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Cohesive education is key to continued development



Textbooks can play a principal role in enhancing soft skills-based human capital. Star File Photo Aisha Binte Abdur Rob

From being dismissed as a "basket case" at birth to being hailed as a "development surprise" for some years now, there are few parallels to the Bangladeshi development success story thus far. However, in scaling new heights of economic growth, Bangladesh must find more footholds beyond garments exports and remittances. The need for a more competitive workforce translates to a demand for greater investments in human capital—and in the economy of the future, human capital will entail more than conventional hard skills. There is now a recognised need for building soft skills pertaining to social cohesion, which the education system is apt to inculcate in new generations of economic actors. Socially cohesive education is, therefore, an imperative for Bangladesh in achieving continued development.

The meteoric rise of Bangladesh's economy certainly traces a stunning developmental trajectory. However, as Bangladesh approaches the prospect of graduating from the "Least Developed Country" status in 2024, new challenges loom on the horizon. Not only will the economy have to grapple with the loss of substantial LDC privileges, it will also find itself pitted against stronger competitors. This transition is made more complex

and uncertain by the onset of the Fourth Industrial Revolution which portends transformative shifts in economies around the globe.

The World Bank's Development Update on Bangladesh (October 2019) underscores the importance of improving labour productivity and filling the current skills gap for maintaining the country's economic momentum. Thus, human capital will be key to Bangladesh's sustained economic growth in this new climate of possibilities and challenges. As stated by the World Bank's Country Director for Bangladesh and Bhutan, human capital development is now the critical stepping stone to realising Bangladesh's vision for growth.

The nexus between improved education and enhanced human capital is well-established in both development theory and practice. The policy emphasis on educating for human capital is also common across developed and developing countries. This rests on a strong evidentiary base that links improved schooling to increased earnings, better income distribution and overall economic growth. Therefore, in directing the future course of its development trajectory through investment in human capital, Bangladesh must renew the focus on education.

While there is remarkable progress in this regard in quantitative terms, as evidenced by consistently rising levels of primary and secondary enrolment (World Bank 2016), serious and persistent questions on quality have also arisen. For instance, research by Save the Children in 2018 revealed that 44 percent of first graders were unable to read their first word and 27 percent of third graders were reading without comprehension. Quality is now increasingly more important for Bangladesh; as Eric Hanushek's research demonstrates, it is the quality of education, more than educational attainment in quantitative terms, that enables developing countries to close the gap with developed countries in long-term economic performance.

Assessing education's role in building human capital requires an exploration of the evolved meaning of human capital in the contemporary global economic scene. According to the World Development Report 2019, enhanced human capital depends not only on improving the conventionally important hard skills, but also soft skills such as empathy and collaboration. There is a substantial body of research that makes these implicit links between education, social cohesion and economic growth more explicit.

In addition to transmitting knowledge and skills, education can make a vital contribution to economic growth through its role as a socialising force. As Mark Gradstein and Moshe Justman have argued, education can potentially diminish the costs of norm enforcement, by inculcating such norms through education, and avoiding costs arising from conflicts between diverse social groups. In both senses, cohesive education carries substantial benefit from the development perspective.

The third and most pervasive impact of education as a socialising force is through its reduction of the "social distance" between economic actors in society. Across contexts as diverse as Africa and the United States, economists have demonstrated that cultural polarisation renders economies inefficient and weakens their long-term performance. Hence, where education instils values of social cohesion, this can catalyse economic engagement within and across all factions of society, increasing the efficiency of production and exchange and thereby augmenting economic growth.

In Bangladesh, much advocacy and activism efforts have been expended on quantitative progress in education and some also on qualitative improvements in the transmission of knowledge and hard skills. However, there has been scant attention to education's potential to socialise. There is thus a dearth of empirical evidence on the extent to which education in Bangladesh is cohesive and can bridge social divides for a progressive economy.

Research undertaken at the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University, in collaboration with the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University, USA, addresses this dearth by studying textbooks under the National Curriculum and Textbook Board, which is the state-owned publishing house for textbooks. The study assesses the content of these textbooks based on criteria of social cohesion.

Textbooks have a central role in schooling and can play a principal role in enhancing soft skills-based human capital. This is because textbooks can reproduce social constructs and advance the enterprise of nation-building. Correspondingly, textbooks shape the worldviews of the upcoming generation of economic actors whose interactions in the economic sphere will set the pace of development for years to come.

An analysis of a selection of NCTB textbooks against the criteria of social cohesion reveals some deeply concerning trends—majority ethnic and religious identities obscuring the heterogeneity of Bangladeshi society, gender stereotyping and tokenism, limited recognition of social inequality and injustice and few expressions of fundamental values like equality, human dignity and non-discrimination.

The study marks the need for a new focus on the quality of education measured against the demand for improved human capital, recognising socially cohesive education as a catalyst for economic growth. To conclude, therefore, Bangladesh's economic future pivots on its preparedness for impending challenges and adaptivity to evolving global markets. Education is the prime site for investment in this future and thus, the delivery of socially cohesive education is an imperative that must be met at all levels of Bangladesh's governance, advocacy and activism.

Aisha Binte Abdur Rob is a Research Associate at the Centre for Peace and Justice, Brac University. Views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of Brac University and the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University.