

Education Watch 2009-10



Exploring Low Performance in Education
The Case of Sylhet Division



Overview

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**Exploring Low Performance in Education
The Case of Sylhet Division**

Overview of the Main Report

Research Team

Samir Ranjan Nath

Md. Mahbubul Kabir

Kazi Saleh Ahmed

Goutam Roy

Awlad Hossain

S. M. Nurul Alam

Fazlul Karim Chowdhury

Amina Mahbub

Reviewers

Manzoor Ahmed

Kazi Fazlur Rahman

Jowshan Ara Rahman

Roushan Jahan

Ahmed Al- Kabir

Editors

A. M. R. Chowdhury

Rasheda K. Choudhury

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Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE)

Contact address

Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE), Bangladesh

5/14 Humayun Road, Mohammadpur, Dhaka 1207

Phone: 9130427, 8155031, 8155032

E-mail: info@campebd.org

Website: www.campebd.org

Overview

A. Background

Bangladesh has made progress in various arena of socio-economic development since its Independence in 1971. Such progress has been possible due to continuous and collective effort of common people, the government and the development partners. However, sadly, after four decades of Independence, a high rate of poverty with huge income and wealth inequalities are the realities.

Education is a key to address the challenges of development. The country has improved much in various aspects of educational attainment. Major improvement has occurred during the past two decades. An unfortunate feature of educational development in the country, however, is the inequity. Inequities exist in terms of school type, streams of education, geographical locations and socioeconomic status. Coexistence of development and inequity does not match with the spirit of our Constitution or the new Education Policy 2010. Elimination of inequity from education in Bangladesh is urgently needed. In-depth studies are required to understand the nature of such inequities, formulate policies for an equitable educational provision and proper implementation of such policies.

Geographically, Sylhet division is a low performing region. This study explored the reasons behind the slow progress of Sylhet division in school education. This can be considered as a case study on Sylhet division in the broader context of regional deprivation in education.

B. The Sylhet Division

Sylhet division is located in the North-East corner of Bangladesh. It has an area of about 12,596 Sq. Km. with about nine million population. It has 8.5% of the total land area and 6.4% of the total population of Bangladesh. Whereas 23% of the country's population live in urban areas, it is 12.5% in Sylhet division. Distinct from other areas of the country, Sylhet is characterized by its diversity in social, economic and geographical outlines. Of the total land, plain land covers 57.5%, haor 30.2% and tea estates/forest/hilly areas 12.5%.

Sylhet is more prosperous and rich in terms of natural resources and general economic condition of the population but has worst social outcomes. Whereas, 40% of the population live below poverty line at the national level, it is 33.8% in Sylhet division. The division has the lowest human development index. In terms of health indicators it has the highest U5 mortality and fertility rates, and lowest rates of immunization. Historically, Sylhet has a huge number of its population living abroad. Approximately 5% of the households in Sylhet division depend mainly on such remittances.

In Sylhet, the net enrolment rate is 80.5% at primary level and 64.2% at secondary level. Both the figures are much lower than the national averages of 86.4% and 77.7% respectively. Similarly, in terms of ever schooled population and the rate of primary and secondary education completers, Sylhet division lag much behind the national average as well as other parts of the country. Sylhet is a worse performer in terms of literacy rate too. The literacy rate for 7+ population is 40.7% and for adult population it is 44.4%. These rates are respectively 48.5% and 52.1% for the whole Bangladesh. There is no literate person in 30.8% of the households in Sylhet division compared to 21.5% for the whole country.

Educational situation of Sylhet division in comparison with national scenario

Indicator	Bangladesh	Sylhet	Index
NER among children aged 6-10 yrs.	86.4	80.5	92.5
NER rate among children aged 11-15 yrs.	77.7	64.2	83.6
% of ever schooled population (6y+)	67.2	61.4	79.0
% of primary completers (11y+)	51.3	43.1	70.2
% of secondary completers (15y+)	14.3	7.1	35.4
Literacy rate (7y+)	48.5	40.7	66.6
Adult literacy rate (15y+)	52.1	44.4	73.0
% of HHs with at least one literate person	78.5	69.2	90.1

NER = Net enrolment rate, HH = Household

The highest values of the first two indicators occurred in rural Khulna division and the rest in the metropolitan cities.

Source: CAMPE, 2009

The above description of Sylhet division clearly shows a paradoxical situation: a relatively good economic condition

but worsening social indicators. Though the findings of the earlier studies of *Education Watch* revealed the paradox, no detailed analysis was possible due to study focus and unavailability of data. This is alarming and deserves special attention. The *Education Watch* thus decided to explore the reasons behind such a backward situation of Sylhet in education.

C. Objectives and Methods

The major research question was why the Sylhet division is lagging behind the other parts of the country in various educational indicators? What are the constraints (social, economic, regional, environmental, migration-related, faith-based, etc.) that put Sylhet behind other divisions? Why these constraints prevail and how these can be addressed?

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were adopted in achieving the above research objectives. Much of the quantitative information for the study came through three surveys, viz., a household survey, an educational institution survey and a community-level survey. Under educational institution survey, both primary and secondary educational institutions were covered. For the qualitative part of the investigation, four communities (villages in rural areas and *mahallas* in urban areas) from four different locations were selected and in-depth exploration was done on various issues related to education. In addition, available official statistics was used to supplement the qualitative and quantitative information.

The sampling was designed in such a way that separate estimates are possible for the five strata of interest (four rural districts and the urban areas). Proportional allocation of sample was ensured for three distinct spots in each stratum, viz., plain lands, *haor* areas and tea estates/hills/forests. Primary data were collected from randomly picked 344 communities, 7,498 households and 254 educational institutions. The Community Series of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and list of educational institutions maintained by the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE) and

Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) were used as sampling frame. Fifty-six in-depth interviews, 12 focus group discussions, 64 case studies and eight observations comprised the pool of data for qualitative analysis. For the latter, various types of informants were interviewed using 15 different checklists. The fieldwork for the study was done in March-April 2010.

D. Major Findings

This study explored various issues related to household, educational institution and community. Multiple as well as interrelated factors were found responsible for lower performance of Sylhet division. The reasons are hardly unique in the sense that these also exist for other parts of the country. However, the level and degree of importance of some of the reasons were different in Sylhet compared to the rest of the country. These are particularly due to socio-geographical characteristics of this division.

Geography

Haor and tea estates are two significantly different geographical locations in Sylhet division where housing, transportation and livelihoods are significantly worse from

Net enrolment rate by stratum, location and age group

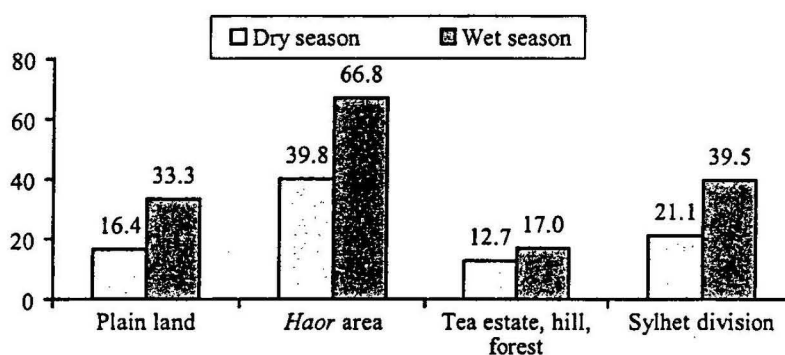
Stratum/location	Age group		
	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-18 years
Stratum			
Rural Sylhet	83.6	67.0	75.8
Rural Sunamganj	80.6	64.1	73.7
Rural Habiganj	82.0	68.1	76.0
Rural Moulvibazar	81.7	65.3	73.9
Urban areas	86.6	68.1	77.9
Location			
Plain lands	83.8	69.0	77.0
<i>Haor</i> areas	82.4	62.8	74.0
Tea estates	70.6	57.6	64.4
Hills	89.3	66.3	78.5
Forests	79.0	62.8	71.5
All Sylhet	82.4	66.3	75.0
National	86.4	77.7	82.4

Source: Education Watch Household Survey, 2010

other parts of the division and the country. Seasonal variations also exist in these. This study reveals that except urban part of Sylhet division, school enrolment rate was behind the national average in all the districts and locations. The rate was far behind in the tea estates and in Sunamganj and Moulvibazar districts. Rural Sunamganj is largely covered by haors and rural Moulvibazar by tea estates.

The children in these areas are unable to continue education smoothly mainly due to economic deprivation and social inequalities arising from their geographical isolation. Although the overall economic situation is better than the rest of Bangladesh, there is a likelihood that due to the geographical reasons the inequality in income distribution (in terms of Gini coefficient, for example) would be worse in Sylhet. Compared to 38.5% overall in Sylhet division, more than half of the *haor* communities (54%) under study had only *kancha* roads. The head teachers reported that over a fifth of the students had to face 'bad' transportation during dry season which doubled in the wet season. The situation was worse in rural Sunamganj and in the *haor* areas. Qualitative investigation found the practice of child labour as a major reason for dropping out from schools.

Percentage of primary students facing transportation difficulty by location and season



Source: Education Watch Educational Institution Survey, 2010

Late start and early dropout

Children of Sylhet division, in general, start school late compared to other parts of the country; they also drop out

earlier than others. The age-specific enrolment rates in Sylhet division were found lower for all ages compared to the national averages. Whereas, at the national level 65% of the children of age six was found enrolled in schools, it was 52% in Sylhet division. A portion of the parents reported that they were not aware about age of admission to school and a portion could not mention any reason for this. Schools also refused admission to some children. By the age of 15 years, half of the children of the plain lands, 60% of those of *haor* areas and 73% of those in the tea estates/hills/forests were out-of-school. The comparative national figure was less than 40%. A portion of them were just unable to bear cost of education and others engaged in income earning activities too early. Poor teaching-learning provision and lack of care in schools were identified as important reasons for leaving school.

Age specific net enrolment rate

Age (years)	Plain areas	Haor areas	Tea estate hills/forests	Sylhet division	National average 2008
6	50.5	55.2	52.3	52.1	65.0
7	86.5	82.2	79.6	84.3	85.5
8	92.7	92.2	90.1	92.4	93.3
9	94.0	92.2	89.4	93.0	94.5
10	89.6	87.7	84.2	88.4	92.1
11	89.5	85.4	86.5	88.1	90.8
12	78.5	70.9	74.2	75.7	83.9
13	71.0	65.1	65.6	68.7	80.4
14	53.6	53.7	45.6	52.8	71.9
15	49.2	39.2	27.4	43.5	61.9

Source: Education Watch Household Survey, 2010

Community awareness

The parents were found appreciating the value of education but when they, particularly the poor, weighed it against economic opportunity costs the latter prevailed in many cases. We thus found a high incidence of child labour, both paid and unpaid. Added to this is the lure of migrating to a foreign country, especially UK, for better livelihood. The heads of the educational institutions also identified 'lack of awareness' of the parents as a barrier to educational progress in Sylhet division.

Educational facilities

Compared to the other parts of the country, per capita availability of primary level educational institutions in Sylhet division was not less but it was not the case for secondary education. Against 6.4% of the student population at both the levels, Sylhet division contained 7.8% of the primary level institutions and 3.9% of the secondary level institutions in the country. This clearly shows inadequacy of secondary education provision in Sylhet; which indicates lower institutional investments in education. Infrastructure of the educational institutions and learning opportunities there play important role in the performance of the students. The primary educational institutions in Sylhet division were found behind the other parts of the country in majority of the indicators related to school facilities and learning opportunities. On the other hand, in case of secondary education, institutions in Sylhet division were mostly compatible to those in other parts of the country. Primary educational institutions in Sylhet division lacked electricity and drinking water facilities, play grounds, cleanliness of walls and floors, and good quality blackboards. It also lacked secondary science laboratories.

The teachers, their absenteeism and punctuality

Whether it is a primary or a secondary school, shortage of teacher was a common phenomenon in the schools of Sylhet division. Average number of teachers was 4.4 in the primary schools and 12.8 in the secondary schools. The corresponding figures at the national level were 5.1 and 14.3. However, the teachers in Sylhet division were comparable to the other parts of the country in terms of educational qualification and training. Proportion of female teachers was also better in Sylhet. A quarter of the rural school teachers lived in urban areas.

Absenteeism, and late arrival in and early departure from school – all are significantly higher among the school teachers in Sylhet division. On the day of the survey, 21.6% of the primary school teachers and 12.4% of the secondary school teachers were absent from school. These were higher than the national averages. The situation was found at its worst at

primary level, especially in rural Sunamganj, Habiganj and Moulvibazar districts. Over a quarter of these teachers were found absent. Females and teachers in schools of *haor* areas were more likely to be absent.

Very few of the teachers who attended in school on the counting day were punctual as a good number of them attended school late and/or departed early. The problem was more serious at primary level. The average loss of time for this was 56 minutes per day for primary teachers and 48 minutes for secondary teachers. Primary school teachers in the *haor* areas and in Sunamganj district were least punctual. Average loss of

Average loss time (minute) per day per teacher

Sunam/location/gender	Primary teachers	Secondary teachers
Stratum		
Rural Sylhet	66	70
Rural Sunamganj	80	44
Rural Habiganj	56	58
Rural Moulvibazar	41	27
Urban areas	42	47
Location		
Plain land	50	51
Haor area	76	38
Tea estate/forest/hill	34	-
Gender		
Females	54	47
Males	60	49
All	56	48

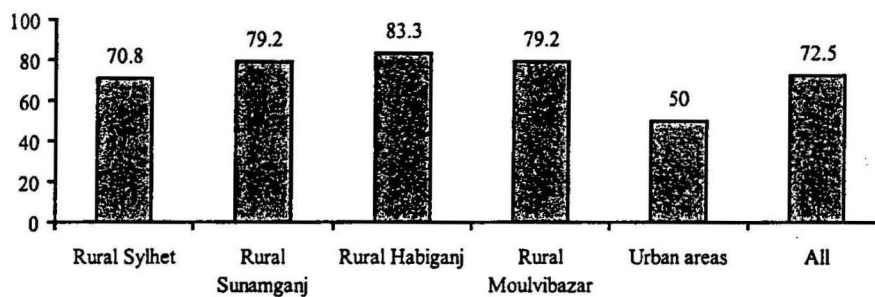
Source: Education Watch Educational Institution Survey, 2010

time per day was 76 minutes for *haor* teachers and 80 minutes for Sunamganj teachers. The male teachers were ahead of their female counterparts in terms of loss of time. The qualitative study also confirmed that only a few teachers attended school on time and stayed there for the entire duration. A good amount of contact-hours is lost due to this which affects classroom teaching, co-curricular activities and students' behaviour.

Management weakness

School managing committees and the *upazila* education officials were less pro-active in addressing the key issues of school operation. Some educational institutions were not visited at all throughout a year or visited once or twice which is inadequate to meet the needs of the institutions. Visit from the *upazila* resource centres was also very limited— 72.5% of the primary schools had no visit during 2009. Scanning the meeting minutes of the school managing committees, we did not find any record of discussion of teachers' discipline. The *upazila* education officials put it on their agenda but could not track it and take any effective actions. School visits were mostly superficial. Issues discussed in those visits were not directly linked to identification of practical barriers related to quality of education or how to overcome those barriers. Shortage of officials was found a major constraint in school supervision.

Percentage of schools had no visit from URC by stratum



Source: Education Watch Educational Institution Survey, 2010

Non-resident Bangladeshi households

Non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB) are important source of earning in Sylhet division. About a fifth of the surveyed households were identified as connected with non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB). Majority of them sent remittances to their kith and kin back home during the year prior to the survey. Fifty-two percent of the remittances was used to meet day-to-day family expenses and construction and reconstruction of houses. Amount of NRB remittances spent on education was 3.7% of the total remittance. A part of the remittance also went to fund madrasas, mosques and schools.

A very small portion of the donation was for general education. Again, in terms of amount of donation, the madrasas got priority. We also observed that having NRB member in the household had positive impact on school enrolment of the children; however, such impact was limited to primary education. It can thus be said that the remittance could better be utilized for education of the children of NRB households as well as for educational development of the common people.

Migrant households

An issue often mentioned concerning Sylhet division is migration. However, we did not find it as a serious problem which could influence social or educational progress of the division. Of the total households in Sylhet division, 5.3% came from outside Sylhet division, 3.6% migrated from one part to another within the division and 91.1% were non-migrants or permanent residents. In terms of school enrolment the migrants and non-migrants (permanent residents) performed equally well. However, those who migrated from one part to another within the division lagged much behind the previous two groups. Such a relationship was found throughout the schooling years (6-15 years).

Role of madrasas

Madrasas have important place in our education system. Incidence of children enrolled in madrasa education was found more in Sylhet division compared to other places in Bangladesh. Enrolment in non-graded madrasas like *kaomi* and *kharizi* was found more in Sylhet division. Parental wish to provide their children with madrasa education due to its link with religion was found as one of the major reasons for enrolment in the madrasas. Some parents perceived that madrasas provided better quality education and to some it was the closest educational institution available. The permanent residents, NRB households and the mothers with incomplete primary education were more likely to send their children to the madrasas.

Educational investment

Although per capita availability (say, number of schools per 1000 school aged children) was not less for primary schools in

Sylhet, it was significantly less for secondary schools, compared to the rest of the country. While Sylhet has 6.4% of the school-aged children, it has only 3.9% of the secondary institutions. Our study also found that 42% of the villages had no primary schools at all. It is plausible that many of such villages are small villages without 'adequate' number of children. It was found that many of such villages are in areas inhabited predominantly by ethnic minorities.

E. Policy Recommendations

This study unfortunately failed to unearth any significantly unique factor that explained the poor progress in Sylhet. As much of the factors identified resonate quite well with the overall educational discourse nationally, the solution will also have to be found in the overall national strategies and priorities. The *Education Watch* studies of 2003/4, 2007 and 2008 identified inequity as a serious problem. Recommendations made in these studies to tackle inequity in education are also very much relevant to Sylhet division. Reinforcement of present policies would perhaps help the division progress faster.

- Considering the broad geographical diversity of Sylhet division and variations within, a general principle of educational development strategy would possibly not fit for the whole region. Recognising the fact and the principle of equity mentioned in the Education Policy 2010 it is important to flag on decentralized educational planning and implementation. Educational institutional level planning as part of broader *upazila* level planning for educational development through some guiding principle of the government should urgently be considered. Involvement of tea-estate management in the planning process is important for the tea estates.
- Children of *haor* areas are at risk of not attending schools due to unique geographical reality there, which has different effects in dry and wet seasons. To help the children improvement of the transportation system is urgent. However, construction of roads would not be feasible throughout the *haor* areas. Considering the mode and strength of water flow during wet season new roads can

be constructed wherever possible and existing roads can be reconstructed. Special water bus services for the students and teachers can be introduced specifically during the wet seasons in haor areas.

- Various affirmative actions that the government and the NGOs have undertaken already can be expanded in some parts of Sylhet division. These include stipend and cash for education programmes of the government and non-formal education provision of the NGOs. Volume of *upabritti* and secondary school stipend programme can be expanded in those communities where enrolment rate is poor and early dropout is high. Most communities in the *haor* areas in rural Sunamganj and Habiganj districts and the tea estates in Moulvibazar district deserve such incentives. This would help reducing economic vulnerability of the households and encourage them to send children to school and continue education.
- Supervision of schools is in general weak in Bangladesh especially due to overburdened supervisor such as assistant *upazila* education officers (AUEO). Sylhet is not different. It is important to appoint more AUEOs in all *upazilas* of Sylhet division especially in the remote and hard to reach *upazilas*. The aim of this should be to give responsibility of a small (12-15) number of schools to each of them so that they can increase their school visits and improve quality of supervision. Supervision from the *upazila* resource centres and by the school managing committees should also be increased. Focus of this should include teachers' regular attendance with punctuality and quality teaching-learning in the classrooms. The potential role of union parishads in this should be seriously considered.
- More teachers should be appointed in those schools where there is a shortage and the teachers should be encouraged to live nearer to the schools as much as possible. Teacher shortage can immediately be filled by appointing more temporary teachers from the local communities. Local teachers are particularly important for *haor* areas in Sunamganj and Habiganj districts. Special hardship allowance for the teachers working in the remote and hard to reach areas including the tea estates and hills can

be introduced. Motivational workshops for the teachers can also be arranged. Thailand has achieved success in keeping their doctors in rural areas by increasing the remuneration.

- Regular parent-teacher meetings can be organised at school level to make the parents more aware and responsive about education of their children and the teachers more responsible in their duty and accountable to the needs of the students. The school managing committees can also play important role in increasing the link between parents and the schools and accountability as a whole. *Upazila* education office has to play a strong role in this which can be done through allocating smaller number of schools, as mentioned earlier, to each AUEO and providing close supervision to them.
- More schools need to be established in the tea estates and in communities in remote haor areas where there is shortage of primary schools. If establishment of formal schools takes time, non-formal primary schools can be established as a temporary solution. The government can provide financial support to the experienced local and national NGOs and the private initiators to provide such facilities. Appointment of local teachers should be a must in these schools. The division has lesser number of secondary schools than its share of the school-aged children. The government should encourage setting up of such schools in large numbers to offset the disparity.
- A mechanism can be found out to encourage the non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB) to contribute more for educational development of Sylhet division. Space should be created so that a collective initiative can be taken. The government can initiate creating a special education fund for Sylhet division in which both the government and the NRBS can contribute. Government's contribution to this fund may encourage the NRBS. An autonomous authority rather than a government agency would do well in better utilization of this fund.

Finally, it is important to uphold the present gender parity in student participation and teachers recruitment.

Contributors

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed¹
 Ahsan Abdullah²
 Dr. Anwar Akash²
 Dr. Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad¹
 Brigadier General (Rtd) Aftab Uddin Ahmad¹
 Dr. Manzoor Ahmed^{1,5}
 Dr. Kazi Saleh Ahmed^{1,4}
 Zahin Ahmed¹
 Jasim Uddin Ahmed³
 Dr. Zaheda Ahmad¹
 Prof. Kafil Uddin Ahmed³
 Prof. Shafi Ahmed¹
 Dr. Syed Sadd Andaleeb¹
 Syeda Tahmina Akhter³
 Prof. S. M. Nurul Alam^{2,4}
 Dr. Mahmudul Alam²
 Prof. Md. Shafiul Alam²
 Kazi Rafiqul Alam¹
 Khondoker Shakhawat Ali²
 Prof. Muhammad Ali³
 Ruhul Amin³
 Mohammad Niaz Asadullah¹
 Prof. Ali Azam³
 Dr. Anwara Begum²
 Dr. Abbas Bhuiyan²
 Dr. A. M. R. Chowdhury^{1,6}
 Dr. Md. Fazlul Karim Chowdhury^{1,4}
 Subrata S. Dhar¹
 Nabendra Dahal¹
 Hasina Habib³
 Reshada K. Choudhury^{1,6}
 Dr. M. Anwarul Huque¹
 K. M. Enamul Hoque²
 Prof. M. Nazmul Haq²
 Dr. M. Shamsul Hoque³

Shamse Ara Hasan¹
 Md. Awlad Hossain^{3,4}
 Md. Mofazzal Hossain²
 Dr. Muhammad Ibrahim¹
 Prof. Md. Riazul Islam³
 Roushan Jahan^{2,5}
 Dr. Ahmed Al-Kabir¹
 Md. Mahbubul Kabir^{3,4}
 Nurul Islam Khan²
 Dr. Abu Hamid Latif¹
 Erum Mariam²
 Simeen Mahmood²
 Mohammad Mohsin²
 Dr. Ahmadullah Mia²
 Md. Wahiduzzaman Miah³
 Dr. Mustafa K. Mujeri¹
 Amina Mahbub^{3,4}
 Samir Ranjan Nath^{2,4}
 M. Ehsanur Rahman²
 Jowshan Ara Rahman^{1,5}
 Kazi Fazlur Rahman^{1,5}
 Prof. Mustafizur Rahman¹
 M. Habibur Rahman²
 A. N. S. Habibur Rahman³
 Dr. Siddiqur Rahman²
 Dr. M. Asaduzzaman¹
 Dr. M. Matiur Rahman³
 Abdur Rafiq²
 A. N. Rasheda¹
 Taleya Rehman¹
 Goutam Roy^{3,4}
 Prof. Rehman Sobhan¹
 Mohiuddin Ahmed Talukder²
 Mohammad Muntasim Tanvir²
 Dr. Mohammed Farashuddin¹
 A. M. M. Ahsan Ullah³

1. Advisory Board member
2. Working Group member
3. Technical Team member
4. Study Team member
5. Review Team member
6. Editorial Team member