Planning for Education For All (EFA) is planning for Inclusive Education

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Based on the "Education For All" (EFA) Conferences in Jomtien (1990) and Dakar (2000), and on the Conference on Special Needs Education in Salamanca (1994) inclusive education is increasingly becoming one of the strategies to achieve the goal of EFA in countries all over the world.

Inclusive education is a process of addressing and responding to the learning needs of all children using child-friendly, flexible and effective teaching-learning methods. Though there is a special focus on those who are vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion, inclusion benefits all children. Better training and support of teachers is a critical part of the development towards inclusive education. Much of the learning that is taking place now is based on rote learning, meticulous following textbooks, and copying. This does not challenge the capable and bright children and neither does it support the less advantaged learners. Inclusive education also promotes greater cooperation between teachers, learners, parents and communities. There is for example strong evidence that better use of child-to-child cooperation contributes to the development of a more inclusive education in ways that will improve conditions for all learners.

"…[regular] schools should accommodate all children regardless of their physical, intellectual, socio-economic, emotional, linguistic or other conditions. This should include children with disabilities and gifted children, privileged and underprivileged, street and working children, children from remote or nomadic populations, children from linguistic, ethnic or cultural minorities and children from other disadvantaged or marginalized areas or groups." (Salamanca Statement)

# **Inclusive education is a human rights issue**

Inclusive education is based on a rights and responsibility analysis showing that national mainstream education systems are responsible for the education of all children. Furthermore, the Convention on the Rights of Child (CRC) - ratified by the Government in 1992, and thus legally binding - states that such education should be relevant, developmental, child-friendly and participatory. Equally important is Article 2 of the CRC, which states the right of all children not to be excluded and discriminated against. A logical consequence of this right is that all children, wherever in the world, have the right to receive education that does not discriminate, segregate or exclude. Although this is the prime responsibility of the state, all adults are equally responsible - parents, teachers, religious leaders, media people and society at large.

"Regular schools trying to become more inclusive are the most effective means of combating discrimination, creating welcoming teaching-learning environments, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (Salamanca Statement).

# **Marginalisation is a threat to society**

The lack of reliable data on marginalized and excluded children in general, prevents the Government from responding concretely and effectively to their educational rights and needs. In general, there is a low value attached to the education of street children, children with disabilities, children in refugee camps and other disadvantaged children as compared to the education of middle-class children.

Most of the current strategies and programmes have been insufficient or inappropriate regarding the rights and needs of children vulnerable to marginalisation and exclusion. Where such programmes do exist, they are planned and implemented segregated from the mainstream, as programmes for children identified as being 'difficult' or 'different'. In a similar way, exclusive programmes have been set up for the rich. This has resulted in "special" and segregated programmes for the poor, such as for working children, for Bihari children, for children with disabilities, and expensive private schools for privileged children!

In Bangladesh formal and non-formal, government and non-government, mainstream and special, public and private education, have become a form of discrimination while promoting a highly unequal society. Furthermore, different ministries are responsible for different education programmes, as if education is a right for some children, a social service for others, and no right nor service for those left out.

If positive and democratic changes in society are to be taken serious, all children, also those from privileged families who may be next generation's decision-makers, need to become sensitised towards discrimination and prejudice based on difference. The best way to learn this may be in a national inclusive mainstream education system!

Donor funded programmes separate from the ministry of education and controlled by donors paying for supplies, training, operations and recurrent costs may also seriously hinder the development of a sustainable and inclusive mainstream system. These programmes often duplicate existing activities and distract education personnel by drawing them away from national, government-led programmes and requiring them to focus on the immediate outcomes of individual programmes rather than the long-term development of service infrastructure.

The Education Watch Report 2000 revealed the lack of quality in education - both in government and NGO programmes. There is an urgent need for the development of one basic, but flexible curriculum, and for teachers with the motivation, exposure and training to respond to different learning needs, who know the appropriate pedagogic approaches for inclusion of all children irrespective of individual differences like socio-economic background, gender, (dis)ability or ethnicity.

Though the Government signed and ratified many international Conventions and Declarations on equal education rights and opportunities, there continues to be a serious lack of procedures and mechanisms for consultation, interaction and dialogue on inclusive education as a quality aspect of EFA at policy planning and implementation level throughout the country.

# **Inclusion - a developmental approach to education**

Both, the E-9 Declaration (Recife, 2000) and the Dakar Framework for Action on EFA [para 19] call for a mainstream education system that is inclusive and flexible:

" The key challenge is to ensure that the broad vision of Education For All as an inclusive concept is reflected in national government and funding agency policies …"

Inclusive education requires changes and adaptations, while making use of available resources to support learning and building on existing practices and knowledge. The curriculum may be a major obstacle but at the same time also a major tool to facilitate the development of a more inclusive education system. Inclusive education research and pilot programmes from all over the world - including many low income countries - suggest some key elements for more inclusive curricula leaving room for schools or individual teachers to make adaptations that make better sense in the local context and for the individual learner, such as for example assessment based on individual progress instead of based on peer competition!

Inclusive education is not a special approach that shows us how some learners - e.g. children with disabilities - can be integrated in the mainstream education, but it looks into how to transform the regular education system in order to respond to different learners in a constructive and positive way.

# **Lack of financial resources are no excuse for discrimination**

Though extra financial resources may be needed, they are needed for better quality education for all. Poor education provision is very costly due to the high repetition- and dropout rates and because of the lack of achievement at the end of the learning cycle. There is an urgent need to review the way in which resources are allocated and spent within the education system. Part of the process of developing more inclusive access and programming requires a critical analysis why the mainstream education system is not successful in providing education for all learners. It also asks for identification of existing resources and innovative practices in local contexts, and examining barriers to learning and participation! Improving the mainstream system for all from an inclusive perspective benefits all children. The cost of education of currently marginalized and excluded children should never be the issue, and the eventual social and economic costs of exclusion, if these children are not to be educated should always be added in the total cost estimates.

# **Implications for the National Plan of Action (NPA) on EFA**

There is an urgent need to tackle discrimination and exclusion at all levels in society. Reversing this situation may best be done through education that not only values academic learning, but also teaches and models understanding and acceptance of diversity. Developing a National Plan of Action (NPA) on EFA incorporating strategies for relevant, developmental and inclusive education is one of the government's obligations after signing the Dakar Declaration. Inclusion in education is not likely to become the norm unless concerted efforts to promote such an approach in thinking and planning are made at the national level. Inclusion must be linked to a wider education reform enhancing the system's effectiveness for all children. Not only should EFA be inclusive, so should be the process of developing the NPA! During 2002, all nations are requested to develop an NPA with concrete strategies for achieving EFA. The NPA must be prepared in consultation with all groups in society including community leaders, teachers, parents and learners. Unfortunately, the present draft still seriously lacks action and strategic planning. Furthermore, the inclusive approach is completely missing despite the international commitments. And civil society - especially outside Dhaka and at grass root level - is still waiting for the democratic consultation process in developing the NPA on EFA. There is still ample time to do this. Will the government take up the challenge and provide the scope and timeframe for this democratic consultation and decision-making process involving different stakeholders at different levels as laid down in the Dakar Framework for Action?

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