Understanding Operations of Floating Schools: A Case of Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha in Bangladesh

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Understanding Operations of Floating Schools: A Case of Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha in Bangladesh

Jashim Uddin Ahmed1
N.M. Ashikuzzaman2
Nabila Nisha3

Abstract
Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change since it is a delta formed by the confluence of major rivers. Making sure that schools are resilient against such natural disasters in Bangladesh should be a priority for any disaster risk reduction preparedness and planning. To address this challenge, Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha (SSS) found an innovative way to deliver information and primary education to residents of wetland area in Bangladesh. It operates 111-vessel fleet of floating schools, libraries, health clinics and training centres, equipped with wireless Internet access, serving over 1,00,000 families. This case captures a clear picture of this rapidly growing non-governmental organization (NGO) of Shidhulai and its extensive activities leading to the transformation of the region’s waterways into pathways for education, information and technology in Bangladesh. Although the case partly focuses upon the role of NGOs and the operational concept of floating schools across the world, an examination of SSS’s growth, challenges, current and plans ahead strategies is the main emphasis here. All these discussions ultimately pave a clear way as to which steps the NGO could take to strengthen its position, and support the development of socio-economic infrastructure of Bangladesh.

Keywords
Bangladesh, primary education, NGO, Chalan beel, children, boat schools, Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha

Disclaimer: This case is written for classroom discussion and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation or to represent successful or unsuccessful managerial decision-making or endorse the views of the management.

1 Professor, Department of Management, School of Business & Economics, North South University, Bashundhara, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
2 Research Associate, Inter Research, Bashundhara, Dhaka, Bangladesh.
3 Senior Lecturer, Department of Accounting & Finance, School of Business & Economics, North South University, Bashundhara, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Corresponding author:
Jashim Uddin Ahmed, Professor, Department of Management, School of Business & Economics, North South University, Bashundhara, Dhaka 1229, Bangladesh.
E-mails: jashim.ahmed@northsouth.edu; jashimahmed@hotmail.com
Introduction

Bangladesh is located in the northeastern part of South Asia and covers an area of 147,570 square kilometres. It is almost entirely surrounded by India, except for a short southeastern frontier with Myanmar and a southern coastline on the Bay of Bengal (Chowdhury et al. 2013; NIPORT, Mitra and Associates, and ICF International 2013). Bangladesh is a developing country with a huge population (156.18 million, July 2015 estimate). In addition, the density of population (1,045 people per square kilometre—five times than that of any other ‘mega’ country (>100 million)) is itself is a challenge (World Bank, 2012; World Factbook, 2016).

In Bangladesh, there are four major stages in the general education system. These being, primary school education, secondary school education, higher secondary school education and tertiary and higher education. Though the availability and accessability of primary education for every child is high on the global context (Sarker & Davey, 2009), access to and achieving the right to education for Bangladeshi primary school going students in remote area is still remaining a crucial challenge (UNICEF, 2014).

Altogether, currently, there have almost 16.5 million primary school aged children (6–10 years) in Bangladesh. However, the Government of Bangladesh has shown commendable zeal whilst establishing laws to promote the quality, quantity and accessibility of primary and secondary education in the country since its liberation in 1971. The Primary Education Act (1981), The Primary Education (Compulsory) Act (1990), and later the country’s first National Plan of Action (NPA) on Education for All (EFA) (1990) are all legal endeavors carried out by the government to both ease access to, and boost enrolment of primary and secondary education (Ahmed, Ahmed, Khan & Ahmed, 2007).

The Role of NGOs in Primary Education

The term non-governmental organization (NGO) encompasses a broad array of organizations, varying in their specific purpose, philosophy, sector-wise expertise and scope of activities (Zohir & Matin, 2004). Non-governmental organizations today are visible actors in the field of socio-economic transformation in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh, such organizations first surfaced soon after the liberation war. The main aim behind the emergence of such organizations initially geared towards alleviating poverty and promoting sustainable development in Bangladesh. Over time, NGOs began to shift their emphasis to socio-economic development and started pursuing programmes related to healthcare, family planning, income generation, self-reliance and, most importantly, education for the disadvantaged and the poor of Bangladesh (Haque, 2013).

In fact, the number and the role and function of NGOs in the education sector have steadily and gradually increased in recent times. Currently, out of the 2502 (including 251 foreign) NGOs operating in different capacity in Bangladesh, over 400 NGOs are directly involved in the delivery of basic education programmes (NGO Affairs Bureau, 30 September 2016). Most of these programmes are designed to reach the poor and disadvantaged children of the country. Approximately, 4–8 per cent of the primary school age children in Bangladesh receive non-formal primary education (NFPE) in these NGO programmes (World Bank, 2002). Non-governmental organizations also have contributed to the development of supplementary reading materials for the primary school children.

Most of the NGOs in Bangladesh have been lauded for its success in achieving gender parity at primary and secondary school level and for its notable progress at the enrolment level of underprivileged children. Providing quality primary education to the poor and disadvantaged is one of the major programmes run by these NGOs. It does not stop here, the NGOs prepare children, aged 5+, across the
Bangladesh. Moreover, the organization aims to combine their floating schools as both a school boat and school house. Externally, SSS has bigger plans to develop their initiatives by partnering with various other NGOs and authorities across Bangladesh. The NGO plans to replicate its ‘floating education’ model in partnership with local organizations in Bangladesh like Care Bangladesh/Grameenphone, People’s Oriented Program Implementation, Subarno Foundation, and Grambangla Unneyon Committee (UNDP, 2012). Besides, aspects of this model like solar lamps, solar home systems, locally developed educational content, and FloodCharts will be additional aids provided by SSS to these replication efforts. Replication of the project is also being encouraged in India in collaboration with UNICEF. Furthermore, researchers from the Open University, UK conducted studies on SSS’s floating education system for their English in Action (EIA) project in Bangladesh, with support from the Government of Bangladesh, BBC Trust and UK’s the Department for International Development (DFID). The long-term aim of the project is to launch solar-powered boats in Bangladesh that target developing riverside residents’ English language skills. Overall, SSS has exciting plans for its journey ahead in Bangladesh and hopes to achieve a strong position across global initiatives of similar NGOs.

Notes
1. Historically, the beel spreads over the 18 sub-districts (upazilas) of six districts of Bangladesh, including Rajshahi (Paba, Bagmara and Mohonpur); Pabna (Chatmohor, Vangura and Faridpur); Sirajgonj (Tarash, Ullapara, Raigonj and Shahjadpur); Natore (Sadar, Singra, Gurudaspur and Baraigram); Naogaon (Manda, Raninagar and Atrai); and Bogra (Nandigram). It presently spreads over only 10 upazilas, however, including Singra, Gurudaspur, Boraigram, Chatmohar, Bhangura, Faridpur, Shahjadpur, Ullapara, Tarash and Raigonj, in the three districts of Natore, Pabna and Sirajgonj (Hossain et al., 2009).
2. Literacy as defined by the UNESCO (and subsequently the premises upon which this article refers to) is ‘any individual who is literate; who can read, write, and is socially aware’ (UNESCO, 2015).

References
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