

## **Literacy, Community and Responsibilities through Ganokendra (People's Centre): An Innovative Approach of Lifelong Learning and Sustainable Development**

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### **Abstract:**

*Bangladesh has earned significant reputation in the international arena for developing and operationalizing innovative approaches and methodologies in the areas of education, lifelong learning and sustainable development aimed at promoting better quality life of the disadvantaged poor at the grassroots level. One of such innovations is the establishment and operation of Ganokendras or People's Centers, pioneered by Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM). DAM's interventions are generally focused towards catering to the needs of the poor and extreme poor people at the grassroots level. This paper describes the work of the Ganokendras as they have moved from centers established from outside the community to 'peoples centers' which are sustainable, and owned and managed by their communities.*

Keywords: Ganokendra, people's centres, education, literacy, Bangladesh

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### **1. Introduction**

From a very small undertaking in 1958, Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), over a period of more than five decades, has emerged as one of the largest NGOs in Bangladesh. In 2013 DAM was ranked 76<sup>th</sup> among the top 100 NGOs in the world by the Swiss *Global Journal*. DAM's overarching goal has been to create conditions where the target beneficiaries could utilize their own latent social energy and in order to forge ahead to achieve sustainable development. DAM delivers a program of services through its Ganokendras or People's Centers. These centers have developed into centers of learning where the cross-fertilization of ideas and experiences takes place.

DAM started Ganokendras in 1992. The total number now stands at 4,193 spreading over 46 districts in Bangladesh. 771 of these Ganokendras have library facilities with collections of books, newspapers, newsletters, magazines, booklets, posters, wall magazines, and daily newspapers. These libraries are used by students and people in the local community. In fact,

the Ganokendras now serve as hubs for a range of activities, and it is not only DAM that provides services through the Ganokendras, as these establishments are also used by other government and non-government agencies to extend their services to the community.

## **2. Ganokendra: A DAM innovation**

DAM's interventions are generally focused towards catering to the needs of the poor and extreme poor people at the grassroots level. Its interventions are varied in nature and different in size and scope ranging from empowerment of the target beneficiaries through:

- education and motivation;
- institution building;
- literacy and continuing education;
- lifelong learning;
- capacity development training and trade based livelihood support for income generation;
- social services; and
- advocacy campaigns.

During the course of implementation of its development programs DAM facilitated the establishment of Ganokendras as a way to develop the long term sustainability of its intervention programs. Initially, Ganokendras served as centers of learning for the neo-literates and semi-literates by offering post-literacy and continuing education programs supported by various learning facilities provided through libraries established in the Ganokendras. However, over time the status of the Ganokendras assumed greater importance, their role became more diversified, and acceptance among the communities they served increased significantly. Gradually, Ganokendras became known as *People's Centers*, and are owned and managed by the local community.

## **3. How are Ganokendras unique?**

Ganokendras offer a paradigm shift towards people-centered development and the development of an educated society through offering learning opportunities to both children and adults alike. Ganokendras are community based peoples' institutions established through people's initiatives to address a community's education, learning and developmental issues and needs through collective decisions and collective social actions following democratic principles. It is a new institutional arrangement to allow local people to use creative thinking and unleash their latent social energy. It is through this institutional mechanism that community people congregate and sort out various social issues like dowry, child marriage, and divorce, and take active roles in developing community consensus against women trafficking and drug use.

Over time the Ganokendras have been transformed into hubs for all community activities. The Ganokendras provide state-of-the-art digital learning centers with computers and Internet facilities which have helped communities to link to and learn many things from the outside world. Library facilities also provide access to newspapers and journals which attract the more educated sections of the community. A diverse range of people congregate, read newspapers and journals and also discuss community issues and share ideas to resolve problems. In this shared meeting space, people also prepare community needs-based plans, implement their planned development activities, mobilize resources and undertake participatory monitoring and evaluation to assess progress.

The Governance structure of Ganokendras include a General Body consisting of 75 to 100 members, mostly adult learners (men, women, and youth) from the community, and a nine member Executive Committee elected by the General members. Led by an elected Chairman, the General Body is responsible for the day-to-day functions of the Ganokendra. The overall responsibility of the management committee is to manage and implement development interventions, ensure support from local government bodies and community leaders, and to mobilize and manage local resources. The General Body of the Ganokendra may hire required resource persons from its resource pool on a needs basis.

The Ganokendras are self-motivated and self-managed institutions for rural people. They are geared towards ensuring development interventions to sustain their communities after the support agency has phased out its original implementation program. The Ganokendra intervention programs have facilitated sustainable development at the community level and contribute significantly to the achievement of Bangladesh's Millennium Development Goals.

#### **4. Getting started**

Once a Ganokendra becomes operational, an apex body of Ganokendras called Community Resource Center (CRC) which are mostly ICT-based, are formed at the Union level with representation from the community level Ganokendras. The CRC coordinates activities at the broader community level and builds solidarity to address bigger development issues within the union, provide the people' with a voice and advocate at a higher level. As part of its exit strategy DAM is strengthening the capacity of the CRCs so they can take over the responsibilities of Ganokendras at the Union level through the phase out process. As part of this process, many Ganokendras have already obtained registration from the Social Welfare Department, so that they can operate independently as community-based organizations while maintaining close links with DAM.

From the very beginning, DAM's strategy has been to empower poor and extremely poor people through literacy and lifelong learning, institution building and awareness raising; followed by enhancing their technical and productive skills through education and practical training. This training is complemented by livelihood support so participants can become productive members of their families, earn income to improve their quality of life, and eventually break out of the poverty trap.

All of DAM's intervention programs are undertaken at the grassroots level and centered around the Ganokendras. This is where community people congregate to discuss:

- economic and social issues for collective social actions; and
- neo-literates, including adolescents, children and adults and especially women and girls, come to sharpen and upgrade their newly acquired literacy skills through gaining access to relevant materials for education and empowerment.

Through the Ganokendra, people acquire livelihood skills which enable them to become integrated in the economic mainstream. It is the center which serves as a:

- platform for training;
- center for information sharing and issue-based discussion;
- support/linkage for income generating activities, and
- socio-economic development programmes linked to people's empowerment to make informed choices.

So local community members become active participants in decision making, have ready access to information and services including finance and market information, literacy and lifelong learning skills education, communications technologies, and occupational skills development.

## **5. Meeting diverse learning needs**

To provide support for the Ganokendras' education program, DAM has developed a number of printed and video materials which include: literacy primers, follow-up materials, and supplementary reading materials; livelihood skills training materials; and awareness raising materials. Furthermore DAM has developed videos on basic literacy, continuing education, livelihood skills and lifelong learning. DAM has so far developed 701 titled materials on education, literacy, skills training and non-formal primary education, as well as literacy primers for use at the community level through meeting diverse learning needs.

DAM's published materials play a critical role in enhancing literacy, life skills, lifelong learning and self development for the library users. The educational materials contribute to empowering participants through various messages in the areas of literacy education, health, improving livelihood, human rights and social justice, environment, gender and disaster risk reduction. The materials are also used in training programs organized for DAM and conducted by outside NGO professionals that use the Ganokendra infrastructure. DAM has also created opportunities for the NFE graduates to sit the Secondary School Certificate Examination through Bangladesh Open University. Through this process many students have passed and received their Secondary School Certificate.

## **6. Effects on literacy**

Due to DAM's intervention programs using the Ganokendras, literacy rates in targeted communities have increased and the literacy competency level of adults have been consolidated. 75% of neo-literates scored minimum levels on the standard literacy test, while reading and life skills were significantly better than writing and numeracy skills. As a result a significant portion of women members (43-70%) could perform assigned tasks. Through the Ganokendra learners are more vocal and they share their learning with their peers, relatives and other community members which raises awareness and motivates to apply these new understandings in their daily lives.

Ganokendra libraries have facilitators who interpret appropriate information that opens up opportunities for lifelong learning, literacy enhancement, critical thinking, and ultimately, empowers users. DAM has been developing basic reading materials that support literacy based on local knowledge and are therefore attractive to neo-literates and semi-literates. Learners are encouraged to read for pleasure and as a prerequisite for continuing education. Positive impacts of the Ganokendra libraries include:

- educating users to develop their reading, writing and language skills; and
- developing their creativity.

Equitable access to information is essential to develop educated and informed citizens who can participate in a democratic society and accelerate development towards sustainability. At present, the library links Ganokendra members to other socio-economic development activities which will ultimately improve in the quality of their lives.

DAM's educational intervention programs in have provided opportunities to 6,725,924 learners and enables them to attend mainstream into education. Learners' needs are determined through a baseline survey, training needs assessment, focus group discussion, and a market survey for identifying the demand of livelihood and trade skills. Since the inception of the Ganokendras, DAM has been applying trainee-friendly, interactive-training/teaching and learning methodology. The multi-grade teaching-learning methodology used in non-formal education has been an innovative adaptation by DAM, and one which has been highly recommended as world class by the European Commission.

DAM has been implementing all its development interventions through the Ganokendras as the main driver at the community level. DAM's interventions include the following:

- livelihood intervention has given opportunities to 444,692 participants
- health intervention to 2,467,527 beneficiaries; and
- human rights and social justice intervention provides support and services to 183,999 participants who otherwise would grow up in social exclusion.

These are the measurable achievements of DAM's intervention programs which support the achievement of Literacies for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" through lifelong learning and sustainable development which is a focus of IFLA's Trend Report. ICT tools have been used in training delivery and teaching-learning strategies either routinely or occasionally in most of the CRC based Ganokendras. It is important to mention that CRC based Ganokendras are equipped with ICT tools and have been providing computer training support, Internet facilities and mobile marketing information., The provision of ICT tools also supports local campaigns, documentary and recreational film shows, and folk media to motivate and raise awareness on a variety of development issues.

## **7. Challenges**

The biggest challenge when during the initial organization of a Ganokendra is the availability of a suitable permanent venue to accommodate everyone in the community. This is not easy. The lack incentives such as financial rewards and professional development skills for facilitators, affects their enthusiasm. The irregular flow of information materials, particularly in remote areas, and the intermittent supply of daily newspapers also becomes a big challenge. Improvements in roads and communication facilities may improve access with the increasing number of users of newspapers. Facilitators also often face difficulties in the management of multi-sector activities. Other challenges include:

- the persistence of a narrow vision of literacy;
- inadequate macro support for literacy;
- missing links with higher education the absence of local level planning;
- overcoming social hurdles for women wishing to participate;
- geographical remoteness;
- reaching the extreme poor; and
- increasing ICT tools in Ganokendras.

Strategies to move the Ganokendras forward include:

- the role of youth role as change agents;
- local development forums which are a public-private partnership
- acting as an emerging voice for local level planning
- the increased use of ICT devices;
- flexible vocational education; and

- the horizontal exchange of experience.

DAM has been active in assisting the Ganokendras, gradually improving living standards by addressing the development needs of communities, providing a platform for building solidarity amongst disadvantaged people, and making job-oriented skills training available to everyone.

## **8. Conclusion**

DAM's strategy has been to empower the target beneficiaries through institution building, literacy and continuing education. Motivational awareness development on various social issues is facilitated and includes capacity development training and trade-based livelihood support for income generation, social services and advocacy campaigns for the empowerment of local communities through the Ganokendras. DAM's focus has been to motivate the people in these poor communities so that they can acquire the skills to take ownership and solve their own problems and continue to forge ahead to achieve a sustainable development even after the initial support has been withdrawn.

The inclusion of library facilities has played an important part in the success of the Ganokendra concept. The libraries provide free and equitable access to a wide variety of printed materials so community members retain and further develop their literacy skills in reading and writing, while also sharpening their communication skills through discussions, the use of ICTs and participation in oral competitions. Libraries play a key role in creating literate societies and promoting literacy by offering relevant and attractive reading material for users of all ages. The Ganokendra library facilities are continuing to enhance and sustain literacy skills for life which will eventually lead to national development and poverty reduction.