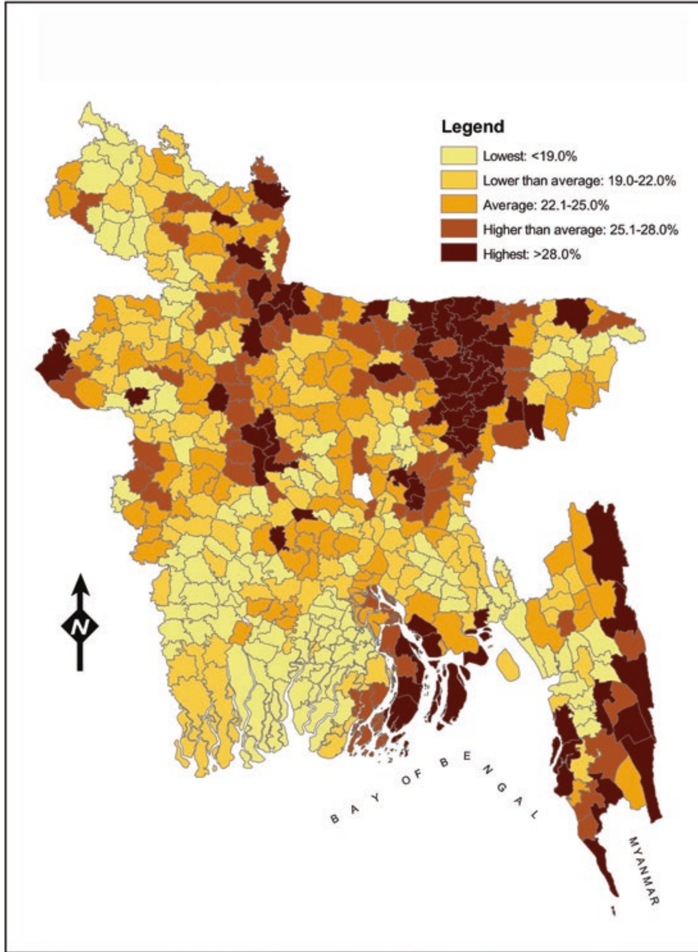

Fig. 3.2 (continued)

and remain disconnected from the benefits of mainland (Raza, Bhattacharjee & Das, 2011). In Sylhet division, for example, *haor* areas hosted most of the out-of-school children, and in these areas, girls were found to be more vulnerable at both primary and secondary levels (Nath, Yasmin & Shahjamal, 2005). Poverty and inaccessibility were reported as the major reasons behind non-participation in *haor* areas.

Access to school in *char* areas has typically been one of the worst factors. An estimated 40% children of age 6–15 years in North Char and 60% in Mid Char areas, and 46.4% in *coastal areas* were out-of-school (CARE Bangladesh, 2006). Due to sudden and slow onset disasters in the coastal areas, cultivable land, crops and homestead are often damaged. Children face a higher degree of hazards to access schools due to the unavailability and unaffordability of transportation facilities. In both cases, high educational expenses were reported as the main cause for pushing children out-of-school.

Characterised by mountainous terrain and dense jungle, the *Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT)* is a topographically and demographically distinct area from the rest of the country. It is inhabited by 11 ethnic groups, each retaining a distinct language, culture and justice system (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization [UNPO], 2008). Various surveys continue to rank CHT among the lowest performing in different development indicators. According to Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2012–2013, more than 40% of children from this region do not attend pre-primary education and miss developmental readiness. In the CHT only 27.63% of school-entry age children enter the first grade. The primary and secondary net attendance rates stand close to national averages with gender parity. However, still one third of primary and more than half of secondary children remain out-of-school (BBS & UNICEF, 2015). The reasons include inaccessible terrain, dispersed population habitat, linguistic and cultural diversity, which, together with straightjacket national policies and programmes, make educating ethnic minority children a major challenge. Lack of transport facilities, high transport costs, tensions stemming from ethnic conflicts and low parental awareness are bottlenecks CHT children face while accessing education. Quality continues to suffer due to chronic vacancies in remote locations. The issue of multiple languages remains as a barrier in ensuring quality interaction (Durnian, 2007), where children from different ethnolinguistic communities may participate in one classroom, while the teacher can come with a different language ability.

Although as a whole the situation of city/urban areas is better than the above-mentioned disadvantaged pockets, they however host a special pocket of disadvantage: *slums*. In all development indicators slums perform worse than rural areas, with better-off urban areas outperforming them both (UNICEF, 2010). The poorest of the poor usually end up in slums, and suffer from severe social-service deprivation. Education indicators for slum children are the lowest. Net enrolment is just 70%, over half of those enrolled leave school prior to Grade 5, and drop-out rates are more than six times the national average (Cameron, 2010). In addition to high drop out and repetition rates, slums have an extremely poor ratio for gender parity in secondary schools and three times more child labour than the national average (UNICEF, 2010). Around 19% of 5–14-year-old slum children were involved in work, the rate being the highest among other marginalised groups (BBS & UNICEF 2007).

Slum children are forced to drop out due to extreme poverty, mobility of makeshift settlements, slum evictions, inadequate schools, poor-quality provision, high opportunity cost and low access to other services and safety net programmes (Cameron, 2010; World Bank, 2007a). Those attending schools are often first-generation learners, and are from markedly poorer households typically headed by a day labourer or a female head, with little education, low access to information, and have low food security and high prevalence of ill health. Lacking a literate home environment, these children are typically ill-prepared for school (Cameron, 2010).

Learning and Assessment Disparity

Wide learning disparities become evident when parameters such as socioeconomic background, gender and geographic location are taken into account. The way instruction is organised raises risk for children 'at risk of dropping out', as their learning needs remain mostly unaddressed due to large class size, low contact hours and a predominant use of group teaching not catering to individual needs. The 35–40 min lesson period makes the learning process fragmented and reduces time-on-task. Equal emphasis on all subjects instead of more time for the foundational skills of reading, writing and numeracy undermines the importance of learning basic learning-tools in early grades (CAMPE, 2015). Performance of PECE examinees in languages was significantly worse than other subjects (CAMPE, 2015), which indicates children's inability to move from 'learning to read' to 'reading to learn' phase.

In National Student Assessment 2013, while 75% and 57% of Grade 3 students performed at Grade 3 level in Bangla and Mathematics respectively, only 25% of Grade 5 students performed at Grade 5 level in Bangla and Mathematics (DPE, 2015b). This shows how learning disparities are widening as children progress through the upper primary grades. In fact the National Student Assessment results in 2011 and 2013 have reported no improvement in student achievement, showing system inefficiency in equipping children with foundational skills of literacy and numeracy.

When many developed countries have banished high-stakes public examinations at primary level considering them more harmful than beneficial (CAMPE, 2015), the Primary Education Completion Examination was introduced in 2009. The exam infused inequality by providing separate treatment to a section of 'good' students to ensure a 'perfect' score (CAMPE, 2015). This not only instilled unfair favour for children with higher academic abilities and marginalised those who could not succeed, but students of other grades were deprived of teachers' attention (CAMPE, 2015). The schools channelled most resources—the best classrooms, best teachers and the most contact hours—for the Grade 5 children to cater to examination demands, thus depriving the lower grade learners. The way the examination is conducted and the use made of it do not support learning, as it is aimed at grading children, not providing feedback so that students can improve their learning (CAMPE, 2015; Odland, 2005; Perrone, 1991). Also there are stark differences in the Primary Education Completion Examination and National Student Assessment results. While the Primary Education Completion Examination results show that 98% of students passed, the National Student Assessment reveals only one quarter actually acquired grade-level competencies. The discrepancies between the two assessment results—both administered by Directorate of Primary Education—not only challenge reliability but also the validity of the system.

Ethnicity Disparity

The issues around ethnicity have been partly discussed earlier for the CHT; however ethnic minority communities also live across other land areas in the plains. Bangladesh is home to around 45 distinct ethnic groups, comprising around 1.6% of the population. About one fifth of the ethnic minority children are out-of-school, and both primary and secondary net intake rates are below the national average (Nath, 2009). Comparison showed CHT children are more vulnerable to non-participation than their plain land counterparts. There are also considerable differences in school participation among the different ethnic groups. For example, *Chakmas* are in a far better position than the *Mros*—one of the most endangered ethnic communities (Chowdhury, 2015).

As in many other countries, ethnic minority children face special educational disadvantages, as the language of instruction and textbooks are in a language different from their mother tongue. From a learning perspective, this is counterproductive (UNESCO, 2012). Children not only find it difficult to cope with a medium of instruction other than their mother tongue, but also find it extremely difficult to engage in learning tasks. Moreover, teachers feel overwhelmed by children's inability to participate, and the early experiences of school failure have a damaging effect on further learning ability (UNESCO, 2008).

As global evidence suggests, teaching and learning in the mother tongue has a positive impact on literacy development and overall learning, especially during the early years (UNESCO, 2012). It increases coping ability during transition from home to school, facilitates meaningful classroom interactions, develops confidence and comfort in learning, and produces better performance (UNESCO, 2008). Although there are 45 ethnic groups, Bangladesh lacks experience in mother tongue-based Multilingual Education (MLE). At present only a few NGOs are implementing Multilingual Education on a limited scale, with no coordination among the key partners.

Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities (CwDs) are one of the groups most vulnerable to exclusion; however there is a significant lack of data regarding their school participation in Bangladesh. Only 11% had access to some sort of education (CAMPE, 2011), while only children with mild disabilities were enrolled in schools (DPE, 2011b). Mild disability refers to the slow rate of maturation, reduced learning capacity and inadequate ability in social adjustment. Out of 2.6 million CwDs, only about 1500 had access to special education schools which were under the social welfare department (Ackerman, Thormann, & Huq, 2005). Ahsan (2013) identified key barriers in

CwDs' participation in education, including the non-cooperative attitude of teachers and school authorities, the lack of teachers' capacity and access to resources, negative peer attitudes, discriminatory school policies, unavailability of screening tools, inaccessible physical environments, negative attitudes of family members due to the social stigma attached to disability and the lack of inter-ministerial coordination along with confusing and contradictory policies that support both inclusion and segregation (see also Malak & Tasnuba, Chap. 7, this volume).

Children of Sex Workers

Children of sex workers are one of the most marginalised and socially excluded groups in Bangladesh. Roughly half of them do not go to school (Alam, 2005), as there are no government facilities inside brothels. Social stigmatisation results in people withdrawing their children from schools if sex workers' children are enrolled. While a few NGOs have stepped in to provide non-formal education in some brothels, they have been heavily external aid-dependent and unsustainable. National estimates are unavailable in this regard.

Refugee Children

At an abysmal time when the world refugee crisis has reached its peak, Bangladesh has hosted Rohingyas, a persecuted Muslim community facing forced eviction in Myanmar, for nearly 25 years. While 30,000 refugees are registered under two camps, around 100,000–200,000 more live illegally outside camps (United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR], 2007). The Rohingya children are not entitled to enrol in government accredited formal schools. The host community and central and local government authorities discourage their access to schools, envisaging that any support would encourage more influx from bordering Myanmar. The unregistered Rohingya children, growing up with no formal education, can only look forward to a life of exploitation and underpaid work.

The Need for Equity-Informed Strategies

Bangladesh's performance in economic development has been impressive, most having taken place since the early 1990s (World Bank, 2007b). Yet the benefits have not been evenly distributed, and economic inequalities are in fact widening (UNICEF, 2010). Economic growth is necessary for poverty reduction and overall development. However, evidence from other countries shows that poverty reduction is more dependent on inequality reduction than economic growth, a lesson from

which Bangladesh could largely benefit. There is growing evidence that investing in education and protection of a society's most disadvantaged children affords benefits to all and can lead to sustained growth and stability (UNICEF, 2010).

A recent multi-country study confirms statistically significant relationships between inequality in education and violent conflict (UNICEF and Family Health International 360 [FHI360], 2015). The likelihood of violent conflict doubles in countries with high levels of educational inequality. Reducing inequality therefore benefits not only disadvantaged children, but all. Also the cost of failing the excluded children for another 15 years would be high in deepening poverty and triggering further conflict and violence.

While there is no 'cure' for solving the ubiquitous problem of educational inequality, galvanising programmes and policies with an 'equity' perspective can identify exclusion and ways to address it systematically. Unless this is done, the national averages will continue to mask the deeply entrenched inequalities, pushing many children out of school. The 'equity bottleneck' analysis makes it clear that some issues need urgent attention from upstream policy and on-the-ground programmes to reach children left behind and advance the development agenda more equitably.

Research has categorically proven that *ECD* is critical for building foundational cognitive and behavioural skills and equalising learning opportunities by creating a 'level playing field' for disadvantaged children by preparing them for formal learning environments. However, parental understanding of early stimulation remains very low in impoverished communities, which explains why children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds cannot thrive equally to their wealthy counterparts. Expanding ECD provisions in urban slums and special disadvantaged pockets can be an effective strategy to ensure children are adequately ready to participate in primary education on time.

At any given point, formal education will fail some children, particularly the most disadvantaged ones. Well-targeted, accelerated and flexible *second chance education* programmes linked with vocational skills development are critical to achieve maximum gains in reaching these children. Expanding secondary education is important because low participation in this level means low participation in a skilled workforce, low recovery from poverty, higher incidence of child marriage and child labour and low-quality teacher supply to the primary level. Increasing the number of secondary schools, particularly in remote corners, and enhancing state support to run secondary education combined with special incentives for poor children, social protection for girls, community mobilisation initiatives to combat child marriage practices and creating opportunities for vocational/technical education can offer the ever-increasing primary education completers a route to further education.

Gradually *eliminating harmful social practices* such as child labour, child marriage and corporal punishment need to be addressed through social mobilisation activities. A comprehensive child rights policy backed up by laws needs to be aggressively implemented to combat child labour and violent disciplining in schools. Teachers must receive training on non-violent means to manage classrooms. Prohibition of child marriage should be strongly imposed, and the current

amendment of the Early Marriage Inhibition Act 2014, where the minimum marriageable age for girls is lowered to 16 years (if parents want), should be ruled out immediately, as according to national and international acts, such as 'The Children Act, 2013' and the 'United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child', all people under age 18 are children.

Reducing all forms of gender inequalities is a priority for all to benefit. A shift from parity to gender equality is needed to enable all girls to reap the full benefits of education (UNESCO, 2015b). This shift refers to the fact that due to the push for parity by EFA goals, many education systems have achieved gender parity goals referring to equal numbers of boys and girls enrolling in schools. However, as Wiseman (2008) pointed out, the question remains as to whether these parity indicators are masking gender inequalities in the system and in the broader society in relation to the status of women in social, political and economic spheres where the education systems are located. Critical feminist literature suggests that institutionalised sexism is a hallmark of schooling that reproduces a patriarchal system through overt (e.g. formal gender segregation) or subtle (e.g. hidden curriculum) forms. On the other hand, sociological literature suggests that gender differences in higher education and labour markets persist and that these differences affect schooling choices for girls and their integration in economic development (Wiseman, 2008).

In Bangladesh gender-segregated seating arrangements start from Grade 1 throughout the primary schooling, while single-sex schools are a popular form at the secondary level. Therefore, elements of gender stereotyping in the current schooling culture should be carefully examined, and school capacity and resources should be ensured so that gender-inclusive environments can be created within schools, as well as boys and girls being able to start challenging gender stereotypes, leading to an equal participation in socioeconomic and political spheres. This can start with simple strategies such as mixed seating arrangements; breaking stereotypes that encourage reproduction of gender inequality, such as engaging both boys and girls in cleaning and guest entertainment duties—tasks traditionally allocated to girls only; having separate toilets for girls and boys, with menstrual hygiene facilities for girls; and encouraging girls to take leadership roles in various in-school activities. In addition, community awareness raising programmes can be developed to involve community members in creating a truly gender-inclusive school environment.

The government should consider developing a comprehensive strategy for Children with Disabilities' (CwDs) physical, social and pedagogical inclusion. While schools should be physically accessible, they should also be welcoming, non-intimidating and truly inclusive. Parental and community awareness activities should go along with teacher training programmes that equip them with necessary pedagogical tools to address the special learning needs of CwDs. Policy intentions in themselves are not enough; actions must be taken to ensure that the CwDs can participate in schools. These actions should be multifaceted at the service level (schools accessible by CwDs), the capacity level (teachers know how to deal with CwDs integration in learning process) and at the awareness level (communities do not attach stigma to CwDs and take them to schools). Activities in isolation will not

help. Small-scale school level pilots can be undertaken to generate a model that demonstrates inclusion at multiple layers leading to full participation of CwDs.

Ensuring *mother tongue-based multilingual education* along with establishment of geographically appropriate school policies supported by culturally inclusive curricula can lead to the more meaningful educational participation of ethnic minority children. For this too, a sensible and well-planned comprehensive pilot should be carried out, before going for mass-scale intervention. For example, producing textbooks in different languages is not a solution. If the teacher's capacity across ethnic community inhabited regions is not well thought out, textbooks will be of little use. Additionally if logistical readiness at the school level is not ensured, there will be no classrooms and teachers to teach subjects using textbooks written in different languages.

Most fundamentally, if the primary education competency framework does not incorporate learning expectations for mother tongue literacy, as there is for Bangla and English languages, it will mean that communities and schools will not make efforts to teach those textbooks/languages. Therefore well-thought-out concrete action plans need to be undertaken before introducing fancy policy statements and unrealistic inputs, such as textbooks in minority languages. More importantly, in addition to putting pedagogical weightage on the mother tongue of ethnic minority children, it is also important to pass strong messages to children through the official curriculum that their ethnic identities are equally valued and celebrated across the broader curricula, school life and the society at large.

While expanding general service provision, *supply-side factors*, particularly minimum quality standards of services and facilities, should be ensured, so that schools are available, accessible and utilisable. Low levels of parental awareness combined with poverty-related pressures lead to low utilisation of available services. The society's overwhelming bias towards 'first boys'—often the privileged ones—leads to the social perception that children from poor families are not capable of pursuing academic learning. Therefore, addressing *demand-side factors* should be attended to so that parents can make informed decisions in ensuring the timely enrolment and completion of their children's education.

Single-sector interventions cannot lead to expected results, as the functions they perform are considerably stymied by a broad set of socioeconomic factors. Targeting the most disadvantaged children with *multisectoral interventions* is crucial. For example, education interventions in selected poverty-stricken areas could be supported with a comprehensive set of health, nutrition and livelihood support programmes so that the beneficiary communities could come out of the vicious cycle of disadvantage successfully and in a sustainable manner.

Acknowledging that quality data are needed to plan and implement interventions, a regular and *systematic data collection* process should be institutionalised by the government bodies, which can generate authentic, meaningful, usable data to carry out equity bottleneck analyses periodically. For example, the Directorate of Primary Education's sector performance report provides only national level data. Data at district, sub-district or further smaller units are unavailable in the Annual Sector Performance Reports nor are there data on specific disadvantaged groups,

such as children with disabilities or ethnic minority children. In addition to strengthening Education Management Information System (EMIS), investment in grounded, longitudinal qualitative research can provide evidence for information gaps.

Strengthened coordination of government and NGO service providers and complementarity of formal and non-formal education with a call for a more equitable distribution of services is needed to ensure Universal Primary Education. Currently there is no functional coordination among GO-NGO service providers; as a result some areas are experiencing service saturation, while some are remaining service-deprived.

Education sector planning in Bangladesh is highly centralised, with virtually no planning capacity created at subnational and service levels. Meaningful *decentralisation* of authority and resources is important to ensure education services are responsive to local demands.

Conclusion

Educating every child is a social justice imperative. To the degree that any child has an unequal chance in life—in all social, political, economic, civic and cultural dimensions—her/his rights are violated. As per various commitments, the government has to ensure the rights of every child, everywhere. Also, reducing educational inequality is not merely a moral imperative. It is the best possible investment a country can make to yield larger dividends for poverty reduction and economic growth and pave the way for greater social harmony based on egalitarian relationships. If the current inequality patterns do not change, the socioeconomic implications would be high in terms of unskilled workforce, higher levels of poverty, disease and increased risk of conflict, which will not be contained within the country's border (Kim & Hulshof, 2016). Therefore, ensuring quality education for all is a transnational priority.

However, social inequalities are so deeply entrenched that individuals, communities and schools feel that discrimination, bias or favouritism is justified in certain contexts, without fully understanding the consequences. For many, accessing education services is still prohibitive and there is a greater need for state investment in reducing inequalities to boost overall socioeconomic development (UNICEF, 2010). With the new set of SDGs, there is a renewed momentum around the right to education in all settings now.

Understanding education as a common cultural human effort, it is time to take a paradigmatic shift from uniform quantitative expansion to an approach that takes into consideration the differentiated needs of geographies and communities and advocate for an equitable service expansion with targeted interventions tailored to specific needs. In this way the country should start to invest in human capital development in the most disadvantaged children of Bangladesh. Educational provision should ensure that children's location, socioeconomic status or conditions do not determine access, at least during the first two decades of their life—from birth through adolescence.

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