

EDUCATION FOR STREET CHILDREN: A CASE STUDY OF *CHETONA BIKASH KENDRA*

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INTRODUCTION

Background and context

Community Development Library (CDL) has been working mainly in the fields of development information and communication since its inception in 1980. CDL was established with a mission to deliver development information to activists and organizations that are working in the broad areas of research, human development and right-based works. Among them are catalysts in different fields including academics, planners, development practitioners, cultural activists, political activists, human rights activists, peace activists, environmentalists, feminists, journalists, researchers, teachers, trade unionists and community leaders. The target audience is engaged in activities intending to change the quality of life of the people, particularly the disadvantaged groups of the society.

Mission of CDL

CDL believes that 'information' is the critical missing link between ignorance and enlightenment, between poverty and prosperity, between dehumanization and empowerment. The vulnerable people and the communities have little or no access to vital information, particularly information on availability of and access to resources. CDL feels that a well-planned effort encompassing collection, processing and dissemination of information would help in attaining the required level of awareness in the society and, in turn, would accelerate the process of empowerment of the people by reducing knowledge gap.

Knowledge based activities

There are, however, debates on the relevance and efficacy of knowledge based activities and services. Is it tantamount to social work or somewhat different

from it? The overwhelming majority of the NGOs in Bangladesh are involved in social mobilization and rural development activities mostly providing micro credit. CDL, however, works with a different medium. Nevertheless, there is a general relevance about concomitant features, which together define the scope of CDL's development strategy and thrust. These are:

- Involves the community;
- For the good of the community;
- Not for profit;
- Can bring social change.

CDL's immediate aim is to enhance the knowledge base of the society. A host of programmatic instruments are used to achieve this objective. These are mainly as follows:

- Rural Information Resource Centre;
- Central Library, Documentation & Information Centre;
- Research and Publication;
- Education Extension Program.
- Education extension program

Poverty reduction is a strategic thrust of the government, as well as many NGOs. CDL provides services to a wide range of intervening institutions and catalysts that work with poor communities. However, CDL directly works with the poor in one area through its Education Extension Programme. Within the framework of this programme, a *Chetona Bikash Kendra* (centre for awareness development) was founded, which offers a comprehensive education package for squatter children.

URBAN POOR

Poor neighbourhoods

Poor people live in impoverished neighbourhoods with no or little access to amenities of life. Many of them are recent immigrants from rural areas and have been crowding in squatter settlements, popularly known as *bostee* (slum). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) defines a slum as a "cluster of compact settlements of five or more households which generally grow very unsystematically and haphazardly in an unhealthy condition and atmosphere on government and private vacant land" (BBS, 1999). According to a BBS survey carried out in 1997, there are 2,991 slums in the country. Majority of

the slum-dwellers lives in makeshift houses called *jhupri* (shanty)¹. Slums have the following characteristics:

- Predominantly very poor housing structure;
- Very high housing density;
- Poor sewerage and drainage or even no such facility;
- Inadequate, unhealthy drinking water supply;
- Unhealthy atmosphere;
- Little or no paved road; and
- Inhabited by poor, uneducated and below poverty level people.

Most of the slum-dwellers are recent immigrants from rural areas who are victims of different processes of pauperisation. They come mainly for economic reasons. Among other reasons are social (uprooted, driven out, abandoned, etc.) or natural disasters (river erosion). For livelihoods, they mainly work as:

- Rickshaw puller;
- Industrial labourer;
- Construction labourer;
- Peddler;
- Housemaid;
- Porter; and
- Other services.

Street children

Slum children are often termed as *tokai* (street children). They are perhaps the most vulnerable section of the society who suffers from human deprivations of all forms. Many children are forced to live and earn on the street due to their vulnerable and distressed situation. Some of them are run-away or abandoned children. A study done by the Department of Social Services explains the precarious situation of these children in three cities (DSS, 1999). Findings of the study are summarized below.

- 31 percent are 8-10 years, 34 percent are 11-13 years and 35 percent are 14-18 years of age.
- Among them, 45 percent live with parents, 18 percent maintain contact with parents and 24 percent have no contact with parents.
- 51 percent live in slums, 13 percent in launch terminals, 9 percent in market places and 8 percent in railway platforms.

¹ *Jhupri* has a ceiling, which is less than four feet and is made of very cheap construction materials like straw, bamboo, grass, leaves, polythene, gunny bags, etc.

- They are involved as *tokai* (collector of rags, animal bone, paper, etc), as vendor (fish, vegetables, etc), as rickshaw/van puller and as beggar.
- Majority (53%) earns Taka 10-20 (about a quarter of a US dollar) a day.
- 27 percent work under employers.
- 61 percent (of those who work under employers) are compelled to work longer hours and 52 percent are tortured by employers.
- 28 percent have one meal, 56 percent have two meals and 16 percent have three meals a day.
- They mostly suffer from gastro enteric and stomach pain (25%) and diarrhoea (23%).
- 53 percent do not receive any treatment.
- 30 percent urinate/sheath on roadside and 22 percent use public toilet.
- 3 percent use toothpaste and toothbrush and 79 percent use charcoal.
- 47 percent regularly play and 53 percent do not.
- 9 percent girls are subject to sexual harassment.
- 31 percent are assaulted by police and 35 percent by *mastans* (terrorist / muscleman); 8 percent have been in the police custody or behind the bar.
- Felt-needs are shelter (34%), education (28%), income (22%), medical treatment (10%) and recreation (6%).

PROGRAMME FOR THE POOR

School for street children

Every child has a right to education. Over two million Bangladeshi children live in the slums and streets. They have little or no access to basic education. Although primary education has been declared free and compulsory, many parents cannot afford to send their children to schools due to financial and social factors. Being members of very poor families, these children are often involved in different odd jobs to supplement their family income. CDL wants to reach a small segment of these children by providing them with basic education through its Education Extension Program. With this objective, a school named *Chetona Bikash Kendra* (CBK) was established in a poor neighbourhood of Dhaka City in May 1986. The school is supported by HEKS. Its main activities and features are as follows:

- Basic primary education is provided based on the national curriculum.
- Teachers are appointed by CDL.
- CDL has rented the premise and supplies books and stationeries free of cost.
- Teachers maintain contact with the parents and the children to attend classes regularly.

- The school provides awareness on health and sanitation.
- Documentary and juvenile feature films are screened in the classroom as part of education and recreation.
- Six-monthly exams are held.
- Study tour for the students is arranged once a year.
- Vocational training on sewing, tailoring, handicrafts making, boutique, electric work, etc., are provided to interested students and their mothers.
- One doctor visits the school once a week and provides counselling and treatment.

Enrolment

The CBK started in 1986 with 102 students. Currently (as of 2003) 856 students are enrolled in different grades from I to V. Among them 423 are girls and 433 are boys (see Table 1). The school has two shifts.

Objectives

CBK has following objectives:

To enhance the accessibility to education facilities for urban poor children;
To integrate child literacy with environmental and vocational training so that education becomes meaningful in their lives.

Year	Students enrolled		
	Boys	Girls	Total
1986	56	46	102
1987	85	81	166
1988	93	98	182
1989	93	86	179
1990	113	98	211
1991	158	151	309
1992	263	239	502
1993	341	270	611
1994	341	331	672
1995	359	346	705
1996	398	384	782
1997	382	373	755
1998	293	267	650
1999	438	412	850

2000	464	398	862
2001	445	423	868
2002	464	398	862
2003	433	423	856

Table 1: Enrolment of students in CBK

CBK ACTIVITIES

Primary education:

A team of six teachers and one office assistant runs the school programme of the CBK. The school follows the standard curriculum of primary education of the Government. CDL provides textbooks, exercise books and stationeries to all students. Education is free. Students get a free meal (snacks) during the interval.

Examinations are regularly held to review the progress of the students. A mid-term examination is held in June and annual examination is held in December. Results are satisfactory. The success rate is 96% compared to the rate in government schools (80%).

A total of 225 new students were admitted in Grade-I in January 2003. After completion of the primary course (Grade-V), 32 students were relocated to other secondary schools in the same year. Because of the quality of education and good rapport with the local community and parents through home visits and counselling, CBK has become the best performing school in the locality.

Teacher-student meeting

Teacher-student meetings are held once in every two months. The students and the teachers sit together to discuss different issues of well-being. They discuss about attendance, cleanliness, vitamin deficiency, personal hygiene, nutrition, school discipline, examination results, etc. The meetings are very participatory and the students are motivated to follow rules and regulations. Separate meetings are held for the students of morning shift and the day shift.

Home counselling

To motivate the parents and students for school admission, regular attendance, as well as change in behaviour, attitude and practices regarding various issues discussed in the classroom, teachers regularly visit families of

the students. These visits have significantly improved school attendance. The parents feel the importance of the visit, because they can learn about the school programmes and the progress of their children.

Parent-teacher meeting

Parent-teacher meetings are held once in every two months. Parents and teachers sit together and discuss issues such as sending their child to the school on a regular basis, taking care of the child, importance and necessity of child education and vocational training, looking after the child at home, how to cook nutritious meals, importance of drinking clean and boiled water, health and nutrition, sanitation, personal hygiene, etc. Teachers and parents share some specific tasks and responsibilities in their respective capacity to implement the decisions of these meetings. The tasks and performances are reviewed in the subsequent meetings.

Referral service

CBK provides referral service by enrolling 'primary graduates' in adjoining secondary schools. CBK teachers also monitor their progress in the new schools by occasional visits to those schools and their homes. In 2003, 32 'primary graduates' of CBK were admitted in three different secondary schools. CDL also arranges local sponsors to support financial needs of the very poor but meritorious students who intend to pursue further education.

Recreation

Sports and study tours are arranged for physical and mental development of the children. In 2003, two such programs were organized. The students of Grade III, IV and V were taken to the National Museum. Annual sports were held at a nearby playground.

Children's corner

Special emphasis is given on physical, psychological and cultural development of the children. To that end, a "children's corner" was established in CBK. This includes a small library, selected education materials, facility for screening videos and some facility for indoor games. Besides, discussions, debates, painting competition, story telling, poetry recitation, music competition, etc. are organised time to time.

Children's corner, although relatively a new initiative, has created a significant impact on the children. Many children have demonstrated remarkable creativity and talent. Screening of documentaries and feature films has helped in changing attitude and behaviour of the children regarding health, sanitation, hygiene, team spirit, etc. The film show is organized at least once in every two months. CBK has a TV and a VCR for screening of videos.

Awareness building

Film shows are arranged for the children primarily to create awareness regarding various social and development issues. It is also a source of entertainment to the students. In 2003, nine films were screened. Among these were, fairy tales and documentaries on rights of the girl child, preventive health care and social awareness. Videos are screened in the school premises. In 2003, two films shows were organized for the parents.

Students are encouraged to communicate the messages of primary health care (PHC) discussed in the student-teacher meetings to their parents. Among the topics are issues of nutrition and early marriage.

Primary health care

CBK has one part-time medical doctor. He regularly checks the health and nutritional status of the children. He holds discussion with students and parents to increase awareness and knowledge on diseases and to foster a positive attitude on prevention of diseases. The students commonly suffer from respiratory infection, various skin diseases (scabies, impetigo, taenia), ear infection, conjunctivitis, diarrhoea, dysentery, worm infestation, fever, malnutrition, etc. In 2003, nine discussion sessions were held with the students of CBK and another eight with their parents. Students also receive necessary medicines free of cost. Medicines are collected from a local donor who owns a pharmaceutical factory.

Vocational training

CBK routinely organises vocational training to students and their mothers. In 2003, 92 students and 10 distressed mothers received vocational training. Among the students, 20 received training in electrical works, 37 in tailoring and the rest 35 in sewing/embroidery. Besides, ten mothers got training in tailoring. Training courses are free of charge. The trainees are provided with necessary materials. The products produced during the training period are sold in the market and the sales proceeds are reinvested in running further

training courses. One shop has been contracted for display and marketing of the products. CDL organises exhibition at its central office once a year to promote marketing of these products. The parents are very much interested in the vocational training programme because of the earning potentials.

Capacity development of teachers

As part of CDL's overall capacity building strategy, CBK teachers attend different training courses, workshops and seminars organised by different organisations. In 2003, they attended the following:

- Reproductive and Child Health organised by *Caritas Bangladesh*
- Education Materials Development organised by *Friends in Village Development Bangladesh*;
- Beijing +5 organised by *Women For Women*;
- Children Right and Education organised by *Bangladesh Child Rights Forum*;
- Problems of Adolescent Girls organised by *Centre of Mass Education in Science*;
- Health, Sanitation and Arsenic organised by *Voluntary Health Services Society*;
- The State of Human Rights in Bangladesh – Women's Perspective organised by *Women for Women*;
- Women's Rights in Bangladesh organised by *Bangladesh Mohila Parishad*;
- Reading for Children organized by *Save the Children USA*.

Challenges

One challenge faced by CBK is dropout of students in classes due to their financial constraints, though they are few in number. These children sell labour in the informal sector activities to support their respective families. Teachers spend a lot of time motivating students and parents to keep the children in the school until the primary course is completed.

In designing the programme of CBK, CDL has taken a holistic approach to children's education. CDL intends to strengthen and repackage the programme to suit its overall vision and mission. Related strategies are:

- Taking a holistic approach for social mobilisation through information and knowledge empowerment of the poor children.
- Developing the CBK as an institution that provides intensive educational support at the primary level to the slum children, which is

also a centre for learning on social and environmental issues as well as a centre that can cater for developing their vocational skills.

- Strengthening children's corner for the psychosocial development of children who are knowledge poor.
- Helping the process of Early Childhood Development through awareness building and other special child-centred programmes.

CDL is planning to further develop the children's corner, where the students and the children of the locality will have an opportunity to engage in reading, exchanging ideas, discuss problems, and also have recreation. The corner will have more books, computers, games and accessories so that children after the school hours can spend good times.

CONCLUSION

The *Chetona Bikash Kendra* (CBK) is now considered as an Urban Information Resource Centre (UIRC) for poor children. The scope of the centre has been widened facilitating access to awareness and basic education in a meaningful way along with developing the vocational skills. CBK uses a combination of formal and non-formal approaches in its education programme for urban poor children. Rather than focusing only on literacy, it addresses the wider issues of child development. Through CBK, CDL is trying out a methodology, which eventually may emerge as a model of good practice for child development.

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