



BEYOND ACCESS

BRINGING CAREGIVERS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER
IN PUBLIC LIBRARIES
IN BANGLADESH



Children at a Bangladesh library. Photo credit: Beyond Access

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beyond Access focuses on strengthening the social power of public and community libraries around the world. The project began with the recognition that libraries are widespread throughout developing countries, but continue to be undervalued by social development projects. By drawing on libraries' pre-existing institutional and infrastructural utilities, Beyond Access introduces long-term programs that use technology to meet the needs of the different communities it serves. Managed by the global nonprofit organization IREX and funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Beyond Access works with civil and state partners such as Save the Children to transform libraries into sustainable public information and communications technology (ICT) hubs. The initiative implements library programs in nine different countries along three different axes of focus: digital literacy and inclusion, financial inclusion and economic opportunity, and community-led literacy solutions.

Keywords: tablets, literacy, youth, public libraries, Bangladesh

CONTEXT

In terms of Internet connectivity, the World Bank's *World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends* found that Bangladesh has the fifth-largest offline population in the world, with about 148 million still not connected to the Internet. The report also made it clear that digital literacy rates are not high in the country. According to a 2016 report, less than 6 percent of adults in the poorest countries, and less than 1 percent in Bangladesh have attended a literacy program.

Since 1990, Bangladesh's primary education system has made strong progress toward the Education for All goal of universal primary enrollment, achieving a 97 percent net primary school enrollment rate by 2013. Nevertheless, the country's education system is hampered by high dropout rates, non-enrollment among vulnerable communities, and quality issues. In this environment, poor literacy results are an important challenge. Only 25 percent of children who complete primary school achieve the desired competence in Bangla reading, writing, and vocabulary by the end of fifth grade.

Data shows that libraries are widespread throughout developing countries, yet are undervalued by social development projects. A 2012 study by Nafiz Zaman Shuva found that there are two major categories of public libraries in Bangladesh: 68 government-run and 972 non-government public libraries. The non-government public libraries do not receive any financial and personnel support from the government. They also lag behind in terms of infrastructure, especially computers and Internet facilities. Community libraries, in the form of a small collection of books located in a local's home, have been aided by nonprofits and promoted in remote areas.

| Bangladesh | | | |
|---|--------------------------|---|-------|
| Population (UN, 2015) | 160,411,249 | Fixed broadband subscriptions (%) (ITU, 2016) | 3.77 |
| Population density (people per sq.km) (UN, 2015) | 1,113.98 | Mobile cellular subscriptions (%) (ITU, 2016) | 77.88 |
| Median household income (Gallup, 2006-2012) | US\$ 2,819 | Individuals using the Internet (%) (ITU, 2016) | 25.4 |
| Education (Mean years of schooling) (UNDP, 2013) | Male: 5.6 Female: 4.6 | Individuals using the Internet by gender (%) (ITU, 2016) | N/A |

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Beyond Access' program in Bangladesh is literacy-focused. The initiative established a network of 24 libraries located across diverse regions of Bangladesh. Within this network, Beyond Access introduced early-grade literacy resources. Before Beyond Access' interventions, these libraries were targeted almost entirely toward adults and university

students. Despite the fact that Bangladesh has more than 5,000 libraries, more than 80 percent of children in grades one through three had never used one. Since the program began in 2015, librarians have shifted the focus of their work to include and encourage young children by providing not only reading materials and dedicated space for novice readers, but also ICT resources. The library-owned tablets available to children who are learning to read are equipped with educational software where students can practice the fundamentals of reading and writing, engage in creative projects, and learn the basics of digital literacy. Librarians receive training in the use and management of the devices and assist in monitoring data about the effectiveness of the program.

| Project details | | | |
|-----------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Technology | Tablets in 24 libraries | Training | Librarian training: Making child-inclusive spaces and adding child-focused materials and services; tablet management and project/data monitoring |
| Year program started | 2015 (-2017) | Cost to users | Free |
| Geography | 20 sites in different regions of Bangladesh | Total cost of program | Not disclosed |
| User profile | Children in grades 1-3 and their parents; librarians | Associated organizations | Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, IREX, READ Project, Save the Children, USAID |

PROGRESS AND RESULTS

Where libraries were once thought of as a resource for practiced readers, they are now enthusiastically supported as children-friendly spaces. Parents, teachers, and librarians overwhelmingly support this shift in purpose. Within a year of the program’s implementation, more than 45,000 visits by children were recorded. The more children-specific events a library holds, the more attendance they record.

The program in Bangladesh shows specifically how valuable libraries can be as educational supplements. This demonstrates that not only are libraries untapped social and community resources, but that they can be successfully harnessed as strengthening agents in areas where formal education may be lacking or needing reinforcement. In Bangladesh, where primary school enrollment is high but retention is low, teachers report better learning outcomes and smoother classroom management due to the supplemental literacy programs children engage in at the library.

CHALLENGES

Rapid government turnover– The value of libraries rests in large part on their readymade integration in government funding structures. Political instability in developing countries, however, can pose significant challenges to the continuity of these programs, as funding priorities may shift away from supporting community resources, social cohesion, and education. For this reason, Beyond Access diversifies its partners, ensuring that both governmental and non-governmental resources support each program.

Community resistance – Not all librarians are amenable to the notion that libraries should prioritize more than just books. It can sometimes be challenging to garner the support of library administrators for the inclusion of ICT.

Social norms – Although the number of children visiting the library has increased exponentially, many of them spend time there alone. Parents report difficulty in finding time within the library’s schedule to spend time there with their children, although findings show that parental presence boosts social and educational outcomes. This parent-child element of the program has not always been effectively communicated and/or implemented in the libraries.

BEYOND ACCESS’ SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE PROJECTS

Connecting with anchor organizations is imperative – IREX does not have a physical presence in any of the countries where they work, so it is imperative that they partner with local organizations. This is not only a logistical necessity; Beyond Access’ funding policy is to contribute no more than 50 percent of each program’s total costs. This local buy-in element of the initiative contributes to the strength of each program’s sustainability, and Beyond Access reports that their partners almost always succeed in raising more than the required half of the funds.

Identification of stable and longstanding resources in target country helps with the project’s sustainability – Beyond Access’ methodology centers on sustainability. To this end, they identify stable, longstanding resources within each country in which they work. By consulting and partnering with local governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and nonprofits, they seek to influence the priorities of pre-existing institutions and funding structures to include their library projects. In the case of Bangladesh, this was the goal of their partnership with Save the Children. By bringing the attention of such a large and effective funding organization to the untapped resource of libraries, Beyond Access seeks to make a lasting impact on the field of social development.

SOURCES

Turner, J. (2017, November 27) Personal Interview

Project websites: www.beyondaccess.net
www.readbangladesh.org