

External influence, policy transfer and national ownership: A case on primary education of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explain 'how the development partners have worked to transfer policies in primary education of Bangladesh', followed by an assessment of national policy ownership in context of external policy influence in the sector. The external development partners' mode and nature of the policy influence has taken the form of 'emulation' in primary education sector. Emulation entails making, by the development partners, the funds and policy ideas available for reforms in educational development projects and programmes. They have tried down various modalities and by the way they have consolidated their position in directing primary educational development by introducing sector-wide approach. Together with this, they have imported many reforms from the outside in the education system. Empowering schools to prepare school improvement plans within the second primary education development program is an example of external policy transfer. This raises questions about government's leadership in educational development policies. Lack of national policy ownership weakens ministerial accountability to the government or the parliament. National capacity constraints, uncertainty of national education policy, and resistance of the domestic interest groups to local reforms are some of key bottlenecks towards promoting national stewardship in policy domain.

Keywords: Development partners, external influence, policy transfer, national ownership

Being independent in 1971 the Government of Bangladesh had alone tried to expand primary education by allocating own resources during 1973-80 (World Bank [WB] 2004). However, these national endeavours did not yield good results as the enrollment rate fell from 74.21% in 1973 to 62.63% in 1980 (Government of Bangladesh [GoB] 1987). The government's solitary journey was mainly due to non-receipt

of money from the multi-lateral donors to develop the sector. Actually, international education lending (particularly of the World Bank) was confined to manpower planning, and primary education was not empirically accommodated until 1980 (Heyneman 1999). The **Education Policy Paper**, produced by an external advisory panel on education in 1980 influenced the World Bank to shift the focus from higher to basic education as a strategy to protecting the poor (Heyneman 1999). Since then primary schooling had been acknowledged, in the bilateral and multilateral aid policies, as providing better access to formal and informal sector employment for poor households and encouraging behavioural change particularly in the areas of health, nutrition and fertility (Colclough and De 2010). Such acknowledgement connoted that Bangladesh was an important case for donors' educational development support. Of the

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global total of some 145 million children of primary-school age who were out of school in the late 1980s, some 60% were from four countries – India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nigeria (Lockheed, Verspoor and Associates 1991; cited in Colclough and De 2010).

In this backdrop, Bangladesh started receiving financial and technical support from bilateral and multilateral development partners (DPs) and this began with International Development Association (IDA)'s 'Universal Primary Education (UPE)' project during the Second Five-Year Plan period (1980-85) to improve the infrastructural facilities, textbook distribution and teachers' training for primary schools in 44 *upazilas* (Rabbi 2006; Ahmed 2012). An innovative Food For Education (FFE) programme was introduced with the involvement of World Food Program (WFP) in 1993 to encourage low-income household parents to send their children to schools. Later, the European Union joined hands in this programme. These projects are still in operation with the assistance from the WFP and the European Commission (Centre for Policy Dialogue [CPD] 2010). Besides these, the high-ranking projects and programmes, implemented by the government and the DP in collaboration are General Education Project (1991-96) and three Primary Education Development Programmes (PEDPs) in order (1997-onward).

The DPs have gradually extended their engagement towards sector policy and management issues by playing prominent role in the project/programme design, funding and implementation (USAID 2002; Unesco & Unicef 2013). For instance, the World Bank (WB) played a key role in the PEDP1 and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) did the same in PEDP2. Key areas of monitoring and oversight, including joint fiduciary oversight of PEDP3 have been delegated to the ADB and the World Bank (ADB 2011a).

With this background, this paper aims to explain 'how the DPs have worked to transfer policies in primary education of Bangladesh', followed by an assessment of national policy ownership in context of external policy influence in the sector. By inferring highlights from the discussion and analysis the paper concludes with recommendations to ensure national policy ownership in education sector.

Analytical framework and data collection methods

Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) provide four degrees of policy transfer namely, copying – involves direct and complete

transfer; emulation – involves transfer of the ideas behind the policy or programme; combinations – involve mixtures of several different policies; and inspiration, where policy in another jurisdiction may inspire a policy change, but where the final outcome does not actually draw upon the original. DPs' influence in the primary education can be explained by Dolowitz and Marsh's *emulation* form of policy transfer. These external players infuse policy ideas in the sector by utilizing platforms such as 'international pressures' and 'loans'. International pressures in terms of declarations derive from conferences. A developing country has to transform these declarations into national policies as a conference participant, and more importantly, when it approaches the development partners for financing its education sector. As a developing country Bangladesh has been reliant on the DPs for financial and technical support to develop its education sector. In response to the government's needs, the DPs have tried down different cooperation modalities. There comes a relevant question about national policy ownership. Analysis of this paper has been organised around external policy influence, its underlining factors and national policy ownership in primary education of Bangladesh.

In order to put together the analysis and discussion the authors have (a) reviewed literature including journal articles, research monographs, book chapters, newspaper reports and columns, sector performance monitoring reports, and project documents; (b) administered semi-structured questionnaires to seek the opinions, accounts and interpretations of education experts, bureaucrats, school head teachers, and former executives of the multilateral financial institutions through interviews; and (c) visited two schools, which are located in about 30 kilometer far away from the Capital Dhaka, to see the outcomes of the DPs' sponsored policy implementation.

External influence in primary education: *Modalities, avenues and evidence of policy transfer*

As said earlier, the development partners' mode and nature of the policy influence has taken the form of 'emulation' in primary education sector. Emulation entails making, by the development partners, the funds and policy ideas available for reforms in educational development projects and programmes. The DPs have tried down various modalities and by the way they have consolidated their position in directing primary educational development. Together with this, they have imported many

reforms from the outside in the education system. This section looks into these aspects in detail.

Finding a common cooperation modality

During the last three decades of their working for primary education, the DPs' landmark shift regarding cooperation modality occurred in 1997 through the transition from project- to programme-based assistance. Their impression with the project mode of development assistance was broken mainly because of two implications in the education sector. Firstly, although good short-term impacts were often generated from the projects these used not to live long due to lack of local ownership. Secondly, projects created much duplication in an uncoordinated and crowded development landscape (Ahmed 2011; Save the Children 2009). Additionally, the government had to keep track of a high number of individual projects by using donor imposed different disbursement and accounting procedures rather than using, and strengthening, the government's own procedures.

These shortcomings led the DPs to shift from project- to programme-based approach (PBA), and this was also introduced globally at the behest of the donors in the 1980s (Ahmed 2011). PBA consists of an umbrella over myriad of projects that are formally coordinated to deal with diverse activities of the donors. In light of this approach Primary Education Development Programme (known as PEDP1) was designed in 1997; essentially without a clear agreement of cooperation modality between the DPs and the government. Each donor had its own mandate to set goals, disburse funds, and show progress and achievements. Weak coordination and duplication impeded the implementation of PEDP1.

To mitigate the coordination issue and achieve greater coherence in development assistance, the DPs finally came up with the sector-wide approaches (SWAPs), as variations of PBAs, in education and health. Its defining characteristics include, "all significant funding for the sector supports a single sector policy and expenditures programme, under Government leadership, adopting common approaches across the sector, and progressing towards relying on Government procedures to disburse and account for all funds" (Brown et al. 2001; cited in Smith 2003).

On the premise of sub-SWAP, Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP2) was designed and

implemented during 2002-2011. Participating donors created a **Project Liaison Unit** within the ADB and the Government created a single Programme Management Unit (PMU) to manage the diverse and complex operations of the programme. Joint review missions (JRM) were conducted biennially for monitoring the progress made under SWAP,

Due to SWAP, no donor can, theoretically, push its agendas separately; rather they are compelled to fit their respective agendas into the overarching programme. In reality, the DPs have remained dominant players in the policy process. Findings from interviews conducted for this study, point to the gaps between the existing national capacity and the SWAP's required capacity to design policy and programme. SWAP calls for a higher level of capacity in decision making – especially relating to planning, prioritising and performance monitoring. It also called for a capacity for high-level policy dialogue with the development partners, which the government lacks. Presently, national capacity to negotiate with the development partners is not backed up by departmental ownership and sector specialisation by staffing the Ministry and the Directorate with strictly career primary education bureaucrats, as elaborated in an interview with the authors by an education cadre who is working in the Directorate of Primary Education.

Avenues to transfer ideas in primary education system

The development partners have utilised two platforms – one is international and another is local – to influence the primary education sector of Bangladesh. The international avenue to push policy agenda in primary education are the international conferences. Among a watershed of conferences, three international gatherings have been the most influential in shaping the country's policies for primary education. First was the World Conference on Education for All, held at Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990. This conference reawakened external cooperation for universal primary education in developing countries in context of a school enrollment decline in basic education during the 1980s (Alexander 2001). The conveners of this conference were the World Bank, Unicef, Unesco and UNDP; all were working under the United Nations (UN) mandate and the participants were all the developing countries' governments across the globe. Thereafter, two major global education policies were adopted in 2000, namely

Dakar Framework of Action and the Millennium Development Goals.

Global initiatives through conferences result in common understanding about the policy priorities between the aid recipient country and the aid lending agencies and thus, paving the easier way of policy transfer. For instance, the Jomtien Conference made declarations on the attainment of universal primary education by 2000, five additional undertakings on other aspects of access to education and the affirmation of the quality of primary education. Similarly, the UN Millennium declarations set specific targets to be achieved by 2015. As a signatory to these declarations, Bangladesh reciprocated these targets in its subsequent plans and programmes (see Table 1).

Table 1: Influence of international declarations on national policies

International Goals/Targets	Their imitation in national policies
World Conference on Education for All (EFA) (Jomtien, 1990) EFA Goals: Goal 1: Universal access to learning; Goal 2: A focus on equity; Goal 3: Emphasis on learning outcomes; Goal 4: Broadening the means and the scope of basic education; Goal 5: Enhancing the environment for learning; and Goal 6: Strengthening partnerships by 2000.	Compulsory Primary Education Act 1990: Compulsory primary education programme introduced in 68 Upazilas in 1992 and was expanded all over the country in 1993. A separate Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) was created in 1992. National Plan of Action-I 1991-2000: its aim was “to enhance both their quantitative and qualitative dimensions and also take up other feasible supportive programmes to attain the EFA 2000 targets” successfully. The actions proposed in the NPA I would “be dealt with two broad programme categories, (a) Primary Education and (b) Mass Education”.

World Education Forum (Dakar, 2000) Dakar Framework of Action Goal 1: Expand early childhood care and Education; Goal 2: Provide free and compulsory primary education for all; Goal 3: Promote learning and life skills for young people and adults; Goal 4: Increase adult literacy by 50 percent; Goal 5: Achieve gender parity by 2005, Gender quality by 2015; and Goal 6: Improve the quality of education.	National Plan of Action-II 2003-2015: its aim is that all primary school-age children (6-10 years), boys and girls, including ethnic minorities, disadvantaged and disabled, should be enrolled and successfully completing the primary cycle and achieving quality education by considering the gender equality. Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) was upgraded into a full-fledged ministry in 2003. Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) October, 2005: It was an eight point strategic agenda where the third point was on Quality Education (particularly in primary, secondary and vocational levels with strong emphasis on girls' education) .
The Millennium Declaration, (UN, 2000) Millennium Development Goals Goal 1: Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; Goal 2: Achieving universal primary education; Goal 3: Promoting gender equality and empowering women; and Goal 8: Developing a global partnership for Development.	

The local avenue of the DPs' policy influence has been their leading role in the design of three primary education development programmes. PEDP1 was prepared with the assistance of Japanese Grant administered by IDA, and this programme was implemented by the DPs and Government through 27 projects during 1997-2002. Before the expiring of the PEDP1 the Government requested the ADB to start the preparation of PEDP2. At the same time, a few other development partners wanted to take part in this programme preparation. Accordingly, Technical Assistance team of ADB and additional TA provided by Netherlands, Norway, EU, Unicef and IDA jointly prepared PEDP2 for five years (2003-2008) at an estimated cost of US\$ 2.3 billion. The World Bank (2011) reported that Government's participation in this programme preparation was limited. The programme lacked participation of key implementing line units of DPE, and was pushed for accelerated approval without adequate preparation; avoided tough policy issues and accepted high failure risk; and included a large number of non-prioritised actions (WB 2011). As continuation of the DPs' support in programme design, the government received a TA of US\$ 9.9 million from the ADB for preparing the third primary education development programme in 2009.

Similar to the sector development programme design, there was inadequate involvement of the Government in preparation of the Macro Plan (MP). It was prepared largely by external, international consultants (engaged by ADB) and published in

July 2002. The Government adopted and endorsed this plan in January 2003. The Plan outlined the objectives of primary education and provided an overarching policy framework, strategies, and implementation plan, to be carried out under PEDP2. As part of the MP, a stipend programme was instituted which targeted at the poorest 40% of enrolled primary school students, estimated at the time to number over four million annually (WB 2004; WB 2011).

What have been transferred in primary education system?

The development partners' engagement through either international forums or the country's programme design and implementation has introduced various policy ideas in the primary education system. It can be said more precisely that the World Bank and the ADB's involvement in programme design and implementation implies large-scale

policy influence. Generally, their support is intended to help stimulate constructive change since the respective Board of Directors approves a loan or grant when the recipient country can sufficiently stimulate the intended change of the loan or grant (Heyneman 1999). Hence, it was not just financial support that the DPs brought on board, as they were also instrumental in influencing certain policy directives with far-reaching consequences. Table 2 clusters the interventions adopted within the frameworks of PEDPs.

Table 2: Program interventions to develop primary education in Bangladesh

Interventions	PEDP1 (1997-2002)	PEDP2 (2004-11)	PEDP3 (2011/12-15/16)
Equitable access to quality education	Block grants to schools to support the provision of stationery to the poorest students Social mobilisation	Enhance institutional capacity of DPE at central and local levels to promote inclusive education Improve primary school access and retention for disadvantaged children through stipends	Second chance and alternative education Pre primary Mainstreaming inclusive education Education in emergencies Communication and social mobilisation Targeted stipends School health and school feeding School physical environment

Quality improvement in schools and classrooms	Teacher development, school supervision and school cluster-based training Improving teaching and learning	Improve learning environment through provision of new classrooms, better quality textbooks, and an additional 35,000 teachers Improve the quality of pre-service and in-service teacher training; Community participation and support for raising quality standards in primary schools	Shikhe Protiti Shishu [Each Child Learns]: School and classroom based assessment Strengthening curriculum and textbooks Textbook production and distribution ICT in education Teacher education and development
Organisational development and capacity building	Strengthening National Academy of Primary Education (NAPE) and National Curriculum Textbook Board (NCTB) Strengthening institutional capacity at the national level and at the district, upazila and school levels	Capacity of the MoPME and the DPE Education Management Information System (EMIS) capacity; Field capacity at divisional, district and upazila levels Organisational and management capacity at school level	Strengthen field-level offices Organisational review and strengthening PEDP3 management and governance PEDP3 financial management Sector finance Strengthen monitoring functions Human resource development Public-private partnerships (PPP) Need based infrastructure development
Infrastructure development	Construction of new schools and additional classrooms	Quality improvement through infrastructure development	

Source: Based on WB 2011; WB 2004; GoB 2011

Two trends can be drawn from Table 2. Firstly, the changes have been mostly incremental. Quality education and participation in schools have been incrementally emphasised in PEDPs, along with the undertaking of some innovative elements to ensure the effectiveness of primary education in the country. Secondly, the sector did not experience any policy reversal during the implementation period of PEDPs. One intervention implemented in a programme has been carried on in the next programmes. For example, social mobilisation was undertaken in PEDP1 to promote equitable access to quality education, which is retaken in PEDP3 for the same purpose. Likewise, a decentralisation framework was explored and developed in PEDP2 for raising the quality standards in primary schools and this framework has been identified as part of a comprehensive devolution plan and planned to be expanded in PEDP3. Box 1 explains the decentralisation framework, developed under PEDP2.

External influence and national ownership

The foregoing discussions demonstrate that the country drew policy agenda from international initiatives; but, when the global commitments and frameworks were translated into actions at national level the leading role was played by the DPs. Government's capacity to show stewardship in project design and implementation has been overrated in paper so far. For example, the responsibility of coordinating the implementation of the discrete projects of the PEDP1 was bestowed upon the then Primary and Mass Education Division (PMED) (renamed as ministry since 2 January 2003). In practice, the IDA supervision team took the lead in refining and finalising data collection, analysis and reporting on key performance indicators (KPIs) of PEDP1 (WB 2004). DPs' dominant postures continued in PEDP2 and PEDP3 as explained in detail in previous section. This raises questions about government's leadership in educational development policies. Lack of national policy ownership weakens ministerial accountability to the government or the parliament.

Box 1: Decentralised planning and implementation at school level

A decentralisation framework was developed under PEDP2 for effective and efficient service delivery and community involvement. Within this framework, the planning function was decentralised at the school level with the implementation of the school-level improvement plan (SLIP) in 316 *upazilas* (ADB 2008). Under SLIP, a three-year development plan including specific allocations and implementation time-frames were prepared for the concerned school, by the school itself and submitted to the Upazila Education Officer (UEO) for the approval. A SLIP school received a grant of BDT 20,000 from the government and explored community subventions to implement the plan and thereby creating a platform for a collective initiative for school development.

With emphasis on teaching and learning, SLIP funds were spent for achievement awards for students, class room management, teaching and learning aids, school dress for poor students, small-scale infrastructure repairing (electrical wiring, fitting fans, etc.), sports equipments, and extra-care of weaker students through appointing *para-teachers* and specialised teaching materials. These heads of expenditures altogether contribute to creating a school environment more attractive than the children's homes, resulting in an increase

in school attendance and an improvement in quality of learning. In addition, the introduction of SLIP brought about, through the evolve of the concept of planning at the school level, a bottom-up approach to planning and development, need based expenditures to enhance teaching and learning, and an institutionalised community involvement for school development.

Three reasons can broadly be identified for evolving this successful decentralisation at the school level. Firstly, community's own interest and its previous experience have induced them to support the primary schools under the auspices of SLIP. These schools serve the community's children. Historically, primary schools were local or community based institutions, even when receiving government funding (Sobhan 1998). Secondly, the standard resistance to reforms from the teacher community and/or bureaucrats did not occur, since the introduction of SLIP did not curtail their existing authority. Rather, SLIP involved them in the planning process by redefining their roles, as, the Head Teacher was made SLIP Committee's Member Secretary and the *Upazila* Education Officer was made SLIP's approving authority. Thirdly, since 1997 a sequence in undertaking development programmes was maintained in the Education Sector, leading to a better understanding of carrying out reforms between the government and the DPs.

Could the country reverse this trend? Three factors can be identified which made the country dependent on the development partners on the one hand and facilitated the latter to influence the sector on the other end. First of all, the country needs external financial support to develop its education sector. The government had to spend 96.7% of its educational allocations for teacher salaries in primary schools

(Behrman et al. 2002). This meant that very little national resources remained to fund primary educational development, and it created a legacy of the country's dependency on external funding. Table 3 demonstrates the proportional development costs of the government and the DPs in the four largest project/programmes in terms of aid, loans, and grants.

Table 3. Sharing project/programme costs by Government of Bangladesh and development partners

Name of project/programme	Total cost in US\$	GoB's contributions in US\$	Donors' contributions in US\$
General Education Project (GEP)/1991-96	335.51 million	68.89 million (20.53%)	266.62 million (79.47 %)
Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP)/1997-2002	2762.78 million	2010.78 million (72.22 %)	752.00 million (27.78 %)
Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP2)/2004-11	1815.00 million	1161.00 million (64 %)	654.00 million (36 %)
Third Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP3)/2011-2016	7357.93 million	6302.43 million (85.65%)	1055.50 million (14.35 %)

Source: GoB 1996; GoB 2003; ADB 2011b; GoB 2011

The DPs' share nose-dived from around 80 % in 1991-96 to 15 % in 2011-16. Although the government's allocations increased remarkably, its counterpart fund (i.e. ratio of the funding for the same activity) is less than that of the development partners. These funds aim to introduce critical changes in the education system such as introduction of decentralisation framework at school.

PEDP2's allocations can be explained as an example of the DPs' higher costs bearing. This programme was implemented with a cost of US\$ 1,815 million. Of this amount, eleven DPs contributed US\$ 685.2 million including both loans and grants. The remaining US\$ 1161 million was financed by the government (ADB 2011b). GoB's share comprised of US\$ 864 million (74.42%) for the stipends project and only US\$ 297 (25.58%) as counterpart funds. Similar was in case of PEDP1. A comparison of counterpart funding in PEDP1 and PEDP2 between the government and the DPs is illustrated in Figure 1.

Japanese Grant Fund and IDA's assistance to formulate a broad based programme for overall development of primary education. Additionally, extensive training was given to staff in procurement and financial management within PEDP1. Seven targeted TA, based on needs assessment, will be provided to strengthen capacity for effective implementation of PEDP3 (WB 2004; ADB 2011a). However, high staff turnover undermined the impact of these capacity building and institutional development interventions. A significant proportion of the people who had been involved in implementing the General Education Project were no longer at their positions during preparation and implementation of PEDP1. In addition, four officers succeeded the helm of Secretary Position of the MoPME during PEDP1, which resulted in unsatisfactory programme implementation performance despite the commitment by Government (WB 2004).

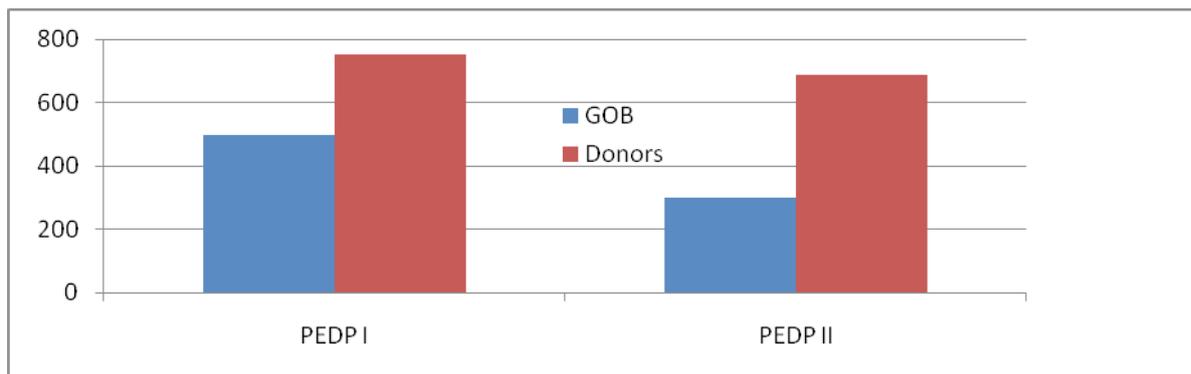


Figure 1: Counterpart funding of government and development partners in PEDP1 & PEDP2

Secondly, the public sector is beset with deficiencies in terms of capacity to set policy direction for primary education system. To overcome these deficiencies, the government receive technical assistance from the DPs. ADB's US\$ 9.9 million grants to the Bangladesh government in 2009 to prepare the primary education sector development programme is an instance of the DPs' continuous appearances in the policy and programme design (ADB 2008). This technical assistance engaged both national and international consultants.

Almost all projects and programmes consistently put emphasis on enhancing the government's capacity to prepare and implement national plans and programmes. For example, a Project Preparation Cell (PPC) was established in 1994 with

Finally, vested interests and lack of political consensus regarding national education policy formulation and implementation facilitated the external policy influence in the sector. The need for a comprehensive national education policy has been voiced repeatedly, but this goal remained elusive. Attempts were made by different political regimes to have an education policy for the nation, which can be seen through formation of a commission by one regime and scraping its recommendations by the following regime. Before 2009, a total of eight committees or commissions were formed and reports were produced; however, none was fully implemented (Rabbi 2006).

At last, after three decades of independence, the country had

a National Education Policy (NEP) in 2000, approved by the Parliament. However, with a change of government following the national elections in 2001, it was anticipated the fate of NEP as uncertain (Japan Bank for International Cooperation [JBIC] 2002). The new government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party which replaced the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) in 2001 national elections, scrapped the 2000 policy and instead, formed a commission led by the former Dhaka University Vice Chancellor Professor Muniruzzaman Mian in February 2003 (Jubere 2004).

Again, after coming to power in December 2008 national elections, the Awami League Government formed an 18-member Education Commission to draft the new education policy without reviving the earlier one. Based on their recommendations the **National Education Policy 2010** was passed in Parliament in June 2010 (Institute of Governance Studies [IGS] 2010). Nevertheless, the absence of main opposition party in the passing of the Policy in the Parliament does not guarantee the policy be taken up by the opposition if it comes to power in the future.

In absence of a broader education policy at the national level, home-grown reforms have also faced resistance from the vested interest groups. In 2008 the interim non-party government decided to leave the task of improving the functioning of primary schools in 20 *upazilas* to the Brac on a pilot basis. This idea came to naught on the opposition from the teachers' community (Haque 2009). In this context characterised by national dependency for external resources, capacity constraints and a long-standing vacuum and uncertainty in the relevant national policy and resistance by the vested interest groups to any attempt to replicate and consolidate a local model the remaining players have been most notably the development partners, who gradually intervened and assumed a key role.

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show how the policy processes of the primary education sector have been influenced significantly by development partners. They played key role in project design and performance monitoring. Because of the introduction of SWAp in the education sector the development partners could have enhanced delegated cooperation in key areas of monitoring and oversight, including joint fiduciary oversight of PEDP2 by ADB and PEDP3 by the ADB and the World Bank.

Development partners' leading role in policy processes has been triggered more by a lack of capacity in the government to design policy and programmes for the primary education sector, a long policy vacuum and a lack of national consensus on policy issues across the political parties, and resistance by the vested interest groups to local reforms. DPs' influence in the education policy space has weakened national ownership, and this questions sustainability of educational achievements and their further improvements. Thus, the key challenge is to strengthen country ownership of policy and leadership in aid management. The Government should take primary responsibility to design policies and programmes. While formulating national policy and preparing plans and programs national expertise needs to be explored and utilized. Also, there is a need for building capacity within state representatives to negotiate with the development partners. This capacity would also need to be backed up by departmental ownership and sector specialisation by staffing the Ministry and the Directorate with strictly career Primary Education bureaucrats. When government demonstrates the capacity to design its own policy agendas, this capacity should be a basis for accessing aid.

Access to aid is not solely linked with policy capacity; it depends also on the governance of the sector. In this context, a key recommendation is to continue the decentralisation framework namely SLIP with adequate budget support and authority.

Finally, Bangladesh is home to many development innovations and models developed by non-government organisations (NGOs). There is much to gain by leveraging the learning and experiences of the non-profit sector. A partnership framework relating to quality improvement functions at school level between the public sector and NGOs needs to be devised. However, it is essential that the framework spells out in clear terms the roles and responsibilities of the key actors and lays out the terms of contracting in a transparent manner.

Providing education for all is a challenging mission for any government, especially so in the case of Bangladesh. Despite the varying interests and political differences amongst the numerous stakeholders associated with the policy making process, the ultimate goal is to provide citizens with better education. This can very well be a good common starting point for aligning the different and apparently conflicting stakeholder interests.

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