

# **Self-Help Initiatives: A key to empowerment of People With Disabilities in Bangladesh**

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## ***Introduction:***

Self-help initiative is one of the most important means of empowerment of people with disabilities. It's an effort of changing situation by utilizing own resources and potentials. PWDs' self-help initiative is a group solidarity which enables them to support each other and to overcome common difficulties through the exchange of practical experiences, information, insight and knowledge. That solidarity and mutual support serve as a basis for collective action to improve the existing situation of people with disabilities in the community. In Bangladesh we have our experiences of self-help initiatives in diverse modalities. Through this paper I would like to share you some introductory information on how the challenges have been taken towards improving socio-economic and cultural status of people with disabilities in the community through various self-help initiatives at individual levels or in groups. Those initiatives have been taken at different levels by different stakeholders like people with disabilities themselves, parents and others.

In accordance with the needs and situation, modalities of such initiatives are little bit different from one another, but the objective of most of those initiatives remains same, empowerment of people with disabilities by their own.

## ***Importance and Emergence***

Persons with disabilities have the similar human needs and potentials as others living in the community. But, they are increasingly continued to be marginalized because of their lack of participation in the mainstream development and decision making process. It is recognized that large numbers of disabled persons in Asia and the Pacific have been deprived of their rights and opportunities in social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Therefore, it has become inevitable to PWDs to help each other for the fulfillment of their rights and development needs, as well as making others to listen to their voices and concerns. People with disabilities' self-help initiatives have got increased attention and importance all over the world during the last couple of decades. This importance has been strongly recognized at all stages of disability movement at

national and international levels and is reflected in the national, regional and international policy documents, tools and instruments on disability.

The United Nations General Assembly, in 1982, in its World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons, stressed on the establishment and growth of organizations of disabled persons as well as facilitating participation of PWDs and their organizations in the decision making. In 1987, a regional expert seminar called upon the ESCAP secretariat, ESCAP members and associate members and other concerned agencies and organizations in the Asian and Pacific region to provide assistance in establishing and strengthening self-help organizations of disabled persons in order to enhance the participation of disabled persons at all levels of society. In 1988, the General Assembly, through its resolution 43/98, requested the Secretary-General to, inter- alia, promote and support the establishment of strong national organizations of disabled persons. The UN Standard Rules, articulated, 'States should recognize the right of organizations of persons with disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at national, regional and local levels. States should also recognize the advisory role of organizations of persons with disabilities in decision-making on disability matters'. In 2002, self-help organizations of persons with disabilities and related family and parent associations came up as topmost among seven priority areas of actions in BMF, intended for the decade 2003-2012 in the Asian and Pacific region. And in September 2006, at a mid point review meeting on BMF this priority kept with same importance for the rest years of the decade, in Biwako plus five. Therefore, there is no different opinion on the need and importance of PWDs' self-help initiatives and it is a key to empowerment of people with disabilities.

As in compliance with the global, regional and national reality and needs there has been a spontaneous emergence of self-help organizations of people with disabilities in Bangladesh. We have a history of self-help initiatives for more than four decades. Since 1963 we have been experiencing self-help efforts of and for people with disabilities in different modalities and approaches that includes Disabled Peoples' (self-help) Organizations (DPOs), parent associations and self-help group/peer group activities.

Beginning of the self-help initiatives in Bangladesh was mainly pioneered by some dynamic leaders with hearing and visual disability, professionals and parents. In the *Asia & Pacific Disability Forum, 3rd General Assembly & Conference February 27-29, 2008 Dhaka, Bangladesh* 2

course of time a large number of people with disabilities from different levels and categories have been getting involved and strengthening this movement.

### ***Approaches and Definition:***

Self-help organizations have been emerged in different communities on different perspectives. Therefore approaches and modalities were different though the purpose is same, strengthening self-representation, participation and integration of PWDs in the mainstream. There remains some variation in defining DPOs from organization to organization in terms of composition (percentage/ratio of PWD members), combination and representation (representatives of CWDs, PIDs and PSDs). Therefore a common consensus on the working definition in this regard is reported to be useful.

### ***Modality of Self-help initiatives in Bangladesh***

PWDs' Self-help endeavors were initiated in the country in early sixties through the formation of Bangladesh National Federation of the Deaf (BNFD) in 1963 and National Federation of the Blind (NFB) in 1964. These organizations are mainly comprised of deaf and blind people respectively. Both the organizations are representing deaf and blind people at national level. Both the organizations have their branches in different districts over the country.

Majority members of BNFD are deaf people. Even with a lot of difficulties and limitations this organization is governed by an elected body. Deaf People tend to practice a democratic culture in this organization. Constitutionally the President, one among three Vice Presidents, Treasurer and one Executive Council Member are come from non-deaf members of the organization. Major activities of this organization include promotion of education and vocation training for deaf people and to promote their sports and cultural activities. Deaf members of this organization have got their strong feelings of affiliation and belongingness to this organization. They feel much more comfortable and friendly within the environment of this federation.

National Federation of the Blind NFB promotes education and vocational training for blind people. Though a pioneer organization in disability movement of the country it has been passing through lots of challenges. Individual members and representatives of the district branches form its National Executive Council. All members of this organization

are blind people except the treasurer. Constitution of this organization mentions that the Treasurer should be a sighted person.

In 1985 Bangladesh Protibandhi Kallyan Samity (BPKS) emerged as a cross disability self-help organization in Bangladesh. It promotes disabled peoples' organizations (DPOs) at grassroots level through a unique approach 'Persons with disabilities' Self-initiatives to Development (PSID). By this time this approach has been promoted to 29 districts of the country. In 1995 Action on Disability and Development ADD, a UK based organization started working in Bangladesh recognizing the fact that disabled people are rarely included in development work. ADD promotes a more sustainable, rights based approach and grassroots disabled peoples' organizations. Now it has been working in 23 districts.

Besides, a good number of organizations working for people with disabilities in the country have been organizing self-help groups/peer groups of people with disabilities, parents, children with disabilities and women with disabilities. These groups have also been playing significant roles in the promotion of rights and dignity of people with disabilities in Bangladesh. Among such initiatives efforts of Center for the Rehabilitation of the Paralysed CRP could be mentioned. As the only treatment and rehabilitation center for paraplegic persons in the country there have been a large number of ex-patients staying in the community. CRP took initiatives to organize them through self-help groups. So far 61 self-help groups have been formed by the initiative of CRP. Among those 61 groups 28 have been registered with the department of social services, government of Bangladesh.

There also remain a good number of organizations led by individual PWD. Decision making body of such organizations comprised of dedicated social workers, social activists and resource persons where main initiatives are taken by the PWD leader.

**Parents' organization:** Initiatives by the parents are still insignificant in the country in comparison to others. In 1977, some parents who were having a lot of trouble and agony with their children with unusual behavior, guided by a dedicated expert on mental retardation, initiated a parents' organization 'Society for the Care and Education of the Mentally Retarded Children (SCEMRC)'. The name of this society was later on changed

to SCEMRB and now Society for the Welfare of the Intellectually Disabled (SWID) Bangladesh. Most members of this organization are parents of intellectually disabled children.

Objectives of this organization are development of social awareness regarding intellectual disability and do advocacy for establishing equal rights of the intellectually disabled; creation of provision for special education, inclusive education, vocational training, rehabilitation, counseling and other therapeutic services for the development of the intellectually disabled persons; conduct research and publication for the benefit of the intellectually disabled persons; and also development of manpower for working with the intellectually disabled.

SWID Bangladesh has pioneered the inclusive education in Bangladesh. It promotes mainstream education of the intellectually disabled children. So far, it has 44 branches over 37 districts of the country.

By another parents' initiative 'Bangladesh Parents' Club of the Deaf (BPCD)' was established in 1985, in order to extend mutual support and cooperation for the development and welfare of their deaf children. BPCD promotes education and vocational training for deaf children. It also carrying out marriage counseling and successfully conducted more than 50 marriages among deaf boys and girls.

Self-help organizations were established with initiatives of disabled persons in the without influence from abroad. They have been established under restricted conditions in terms of resource availability, common understanding and proper coordination. Though there is a National Disability Forum, NFOWD, the largest network of organizations working in the field of disability with 259 member organizations there are two networking bodies of DPOs in the country. National Alliance of Disabled Peoples' Organizations (NADPO) having 66 member DPOs under BPKS patronization and National Grassroots Disabled Peoples' Organization (NGDPO) having 92 member DPOs supported by ADD.

### ***Consolidation:***

In this situation of self-help initiatives in Bangladesh mixed impression and keen interest have been created among PWDs and the organizations working on disability. Strong *Asia & Pacific Disability Forum, 3rd General Assembly & Conference February 27-29, 2008 Dhaka, Bangladesh* 5

enthusiasm as well as distortion of understanding has also been observed among them. As self-help organizations of people with disabilities has got utmost importance to promote a rights, dignity and an inclusive society for all there remains a strong need for proper information and consolidating all self-help endeavors of PWDs and others.

Through my presentation I could only make a small introduction of the issue in Bangladesh and still there remain a large number of organizations with their noble contributions. We intend to learn much about them and to explore their good practices. I believe consolidation of each and every such initiative through sharing of experiences, exchange of resources and information and establishing a coordination mechanism at local, national and regional level will strengthen PWDs' self-help initiatives within this region by many times.

On the backdrop of the above, Association for the Welfare of the Disabled People (AWDP) has taken an initiative to conduct a situation review on endeavors of PWDs' Self-help Organizations, DPOs and parents' Organizations in the country. As Self-help Initiatives is one of the key thematic areas National Disability Forum-NFOWD it will extend all out support and cooperation to conduct this review. Specific objectives, scopes and expected results of the review will be as follows:

**Specific Objectives:**

1. Explore pertinent information PWDs' self-help organizations in Bangladesh;
2. Explore organizational structure, approaches and modality of activities of SHOs in Bangladesh;
3. Explore level and type of participation of PWDs in self-help organizations;
4. To learn about national, regional and international policies, commitments, concepts and practices of PWDs' self-help organizations and make a comparison with local practices and approaches;
5. Explore steps to establish and run SHOs and measures taken to ensure sustainability;
6. Explore the trends/evolution of SHOs in Bangladesh.

**Scope of the review:**

This review will develop a general understanding of the present situation of SHO, DPO and other SH initiatives in the country based on the information from six divisions. Information

from will be collected from selected SHO, DPO, individual PWD led organization, parent association and other NGO through this review. Information will be collected from available govt. documents, UN, ESCAP and DPI documents. This will cover very basic information of the type, modality and trends of the self-help endeavors of/for PWDs in the country as a basic reference document.

**Expected results:**

1. Information of the number and types of self-help organizations of persons with disabilities, DPOs and family/parent associations in Bangladesh will be available.
2. Information of current activities and approaches of SHOs, DPOs and family/parent associations will be available.
3. Information of organizational structures and good practices of SHOs, DPOs and family/parent associations of the country will be available.
4. Information of national and international concepts and understanding on self-help activities of PWDs will be available.
5. Relevant information of tasks mentioned in national and international mandates/commitments, policies, legislation and action plan on SHOs of disabled persons will be available.
6. Information of prevailing needs and gaps in self-help activities in the country will be available.
7. Information of possible areas of cooperation between SHOs and other organizations/agencies will be available.
8. Information of the measures taken to establish, operate and ensure sustainability of SHOs in Bangladesh will be available.
9. Information material/handbook on self-help endeavors in Bangladesh will available in simple Bangla language as well as in English.

I believe sharing of your valuable opinion and experiences on this issue will immensely benefit us to successfully accomplish this review and enable us to contribute towards consolidating self-help movement in Bangladesh as well as in other countries in this region.

Thank you.

*Presented by:*

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