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## Shelter-based Community Libraries: In search of Alternative Livelihoods for Pavement Dwellers in Dhaka City

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### **Abstract:**

*Each night, around 20,000 people – both adults and children - make the streets of Dhaka (the capital city of Bangladesh) their home. Living amongst the noise, rubbish and traffic, thousands of families walk the streets of Dhaka, looking for a safe place to rest for just a few hours each night. Trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, the pavement dwellers are amongst the most vulnerable people in Bangladesh. Pavement dwellers can be found in ferry landings, train stations, bus stations, market centers, religious shrines, parks, and on footpaths. There are very few organizations who are serving for them. Concern Worldwide (one of the INGO) and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) have jointly come forward to support 10,000 pavement dwellers through dedicated pavement dweller centres, providing them with the opportunity to make their own choices for a better future. It will also establish sustainable services for providing basic functional education for 900 children/youth and 400 adults, psycho-social counseling for 600 children and 150 adults, market-based vocational skills training for 450 children/youth and adults, entrepreneurial skills training for 400 children/youth, and life skills education for 800 children/youth. With a view to this, the project decided to set-up libraries based on their shelter centres. The project realizes that as of today in Bangladesh the most poor communities do not have access to a library. This damages educational outcomes for many. The author has been appointed as a Library Consultant in that project. It is an amazing experience that based on the demand of the pavement dwellers; the author had to collect the resources and different audio-visual aids. At the beginning, the author had to face tremendous challenges to get their attention because most of the children of the pavement dwellers didn't feel interest to any attractive reading books or illustrative collections. They were very much fond of watching movie, cinema, drama, cartoon, hindi film, action film, and so on. To attract them on library resources, the author has prepared*

*and presented different video documentaries on how river erosion affected children encouraged to read and to go to school, how sex workers children become curious to create reading habit which leads them to go to school. And for motivating youth pavement dwellers achieving social skills on different professions (like barber, carpenter, shopkeeper, hawker, micro investor, cooperatives, maid-labour, day-labour, riksha-puller, van-driver, etc) short video documentaries have been made and presented on different IGAs (income generating activities). Thus libraries have turned into integral part in the lives of the pavement dwellers. The basic aim of the paper is to share the ideas on how a considerable number of pavement dwellers children have been admitted in government and public schools during the last couple of years by the help of the library services. This will reveal how the youth pavement dwellers capacity has been increased through training and library services. It will also explain a good progress in enabling better access for pavement dwellers and their children to basic services in education, health and legal aid through library and information services. Some interesting case studies will also be discussed in this paper.*

Key Words: Shelter-based Libraries, Pavement Dwellers, Community Libraries, Dhaka City

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## **Introduction**

Ever since it's founding, Bangladesh has been known as one of the world's poorest countries. The poverty rate has fallen from an estimated 74% in 1973-74 to 40% till 2011 (Yunus 2009). Since the independence of Bangladesh, there are many government and non-government organizations have been working for poverty alleviation in different ways but the shelter based community library is a concept of Concern Worldwide (one of the INGO) and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) as they wanted to support 10,000 pavement dwellers providing them with the opportunity to make their own choices for a better future. There is no doubt about the fact that development is a product of education and education is a process through which people are formally and informally trained to acquire knowledge and skills. So the roles of libraries and librarians in the concept of poverty alleviation and capacity building of the people can never be overemphasized if it serves in innovative way by breaking the tradition (Ogunsola 2011). It is already proved that library services have been transformed from passive to active and support to action-oriented. The project namely "Amrao Manush (we are people too)" has been designed to improve the lives of the pavement dwellers particularly those who are least served by the private sector or government programmes. The name of the project was proposed by two women pavement dwellers during the project design phase. The project had overall objectives and some specific objectives. It was how the marginalized people can access to alternative livelihoods through the library services. The project realized that one of key process which is market based vocational skills training can change the lives of the poor people and it is possible to attain through a library. By using the library as a training centre on different IGAs (Income Generation Activities) the project thought that marginalized people can change their behaviour and lives as well. The project also paid attention for getting most significant changes through innovative effective library services where interest-based resources will be prepared and collected to attract the poor people towards the library. Training through library helped them to engage with different professions

like Hawker, Carpenter, Vegetable seller, Fish seller, Barber, Rikshaw puller, Van puller, Security guard, Helper of the bus, Driver, Registered day labour for loading and unloading goods from the truck, Waste collector of the city corporation and so on and earn a minimum amount of money which is sufficient for their survival. The study is primarily concerned with 110 pavement dwellers in 2 shelter centres which represented 10, 000 and data/information has been collected from them using different techniques like Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), Consultation, Observation, Personal Interview and Analysis of Secondary Documents. The immediate result was to involve them with IGAs and ensure schooling for their children. Its long term impact was to introduce library as skill based training centre for building capacity of the pavement dwellers and provide support to build their next generation educated and civilized. This project has created an environment and increased public recognition that pavement dwellers are Bangladeshi citizens entitled to the same rights as others and who fulfil important functions in society. They deserve to be treated with dignity and respect like everybody else. The paper intends to share the experience of the author about the project as he was recruited as a consultant. It will explain how the shelter- based community library demonstrated the alternative livelihoods for the pavement dwellers based on their interest and what are the learning's they learned from the library which changes their beliefs, attitudes, practices, behaviour and made them an important part of the community.

### **Description of the study**

Traditional approach always brings as usual result in the context of poverty alleviation in Bangladesh which is not satisfactory. Keeping it in mind, both CWW and DCC thought to introduce an innovative library approach by breaking the tradition. In poverty alleviation they have more than forty year's experiences. It was a 3-year project (March 2008- February 2011) to address the needs of pavement dwellers in Dhaka City. The general view is that most pavement dwellers are newcomers to the city looking for a place to live. However a recent survey conducted by the City Corporation showed that 63% of the respondents have been staying in the same location for at least 10 years or more (Zillur, 2009). It is estimated that there are between 15,000-20,000 pavement dwellers in Dhaka alone (BBS 2009). This may seem a relatively small number considering that Dhaka has a population of around 15 million. The consequences of climate change have been contributing to increase the number of extreme urban poor as more people are losing their land due to erosion and floods. Because of a lack of shelter even during emergencies, no access to good quality food and the poor quality of water and sanitation services, pavement dwellers suffer from health problems. They are often denied access from their basic rights due to low status. In most cases, they are disqualified from services due to their inability to give permanent address. They do not qualify for formal or informal savings and credit services provided by NGOs and CBOs (Community Based Organizations).

The study has discussed two shelter-based community libraries which located at Sadar Ghat (Ferry Station) and Kamlapur (Rail Station) in Dhaka City as the huge number of pavement dwellers found both of places. Both were two-storied building on abandoned property donated by the Dhaka City Corporation. In each shelter centres, there was one recreational room (hall room) where at the night time most of the adult pavement dwellers met for adda

(gossip). They were used to watch TV, play cards, Keram boards, ludu, daba, etc. In day time children and women were used to visit the library for pleasure. It has been observed that except sleeping time, most of them preferred to stay in the recreation room for a long time. They were very much interested on watching Hindi movie, action film, Bengali action movie etc, rather than others game. Children mostly liked to watch cartoon and read illustrative materials. The project decided to utilise the recreational room as a library.

## **Steps towards innovative library**

### **a. Prepare beneficiary profile**

As a Library consultant my prime responsibility was to make the library innovative for transforming the lives of the pavement dwellers. Exploring their internal potentiality was the first task to me to achieve project objective. At the beginning of the project, it was needed to introduce pavement dwellers with each other and the project as well. With a view to this, I formed groups based on their age and conducted session namely “story of life” where pavement dwellers were very comfortable to speak about themselves. The study has applied appreciative inquiry method for hearing their voice in the form of a story and consulted several times with project personnel’s, community people and pavement dwellers about the service pattern which helped them to change their lives. In their story, they explained about their identity, level of education, reasons for existing situation, personal liking, unlinking, interest of works, skills, dream, ambition, future plan, etc. Most of the pavement dwellers indicated that getting money is important. *“TK. 150 (US\$ 2) on an average per person income in a day will be a very good day to ensure three meals; TK. 75 (US\$ 1) for two meals in a normal day and TK. 50 (less than US\$ 1) or below for one or no meals in a bad day”*, said Jabbar (one of the beneficiary). *“We wish to live from hand-to-mouth and want to save some money from good days to cover bad days”*, mentioned Ali (another beneficiary). But they didn’t have any ways to save money. Just for this, they requested to form a cooperative society that must be controlled by the project. When asked about the future plan, most of them didn’t have any. The exceptions were some children, who would like to be a student like others. Based on the story, I have analyzed their dream with a view to explore their potentiality. From AI & Consultation techniques, their needs have been assessed that helped to prepare the beneficiary profile. Table 1 & 2 reflects the data based on their age and early activities for getting money.

Table-1: Percentage distribution of the enlisted members in the library by gender and age group

Age group	Male (N=48)	Female (N=62)	Overall (N=110)
15-25 yrs old	17	12	14.5
26-35 yrs old	23	32	27.5
36-45 yrs old	20	25	22.5
46-55 yrs old	33	22	27.5
55+ yrs old	7.0	9.0	8.0

Table-2: Percentage distribution of the enlisted members in library by their early activities for getting money

Source of getting money	Male (N=48)	Female (N=62)	Overall (N=110)
Beggars	40	25	32.5
Drug seller	20	26	23
Used by the political leaders	20	0	10
Maid servant	0	30	15
Sex trader		9	4.5
Tokai (child waste collector)	20	10	15

## **b. Prepare training profile**

Based on the statement of the pavement dwellers, plans have been developed in search of alternative livelihoods. Special emphasis has been given on best suited training and selective knowledge services for changing behaviour and attitude. Service standards to involve all the pavement dwellers were also the priority task to me. For attracting youth pavement dwellers on different professions, some motivating lessons have been shared through videos and other AVMs (Audio Visual materials) like TV, Radio, Illustrative materials, National text books, Graphics, Charts, Cartoons, Posters, Playing equipment etc. These have worked as tonic. The most of the young pavement dwellers have preferred 10 small professions and felt confident to involve themselves. At the same time they wished to get practical training and micro credit to start the business. These professions were as follows: Barber, Carpenter, Fish Hawker, Small shopkeeper, Vegetable seller, Rickshaw-puller, Van Puller, Egg Seller, Cleaner, Day labor, Maid servant, Security Guard and Caretaker of housing society. To stimulate the children some educational videos namely Mina carton, Amaner Attojibini, Schooling of river erosion affected children and sex workers children, etc. were presented. These also inspired the children and adolescent pavement dwellers to go to school. They become interested to visit the library frequently for gathering knowledge. Thus the need-based training and learning profile has been prepared for the pavement dwellers with a view to build the capacity on the aforesaid micro professions and to create interest among their children to go to school.

## **c. Develop skill-based training modules**

For developing training modules, I started mind mapping for best suited training to engage the pavement dwellers with IGAs. Realizing their level of knowledge, I have adopted innovative approach to get them connected with the library that included formal training through workshop, class lecture, group meeting, practical demonstration of IGAs, tour, cultural events, picnic, spot visit, inspirational activities like indoor games competition e.g. ludu, daba, keram, playing cards etc. outdoor competition e.g. football match, cricket match etc. To make the training effective, I collected resources and assigned resource persons for practical sessions, designed modules with convenient schedule. Mock test have also been taken to measure the training performance of the pavement dwellers. Considering their curiosity, special emphasis has been given on informal learning's as well like discussion regarding socio-political issues, what should be done and what should not be for the welfare of the personal life and for the country. Earlier I found that they were very interested to watch movie, drama, advert, songs, action films, etc. It encouraged me to develop scripts for making some motivational video documentaries on different IGAs. I shared it with project personnel's and they well-accepted this idea and advised me to make some realistic short video documentaries for them. It has brought radical changes in their way of thinking. What they watched on videos, wished to implement in their real life. Therefore, demand has come from the beneficiaries to make them skilled on micro professions by the help of the video documentaries. I have then developed formal training modules through video documentaries to make them productive force of the country. Some modules have been revised for providing life skills training complemented by psycho-social support in reviewing existing life skills modules and adapted these to the specific context and needs of the pavement dwellers.

Project people have also been trained-up in these revised modules. These modules focused enabling children and youth to be self-responsible in ways that result in positive relationships with respect for others. The library project has helped children and youth for developing positive assertiveness skills to protect themselves from drugs, violence, harassment and other threats. Another module has been developed specifically on HIV/AIDS as they were generally more exposed to the risk of becoming infected with HIV/AIDS. As another form of psychosocial support, the library project has piloted legal aid assistance for those pavement dwellers who wanted to pursue their rights through the courts. This focused primarily on women's rights associated with crimes that have been committed against them, such as rape and physical abuse. Here it is needed to mention that due to aforesaid reasons, these modules were not look like the traditional ones.

#### **d. Disseminate social information services**

Besides these, the library has provided anticipatory knowledge services namely “Jene Rakha Valo” (Good to know) and “Jiboner janno tathho” (Information for life) which contain information related to health and hygiene, population control, respect parents and others, behavior and manner with older and younger, religious knowledge, social norms and values, dignity of labor, roles and responsibilities of a citizen, value of education, childcare, hand wash, use of public toilets, save environment from pollution, cleanliness, disaster risk reduction, emergency response and other social issues. With a view to create self-awareness among the children, I have set up a corner in the library with one PC (personal computer) and some illustrative learning materials. There were some playing instruments as well. Therefore, children started library visit daily. They have passed time by watching cartoon and doing some creative activities. As a result, they have been motivated to go to school. They become interested to observe the national days as well like other school going children.

#### **Innovative library in practice**

The library has created “can do” attitude among the pavement dwellers as poverty made them inferior from their childhood to get a job in the competitive market. But after watching some life skills videos, most of them were attracted on it and confidently acknowledged that they can do it. “How to be a small trader” was one of the short documentaries that covered practical demonstration of 10 micro professional’s experts on small trading. “Give us the opportunity, we will do it” said by most of the pavement dwellers after watching this video. I then processed person to person best-suited training based on their interest and skills and engaged technical persons for practical demonstration. Project supplied need based learning resources and other logistics. Finally they received vocational training for a short period. The duration of the training was varied upon 3 days/1 week/15 days depended on the learning capacity of the pavement dwellers. But the training session was a continuous process. After training, the capacity of the pavement dwellers has been assessed by the project M&E (Monitoring & Evaluation) team. Only the eligible pavement dwellers were selected for receiving non-refundable micro credit from the project by which they could involve themselves with IGAs. Initially the project people helped them to choose the working location. For example, one pavement dweller has been trained up on hair cutting, the project helped him to involve with any Barber shop where he could work on a contract basis. The

contract, identity and other security have been ensured by the project so that, there was no any scope for the pavement dwellers to be untrustworthy to anyone in the society.

Some videos were educational but funny to attract the children to go to school. For example, “Amader School” was such kind of video that exposed the positive impact of free schooling. *In school time, one of the Maulana (Religious Leader) found that some children were jumping over the river from the coast. It shocked him though he knew that all the children become homeless due to river erosion. They took shelter on the Helipad (little bit high land for emergency Helicopter landing). He motivated them and bought them back to school explaining its long term benefit. The head teacher welcomed them and given them new books, khata, dries milk, playing instrument to play in the school ground. They could not believe that all are free for them.* Thus they become interested to go to school. It was the theme of another video. Though it was only 5 minutes short video but its impact was really great. Watching this video, children interested to go to school and their parents become very serious to send them school. Due to illiteracy, most of the pavement dwellers preferred visual materials instead of printed sources. Keeping it in mind, I have designed different posters which conveyed messages about their rights, health and safety measures, food and nutrition issues, poverty issues and other behaviour change issues. For example, one wall poster for “*No smoking*” demonstrated issues on why it is harmful for health, another poster on “*Education for all*” revealed that education is not opportunity, it is right for everyone.

## **Output analysis of the library project**

### **Transformation of lives**

The project started aiming to engage the pavement dwellers with different IGAs. The analysis from the below multiple response table-3 shows that the targeted pavement dweller attended in multiple activities provided through library where highest 80% male participant attended in Economic aspiration video shows and about 85% of female participants attended in right Awareness video shows.



Table-3: Percentage distribution of the enlisted beneficiaries attended in library supports activities by types and gender

Types of library supports	Male (N=48)	Female (N=62)	Overall (N=110)
Life skill video shows	67	65	66
Economic aspiration video shows	80	78	79
Rights awareness video shows	75	85	80
Reading life story with pictorial picture books	65	70	67.5
Dreaming exercise competition	75	80	77.5

The table-4 highlighted that the significant percentage of overall targeted participants (60.5%) involved with different economic work and disaggregating by gender, about 65% female are involved with different economic works due to the project intervention which they never thought before joining with the project.

Table-4: Percentage distribution of the beneficiaries changed their status through library supports

Types of benefits	Male (N=48)	Female (N=62)	Overall (N=110)
Involved with different economic work	56	65	60.5
Negotiation skills with the clients	-	70	35
Know at least 3-5 human rights issues	80	82	81
Changes hygienic practices (i.e. cooking process, hand washing practices, etc.)	73	75	74
Started savings in a group	65	79	72

### **Encouraged for savings**

I discussed with the beneficiaries about importance of savings and encouraged them to save a portion of their income for future welfare. Most of the pavement dwellers in two centres started depositing savings. In most cases this saving was for short period-they deposited money for short time and withdrawn when needed. The library project also collected some micro finance guides and provided necessary information about savings. This has helped them to protect and increase their financial capital base.

### **Connected with health services**

I had to prepare inventory of health service providing agencies (government, non-government organizations and others) near the shelter centres. Furthermore, the project people continuously updated the list. During final evaluation of the project, it has been found that 95% of the beneficiaries in two centres received medical services (consultancy, check-up, medicine, counselling and others). These arrangements assisted them accessing into health services.

## **Rapport building**

The library and implementing authority jointly arranged meeting with the community people to raise their awareness and asked them to extend their support for bringing positive changes in the lives of the pavement dwellers. This helped collectively to achieve the project objectives.

## **Worked in a group**

In many formal/informal discussions and training session, I encouraged them to form groups. This resulted in developing relationship to work in group. Therefore, beneficiaries know each other, are better aware and ready to work in group-based initiatives.

## **Functional education**

Based on the interest, the project identified school-aged children and motivated them to go to school as earliest as possible. This initiative has contributed in reducing drop out rate.

Dramatic changes have been taken place in their lives as long as they engaged with IGAs. They are now much conscious about their rights and entitlements than before. Now pavement dwellers are recognized as citizens of Bangladesh, fully entitled to the rights that other citizens receive. Following milestones have also been achieved by the shelter based community library project:

- Laws and policies are now established for protecting the rights of the pavement dwellers
- They have legal recourse when treated unfairly
- No one can push them to the street as they know their rights and choice
- They are getting shelter, work and other supportive environment
- Financial and human assets are effectively protected them from loss or harm
- They are now aware about STD (Sexually Transmitted Disease) prevention and treatment, risk to HIV and AIDS
- Leadership skills among pavement dwellers have been cultivated

The project has followed a multi-dimensional approach in its activities to deliver better training and information services so that the pavement dwellers can have a better quality of human life and library has turned into integral part in their lives.

### **Measuring progress**

An integrated M&E (Monitoring & Evaluation) process were followed i.e. baseline data collection, weekly follow-up for measuring savings, FGD conduction, keeping record sheet and analysis and participatory reflection review to measure the effectiveness of the project. Regarding this below indicators were selected through regular monitoring:

- Buying capacity than previous day (Purchasing power capacity)
- Deposit money (savings attitude and savings amount)
- Increasing money (Per capita daily income)
- Good behave with wife or family members (Relationship with the family members and wife and husband)
- Interest increase to work and visit library for knowledge (% of people with increased interest to work and % of people visited library)
- Send children to library and try for schooling them (Children enrolment rate in formal and non-formal school/education)
- Want to go native village for starting small business/shopping, (% of people reintegrated to their native village and started small business/trade)
- Experience sharing in a group-how they buy and sale or do their task
- Knowledge sharing- what they learn from library
- Problem-if any
- Solution

## Challenges for adopting innovative library approach

- Produce the innovative training modules and prepare the activity plan in new context
- Liability of newness
- No specific research on it
- Limited resources
- Make them aware about library services
- Social and religious influences
- Time constraint

### *Nargis can do many things*

*Nargis's mother died at her early age. Her father got married to another woman. The step mother used to beat her almost all the time. She considered as a family burden. This made Nargis so sad that one day she left home from Burguna and came to Dhaka. It was twenty years back when Nargis was twenty years old. As it was her first time in Dhaka at the beginning she was puzzled. Many people offered her to sell sex. But in her mind she wanted to find a way where she can live with dignity. At the Sadarghat terminal she started to beg to live. Soon she met with Montu, a young loader working there. One day Montu offered her to get married and she agreed. They started to live under one of the planks connecting the pontoon of the terminal. Happy days passed quickly. After some days Montu started ill behavior with her. Meanwhile, she became a mother of a daughter. Her husband forgot her and their daughter. At this perplexed moment Nargis came to know that there is a shelter centre for the pavement dwellers very near where she can live free of cost with her 4 years old daughter Nazma . She became the participant of the project and started visiting library regularly with her daughter. She received short training on cleaning and gathered knowledge about many social issues. Finally DCC recruited her as "a ferry terminal cleaner". The income made her confident. Her husband further started good behavior to her like the early age. She saved 200 taka (2.85 US\$) with the savings team of the project within three months. She wants to start her own grocery shop business back in the village. That is why; she is doing her savings seriously. She doesn't want to sleep in the street anymore. She wants to give her daughter a dignified life. Nargis's courage and struggle is an example among the other inhabitants of the terminal. "It is not merely a library; it is my home, my heaven. It taught me to survive with dignity and showed my daughter's bright future", said Nargis. 'Nargis also can do many things' has become a local phrase among the floating people of Sadarghat now a days.*

## Conclusion

In the streets of Dhaka, we see many girls and boys begging, selling flowers or picking waste living a life foreign to us – a life unthinkable for the members of our families. Like all people, these people too have dreams. Their dreams are simple - just to be able to survive each day with dignity and be able to eat rice at least twice daily. Their dreams most often do not go beyond tomorrow or next week. Many of these people have run away from their homes as result of domestic violence or family conflicts, rooting from poverty. Some try to go back but end up coming back to the streets of Dhaka as they prefer living under the open sky instead of having to face violence and poverty at home. These people were born innocent like you or me but have lost their innocence almost before they could learn to walk. Shelter based community library has shown them the way of new life. But adopting an innovative library approach for poverty alleviation is a very challenging task as people do not prefer to go for new approach beyond the traditional one. Based on pavement dwellers demand the most realistic approach has been adopted for their poverty alleviation. The paper has outlined the success and its lessons learnt would be a milestone for poverty alleviation strategy in Bangladesh if Government and Non-government organizations apply this for the sustainable development of other socially disadvantaged people. It can be hoped that near future if the study gets fund, with this experience direct implementation of this types of project will be possible for socially marginalized people (like sex workers, hizra-neither man nor woman, char and hoar people, vagrant, trivial etc). It is therefore, necessary to develop and adopt innovative strategies in Bangladesh to involve libraries and information services in the context of poverty alleviation.

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