

Session VII
**Policy Processes and
Challenges**

Policy-making Process in Bangladesh: Past Experiences and Present Trends

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Introduction

Public policy making is not a routine administrative function of the government; rather it is an interactive process induced by sociopolitical and other environmental factors. The policy process is also interdependent with policy context and content. Because of contextual variation, public policies of developed countries differ from those of developing countries. Public policies in developing countries are influenced by an unstable sociopolitical environment and face various problems and challenges. This paper examines the policy-making process of a developing country, namely, Bangladesh, focusing on its education policy as an attempt to determine the strengths and weaknesses involved in the process. Education, as one of the pillars of human development, deserves urgent attention in Bangladesh where adult literacy is only 62%. This is far from the MDG targeted achievement of 'Education for All' by the year 2015. Hence, it is imperative to analyse the dynamics of the policy-making process to visualise an effective process in the sector.

The method of content analysis has been adopted taking into account the findings of various studies and articles on policy-making. The paper analyses the theoretical perspective of the policy-making process in the beginning to form a backdrop, then concentrates on recommendations of education commissions and committees formed since the British period and identifies the influence of various actors and factors before arriving at concluding remarks.

Public policy as a concept

Policy reflects future goals and aspirations, with guidelines for carrying out those goals. Dye (1981) in a simple definition states:

"Public policy is whatever governments choose to do or not to do."

Here, not only government action but also government inaction has been focused upon contending that government inaction can have just as great an impact on society as government action. Both action and inaction are organised through public policies. Hogwood and Gunn

(1984) have given a detailed definition of a policy through identifying various dimensions of the term. They define policy:

“as a label for a field of activity initiated by the government or a legitimate authority; as an expression of a general purpose or desired state of affairs; as specific decisions of government; as a particular set of activities having authorisation, parliamentary approval, or statutory endorsement; as a programme involving particular packages of legislation and organisation efforts.”

This definition identifies the legitimacy of a policy pointing out that a policy must be formulated by the government or any legitimate authority having due authority. Anderson (1975), identifying the focus of public policy as society and the locus as government states:

“When a government takes a decision or chooses a course of action in order to solve a social problem and adopts a specific strategy for its planning and implementation, it is known as public policy”.

Public policies may deal with a wide variety of substantive areas: education, health, welfare, defence, energy, environment, security, communication, taxation, rural and urban development, poverty reduction, housing, rehabilitation, and so on. They may range from the vital to the trivial, from the allocation of millions of taka (the Bangladeshi currency) to an environmental protection project, to the designation of an official emblem. A policy's strengths and weaknesses, apart from content analysis, may be determined by examining the policy-making process which eventually influences context and output.

Policy-making process: a theoretical perspective

Policy-making is not a single shot activity but involves a complex and wide system with a variety of interests and actors. Anderson (1975) opines:

“Policy making involves political activities that involve authoritative decisions on behalf of a community, creating rights and concomitant duties, establishing standards of equity to govern the distribution of resources and the allocation of public services.”

The effectiveness of policy-making is determined by how efficiently government involves various interests, accommodates them by creating a right balance, and achieves, with this common effort, a favourable collective purpose. The process can best be explained in terms of models.

The system model

The policy-making process is conceived as a systemic model by Easton (1965) presented in simplified form in this diagram in Figure 1.

Through a step-by-step process, the model shows at a glance how inputs originate and create demand and support to the political system where the authorities are induced to play their legitimate role in making policies as outputs to address a particular problem. The feedback

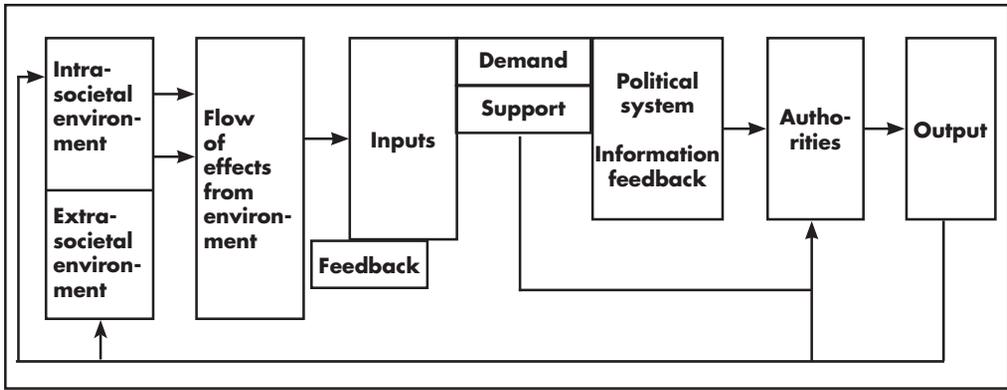


Figure 1: **System model of policy-making**

from output reaches the intra-societal and extra-societal environment to create further moves for modification or revision of the policy, which in the form of a cycle continues making the whole system ever-rotating and living. The model is too simple and fails to portray the complexities of decision making within the political system, which Easton referred to as the 'black box' that involves government, parliament, ministers and bureaucrats, and a degree of their power and influence.

The process model

The process model of policy-making identifies a variety of activities which occur within the political system including identifying policy issues, agenda setting, making a policy framework, and making policy legitimate.

Identifying policy issues: public opinion

Key (1967) in his book, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* writes:

“Government attempts to mould public opinion toward support of the programmes and policies it espouses. Given that endeavour, perfect congruence between public policy and public opinion could be government of public opinion rather than govern by public opinion”.

There is very little direct evidence in the existing research literature to support the notion that public opinion has an independent influence over public policy; instead public policy shapes public opinion (Dye 1981). The public does not have opinions on many major policy questions; public opinion is unstable, and decision makers can easily misinterpret as well as manipulate public opinion.

Identifying policy issues: elite opinion

Persons referred to variously as the political elite, political activists, the leadership echelons, or the 'influential' have preferences more likely to be in accord with public policy than mass preferences. This finding is well supported in research literature (Key 1967). Policies are not determined by elite preferences, government officials act rationally in response to events and conditions and the well-educated and the informed elite understand the actions of government

better than the masses. But the elite cannot operate independently of environmental resources and maintain consistence over their demands for long.

Agenda setting

Agenda setting means deciding what will be decided and is a crucial stage in the policy process. Policy issues do not just happen; creating an issue, dramatising it, calling attention to it, and pressuring government to do something about it, are important political tactics employed by influential individuals, organised interest groups, policy planning organisations, and the mass media. These are the tactics of agenda-setting. On the other hand, avoidance of decision making, preventing certain conditions in society from becoming policy issues, is also an important political tactic. It occurs when influential individuals or groups operate to prevent the emergence of challenges to the dominant values or interests in society.

Mass media

The mass media, particularly television networks, play a major role in agenda-setting. By deciding what will be 'news', the media sets the agenda for political discussion which helps generate ideas in the policy-making process. Systematic research has shown that issues that receive greatest attention in the media are more likely to be viewed by voters as important (Dye 1981).

Policy planning organisations

A great deal of policy formulation is carried out by organisations remaining outside the government process. These organisations bring together, in round table forums, the leadership of corporate and financial institutions, leading intellectuals, and influential figures in the government to examine policy options. The Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) is one such organisation acting as an autonomous research institute which explores policy alternatives, advises government, and develops policy consensus in socioeconomic development.

Framing policy

The activities of 'the proximate policy makers' – ministries, bureaucrats, and agency officials – have traditionally been the central focus of the policy planning process. They perform the policy framing phase, which is concerned with official processing in coordinating policy options emerging from different sources. In addition, the phase is concerned with details of implementation, what agencies get control of the programme, and how much money will be spent. The decisions of the proximate policy makers tend to centre on the means rather than the end of the public policy.

Legitimising policy

The final phase of the policy-making process is to obtain formal recognition of the designated authority in the country. Depending on the system, it may be placed before Parliament for debate, or in the cabinet for discussion. In a democratic setting, party influence is a dominant factor in legitimising a policy. Conflict between parties occurs most frequently during parliamentary debates on determining strategies for social welfare issues because

each one tries to stick to a strategy commensurate with its own manifesto. It requires a lot of balancing and moderation before a final policy output can be obtained.

To get a comprehensive idea about the dynamics of the policy-making process, it is important to analyse interactions among groups involved in the process arena or policy network. Rhodes (1988) argues that policy networks vary from one policy to the other, depending on certain factors like constellation of interests and distribution of resources. Therefore, to understand clearly the process of policy-making in a country, a particular policy needs to be carefully examined. The present study is focused on education policy in Bangladesh.

Educational policy in Bangladesh

Education system: an overview

The Constitution of Bangladesh enjoins upon the government the obligation to ensure literacy for all citizens within the shortest possible time and mandates the state to adopt effective measures for the purpose of establishing a uniform, mass-oriented, and universal system of education and to extend free and compulsory education to all children, removing illiteracy within such a period as may be determined by law.

Bangladesh is a signatory to the declaration at the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) held in March 1990 in Thailand. The government reiterated its commitments to the World Education Forum (Dakar 2000) towards achievement of the EFA goals for every citizen by the year 2015 (GOB 2004). EFA is also a target to be achieved by the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) formulated by the government as a key policy framework for implementation in all sectors including education.

Pursuant to its constitutional obligations and international commitments, the government took active measures to improve the education system. These include: (i) enactment of the Compulsory Primary Education Act, 1990; (ii) creation of a separate Ministry of Primary and Mass Education in 2003; (iii) formulation of a National Plan of Action (NPA) for EFA in 2003; and (iv) constitution of Education Commissions. In all the Five-Year Plans (FYP) there were overall directions and guidelines for developing the education sector. Major educational objectives highlighted in the FYP documents are as follows.

- Providing values-based education
- Emphasising job-oriented and needs-based education
- Modernising the curriculum
- Ensuring efficient management at all levels
- Ensuring teacher effectiveness at all levels
- Revitalising technical and vocational education
- Ensuring gender parity at all levels

The educational system in Bangladesh has three major stages: primary, secondary, and higher education. Primary education consists of a five-year cycle while secondary education and higher education are of seven and five year cycles, respectively. Primary education is

provided through two major institutional arrangements: general and 'madrasha' streams, while secondary education has three major streams: general, technical-vocational, and madrasha. Higher education has three streams: general, madrasha, and technology. Madrashas have similar core courses to general streams but place additional emphasis on religious studies.

In 2000, the government formulated an education policy providing guidelines and directions for different stages and streams. But in 2002, an expert committee found inadequacies on detailed examination of the policy; its implementation was postponed and an Education Commission was formed. The Commission submitted a report in 2003 with recommendations which are now being processed for adoption.

Educational planning process

The planning process in Bangladesh, Rahman (1986) points out, follows the conventional macro model with an approach designed to fix aggregate targets for growth, fix sectoral and sub-sectoral targets, and finally, draw up projects to realise these macro-micro targets. Five-Year Plans prepared by the Planning Commission (PC) and approved by the National Economic Council (NEC), with the Prime Minister as its head, are implemented or processed through annual development programmes (ADP). The planning process involving various stages of a Five-Year Plan (FYP) is shown in Figure 2. FYPs cover all sectors including education, giving overall guidelines and general directions for formulating policies and development programmes and projects (Islam 1993).

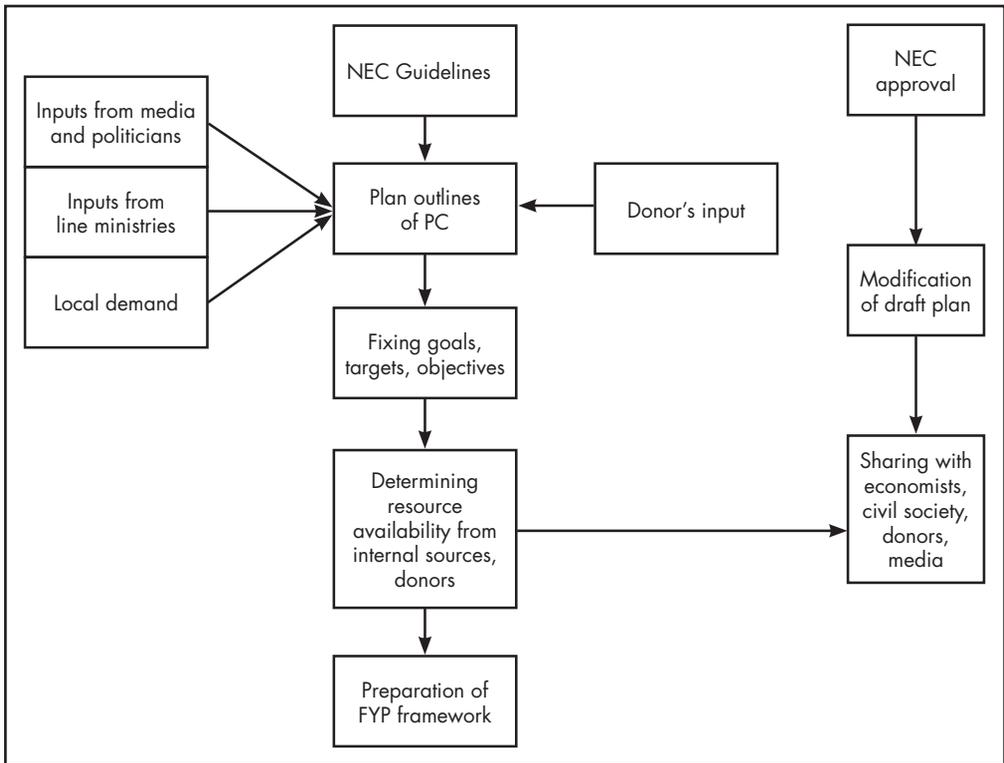


Figure 2: The planning process involving stages in the Five-Year Plan

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) approved the Poverty Reduction Strategy 2005, outlining a comprehensive medium-term strategy for socioeconomic development. The matrices attached with the PRS document assign key targets and strategic goals for all sectors including education. Policy makers, according to government instructions, are required to follow the prescriptions of the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) to draw up sectoral policy frameworks in order to attain targets within the time frame indicated in PRS matrices. The PRS has become a principal guiding force in sectoral policy planning.

The educational policy-making process

Rule 4 of the Rules of Business (ROB) 1986, Government of Bangladesh, clearly obliges the line ministry to make policies relevant to its allocated jurisdiction (GoB 2004). The process starts with identification of policy problems, ideas, or issues that are placed on the policy agenda of the government. Ideas originate from local demand, plan documents, and influence of interest groups and donors.

The Ministry accomplishes a policy framework after obtaining the opinions of relevant ministries, agencies, and specialised bodies. Most of the issues are referred to the ministries of Finance and Law for comments. The Finance Ministry gives clearance related to verifying the projected expenditure involved, whereas the Law Ministry examines the proposed policy agenda to determine whether or not it contradicts the existing legal system. If the proposal involves recruitment of new manpower, the matter is examined by the Establishment Ministry. An inter-ministerial meeting, which is a forum for building consensus on available options, is normally convened to open the floor for discussion. The selected policy agenda is then forwarded to the Cabinet which, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister, makes the decision to approve, reject, or modify the proposal. Unless enactment on a special issue is concerned, the matter is not referred to Parliament.

The policy-making process applicable to all sectors, including education, is shown in Figure 3.

Initiatives in policy making through educational reform

Educational reform has always been considered as an obligation by all governments, even during the British period (1757-1947). The initiative started with the Hunter Commission in 1882 which emphasised spending on primary education, management of educational institutions under national education management, and the need to support non-government education institutes (GoB/NAEM 2005). William Adam's Report in 1935 pointed out some key areas for improving the educational system. These include motivating villagers to donate land for schools, composing textbooks in local languages, and arranging for training of teachers. Recommendations were mainly 'supply-push' efforts having little scope for stakeholders' participation (GoB/NAEM 2005).

In 1949, during the Pakistani period (1947-1971), the first committee called 'The East Bengal Educational System Reconstruction Committee' headed by an eminent editor and educationist, Maulana Akram Khan, was constituted. After consultation with relevant stakeholders and analysing ground realities, this Committee submitted a report (GoB/ NAEM

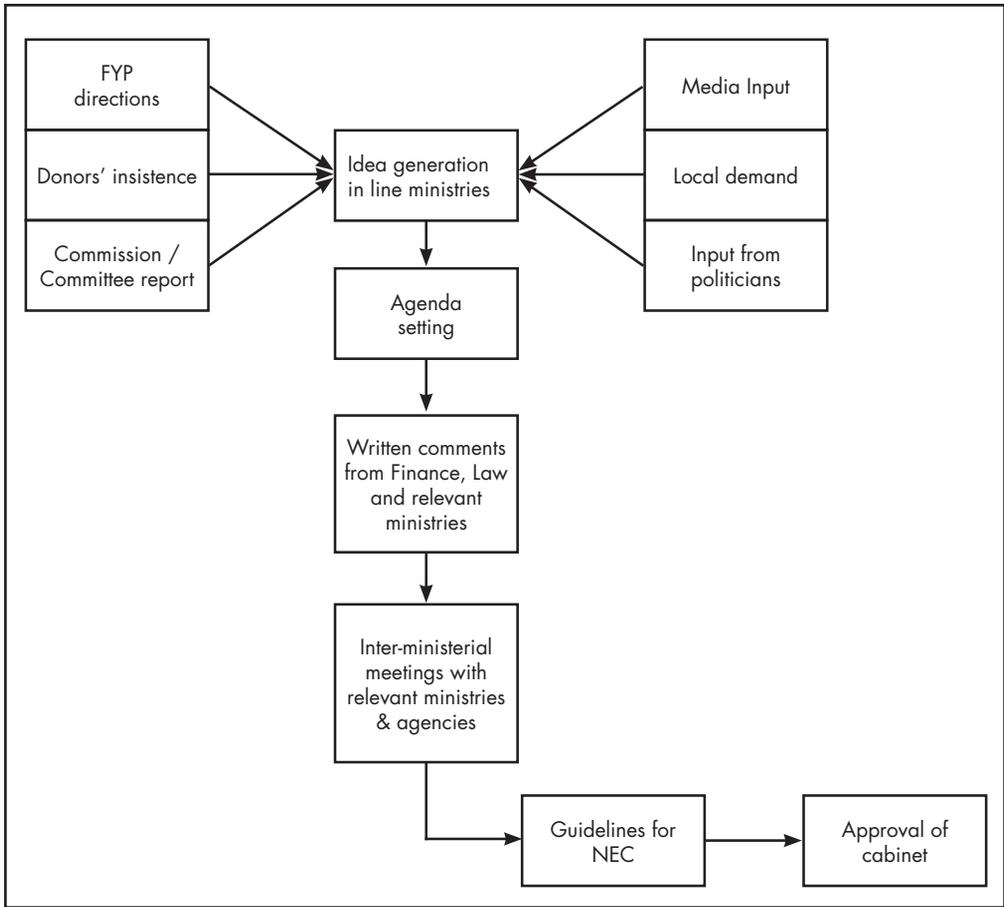


Figure 3: Policy-making process

2005) recommending mainly the following.

- Primary schooling to start at 6-7 years of age, and secondary education between 11-17 years old
- Education in madrashas should include English, the vernacular, and mathematics, with standards similar to those of English highschools.

Establishment of a system of universal, compulsory, and free education for all boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 14 was recommended by the Education Reform Commission of Ataur Rahman Khan in 1957, a commission constituted by the government following a countrywide language movement demanding Bengali as the national language. Without taking steps for implementation, the government kept on constituting commissions until three more had been established up to 1971. The National Education Commission of 1958 (the Sharif Commission) recommended the introduction of vocational and agricultural education. The Justice Hamoodur Rahman Commission, formed in 1964, advocated the abolition of kindergarten and English-medium schools to bring about uniformity in the education system and recommended compulsory schools up to Grade Eight. The last commission during the Pakistani period, the Nur Khan Commission, in 1969 suggested that madrashas should be

fully integrated into the educational system, establishing equivalence with the general stream (GoB/NAEM 2005).

The reform measures during the Pakistani period were consultative in nature, focusing more on policy frameworks rather than on implementation of policy recommendations. The government resorted to diluting the intense demand for improvement in the educational system by concentrating more on means rather than ends.

After independence, motivated by its constitutional obligations, the government formed a National Education Commission in 1974 (Qudrate-Khuda Commission). This commission recommended a compulsory education system initially up to grade five, and at a later stage up to grade eight; a recruitment system with a preference for female teachers at primary levels; and a curriculum emphasising need-based practical education. The commission prepared its report after consultation with educationists, professionals, guardians, teachers, politicians, and after thorough examination of existing realities and potentials (GoB 2003).

The Advisory Committee formed in 1979, headed by Kazi Jafar, a minister, recommended handing over the responsibility for primary education to the Union Parishad (UP), the lowest tier of local government. A union committee was suggested to supervise all schools, while each school was to have an individual managing committee (MC). The development and maintenance of schools were to be carried out with funds collected locally from guardians. The teaching community was reluctant to be placed under UP control, for which reason the local government management system could not be established (GoB 2003).

In 1986, another National Education Commission (Professor Mafiz Commission) was formed, which suggested a primary education system with eight years of schooling along with major recommendations for a pre-primary education system and mid-day meals for students. The proposal for an enhanced primary cycle up to Grade VIII was reiterated in the National Education Policy 2000. In reality, almost all rural primary schools are three-roomed structures incapable of accommodating eight classes without major infrastructural development requiring huge investments and consequential stress on the government exchequer. This rationale led the National Education Commission 2003 to stick to the existing five-year primary cycle without subscribing to its enhancement as proposed by some earlier commissions (GoB 2003).

Apart from the issue of duration, some salient features of the National Education Policy 2000 were arranging five-roomed school structures, maintaining a teacher:student ratio of 1:35, uniform primary teaching in all schools, establishing a separate Public Service Commission for teacher recruitment, arranging pre-primary education for children aged five plus years old, and emphasising training for teachers. The National Education Policy 2000 was based on the recommendations of a 54-member education committee under the chairmanship of Professor Shamsul Hoque. The draft policy, before its placement in the cabinet meeting, was discussed in a number of meetings, seminars, and workshops attended by educationists, politicians, and education administrators. As desired by the cabinet, the matter was raised

in Parliament for discussion and, later, adopted as a policy. In the phases of setting the agenda and framing the policy, the committee did not take adequate steps to ensure the critical examination of guardians, members of the community, and other interest groups. The present government, on 10 October, 2001, decided to re-examine the policy provisions and formed a 52-member specialist committee under the chairmanship of Dr. M.A. Bari, former Chairman of the University Grants' Commission (GoB 2003).

According to the recommendations of the special committee, the cabinet postponed implementation of the Education Policy 2000 and formed an Education Commission under the chairmanship of Dr. Maniruzzaman Mia, former Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University. It has two secretaries to the government, nine vice chancellors, principals, professors, heads of schools and madrasahs, relevant officials, and representatives of teacher associations. The committee established 12 sub-committees to examine 12 different areas of the system. The commission held meetings with persons interested in education; teachers in primary, secondary, and madrasa schools; primary education officers; principals and vice principals of colleges; and professionals from various disciplines including agriculture, engineering, and medicine. The commission held 15 meetings in addition to a series of meetings of the sub-committees. A sample survey was also conducted covering educational institutions to help analyse ground realities and genuine demands and requirements for systemic improvement. The commission submitted its report with recommendations on three categories: general education, professional education, and special education (GoB 2003).

A 13-member implementation committee under the chairmanship of the Additional Secretary, Ministry of Education, was set up, and it finalised recommendations to be placed before the cabinet. The future course of transforming the set recommendations into a policy depends on the cabinet decision. In the process of formulating recommendations, the commission undertook active consultation and secured the participation of important stakeholders.

Key actors in the policy process in Bangladesh

Donors

In the country's development initiatives, donors are influential actors in promoting programmes and projects. In 1975-76, project aid in the education sector of the annual development programme allocation accounted for 14%, rising to 53% in 1990-91, and 29% in 2003-04 (GoB/ERD 2005). Donors' preference as an influencing factor started to emerge in 1950 with collaborative programmes; this influence has continued to this day. The education sector has more than 20 development partners among which Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD), Japan, and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) are major partners. Recent declining trends in project aid has caused stress on resources. For example, the mid-day meal for primary students is important not only from a nutritional point of view but also for increasing contact hours and attendance. The Economic Relations Division sought development partners to participate in these initiatives despite their reluctance. This appears contradictory to the development partners' claims to have pro-poor targets. Initially, in the stipend programme

of secondary-level girl students, development partners were reluctant to participate fearing widespread misuse of the fund. But with positive initial results out of limited initiatives, donor commitments started to pour in and have continued until today, making the Female Secondary School Stipend Programme one of the most successful programmes in the country.

Bureaucrats

The Rules of Business (ROB) of the ministries accord considerable power to the Secretary as the administrative head and the principal accounting officer advising the Minister on policy priorities (ROB 4). The Secretary is the custodian of information influencing policy prescriptions and is responsible for processing promotions and transferring key functionaries as well as budgetary control of yearly allocations. In the selection of programmes and projects, proposals are prepared by a ministry-level committee headed by the Secretary. Once these are approved by the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council, bureaucrats have a substantive role in monitoring and evaluation.

During the British and Pakistani periods, bureaucrats played the apex role in agenda-setting, framing policy, policy revision, and the implementation process. After independence, however, with the democratic setting gaining ground, bureaucrats started assuming advisory roles to the political leadership. Because of their practical experience in implementation and professional prudence, they are well positioned to propose alternative frameworks in terms of feasibility and practicability of policy proposals. The political leadership benefits from their knowledge and expertise on legal and procedural systems.

Politicians

Major political parties have a support base among the people and have commitments through their election manifestos to facilitate 'Education for All'. They opt for targeting mass-oriented, uniform, and needs-based education, but differ in their strategies to attain it. They generate policy ideas through their election pledges and, when they come to power, try to incorporate the policy ideas in the sectoral plans.

The Parliamentary Standing Committee (PSC), constituted of members of Parliament (MP) from the party in power and the opposition, is a mechanism for participating in the policy process, particularly in ideas generation and the policy framing phase. The committee pre-empts the making or revising of policy. Normally, it sits once a month to discuss issues of public interest in the sector in which the minister concerned, as a member of the committee, puts forward the rationale for the ministry's actions. The chairman, who is not a minister, and the other members examine the steps taken and recommend further action or modifications. The committee is authorised to investigate gross violations adversely affecting the public interest.

Professional groups

Teachers form professional groups in alignment with political parties. Because of their vast numbers and linkages with the grassroots, they are influential in the policy-making process. Although they do not play an effective role in ideas generation, they influence the political leadership and bureaucracy in setting agendas and framing policy. They are very conscious

of their group interests. Any policy that might go against their interests in private coaching, consultancy, part-time teaching, and salary and other benefits, leads them to exert group pressure to oppose it.

Community

During the British period, benevolent community leaders used to play the role of financiers and organisers of educational institutions, looking after management and well being: but these were scattered initiatives. Now, community leaders and guardians are involved in management functions as chairpersons or members of managing committees (MC) or joint parent-teacher committees (JPTC). These MCs and JPTCs, being institution-based, can hardly transform their voices into forceful central demands to induce policy processes. The media provide channels where they can ventilate their views. They can approach politicians to convey their grievances and transform their ideas into policies. In the PRS, community participation has been brought to centre stage, and this is best organised with the involvement of community leaders in seminars and workshops at the policy formulation stage.

NGOs

NGOs are non-profit private bodies working throughout the country with an agenda normally involving education as a service to the poor and disadvantaged segments of society. They are well informed about local problems and challenges because of their practical experience. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), a large NGO with a countrywide network, has undertaken innovative teaching-learning mechanisms through one-teacher community schools that have been found to be effective for students of underserved areas. In 1972-73, the proportion of foreign aid to Bangladesh disbursed through NGOs was 1% only, whereas in 2003-04 it rose to 31% (GoB/ERD 2005). Because of their financial strength and expertise they have considerable influence among policy makers, particularly in the ideas generation phase. Donors also put pressure on government to use the experience and services of NGOs and to recognise them as partners.

Private sector

The Government of Bangladesh encourages private participation in the higher and pre-primary stages. The government has also taken steps to modify the legal framework in order to establish a uniform curriculum and administrative norms in kindergartens as well as pre-primary and primary-level schools. The Private University Act is also being modified to ensure a standard quality of university education. But the recent influx of private entrepreneurs establishing house-based private universities without taking care of the necessary infrastructure or proper academic environment has caused anxiety. Most of them are rich people having linkages with powerful people in the administrative hierarchy. Because of their linkages, they can apply ample pressure to the policy planning process.

Conclusion

The policy-making process in Bangladesh, with reference to education policy, has been examined and analysed over a period of time. The frequency with which commissions and committees are formed for policy recommendations has increased recently compared to the

past. While during British time it took more than 50 years to form a new commission, the same gap came down to five years both during the Pakistani period and after independence. This means there has been very little time to implement policy prescriptions.

The policy-making process was a supply-push rather than a demand-pull exercise during the British and Pakistani (Rahman 1986) time, allowing little scope to accommodate the ideas and experiences of stakeholders. Recent endeavours, particularly the latest commission in 2003, came up with recommendations after taking into consideration the views and opinions of stakeholders including experts, teachers, guardians, professionals, politicians, and members of the community. Recommendations were made by the commission on an incremental basis taking into consideration institutional capacities at all levels.

Donors played a vital role in the policy-making process during the 1990s. The recent trend, however, is one of gradual decay of their influence with declining availability of donor assistance. Donors, at present, insist on more NGO participation in the policy-making process and channel increasing share of foreign funds to them. Policy makers are now more motivated by the PRS, which provides policy prescriptions to attain objectives and goals in sectoral policy matrices.

In the present democratic setting, the views and directions of political leadership are gaining prominence in all phases of the policy-making process. Bureaucratic dominance is now a factor of the past and has subsided considerably, establishing political leadership as a major guiding force in formulating policy prescriptions. Ideas generated by stakeholders, including the media, are considered with due importance, examined, and framed with the help of bureaucratic inputs before being approved by the relevant democratic authority. This policy-making trend is likely to be consolidated with the gradual maturing of the democratic system, paving the way for more pro-people policies in all socioeconomic sectors of the country.

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