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The challenges of geographical inclusive education in rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT
This paper considers the challenges of promoting inclusive education in geographically isolated rural communities in Bangladesh. Inclusion is explored from both government and non-government (NGO) providers, and identifies challenges and opportunities for implementing inclusive practices. Challenges for implementing inclusion are linked to poverty, gender inequality, ethnicity, remoteness, language barriers, issues for children with disabilities, and the negative impact of climate (e.g. monsoonal flooding, landslides, and other natural calamities that beset Bangladesh on a regular basis) as well as the current humanitarian crisis with the Rohingya children now in Bangladesh. While there is sometimes a mismatch between government policy and the literature on inclusion in relation to practical implementation at the local level, opportunities for inclusion come with the dedication and passion of educators who provide teacher training about inclusive education, assistive technologies (Braille materials, hearing aids, etc.), multi-lingual education (MLE) materials, and advocacy by reaching out to parents and community members. Findings indicate that characteristics such as culture, the development of local resources, and the climate of the local context need to be considered in developing relevant inclusive policy to enact effective geographical inclusive practices in rural Bangladeshi communities.

KEYWORDS
Geographical inclusion; rural and remote education; diversity

Introduction

International understandings about inclusive education have moved from an emphasis solely on students with disabilities to an emphasis on educational opportunities for all (UNESCO 1990). Inclusion involves all students having the right to be included at their local school, to actively participate with others in learning experiences, to be valued as members of the school community, and to have access to a system that delivers a quality education that is best suited to their unique competencies, skills, and attributes (Ainscow 2000). Inclusive education is ‘a process aimed to offering quality education...
for all while respecting diversity and the different needs and abilities, characteristics and learning expectations of the students and communities eliminating all forms of discrimination\(^1\).

Inclusive education is underpinned by values of social justice and citizenship that promote equity, participation, respect for diversity, compassion, care, and entitlement (Carrington et al. 2012) and has evolved from the idea that education is a basic human right for all children (Artiles and Dyson 2005). Inclusive education must therefore be developed as a total approach to overall childhood development. It not only requires teacher development, but also support and awareness from within the entire education system and the wider community in which schools exist. The main goals of inclusive education include providing educational opportunities for students who attend school but who for different reasons do not achieve adequately (for example, students with learning difficulties), and for students who are not attending school for a variety of reasons. The purpose of this discussion paper is to explore how inclusive education is being addressed in geographically challenging settings in rural, and often remote, areas of Bangladesh.

Concerns that children in rural and remote areas are being overlooked in discussions about inclusion are not new. Miles and Singal (2010) highlight the need to determine which children are being ‘included’ in the discussion and which are excluded. According to these authors, while inclusive education has until recently been focused on education for students with disabilities, the Education for All (EFA) (UNESCO 1990) movement has moved away from including students with disabilities. Instead, the EFA agenda has focused on working with the most marginalised children in society who have limited or no access to formal schooling. Miles and Singal (2010) suggest a need for a greater collaboration between these two agendas to ensure that the learning needs of all students who are marginalised are addressed. It is this fusion of inclusion principles and EFA that we take in the current paper.

The dimension of inclusive education in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a mostly homogeneous and monolingual country; however, there are some minority groups living in a range of geographical areas. These groups include a diverse ethnic population concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sylhet and Rajshahi divisions and Mymensingh districts. People in these areas have different languages, cultures, and geographical challenges to that of the majority group of Bangladesh and their values should be considered a part of any inclusive education programme. Both the government of Bangladesh and non-government organisations (NGOs) are actively engaged in providing quality primary education and they are working in many specialised areas such as inclusive education. However, experience shows that the benefits of inclusive education practice have not reached all marginalised communities.

The Constitution of Bangladesh also has granted equal rights to all citizens irrespective of sex, age, class, caste, ethnicity, and religion. According to constitutional obligations, the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act (1990) stipulates that: (i) no child is deprived of education for lack of teachers, learning materials, or adequate space, (ii) no child is subjected to disparities of access to primary education arising from gender, age, income, family cultural or ethnic difference and geographic remoteness, and (iii) the quality and relevance of primary education programmes are improved and supplied, and that all possibilities are acted upon to improve learning contents and materials to enhance physical facilities and to carry out necessary reforms in the primary education system. Linked with the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act, the government and NGOs have initiated many project-based and multidimensional programmes since the 1990s. Some of these initiatives include the Under-Privileged Children’s Educational Programs\(^2\), the UNICEF Hard to Reach Urban Child Program (UNICEF 2003), the Reaching Out of School Children Project (World Bank n.d.), the Stipend Project (Tietjen 2003) and others. However, experience has shown that satisfactory change has not happened in raising school attendance and the classroom level learning environment, particularly in rural areas of Bangladesh.

**The right-based framework of inclusive education in Bangladesh**

In 2010 Bangladesh introduced the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education 2010) to address the contemporary educational agenda, including inclusive education. This policy identifies the inclusion of diverse groups of children including those with disabilities and those from ethnic communities as well as socio-economically disadvantaged sectors and/or disaster and climatic affected areas. Though, theoretically, schools are open for all children, groups who remain marginalised and/or ignored are children from minority ethnic and linguistically diverse backgrounds. It will be argued in this paper that very often children living in areas geographically remote from government and non-government (NGO) sectors of power and communication are severely limited in schooling opportunities.

Rural communities located far from cities or government centres are disadvantaged due to the remoteness of access to educational resources and lack of teachers qualified in inclusive practices or, simply, qualified teachers who come from, or understand the needs of, the community. This problem of educational access is not unique to Bangladesh. Close geographically to Bangladesh, Chrishna and Prajapati (2008) examined how students with intellectual disabilities in Nepal were marginalised. While government policy now mandates that all children should receive a public education and be integrated into their local schools, the reality is different. As is the case in Bangladesh, a major concern in Nepal is that services for children are centred in the bigger towns so students in more remote areas are not supported due to lack of resources and teacher training. Khamal (2015) found that children in the marginalised Dalit community in Nepal faced major barriers to their schooling which included: poor resourcing of rural public schools; not having Napali (the language of schooling in Nepal) as their first language; discrimination due to on-going adherence to caste-based practices by some teachers; lack of parental support for education due to the cost involved with a greater need for children to financially support the family; and the early marriage culture for girls. These geographical
barriers have some parallels in Bangladesh where discriminatory cultural attitudes, differential treatment of students, student separation from the education system or circumstances which render schools inaccessible, along with a lack of support for children living with poverty and hunger in spite of a government incentive for primary education, create barriers for the inclusion of all children.

Sapkota (2018) described how infrastructure and human well-being is affected by geographic location. The farther away from major centres communities are located, the more limited their resources, leaving local government and communities in remote areas having to prioritise which services, such as road access, access to drinking water, health services, and education for all are going to receive support and which are not. Mininni (2017) explored the role of economic empowerment of women in rural Rajasthan. The solar mamas programme (Barefoot College 2016) is dedicated to empowering socially marginalised rural women in areas where agriculture relies on the seasonal monsoonal weather and education for women is low or non-existent. In this programme women earn money from employment in building, operating, and maintaining small-scale solar powered home systems, solar cookers, and solar lanterns in their local communities. A purpose of the programme is to assist rural women to become more independent in contributing to the well-being of their families. Earlier studies have revealed that involving rural women in programmes where they can earn money has contributed to higher enrolments of girls and female adolescents in schools (Duflo 2012). Mininni’s (2017) study found that while women felt somewhat empowered through earning an income, societal pressures and expectations determined who controlled the income. In some families the women controlled their money, in other families the husband or extended family members controlled the income, giving the wage-earner a token amount for her to spend. These priorities are similar to those within the rural context of Bangladesh as shall be described later in this paper. It is therefore important to consider the socio-cultural dynamics of a rural community in understanding whether or not education is a priority for children in that community.

Like many countries, Bangladesh has been part of the global movement for inclusive education and has drawn up many policies to guide educators on expected approaches to create inclusive education. After liberation in 1971, for example, and in line with its constitutional obligation, the Bangladesh Primary Education (Compulsory) Act 1990 aimed to legitimise all children’s education. This Act informed many further policies and plans of the government such as the National Children’s Policy (Government of Bangladesh 1994), Operational Framework for Pre-Primary Education (Government of Bangladesh 2008), the National Programme of Action for Children (2004–2009) (Government of Bangladesh 2013b), the Child Act 2013 (Government of Bangladesh 2013c), and the Comprehensive Early Childhood Care and Development Policy (Government of Bangladesh 2013a). This framework was linked to the Education for All: National Plan of Action II (2003–2015) (Ministry of Education 2003), the National Children Policy 2011 (Government of Bangladesh 2011), the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education 2010), and the Education Act 2013 (Ministry of Education 2013).

The recent large initiatives in primary education, the Second Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP-II) (2003–2011) and Third Primary Education Development Programme (BEDP-III) (2011–2017), address inclusive education as a mechanism to reach its main focus of quality improvement of primary education and the issues of
inclusive education. With PEDP-II, the *Access and Inclusive Education Framework 2000* for inclusive education was developed through a series of consultative workshops between government and non-government organisations and development partners in 2003. As can be seen from the literature above, Bangladesh policy has a clear vision on inclusive education. The main challenge is to ensure that these policies are implemented at the local level. The following sections will describe some challenges educators in rural and remote areas of the country face in implementing policy.

**Geographical inclusion of education in Bangladesh**

Of particular importance for the current paper is how the government and NGO initiatives in inclusive education are realised in rural and remote communities. Geographical inclusion means that students in all regions of the country should receive equity in inclusive education no matter where the community is located, but this does not always happen. Geographic inclusion in Bangladesh falls under the key dimensions of Indigenous children, tea garden children, coastal area children, hoar (wetland) children, children of border areas, and children of the monga and flood affected areas. Indigenous communities are mostly concentrated in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, Sylhet, Mymensing, and Potuakhali districts. Tea garden children are located on Sylhet where tea is a primary industry. The coastal areas include Saint Martin, Cox’s Bazar, and southern areas of Bangladesh which are mainly natural disaster-prone areas. The border areas include the border districts of Bangladesh such as Sathkhira, Khulna, Jessore, Thakurgaon, Sylhet, and Tekhnaf. The monga (hunger and starvation prone areas) in the northern part of Bangladesh are Rangpur, Nilfamari, and Kurigram. Other than the coastal belt, some districts such as Khulna, Satkhira, and Bagerhat are severely affected by climate change which has caused increased waterlogging, flash floods, and many other unpredictable disasters which have serious effects on children’s access to education.

As can be seen from the above, the geographic make-up of Bangladesh is diverse. It follows then that isolated communities in such a diverse landscape would also have diversity in cultural make-up and, subsequently, on the targeted provision of inclusive education. Research into how inclusive education is delivered in remote areas of developing countries is fairly new (see, for example, McDonald and Tufue-Dolgay 2013). Much of the literature for Bangladesh is in the form of government/NGO documents/policy. The current paper explores how providing inclusive education from the perspectives of educators working in the field can be, and is, a continual challenge. The following sections describe some of the diversity in geography and culture that pose barriers to implementing inclusive education in rural areas of Bangladesh.

**Indigenous children in the remote Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) areas**

The Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region is situated in the south-eastern part of Bangladesh. It is different to other parts of the country with its diversity in geography and remoteness. Traditional and cultural diversity of the eleven different Indigenous communities, emergency situations due to natural disaster, conflict, and prolonged displacement all have an impact on the provision of inclusive education. The region is still one of the most disadvantaged regions in the country in terms of developmental indicators including access
to quality education (Barkat 2009, 2017). The school enrolment rate in CHT is very low, particularly among the remote rural communities. According to the Socio-Economic Baseline Survey of CHT by UNDP–Chittagong Hill Tracts Development Facility (CHTDF) (Barkat 2009), the school enrolment rate in CHT was 73%, which was lower than the national average of 99.4%. The dropout rate was high at 65 percent. The study also showed that only 7.8% of all household members completed primary education and only 2.4% completed secondary education. About 54% of household heads had no education, about 9.4% completed primary education, 4% completed secondary education, and only 2% completed higher education. The number of school completions is higher for Bengali people (11%) in the CHT areas than among Indigenous peoples (8%). About 77% of female heads of the home had no education while 11% attended school but did not complete their primary level of education. In another study conducted by the Manusher Jonno Foundation in 2011, 44% of household members had no education while 17% of household members were low-literate. The primary school enrolment rate was 95%, but the drop-out rate at primary level was 59% and at junior school level, 24%. Language barriers were described as one of the main obstacles for this low performing education situation in CHT along with other factors such as remoteness, poverty, insufficient schools and teachers, absenteeism of Indigenous local teachers, as well as inadequate infrastructure facilities and a centralised national curriculum.

One of the major groups of students of concern for geographical inclusion is Indigenous children. Although Bangladesh is described as a homogeneous and monolingual country, there are 27 Indigenous communities across the country apart from the mainstream nationality (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2011). As per the National Education Policy 2010, the Bangladesh Government has started Mother Tongue-based Multi Lingual Education (MTB-MLE) at the pre-primary school level, starting in 2017 in five major Indigenous languages – Chakma, Marma, Tripura in the CHT region, and Garo and Sadri in the plain-land Indigenous communities. The Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) has been implementing education focused projects since 2004 through local partner NGOs, aiming to ensure the right to primary education for all children, MTB-MLE, and improving access to quality education. While the government is planning to include other communities in the MTB-MLE programme, it has not been possible to include the Indigenous community of the Santal, in the northern plain land districts in the Multi-Lingual Education Programme from 2017 because this community has already lost their native script (has become extinct). The loss of native language is a growing problem in many remote areas as we continue to embrace global education objectives. As can be seen above, Indigenous communities will have little choice but to join the majority educational process if children in these areas see education as part of their future development.

Coastal and haor areas children in Bangladesh

Children of the coastal and haor (a bowl-shaped tectonic depression that receives runoff surface water) areas have different annual natural disasters such as cyclones and tidal waves (or jolochash, local Bangla word for tidal waves) that affect their lives and their schooling. Among all the disasters, floods have attracted the widest attention and are well documented by researchers because of their severity and the frequency of their occurrence. Children of the river islands, coastal, and haor areas are extremely vulnerable and
insecure, with no guarantee for their basic needs and livelihood. Many of the children in these areas are malnourished and suffer from ill health. Further, most of the people are economically and socially disadvantaged with 55% being hard-core poor and 65% unemployed (Ahmed and Nath 2005). While there is a high school enrolment rate of around 75%, the attendance rate is low and the school dropout rate is as high as 65%.

The inundation of water during the flood and monsoon season restricts the availability of transportation to and from school. In such submerged conditions the canals, rivers, and haors cannot be crossed and, as a result, attendance of both teachers and students at schools is low. At these times, there are generally poor communication systems in these areas to connect with others both locally and nationally. Poor communication affects information and resources passing from the centres of education in the city to these rural areas as well as within the rural areas themselves, thereby compromising the delivery of quality inclusive education.

Another difficulty is the need by parents to engage children to work during the harvesting season (April to June and October to December) or to earn money from the tourist trade. Attendance at such times can slip to only 20–25% of the children at school. Overall the number of out-of-school children in the coastal areas, combined with those who have dropped out and those non-enrolled, can be as high as 87%5. One of the authors visiting Saint Martin Island, located on the north-eastern side of the Bay of Bengal, describes a place of natural beauty attractive to tourists. However, during a visit to the school on this small island of 4,000 people, she found that there was no head teacher available at the school and very low student attendance. Instead of attending school, the majority of students were found on the beaches trying to make money in the tourist trade. The teachers at the school described that in order to make the school more attractive to students a new wash-block needed to be installed for better hygiene, particularly for female students. A school meals programme to encourage student participation had been initiated; however, this was not enough of an attraction to encourage students off the beach areas. Additionally, the school closes during the rainy season and teachers are not willing to reside on the island as transportation to the district is difficult. During the floods, many schools remain closed for several months as they are used as shelters and relief camps. No alternative education has been offered for children during this crucial period.

Children of monga and flood affected areas

Every year after the planting of aman paddy (the main rice crop) there is the lean period (from September to November) where the poorer sections of the population, who depend mostly on agricultural activities, remain unemployed. This period is locally known as monga, which means severe scarcity of both jobs and edible food. Children in these areas are forced to drop out of school as they remain unfed. During monga, children either migrate elsewhere with their parents or are engaged in child labour (domestic in many cases). An Education Watch 2003/2004 report (Ahmed and Nath 2005) observed that in areas vulnerable to seasonal food shortages (such as the annual monga season), many school-aged children never enrol in school or drop out in search of work. Research from a school catchment area revealed that ‘scarcity of money’ or ‘poverty of the household’ (Ahmed and Nath 2005, 65–66) is the main reason for not enrolling in or dropping
out of schools. Over 40% of children who dropped out of school indicated poverty as their main reason for dropping out (Ahmed and Nath 2005).

**Children from the tea gardens**

A number of children in the tea gardens of Sylhet, CHT, and Moulvibasar districts are vulnerable as their families remain socially excluded, low-paid, and overwhelmingly illiterate. Nath, Nilufar Yasmin, and Shahjamal (2005) found that over 60% of the population in the tea gardens had never been to school. It was found that a number of remote villages had a high percentage of out-of-school children and in some areas over 90% of the children were out of school. Parents, who have never been to school, described that they could see no reason why their children needed schooling, particularly when they were needed to earn money to support their family. Ancestors of today’s tea garden have been families who were ethnic minorities brought to work the gardens generations ago and even today members of the community feel like foreigners who believe that the only way for a better life is to leave the tea gardens (Nath, Nilufar Yasmin, and Shahjamal 2005). Challenges to providing inclusive education in the areas mentioned above include flooding, remoteness of location, poverty, lack of Bengali and cultural exclusion. While these are great obstacles to overcome, there are other disconcerting factors that affect schooling for children in rural areas, as described below.

**Children situated in border areas**

A disturbing trend that keeps children out of school is human trafficking. Trafficking of women and children has emerged in recent times as a serious problem in less developed countries. The northern side of Bangladesh along the border it shares with India is a primary area of large scale women and child trafficking. The fundamental right of education is an idea far away from this situation. Poverty and unemployment along with a demand for cheap labour in Bangladesh imply that a large number of people are still vulnerable and fall prey to traffickers who use the promises of jobs and marriage to entice their victims (Osmany 2008). Many children in this area are in danger and are denied their educational and human rights. A similar situation is a current problem on the eastern border between Bangladesh and Myanmar with the massive influx of Rohingya refugees. Many of these refugees are orphaned and there are many disturbing reports of young girls being sold as sex slaves after arriving in Bangladesh. This problem is a growing and ongoing crisis through which many children are becoming lost, as described in the following section.

**The Rohingya crisis in Bangladesh: forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals in Cox’s Bazar**

On August 25, 2017 violence erupted across Rakhine State, Myanmar causing great numbers of the Rohingya population to flee the country into Bangladesh. The speed and scale of the influx has resulted in a critical humanitarian emergency (ISCG 2018). As of January 2018, more than 655,000 refugees have entered Bangladesh with an estimated 60% of them being children (ACAPS 2017; UNICEF 2017; ISCG 2018).
great influx of people to the region has caused economic and security challenges to the country (Kundu 2017). The Rohingya refugees have used most of their savings on transportation and the construction of shelters often out of no more than bamboo and thin plastic. They are now reliant on humanitarian assistance for food and other life-saving needs. Basic services along this border area that were available prior to the influx are under severe strain due to the massive increase of people in the area. In some of the sites that have spontaneously emerged, water and sanitation facilities are limited or of poor quality, with an extremely high density of people raising the risks of an outbreak of disease. The Rohingya population in Cox’s Bazar is highly vulnerable; they have fled conflict and experienced severe trauma and are now living in extremely difficult conditions (ISCG 2018).

There are further concerns about Rohingya children’s personal safety, as many have arrived without parents. These vulnerable children, particularly girls, are at risk of abuse such as people trafficking, drug trafficking, and sexual exploitation. Being stateless, there is no clearly identified authority to whom they should report abuse. Cholera, acute respiratory infections, acute watery diarrhoea, measles, and malnutrition are some of the health concerns along with a lack of clean water for drinking, hygiene, and sanitation (ACAPS 2017). The Bangladeshi government and NGOs are working to provide protection for the refugees. UNICEF (2017), for example, has proposed plans to set up education centres to reach at least 150,000 children and 50,000 host community children aged 4–14 to provide a safe environment. A needs assessment report (ISCG 2018) indicates that 453,000 people continue to need Education in Emergencies (EIE) assistance.

There continues to be no targeted services for children aged 14–18 as well as for mainstreaming children with disabilities in education programmes. Separate strategies are needed for children aged 14–18 with a plan targeted to provide 77,666 girls and boys access to education. To work with these children 1,479 teachers will need to be recruited and trained to share lifesaving programmes and to give psychosocial support in classrooms. A total of 36 School Management Committees (SMC) have been formed and 902 temporary and semi-permanent learning classrooms have been built. The double vulnerabilities of the children’s huge shock and trauma as well as the danger of becoming victims of abuse and harassment mean that they require essential safe and secure spaces. Being out of school increases the risk of child marriage, abuse, sexual exploitation, trafficking, and child labour and high malnutrition rates for these children.

Humanitarian agencies are expanding operations in education, nutrition, gender-based support, and community mobilisation through volunteer network at the camps and makeshift settlements. BRAC, as one such agency, is launching expanded nutrition and education programmes with UNICEF (BRAC 2018b). To date, 40,546 children have received recreational support through 215 Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) created by BRAC. Many educational institutions in the host community remain closed due to schools being used for relief distribution or army camping grounds. As well as addressing the needs of the refugees, there is an immediate need to resume educational activities for the host community to ensure that the tension between the two communities does not escalate. With an increase in employment and volunteering opportunities created by humanitarian organisations for the host community, many high school and college students have dropped out from their educational institutions with the aim of earning money through taking up jobs to support the refugees. There are several organisations...
with learning centre operations within the makeshift settlements and so there is a need to coordinate and streamline educational services to provide a consistency of support and learning to children (BRAC 2018a).

As indicated, Bangladesh is a highly diverse country both geographically and culturally-linguistically with each region presenting unique challenges to educators. The notion of inclusive education as a ‘one-size-fits all’ approach would be severely tested if applied to the various regions described above. Poverty, social exclusion, being a member of an ethnic minority group, and the vagaries of annual geographic and climatic events have all had major impacts on children’s opportunities to be educated. However, while as daunting as the above stories may be in relation to providing children with inclusive education, educators both in the government and non-government sectors are working to provide such education to these vulnerable children, as described below.

Meeting the challenges of geographical inclusion of education in Bangladesh

Alongside the Bangladeshi Ministry of Education, several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are working in Bangladesh to support educational initiatives. NGOs are generally independent of governments and international government organisations, devoted to resolving long-term issues such as climate change, healthcare, and education. The INGOs have the same mission as NGOs but have a wider international scope as they are dealing with many different issues in many countries at the same time. INGOs are generally founded through private philanthropy or as an adjunct to existing international organisations such as the Catholic or Lutheran churches. The NGO/INGOs of particular interest in the current paper include the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), BRAC, and Save the Children. These organisations work alongside programmes provided by organisations such as DFID (Department for International Development) Bangladesh, Australian Aid, UNICEF, UNESCO, UNDP in CHT, and the World Bank.

One of the largest NGOs supporting inclusive education in Bangladesh is BRAC which employs over 100,000 people, reaching more than 126 million people throughout the country. BRAC has several modes of support for inclusion such as providing ‘boat school’ for children of geographically hard to reach areas (costal belt, hoar, and waterlogging areas), and schools for children with disabilities, especially for children who are physically challenged. For students with disabilities, major interventions include providing assistive learning devices such as hearing aids, spectacles, and Braille material for reading and writing. BRAC is a centre of advocacy for inclusive education, reaching out to parents and other community members, explaining the rights and laws for people with disabilities (PWD) and the rights and protection of people with neuro-development disabilities (NDD) as well as establishing an awareness and sensitivity of parents and community people around the social stigma attached to children with disabilities. The organisation provides regular sessions for teaching staff, provides parent meetings, provides basic training about PWD, how to create friendly learning environments for students with disabilities, training staff on how to teach students to use assistive technologies effectively, and training teachers about how to adopt inclusive pedagogy. BRAC offers training to parents on the use of assistive technologies and how to care for children with disabilities.
with a focus on behaviour management, socialisation, practicing different activities for physical and intellectual development, as well as stress management.

Education for Ethnic Children (EEC) schools and mother-tongue (MTB-MLE) schools are supported by both BRAC and the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF). Under MJF, 5,095 children receive their education in their mother tongue with MLE teacher training and support for MLE teachers, MLE printed materials, and a local contextualised school calendar. Learning resources and teacher guides for these schools are used up to Grade 3 alongside the conventional curriculum which is taught in the national language, Bengali. Teachers are provided with an 11-day training session where, on the sixth day, an ethnic teacher (Batch Teacher) joins the session on how to deliver lessons and co-curricular activities in a mother tongue. Teachers go through a 3-day orientation at the commencement of the school year and if there are students from more than one ethnic community, an assistant teacher is recruited from the local community to provide language support. Two-day teacher refresher training is offered monthly at field offices. A key factor in these schools is engaging a local school management committee who contribute to the school’s management, ensuring quality teaching and adopting ‘rights-based’ governance. Ideas from local community members are effectively adopted and incorporated in the school’s management to profile the benefits of a localised education for the community.

Field staff and management also participate in regular training and maintain continual contact with the various schools around the country. Field staff members are trained in script reading and writing and acquire the same basic teachers’ training as school staff so their practices align. A core group visits school and reports in bi-monthly meetings on how schools are managing and to report on the progress of schools. This intensive training and focus on local contexts for education provide pathways for marginalised children to attend school.

The future for geographically inclusive education in Bangladesh

While much is being done to bring inclusive education to all students in Bangladesh, there is more to do. A key challenge is the absence of a unified educational system where a collaboration of different education systems and curriculum create an inclusive culture and values of social justice, positive attitudes, and respect for all citizens (e.g. the poor, women, ethnicity, religious minority, and physically challenged people). At present there is a lack of coordination, cooperation, or integration within government ministries as well as between public and private services which have an influence on promoting the right to education for all through quality reforms in education. There is a need for an appropriate, local context based, gender sensitive curriculum. To achieve this, teachers will need to be suitably trained and resourced to create supportive, friendly learning environments. There is a lack of adequate information about inclusive education nation-wide with gender disaggregated data impeding the actual analysis of the situation. The authors of this paper advocate for an equity-focused database and information system that will enable educators to monitor and evaluate reform strategies and policy measures to determine what impact these have on diverse learners in rural Bangladesh.

To counter the above challenges the Bangladeshi authors of this paper offer the following recommendations: 1) an awareness raising campaign involving students, teachers, parents, and community members with a focus on promoting rights and equality of
education for all; 2) strengthening partnerships between the public and private sectors with the formation of expert groups from each to act as guides and mentors; 3) stronger advocacy for policy and legal reforms in the area of inclusive education, particularly for students in geographically rural and remote areas; 4) stronger budgetary allocations for promoting inclusive education for all children; 5) capacity building workshops for relevant stakeholders to raise awareness of inclusive education issues and skill development training in inclusive pedagogy; 6) more opportunities to maximise interactions to strengthen the exchange of ideas with mainstream communities in order to remove prevailing ignorance and negative attitudes about inclusive education; 7) teacher training, the development of a training manual and educational materials for MLE; and 8) stronger advocacy for a gender-responsive national budget to promote a rights-based approach to education with a priority to include a diversity of learners in a range of different contexts.

Conclusion

In this discussion paper we have considered the challenges of geographical inclusive education in rural and remote Bangladesh. Some of these challenges are being met and are beginning to have a positive impact on local communities. For example, there is now more training of staff in how to provide more inclusive education with particular reference to the needs of local communities. More assistive technology is being incorporated in schooling to target specific learning needs and there is a more concerned effort to reach out to community members, particularly parents, to change understandings of inclusive education. Through increased awareness of inclusive education (laws and legislature of inclusion) by students, teachers, parents, and community members, the culture of silence is beginning to break down. Inclusive education is receiving a greater acceptance in the community and in schools. Greater confidence and solidarity have been achieved amongst students, teachers, and parents to create safer educational environments, public spaces, and neighbourhoods of trust. More interactions are occurring through various extracurricular activities, organised to improve cultural peace and harmony where all children are encouraged to express their feelings freely and voice their concerns. There has been more inclusion of information about sexuality and reproductive rights education with more positive attitudes of police and local representatives demonstrated. Law enforcers have become more vigilant and proactive in combating sexual violence against girl students. There is stronger advocacy and lobbying within the government to introduce and reform relevant laws, with collaboration between the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the Ministry of Education and Home Affairs. With strengthened advocacy, greater success can be achieved to address these challenging issues. The measures described here are cost effective and people centred; such a comprehensive approach can be replicated in all areas relevant to the local context to ensure educational parity at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of education.

Notes

2. See http://www.ucepbd.org/.
3. The Situation of Primary and Secondary Education System in CHT (not published).

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

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Rokhsana Perveen is currently working as Superintendent of the Primary Teachers Training Institute in Bangladesh. This institution is under the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. She has been working in this position since 2011. It is the main training centre for government primary school teachers in Bangladesh. In this position Rokhsana conducts pre-service training, in-service training, short course training, supervising research, and takes the initiative to improve and modernise the teaching-learning of primary teacher training. Moreover, on the premises of the training centre, there is an Experimental School which is directly supervised by her. As Research Officer she has worked in the Access and Inclusive Education Cell. She worked for pre-primary education and inclusive education. She was involved directly with the Child to Child Project with UNICEF and also worked as a member of Pre-Primary Curriculum with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board. Her interest areas are inclusive education, pre-primary education and curriculum development and multilingual education.

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References


