

# Childhood Poverty and Education in Bangladesh

Policy implications for disadvantaged children

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## CHILDHOOD POVERTY AND EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH: POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

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**Abstract.** This paper is based on a recent study carried out as a part of the Visiting Research Fellowship at the UNICEF Office of Research. It offers a theoretical understanding of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, building on the empirical findings of the fieldwork carried out in Bangladesh to develop case studies addressing the questions, why do so many socio-economically disadvantaged children tend to drop out from formal secondary school, and why do some succeed? After exploring the challenges of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, it shows how the challenges could be mitigated through attention to the ecology of human development. This paper demonstrates a better understanding of childhood poverty and education in relation to the theoretical perspective through drawing together empirical evidence, summarising and interpreting it, in a more integrated manner and context. On the basis of this examination of the phenomenon, research findings have translated into recommendations for policy and practice to improve formal secondary schooling for socio-economically disadvantaged children in Bangladesh.

**Keywords:** Childhood poverty; education; disadvantaged children; policy implications; Bangladesh

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education has long been understood as contributing to the development of human potential as well as social growth (Dewey, 1899). It has also 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. It is also widely held that education is one of the most effective ways of addressing poverty, partly through increasing productivity leading to higher incomes for individuals and thereby reducing poverty (Oxfam International, 2000). Therefore, education plays a key role in determining how we spend our adult life. The quality of education is the key to changing both the personal life of individuals and society as a whole.

Education empowers, provides choices, and a voice to disadvantaged children and young people. It also promotes health by teaching them about good health practices, active citizenship through developing skills for life and a sustainable future. In these ways it helps socio-economically disadvantaged children to break down the poverty cycle and to have a better future. It provides the stepping-stone to self-development for those who are disadvantaged by creating choices, and builds self-confidence and self-reliance for individuals. Education should therefore focus on individual development, rather than on an ideologically-driven and centralised philosophy of education. However, on the one hand, a higher level of education means higher income, better health, and a longer life, while on the other, the long-term social and financial costs of educational failure are very high (Panagiotis et al, 2011; Hirsch, 2006).

Education is perceived as an instrument of economic growth, productivity, and enculturation of humanity. This explains why it is often assigned the task of being a pre-requisite for the development of labour, control of fertility, mortality, and fostering an improved quality of life and increased life expectancy in both developed and developing nations. The World Summit for Social Development 1995 also highlighted the importance of education for social equity and social justice, in terms of the fight against poverty, in the creation of productive jobs, and in strengthening the social fabric to achieve human security. This summit emphasised the need for access to education through the provision of literacy and universalization of basic education and primary health care (United Nations, 1995).

In the modern knowledge economy, one shot at education that determines once and for all our future life choices is not enough. But those who fail at school during childhood often find it difficult to recover later on. In developing countries like Bangladesh, those with weak basic educational qualifications are much less likely to continue learning in their adult life. A fair and inclusive schooling system makes the advantages of education available to all and represents one of the most powerful devices to make society more equitable. But systemic structural social exclusion and gender inequality are deeply intertwined with childhood poverty in the Bangladeshi schooling context. If education is to reach all children and provide them with equal opportunities, educational planning needs to be based on a sound analysis and understanding of the complex dynamics of childhood poverty and systemic structural social and political exclusion in schooling, and their impacts on children's life situations.

Bangladesh has made progress in the scale and provision of access to education in recent times and gender equality is satisfactory (World Bank, 2008), but poverty remains a barrier to education for many in Bangladesh where 40 per cent of the population live below the poverty line (World Bank,

2009). Childhood poverty in Bangladesh is a critical issue which is under-explored in the literature, and it is in this area that this working paper makes a contribution by providing empirical evidence. A range of perspectives is crucial for understanding childhood poverty and educational exclusion, challenges and theoretical orientations. This paper therefore presents issues relating to childhood poverty from different perspectives including those of disadvantaged children, their parents and teachers. And finally it is important to analyse perspectives or issues in relation to levels of ecological systems of human development so that a better understanding of experiences of childhood poverty may lead to more integrated approaches to addressing the influence of childhood poverty on education. After providing an overall picture of the Bangladeshi context and challenges of childhood poverty faced by disadvantaged children in two rural areas by using an ecosystemic framework, this paper discusses the many complex ways in which efforts to tackle the challenges of childhood poverty have been influenced by ecological factors within the context of the study.

## 2. THE CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

Situated in the north-eastern corner of south Asia, Bangladesh is one of world's most densely populated countries, with about 150 million people crammed into a system of river deltas which empty into the Bay of Bengal. The population growth rate is around 1.37 per cent (BBS, 2011). In Bangladesh about 44.7 per cent of the total population is estimated to live below the poverty line. The proportion of hard-core poverty (consumption of less than 1,805 calories per day) fell from 30.7 per cent in mid-1970 to 27.9 per cent in 1991-92; the absolute number of persons in hard-core poverty has, however, risen because of the increasing population and is now estimated at thirty million. A key factor contributing to poverty in Bangladesh is levels of literacy, especially among women, which hamper government efforts to curb the population growth rate and increase labour productivity and efficiency (World Bank, 2001).

Since independence, the country has been beset by political and economic instability, aggravated by repeated natural disasters. Development in this context has proved extremely problematic. Although rich in human resources, the country is currently characterised by widespread illiteracy, political chaos and underdevelopment. The majority of the population depends directly or indirectly on agriculture for their livelihood and lives in rural areas in the fertile Ganges-Brahmaputra delta, an area swept by frequent cyclones, tidal surges, floods and river erosion. Average life expectancy for both sexes at birth is 61; nutritional deficiencies, overcrowding, poor water and sanitation contribute to major health problems.



Map 1: Bangladesh on the World Map

The alleviation of poverty figures prominently in the development planning of Bangladesh, and it is seen to depend largely on faster economic growth. The Government has prioritised family planning programmes to reduce the rate of population growth, and has also prioritised literacy expansion initiatives to address human resource development, focusing on emerging industries as well as manpower export. By expanding enrolment and improving quality of primary education, the Government expects to make a major contribution to a better-educated workforce in Bangladesh. The key to achieving higher rates of economic growth, and at the same time ensuring equitable distribution of these economic benefits, is seen to lie in the development and utilisation of human resources, which Bangladesh has in abundance.

It is widely felt that education can help to break through this vicious cycle of underdevelopment. In developing 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 institutional and social processes, the phenomenon of poor quality education is part of a vicious cycle of unsustainability in the broader context of development. Education ought to meet the material, intellectual and moral needs of the people in the country (MoE, 2011). Effective education should address the problems of literacy, create employment opportunities through better distribution of skills, spread useful health knowledge more widely, and have an impact on the economics of population growth at the individual level (Oxfam International, 2000).

### 3. CHALLENGES OF EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

The Constitution of Bangladesh acknowledges education as a basic human right to its citizens and the importance of education is well-established in legal frameworks. However, the State has made a strong commitment to education through ‘a constitutional obligation of providing basic education to all its citizens by removing illiteracy within a given time frame’ (Article 28, clause 3 of the Constitution). This commitment has been strengthened through the Government's engagement in a number of international declarations (WCEFA, 1990; UNESCO, 2000), including the present target for the achievement of EFA goals by the year 2015.

The Government of Bangladesh has recognised education as a fundamental right of every citizen through its constitution and enjoins on the State ‘to adopt effective measures for (a) establishing a uniform, mass-oriented and universal system of education and extending free and compulsory education to all children to such a stage as may be determined by law; (b) relating education to the needs of society and producing properly trained and motivated citizens to serve those needs and (c) remove illiteracy within such time as may be determined by law’. In pursuance of the constitutional commitment to ensure educational opportunities for all citizens and to build a just and equal society, all citizens will have the opportunity to participate in education to fulfil their individual potential, be effective members of their family and community and be productive and responsible citizens, capable of facing the challenges of the 21st century.

Education therefore has been recognised as a priority sector by all Governments since the independence of Bangladesh. In order to maintain a modern, scientific and effective education system, the Government continues to attach the highest priority to the improvement of the education sector at the very least, in terms of stated policy and increasing investment in education (Shohel, 2010). Though investment in education in terms of gross national product (GNP) is relatively low in Bangladesh compared to other South-Asian countries, the Government has taken a number of steps to strengthen governance and performance in the education sectors to pursue both efficiency gains and improve equity and quality in educational outcomes. The policy initiatives that have been taken include policy reforms, specific areas of administrative and functional decentralisation, as well as enhancing financing. While some positive developments have taken place still many challenges remain within the Bangladeshi education systems.

However, basic education remains a massive challenge for Bangladesh, because the quality, range, and state of development of the education system are poor, to such an extent that it actually contributes to inequalities. The Government’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) emphasises education as a key to human development. It therefore states in the section ‘Investing in People: Education’:

“Deprivation from education itself is a key element of poverty. The number of poor people deprived of education is disproportionately high, and lack of education in turn limits their capacity to overcome poverty, thus creating a vicious and intergenerational cycle. Empowering people with knowledge and skills is the most vital component of human development for poverty reduction. Education and learning have thus become key elements of poverty alleviation. The education system in Bangladesh is not pro-poor; and the quality and content of education do not effectively serve the goals of human development and poverty reduction. There is general agreement that the number of institutions and

enrolments have grown at all levels, but quality of education has deteriorated especially in institutions where the children of the poor families go.” (Planning Commission, 2005:125)

As primary education receives about half of the education sector budget, a simple way of acquiring a perspective on the education budget is to note that approximately £2 (approx. USD 3) per annum per head of population is spent on primary education in Bangladesh. So while it seems the Government is working towards all children and adults having access to quality basic education, there is also clear evidence that the State continues to fail to provide basic education for all of its citizens through the formal education system. Of the 20 million primary school-aged children, four million are out of school and another four million or more drop out before completing primary education.

As a result of reforms, the enrolment rate has increased and gender equity has been reached but attendance and efficiency levels are average in primary schools, and many disadvantaged children still do not attend (Jahan and Choudhury, 2005). There is also an exceptionally low average level of attainment among children who complete primary school (Hossain, 2006). A nationwide survey study of primary school completers shows that only 1.6 per cent of children acquired all of 27 competencies tested in the survey and half of the children failed to achieve 60 per cent or more of the basic competencies (Ahmed et al, 2003).

Five years of primary education have been free since 1973 and compulsory for the 6-10 year age group since 1991 through the Compulsory Primary Education (CPE) Act in 1990, and so should be accessible to all regardless of economic status. However, education is not free in practice. There are still direct and indirect opportunity costs of education for families. Average government spending per student per year for primary schooling is Tk 730<sup>1</sup> whereas average parent spending is about Tk 1,000 per year (Chowdhury et al, 2002). The higher opportunity cost of labour to poor families also means that children attending primary school are not without cost to them.

In the National Education Policy 2010 the Government gave more commitments to education, planning to extend primary education from five to eight years by 2015. Specific strategies have been developed to address major problems identified such as low enrolment particularly of girls, low attendance and secondary dropout in primary and secondary schools (Planning Commission, 2005).

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<sup>1</sup> Taka (Tk) is the name of Bangladeshi currency. £1= Tk 130.

#### 4. CHILDHOOD POVERTY AND EDUCATION IN BANGLADESH

Childhood poverty is a condition that is characterised by an unacceptably low standard of living due to insufficient resources in the households in which they live. It is generally considered as unacceptable for two main reasons: 1) the long-term impact of poverty on children's development, educational outcomes, job prospects, health and behaviour (UNICEF, 2007); and 2) consequent intergenerational transmission of poverty. Children are exposed 'to recurrent poverty spells or even a life full of hardship, increasing the chances of passing their poverty onto the next generation' (Grinspun, 2004:2). However, childhood is an important time for human development and it is 'much more than just the space between birth and the attainment of adulthood, childhood refers to the state and condition of a child's life: to the quality of those years' (UNICEF, 2004:3; emphasis is original).

Childhood poverty is a huge barrier for social and educational inclusion not only in the Global South, but also in the Global North. Childhood poverty is correlated with dropping out of school, low academic achievement, teenage pregnancy and childbearing, poor mental and physical health, delinquent behaviour, and unemployment in early adulthood (Brooks-Gunn and Duncan, 1997; Duncan and Brooks-Gunn, 1997). The longer children live in poverty, the lower their educational achievement and the worse their social and emotional functioning (Duncan et al, 1994). Children living in childhood poverty are exposed not only to more psychosocial stressors but also to more impoverished physical living conditions (Evan and English, 2002).

A study by Sen and Hulme (2004) shows that in Bangladesh around 31 per cent of the rural population suffers the indignity of chronic poverty – low consumption, hunger and under-nutrition, lack of access to basic health services, illiteracy and other deprivations for more than a decade. About 20 per cent of the total population lives in extreme income poverty and almost 19 per cent of rural households cannot have 'three full meals' a day; about 10 per cent subsist on two meals or less for several months every year. Despite childhood poverty, across the education systems in Bangladesh, many disadvantaged children and young people do transfer from primary into secondary schools. However, there is significant dropout amongst children who have made this transition. On the face of it, there could be many reasons for this. Childhood poverty is likely to be one of the main reasons behind many of them (Shohel, 2010; Doftori, 2004).

A report on childhood poverty in Bangladesh shows that 33 million children - about half of all Bangladeshi children - are living in poverty while about one in four is deprived of at least four basic needs among the following: food, education, health, information, shelter, water and sanitation. In Bangladesh, children (0-17 years) constitute 44 per cent of the total population i.e., 142 million in 2006. One out of every six children is a working child; basically more than seven million children are working across the country. In Bangladesh, around 26.5 million out of 63 million children are living below the national poverty line. The highest proportion of children, 64 per cent of those aged 3-17 years, are deprived of sanitation, 59 per cent of information, 41 per cent of shelter, 35 per cent of food, 16 per cent of health and 8 per cent of education. The report stresses the importance of strengthening the profile of children at the national policy table and, in order to realize the existing relevant policy commitments, policy recommendations include monitoring the implementation of laws, regulations and programme results, and an increased budgetary allocation (UNICEF Bangladesh, 2009).

Poor health, lack of basic learning materials and school equipment, and life in catchment areas are the factors influencing this silent exclusion. Studies suggested that children who are over-age, irregularly attending school and under achieving are most likely to drop out (Hossain and Zeitlyn, 2010), and there are interrelated links between childhood poverty and exclusion from education. Children affected by childhood poverty are less likely to go to school, more likely to dropout from school and even once they are in school are more likely to be 'silently excluded' from education (Shohel and Howes, 2008). Children with poor health which is linked to childhood poverty and poor diet perform worse in school than others (Pridmore, 2007).

Whilst poverty is a major factor in educational quality and equity, other factors are at play which could be termed as 'cultural poverty'. Bangladeshi society is strongly patriarchal. Therefore, in some cases poor families prioritise educating their sons over their daughters because boys have better employment prospects in the future to provide income for the family (Hossain, 2006). On the one hand, as there are no state benefits in Bangladesh, boys are perceived as providers of financial support to aging parents; on the other hand, girls' labour is often central to the household chores.

Apart from the financial factors, existing socio-cultural norms and practices discourage parents from sending their daughters to school (Papanek, 1985; Quasem, 1983). Also from the parents' point of view, education for daughters may seem less attractive than for sons because a girl's education brings fewer economic benefits if she marries early and stops working, or if after marriage she ceases to provide an economic contribution to her parents (Hossain and Yousuf, 2001). It might be argued that this 'cultural poverty' hinders community involvement and parental interest in promoting girls' education (Khatun, 1979).

Also the low relevance of education to the realities of life has been seen as an obstacle to educational achievement. Rural families prefer their daughters to learn those skills which would increase the possibility of marrying into an economically and socially better off family (Quasem, 1983). An earlier study shows that middle class families view education as a favourable factor in increasing the possibilities for their daughters making a good marriage, since education helps girls manage households more efficiently (Ahmed, 1978).

A comparatively recent government study of school enrolment shows that 91 per cent of children from the most educated families are enrolled in schools whereas only 12 per cent of boys and 7 per cent of girls from illiterate families are enrolled. Lack of physical facilities, i.e. toilets, tube-wells, boundary walls, and so on, discourages attendance of girls more than boys at school (Ahmed and Hasan, 1984). Enrolment of girls is negatively associated with distance of school from home, because parents may be unwilling to allow girls to cross a major road or river on the way to school (Jahan and Choudhury, 2005).

Though over the years infrastructure and teaching staff have been improved and increased, access to education remains problematic and the quality of education delivered is less than satisfactory. As Robinson (1999:20) 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."

## 5. STUDY OVERVIEW

### 5.1 Rationale of the Study

The Government of Bangladesh and donor agencies make major investments to extend access to education for marginalised children, but there is little evidence to substantiate the effectiveness of supported education programmes for those they intend to benefit. Little attempt has been made to empirically investigate effects of childhood poverty on children's attainments in Bangladeshi secondary schools. There are important gaps in this knowledge base that the present study sought to address. Very little is known about the actual conditions faced in everyday life by those who live in childhood poverty. Quality education is a prominent aspiration in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but there are few studies of school improvement in relation to the educational achievement of disadvantaged children in Bangladesh. This is especially true for the rural children who constitute the majority of those impoverished in Bangladesh.

In framing the issue of challenges faced by disadvantaged children living in childhood poverty, it is important to take into account the many and various interrelated influences that could affect their study in secondary schools. As we will see, the theoretical framework adopted for this purpose raises questions about the influence of home life, community, institutions and wider socio-political factors on the opportunities, experiences and difficulties faced by disadvantaged children in rural Bangladesh.

### 5.2 Research Questions

With regard to the knowledge gaps and understanding of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, the research concerns lie with the contexts of individual children and their schools. The following questions were derived following an exploration of the literature:

- What kind of challenges do the children living in childhood poverty face during secondary schooling in Bangladesh?
- How can we better support them during secondary school education to achieve educational success and a better future?

### 5.3 Objectives of the Study

The research aimed at achieving a better understanding of the challenges and barriers for disadvantaged children associated with childhood poverty and educational exclusion in Bangladesh; to provide evidence about the probable effectiveness of proposed solutions to those challenges and barriers; and to give voice to the disadvantaged children, their parents and teachers. It also aimed to better understand the individual, pedagogical and institutional contexts associated with formal secondary schooling.

### 5.4 Theoretical Framework of the Study

The study is theoretically situated in Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1992) work on ecological systems theory. Whilst it is clear that poverty has a direct impact on school attendance, children's energy levels, and concentration (Oxfam, 2000), we have little understanding of how it hinders school transition. Ecological systems theory takes a broader view of the impact of poverty, showing how

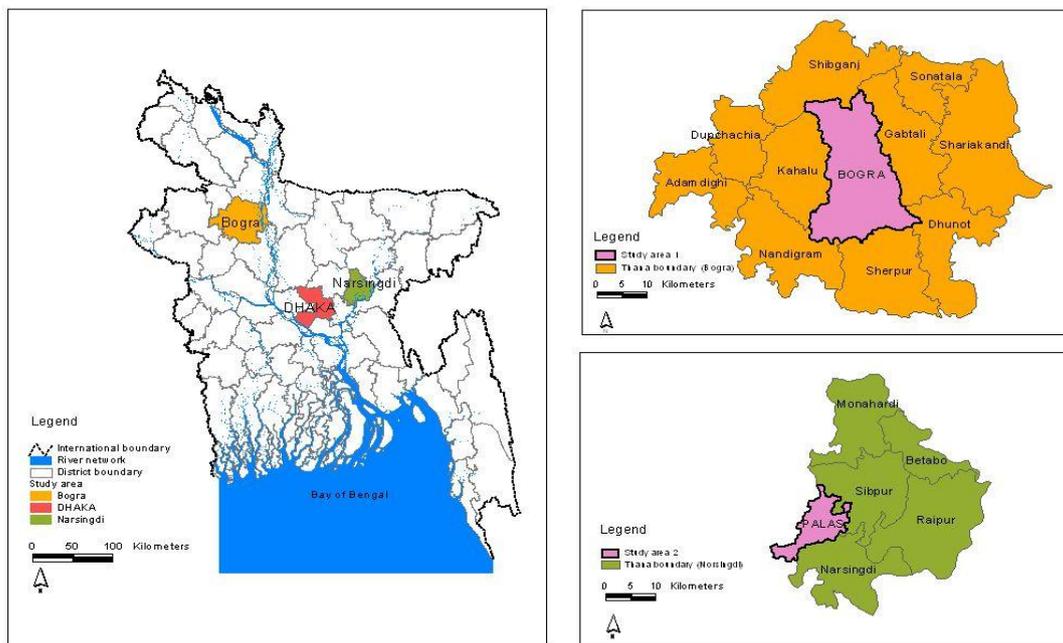
experience within the school system is dependent on personal, cultural and economic factors through school and home, family, and religion, to be seen in connection with changing or dominant aspects of the culture, society and community:

“The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relationships between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded” (Bronfenbrenner 1979: 21).

The methodology explained below provides a practical means to support such a study in the complex case of schooling, for the development of more inclusive practice.

### 5.5 Methodology of the Study

A mixed method approach was employed to carry out in-depth case studies of disadvantaged children and their schools from two geographical locations in Bangladesh namely Bogra and Narsingdi. The settings of the study were two distinct rural areas of Bangladesh chosen because they facilitate useful comparison within the particular contexts as well as better access for the fieldwork. Two schools were selected from these two research sites based on availability of disadvantaged children who had graduated from nonformal primary schools.



Map 2: Bangladesh: location of the two research sites

Two cohorts of children who started secondary schooling in 2008 were chosen as the target population from two schools. Twelve disadvantaged children from each school were chosen for case studies six of whom were female for gender balance. Thus a total of 24 disadvantaged children were selected as a sample for this study. Among these, half had dropped out during different stages of

their secondary schooling while others were continuing their studies at Grade X level at the time of the fieldwork. To collect data on the life of individual children, interviews were conducted with them and their parents, and to collect data regarding the school context, interviews were conducted with the head teachers and focus group discussions were carried out with assistant teachers. The fieldwork was carried out from March to June 2012 and four research assistants worked with the author to collect and process empirical data. Ethical principles were followed throughout the research process.

## 6. DRAWING CONCLUSIONS FROM THE EMPIRICAL DATA

By using the theoretical framework, the data generated show how each of the problems represents a significant challenge at different levels (micro, meso, exo and macro) for the ecology of human development. This paper shows the ways in which different individuals (children, teachers and parents) contribute to the challenges of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, and the ways in which they provide resources for overcoming these challenges.

### 6.1 Challenges of Childhood Poverty and Educational Exclusion

Though the Government has not seen childhood poverty as a problem in the context of education in Bangladesh, nevertheless scenarios suggest that it is a serious challenge for Bangladeshi children. Generally at state and society level, school failure is seen as a lack of quality education (Robinson, 1999; Hossain, 1997). But longitudinal (2008-2012) empirical data on educational attainment suggest that, for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, childhood poverty is clearly a hurdle to overcome if they are to persevere with their education. Challenges come not only from the educational setting, but also from curricula, their family backgrounds, everyday life experiences and the communities they live in. The challenges inherent in childhood poverty derived from different perspectives and are interwoven with the various elements of individual children's lives.

In the following section we see how the challenges of childhood poverty and educational exclusion are related to and influenced by the different levels of ecology of human development. The following analysis helps to show which challenges are deeply embedded in and maintained through the ecological systems, and also which are well-understood and perceived by those involved. This will lead to substantial recommendations for ways forward in addressing these challenges.

#### *Poverty*

Longitudinal empirical data demonstrate clearly that poverty impacts on children's ability to enrol, attend and remain in school, especially at higher grades in secondary schools. Empirical evidence from the study shows that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds were over-represented in terms of dropout rates and failure at school.

The goal of nonformal schooling is to provide a flexible and high-quality basic education. But the data demonstrates that the influence of poverty on educational attainment for disadvantaged children is maintained at every level (i.e. micro, meso, exo and macro) of ecology of personal development. For instance, the financial barriers of school fees for many children, and children's daily feelings of hunger and malnutrition, which influence their learning, are micro-level influences of poverty. Attitudes of the members of the communities and institutions towards economically deprived children, as may be shown in a teacher's behaviour in the classroom towards poor children, are meso-level aspects. State policy, which hinders an individual's emergence from a situation of economic deprivation by not supporting children to continue their studies, is a macro-level factor.

From the perspectives of those involved, their understanding of the influences of poverty depends enormously on their own particular positions. Poverty is seen as a structural problem contributing to school failure, but the policy-makers do not pay attention to discriminating behaviours/conduct of teachers, or to the lack of food, and neither do they use their influence at the local level to challenge practices at the macro-level. Children see poverty as the main obstacle to continuing their

education, but they also experience it as hunger as well as neglect by other people. Teachers see poverty as a barrier but they do not see it as a result of societal structure, or as anything that they have power to change. They often think that people are not hard working and that the majority do not entirely understand the complexity of life. Parents see poverty as the misfortune of not having inherited wealth and being born into a poor family. They also see it as instability of earnings and job opportunities. So the challenge of childhood poverty for educational attainment is very real and maintained at all four levels, but only very partially understood by all those involved. This means that no one is seriously addressing this challenge.

### ***Early Marriage***

Early marriage is a problem for the continuing education of girls in general; but data show that it is more of a problem for children from low socio-economic backgrounds, because they experience more pressure to find financial and cultural security during the early adolescent period of secondary school. Marriage is an exo-system element of individual life and a life changing event. Marriage brings family responsibilities to an individual. Society has promoted the idea that females should be at home and taking care of the family, therefore in most cases after marriage girls do not have the chance to carry on their education. Therefore, early marriage represents a challenge for girls to continue education. It has psycho-physical and socio-cultural dimensions in personal life. The new role of a spouse brings psychological stress and creates a different social identity and responsibilities.

Early marriage is seen as a malpractice of social norms and a result of childhood poverty, as well as a lack of awareness of the potential negative results of assuming family responsibilities too young. Children see it as part of life. Teachers consider one of the causes to be poverty, as well as lack of education and awareness. Parents see it as their duty to ensure their children get married early as it is a cultural norm in rural areas and is believed necessary for the betterment of the family; some of them consider a daughter as a burden for the family.

The challenge of early marriage puts pressure on girls to leave school. Childhood poverty has a link with early marriage as parents need to continue expenditure on their daughter, including the indirect costs of education. In addition there is a risk of failing to arrange a good marriage for their daughter. And in the long run, investment in girls' education does not bring any financial benefit for the family as it does in the case of boys. Structures at the community and state levels are particularly responsible as there are neither social security nor better employment opportunities for girls, and their chances of financial freedom are minimal.

### ***Value of Education***

Empirical data show that people from lower social classes generally do not value education for its own sake. Some saw it as a tool for changing life if it leads to better opportunities for getting a job. Firstly, at micro-level an individual will decide from the personal perspective and according to their way of life, whether education is worthwhile or not. Secondly at meso-level, the value of education is generated and appreciated through social awareness and interaction as well as by example. And finally at exo-level, in general it is developed through social values, institutional approach and work place policy. In this case education is treated as a tool for obtaining a job.

The value of education is not widely recognised in poor communities in Bangladesh. That has an impact on school enrolment and children remaining at school. The perception of some children was that education is not intended for the poor. Teachers claimed that parents do not value education, as they are not educated. But parents argued that a limited amount of education does not change their children's lives. Children and teachers appeared to suggest that the poor do not value education. The institutional culture of formal secondary schools supported the general view of teachers that the poor are unable to see the value of schooling. An interesting quote from a pupil about teachers was that they were 'thinking I'm not worth teaching'. Parents appeared to think differently – in general they value education, but pragmatically they see that limited education has no practical benefit for many children. Parents value education if their children can achieve a level of schooling which will offer the opportunity of a better life. Therefore, in practical terms, if this opportunity does not appear to exist children will often not be enrolled in schools, or they will drop out later.

### ***Relevance of Education to Future Prospects and Employability***

As mentioned earlier, formal school education is not life oriented and needs-based. The irrelevance of education to the future prospects and employability of the rural poor results in boredom, lack of understanding of future careers, poor marks in exams, and absence from school. The formal secondary school curriculum is fixed at the macro-level, developed centrally and is strongly supported nationally. On the whole, teachers do not challenge the irrelevance of course contents which is related to urban life, by giving examples from the everyday life of rural communities.

Formal school education is not life-oriented, and children thought that it is not so useful in their day-to-day life apart from improving basic literacy. Parents thought that it is not very useful for their children's lives, and especially so when considering finding a job, unless children manage to complete their education and graduate from university. Therefore, the challenge of irrelevance of education in primary and secondary level curriculum is that it decreases the motivation of both children and parents. This has clear implications for children's enrolment and dropout rates as well as educational attainment.

### ***Quality of Education***

The quality of education is important to build children's future prospects. As discussed earlier, the quality of schooling in Bangladesh is a serious concern for further educational development in the country. Longitudinal data show that children's school attainment is very poor. This contributes to early dropout from formal secondary school.

The influence of the quality of education permeates all four levels of the ecology of human development. Firstly at micro-level, if the quality of education is poor, children will fail to understand lessons, can fall behind, and may struggle to catch up with progress in the class. The school experience becomes boring and unpleasant and they waste their time at school. Secondly at meso-level, teachers and schools should ensure the quality of education. Thirdly at exo-level, this responsibility falls on the community and local government. Finally at macro-level, the State can ensure quality by reinforcing policies and by providing necessary resources and support.

The challenge of the quality of education is related to the institutional culture and the teachers who are part of that culture. Parental pressure, community reinforcement, school improvement and policy need to be implemented using the facilities and resources available for ensuring the quality of education in formal secondary schools.

### ***Teaching-learning Methods***

Teaching-learning methods are the main tools for delivering education. Longitudinal data show that teacher-centred teaching-learning methods and passive learning in formal secondary school discourages disadvantaged children. Lack of teaching skills and teachers' pedagogical skills are the main reasons for lack of stimulus within formal secondary schools.

The influence of teaching-learning methods has a clear impact at the meso-level for individuals (as micro-systems) in schooling. Although formal secondary school classes have large numbers of children, innovative participatory teaching-learning could improve the situation and produce better learning outcomes. At exo-level the interface between institutional culture and policy implementation has a direct link to teaching-learning methods.

The teaching-learning methods used in formal secondary schools are not very effective and do not ensure active participation in classroom learning. Teachers understand the differences between active and passive teaching and learning and acknowledge that their methods are not effective. The challenge of teaching-learning methods lies in teachers' understanding of pupils' abilities and the subject contents they are teaching.

### ***Teacher-student Relationship***

Without good teacher-student relationships, we can not expect positive interaction between them. Empirical data shows that a lack of good teacher-student relationships has an influence on children's motivation to learn. The influence of the teacher-student relationship is supported at two levels. Firstly at micro-level, the comfort or discomfort of children develops within the classroom and school; secondly at meso-level, as interaction takes place among teachers and children. Good leadership within the school should facilitate positive interaction.

Children felt that teacher-student relationships are not cordial in formal secondary schools. However, many considered this to be understandable due to the large numbers of pupils and difficulty of maintaining good relationships with every student. The challenge of student-teacher relationships needs to be negotiated within the institutional culture with input from the community. Parental and community involvement could assist in producing improvements in this area.

### ***Health and Hygiene***

Health and hygiene are important for human well-being and are an essential part of a good educational environment for children. The influence of health and hygiene is supported at three levels. Firstly at micro-level, children can have good or bad physical and mental health. Secondly at meso-level, children will benefit from a school environment which gives them a sense of good health and hygiene. Finally at exo-level, institutions could ensure the health and hygiene of children in their schools.

Formal schooling has failed to provide necessary health and hygiene awareness in the curriculum and in practice. Children see it as bad practice and as harmful for individual and collective health. Teachers see it as a result of lack of resources and a difficult issue to manage. The institutional environment of formal secondary school neglects the challenges of health and hygiene. But these institutions in particular should care about human well-being and the creation of a congenial atmosphere in school for children.

### ***Child Labour***

The problem of child labour is significant in Bangladesh. In 2000, around 6 to 8 million, or about one fifth of all Bangladeshi children between the ages of 5 to 14 were classified as child labourers (Salmon, 2005). Most of these children work in the agricultural sector. Among the poorest quintile of households, the share of family income contributed by child workers reaches nearly 50 per cent. Children are much more likely to work when they live in a household where the potential for income generation is low and where it is already exhausted.

### ***Child Malnutrition***

Child malnutrition is pervasive in Bangladesh. Research suggests that public cash transfers and relief programmes that provide food to the poor, such as the Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme and the Food for Work Programme, as well as interventions by NGOs, have significant impacts on reducing child malnutrition (Deolalikar, 2005). To attain the millennium development goal of halving child under-nutrition by 2015, Bangladesh must scale up targeted income poverty interventions, public food transfer programmes targeted at the poor and regions with the largest number of malnourished children, interventions that reduce the risk and vulnerability of poor households to natural disasters, nutrition education for mothers and care givers, and rapid pro-poor economic growth.

### ***Predominant Cultural Norms***

Empirical data suggest that in general teachers, schools, community and education systems have a tendency to follow the main cultural trends when it comes to schooling. For example, the social class identity of children is perceived through cultural norms which can create a superiority-inferiority complex. Corporal punishment and private tutoring are also trends in the educational culture of Bangladesh. Corporal punishment decreases the motivation to attend school and creates fear as well as psychological stress among disadvantaged children thus contributing to school dropout. On the one hand, private tutoring encourages teachers to neglect their duties and not deliver lessons properly and productively, as they have invested their time in private tutoring. On the other hand, children from economically deprived families cannot afford private tutoring.

Two major issues underlie the empirical data in relation to the challenges of childhood poverty. The first of these can be summarised as an aim to promote active citizenship for children. The second concerns the priority of maintaining a child-focused culture rather than a bureaucratic one.

What then would be the ideal in respect of these underlying issues?

### ***Active Citizenship***

Research (Shohel, 2010) illustrates the ways in which the process of supplementary nonformal education involves the articulation and educational understanding of the collective and community dimensions of children's experiences and expectations. As such, nonformal education is based upon 'active citizenship' (Allen, 1992) which engages individuals leading autonomous lives as morally responsible individuals. For leading a collective life, responsibility towards the 'community' becomes an obligation. The nature of this obligation towards oneself and one's fellow citizens is a collective responsibility for individuals, and is the distinguishing feature between acting as 'full citizens' (Mead, 1986) and not doing so. Citizenship - that is community membership in general - is the embodiment of individual responsibility, self-respect and achievement (Morris, 1994). It allows the achievement of instrumental goals such as social welfare and human capital investment, and non-instrumental goals such as solidarity, social equity and social justice (Fullinwider, 1988). It is obvious that participation in community life by the school is necessary to bring about change as Kemmis et al (1983:18) suggest:

"If changes are to be wrought in our social structure... then individual virtue and individual action will be insufficient to bring them about. They must be brought about by collective action capable of confronting unjust and irrational social structures. The socially-critical orientation sees right knowledge and right action together: it does not value only knowledge and leave action to follow. It therefore requires participation of the school in the life of its community and of the community in the school."

Therefore, the secondary school curriculum should be relevant to children's collective lives in the context of their communities, rather than developed centrally on an ideological basis.

School should provide young people with a sense of community and an experience of democratic participation. But unfortunately teaching and learning practice in the classroom is detached from community and real life situations in Bangladesh. Children's learning becomes isolated and focused on text-book based information. The wide gap between prescribed and practiced curriculum makes the situation worse. Therefore centralised curriculum practice fails, and there is little attempt to connect with the lives of children, often producing alienation and frustration among them. According to the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century (UNESCO, 1996:21), education is considered as a social experience through which children learn about themselves, develop interpersonal skills and acquire basic knowledge and abilities. The commission further suggests that this learning experience should start in early childhood through the involvement of families and local communities.

Parents, teachers and children need to discuss openly how schools could work as social and learning communities rather than as knowledge factories or bureaucratic organisational machines. Schools should be able to create a sense of stability and belonging within the community and among the disadvantaged children. To do so they must welcome everybody whatever his or her background; accept each person's individuality; allow people time to develop as an individual and learn to take care of one another and be treated with respect; provide a place where young people want to stay; offer the chance to learn; stimulate learning and encourage initiative; allow diversions and mistakes

but provide feedback to develop a sense of direction; foster concentrated study; provide an environment where children enjoy learning and it becomes infectious.

Formal education tends to focus on acquisition of knowledge which sometimes becomes concentrated in the classroom. UNESCO (1996) recommends four principal pillars of education namely; learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be. There should be opportunities for children to understand how to learn through the acquisition of wider general knowledge and the scope to work on a number of subjects. They need to acquire occupational skills as well as competencies for working in local and wider contexts. Children should develop understanding of their local and wider community for life and work within a society that promotes pluralism and mutual understanding. Finally, education should develop ones' personality and abilities regarding independence, judgement and responsibility.

From this point of view, teaching and learning methods need to focus on local and community needs by using local materials and contexts thus enabling children to develop as active citizens for the improvement of communities both in local and wider perspectives. If school fails to make learning more active and engaged, young people lose their motivation which is also affected by quality of education, teacher-student relationship and social class identity.

### ***Child-focused Culture***

Education is a human right for the betterment of young people who are the future citizens of society. Consequently children are expected to spend a considerable time in school and it is here that they first experience living and working together in a social context. It should therefore be a happy and exciting place for them. For socially disadvantaged groups, a welcoming school environment is even more important, especially in fragile and troublesome neighbourhoods. In practice however, formal schools may sometimes privilege some and marginalise others.

As discussed earlier, teaching-learning methods in formal secondary schools do not support individual children from socio-economically deprived families. The focus when transmitting knowledge should be problem solving not as an exercise from a textbook, but based on world problems related to their everyday life. However, a project-based teaching-learning method might better suit the needs of these children.

The quality of education provided by formal secondary schools is not satisfactory and this probably contributes to the high dropout rate. Many factors are associated with the quality of education such as curriculum, teaching-learning methods, quality of teachers, leadership within the school and space for learning.

On the basis of these two issues, schools should be reformed as nurturing communities by bringing together community members, parents, teachers, public and private services. This will help local people to take initiatives, run the school democratically and bring about change within the community, providing empowerment. In this way, community-based schooling can enable people to assert their collective power and challenge inaction, inequality and injustice.

Disadvantaged children lack the 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1997) for success at school as, within the existing system, their interests and knowledge do not count as being relevant. Teachers' attitudes to and perceptions of marginalised children are therefore self-fulfilling.

## 7. POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

Changes in policy and practice must be based on firm evidence which serves to identify the key underlying issues through the lens of theory, and makes policy makers and practitioners aware of the implications of failing to address these issues. However, it is tempting to draw up a list of recommendations which follows the theoretical framework of the study.

The findings of a study are very important as a contribution to the knowledge domain if they are linked with conceptual and theoretical understanding. Theoretically grounded critical accounts are needed in the study of policy (Finch, 1985). In a different context, relating to the education of women in Bangladesh, Hassan (1995) gives the following summary statement:

“... the core and surface of the society is still prone to superstitious beliefs, the mind is accustomed more to surrender than to question. Emotion together with blind faith makes it hard for intellect to make any headway there and work effectively.”

Even if this over-simplifies the situation, the empirical data of the study supports to some extent the argument that it is nevertheless difficult for research to bring about change to educational policy if it fails to reach the policy-makers.

The study shows that the dropout rate of disadvantaged children is comparatively higher among their cohort in formal secondary schools. The truth is that many unnoticed features of classroom and school life constitute ‘the reality of secondary schooling’ for disadvantaged children. However, schooling is about the fit between the life of individual children and the school system. That is why everyone involved in each aspect of education must work together creatively in an attempt to solve the issues and problems within the whole area of childhood poverty and educational exclusion. Many perspectives are therefore needed to understand the nature of the educational process, whether in terms of decision making, or developing teaching strategies (McCutcheon, 1981).

The paper now examines the policy implications for disadvantaged children if those different stakeholders do not address the current situation.

### 7.1 Implications of Not Addressing These Issues

The analysis to demonstrate the implications of not addressing the issues arising from this study of different human ecology systems has produced multiple conclusions. As Finch (1985:122) advocates:

“... the researcher is the provider of knowledge, not just in the sense of ‘facts’ but, more importantly, of *insights* [original italic] which invite participants to reconceptualize their own world, and therefore possibly to devise ways of changing it.”

In this section, I begin with the challenges identified and analyse the implications for different agencies if they were to ignore them. I also show the nature of challenges arising from the different dimensions, and how this has an impact on policy implications. For example, in terms of the psycho-physical dimension, many of the challenges have no macro-level implications, and can only be addressed at the level of the school, NGO, community; while in the socio-cultural dimension, all challenges are supported at all levels, and so there are many implications for macro as well as exo-level policies.

As a socio-cultural challenge, *early marriage* is still accepted at all levels of the ecological system. Macro-level policies alone cannot address such a challenge and create change in the desired direction. Thus there is a need for policy at the macro-level, which, at the same time, is directed at the three other levels.

Macro-policy directed towards the micro-level: without extending support for girls' education, for example through further development of the grant programme for girls, they will fail to continue their secondary school career.

Macro-policy directed towards the exo-level: without curricular emphasis on the disadvantages of early marriage (borrowing pedagogical techniques from nonformal schools) the attitude and value systems of society will not change.

As my colleague and I have shown elsewhere (Shohel and Howes, 2007a), the motives which inform individual and community action are produced by forces outside the individual in direct or indirect ways (see also Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Social groups, communities and possibly societies as a whole are constantly reproduced, modified and transformed by the actions of individuals who are their members. This has implications for the role and position of schools as institutions involved in education towards sustainable future life. 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 and better living at micro-level without adding substantial costs to the formal education system (Shohel and Howes, 2011).

What would happen if initiatives are not taken for positive change? If active 'citizenship' and 'child-centeredness' are not addressed in the systems by all stakeholders, severe problems will continue to dominate children's experience of school. Early marriage, for example, is an existing extensive cultural practice in Bangladesh, and will continue to be so without an extended and far-reaching educational effort. The current practice of corporal punishment in school is antithetical for active citizenship and survives because the system focuses on efficient schooling but not on student outcomes, i.e. dropout rate. Employability is an important aspect of education for disadvantaged young people, but schools are not focusing on meaningful learning outcomes; they appear to care only about diplomas, grades etc. The result is that at the end of their secondary school career, children hold certificates but do not have the active skills and knowledge needed to access the job market.

These implications show that the study of childhood poverty and educational exclusion has thrown light on issues that go much beyond just access to education. In the next sections the two following questions are answered:

*What are the consequences of failing to promote active citizenship?*

*What are the consequences of not focusing systems on children?*

### ***Implications for Formal Secondary Schools***

In formal secondary schools, children's decision-making capacity i.e. giving preference to their choice of learning, is not encouraged as such. As a result, in a formal secondary school vulnerable or underprivileged children are unable to study the subjects they find most useful or relevant.

By ignoring the possibility of children making contributions to the policy-making process at school level, formal schools make it more difficult to develop a culture of support thus reducing the chances of disadvantaged children continuing their education.

Many children graduating from nonformal primary school who are not helped to prepare for the challenges of childhood poverty and how to deal with them will struggle to cope with situations. Their parents are unlikely to be able to assist them, given that they usually have no experience of secondary school themselves.

The formal education curriculum is centralised and chronologically developed by following curriculum grids between primary and secondary schools. But the findings of this study suggest that primary schools failed to provide the competencies children need for secondary schools. This gap introduces a discontinuity in pedagogy which many children struggle to cope with. Given that they also face competing options to schooling from work and family, children are faced with many reasons for discontinuing their schooling. Those who come from economically deprived families need to enter the job market straight away after finishing secondary school in order to earn, but the curriculum does not address this need. The current separation of formal schooling from every day needs is useless to the disadvantaged children and if continued, adds to the possibility that Bangladesh will fail to meet the MDGs within the timeframe of 2015.

In the formal education system, the design and implementation of the curriculum is based on a narrow concept of rural development which does not give sufficient weight to long-term dynamics and thus does not prepare children for adulthood in their communities. As we have seen, successful community development in rural areas requires a varied and specialised education embracing, for instance, various dimensions of agriculture, small cottage industry and commerce, transportation and irrigation, health, hygiene and nutrition, and other aspects of family life, co-operatives and community governance (Hunter, 1970). For the development of the individual community, programmes need to address problems at the local or community level first. The social and economic differences between rural areas, even within the same country, in reality call for different educational and developmental prescriptions. There cannot be just one centralised formula for all.

Secondary school authorities rely on a consensus of notions of 'ideal education' for the betterment of children. However, learning outcomes cannot be improved without increasing young peoples' connectedness to schools. If their efforts in school are not rewarded, they will have no incentive to continue and may easily drop out.

A lack of sensitivity towards the needs, problems and perceptions of individual children means that classroom practice is unlikely to promote their learning and participation. During schooling peers influence each other. Without well-designed school policies where peers, parents and schools are not involve in shaping the children's learning environment, there can be little impact on preferences for education.

### ***Implications for Local Government***

In rural areas, failure to promote active citizenship through empowerment and engagement of the local government authority resulted in lack of support for transparency or effective learning in school. Under present government policy local government has no responsibility for education. The local government, which is called Union Council, does not have any authority or link with local educational institutes. When we talk about active citizenship, the involvement of local government in the local educational system and priorities is essential.

Empirical data suggests that the influence of local government as an exo-system on individual development is very important. Socio-political influence on the institutional culture has an impact on individual child development in the meso-system and shapes their schooling experience (Shohel and Howes, 2008).

### ***Implications for State Government***

Inequality is a dominant feature of the education system of Bangladesh. One of the positive discriminatory policies is the secondary grant programme for girls in rural areas to achieve gender equity in education. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) mentioned that the Government would introduce a grant programme for boys who are poor to overcome the financial barrier to continuing their education. Disadvantaged children in particular need financial support to complete their schooling. But the Government has not yet delivered this promise and without such financial support, children who are socio-economically deprived will never graduate from school.

Empirical data supports more comprehensive studies of the influence of poverty on education, which have estimated that 40 per cent of the 500 million children under 6 years of age in developing countries suffer from chronic protein-energy malnutrition, and 12 per cent from severe, acute malnutrition (Rhode, 1983). Both forms of malnutrition impair children's physical growth, and cognitive and social development in ways that are relevant for their adjustment to school demands (Pollitt, 1984). Malnutrition, often acting synergistically with infection, reduces the amount and quality of learning time in the early years. Malnourished children are less active, less able to concentrate on learning activities, and less interested in the environment than are their well-nourished peers (Pollitt and Thompson, 1977). They may also be less socially active in schools, further reducing their ability to evoke positive and stimulating responses from the teachers and the broader social environment. For most malnourished children in developing countries, the associated loss and reduced quality of learning time in early childhood results in impaired school readiness. Consequently the Government should develop a school food programme to improve the outcomes of schooling.

Currently the State's approach to curriculum development is similar to that appropriate for developed countries. But as a developing country, Bangladesh needs low-cost, innovative systems of education which will roll back illiteracy and provide basic education to its citizens with the requisite skills for participating in the process of development. Without manpower planning and job market orientation, an approach which is based on 'knowledge for its own sake' cannot improve life for thousands of disadvantaged rural children.

### ***Implications for International Development Agencies***

International development agencies work as development partners of the State. They provide financial and technical assistance for better quality education. But unless educational programmes are designed as part of a holistic approach for development through active citizenship, education will be relatively ineffective for marginalised people. By concentrating on the real needs of the target group, rural and urban education programmes could be designed differently.

Currently international development agencies prioritise new educational systems and approaches aimed at reaching larger numbers of people at lower costs. But an emphasis on active citizenship could instead provide a central focus for changing peoples' lives and helping them with developmental issues. The persistence of 'donor-receiver' relationships perpetuates 'inherent power antagonism' between the collaborating agencies and among staff and proposes a model of international assistance that is no longer workable. This model is almost synonymous with that of 'colonial mentality and oppression', and does not recognise the fundamental interdependence of nations (Kinsey and Bing, 1978:17). International development agencies could instead offer help in developing a sense of ownership, empowering individuals to determine their own future and motivating them to get involved with local developmental initiatives.

Without considering the disadvantaged young people who are the beneficiaries, international developmental agencies' financial support and developmental initiatives are fruitless. By not focusing on individual children, the money invested by development partners in a particular country or community could be wasted. Therefore, the planners of participatory education programmes in Bangladeshi settings need to give greater attention to the way in which they and the beneficiaries work together, especially when policy input comes from outside the community. A collaborative model focusing on children could be based on the belief that a healthy interdependence of the state, institutions and people requires competition, cooperation and coordination for providing innovative educational programmes and learning resources.

### ***Implications for Further Research***

Ecological systems theory has been used to explore the challenges of childhood poverty by putting individual children at the centre of the research focus. In this way we can learn how to better support them, to overcome challenges of childhood poverty, to sustain them in school and to improve the quality of their education. From the theoretical perspective, if we put the emphasis on individual development and try to improve the quality of their life, then we should consider the integration of education with the teaching of life-skills and training for a wide range of occupations which could generate income and reduce poverty in their present as well as future life. Therefore, a Community-based Development Initiative (CDI) would constitute a holistic and viable education for sustainable development (Shohel and Howes, 2007b). This combination is not just a question of educational content, it is an ideological and an epistemological approach leading to, in Freire's (1970) terms, a locally derived empowering process which recognises that for most of the world's population, both ethically and spatially, the local sphere is their most important global field of action. Freire proposes an alternative approach to education using 'dialogue' for building consciousness. He maintains that education is more than an act of learning symbols; it is a process that should use communication to transform reality by empowering the individual.

Education can enhance human capabilities and the behaviour of both individuals and communities. Therefore, there is a need for communities to be involved with the school management system. Community mobilisation programmes could create a space for such involvement and motivate local communities to monitor schools, as well as forcing school management committees and the Government to fulfil their obligations. This type of involvement could develop community ownership and could also generate money to provide supplementary resources. In that case, community members would also ensure that all local children are enrolled and suitably placed in school.

Formal education tends to have physical links into the social systems which are seen as making up communities (Bell and Newby, 1971), rather than a strong orientation to the principle of human well-being which is characteristic of the philosophy of nonformal education. There is therefore a need to support community development initiatives which will bring nonformal and formal education into a holistic learning experience and link both sectors to achieve sustainable educational development in the Bangladeshi context.

Therefore, it could be argued that an integrated community-based education programme could serve as a vehicle for linking family and community interests and strengths on the basis of 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 1990) to the formal schooling system. For example, infusing the values and content of the local culture into the curriculum could be done as early as the primary education level and continued at the secondary level. This continuity in curriculum could serve as a focus for community development priorities that, once organised, could also be focused on other issues which are less important. It could be done by involving teachers in the solution of community problems linked to child development but which are not part of the formal mandate of the school system.

The completion of secondary education is associated with a variety of social and economic benefits to individuals in developing countries. More generally, it provides a credential that is an essential pre-requisite for jobs; under some circumstances it also inculcates skills and attitudes that improve opportunity for occupational advancement. Thus, to the extent that support programmes could improve poor children's chances of completing secondary school, such programmes are an investment that is likely to yield meaningful returns for the community and the nation. Therefore, improving children's physical health; providing child care for working parents; rehabilitating children with learning difficulties; inculcating particular moral, political, or religious values; and generally improving children's current quality of life are important purposes for support programmes.

## 8. DISCUSSION

The effects of childhood poverty on the individual are multi-dimensional and different children face different challenges. To understand the nature of these challenges, it is necessary to consider the background of individuals' lives in the specific contexts. There is a very high dropout rate in formal secondary schools in Bangladesh, particularly amongst marginalised children. Does childhood poverty force disadvantaged children to abandon school, or is it the school that is failing to accommodate or keep them in school? In the context of the Bangladeshi education system, research shows that both children's poverty and their experience of school hinder smooth progression in secondary school and increase their relative disadvantage within formal schooling (Shohel, 2010).

Overall cohort statistics of empirical data show the trend of school failure and dropout from formal secondary school. Seen from the humanistic point of view, education is a human right, thus each and every child has the right to basic education for their own well-being. On the basis of that argument, for ensuring social equity and social justice we want our children to be educated. Thus responsibility lies with the State which seeks to increase access to education for the disadvantaged along with the many NGOs and other organisations across the globe.

The impact of institutional culture and socio-political influences on individual development is an interwoven reality. Institutions teach children the differences between right and wrong, and so on. But what influences the teaching? The influence comes from the institutional culture and the people within that culture. In addition, the socio-political influences of communities have an impact on shaping and re-shaping institutional culture. These influences also have direct and indirect impacts on individual development (Shohel and Howes, 2008).

The research evidence shows that reasons for dropping out from schools include disappointment with school, lack of support at home and school, negative learning experiences and having to repeat years because of poor performance. However, inclusion in education involves increasing access and participation in schools for children and their families as well as reducing exclusion. Access to education is only meaningful when enrolment is secured, regular attendance is ensured, a joyful learning experience is created, and transition through different grades is supported.

Equity through inclusion in education enhances social cohesion and trust. In Bangladesh, the formal school infrastructure has expanded, but the system appears to be quite inadequate to achieve the goal of education for all (Hossain, 1997; Robinson 1999). Major investments have been made in non-formal education programmes, catering for marginalised children and young people who have not enrolled or dropped out from formal school, with good primary school outcomes (Chowdhury et al, 2002, Ahmed et al, 2003). However, several studies demonstrate a statistically higher dropout rate of disadvantaged children from formal secondary schools for economic and social reasons (Khan, 2002, 2001 and Nath, 2002, 2000); only 20 per cent of all children who enrolled in grade VI graduated from formal secondary school with a secondary school certificate (Ahmed et al, 2006).

In the context of South Asian countries, including Bangladesh, parents are more willing to incur direct costs related to schooling for boys rather than girls because of perceived gender differences which are considered to affect the returns from schooling (Dreze and Sen, 1995). While a greater investment in education for boys may be seen to offer better returns, perhaps parents of girls are similarly motivated by the marriage market to invest their education believing that a girl who is

better educated will be better fitted for marriage to a person of higher status. Studies show not only that expenditure on girls' schooling is lower than on boys', but also that an increase in the costs of schooling reduces the probability of girls going to school (Chandrasekhar and Mukhopadhyay, 2006). Moreover, as girls reach adolescence their lives become increasingly restricted to the confines of home (Amin et al., 2002) and they drop out at a faster rate than boys. Poor secondary school completion rates are cause for concern with only 10 per cent of girls who completed primary school passing the secondary school certificate (SSC) exam compared to 25 per cent of boys (Amin and Chandrasekhar, 2009). Although the enrolment rate is relatively higher, the completion rate is much lower than that of boys. Early marriage is also a reason why girls do not complete secondary school (Shohel, 2010); although they continue attending school until they marry, very few are able to continue after marriage (Mahmud and Amin, 2006). However, repetition, dropout and other challenges are still faced by girls more than boys (Nasreen and Tate, 2007:29).

Through two grant programmes, the Government of Bangladesh has tried to increase enrolment in primary and secondary schools. In 2002, the Primary Education Stipend Project (PESP) was started to increase school enrolment, attendance, progression and academic performance of primary school children from poor families in rural Bangladesh by providing cash payment (Tietjen, 2003). The Secondary Female Stipend Programme (SFSP) was introduced with the aim of delaying marriage and motherhood and the programme was successful in increasing enrolment of girls in secondary schools, delaying marriage and reducing fertility, but it was less successful at removing barriers to education for the poor (Raynor and Wesson, 2006).

## 9. CONCLUSION

The contexts of individuals who are suffering from childhood poverty and the contexts of schools in resource constrained situations need support from the government as well as from the community to keep socio-economically disadvantaged children in school, providing an opportunity for a better future.

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) Articles 12 and 13, children have the right to participate in and express their views about decisions affecting them and the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds. But until recently research regarding children has generally reflected adult perceptions of children's needs and there is little engagement with children themselves. In this study of childhood poverty and educational exclusion, children's own perspectives are prominent. Giving the disadvantaged children a strong opportunity and voice in the emerging debate about educational policy and practice in Bangladesh was seen to be valuable in itself and as having the potential to increase understanding of the issues they face during their secondary schooling.

In Bangladesh, formal schooling has no practical application for the disadvantaged children of the country and does not help them to break the cycle of poverty nor to maximise their potential. Therefore, the important question here is: what kind of education would best combat childhood poverty and support children's rights and personal development? The processes of human development and learning are interrelated. Children from economically deprived families in Bangladesh do not have any support for medical and financial needs. The policies that have been developed and implemented in schooling undermine children's right to a basic education and fail to provide them with proper access to a better life. But when dealing with very poor households, especially those in which children are most likely to share responsibility for household duties or family income we need to consider that they have to work to meet their basic needs. Thus the dilemma is the possible conflict between children's need to survive economically and their right to an education.

Considering the State's support for basic education for all, the main challenge in widening access to education switched from motivating parents to invest their time and money in their children's education, to making it possible and productive for parents to benefit from that education. In Bangladesh, formal school has failed to provide access and quality for children from economically and socially deprived families. This contributes to dropping out from school and starting work rather than achieving basic education which is a human right. Generally children do not leave school merely for employment. They go to work after dropping out from school because of exclusion which is related to discouragement, frustration or inability to pay school fees and indirect costs of education by being at school (Kabeer et al, 2003).

In the Bangladeshi social and educational contexts, there are countless examples in which the right to education is ignored by various groups of people within the community and also from outside. Those examples led me to wonder how we can help children from disadvantaged groups maintain a sense of hope, pride and connection to school during the critical adjustment period and while moving through secondary school. The intention is not only to reduce dropout but ultimately to help them succeed in secondary school and continue their education. This research has explored participants' perceptions, expectations and experiences in relation to childhood poverty and

educational exclusion by focusing on providing rich context-bound information (Creswell, 1994), with an underlying belief that situations are complex and hence must be portrayed from different dimensions of childhood poverty, rather than focusing on a narrow field (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). Thus the emphasis was on listening to the voice of marginalised people, as well as understanding and interpreting the varied issues that the stakeholders brought up. From this process a series of insights has emerged about the challenges of childhood poverty with the potential to improve the educational opportunities available to some of the most marginalised young people in Bangladesh. To bring about change in the lives of marginalised children, we need transformation in all parts of the ecological systems of their lives. As Bronfenbrenner (1979:41) says:

“A transforming experiment involves the systematic alteration and restructuring of existing ecological systems in ways that challenge the forms of social organization, belief systems, and life styles prevailing in a particular culture or subculture.”

The outcome of this complex and intensive research process is a demonstration of the complicated combination of factors which affect the chances of success for disadvantaged children. There are links among these factors i.e. community culture and values, social class, gender, death of a parent, access to information and resources, and prior school experience. Stereotyping of children’s social identity by teachers and children emerges as a key factor, because it determines so much of a child’s day-to-day pedagogical experience.

There are grounds for optimism here, because of the enormous difference that teachers can make to children’s experience of schooling, if they adopt a more educative and facilitating role. Several ways have been suggested in which teachers might begin to make the changes required, and changes have also been identified that will be necessary on the part of other key stakeholders including NGOs and policy-makers. I am optimistic about the future of the education system of Bangladesh, and hope policy-makers will get some insight from this study for further development in the field of education. Policy-makers will take the initiative for making changes as Rasheda K. Choudhury (2006), an educational activist, says with a very optimistic voice:

“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.”

By carrying out this study I have gained a deeper understanding of the lives of marginalised children in Bangladesh. This paper has demonstrated that the challenges of childhood poverty for a marginalised individual student are not *just* the temperament and ability of that specific individual, nor peer acceptance and support, quality of teachers and services, school policy and environment, economic and social background, community functions and social norms, or State policy and support; but rather a combination of all these factors.

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