



**Women as leaders of culture and change
a paper on BRAC's Multi-purpose Community Learning
Centre (MCLC)**

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— Women, Information and Libraries Special Interest Group

Abstract:

Women in Bangladesh have limited access to information and resources due to socio-cultural restrictions. Considering this scenario, the aim of this paper is to describe how rural libraries in Bangladesh are playing significant role in improving women's access to information as well as for their empowerment. Since 1995, BRAC, an NGO, started establishing community based Learning Centers; locally known as Gonokendro, in Bangladesh with the objective of creating an opportunity to develop a habit of reading from very early age which facilitates higher consciousness, humanity, and self-awareness among the rural people. These CLCs are becoming information hub for the rural women of Bangladesh through providing opportunity of getting library services, computer training, skill development training, participating in cultural activities. Rural women feel comfort and secured to use these CLCs because of their locational and environmental aspect. Currently 2,490 CLCs are providing services from which 94% sited in the non government secondary school premises. Moreover, 99% librarians of the CLCs are women that give them a women friendly environment. About 50% readers of CLCs are female and to serve a higher percentage of women it also operates mobile libraries.

Key words: *Access to information, Community learning centers, Mobile libraries*

1. BACKGROUND:

In predominantly rural, traditional and patriarchal society of Bangladesh, women generally remain within the periphery of their household boundaries. As a result, they have very limited access to education, information, technology, public and private services, and income and employment opportunities. Due to lack social security, mobility of women and young girls are often restricted in Rural Bangladesh; whereas men have easier access to information, market, technology and social avenues for discussing issues pertaining to them. As girls enter women-hood, their educational and social spheres get further restricted. Early marriage, lack of prioritisations of needs to girls at household level and the social inequalities limit women's scope to influence family or community level decision making in their favour.

The government of Bangladesh has formulated 'National Policy for Advancement of Women' and it has declared women's education as essential for national development (Sultana, 2008). Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2009b) showed that the net enrolment rate of girls in primary education was 94.7% in 2007. Bangladesh exceeded its target of ratio of girls to boys in primary and secondary education; the figures were 1.03 and 1.17 respectively in 2009. Moreover, in the same year, the ratio of women to men in tertiary education was 0.80; the target of this indicator is 1 by 2015.

If we think of a balance growth of Bangladesh, women's empowerment is considered as the transmission of the values and accumulated knowledge of society. Access to Information (A2I) as an initiative of government is also working towards the vision of Digital Bangladesh and support the grassroots where services has not yet improved sufficiently to use technology to access information. It is important to realise that rural people in general and woman in particular have very limited scope to participate and influence in local governance. There are very few women social leaders at the grassroots level in Bangladesh. Women also lack experience and skill of public speaking, knowledge about the political process and procedures, understanding of community and national issues.

In the recent publication "Library Philosophy and Practice 2012 (<http://unllib.unl.edu/LPP/>) based on a study has highlighted how library could play and role creating awareness of Information and providing access to information to women. The respondents were asked, do they know what the information is? One fifth of them answered that, they do not have any idea about information. Of the sixty participants, 80% were aware about information, while 20% of the respondents were not aware about it.

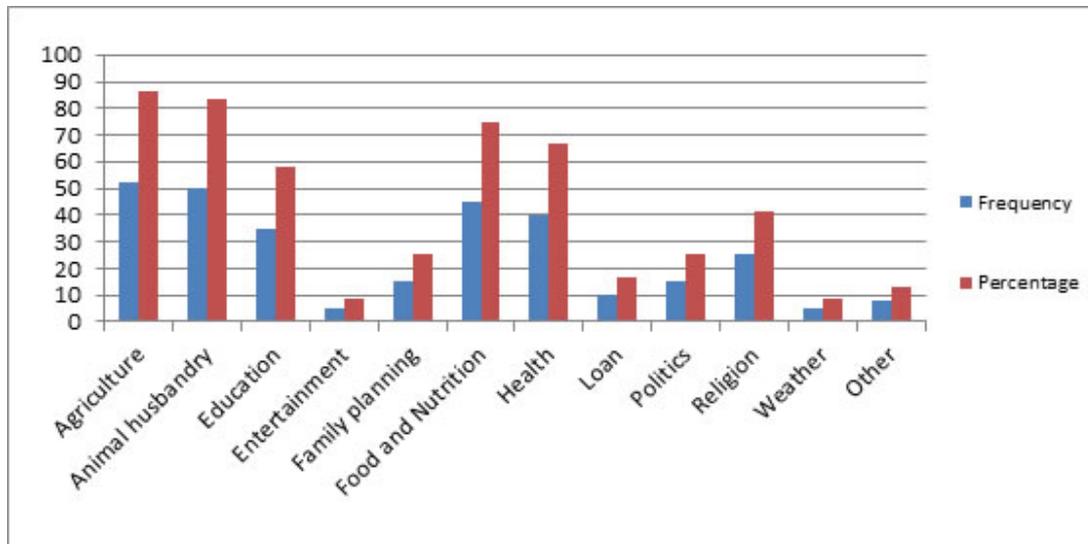
Awareness of Information of the respondents

Awareness of Information	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	48	80
No	12	20
N=	60	100

Types of Information Needs

Saleh and Lasisi (2011) categorized the information needs of rural women in Nigeria into agriculture, education, economy, health, political and others. Rural women in Bangladesh need agricultural, educational, health, economic and social information in their daily lives. The research showed that highest percentage of the respondents (86.66%) needed agricultural information, followed by information on animal husbandry (83.33%), food and nutrition (75%), health (75%), education (58.33%), religion (41.66), politics (25%), family planning (25%), loan (16.66%). The lowest percentage (8.33%) of the respondents needed information on both weather, and entertainment. It can be observed that, although very few (3.33%) women were directly involved with agriculture, most of the women needed information on agriculture and animal husbandry.

Types of Information needs of the rural women



Sources of Information

Information seeking is a complex information and communication activity requiring access to diverse of sources of information to deal with personal, social and work-related problems (Spink

and Cole, 2001). Radio and television are available in almost all houses in the rural areas of Bangladesh. The rural women use these media for entertainment as well as important sources of information. 55 respondents of the study had television in their house, and only 5 respondents did not have their own television. More than 83% of the respondents used Television as a source of information, while about 17% used radio to meet their information needs. On the other hand, about 67% of the respondents took information from their friends or neighbours, and half of the total respondents used personal experience as a source of information. It is interesting that, there was no women who went to library to meet their information need, only 5% of the respondents read newspaper for information.

Sources of Information the Rural Women Use (Multiple responses)

Sources	Frequency	Percentage
Radio	10	16.66
Television	50	83.33
Newspaper	3	5
NGO	5	8.33
Field worker	5	8.33
Library	0	0
Friend/ Neighbour	40	66.66
Personal experience	30	50
Teacher	5	8.33
Other	7	11.66
N=	60	100

Causes to Use the Sources of Information

The women were asked why they had used these sources to meet their information need. 80% of the respondents told that they used these sources of information because these were easily available to them, while 85% of the women used the above sources of information to meet their information need because they knew about these sources earlier. Moreover, few respondents (18%) told that someone had advised them to use these sources for accurate information.

Causes to Use the Sources of Information (Multiple responses)

Causes	Frequency	Percentage
Someone has advised	11	18.33
Prior knowledge	51	85
Easily available	48	80
N=	60	100

Satisfaction of Using the Sources of Information

Lack of information has kept rural dwellers backward and ignorant of modern trends, and this situation persist because there are no information service which really satisfy the information needs of rural people (Nwagha, 1992). In this study, most of the rural women (70%) were moderately satisfied with the present sources of information available to them. However, very few women (13.33%) were highly satisfied with the conventional sources of information. Moreover, about 12% of the respondents were partially dissatisfied, and only 5% respondents were fully dissatisfied with these sources of information.

From these points of view, this short paper highlights the role Library plays in facilitating access to information as vehicle towards girls' and women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

2. MULTI-PURPOSE COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTRES ((MCLCs) LOCALLY KNOWN AS GONOKENDRO: AN INITIATIVE OF BRAC IN BANGLADESH

To improve access to information and to increase the literacy and learning skill of rural disadvantaged people, BRAC, an NGO has established Multi-purpose Community Learning Centers (MCLCs), locally named as Gonokendro. Over the year MCLC emerged as places that encourage and facilitate the practice of liberal thinking. These libraries are multipurpose learning centres that are liberal in nature and are institutions of mass people. These centres primarily create an opportunity to develop a habit of reading from very early age which facilitates higher consciousness, humanity, and self-awareness among these people and eventually transform the society into an enlightened one. The libraries give people access to a wider range of printed materials, skill development training, information technology, and cultural activities that discover human creativity and help in their cognitive development. Thus, MCLCs is making major qualitative impact in the scenario of rural society.

These MCLCs reaching to a wider range of rural people across the country and satisfying need of different age group of library users – children, student, female, adults, elderly, people with disabilities and poor, literate, neo-literate, semi-literate and illiterate people by providing them with various printed materials and opportunity to participate in different activities. MCLCs intend to take services - educational, skill developmental, technological, social and cultural- to rural communities that have least access to such services otherwise and therefore meeting needs of different segments of people of such communities.

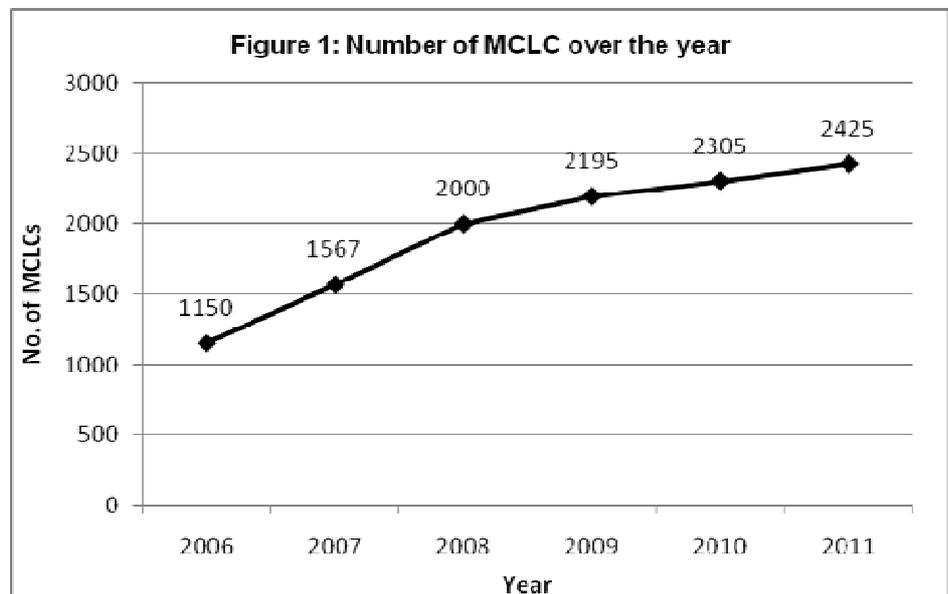


3. OVERVIEW OF MCLCs

The main focus of BRAC community learning center is to create a

“learning society” in rural areas of Bangladesh. To optimize the coverage area as well as to reach a greater community, most of the MCLCs are established at the premises of non- government secondary schools. Some of the MCLCs are at local clubs or at the place of union parishad (union is the lowest unit of local government structure in Bangladesh). Currently, BRAC has approximately 2,500 MCLCs (as of March, 2012) at all over the country.

Figure 1 is presents number of MCLC over the year from its inception.



4. USERS OF GONOKENDRO: AVENUE FOR GIRLS AND WOMEN ACCESSING INFORMATION

MCLCs are reaching to a wider range of rural people across the country and satisfying need of different age group of library users- children, student, women, youths, adults, literate, illiterate people by providing various printed materials and opportunity to participate in different activities.

Figure 2 and 3 shows the percentage of male and female member, and percentage of studentS and general member respectively. It is showing that the percentage of female user is greater than the male. Moreover, student use MCLC more than the general member.

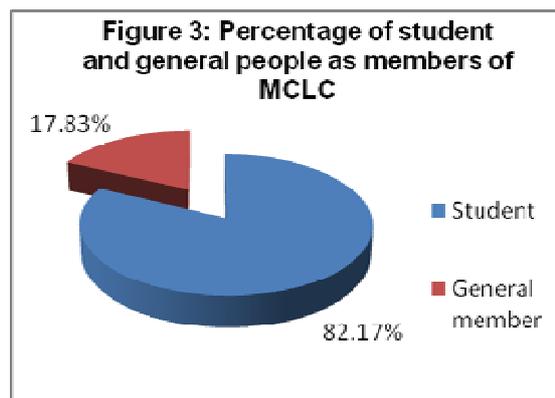
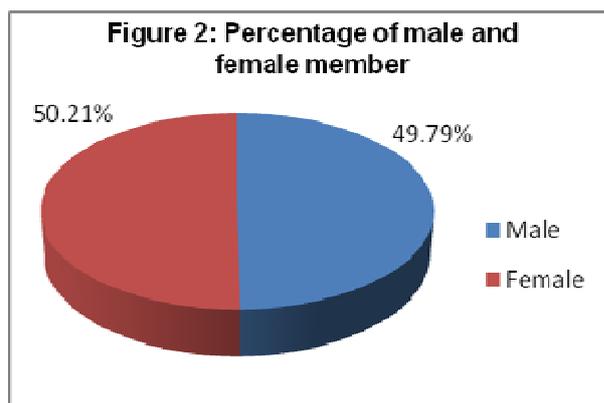
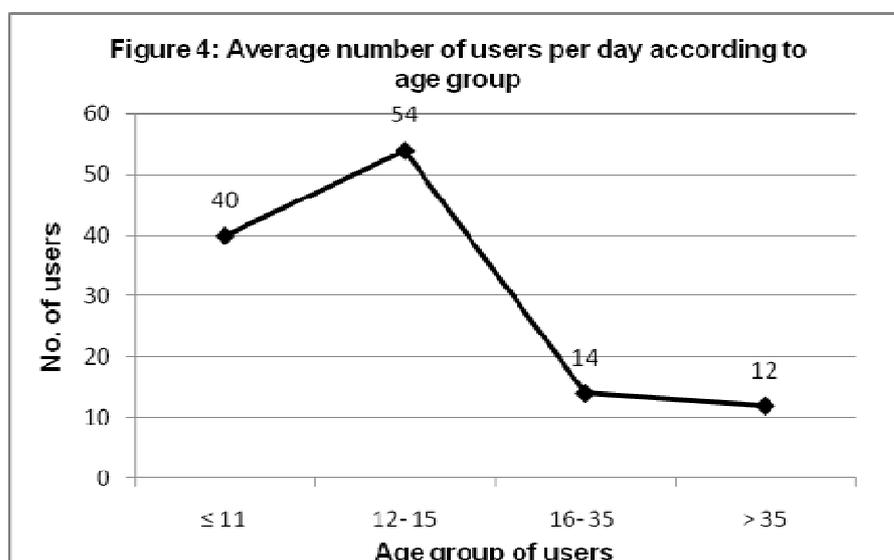


Figure 4 presenting the average number of users per day according to their age group and the number is higher for 12- 15 age group of user who are mostly the students.



The reason behind the higher percentage of student as user of MCLC is that, most of the MCLC are at the premises of schools. In the class routine of schools with MCLC, a certain period of every week is fixed for the use of MCLC. Moreover, if we summarize the regular services for student, we can see that, for student- they have special hour for MCLC use, get opportunity of being a member of readers' forum and be awarded as best reader, participating in wall magazine preparation and publication, getting computer training (children and student package), reading books and newspapers, using reference books beside of text books, participating at socio- cultural activities etc.

5. INTEGRATION OF GENDER IN FORMATION OF MCLCs:

Multipurpose Community Learning Centres involve female members of communities in all of its activities- from its formation to its running and management. Community people and members of school management committee are responsible for the activities of MCLC.

An important feature of MCLC is its self- sustainability. Within two years of establishment, MCLCs become trust managed and all of its expenses are managed by the trust.

The set up procedure of MCLC has several steps. These are as follows:

Committee formation: Before the establishment of MCLC, representative from BRAC (generally programme organiser) contact community people. Through small and large group discussion, they create a committee which works until the formation of trust. Usually one-third member of the committee are women. This initial committee contributes in raising fund, increasing members, forming youth committee and recruiting librarian for MCLC.

Establishment of MCLC: To establish MCLC at the school premises, the community people provide a 400-500 square feet room at free of cost. The community has to collect minimum of 700-800 USD to make a reserve fund and in a saving account of a local bank, this amount of money is deposited. Moreover, they also collect around 150 USD for furniture (book shelf, table, chair etc.) for the library. BRAC provides around 500 USD as a grant for buying stationary materials and for additional furniture and fixtures at the time of establishment. BRAC also provide 1,000 different kinds of books and 1or 2 daily newspaper to the library. BRAC bear the cost of librarian's salary and other corresponding expenses until the formation of trust.

Naming of MCLC: Generally MCLCs are named according to the name of the place.

Member and subscription collection: Initially, 400-450 members required to start a MCLC. It is ensured that 50% of the members are female from the inception of MCLC. The local people, school teachers, students and community members are included as members of MCLCs.

Trust formation and investment: Within two years of library establishment, community has to collect minimum around 1,000 USD and with matching of around 1,000 USD from BRAC, the total amount in deposited in a local bank and MCLCs are registered as trust at government institution. The interest of this money is used to pay the regular expenses of the library such as- salary of librarian, newspaper bill, electricity bill etc. After formation of trust, MCLCs become self sustainable. A trustee board is formed to maintain and manage the activities of MCLC. Total 11 members select as the members of trustee board where five are permanent and rest six are impermanent. One of the local employees of BRAC is also included in the trustee board. Among 2,490 MCLCs, 2,088 are managed by the trust.

In this entire process of the formation towards taking the sustainable approach towards MCLCs, it is ensured that women participation remains minimum of 30%.

Management of MCLC: Trustee board is responsible for the maintenance and management of MCLC. To support the trustee board, every MCLC has a youth committee which is formed with the youth of the community with 30-50% women. They help to mobilise fund for the MCLC as well as organising different socio cultural activities. This youth committee also collect seasonal crop from the community to increase the fund of MCLC. The participation of young girls and women in this process creates awareness among community members regarding the roles of girls and women as integral part of community development.

Librarian selection: To perform the daily activities of MCLC, a local woman is recruited as librarian. BRAC has taken an affirmative action to have only woman as librarian because rural women of Bangladesh are disadvantaged and they have lack of livelihood opportunities. Moreover, due to women

librarian, women members of community feel more connected to reading culture and secured. 2,469 are MCLC are run by female librarian. Librarians are from communities, so they are part of identifying the issues and needs of women in relation to services, rights and information. Librarians are mainly responsible for the opening and closing of library, book issuing, maintaining registers etc. The librarians receive an 11 days short training course on basic rules and procedures of library management.

Local Resource Person (LRP): Participation and ownership of community people is very necessary for sustainable development of MCLC. Moreover, reducing cost and dependency on BRAC staffs is also important for MCLCs to become a successful community organization. With this end in view, from 2011, MCLC has started to recruit Local resource persons (LRP) from the community. The LRPs are individuals volunteering and identified from the local community from amongst those with interest and commitment to local development. They are then trained for the delivery of particular services to the communities to which they belongs to. Being local, the LRPs can better understand the community characteristics and deliver the services accordingly. They are not BRAC's permanent staff, they are working with BRAC in part time basis.

LRPs are responsible for arranging orientations for the committee members, organizing cultural programs and competitions for children on various occasions, establishing new MCLC, mobilising fund for the MCLC, increasing number of readers and members, increasing community participation in MCLC activities etc.

6. MCLC SERVICES: INNOVATIVE APPROCAHES

MCLCs not only have library services, but also providing other services related to the development of human resources. MCLCs intend to take services - educational, skill developmental, technological, social and cultural - to rural communities that have least access to such services otherwise. Therefore, various activities of MCLCs are satisfying the needs of different group and segments of people of communities. The regular activities of a MCLC included- community library service, mobile library service, special corner for children, reader's forum, organising different socio-cultural activities, skill development training, training on information technology, micro museum, popular theatre for awareness building, involving local resource persons.

6.1 Mobile Library

An innovative concept of MCLC is 'Mobile Library' is to serve a wider range of people, especially targeting women, people with disabilities and elderly people who are unable to come to centre based libraries. The objective is towards broadening access to books, readings materials and information. Usually the female Librarian or an Assistant Female Librarian runs the Mobile Library. She goes to the specific spots by a rickshaw or rickshaw van with 100 books in a trunk once or twice a week. She also carries a list of all the books of the MCLC so that the members of the mobile unit can choose books from that list. During this, the Librarian also interacts with community women and gets their views of their needs related to information they require to link to the world.



Book distribution at Mobile Library

Women of the village, students who have passed SSC examination and pass leisure time, drop out students and elderly people are members of mobile libraries. It also offers free membership to ultra poor and differently able. At present, 665 MCLCs have Mobile Library where 35,463 members (66.91% female) are getting the opportunity of this service. Recently, to address the need of the people of haor area (areas that are submerged at a certain period of a year) and flood prone area, Mobile Libraries on boat has initiated.

6.2 Skill Development Training:

MCLCs play an important role to improve the socio-economic condition of the rural communities by arranging skill development training for youth in collaboration with the Directorate of Youth under the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Bangladesh. These training are selected based on the market survey and include- computer basic training, electrical works and electronics, livestock rearing, fisheries, poultry, tailoring etc. Some of these training are institutional and are arranged in Youth Development Training Centres; others are non-institutional training and takes place in the premises of MCLCs by inviting trainers from the Youth development Training Centre.



Self employed female youth (Tailoring)

Skill development training has brought about significant changes in the socio-economic condition of the recipients. It has given them an opportunity to be self dependent. Since 1998, a total of 69,551 people including 55.97% female have received skill development training. Though the training commenced in 1998, it was an informal project between BRAC and Department of Youth Development (DYD) of Ministry of Youth and Sports. To make the collaboration formal, in 2011 a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) has signed between these two organizations where they made a contract that every year 10,000 youths of BRAC will receive institutional and non institutional training from DYD.

6.3 Information Technology in MCLCs:

Access to information is an important prerequisite of development. To provide basic computer skills and create access to information technology for the rural people, 1,165 MCLCs (48.04% of total MCLC) are equipped with computer and computer training facilities. . MCLCs offer computer training to people of different age groups. The training is designed in three different packages – children package, student package and general package for different duration. The durations of Children's package and Students' package are one month each and the duration of General package is 3 months. These packages cost very nominal in comparison to other institutions offering such training. In each batch of children and student package at least one ultra poor or differently able children or student are given training for free.

The librarian of the MCLC facilitates these training packages. She receives a 12-day basic, 18-day advance and 6-day refresher training on IT from BRAC to run the computer training packages effectively. So far, a total of 86,610 people (50.28% female) received computer training from CLCs. From 2011, a special training on computer trouble shooting has been introduced for the librarian to solve the general hardware and software related problems. Already 466 librarians have been trained up and now they own can solve simple problems of computers.



Computer training for students

In 2011, at 500 MCLCs, television has been delivered. This service has increased the duration of opening time of these CLCs as well as attracts a new group of user (mostly illiterate people). For this extra time, the committee members take responsibility to run the MCLCs. People are now spending more time on CLCs and getting more information.

6.4 Readers' Forum:

MCLCs form Readers' Forum to increase book transaction rate as well as to enhance reading habit among its members through competition. Two types of Readers' Forum are formed - one for the students and the other is for general readers. The Student Readers Forum is formed with 20 to 30 students of the adjacent secondary school and the General Readers' Forum is formed with at least 10- 15 ordinary members (youth/adult) of the MCLCs and among them minimum 50% are women. The members of the Forums are given a separate book transaction card in addition to the library card and by using this; they can borrow more than one book (2/3) at a time. Duration of each Readers Forum is 2 to 3 months and fortnightly members sit together to discuss and share their thoughts about the books they have read. At the end of a Forum, an evaluation committee selects best three readers from the group by analyzing their performance records. Readers' forum increases the depth of knowledge and encourages the members to read books with understanding.

6.5 Popular Theatre

To familiarize the activities of MCLCs and increase community participation, from 2011, with the collaboration of BRAC Community Empowerment Program (CEP) popular theater has been initiated in MCLCs. Initially it has been started in 14 upazillas of two districts in Bangladesh. The main purpose of this is to let people know about the regular activities of MCLCs, encourage people about reading book, increase participation of community in MCLC activities through performing theatre. Total 353 theater shows played in the year of 2011 on the selected areas. Number of readers, members, rate of book issuing has increased within these areas after these shows.

6.6 Children Corner:

In rural Bangladesh, the need for learning of children at early age remains unaddressed apart from schools. Taking this into account most MCLCs have a special corner exclusively for children with child friendly books, toys, maps, pictures, blackboard and various indoor games. Children can read books, play games, share their thoughts in these corners which help to develop reading habit among them and boost up their creativity. Moreover, librarians organise storytelling and drawing session once in every week for the children. Girl children are encouraged to participate by creating and enabling and child friendly safe space.



Story telling at children corner



Children are playing at children corner

6.7 Socio-cultural Activities:

Organising socio-cultural activities is an important component of MCLC which encourages local communities to bring issues pertaining to their lives and participate in the activities of MCLCs. This generally includes competition on drawing, essay writing and recitation, preparing wall magazines, publishing annual magazines and calendars, celebrating important days like Independence Day, Bengali New Year and arranging different fair and exhibition like book exhibition, IT fair etc. MCLC also organise different kind of social works such as eye camp, blood donation camp etc.



CONCLUSION:

Over the year, MCLC are serving a wider range of community by crating access to information. MCLCs are becoming information hub for the rural disadvantaged people, especially girls and women. These are the common place where people of different age, status, religion come and interact with each other.

“MCLCs have remarkable impact on the respective user community”- this finding has been found out by the Chairman of Dept. of Information Science and Library Management, University of Rajshahi, Dr. Md. Shariful Islam, in his study on “Impact Assessment of BRAC Rural Libraries (*Gonokendra*) in Bangladesh”. He also shows in his study that, MCLCs are meeting up the minimum informational needs of the local community as well as playing important role in cultural advancement of rural people, especially women. Moreover, these centers are creating awareness among the rural people about the need of learning and enhancing their reading habit.

Multi-Purpose Community Learning Centres (MCLC) at a Glance

Program Priority	Quality Improvement	Network Mechanism	Ownership	Outcomes	Sustainability
<p>-Develop reading habit among the rural people of Bangladesh.</p> <p>-Create access to a wider range of printed, electronic and other types of continuing education materials and information technology for rural citizens.</p> <p>-Increase and improve skill and capacity of youth citizens.</p> <p>-Enhance community participation in various socio-cultural and social activities.</p> <p>-Ensure participation of women in different kind of activities.</p> <p>-Engage disadvantage group of community including female, differently able and older people through mobile library.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Number of library users in rural areas of Bangladesh is increasing. Thus improving acceptable level of knowledge and skills. 2. Children, student, youth as well adults of community capable of using computer for accessing relevant information. 3. Number of people who have acquired livelihood skills and are engaged in income generating activities, including wage or self-employment. 4. Introduce community ownership and participation. 5. Instigate management practice through trustee board. 	<pre> graph TD MCLC[MCLC] --> CP[Community People] CP --> BRAC[BRAC] BRAC --> TC[Trust Committee] BRAC --> LRP[Local Resource Person (LRP)] TC --> SMC[School Management Committee (SMC)] LRP --> SMC SMC --> SST[School students and Teachers] </pre>	<p>Trust Managed MCLCs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Community people are the owner of MCLCs -Trustee board is responsible for maintenance and management of MCLCs 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. People (at least 50% of them being women) in rural communities, including neo-literates, semi-literates youth, adult and children, accessed MMCLCs for enhancing knowledge and skills required for improved living 2. Children and youth in rural communities (at least 50 of them being women) gained knowledge and skills on computer offered by the MMCLC for accessing relevant information. 3. People (at least 50 of them being women) in rural communities, including illiterate/neo-literate/semi-literate youth/adults 	<p>MCLCs are self sustainable in terms of monetary, management and ownership aspects. Within two years of establishment, MCLCs become trust managed and completely owned by the community people.</p> <p>Trust formation: Within two years of establishment, community has to collect around 1,000 USD. Then BRAC provides around 1,000 USD as a matching fund. The total amount then deposited in a local bank and MMCLCs are registered as trust at government institution. The interest of this money is used to pay the regular expenses of the MCLC such as- salary of librarian, newspaper bill, electricity bill etc. After formation of trust, MCLCs become self sustainable.</p>

				<p>acquired livelihood skills and using them for income generation, including wage or self-employment.</p> <p>4. Rural Communities developed ownership including financial sustainability, achieved for operating the existing MMCLCs with active involvement of the community by forming trusts</p>	<p><u>Management:</u> A trustee board is formed to maintain and manage the activities of MCLC. Total 11 members select as the members of trustee board where five are permanent and rest six are impermanent (local persons). Permanent members include- secretary of SMC (in case of MCLCs at school premises) or union parishad chairman (MCLCs on union parishad / local club premises), headmaster, BRAC representative and two local persons.</p> <p><u>Community involvement:</u> Community people are the owner of MCLCs. They participate and get involved in all the activities of MCLC.</p> <p>Currently, among 2,490 of MCLCs; 2,088 (83.86%) are managed by the trust.</p>
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Brief biographical information:

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Md. Nazrul Islam has been working in BRAC since 1988. From 1998 he is implementing Multipurpose Community Learning Centre known as Gonokendro. Gonokendros are community libraries, situated mostly in non government secondary schools premises, in rural areas of the country. These libraries are multipurpose learning centres targeting mass people i.e. children, student, community and underprivileged indigenous people.

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