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# Bangladesh's New Generation of Youth-Led Education Civil Society: Prospects for Reinvigorating Education Reform

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## Key Insights

This Brief is based on a case study of a new generation of civil society actors working on education in Bangladesh. They have emerged in the past 10 to 15 years, in a context of shrinking space and declining aid flows.

- Bangladesh's emerging generation of new education civil society actors marks a shift in the motivations and activities of activism around education. There is much to be learned about their innovative approaches and strategies.
- The constraints and challenges they have faced also speak volumes about how the context in which they have emerged has affected their scope of action and impact.
- The new-gen civil society actors are young and often from backgrounds in business and tech-based innovation. They approach their work in a spirit of altruism and personal commitment.
- The initiatives of these new actors remain relatively small in scale, and have to date had limited impacts on broader education policy agendas.
- Evidence of this new-gen of education civil society confirms the vital importance of legal and political space for engagement, as well as of adequate resources.

The recent dramatic and unexpected student-led movement to restore Bangladesh's democracy highlighted the significance and power of its organized youth. In a context in which young people's initiatives have been suppressed and silenced for 15 years, it is clear that more attention to and support for youth civic initiatives is vital for invigorating Bangladesh's education reform agenda.

# Introduction

This Brief describes the new generation of education civil society actors in Bangladesh, briefly analyzes the context in which they emerged, and argues that support and space for these new youth-led initiatives is vital for reinvigorating Bangladesh's education reform efforts in the wake of the mass democratic movement that unseated the authoritarian Awami League regime in 2024.

Bangladesh was well-known in the early 2000s for both its active and innovative civil society and for its achievements in expanding access to education, particularly for girls and children from low-income and rural families. These factors were connected: civil society, led by the Campaign for Popular Education, piloted approaches to reaching those excluded from school, advocated for investment in primary schooling, persuaded citizens of the value of education, and monitored progress towards Education For All and the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>1</sup>

At times, NGOs and civil society organizations worked in partnership with government, but at others they scrutinized and criticized government performance; government innovations such as food for education and scholarships and stipends for girls and children from poor households were motivated in part by the threat of the successful example of NGO models for improving access. The past decade has seen progress towards improved education outcomes stall: the 2022 National Student Assessment found that there had been no significant improvements in reading or arithmetic since 2017. After completing primary education, half of all children could not read at their grade level and two-thirds were unable to count.<sup>2</sup> After 2009, civic space was shrinking under the increasingly authoritarian Awami League regime. Civil society organizations and the independent media faced threats, violence, efforts to delegitimize their work, and constraints on their ability to access funds and on their free speech.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, international aid to civil society in Bangladesh was declining, in part because of the challenges organizations have been facing in their work.

This Brief is based on a case study of the new generation of civil society actors working on education in Bangladesh that have emerged in the past 10 or 15 years, in a context of shrinking space and declining aid flows. The case study was motivated by a broader review of the literature on education civil society which found that while a great deal of attention had been paid to the NGOs and coalitions that drove the rights-based Education For All movement of the 2000s, there had been less focus on the new actors that had emerged since. Many of these newer non-profit groups focused on improving the quality of education rather than on inclusion or widening access, and many also had adopted technology as part of their solutions. There were some indications that these newer non-profit actors were in effect promoting privatization through advocacy for 'school choice' and private sector participation.<sup>4</sup> The case study of new civil society actors in Bangladesh was one of a pair designed to test this assumption (the other in Honduras). The case studies asked: who are these new education civil society actors, and what are their aims and policy agendas? Are they advocating for Education For All and for the right to publicly-funded schools, or promoting privatization whether directly or in effect?

The Bangladesh case study was conducted in late 2023 and early 2024, and involved: reviewing the limited existing literature on new-gen education civil society actors, and identifying the new civil society organizations working on education, and interviewing them about their origins, motivations, strategies, and activities.

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1 A. Mushtaque R. Chowdhury, Samir R. Nath, and Rasheda K. Choudhury, "Equity Gains in Bangladesh Primary Education," *International Review of Education* 49, no. 6 (November 1, 2003): 601–19, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:REVI.0000006929.59667.16>

2 "National Student Assessment 2022: Grade 3 and 5" (Dhaka: Directorate of Primary Education, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Government of Bangladesh, 2023).

3 M. D. Surie, S. Saluja, and N. Nixon, "A Glass Half-Full: Civic Space and Contestation in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka," *Gov Asia* (San Francisco, CA. USA: The Asia Foundation, 2023).

4 Prachi Srivastava, "Framing Non-State Engagement in Education" (Paris: UNESCO; GEM, 2020).



## Origins and Motivations

The founders and leaders of the new generation of education civil society actors are young and middle- or upper-middle class. They often have backgrounds in business, whether family, academic, or professional. Most emerged at the start of the tenure of the Awami League government which was in power from 2009 until toppled by a student-led democracy movement in 2024. The full range of new civil society actors identified for this case study<sup>5</sup> is along a continuum from small private charitable or solidaristic initiatives at one end, to larger non-profit organizations with national reach and international recognition such as the Jaago Foundation. There is also a growing number of successful non-state initiatives (such as the acclaimed and popular 10 Minute School<sup>6</sup> platform) which are for-profit start-up tech businesses or social enterprises; we do not focus on them here.



A mural celebrating the volunteers behind the Jaago Foundation's activities

*Credit: Naomi Hossain*

<sup>5</sup> We were unable to identify any comprehensive directories or lists of education foundations, NGOs and civil society organizations, although we understand that there are networks and many such groups are members of the national education coalition, CAMPE. The sample of interviewees reached and organizational websites and reports reviewed was arrived at through a combination of online searching and through 'snowball' sampling, by asking interviewees for the names of other potential foundations and network partners and members.

<sup>6</sup> <https://10minutecool.com/> [accessed October 13 2024].

The new-gen civil society actors are mostly small organizations compared to the large NGOs such as BRAC which have been so prominent in education activism. They tend to emphasize altruism and to prioritize personal contact with the schools and children they serve over scale or the professionalization of their activities. Interviews revealed that powerful personal impulses to help children who were less fortunate were key driving motivations: all recognized that high quality education could transform children's prospects, but also that existing public provision was deeply inadequate, and that even those children who attended were learning little.

## Funding Modalities

A key feature of these new non-profit actors in education is that they are not reliant on international aid, nor registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), the government agency tasked with regulating non-profit groups that receive foreign funding. Some received aid for specific projects, but none received core or institutional funding, and relationships with aid donors were relatively unimportant. Reasons include that as Bangladesh emerges from least developed country (LDC) status, it will no longer receive so much official development aid; aid is in any case an unsustainable source of funding; and the country's development has generated considerable wealth which can be tapped.

Four sources of funding were noted as most important for the new generation of education civil society:

- corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds
- private donations, including through *zakat*<sup>7</sup>
- sponsorship models
- 'innovative' financing, including from foundations.

This departure from the earlier generation of education civil society initiatives is significant, and merits further attention. It may offer the prospect for alternative models of financing non-profit activity in Bangladesh which will need to be explored in a context in which aid to Bangladesh is declining, and in particular to civil society and to education.

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<sup>7</sup> *Zakat* is the obligatory charitable donation to the needy enjoined on Muslims through a tax on wealth and income. In Bangladesh is not mandatory or collected by the state, and most people it seems pay their *zakat* to private charitable initiatives.

# Strategies and Activities

In terms of their activities, most of the new-gen actors aimed to provide high-quality formal schooling for the most vulnerable and excluded groups. This often meant establishing schools in areas where there were none, for instance in remote parts of the country, in informal settlements or slums, and bringing learning to where the excluded children are by establishing mobile schools on buses. The founder of It's Humanity Foundation, Adnan Hossain, said “we talk about complete education and no child being left behind”, using the language of the Sustainable Development Goals. He listed the range of communities and locations in which they work, including having started a special school for children with learning disabilities in low-income urban communities.



Mural depicting the transformation of a child from a low-income family into a happy school-going child with a more prosperous-looking family, on the wall of the Jaago Foundation building.

*Credit: Naomi Hossain*



While there is a strong emphasis on reaching the excluded, quality education is a core goal for all of these actors. As Korvi Rakshand, founder of the Jaago Foundation explained, new-gen actors had moved on from the older preoccupations with access:

[W]hat BRAC did, what Proshika did, what Grameen did at that time was important. They laid the field. They talked about getting every child to school. That was their role. After independence, that 40, 50 years, that was important. That time if I spoke about quality education, where the children are not going to school, it wouldn't work. But now, after 50 to 53 years, do we still want to have the same dialogue? Just send our children to school? No. Bangladesh has already achieved, they say, 100%, but actually, 95% of people are going to school. That 5% anywhere in the world you go to; America, UK, you will find the same problem. Now the question is, when 95% are going to school, what are they getting in the school? Government school is free. Why do people come to JAAGO school? These are the important questions. Because, number one, they find teachers in the school. In government schools, when you go to the remote parts, teachers are missing. Because the monitoring system is missing. And it's understandable, the size of Bangladesh, the amount of teachers, it's hard to monitor. They need a good mechanism to monitor. What are the teachers teaching in the school? Are the teachers trained? You can have fancy buildings. But if you don't have qualified teachers, it will not work.

Several, including Jaago, had developed models using technology to bring more teachers trained in the sciences into classrooms where those specialisms were not available. Others had experimented with models of telephone-based learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, when public schools were closed for almost two years. For several, the key aim was to demonstrate that with the right inputs and environment, all children can learn.



The Jaago Foundation's founder, Korvi Rakshand, demonstrates how the foundation brings science teaching into classrooms where teachers do not have that specialism.

*Credit: Naomi Hossain*

In the latter phase of the Awami League regime, the Ed Tech Hub, an initiative funded by the World Bank, UNICEF, and UKAid was focusing on using online systems to train teachers to deliver a new exam-free curriculum – which has been scrapped since the August 2024 uprising. However, as well as equipping teachers to teach that curriculum, the online initiative also aims to improve teachers' digital literacy and reduce the costs of training Bangladesh's 400,000 government primary school teachers.

Apart from training teachers and introducing technology into the learning process, organizations were also focusing on broadening learning experiences, with an emphasis on play and the arts. Others were providing other kinds of soft and life skills education, for instance sexual and reproductive health (for adolescents and secondary school students), climate change, livelihoods, and leadership.



Some researchers and activists were critical of the focus of some new-gen organizations on service provision, arguing that the focus should be on improving public education:

I think NGOs' first responsibility should be pressuring the government to bring students to the school first. We are already paying taxes for teachers and schools, so why should there be separate NGO schools? ... Now, what we should do is fix this system.

Others such as Manzoor Ahmed of the BRAC Institute of Educational Development saw the potential value of these approaches:

providing models of services like out-of-school children and working children and children in various difficult circumstances where the regular government school cannot really serve. There is a lot of creativity and flexibility required where CSOs can do it. Now, if the procurement model is changed, and it becomes more of a partnership model, then the government and CSOs can work together. So, it is both influencing the policy and providing services, where the services cannot be just the regular public system but something beyond that. So these are the two kinds of things that various kinds of civil society organizations can do.

However, while there is in theory potential for different civil society strategies to influence education policy, there is no evidence that the new-gen actors were either trying, or succeeding, even inadvertently or through the examples of their successful schemes, to do so. A key finding of the case study was that policy advocacy was not an important part of their overall strategy for change. The main reason for this appears to be that, as respondents noted, the space for policy advocacy of any kind had shrunk in Bangladesh. Interviewees from CAMPE, the national education coalition, and the BRAC family of organizations noted that the new generation of civil society does less policy advocacy than the more established organizations had done in the heyday of the Education For All movement in the early 2000s. Close observers noted that the main influences on education policy, including the recent (now abandoned) shift to a less assessment-based model, were purely political: the desire to demonstrate that Bangladesh was moving into middle-income status and needed a modern new education system to match that. None of the actors identified thought they had had any influence on the system, and none really had much sense of how that policy had come about at all, signaling clearly that these most prominent education civil society actors have (or had) no seat at the policy table and no close connections with those making education policy choices.

*Policy advocacy was not an important part of the new-gen actors' overall strategy for change ... None thought they had any influence on the system, or had much sense of how policy changes had come about.*

Afsana Sadiq Atuly from the EdTech Hub explained that “the government is not very open to have outsiders in the education sector at the primary level”, making policy advocacy challenging. She noted that organizations like Jaago and CholPori are “disruptors” because they are demonstrating new ways of improving education outcomes as models for the government to adopt:

So when I talk about disruptors, they're creating some examples within the system. Like what is possible and not imagined. For example, I was talking about Jaago: very low-resource school, but the students are going to international universities after finishing the 10th grade, right? So ... the problem is not the kids. The problem is the system. So when you can prove that any child can achieve everything possible if given the right opportunity, that shows the system that there is something wrong with the system itself rather than the child. So, for me, that's what I mean by disruptors.

This language marks out a stylistically and tactically different approach to influencing, borrowed from the tech sector and corporate culture, as distinct from the earlier generation of NGOs who adopted social movement strategy terminology like conscientization, mobilization, and empowerment. Despite these framings, none of the organizations displayed a commitment to supporting privatized provision of schooling as an option for wholesale education reform. Most actively disavowed this as an agenda, noting that their efforts were geared towards demonstrating the value of systemic changes to raise standards. Older organizations such as BRAC had themselves moved towards more private and fee-paying models of provision, but chiefly at secondary level (which is already substantially private). It is not clear, however, whether this absence of a privatization policy agenda reflects the absence of any space for independent advocacy or policy influencing in general.

## Policy Implications

Following the downfall of the authoritarian Awami League, the new-gen education civil society actors in Bangladesh represent a promising arena for the reinvigoration of education reform efforts in a context of potential democratization. These youth-led organizations emerged in a context where space for free speech and independent social action was shrinking and often criminalized. In this

*The new-gen education civil society actors emerged in a context where the space for free speech and independent social action was shrinking, and civic actors were being criminalized.*

restricted space, these initiatives developed innovative approaches to improving education quality for some of the most marginalized children in Bangladesh. They can be seen as part of a broader youth movement in support of raising education standards and educational equity. The recent student-led movement dramatically demonstrated the potential power of youth organizing in Bangladesh, and that youth aspirations for their country, and their organized initiatives, merit far greater attention and support than they have to date received.

So far these organizations and their activities are small in scale compared to the need for high quality education in Bangladesh, and they are not organized to deliver large-scale services. This is appropriate and in line with how most of these young founders view their organizations: as filling gaps for those who need specialized forms of education the most, and as (potentially, at least) demonstrating that children from the most disadvantaged

*Education civil society groups in Bangladesh do not appear to be organizing in support of privatization in general, unlike some tech-based non-profit education groups elsewhere in the world.*

backgrounds can learn and succeed in formal education. The new-gen education civil society groups in Bangladesh do not appear to be organizing in support of privatization in general, unlike some tech-based non-profit education groups elsewhere in the world. That said, closer attention needs to be paid to how these groups evolve in a more open policy and civic space.

Although many of these groups are members of the national education coalition, CAMPE, they had to date had a limited impact on education policy. This is largely the effect of the restrictions on independent policy advocacy in general in the years leading up to 2024. The trajectory of the new-gen organizations vividly illustrates the stunting effect of shrinking civic space on the prospects for effective national education reforms. It supports the argument that shrinking civic space has a negative impact on development outcomes, even when the targets of efforts to restrict civil society are primarily those with more ‘political’ or democracy and human rights agendas.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Naomi Hossain and Marjoke Oosterom, “The Implications of Closing Civic Space for Hunger and Poverty in the Global South,” *Global Policy* 12 (2021): 59–69.

Raising the standard of public education and learning outcomes remains a major priority for Bangladesh. Government and aid agencies committed to education reform in Bangladesh need to prioritize the creation of a broad and inclusive policy space for dialogue, exchange of ideas, and monitoring of government education policy and implementation. Judging from the experience of the 2000s, this offers strong prospects for strengthening both the design of education reforms, and their implementation.

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In a context of declining aid flows in general and to Bangladesh and to civil society in particular, it is not clear that the models of funding and civil society engagement with policy in the 2020s will resemble those of the 2000s. Instead, these groups are likely to continue to develop funding models based on private charity, *zakat*, and CSR of various kinds. If these alternative funding sources can be scaled up and regularized, education civil society stands a stronger chance of achieving sustainability and national ownership, without over-reliance on international aid. The

*New modes of funding for civil society merit further analysis; if they can be scaled up and regularized, education civil society stands a stronger chance of achieving sustainability and national ownership.*

scale, extent, sources and modalities of these new modes of funding for civil society merit further analysis and data collection. In addition, the impacts of these funding sources on the nature of strategies and activities of these organizations deserve to be studied in more depth and over time, particularly as the space for policy advocacy begins to open up with the process of democratization.

There is a need to establish new policy spaces in a setting where for 15 years non-state actors have had little say with respect to policy, or space to monitor its implementation. Support for the national education coalition CAMPE to strengthen its capacity for policy advocacy, and to give prominence to young civil society leaders in particular, is also an important priority for the immediate future of Bangladesh's education reform effort.



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Cover photo: It's Humanity Foundation's School in a Bus is one of the innovations by the new generation of education civil society actors. Credit: Shaharul Islam

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