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## Nonformal Education for Sustainable Development: A Bangladeshi Perspective

*M. Mahruf C. Shohel<sup>1</sup> and Andrew J. Howes<sup>2</sup>*

### Abstract

Sustainable development means ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ (WCED, 1987:43). Meanwhile, any education worth the name is a life-long process for the betterment of human well-being. The social purposes of education are located in the long term, and it is right therefore that education should be oriented towards the construction and maintenance of a sustainable future.

However, many children in developing countries get very little education. They have little chance to attend even low-quality primary schools, and dropout and failure rates are alarming; many leave semi-literate, soon to relapse into illiteracy, with disastrous consequences for their participation as individuals in the creation of a sustainable world. Moreover, the majority of those who are at school experience a traditional, formal education paradigm, aimed primarily at selecting and building human capital for economic growth. This paradigm is seen to be increasingly at odds with the concept of education for sustainability.

Since the 1960s, nonformal education has comprised a wide spectrum of educational and training activities organised outside the formal school system. Innovative learning methods are aimed at the development of practical skills, including matters of health, sanitation, literacy, to be applied in real life situations. As an alternative approach to basic education, the nonformal sector as a whole thus increases pressure for change in the wider education system.

Drawing on a three-year empirical study of young people at the point of transition between the nonformal and formal sectors of schooling in Bangladesh, this paper will develop a framework for analysing how the nonformal education paradigm could usefully and realistically increase practice for sustainability in the formal system.

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<sup>1</sup> Doctoral Research Student, School of Education, The University of Manchester

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer in Education, School of Education, The University of Manchester

## **Introduction – Sustainable Development and Education**

Sustainable development means ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs’ (WCED, 1987:43). It is not just about pollution, weather change, or environmental issues, it is about the relationship between all aspects of ecological and human life. Therefore, ‘human beings are at the centre for concern for sustainable development’ (UNCED, 1992: Principle 1).

Taking such a standpoint, the centrality of education in contributing to sustainable development becomes clear. Education has long been understood as contributing to the development of human potential as well as social growth (Dewey, 1899). It also has been seen as a basic human right and as an integral part of access to political power and participation (Torres, 1990), and can therefore be considered as an act of socialising individuals for social competences. In particular, in the context of serious questions about sustainability of development processes, education should be contributing to the competence of individuals to participate in and construct a sustainable way of life.

However, the influence between education and development works in the other direction as well. The unsustainability of development has an impact on schooling, and thereby on individual development. In countries such as Bangladesh, many children have no chance to attend even low-quality primary schools. Dropout and failure rates are alarming; many leave semi-literate, soon to relapse into illiteracy. Given that the result of such failure is often an exclusion from social processes, such poor quality education is part of a vicious circle of unsustainability.

The situation is often little better for the majority of those who do complete their schooling. Their school experience is of a traditional, formal education paradigm, aimed primarily at selecting and building human capital for economic growth. As we will see, this paradigm is increasingly at odds with the concept of education for sustainability.

There are reasons for optimism however. Since the 1960s, nonformal education has comprised a wide spectrum of educational and training activities organised outside the formal school system (Shohel, 1995). Innovative learning methods in nonformal schools are aimed at the development of practical skills, including matters of health, sanitation, literacy, to be applied in real life situations (Shohel, 1994; Shohel and Howes, 2005). As an alternative approach to basic education, the nonformal education sector as a whole thus increases pressure for change in the wider education system. The purpose of the paper is to analyse how holistic and community-based nonformal education might offer lessons for the formal sector in terms of supporting sustainable development.

In Bangladesh, on which this paper will focus, about 44.7% of the population of 140 million people lives below the poverty line. The government is helping ensure that all children and adults have access to quality education. Although the investment in education in terms of gross national product (GNP) is low compared to other South-Asian countries (Haq and Haq, 1998), primary education receives about half of the education sector budget. By expanding enrolment and improving quality of primary education, the government expects to make a major contribution to a better-educated

workforce in Bangladesh. Yet, problems persist. Of the 20 million primary school aged children, four million of the more disadvantaged are out of school, and another four million or more drop out before completing primary education. As a result of reforms, enrolment levels are high and gender equity has been reached but attendance and efficiency levels are average (CAMPE-UPL, 1999). Due to the large population and inadequate funding, therefore, the state cannot provide basic education for all of its citizens through the formal education system.

Nonformal education has become the second chance education for the people of the country who have not enrolled at the schools or who have dropped out from the schools. They also receive some practical skills, which they can apply in real life situations as and when necessary. About 450 NGOs run educational programmes (CAMPE, 2002). The objectives of nonformal education programmes run by NGOs are to reduce illiteracy; contribute to the basic education of children, especially those from the poorest families; promote the participation of girls in education; empower women; and support the government's universal primary education programme. On the face of it then, nonformal education is a necessary part of a sustainable education system in a context such as Bangladesh.

As a developing country, Bangladesh faces particular challenges in educating its citizens for sustainable development. It is facing multiple developmental challenges, among them most crucial problems are as follow:

- Extreme Population Density
- Mass Poverty and Illiteracy
- Unstable Political Situation
- Corruption
- Fragile Ecology
- Limited Natural Resources

Education is the key to develop human capital and breaking the various cycle of ignorance and exploitation. It also the key to empowering people specially women to improve their lives (Haq, 1997). Bangladesh has not yet performed to the best of its potential in developing human capital and remain a country where illiteracy is widespread. The physical infrastructure and financial capital are not sufficient to break the vicious cycle of poverty in the country. But the country has made remarkable progress to combating poverty, and the recent Nobel Peace Prize awarded to world renowned economist Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank is an example how community-base development initiatives can change peoples lives. With a very optimistic voice, Rasheda K. Chodhury (2006), an educational activist, says:

‘The people of Bangladesh. with all their resilience, productivity, and innovativeness have proved beyond doubt that the country has all the potential to move ahead if strong political will combined with good governance structures, democratic practices, and pragmatic strategies are in place’ (The Daily Star<sup>3</sup>, February 4, 2006).

### **Role of Education**

Education is a life-long process for the betterment of human well-being. Education for sustainable development is fundamentally about the links between the awareness of

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<sup>3</sup> A national daily English-language newspaper in Bangladesh

the human as a whole in the nature and its supporting social systems and the health of the planet which we inhabit with responsibilities of present and future world. As such then, education is the key to any sustainable development programme. At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the role of education in promoting sustainable development was made explicit by Agenda 21, the global action plan for the 21st century:

"Education ... should be recognised as a process by which human beings and societies can reach their fullest potential. Education is critical for promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address the environment and development issues" (Agenda 21, 1992).

*How* though can education play a role in promoting sustainable development? Different theories have been used, implicitly or explicitly, in answering this question, and we can group them into three main types:

1. education *about* sustainable development;
2. education *for* sustainable development;
3. education *towards* sustainable development

There is a marked difference between education *about* sustainable development and education *for* sustainable development. The first is an awareness lesson or theoretical discussion; it is this approach which dominates many approaches to sustainability in most schools:

Thus, albeit many education institutions have incorporated "green" preambles, this was not sufficient to allow principles of sustainable development to leave deep imprints on education as such, or on how education institutions are being run. Education on environment and sustainable development mostly takes place in few and discrete lessons, and detached from the rest of the curriculum. (de Visser, 2002: 12)

In our opinion, more than a theoretical discussion is needed at this critical juncture in time. The second theoretical approach is the use of education as a tool to achieve sustainability. While some people argue that "for" indicates indoctrination, we think "for" indicates a purpose (McKeown, 2002). This purpose gives education for sustainable development a different theoretical basis. For example, Robinson and Shallcross (1998: 70) argue that,

‘There is a clear commitment in education for sustainable development to changing attitudes and practices so that actions are more consistent with sustainability in whatever sense this term may be locally constructed. It is through the primacy of actions that the ultimate evaluation of the success of any educational programme for sustainability will be made.’

From this perspective, sustainable development has multi-dimensional challenges i.e. economic, environmental and social. Meeting these challenges both now and in the future requires citizens who are *active* in addressing the issues which hold back their development. For example, Huckle and Sterling (1997) argue that:

‘Education for sustainability... helps people and communities to examine critically the technologies, systems of economic production, cultural systems of reproduction, laws and politics, and ideas and ideologies they currently

employ for living with the rest of nature. It also helps them reflect and act on viable alternatives' (p.4).

'Specific methodologies employed might include or emphasise experiential and co-operative learning; systemic thinking patterns, soft boundaries and 'fuzzy logic'; the clarification and judgement of values; ideology critique; critical reflection and creative thinking; the envisaging of sustainable future...' (p.35).

Therefore, education for sustainable development is about practical and contextualized learning of how to live a better life and to care for the present and future of the globe.

In practice, different worldwide organisations appear to have adopted various mixed theoretical approaches. For example, the World Bank's DEPWeb takes an approach which begins with problematising the notion of sustainability, showing how there are likely to be tensions and contradictions in any strategy... (World Bank Group, 2001).

'The Development Education Program (DEP) team designs tools and resources to help teachers and students, principally at the secondary school level, study -- and think critically about -- the often complex social, economic, and environmental issues of sustainable development affecting their countries, their regions, and the world'.

UNESCO's DESD emphasises values as a starting point:

'The overall goal of the DESD is to integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of learning to encourage changes in behavior that allow for a more sustainable and just society for all' (UNESCO, 2005a).

Elaborating this perspective further in a statement on 'Visions and Definition of ESD':

'Education for sustainable development is about learning to:

- respect, value and preserve the achievements of the past;
- appreciate the wonders and the peoples of the Earth;
- live in a world where all people have sufficient food for a healthy and productive life;
- assess, care for and restore the state of our Planet;
- create and enjoy a better, safer, more just world;
- be caring citizens who exercise their rights and responsibilities locally, nationally and globally.'

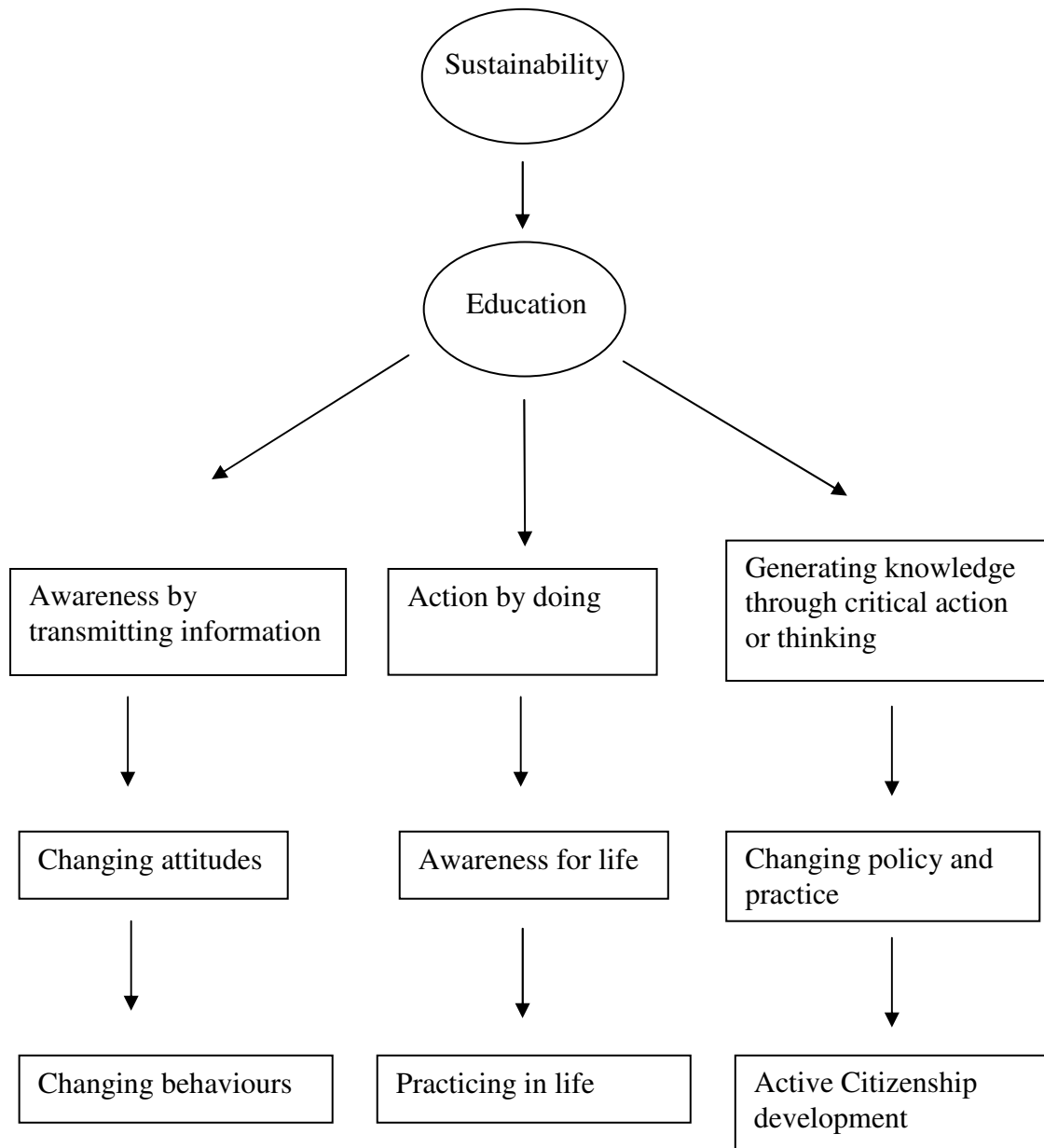
(UNESCO 2005b)

This emphasis on the elaboration of values has the potential to create interesting debate, but the link between discussing values on the one hand, and changing practice on the other hand, is often far more problematic than is generally assumed.

We summarised the third theoretical approach as education *towards* sustainability. Under such a label could be placed approaches which draw on ideas such as Freire's *conscientisation* (1972). The question of sustainability raises a larger question: what is to be sustained and for who? We can answer that the environment is to be sustained, for the purpose of human well-being. This leads to a focus on community level participation and implementation. But there is no point if communities are not being empowered to generate and apply their own solutions through the process of

conscientisation (Freire, 1972). Freire’s contribution to debates about pedagogy are very significant here because of the links which he establishes between oppression, conscientisation and dialogue, in the context of communities which represent a diversity of sometimes conflicting interests. Therefore holistic, integrated strategies for education for sustainable development are required which promote an awareness of issues concerned with local and global ecological crisis as well as human well-being through community action and participation.

In summary then, the first model, education *about* sustainable development, provides awareness which generates changes in attitude and then in behaviour. The second model, education *for* sustainable development, focuses on actions which change attitudes and build awareness for life and then so develop lifelong practice. The third model, education *towards* sustainable development, is about generating knowledge through critical action, and so developing active citizenship.



## Diagram: Change Models of Sustainable Development through Education

Strikingly, most of the literature linking education and sustainability is drawn from Western contexts, and of course there are major challenges for sustainability facing these societies, but they are likely to be different from those facing developing countries. In the remainder of this article, we draw on a study of schooling in Bangladesh to draw conclusions relevant to this issue in developing countries.

Given the developmental challenges mentioned earlier in respect to countries such as Bangladesh, any list of actions for sustainability is likely to emphasise meeting basic needs and improving the quality of life, rather than dealing with problems associated with mass consumption for example. Table-1 below illustrates the range of issues and actions that are likely to be prominent in this context:

<b>Priority issues</b>	<b>Actions for sustainability</b>
Population growth	Emphasising disadvantages of early marriage and more children
Food insecurity	Using organic fertilizers
Widespread illiteracy	Education for All
Restricted access to loans	Expansion of micro-credit programmes and skills development
Lack of agency	Citizenship awareness
Corruption	Moral and systems development
Shortage of energy	Saving energy (oil, gas and electricity)
Deforestation	Social forestation
Pollution	Pollution control
Unequal status of women	Women's rights and education

Table-1: Action for Sustainable Development in Bangladesh

### **The Role of Formal Education in Sustainable Development**

Formal education is the provided for the majority of children and young people in Bangladesh. The Gross Enrolment Rate (GER) is 96 per cent according to World Bank statistics; Bangladesh has increased public spending on education by more than 50 per cent since 1990 and spends 45.1 per cent of it on primary levels. In this way formal education is making a significant contribution to achievement of universal primary education and to the Millennium Development Goals.

However, in terms of sustainability, the picture is not necessarily so rosy. It could be argued that formal education represents the model of education about sustainability, the results of which are rarely implemented in real life. Instead, this model emphasises the theoretical aspects of knowledge. Education in this form is often influenced by a political agenda based on and supporting the power of central state institutions. In most cases, the curriculum and organisation of the school is not based on a democratic process; rather the school is run by powerful people for weak subordinates. As a consequence, the formal school system finds it difficult to adapt to changing priorities, or to experiment with alternative approaches.



Local politics is frequently a significant factor in the running of formal schools. In some cases, the problems are rooted in an ongoing power struggle between community leadership and formal high school authority. School authorities typically aim to negotiate with powerful local community leaders to run the school, not necessarily to the benefit of the pupils. For example, the head teacher may involve members of the local elite who have a strong political hold in community so that he/she could run the school management committee (SMC) according to his/her will. One school teacher said in an informal conversation about his head teacher:

‘He [the head teacher] selected the committee [SMC] members so that he can misuse the school fund. He is not capable of running a high school. But he holds the post, because he has link with local touts and doesn’t think about the welfare of the school. He has some supporters among our colleagues who are from local community. You notice that this guy [pointing at a teacher who is crossing the school ground and the interviewee mentioned the name earlier in the conversation] never stays in school for a long time. Every day he goes to somewhere several times, after signing the attendance register he goes away. Head teacher doesn’t say anything, because this guy is his *chamcha*<sup>4</sup>[during my fieldwork, I myself observe the fact]. [Researcher Diary 2005-06: Bogra]

During an interview, another teacher also made same kind of comment:

‘We take money from students for scouting and sports during admission. But he [head teacher] doesn’t allocate the money for students to take part in scouting or any other sports activities. So where does the money go and where is the school managing committee to take care of the school?’ [Teacher Interview- 6: 2005 -06 Bogra]

In the above case local leaders are members of the ruling government party. Different political alliances also have an influence on schools where the local community is a stronghold of the opposition party. If head teacher has complete control over the school administration, he could play with the community leaders in a different way. However, we have an interesting observation in this case, the head teacher is very authoritarian and has close tie with government administration as well as parents. So he run the committee with the help of government administration and tactfully manage the community leaders.

‘I am sitting down in the head teacher’s room and for arrangement to interview students. A man came to see him and complained that he didn’t know that today is the SMC meeting. The head teacher introduced me to him and said he is a member of the SMC. Later the man left, and the head teacher said to me that those people are a problem for him. They don’t want him to run the school properly. But I don’t know what he meant by ‘properly’ and I didn’t ask him as I don’t want to get involve. I asked him whether I could attend the meeting as an observer which would be interesting for me. He said, ‘No problem. You can join us.’ However, later a man came into the room and the head teacher stood up and asked him to have his chair. He introduced me to the man, saying he is the UNO. Interestingly the head teacher soon tactfully excluded me from the meeting. He asked me to do some observation in the classroom.’ [Researcher Diary 2004-05: Norsingdi]

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<sup>4</sup> It is a colloquial Bangla word which has a negative connotation and means ‘someone who support blindly and works for someone’.

About this head teacher, assistant teachers did not say anything though I heard from the head teacher that two teachers are not happy about his decision regarding the arrangement of special coaching class for the SSC candidates during the vacation. My assumption is, in this case, that this head teacher is very powerful and teachers do not want to be in trouble. Such a political culture around schools is very damaging to processes which require risk-taking, courage, and innovation.

The curriculum of formal primary and high school education in Bangladesh is highly centralised. An USAID report (2002) says:

‘A critical feature of the formal school system- at least at the primary level- is the lack of input from the broad education sector, including parents, community leaders, and students, as well as teachers and administrators, at every level of the system’ (p.10).

Though over the years infrastructure and teaching staff have been expanded, the quality of education delivered is less than satisfactory. As Robinson (1999) says:

‘Access to education remains inequitable, especially for the rural landless, urban poor, and girls. This is purely because the real cost of ‘free’ education to consumers is high. The time cost of having children at school may be considerable, and the direct private costs of education are high’ (p.20).

‘Internal efficiency of the school system is low, reflecting high dropout and repetition rates. It takes an average of 8.7 years of teaching to produce a single graduate of the five-year primary cycle. This efficiency reflects the low number of classroom hours, poor quality and absenteeism of teachers, and lack of system accountability. ... The quality of education is still deficient; the curriculum lacks relevance, textbooks are outdated, teachers are poorly trained and supervised, logistical support is weak, and buildings are in poor conditions’ (p.20).

Therefore, Hossain (1997) also notes that the

‘Bangladesh school education system is left with an extremely centralized, non-participatory, non-transparent and bureaucratic educational administration, management and planning system. The system appears to be quite inadequate for the challenges of achieving the goal of education for all, including UPE, in Bangladesh’ (p.75).

In practice, there is no chance for teacher to offer something beyond or outside the curriculum. The formal school curriculum as it stands has little to offer in relation to environmental and sustainable development.

There are some problems in practice in formal education, but which are also inherent in the model. Formal education is creating unemployment and frustration with a large number of graduates come to job market, which also contribute to exclusion from education. It also creates ‘diploma disease’ to become an elite in the society. As one of our respondents said:

‘I was admitted to the high school to get a good job. That’s my dream. I hope one day I’ll get a job which will help me to improve my life.’ [Activity Questionnaire Data- 1: Bogra 2006]

This respondent clearly perceives the link between a high school certificate and getting a good job. In response to our question, why some parents do not want to send their children to school?- an NGO worker said:

‘When you ask the parents about it, they say: you see my neighbour’s son got education, but didn’t manage to get a job. He is hanging around and burden for his father. Because he got some education, now he can’t work as a day labourer. [Most parents] don’t value education. Also they don’t see a good reason to send their children to schools.’ [NGO work Interview-2: Bogra 2005]

In addition, the formal education system is very rigid and curricula are outdated. Formal education fails to bring knowledge into action. During an observation in formal school we noticed that class teacher was giving a lesson from home economics textbook about household weekly duty regarding cleanliness and disposal of things. Surprisingly the very problem she was raising about the household was present in the classroom.

‘I am surprise when she is talking about daily duties for household. She is reading from the book that you need to sweep the house everyday to take away dust and make your house neat and clean. But I see most of the benches and table are full of dusts. Classroom floor is full of papers and leafs. Now she is explaining weekly household duties. She is saying to the students that you need to dispose your broken furniture and other things. If those are not in use, then you might give some one or store them. But I see inside the classroom there are some broken benches which also dangerous for students, they might hurt themselves by the sharp edges of those broken furniture.’ [Observation Notes- 9: Bogra 2006]

Such examples of the mismatch of words and action form part of the hidden curriculum that teaches students in a powerful way, the undesirable lesson that what they say is more important than what they do.

### **The significance of Nonformal Education**

To reiterate: education is seen as a crucial to creating awareness of sustainable development. According to ‘Chapter 36: Education, Public Awareness and Training’ of Agenda 21, education for sustainable development has four major components: improving basic education, reorienting existing education, increasing public awareness and developing specific training programmes (UNCED, 1992). None of these four areas is outside the boundary of nonformal education.

Nonformal education is defined as ‘any organized, systematic educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups of the population’ (La Belle, 1986:2). But it is based on the pedagogy from the ideas of transformative learning and participatory democracy. It also includes the process of public involvement components and recognise the values of sustainable development. It also occurs outside of traditional school setting, such as community-based activities organised by NGOs (Merriam and Caffarella, 1991). In relation to sustainable development, nonformal education facilitates, as it based on critical approach to education (Freire, 1970, 1985), public involvement in resource management and policy formation. Through this process, it

empowers local communities to take greater control of resource use decisions and social reformation that directly affect them.

In Bangladesh, nonformal primary education contribute 7% of total primary enrolment (Ahmed and Nath, 2005). Equally significantly, nonformal primary education opens the gate of education for the disadvantaged, especially poor and girls to get access to basic education. 70% students of BRAC nonformal primary schools are girls. Thus it is also bringing gender equity in education. The benefits of the nonformal education intervention in education system in Bangladesh and its citizens' life are both immediate and long-term. Nonformal education programmes provide literacy and life skills along with a social consciousness on the issues such as health care, hygiene, first aid, nutrition, sanitation, family planning, civic responsibilities etc. These have immediate affects on children's 'self-confidence' and on capability to handle day-to-day affairs better and escape from exploitative social relations.

## **Contributions to Education for Sustainable Development**

### ***1. Through the curriculum***

Educating people for sustainable development may be inculcated through a variety of programmes and curricula. Nonformal education can be used to promote education for sustainable development in a broader sense. Nonformal education for sustainable development might begin to promote behavioural change. Evidence suggested (Shohel and Howes, 2005) that nonformal primary graduates are more aware of health and environmental issues than the formal primary graduates. In general, the nonformal school method pays much more attention to explanations of healthy and unhealthy behaviour, and there is a suggestion that these explanations are passed on to other members of the family. From the point of view of educational relevance, nonformal primary curriculum is more life-oriented than formal primary curriculum. Nonformal primary curriculum is based on formal curriculum with special emphasis on the needs of the target group.

The curriculum of nonformal education is still based on centralised government curriculum, taking account of the fifty-three competences outlined by the state as expected outcomes of primary education. However, NGOs are adapting it to fit local needs. They develop their own curriculum for nonformal education programmes. One of our respondents said:

‘Though we have to follow government curriculum for our nonformal primary schools, we reduced the formal curriculum, but add different components which are relevant to the students life and which will be very useful for them in future. We use local materials in schools which are available locally. We run the school shift according to the parents opinions. In the same classroom different students can do different activities which is completely impossible in formal schools. We also give emphasis on extra curricular activities so that schools could be an enjoyable learning experiences.’ [NGO worker Interview-3: Norsingdi 2004].

Regarding timetable and curriculum of the school, nonformal education is very flexible. In the classroom students can decide what subject they would like to do. Teachers take care of the students, paying particular attention who left behind with their classmate and helps them to catch up with the class progress.

In our activity questionnaire survey, each and every respondent mentioned things which they do not like about the schools are related to cleanliness, health and safety issues, such as dirty toilets and bathrooms, dusty benches and ceiling fans, and smells from the nearby chicken farm. Thought in most cases in nonformal primary schools they did not have facilities like toilets, bathrooms, tube-wells or ceiling fans, knowledge and active participation made them more aware of the care of their environment. In response to our question about the differences between high school and primary school one of our respondents wrote:

‘The difference between high school and primary school are: In primary school we use to sweep and clean the toilets before starting the class. But in high school we do not need to do anything. In primary school, teacher never hit us, but in high school beat us if we do not prepare our lesson or do not do our home task’ [Activity Questionnaire Data- 13: 2006 Bogra].

Interestingly, study (Shohel and Howes, 2005) suggests that there may be an educational benefit to students who move from nonformal primary school to formal high school, in terms of heightening their awareness of environmental problems. We hypothesise that this awareness contributes to life chances, to job prospects, to wellbeing - but perhaps not to educational achievement.

In our interviews, nonformal graduates in the formal high school said that they liked the big field attached to the school, big school building, different classes and large student population. But they also discussed the school environment. Some of them told me that they do not like dirty toilets, or the filthy tube-well area. One student told me she does not use those facilities because these are unhygienic and bad for health. Another student said:

‘‘Tube-well area is so filthy! Sometimes children leave loo near to the tube-well. They also use tube-well for cleaning them after shitting nearby which is disgusting and hazardous for public health because other people are using the same tube-well for drinking water. Even I can’t think how they do it.’’ [interview: 2005]

In contrast, when we asked a formal primary graduate about the situation he said, ‘‘It is very normal. In my primary school it’s even worse then our high school. We’re use to it.’’ [interview: 2005]

This discussion highlights the distinctiveness of the nonformal curriculum in terms of its relevance, humanism and flexibility (see Appendix 1) and shows how it is valuable in creating opportunities for education towards sustainable development.

## ***2. Through social action as part of the community***

Sustainable development involves taking into account the social structure within which any change must take place. Explanations of social action demonstrate that it is multifaceted – it is never a simple matter to predict when an individual or group will take it upon themselves to act in a particular way. Nonformal education can accommodate such complexities and incorporate such social action into its practice at the grass-root level.

It is useful to contrast the formal and nonformal education systems, in terms of their connection and orientation to the community. Formal education tends to have physical links into the social systems which are seen as making up communities (Bell & Newby, 1971) rather than a strong orientation to the principle of human well-being which is characteristic of the philosophy of nonformal education. The following comments by formal high school students coming from nonformal primary schools are therefore indicative:

‘No one bothers. Classroom is full of rubbish and dust. It might contribute to our illness. But who cares? I think you now know how difficult to stay a classroom like that. The smell come from the nearby chicken farm is disgusting. They have no right to build a farm next to the high school. They are powerful. Therefore, they don’t care anyone. Even union council chairman doesn’t say any thing, or put pressure on them to move it from hear. I think, we should do something about it’. [Grade VI Student Interview- 5: Bogra 2006]

‘If I become *Head Master*<sup>5</sup>, hope I’ll inshaallah<sup>6</sup>, I definitely bring changes to this school. I won’t sit down in the room, talking to other people or reading newspapers, not taking care of our school and my students and colleagues, like our head sir does. However, I’ll visit each and every classroom regularly to see whether everything is ongoing according to plan.’ [Activity Questionnaire Data- 7: Bogra 2006]

Nonformal education is potentially a meta-concept which affords an opportunity to integrate existing cross-curricular issues such as health education, personal and social education, economic and industrial understanding and environmental education. In this way a comprehensive political literacy could develop leading to reflection and action at the local level. This would involve the integration of environmental education and development education with practitioner base life-skills education and training for a wide range of occupations and so would constitute an holistic and viable education for sustainable development. This combination is not just a content issue, it is an ideological and an epistemological task leading to, in Freire’s (1972) terms, a locally derived empowering process which recognises that for most of the world’s population, both ethically and spatially, the local is their most important global action field.

Formal schools are typically situated near to the public places i.e. bazaar, away from students homes, with the result that parents do not know what is going on in the schools, or even whether their children are attending school or not. In contrast, nonformal schools are normally situated in the community near to the houses, so that parents, especially mothers, can see what is going on in the school. One of the NGO worker mention about the community participation in nonformal primary schools:

‘Sometimes parents help the teacher arrange things in the school. Sometimes they provide necessary material make the school comfortable for students, such as mats, a jug of water etc. teacher also talk to parents passing by about their children and send attendant student to bring the absents in the school.’ [NGO worker Interview- 2: 2004 Norsindi]

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<sup>5</sup> In Bangladesh people normally use ‘Head Master’ instead of ‘Head Teacher’.

<sup>6</sup> An Arabic phrase, which means ‘by God’s will’.

### **Conclusions – reconfiguring formal education**

To understand education and development in relation to the community, we need to know how stakeholders make sense of their own roles by appealing to what are often individual paradigms and processes. Whilst we are quick to recognize the value of formal educators' expertise as being located within the process of enabling learning (Jeffs & Smith, 1990) what is currently neglected is the way in which educational institutions impact (for good or ill) on the delicate social ecology of communities, individuals and educational institutions which interact with and are part of them.

The arguments and evidence presented in this paper suggests that a greater understanding of the model of nonformal education raises a critical awareness of many of the unfortunate features of the dominant model of formal education, in relation to notions of education for and towards sustainable development. The problematic nature of pupils' transition from nonformal into the formal education sector is indicative of the maintenance within the formal sector of a dangerously limited view of what processes within schooling are to be valued and taken seriously. For example, children are normally sensitive to hypocrisy and are skillful critics of gaps between policy and practice (Titman, 1994). Data from the three year longitudinal study show that students who made transition from the nonformal to the formal high schools spoke up about the school environment and health and hygiene issues. It is not just what was ignored in the formal schools which was significant to these young people, but the undervalued positions in which they found themselves.

We have illustrated ways in which the process of nonformal education entails the articulation and educational reconciliation of the collective and communitarian dimensions of people's experiences and expectations. As such, nonformal education is based upon 'active citizenship' (Allen, 1992) which entails individuals leading autonomous lives of their own choosing as morally responsible individuals. This moral responsibility is learnt through attempting to achieve considered, reflective choices on the type of life to live. Such reflection is predicated upon informed decision making. This informed position requires knowledge not only of what the individual is going to do but also what consequences are likely to follow from the actions (Crick & Lister, 1974). White (1983) describes it as 'education in power' or, as Crick (1975) suggests, it is founded on the procedural values of freedom, toleration, fairness, respect for truth and respect for reasoning. Then the 'community' becomes obligation. Mead (1986) describes the nature of this obligation towards oneself and one's fellow citizens as being the distinguishing feature between acting as 'full citizens' and not doing so. Citizenship, that is community membership, is the embodiment of individual responsibility, self-respect and achievement orientation (Morris, 1994) which allows, the achievement of instrumental goals like social peace and human capital investment and non-instrumental goals like solidarity and social justice (Fullinwider, 1988).

As we have shown elsewhere (Shohel and Howes, forthcoming) the motives which inform individual and community action are caused by forces outside the individual in direct or indirect ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social groups, communities and possibly societies as a whole are constantly reproduced, modified and transformed by the actions of individuals who are the members of these social groups and communities. This has implications for the role and location of schools as institutions

involved in education towards sustainable development. We have seen how schools *may* be catalysts of change but they cannot catalyse without being connected to a wider social base. The experiences from Bangladesh suggest that nonformal education can supplement knowledge, skills, perceptions and values associated with sustainable development without adding substantial costs to formal education system. Through ongoing efforts to increase access to basic education and continuing education, the country is making progress in education for sustainable development and moving toward more equitable and sustainable society.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Characteristics of Nonformal Education**

#### *I. Regarding its focus on the community:*

1. Sponsors solidarity and companionship
2. Creates channels of communication with the community
3. Orientation toward a critical analysis of political, social and economic reality.
4. Directs its action toward group work and self-criticism.
5. Promotes both community growth and that of the individuals within the primary groups.
6. Does not discriminate against individuals nor make a hierarchy of their needs.

#### *II. Regarding its relevance and humanism:*

1. Its content has a short-term usefulness, and is determined by the community itself.
2. Develops critical and committed consciousness of the transformation of the physical and social environment.
3. Utilises methodologies where all may participate in a creative process.
4. Provokes self-appraisal.
5. Takes into consideration the different learning styles and necessities of the individuals.
6. Preserves individual identity without losing the fixed objectives of the learning group.
7. Stimulates leadership participation and shares the responsibility of the action.

#### *III. Regarding its flexibilities:*

1. Can take place anywhere.
2. Has an open schedule and learning time is unlimited.
3. Invents its own resources for learning.
4. Creates concepts and constantly redefines the current situations of the participants.
5. Avoids pre-established curriculum.