

Parliamentarians urged to safeguard education, health, protection in national budget



Children and UNICEF called on parliamentarians for safeguarding allocations for education, health and social protection in the national budget during a briefing at Jatiya Sangsad today.

The "National budget 2023-2024 and child rights" briefing, jointly organised by UNICEF and the Parliamentary Caucus on Child Rights, was attended by children from across the country and members of Parliament, including from standing committees on finance, health and education.

"I have spoken to many children who have to work for three meals a day. Most of them no longer go to school. And many have to continue working day after day despite being ill," UNICEF quoted 14-year-old child journalist Maisha Anjum Arifa from Khulna as saying.

Thanks to public financing for children over the past decades, Bangladesh has successfully prevented millions of child deaths by reducing malnutrition and protecting children against preventable diseases through immunisation.

But maintaining this progress will require increased targeted investments by the government, UNICEF said.

"Hearing from the children today, it is clear that we, as public representatives, have a lot more to do for them. I will continue to champion their rights and convey their voices. I ask my colleagues to do the same," said MP Shamsul Hoque Tuku, deputy speaker of the Parliament, and the chair of the Parliamentary Caucus on Child Rights.

In the proposed budget for FY2023-24, allocations for education, health and social protection have proportionally declined compared to last year.

"Bangladesh has made laudable progress in meeting the rights, and improving the well-being of children. But there is a risk of sliding backwards if investments in critical social sectors are not maintained," said Sheldon Yett, UNICEF Representative to Bangladesh, to parliamentarians who attended the briefing session.

The UNICEF analysis highlighted that the proposed health sector budget - down to 0.76 as a percentage of GDP in this year's budget from 0.83 last year - would need significant boosting towards 2 per cent for Bangladesh to deliver on its commitment to Universal Health Coverage.

In addition, UNICEF's presentation outlined how the education share of the budget has declined to 1.76 as a percentage of GDP in this year's budget compared to 1.83 last year. At the same time, a positive move towards greater inclusion is an increase of the educational stipend for students with disabilities.

In the area of social protection, UNICEF welcomed the proposal to increase the number of beneficiaries of the Mother and Child Benefit Program, but noted the importance of adjusting entitlements for inflation to prevent a significant decline of the actual value of the benefits.

"Children cannot wait. Bangladesh cannot wait. UNICEF urges parliamentarians to prioritize children in the budget," Yett concluded as he thanked the government and the Members of the Parliamentary Caucus for Child Rights for their tireless work for children.