

Community Learning Centres in Bangladesh: Lessons learnt and avenues for future action

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Abstract

This article is based on an earlier evaluation of the work and scope of Community Learning Centres run by BRAC, FIVDB and DAM. The article draws on documentary research, statistical data, field-based research and numerous interviews with local actors and decision makers. The demographic and educational context of Bangladesh is noted to make the case for lifelong learning and community learning centres as the vehicle for it. The field research and analysis indicate that CLCs address significant learning needs in rural and isolated communities especially in the area of literacy, basic vocational training, and gender emancipation. The study reveals that community ownership is the key to long-term functioning of a CLC. The findings bolster the argument that CLCs have become the single most effective tool to create lifelong learning opportunities with a focus on social relevance and emancipation.

Key words: Lifelong learning, literacy, gender, vocational training, community empowerment

I. Introduction

In 2013 the author undertook a study on the status and performance of CLCs in Bangladesh, in particular with reference to centres operated by BRAC, FIVDB and DAM.

This study goes back to a request by BRAC management, aware since long of the immense potential of their own CLC operations but conscious of the need for a critical evaluation of the Community Learning Centre (CLC) concept. The inquiry was to look at current achievements and future avenues for lifelong learning with the CLC as the principal delivery platform.

The objective was to obtain a realistic appraisal of the different dimensions of CLC objectives, such as community development, women's empowerment, enhancing basic education capacities, establishing a learning society in rural areas, work and livelihood, and the potentialities of ICT.

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This paper attempts to examine, on the basis of field and documentary research, how far strategies for lifelong learning have been applied in CLC activities. In this respect the study considered the question raised by Manzoor Ahmed in his article “Lifelong learning in a learning society: are Community Learning Centres the vehicle?” (Ahmed, 2014)

A first step of the study of CLC strategies consisted in situating the general context of learning in Bangladesh, determined by a wide range of different social, economic, and demographic factors. The data below point immediately to the dramatic need to intensify efforts in lifelong learning in the rural areas where illiteracy, poverty and ostracism of women is widespread and current opportunities for learning, training and empowerment are largely insufficient. The urgency to act is clearly illustrated by the fact that despite the contribution of primary education to reduction of illiteracy, adult illiteracy remains a major problem. The analysis of the relevant factors will show that the educational and social potential of the CLC concept is enormous and it offers a viable approach to promoting lifelong learning. (see Ahmed, 2014).

The section below presents salient data related to demography, poverty and education to place the Bangladesh situation in the context of South Asia, which points to elements of progress and challenges.

1.1 Demography and poverty (source: UNDP/HDR 2013; UIS 2014)

Adolescent fertility rate (ages 15-19), 2012: 68.2%; (India: 74.7%)

This indicates early marriage is still widely practiced.

Life expectancy at birth (2012): 69.2 years; (India : 65.8)

Bangladesh has been recording steady improvement.

Population growth (2010-15): 1.2% (1.6% in 2005)

(India 2010: 1.3%; 1.6% in 2005)

Population growth has been slowing down considerably in Bangladesh in recent years, faster than in India.

Fertility rate: 2.2 in 2012; 3.1 in 2000.

(India : 2.6 in 2012; 3.1 in 2000).

The low fertility rate indicates a slowing down of population growth, which is also the result of increasing levels of education among girls and women. (source: UIS/UNESCO 2013/14)

Population vulnerable to poverty and/or in severe poverty in Bangladesh (2007):

47.4%; (source: HDR 2013); recent Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics report indicates under 30% in severe poverty in 2013.

1.2 Education (source: UIS 2014):

NER primary education m/f in Bangladesh: 2011: 89%

India: 2008: 90 %; Recent Bangladesh government data show primary net enrolment over 97% in 2013.

Survival to G5 (2009): 66% (71% girls); recent Bangladesh government data show total survival to G5 is 79% in 2013.

Girls do better; yet there is a high drop-out rate, although slowly declining in the last years; BRAC is particularly targeting these drop-out youngsters

NER Lower secondary ed. 2010: 62% (74% girls); India, 2010: 81% (79% girls)

(74% of the relevant age group of girls in Bangladesh are enrolled in lower secondary; upper secondary enrolment shows however a decline of girls enrolment)

Literacy rates 15+ (2011)

M/F: 57.7%; F: 53.0%

Youth literacy:

MF: 78.7 % ; F: 80.4%

Source: UIS/UNESCO 2013/2014

Literacy rates in Bangladesh have increased considerably in the last 25 years, mostly because of primary education expansion; still much remains to be done, in particular for women's literacy.

It should be noted that Bangladesh literacy data are based on testing, contrary to India or Pakistan, where data are based on self-reporting; and probably overstated by 10 to 15% according to Kothari and Bandopadyay, 2010.)

II. The current situation of CLCs in Bangladesh

The number of currently functioning CLCs must be seen in the context described above.

The situation of CLCs in 2013/14 was as follows:

BRAC: 2,425 centres; 900 have computers, 9 have internet connection;

DAM: 880 centres; 42 community resource centres supporting the CLCs;

FIVDB: 691; 14 ICT centres;

Together BRAC, DAM and FIVDB operate some 4,052 centres. There are other education NGOs which also operate small numbers of community learning centers. The total number of CLC's in Bangladesh of varying quality and scope of activities is estimated to be around 5,000.

Since 2002, the Government of Bangladesh, through the Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE), has been operating some 7,000 centres within the donor-funded post-literacy project Post- Literacy and Continuing Education and Human Development (P LCEHD 2), which according to the latest news is being phased out in 2015. The centers started under the project without a sustainability strategy and are not expected to continue to exist after the project ends.

The rise of the numbers of CLCs operated by NGOs in the last ten years must be seen as a response to the immense learning needs in rural areas compounded by the fact that, probably more than 60% of adults (15+), living in rural areas are illiterate, despite rising primary education enrolments.

Rural society in Bangladesh seems to have changed only little over the past decades, as the majority of people still live in rural areas: some 72%,. In this context, and given the focus on Community Learning Centres, what is a possible definition of the “community” or “village” in Bangladesh ? Two anthropologists, Hartmann and Boyce (*A Quiet Violence*. 1975, 1983) proposed, on the basis of their field research the following: “We found that if we took the ‘jamaat’, the Muslim families served by the nearest mosque, and extended that group to include the Hindu families (if there are any) living among them, the result came closest to our notion of village”.

The biggest change having occurred in the last twenty years, is no doubt the presence of primary schools in almost every village community. Unfortunately recent experience has also shown that rising primary education enrolments in rural areas were not sufficient to reduce illiteracy, due to still high dropouts and low learning achievement of those who stay on. A recent study undertaken by Alia Ahmad, indicates that “there can be no hope whatsoever that primary education will wipe out illiteracy in the years to come, in view of the persisting high dropout rates” (Ahmad 2012, p. xx).

This is where the CLC concept comes in. Can CLCs reduce illiteracy and lay the foundation for lifelong learning for all? Recent research, including this article, points to CLCs as a key delivery mechanism towards achieving a learning society, beyond formal school education and beyond basic literacy.

Again Alia Ahmad in her study on BRAC-operated CLCs underlines the issue of illiteracy as a major obstacle on the way to a learning society. If reading and writing do play a key role, then what do we know about the real impact of learning through formal primary education ? Can so-called literate or educated people really read ?

A study by Kothari and Bandhopadyay, “Can India’s literate, read?” (2010), examined the question and came to a dramatic conclusion with respect to learning and reading. They argue, based on their research (17,782 readers in 3,179 households tested in North India), that reading habits in rural primary schools are not at all well established and have become the

principal cause for a massive relapse into illiteracy. The study further indicates that the same would be valid for adults, having followed literacy classes, but largely unable to use and consolidate the acquired skill. It is very likely that the same situation exists in Bangladesh.

III. Definitions of CLC by the three NGOs

Field work and documentary research on the CLC concept allowed the author to identify the following definitions and objectives adopted by the three NGOs:

According to **BRAC**, CLCs are self-sustainable multi-purpose learning centres, situated in secondary school campuses or local union council buildings: “which should provide access to a wide range of learning, skills development and cultural activities to address the needs of the drop-out children as well as rural people; they reach all sections of the community”.

FIVDB defines the CLCs as follows: “CLCs are platforms that promote individual learning and social capital within communities. They aim to enable communities to take initiatives to improve their quality of life and enhance participation in democratic practices.”

The **DAM** definition reads as follows: “to facilitate building a learning society; to facilitate social empowerment and economic self-reliance; ensuring people’s access to services; to support and develop people’s inner potentialities”.

Although the three NGOs are following similar CLC objectives in rural areas, there are some sharp differences when it comes to daily practice. BRAC is basically operating out of secondary schools and is targeting essentially young people and adults who can already read and write. Their focus would be rather on continuing and lifelong learning and with a strong focus on ICTs.

DAM keeps a strong focus on social empowerment of village communities by providing people with their own organization; on the other hand DAM is not yet pursuing a strong pro-literacy strategy due to lack of resources (this is on the point of changing, according to DAM management.)

Concerning FIVDB, they emphasize providing literacy to all but especially women, prior to other learning activities.

Clearly the three NGOs are interested in the broad empowering and emancipatory aspects of the CLC concept that promotes lifelong learning, social empowerment and awareness raising.

IV. Major CLC activities

In order to follow up on the definitions, and commonalities and differences in objectives, field visits were undertaken to have a first-hand feel for CLC activities, and to verify how these activities match definitions proposed by the NGOs.

A brief summary of the principal and most visible activities identified and recorded on the ground is presented below. It describes how the three NGOs translate their general objectives into programmes on the ground.

i) Empowerment of Women and adolescent girls

Women's empowerment goes together with the notion of community empowerment. The three NGOs have developed efficient strategies to put women, and adolescent girls, at the centre of all CLC activities. In fact there was not a single CLC without significant gender-oriented activities.

ii) Adult literacy

Adult literacy has been identified by policy makers and researchers as a fundamental precondition for a learning society and social uplift in rural Bangladesh. As pointed out above, levels of adult illiteracy are still high in Bangladesh, with an even higher percentage in the rural areas. In this respect, FIVDB especially has undertaken a systematic approach towards literacy, by targeting from the outset illiterate women, and then building on the acquired knowledge by leading neo-literate women towards skills training and empowerment. This strategy is less visible in BRAC and DAM centers. Adult literacy has not been a specific focus so far in these centers.

iii) Reading, writing and creating a literate environment

All CLCs focus on the habit of regular reading, from school-going kids to adult neo-literates. Policies for a literate environment vary: for example BRAC is running regularly reading sessions in all CLCs, targeting both young and old ones. As a specific lifelong learning strategy, joint or shared reading is widely appreciated by all generations and it contributes to a literate environment. It was also evident that close-by primary schools benefited from such learning and registered an improved reading level of children, when they took advantage of the CLC reading materials.

iv) Skills training and awareness raising

The issue tops the list of lifelong learning priorities and is considered as the logical extension of previously organized learning activities. The three NGOs have devised several strategies targeting adolescents, young women but also menfolk desirous to enhance their often limited vocational/technical knowledge. Cooperation with the Union Parishad (UP) centres, the local government body, was instrumental to achieve this goal in some cases.

v) Access to information and ICTs

Access to information is identified by many as the primordial element for emancipation. Duflo and Banerjee in their recent publication on 'Poor Economics' (2011), identified the non-access to information (health, education, entitlements, etc) as the principal cause of poverty. Hence many CLCs focus on providing access to recent and reliable information, either through information meetings, brochures and/or leaflets; and the ability to read acquires a critical importance. Increasingly however ICTs are being targeted and several

CLCs plan to start computer courses; there is also the growing trend to provide internet connections whenever possible. The major obstacle towards a wider use of ICTs is the lack of access to electricity connections in many rural areas.

Because of the current trend to quickly over-value the potentialities of internet and connectivity, it is worthwhile to add here a different voice on the issue of ICTs. Rosa Maria Torres (IRE, vol 54, Nov.2008, p.542) stresses that “access to reading and writing continues to be the single most important entry point to the information/knowledge/learning society, much more than access to modern ICTs which require readers and writers in the first place.” She points out that the introduction of modern technologies reinforces the tendency of neglect of the poorest and the rural areas, given their various disadvantages such as lack of energy, distances, etc. (p. 560. Despite growing connectivity even in rural Bangladesh, the three NGOs do focus their energy on learning through the face to face approach. However technology is making in-roads fast and the phenomenal growth of the mobile phone network is allowing people to communicate easily and opening up new learning opportunities.

vi) Children’s education

This is a major concern in Bangladesh where primary education enrolments have become close to universal, but completion rate is still low. Within the CLC project, the three NGOs employ different strategies to harness the educational potential of school-age children and adolescents. CLCs contribute indirectly towards a better quality of learning in near-by primary schools through daily reading- and writing classes in some CLCs, and literacy classes targeting young mothers. This experience makes a case for a stronger association between primary schools and CLCs.

vii) Writing

As pointed out above, all CLCs visited or reported upon, practice regular reading classes. However “reading” is only one part of full literacy: writing, contrary to reading, remains a very personal and even creative approach to learning. Yet it has been found that currently only a few CLCs promote actively writing skills among neo-literates. Those who do register higher levels of learning and participation in CLC activities.

V. CLC practices

5.1 Implementation tools and strategies.

The study went on to look at the practical ways and means employed to achieve or implement the above listed activities. The principal strategies or tools employed to carry on the above activities are described below.

i) Libraries and mobile libraries:

Almost all the CLCs visited boast of some kind of library allowing occasional or regular visitors to borrow or else read on the spot. A special feature is the concept of mobile libraries operated by BRAC, where a rickshaw van tours several villages otherwise out of reach.

Libraries target readers, enhance motivation for literacy and learning, and favor access to reading by girls and women. In addition children are encouraged to read regularly and on a wide range of topics. In view of the serious scarcity of reading materials in rural areas, the library operations respond to a real and basic need for reading materials and further learning.

ii) The facilitator:

This is the key element of any CLC. Almost everything depends on his/her availability to ensure learning and create new and lasting learning and training opportunities. Facilitators are multi-task operators: they teach, manage the library, organize life-skills and other learning sessions, always in close co-operation with the community. In many cases facilitators are women and thus have an easier access to womenfolk who otherwise may not feel encouraged to participate in relatively public learning activities. It appears that a successful CLC is one which has an efficient and motivated facilitator, open to new learning demands and in good terms with the local community. One caveat would be that increasing demands for learning and training put additional stress on facilitators who are not always in a position to respond. They are usually paid a modest amount by the local community and some of them find it difficult to meet the growing demands in terms of time, activities proposed, and the energy and effort they have to devote.

iii) The CLC Management Committee and the issue of sustainability:

In addition to the role of the facilitator, this is a key element for the success of any CLC visited for this study. Both the facilitator and the management committee, working in harmony, constitute the foundation and condition sine qua non, for the sustainability of any CLC. In terms of the financial viability of a CLC project in a given community, the full involvement of all village inhabitants is a must and it has been seen that only those CLCs survive which have managed to identify local resources and at the same time meet the learning needs of the community.

iv) CLC as a delivery platform and social meeting place:

An issue which does not appear in documents and reports, points to the role of CLCs as an essential and basic social meeting place, in an environment hitherto devoid of any such facility. These learning centers have often become social centers (real Gonokendros or people's centers !) allowing locals to learn but also to meet informally, exchange, debate, and thus contribute towards a better networking in the community, using existing ties and creating new ones. All study visits revealed the strong social dimensions of these learning centers. The depth of the social/cultural dimension of the CLC depends however on the level, content and relevancy of learning inputs offered. Not surprisingly the three NGOs, feeling strongly concerned about sustainability, targeted and supported this dimension of the learning place integrating with it the function of social exchange and debate.

5.2 The Pillars of Sustainability.

Field visits revealed that the facilitator, the community management committee and the learning center as a social meeting place, constituted the three pillars of sustainability of any CLCs. In addition, and as pointed out by many learners, local managers and facilitators, a fourth pillar of success would be the quality of learning opportunities. Frequently community members voiced their readiness to make financial contributions provided offers of learning met the demands of locals; not only basic literacy but also and increasingly vocational and livelihood training, providing possibilities of higher income. Further work has to be done to develop appropriate recommendations for action on the basis of acquired insights and information, and in consideration of the concrete educational situation in rural areas in Bangladesh. All actors involved, at the local or policy level were certainly convinced that CLCs had the potential to establish the basis for a learning society through lifelong learning, and that this objective would require a certain number of new initiatives.

VI. Possible avenues for future action

6.1 Literacy, post-literacy

In the light of the persistent high levels of illiteracy in rural areas, especially among women, efforts targeting literacy, with a special focus on writing, should become the norm of every CLC. As Alia Ahmad asserts, “The adult literacy component needs to be added to the existing CLC programme” (p.92).

6.2 Libraries and Mobile libraries

This is a complementary strategy to reading and writing and should receive wider attention within the CLC effort for a literate environment. The successful initiative of mobile libraries, by BRAC, needs to be implemented on a much wider scale in view of the huge needs for reading in village communities.

6.3 Keeping the focus on education of children: pre-school, primary and secondary school, and out-of-school

The three NGOs, though aware of the need to upgrade knowledge and motivation for school-going children, both primary and secondary level, need to widen the programmes, so as to avoid drop-out and reach the un-reached.

6.4 More facilitators to enhance CLC performance

There is an increased demand on the time of facilitators; their duties multiply and it is difficult to see how all these demands could be met by a single person. A proposal has been made to hire, whenever possible, an additional part-time trainer, especially for literacy and reading classes.

6.5 Sustainability and community mobilization

The continued mobilization of communities remains the single most important factor for achieving sustainability. This is particularly relevant for the long-term financial contribution that the community can make.

6.6 Skills training: renewed focus on agricultural productivity and marketing (IGAs)

Within the CLC concept, skills and vocational training should primarily focus on local needs, in particular agricultural extension, horticulture, fisheries, livestock and related marketing activities, with a view to enhance agricultural productivity and income.

6.7 Cooperation between NGOs and BNFE

The immediate future of CLCs in Bangladesh, and their sustainability, depends very much on an enhanced co-operation among NGOs and between them and BNFE. BRAC, DAM and FIVDB, which have shown their commitment and have built a track record, can take a lead in this respect and the government authorities including BNFE have to be forthcoming. An NFE act adopted in 2014 asks to "... establish a working mechanism of government, NGOs and broader civil society." Yet it is well known that "a sustainability strategy incorporating resources from community, NGOs, local government and regular government budgets has not been developed" (Ahmed, 2014, p.9). Time has come to promote action in this respect, ensure sustainability of existing CLCs and most of all enlarge rapidly the number of such centers and meet the urgent learning needs in rural areas.

VII. Conclusion

Taking into consideration the above recommendations, which are all inter-dependent, there appears to be the urgent need for further close co-operation between private (NGOs) and governmental structures, like MOPME and BNFE. Both the BNFE policy 2006 and Education Policy 2010 mentioned the CLCs as the implementing vehicle to promote a lifelong learning approach through NFE for youth, adults and out-of-school children. With over 4,000 CLCs being run for several years by the three NGOs under study, they could take the lead in co-operating with MOPME/BNFE, in developing and refining models of sustainable CLCs, and thus move towards creating a nation-wide network of community-owned, lifelong learning centres. The policy-makers in the government, especially MoPME and BNFE, have to encourage and support this effort.

Of course this would be a formidable undertaking, given that there are more than 60, 000 village communities in Bangladesh. The persisting low levels of educational achievement, the still large numbers of out-of-school children and the high number of illiterate women, all point to the necessity to establish a nationwide non-formal learning structure like a national network of CLCs. Its designated task would be to fill the gap between, on the one side, rigid and thus unresponsive to specific community needs, formal educational institutions, and the unmet learning needs and expectations of rural populations, on the other side.

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