

The Daily Star

BUDGET FY2018-19: HOW DOES EDUCATION FARE?

A problem of vision and strategic thinking

The proposed national budget for FY 2018-19 allocated 11.41 percentage of the total budget for education. Eresh Omar Jamal talks to Manzoor Ahmed, Professor Emeritus at BRAC University, about the budget allocation and the state of the sector in the country.

Eresh Omar Jamal

What is your reaction to the government allocating about 2 percent of GDP to the education sector in the proposed national budget?

In the education circle, the low share of GDP allocation for education in the national budget is a recurrent theme. Benchmark numbers in this respect are 6 percent of GDP and/or at least 20 percent of the national budget (depending on the public finance structure of the country) as recommended by UNESCO and at other international forums. Bangladesh's public spending for education is only about one-third by GDP measure and a little over half by national budget measure of what is recommended.

The FY2018-19 budget, with 2 percent of GDP and 11.4 percent of the total budget, sticks to the trend of low investment in education in recent years. In fact, taking the increase in enrolment into account and considering inflation that raises cost of goods and services, per student expenditure over the last decade has not increased.

Why is it not possible to break away from this low investment pattern and poor learning quality in education despite the rhetoric about the critical importance of human capital for our journey towards a middle-income status? There is a problem of vision and strategic thinking. The budget is not necessarily the instrument for overcoming this basic deficiency. It reflects what the education authorities, the two ministries of education, propose for their sector. What they ask for

is essentially some incremental change rather than any re-ordering of priorities and necessary restructuring of the education system. The ministries have to come up with reform ideas and persuasive arguments and logic for the changes to secure the support of the political decision-makers. They have not been able to do so.

The finance minister would be right in asking that if a substantial increase in education budget were to be made, what assurance is there that the funds would be well-spent and the pay-off would be realised? A significant amount, in fact, remains unspent every year as the allocations and actual spending show. For example, for FY17-18, the original allocated amount of 51.4 thousand crore taka has been revised downward to 46.7 thousand crore, a reduction of almost 10 percent.

Senior ministry officials have said in public forums that lack of funds is not their main problem. But it does not quite add up when the quality of education and the learning outcomes remain poor. And the lack of classrooms, learning materials, laboratories and libraries, and insufficient professional capability and dedication of teachers are lamented. Clearly, there is a capacity gap in the agencies which have to propose changes and ways of using resources effectively. If the barriers lie in the overall governance and policy-making beyond the education sector, the lead has to be taken by the education authorities to highlight and propose solutions to these problems.

From your long experience in the education sector, what would you say have been some of the biggest deficiencies in the budget in regard to the education sector?

The budget reflects the programmes and priorities proposed by the education authorities subject to negotiations about the total availability of public resources and their distribution for different sectors. The annual budget for a particular year by itself cannot show a major shift in direction, priorities and strategies, unless these are worked out in advance by the education authorities in collaboration with the major stakeholders. These also have to be sold to the political decision-makers, and have to be spelled out as part of a multi-year medium term planning. This is where, as noted above, the education authorities are failing to do what they are supposed to do.

The finance Minister said, "...we formulated our National Education Policy 2010 and embarked upon its implementation. We are relentlessly working with the aim to provide quality education for all through various programmes..."

In fact, in the eight years since the Education Policy was adopted, there has been no comprehensive planning to implement the policy. Piecemeal and disjointed actions have been taken from time to time, some of which even contradicted the policy. A case in point is the introduction of high-stake public examinations at the end of Class-V and VIII which compel students to rely on memorisation, private coaching and commercial notebooks. Other glaring examples are the failure to make progress on universalising education up to Class-VIII and implementing a core common curriculum for all basic education students and institutions.

With school education responsibility divided among three authorities—Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Ministry of Education, and the new Madrasa and Technical Education Division—there appears to be no mechanism for maintaining a holistic view of quality, relevance and equal opportunity for basic education for all children. The Education Policy recommendation for a permanent education commission to guide and monitor progress in implementing the policy has not been acted upon.

The Finance Minister, describing the “relentless work” in education, went on to list on-going activities—free textbooks, stipends for students, school feeding, construction and maintenance of infrastructures, drinking water in schools, pre-primary classes, “nationalisation” of schools, recruiting and training teachers, and so on. These are essential elements in any education system.

The new budget does not break any new ground for reform or provide the resources for a quality leap in the education system. The allocations barely keep up with the costs and numbers of students—there is not likely to be a change in per student public spending.

There is clearly a problem of planning, deciding priorities for allocations, and the capacity to manage spending. Teaching staff is the largest item of cost in education adding up to over 80 percent of the operating budget of education. We need to double the number of teachers in a short time to achieve reasonable student-teacher ratio. We need to have capable and qualified teachers for all the school subjects. Infrastructure, despite improvement, remains woefully inadequate. We need to make school a place of pride in every locality and community.

Serious decentralised planning and management with accountability along with rethinking of priorities for spending will lead to better spending and better outcome. The MPO (monthly pay order) mechanism for government assistance to schools has become riddled with corruption and inefficiency. A performance-based approach has to be tried out. These are questions still to be asked and their answers must be found.

What is your overall opinion of the education part of the budget and what advice would you give to the government to better address some of the issues we currently have?

Children who are in Class-I today will be in Class-XII, the final year of high school, in 2030. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4 out of 17 global SDGs) is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning for all by 2030. Where do we stand in reaching the education goals to which Bangladesh is committed?

The education part of the new budget does not offer any clue. Nor is it expected to do so unless the education strategy and priorities spell out what is to be done and how these are to be reflected in budget provisions. Education budget is not a substitute for sound education policy, strategy and plans. There has to be a process and a mechanism which allow the education authorities and other stakeholders to work collaboratively and systematically with a medium-term and a longer-term vision.

The assumptions, targets and implementation mechanisms of subsector plans now in the works for primary, secondary and non-formal education remain largely confined to present structures and patterns of planning and management. The system remains trapped in ineffective habits and practices. Formulation of national strategies and plans, based on SDG-4 objectives and targets, can be an opportunity to ask the right questions and act accordingly.