

Integrated Multi Channel Technology Based Delivery of Skills Training: Changing Lives in Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is predominantly an agriculture-based developing country, with a population of approximately 160 million living in 147,570 square kilometers of land. Bangladesh is among the world's poorest countries. One third of its population lives in extreme poverty, and nearly half of Bangladesh's children are malnourished and underweight. The direct link between chronic poverty and unfavorable agricultural environments is becoming increasingly apparent, partly as the result of climate change and partly as the consequence of mismanaged natural resources and the pressure of an enormous unskilled population on land. The major challenge of the country is to halve the level of existing poverty as per the millennium development goals of the United Nations by 2015. To achieving the Millennium Development goals within the next decade, Bangladesh needs to develop and implement effective strategies. The most important goal of Bangladesh Government's economic policy is to reduce poverty, so as to gradually elevate the vast majority of the people above the poverty line and improve the quality of life for the average citizen. In all national plans and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), poverty is identified as the key issue to be addressed by various strategic actions. One such strategic action is to develop the human resource through developing vocational skills of the mass people, thus empowering them to be able to enter the job market either through wage-employment or self-employment.

The seasonal trait of agriculture in Bangladesh leaves the farmers without work for a considerable period of time throughout the year. The informal economy of Bangladesh is typically composed of very small unregistered businesses that are usually run and managed by families. Although, the informal economy of Bangladesh has been on a rapid rise, the informal workforce are still deprived of opportunities offered by the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) system to develop their skills. If the agricultural workers, landless rural workers, and the unemployed millions in the villages of Bangladesh are to be engaged in productive occupation, making alternative provision for extensive vocational skills training in rural areas is the best solution. Through the provision of such trainings, a large portion of rural population can be enabled to make productive contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and also change their socio-economic conditions.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TVET PROGRAMMES IN BANGLADESH

Existing Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programmes of Bangladesh offer courses of one to four years duration after the junior secondary level (class VIII). The courses are offered by vocational training institutes, polytechnics, commercial institutes, technical training centers and specialized institutes. Certificate level courses (post-class VIII) are offered in about 163 public institutions and some 2,154 non-government institutions including secondary schools. Considering the need and

magnitude of the population, the present capacity of the TVET system in the country is very much inadequate. Limited opportunities for vocational and technical skill development are the defining characteristic of this sub-sector. At present, private sector and NGO investments in technical and vocational skill training is insufficient due to the lack of resources, expertise and experience. TVET mainly serves young males who have completed at least the eighth grade. The existing TVET system rules out those who do not survive in the education system up to grade VIII.

CONTRIBUTION OF DHAKA AHSANIA MISSION IN THE TVET SECTOR

Dhaka Ahsania Mission (DAM), established in 1956, since the early onsets of its development drive has focused on education, and has operated various non-formal education programs for different groups of people. DAM has been working in the TVET sector for many years and has developed institutes for providing diploma on various trade courses as well as established several vocational training institutes in different parts of Bangladesh for offering short skills training courses. In addition, DAM is organizing short training courses for both urban and rural male and female who do not have the requisite education qualification to attend formal training courses. One of the major obstacles DAM faced in conducting large scale skills training is the unavailability of skilled instructors/trainers, especially in the rural and remote areas, where concentration of poor people who needs the skills training most is higher.

RATIONAL FOR A NEW STRATEGIC INTERVENTION

It should be recognized by all that, skills development cannot be the sole agenda of the formal TVET alone. Skills can be acquired through all levels of education and training, occurring in formal, non-formal, informal and on-the job-settings. There should be a wide range of modalities of delivery and organizational and institutional mechanism to address the needs of diverse clientele groups for developing livelihood skills.

In Bangladesh large and medium scale industrial sectors are not flourishing in accordance to the need of the country, as a consequence of sole dependence on the agriculture sector for employment and income. Bangladesh suffers from high level of unemployment and disguised unemployment, which is further worsening due to high population growth rate. Creation of employment opportunities for the rural poor in the non-farm industrial sector is instrumental in eradicating poverty. To more effectively manage its human resources and develop an integrated approach for skills development, there is a need to think beyond state controlled TVET system and emphasis must be given on varied types of non-formal training approaches for skills development.

At present, the strength of conventional vocational skills training institutions can satisfy only a small portion of the huge skills development demand of Bangladesh. This system does not reach out to people of all ages and location, especially those in the remote and non accessible areas. Most of the poor people cannot afford to get training from formal skills training centers either due to the physical distance of

training institutions from their locality or due to their poor economic conditions. Social barriers also work as a restraint, especially for women. On the other hand, it is very difficult and costly to get qualified trainers and set up village level vocational training institutes to meet this demand.

In convergence with Bangladesh government's commitment towards the use of ICT for educational purpose, the National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction has recognized the need of improving the country's knowledge base using education, training and research, and it also emphasizes on the importance of ICT as an invaluable enabler towards achieving this objective. Therefore, going beyond the formal approach of delivery, providing livelihood skills training through multi channel technology based approach is an appropriate and timely alternative to train a huge number of unskilled workforce.

THE PACKAGE MATERIAL

Banking on DAM's experience of developing more than 400 titles of literacy and skills training materials over several decades, in 2012, with the support from Commonwealth of Learning (COL), the Center for International Education and Development (CINED) of Dhaka Ahsania Mission has developed a "package material" for livelihood skills training. This package material has been developed for youths, women and men with limited reading skills and those who have never had the opportunity to participate in any formal skills training programmes. As self reading material this package is also supportive to increase the access of persons with disabilities. With the heading 'let's work and build our lives', this package material contains five pictorial and instructional booklets, which have been developed on five different trades. Each booklet in this package is complemented with an animation video (each of 15 minutes duration). The users of these booklets will benefit from the videos as they can better understand the learning content after watching the videos alongside reading. The booklets in this package are: Flower Gardening, Poultry Rearing, Batik Print, Vermi Compost and Nursery. All booklets of this package use easy to understand language to describe the entire chain of trade, from production to marketing, which is necessary to establish and run small enterprises.

Scope of Utilization

Utilizing the strengths of Open Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL), through this skills training package CINED has introduced a multi channel technology based delivery approach for providing skills training. Materials of this package has been fashioned in such a way that anyone can watch the videos at home or in the Community Learning Centers (CLCs) and read the booklets alongside, either individually or guided by a facilitator, to obtain the necessary skills and information. CLCs or local clubs having audio-visual facilities can arrange skills training programme for anyone interested in the community. Interested people can watch the videos in groups or individually as many times as required and read the booklets to get a thorough idea of the trade and its step by step production process.

Animation videos of this package material are suitable to be disseminated by the skills training programmes of various television channels. Publishing the booklets and videos in the internet can

facilitate online learning and open access for all, anytime and anywhere. In addition, the messages of the booklets and videos can be used to develop audio contents for broadcasting through community radios.

Technical training institutes that are offering different trade courses usually have many limitations. Many of them do not have competency based trade curriculum, skilled instructors and necessary equipments for providing practical training. This livelihood skills training package can be a very useful resource for these technical institutes.

Process of Development

A systematic step by step process has been followed for development of the booklets and animation videos. At the beginning a need assessment exercise was conducted with the beneficiaries, existing vocational institutes and experts of vocational skills training providing agencies both from the government and private agencies to identify trades, required competencies and delivery approaches for the development of skills training materials.

Later, an expert team, consisting of ministry people, subject matter specialists, material developers and audio-visual experts, reviewed the findings of the needs assessment. This team analyzed existing curriculum of government and private training institutes and determined the competency level of the trades. Based on the selected competencies of different trades, education material developers and audio-visual experts developed the scripts of the five booklets and five animation videos.

Based on scripts of the booklets and animation videos, the five booklets and the five animation videos were developed by a group of material developers and audio visual and animation experts. All five booklets and animation videos were field-tested before finalization. CINED has developed a guidebook to support organizations who wish to conduct training of facilitators on this skills training package.

INITIATIVES OF CINED FOR UTILIZATION AND PROMOTION OF THE PACKAGE MATERIAL

Before wide scale dissemination and use of the package material, CINED decided to use this package material in controlled groups in Dhaka Ahsania Mission. After a colorful launching ceremony of the package material in February 2013, CINED utilized Community Learning Centers (CLC) of DAM to provide livelihood skills training using the newly developed package material. So far, 535 persons, of whom 290 are female, received the training. Most of the trainees are members of the Community Learning Centers (CLCs). They received training on one or more trades.

To reach more people in the rural areas with this innovative livelihood skills training package, CINED took the initiative to utilize the popular and effective delivery mode of community radio broadcasting to disseminate the messages of the skills training booklet and videos. At present there are 14 community radios in Bangladesh, who are transmitting locally prepared programmes for the listeners of their respective areas, as per the local needs and dialects. To enhance the awareness and capacity of the community radios to develop and broadcast audio contents on livelihood skills, CINED organized a 3 days' training workshop with support from the Commonwealth Educational Media Centre for Asia (CEMCA)/ Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in June 2013. This initiative expanded the scope of dissemination of skills training by reaching the unreached population through community radio broadcasting channels.

CINED took another initiative and established a partnership with a national daily newspaper "Alokito Bangladesh" to popularize this skills training package through advertisement and featured stories on livelihood skills. This newspaper has a daily page, dedicated to disseminate good practices of the small entrepreneurs of the country, aiming to encourage potential entrepreneurs to start small enterprises so that they can contribute to the informal economy of Bangladesh. To provide continuous support and guidance to small entrepreneurs, a unit has been established in CINED named "Small Entrepreneurs

Support Unit (SESU)" having a website (www.alokitobangladesh.com/sesu) and a hotline number so that anyone can get proper advice and assistance instantaneously. The website continuously uploads articles on good practices of small entrepreneurs of the country and useful information and publications. Anyone can read and download the skills training package from this website.

Copies of the booklets and animation videos have been distributed to selected government ministries, public and private technical vocational institutes, vocational and general schools, NGOs and interested stakeholders for their use. Efforts are underway to use this package material in the upcoming skills training programmes of Bureau of Non-formal Education (BNFE) in Bangladesh.

Individuals interested to engage in income generation are collecting this package and have started developing small enterprises in their homes. Dhaka Ahsania Mission through its 149 field offices in 48 districts are popularizing this package and have made this package available in the district, Upazila and village levels. Moreover, on demand, skills training packages are being sent through postal services.

After receiving skills training using this package material, so far 105 females and 35 males have taken initiative to start small enterprises. They are now at different stages of operating small business. CINED has taken up a joint initiative with the Micro Finance Programme of DAM to provide skills training to members of its 125 groups. Under this initiative, around 3000 group members, mostly women, will receive skills training using this package material. They will later be linked with Micro Enterprise Development Loan programmes of DAM.

With support from COL, the English version of 5 animation videos and 5 booklets has been prepared for wider replication of this innovative delivery approach in other countries.

MONITORING

A list of competencies that the learners would achieve after reading the booklets and watching the videos of this package has been given at the end of each booklet for self monitoring of learning achievements. To assess the achievements from this package material, a simple monitoring system has been introduced to obtain qualitative and quantitative information. Organizations, using this skills training package, are providing periodical monitoring reports to CINED. These reports are being utilized to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the package material. A central database has been established to preserve all monitoring information that will be later utilized for review and revision of this package material.

CHALLENGES FACED

Developing booklets on livelihood skills for people with limited reading skills is very difficult, especially if providing technical information and narrating a production process is involved. After receiving skills training, people sometimes need financial assistance to start small businesses which requires a programmatic approach going beyond providing skills training alone.

Electricity and Audio-visual equipments are required for the demonstration of the animation videos, which are not always readily available in remote areas. Receiving monitoring information from the users is not regular in many cases.

LESSONS LEARNT

Animation videos are very effective to demonstrate processes of production, which are difficult to create or arrange for video shooting. Production process of animation videos is time consuming and costly, but it is very effective and enjoyable for people of all age groups. People who received training through this skills training package highly appreciated its innovative and easy to understand delivery method, which is a combination of pictorial booklets and videos.

In future, while producing new animation videos, there should be more provision of depicting interaction among characters of animation videos in addition to narrating the production process. Developing a link with formal TVET for recognition of skills acquired through this Open Distance and Flexible Learning (ODFL) process and to create scope for up gradation of skills through formal system can be explored.

There can be two sets of skills training material one for the beginners and the other for the advance level learners combining advance level skills and entrepreneurship skills. Competency of advance level skills training materials can be linked with the levels of National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework. There is a need for developing more livelihood skills training materials following ODFL approach to address the growing demands of the informal sector.

CONCLUSION

Through this combined delivery approach, numerous unemployed urban and rural youths, women and men are being able to develop their home-based small businesses for economic self reliance. It is also empowering them for contributing to the informal economy of Bangladesh.