



Bangladesh: **The next generation**

Harnessing our biggest resource: an insight into the thoughts, aspirations and concerns of the youth of Bangladesh and how we must respond to them.



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“There are 55 million people between the ages of 15 and 34 in Bangladesh. They are our biggest asset; if each one of them could be motivated to participate in social work and take one daily action, big or small, to make their community a better place, we could transform our nation.”

Dr. Badiul Alam Majumdar, Global Vice President and Country Director, The Hunger Project Bangladesh, and Secretary, SHUJAN – Citizens for Good Governance

Foreword: How our youth can change Bangladesh

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR,
GLOBAL VICE PRESIDENT AND COUNTRY DIRECTOR,
THE HUNGER PROJECT BANGLADESH, AND SECRETARY,
SHUJAN – CITIZENS FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE.

To be young is to be
in the full flower of life,
when the body and mind
are both at their peak.

Youth also has the advantage of innocence: that state of indomitable grace in which we still believe in our own potential to impact the world around us. Our youth have not yet become ‘prisoners’ of what we call ‘reality’. They have not boxed in their thinking, dreaming or exploring by the walls of cynicism. They have not become stuck to a reality or resigned themselves to the status quo. They have the courage of their convictions along with the mental and physical capacity to pursue them – and thus they dare to break out of the prison of perceived reality.

Not only can they break free of that prison, but they have the ability to create a ‘new’ reality that is shaped not by what is easy but by what is right.

On the other hand we, their elders – and thus their teachers, leaders and inspiration – are all too often too set in our ways to think beyond present realities. The harsh lessons of past experience have placed limits on our thinking and actions. Trapped in a perpetual ‘reality-check’, we

have become risk-avoiders rather than risk-takers. At best, we opt for the calculated risk. We chip away at the foothills rather than try to move mountains. Thus, the changes that our generation enacts are frequently merely incremental or predictable. Our country provides extraordinary examples of the power of youth to change the course of history. They risked their lives at the forefront of our language movement in the lead-up to the Liberation War, and then risked them again and again in the Liberation War itself. While their elders were preoccupied with the risks and realities of taking action, youth leapt ahead into the fire. Unfazed by what seemed unreasonable or impossible, they became change agents whose stubborn idealism shaped the future of our country.

Our Bangladeshi youths are just one illustration of George Bernard Shaw’s famous observation that: “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”



74%

of young people are not interested in politics.

41%

of young Bangladeshis would prefer to live abroad. Main reasons? To earn more money, to study and due to the scarcity of jobs in Bangladesh.

76%

of young people either believe they have little or no influence over government decisions or were unsure of their capacity to influence.



No.1

international role model? Barack Obama: but 48% of males and 52% of females have no international role model.



3

most pressing environmental concerns for young Bangladeshis: temperature extremes (84%), increased drought (69%), and air pollution (65%).



20.2%

of our youth wish they could study more or seek a higher education.

43.6%

of Bangladeshi youth believe that gender-based inequalities will definitely decrease in the next five years.



A generation ready to serve: how we can help young Bangladeshis who want to unlock their potential and dictate their own future

This *Next Generation* report marks a defining moment for Bangladesh. For the first time, we have a snapshot of what Bangladeshis between 15 and 30 think, feel and hope for. We have a picture of their interests, how they spend their free time, and what or who influences them.

There are grounds for optimism: 79 percent are interested in development issues: 70 percent think the country is heading in the right direction. Youth have a clear identity, are happy (despite overwhelming poverty) and are dedicated to their country and families. Above all, this is a generation that wants to get involved: a striking 98 percent want to take part in social work. But statistics tell us that 70 percent don't: and 94 percent couldn't name a youth-based organisation or movement.

Population projections suggest that in every decade up to 2050, more than 30m young people will achieve adulthood. Each will enter the job market or start to raise a family. We can view each successive generation as a problem – or as a unique opportunity: how we use this 'youth dividend' will be critical to our future development.

We believe that to use this human capital effectively, leaders need to listen to the hopes, aspirations and voices of these younger generations – not just today, but tomorrow, and the next day. Each of these 30m

individuals, decade by decade, is a potential asset for Bangladesh. Where young Bangladeshis are given the opportunity, they rise to the occasion, selflessly devoting time and energy to community service and contributing to finding solutions for the daily problems of their neighbourhoods. Each individual who exercises active citizenship is an asset who builds communities and improves their livelihoods.

Today, Bangladesh needs a national debate on how we utilise the social and human resource at our disposal. Our proposal is that this debate should result in a youth charter which embodies the hopes, aspirations and rights of all young people – and maps out a path to how they will be realised.

As a Task Force, we will engage with the government, ministries, business and community leaders on how to use this immense social capital at a national level, and how to maximise the provision of meaningful job opportunities. We will do all we can to match the willingness of young people to get involved with the opportunities that do, and will, exist.

But our message to young people is this. Don't wait. Grasp the opportunity for yourselves. Your future is in your hands.

**Charles Nuttall OBE, Director,
British Council Bangladesh**

A CALL TO ACTION

Our Task Force has responded to the results of the research with the following suggestions:

- Improve the pathways into volunteering for young people in their own communities
- Raise consciousness about community involvement and what it can produce
- Divert resources in youth training into areas which will increase Bangladesh's productivity
- Invest in raising skills of young workers, and give young women more economic opportunity
- Innovate in building mobile telephony as a future educational tool for our young

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What's your view? Can these work? Are there better ways of using our youth capital? We value your opinion: visit www.britishcouncil.org.bd to join the debate.

Commissioning the research:

A unique project to discover more about our nation's youth

We commissioned this extensive piece of research as a starting point for debate and discussion about how we harness the potential of our nation's youth. This research is the first chapter – we want you to continue the story. Tell us what you think; join the debate and help shape the future of this country. Talk to us at www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Our youth hold the key to our nation's future. They have the potential to become a powerful force for political, social, economic and cultural change. Yet they are typically ignored and excluded from policy development and decision making – an exclusion that often occurs at family, community and national levels. Whilst they may be willing to make changes, to commit to action and to work hard, they often do not have the skills nor the opportunity to do so. This is a wasted resource: potentially over 55 million people lacking in direction.

A SNAPSHOT OF THE LIVES OF BANGLADESHI YOUTH

To harness the potential of young people in Bangladesh we need to know more about what drives them. To this end, the British Council commissioned Data International to undertake an extensive survey: one that would discover the status, aspirations and attitudes of our youth. This was initially done through an analysis of all existing research exploring the opinions of youth and then by direct research with people aged between 15 and 30. For this exercise we developed a questionnaire to survey young people about their education, work and family. It probed what shapes their beliefs, defines who they are and influences their choices. And it examined the people that influence them as well as their hopes for their country, their lives and their future.

WHO, WHERE AND HOW

These insights were gathered during the last 12 months through a rigorous direct interview process. 2,167 men and women aged between 15 and 30 were interviewed at work, their place of learning or at home. Sampling techniques were used to ensure all seven administrative districts were included: two districts from each of these were then selected, and a rural and urban area from each of these sampled. All respondents were broken down into seven distinct categories depending on occupation following a classification used by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. This broadly classes the youth population into employed, unemployed, household workers and students. Students represented over a third of the total sample size.

While every effort was made to include youth of different backgrounds, the sample size is not large enough for certain segments of the population. For instance, the coverage of ethnic and religious (except Hindus) minorities is inadequate to draw generalised conclusions and inferences about youth from those groups. Overall, the sample is robust and the results give us a solid starting point from which to explore – and exploit – the potential of the youth of Bangladesh.

A STARTING POINT FOR DEBATE

The results of this major research endeavour are captured in *The Youth of Bangladesh: status, aspirations and attitude survey* (this full document is available from www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh). Some of the results are what we expected, some offer surprise and not a little hope for the way that Bangladesh is being shaped. We shared the research results with our Active Citizens Task Force (profiled on pages 8 and 9), all of whom are key figures representing development, industry, business and community. Each offered their thoughts on the key themes and findings: they considered what elements were important, what they meant for this country and what our response should be. Here we share their stories and some of the key findings of the research project as a starting point for dialogue and debate.



Our Task Force represents leaders in the fields of environmental science, filmmaking, communications, gender equality, governance, entrepreneurship and development. While they are all experts in different disciplines, what links them is an in-depth knowledge of Bangladesh and the issues it faces; as well as a profound desire to challenge and change the direction of this country. Involved in this project from the very beginning, they were instrumental in putting the questions together that formed the basis of the survey and then in analysing what the results meant for our youth and for the country as a whole.



Clockwise from top left:
DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR, Country Director for The Hunger Project-Bangladesh and founder-Secretary of SHUJAN (Citizens for Good Governance) – a civil society organisation; **TAREQUE MASUD and CATHERINE MASUD**, leading independent film makers and co-directors of Audiovision, a Dhaka-based production house; **NAZIM FARHAN CHOUDHURY**, Managing Director of Adcomm and a serial entrepreneur; **SHEELA TASNEEM HAQ**, Senior Programme Officer/Director of Election Programmes at The Asia Foundation; **FARAH KABIR**, Country Director of ActionAid Bangladesh; **MONJURUL AHSAN BULBUL**, Editor-in-Chief and CEO of Boishakhi Television; **DR. ATIQ RAHMAN**, Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies.

Introducing our Task Force

DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

Vice President of The Global Hunger Project in 2003; lent his expertise to the Board of Governors of BARD; was a member of the ‘Committee to Strengthen and Revitalize Local Governance,’ set up by the last Caretaker Government. An author of several books and many articles in professional journals, he is also a popular newspaper columnist. Dr. Majumdar has lectured at Dhaka University, Seattle University, Central Washington University and Washington State University. He has also worked for NASA and the Saudi Royal Family.

TAREQUE MASUD AND CATHERINE MASUD

First feature, *Matir Moina* (The Clay Bird), won the Critics’ Prize at the 2002 Cannes Film Festival and was distributed internationally. Their 1995 documentary on the ‘71 Liberation War, *Muktir Gaan* (Song of Freedom) received wide critical and popular acclaim in Bangladesh. They have made films featuring children and youth-related themes, including *A Kind of Childhood* (2002), and their latest feature, *Runway*.

NAZIM FARHAN CHOUDHURY

Works to develop communications for some of the leading commercial brands in the country and in bringing the slickness of advertising and marketing to the social development sector. He is also one of the founding

trustees of Phiriya Ano Bangladesh (Take Back Bangladesh), a youth organisation which aims to provide a platform for future leaders of the country. Named by *New Age* as one of the ‘Faces of the Future’ in their 2006 ‘Heroes’ competition and recently won the ‘Brand Leadership Award’ at the 17th Asian Brand Congress in Mumbai.

SHEELA TASNEEM HAQ

Has more than 13 years of experience with the development sector in the field of governance. She holds a MA in International Relations and Governance, Conflict and Development and is a recipient of the Chevening Scholar Programme. Ms Haq specialises in designing, managing and implementing various democracy and governance related projects funded by donors and implemented through Non Government Organisations (NGOs), the Government of Bangladesh and multilateral bodies.

FARAH KABIR

Is the Country Director of ActionAid Bangladesh and has worked in the field of development and research for the last 18 years. She has worked with the British Council for almost ten years both in Bangladesh and the UK. In the UK, she was the consultant to the Participative Democracy British Council Governance Team where she focused on developing governance programmes in Scotland. Prior to that she was Assistant Director

of Governance, British Council Bangladesh. Board member of the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and a member of both Education Watch and the Funding Committee of Civil Society Education Fund (CSEF).

MONJURUL AHSAN BULBUL

Is a former editor of Bengali newspaper *Daily Sangbad* and now CEO of satellite TV *Boishakhi*. Also worked at satellite television channel *ATN Bangla*. He studied the media as an Asia Foundation Fellow in the USA before gaining more than 24 years of experience in practical, grassroots, people-oriented journalism and communication programmes in Bangladesh.

DR. ATIQ RAHMAN

Is the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies and played a leading role in UNCED, Rio, 1992, Intergovernmental Negotiations on Climate Change session and all the conferences of parties and climate summits in Kyoto, 1997, leading to the Kyoto Protocol. Dr. Rahman was a lead author of the IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, which received the Nobel Peace Prize. For his “outstanding and inspirational leadership in the field of environment” The United Nations Environment Programme has honoured Dr A. Atiq Rahman with ‘Champion of the Earth’, the highest UN award related to the environment.

Key facts: Core values and concerns

33%
of youth believe it
is local community
leaders who are
most likely to
listen to them.¹

47%
of youth believe their
local murubbi to be
the most influential
person in their lives.¹

17%
of respondents say they have
no national role model.¹



88%
of our youth are either happy or very happy.¹

1.6%
of youth are very unhappy.¹

76.5%
of youth believe women should play a greater role
in decision making affecting their community.²

38%
of youth believe
ending poverty and
hunger to be the most
important MDG.¹

79%
of youth are interested
in development issues.²



3
main factors shaping
youth opinion: family,
TV and relatives.¹

A happy nation who believe in family

EXPLORED BY FARAH KABIR, COUNTRY DIRECTOR, ACTIONAID



Whether in politics, business, commerce or education, it is from the present generation of our youth that leadership will emerge. The outcome of the last election was commonly held to have been decided by the ‘youth vote’; a third of ballots were cast by 18 – 30 year olds*. Knowing their core values and exploring their concerns is vital in shaping the future of our nation: what they think counts.

Our youth can be proud of their heritage: the younger generation has always made an immense contribution in thinking towards free, secular, socialistic politics and been active in the fight for an independent country. Youth were at the forefront of the language movement in the 50s, the

freedom struggle in the 60s and 70s, the Liberation War of 1971, and in the struggle for the restoration of democracy in 1990. Although the survey shows a disappointing level of engagement in politics, our youth have vision and do want a better future: they just need to be shown the way.

Youth is the most beautiful time in an individual’s life. Young people feel, think, dream and use their imagination to develop ideas and form their vision: ideas and vision that are the force behind changing the world. *The Youth of Bangladesh: status, aspirations and attitude study* tells us that most Bangladeshi youth are happy or very happy. From this, we could view the expectations of Bangladeshi youth as simple and minimal: such straightforward desires could be misread as a youth with no vision or drive. But these youth have a vision and will lead the country and the nation to a better future. They dream of a better world and will fight to establish it. They are energetic, positive, happy and eager to contribute. In a world where youth are often branded as rebellious and apathetic, 95 percent of Bangladesh’s 15-30 year-olds say that they are ready to work with their community and engage in nation building.

Our youth cannot do this alone. The survey clearly showed the respect they have for family, citing them as their key influence in life. They believe that community leaders and the local

“We must try and develop so as not to judge anyone, but instead create space for diversity and respect multiple views and opinions.”

murabbi to be the people who will listen to and respect them most. As Ifti Rashid, a Political and Security Analyst observes, “The survey shows the level of power and authority local leaders hold over youth. Any grassroots level reform programmes targeting young people will require hands-on engagement with local leaders who serve as influential opinion-makers amongst youth.” We must inspire them: at the core of this vision of a better future is integrity, love and most importantly, trust. It is vital that the youth have trust in themselves and that the adults they look to as role models in society trust them. Almost one in five Bangladeshi youth have no national role model: what does this say about our nation?

Given a helping hand, our youth can prove the sceptics that consider them as apolitical, non-engaging, selfish and totally sold out to capitalism and consumerism wrong.

Bangladeshi youth are struggling to establish the value of each individual so that they can each live with dignity irrespective of their position in life and society. They are fighting to ensure that the poor and marginalised are respected and can participate to their fullest

“I believe these youth have a vision and will be leading the country and the nation to a better future. I am sure they dream of a better world and will fight to establish it.”

potential. Just over a third of our youth see ending hunger and poverty as the most important Millennium Development Goal to achieve, followed by universal education.

The Leaders of Influence Study, 2007, noted that over two-thirds of youth believed that women should play a greater part in the decision making affecting their local community: our youth can play a part in building a society where gender discrimination is extinct and there is a drive for equality between men and women.

Our youth ascribe to egalitarian and democratic values which enable all to engage, participate and express their views and opinions. They are working for peace and not violence and to assert the rights of the minorities and steer all from the dominance of the majority. We, in turn, must try and develop so as not to judge anyone, but instead create space for diversity and respect multiple views and opinions.

Change is inevitable. Whether it is good or bad lies in the hands of our next generation. Now is the time to empower them and prepare them for the challenges that lie ahead, for it is a difficult world that they will inherit.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do you believe our youth hold the key to the future? Will family remain a key influence in their lives or will global pressures take over? Find out more at www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh and join the debate.

Key facts: Identity



2

top self-defining
factors for men:
nationality and job /
profession.¹



1%
of youth belong to a
political party.³



36%
of youth believe
student politics have a
detrimental effect on
educational institutions.¹

38%
of youth have no
strong feelings
about student
politics.¹

15%
of youth think that student
politics are a good thing.¹

30.5%
of youth believe they definitely
should not be involved in politics.¹

30.5%
of youth believe that they should
be involved in politics.¹



2

top self-defining
factors for women:
family and nationality.¹



25%
of youths who view student politics
positively believe they should
be free from party influence.¹

A proud nation who know who they are – but question where they are going

EXPLORED BY SHEELA TASNEEM HAQ, SENIOR PROGRAMME OFFICER, RIGHTS & GOVERNANCE, THE ASIA FOUNDATION



Identity means many different things and can be shaped by a variety of influences. Nationality, ethnicity, age, gender, education and religion all have a part to play in how we define who we are and how we perceive ourselves.

Who we are and who we can be is further defined by our world view, how we relate to others and the role we choose to play in society. The concept of identity underpins and impacts every area of life: our families; our politics; ethnic relationships and the development of the nation. To look at the hopes, fears and aspirations of our youth, we must first

look at what shapes who they are.

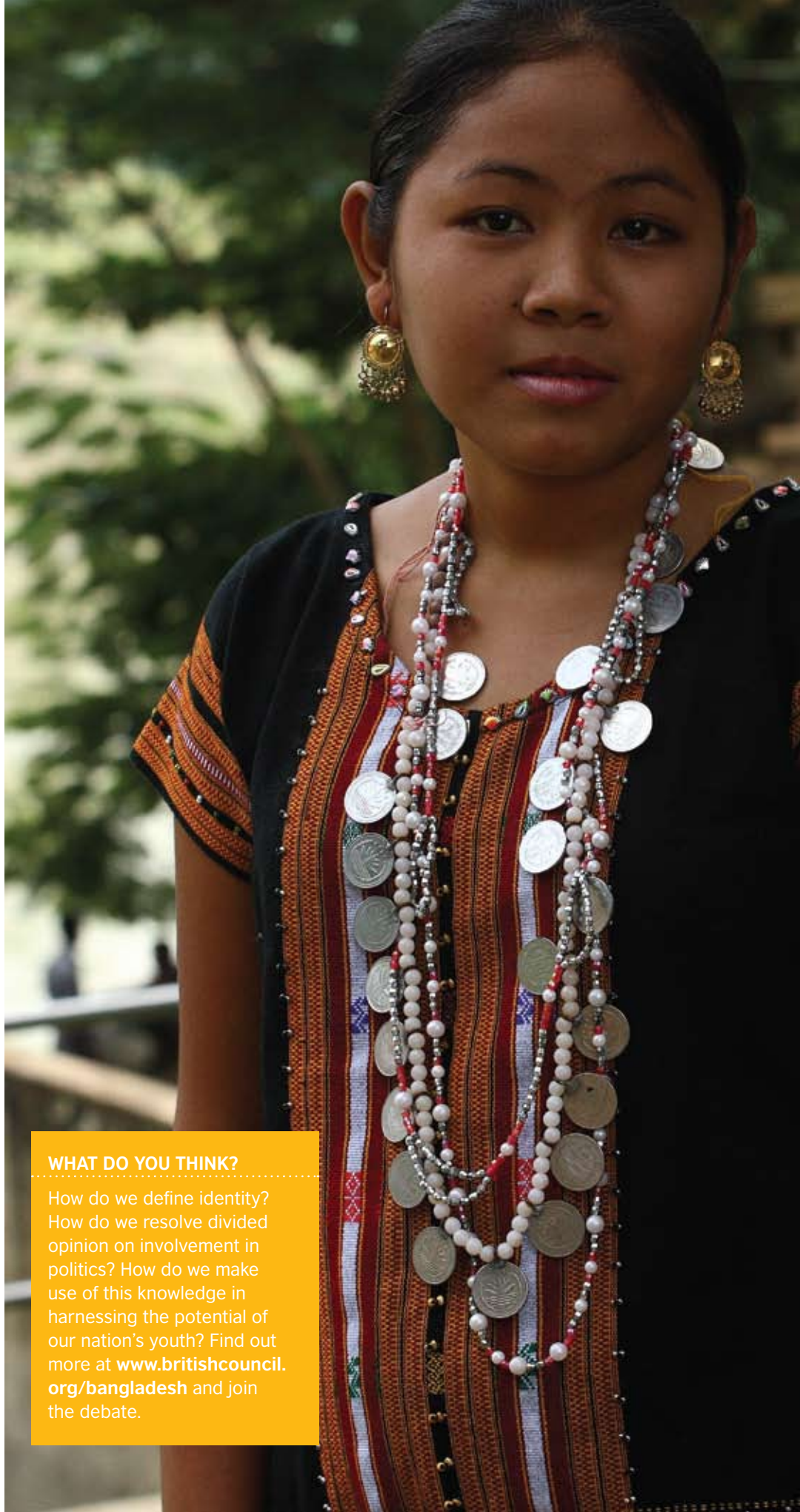
The Youth of Bangladesh: status, aspirations and attitude survey revealed two key facts about the identity of our youth: first, nationality is a key defining factor; second, that our youth are disengaged from politics.

It is clear from the survey that nationality is one of the major issues defining identity, a fact articulated by our youth irrespective of gender, occupation or socio-economic class. Even viewing the data from male and female perspectives, their different understandings of the impact of nationality are not significant (29.1 percent and 21.5 percent respectively). Looking at the second major defining factor of identity, we see that for most Bengali youth, especially females, family origin comes next on the list. On the other hand the ethnic community has stated their ethnic identity as a second major factor for self identification.

We cannot ignore the longstanding conflict of socio-cultural identity between the Bengali and non-Bengali ethnic groups. Over time it has given rise to intra-state conflict in the southeast region of Bangladesh. This conflict has marginalised ethnic groups and gradually deprived them of opportunities to engage in the broader arena of politics and state decision making. This search for self identity by ethnic communities has had a major impact on our

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

How do we define identity? How do we resolve divided opinion on involvement in politics? How do we make use of this knowledge in harnessing the potential of our nation's youth? Find out more at www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh and join the debate.



“Confrontational politics, de-politicisation of the political process and bad governance may have contributed to our youths’ lack of interest in getting involved in politics. The present political system has somehow failed to create a space for our youth to actualise their demands and rights as a citizen.”

“As future leaders of Bangladesh it is essential that our youth start to play a significant role in identifying national issues and concerns that impact our people.”

national identity process. The major challenge for the leaders of our next generation is how they will tackle this issue of ethnic identity.

Nationality alone does not define identity; there are different dynamics to consider. Politics play a major role, as identity is also shaped by actions taken in social and political arenas. Politics does not have to mean belonging to a party nor believing in its policies, rather does it denote the process of establishing and asserting an individual’s rights. The study stated that less than 1 percent of our youth belong to a political party, which could suggest an apathetic attitude to politics. Add to this the fact that over a third of our youth – almost 36 percent – think that student politics have a detrimental effect on educational institutions and only 15 percent think that student politics are good. The picture this presents is not a positive one.

Our youth have divided opinions on getting involved in politics: 30.5 percent think that they definitely should and exactly the same percentage think they definitely

should not. What accounts for these attitudes? Confrontational politics, de-politicisation of the political process and bad governance may have contributed to our youths’ lack of interest in getting involved in politics. Along with this the present political system has somehow failed to create a space for our youth to actualise their demands and rights as a citizen. There is hope though: those who view student politics as a positive phenomenon suggest that social, political and economic demands could be realised through student movements. Could these people represent a force for good in the future?

As future leaders of Bangladesh it is essential that our youth start to play a significant role in identifying national issues and highlighting the concerns that impact our people. Though youth participation in the 2008 parliamentary elections was a positive indication, their participation needs to extend beyond voting (as a right of self determination) to economic enterprise and other central institutions of society. This, in turn, will contribute to better governance and institutionalise the democratic process.

Ultimately, engagement in what happens to our country now and in the future can help our youth create a space in which to work out who they are, what they can be and what their place in society is.

Key facts: Social responsibility

70%

of youth are not involved in neighbourhood or community work.¹

31%

of urban youth participate in community work.¹

6%

of their rural counterparts participate in community work.¹



70%

of youth believe that their country is heading in the right direction.³



98%

of youth believe they should be involved in social work.¹



95%

of youth are willing and able to address local and community issues.¹

94%

of youth could not identify a youth-based or youth-run organisation or movement.¹



75%

of youth believe foreign aid to be useful or essential.¹

35%

of youth believe that Bangladesh's reputation for corruption injures its image abroad.¹

60%

of youth feel that corruption will definitely or may get worse in the next five years.¹



Our youth, our nation: A choice between huge potential and terrible risk

EXPLORED BY DR. BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR, GLOBAL VICE PRESIDENT AND COUNTRY DIRECTOR, THE HUNGER PROJECT-BANGLADESH, AND SECRETARY, SHUJAN – CITIZENS FOR GOOD GOVERNANCE



The results of *The Youth of Bangladesh: status, aspirations and attitude* survey confirm that we should have faith in our young people. 97.9 percent of those questioned answered that they should definitely become involved in social work. About 95 percent said they were willing and able to address local and community issues.

These high percentages apply to both male and female respondents. In other words, almost all young people, irrespective of gender, express a strong sense of social responsibility and desire to participate in community work.

Thus, we have a great reservoir of creative energy for building a better future for Bangladesh.

However, it is disappointing to note that less than a third of the respondents actually participate in neighbourhood or community development activities. Male participation was 40.6 percent and female participation only 17.7 percent. With respect to participation, the urban-rural divide is also worth noting. Although 31 percent of urban youth participate in community work, only 6 percent of their rural counterparts have any involvement in such activities. Thus, despite a high degree of willingness on the part of youth to be of service to their community, only a very limited number – more limited in the case of female and rural youth – actually participate in such activities.

It is also disappointing to note that the tasks in which respondents are involved mostly represent giving handouts rather than promoting self-reliance, and thus are not creative or very meaningful in nature. For example, 23.4 percent of the respondents reported that they are engaged in helping the poor financially. Another 9.3 percent are involved in philanthropic work. Only 6.1 percent participate in development activities in their area. Thus, notwithstanding a great deal of willingness on their part, few young people of Bangladesh are actually involved in community services. Of those who do participate, even

“I have spent many years working with young people, especially from rural areas and underprivileged backgrounds, and I have come to believe whole-heartedly in their ability to truly change Bangladesh. I believe in their energy and their courage, and in their hunger for something better. And, most of all, I believe in their power to change the world.”

fewer participate in meaningful development-related activities designed to move society forward. That is, young people in general, and female and rural youth in particular, are grossly underutilised in the fight to build a better Bangladesh.

The survey results make another interesting revelation. Only 5.3 percent of the 2,167 respondents could identify by name youth-based or youth-led movements or organisations involved in community development activities. That is, a staggering 94.7 percent have no knowledge of the organisations or activities created to serve as a conduit for their participation in their communities. Thus, though the desire to participate is strong in our youth, there seems to be a great lack of visible pathways for them to do so.

This problem presents a great opportunity for those interested in unleashing that potential. The potential arises especially from the fact that most youths are not yet burdened with family responsibilities and so can more easily become volunteers.

To fully realise the enormity of this potential opportunity, one needs only to look at the proportion of young people in Bangladesh's population. According to government statistics, 73.5 percent of Bangladesh's population is below the age of 35. Over a third is between the age of 15 and 34. The Population Data Bureau estimates that Bangladesh's current

“The flip side of the enormous potential offered by a large youth population is the social risk: if, in the absence of guidance and clear direction, our youth fall into aimlessness and vice, they will become a lost generation.”

population is at about 162.2 million. So, the number of young people between the ages of 15 and 34 in Bangladesh is roughly 55 million.

If each of these 55 million youth could be motivated to participate in social work and take one daily action, big or small, to make their community a better place, we could reach a tipping point in the transformation of Bangladesh. Even if these young people took only one action per week, a staggering number of community improvement initiatives would still result. The key to translating this enormous potential into action is our ability, willingness and skill to empower and ignite the youth population of Bangladesh. The question is: are we, as a nation, committed to doing so?

If we are not, we may pay a heavy price. The flip side of the enormous potential offered by a large youth population is the social risk: if, in the absence of guidance and clear direction, our youth fall into aimlessness and vice, they will become a lost generation. Bangladesh will become a victim of social and

political stagnation, and the better world we envision will be lost to apathy and social degeneration. Thus, we are at a crossroads, confronting a choice between huge potential and terrible risk.

Unfortunately, the risk is already beginning to reveal itself. Results of the survey show that the young people of Bangladesh have even now begun to express disenchantment with the state of our nation. They ranked bribery as the second most important factor, next to education, in securing a job. About a third of the respondents felt that corruption will ‘definitely’ get worse in the next five years, with an additional 27.5 percent fearing that it ‘may’ get worse. Over a third believe that Bangladesh's reputation for corruption injures its image abroad. Sadly, some of our young people – especially those involved in partisan politics – have already become part of the problem. Needless to say, negativity breeds further negativity, paralysing all positive action.

It is clear that two futures lie before us and the choice is in our hands. The risks we fear can be avoided and the potential we envision can be harnessed if – and only if – we can empower and mobilise the youth of Bangladesh, steering them forward in a positive direction. We must choose to invest in the power of this generation because the fate of our country lies in the balance. The future of Bangladesh will depend on the courage and wisdom we now show in making this decision.

Key facts: Education and employment



1%

of the youth labour market is made up of entrepreneurs.²

4%

of 15-29 year olds in the job market have a degree or specialised training.²

28%

of working 15-29 year olds have no formal education.²

1%

of youths are engaged in technical or vocational training.²

12%

believe bribery is the major factor in getting a job.¹

76%

of youth work in agriculture, transport or production.²

4%

hold technical or professional roles.²



87%

of youths are enrolled in general education.²

26%

of females are part of the job market.²

78%

of males are part of the job market.²

31%

believe that higher education is a major factor in getting a job.¹

76%

of exports are from the ready made garments industry.²

A willing workforce: But where is the work?

EXPLORED BY NAZIM
FARHAN CHOUDHURY,
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
ADCOMM



The job market is one of the fundamental concerns of our youth. But many of our youth face worrying prospects: few have no job at all (only 4 percent unemployment) yet many are underemployed – the job they do does not match the potential and skills they have – or are frustrated by the lack of opportunity. A good education and being prepared to work hard do not guarantee a good job.

Factors such as nepotism, corruption, social stigma – all can have a distortive effect on the job prospects of an individual. And faced with such barriers, many young people give in and drop out

“Our education system is not geared to turn Bangladesh’s greatest asset into wealth. We need more focus on creativity, logic and research orientation than the memorising-by-rote system we have today. The emphasis needs to be on how to arrive at an answer rather than the answer itself.”

of the job market; that 42 percent would like to live abroad is also a telling statistic. We are losing young people before their journey has even begun. This situation must change.

Our youth make up over half of our population: this fact alone means they are surely the nation’s biggest asset. It is imperative that we find appropriate avenues to harness this potent resource. It is an indisputable fact that if the 2020 goal of ‘Digital Bangladesh’ is to be met, it can not be done without engaging, and giving opportunity, to this generation.

The vast majority of youth already in the workforce are in the low value-adding agriculture sector. Bangladesh’s economic dependence on the agriculture sector is one that needs to be questioned. Most of our planning revolves around holding this sector sacrosanct. But given the needs of our youth (jobs with a future) and the conditions required for economic and social growth, we cannot sustain our nation on fields alone. A push towards employment means a push towards industrialisation. We do not have the land area required to make ourselves an agricultural superpower but we have the young minds and bodies to run factories and knowledge based businesses. Let us make use of them.

While there is equality amongst the genders when it comes to education, there is an overwhelming disparity when it comes to their participation in

the paid work force. It is a conundrum that while most of Bangladesh’s economic success in areas such as the ready-made garment industry is a direct result of female participation, they still do not play a more robust role in the labour market. There might be a host of reasons for this phenomenon but one thing is for certain: lack of appropriate jobs is a major obstacle. Due to the free education for females this group is well suited for jobs in the knowledge industry. More training is required to bring them up to speed with the rigours of global IT outsourcing demands, but Bangladesh’s access to this comparatively endless resource pool means we can be a major player in this area.

The crucial issue regarding youth employability is education. Our education system is not geared to turn Bangladesh’s greatest asset into wealth. We need more focus on creativity, logic and research orientation than the memorising-by-rote system we have today. The emphasis needs to be on how to arrive at an answer rather than the answer itself. Harnessing the raw computing power of Bangladesh’s youth will propel this nation into a different dimension.

What is the main complaint of business managers in any professional organisation in Bangladesh? Plenty of people apply for jobs, few are qualified to do them. The size of our IT, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing

“We do not have the land area required to make ourselves an agricultural superpower but we have the young minds and bodies to run factories and knowledge based businesses. Let us make use of them.”

and ready-made garments industries could easily double (if not more) if appropriate human resources were available. Another recent study showed that if proper vocational skills were given to our migrant workers, the remittance earnings itself could go up to \$30 billion a year. Dr. A. Atiq Rahman, Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS), sums this up, “Resources should be directed towards job-oriented training. Significant portions of our educated youth have been trained with skills that do not have much use in the job market. The training that they get currently does not accelerate job creation within this category. Hence, it is important to divert resources into areas which would help them to get ‘real’ jobs.”

Our youth are willing to work, we know this. They are willing to learn. We just need to give them appropriate training and relevant skills and they will do the rest.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Is it possible to change the basis of our industry? How do we ensure there are jobs for our youth and that they have the skills required to do them? How do we stop our greatest asset giving up or leaving the country? Find out more at www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh and join the debate.

Key facts: Cultural perspective



2

main sources
of national and
international news:
television and
newspapers.¹



71%

of youth watch TV every day
or almost every day.³



2

key role models for
Bangladeshi youth:
Sheikh Mujibur
Rahman and Kazi
Nazrul Islam.¹

64%

of youth believe that there is no chance
Bangladesh will become a fundamentalist
country within the next five years.¹



73%

of youth own a mobile phone.¹

81%

of male youth own
a mobile phone.¹

64%

of female youth own
a mobile phone.¹

85%

of youth do not use the Internet.¹

From Jatra to TV: The differing cultural values of youth today

EXPLORED BY TAREQUE
MASUD, LEADING
INDEPENDENT FILM
MAKER AND CO-DIRECTOR,
AUDIOVISION.



As we close the first decade of the new Millenium, it is more important than ever that we listen to the pulse of the new generation of youth in Bangladesh. They have come of age in a rapidly evolving world and are crucial to the well-being of the country as it grapples with ever more complex issues and problems.

This is the generation that has grown up with cell phones (three quarters of our youth now own one), satellite television and the internet – although many of our youth (85 percent) still do not have access to it. They live in a post-Cold War world where religious and civilisational divides define international politics and

the threat of nuclear Armegeddon has been eclipsed by the threat of global climate change. Too often we assume we know what is best for the young, but seldom do we listen to their views and concerns in an effort to understand them better. This survey is an important step toward a more comprehensive assessment of the needs and potential of that most important of Bangladesh's many resources; its youth.

Much of what we define as culture is reflected in a person's sense of identity, and thus it was interesting to see the prominence that nationality had in defining identity over more specific markers such as language, district or class. That Bangladesh's youth are sufficiently predisposed to identify themselves as members of a national entity first rather than members of a sub-group is significant in that it reflects their potential as a unifying force rather than a divisive one. The other major self-identifier, family origins, is in many ways complementary to the more abstract national identifier, reflecting the personal associations of the respondents and their immediate surroundings. That religion should figure more prominently in the identity of madrassah students is not surprising; as a former madrassah student myself, I know the central role that madrassahs play in the lives of their students, many of whom have little or no family to support them, and find in their madrassah not only a school but a home.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Do we need to find a new electronic language to connect with the youth of Bangladesh? Is the cell phone the answer to tapping into what they need and what they can offer? Find out more at www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh and join the debate.



"If we are unable to properly harness the sense of energy and commitment this generation has to offer, it is not only our failure, it is the nation's loss."

"The importance that role models have in providing youth with a source of inspiration and motivation cannot be underestimated"

Another significant aspect of the survey from a cultural perspective is the pre-eminent role that television seems to play in the lives of the respondents. Only 15 to 20 years ago, before the advent of satellite channels, television played a much more peripheral role in our lives as a source of information and entertainment.

For information, BTV's style of news was hardly reliable compared to print journalism or even word of mouth, and as for entertainment, aside from some notable teleplays (which were often of much higher quality than today's serials), other forms of cultural diversions such as the cinema and stage had a much more influential role to play. And in rural areas the penetration of television was limited, while traditional cultural activities such as Jatra, kabi gaan, and puthi were primary sources of entertainment and cultural affiliation.

But now, not only the proliferation of satellite channels, with their competing news services and a plethora of serials, but the void left by the decline of traditional art forms and entertainment, has given rise to the dominance of electronic media.

They act as a purveyor of culture and information, but also as a vehicle of socialisation and commoditisation.

The importance that role models have in providing youth with a source of inspiration and motivation cannot be underestimated. From the survey two major figures emerge as role models at the national level, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Kazi Nazrul Islam. From a cultural standpoint this is significant in that both of these figures have a strongly nationalist and secularist identification, showing that the essential philosophical underpinnings of Bangladesh's independence struggle are still intact amongst today's youth. The fact that a large percentage (64 percent) also believe there is no chance of Bangladesh becoming a fundamentalist country over the next five years also serves to underscore this point.

Overall, the spirit of optimism and public-service oriented motivation amongst Bangladesh's youth as reflected in the findings of this survey should be an inspiration to all of us, who too often fall prey to gloom and doom scenarios when talking of Bangladesh's future. If we are unable to properly harness the sense of energy and commitment this generation has to offer, it is not only our failure, it is the nation's loss.

Stories of Success:

What happens when the youth of Bangladesh fulfil their potential



“After my visit to Scotland as part of the Active Citizen’s Programme I feel my acceptability among my community has increased and people take what I say more seriously; it has given me the mental strength I need to carry on my work.”

The two stories that follow highlight how effective our youth can be in making a difference to their own lives and to that of the communities in which they live, given the chance to do so. Both Tisha and Shain had the willingness and ability to make a difference: the Active Citizens Project, a partnership between the Hunger Project and the British Council, helped them make it happen.

TISHA’S STORY: A SCHOOL UNDER THE SKY

Meher Nazmun, known popularly as Tisha to her friends and family, is 21 years old, and lives in Munshipara, Rangpur district. As she walked to and from her college, Tisha was troubled at seeing children from the nearby slums on the streets and not enrolled in school. Tisha wanted to help these children go to school but she did not know how she could do this.

Her involvement with Active Citizens changed this. With the help of her youth unit, Tisha initiated a new community intervention. She started teaching these slum children in an open-air school that she called ‘School under the Sky’. The children initially responded well and attended regularly, but after a while attendance dropped off. In Bangladesh, while primary education is technically free, many people living in poverty find the ‘hidden’ cost of school uniforms and books difficult to

bear. This accounts for high drop-out rates. Committed to finding a way around this, Tisha and her unit spoke to the children’s parents and convinced them of the importance of educating their children.

With the support of the community people, Tisha continued with her ‘School under the Sky’ but on rainy days was forced to close the school. She arranged an arts programme for her students, and invited the principal of her college to attend. He was so moved by what he saw that he offered to provide Tisha with a permanent room in which to conduct her classes. He also offered to negotiate with the local government primary school so that her students could be re-enrolled in a formal education programme.

Tisha has recently visited Scotland as part of the bilateral exchange under the British Council’s Active Citizens Project. As well as building her confidence and helping her gain the respect of her community, Tisha believes she has learnt a lot in practical terms, such as having a plan and sticking to it. Her long term aim, though ambitious, is to eradicate illiteracy from Bangladesh. She is committed to do whatever it takes to achieve this aim because she strongly believes the standard of living would significantly improve if only all Bangladeshis were educated.



“My training taught me to think differently about life. I found out there’s a lot young people can do for their community. All that is needed is a collective effort by a group of inspired people who want to make positive changes.”

SHAIN’S STORY: FROM FRUSTRATED STUDENT TO FORCE FOR CHANGE

As a student, Shain was an active political campaigner. But despite his efforts, nothing changed and he grew frustrated. Shain then found out about the youth movement of the Hunger Project and attended one of their workshops. This inspired him to become a non-political youth leader. Shain and his friends formed their own unit, focusing on reducing the use of plastic bags, banned by the government but still widely used in the community.

The group tackled this in two ways: through raising awareness about the impact of plastic bags on the environment; and through practical means. The group provided clay pots to every household in the area and then collected them at the end of the week when they were full of used plastic bags. These were then recycled. At the same time, the group made paper bags and supplied them to the community at a low cost. The money they earned from this was used for buying clay pots. The group gained recognition and acceptability in the community and very soon the number of members increased to 24.

Shain has since become a real force for change. As he explains, “I want everyone to realise that they have a responsibility to society. People should have dreams, big dreams, and the chance to fulfill them.

They don’t need to belong to a movement to do this, but it provides a platform from which to start and it’s helpful to work as a team.” After taking part in Youth Activist Training he has led 11 Youth Leadership Training programmes, giving 400 people the tools to take their part in society and to fulfill their dreams.

And he hasn’t stopped there. Shain campaigns on everything from preventing early marriage to tree planting, has organized 20 maths olympiads involving 15,000 students, is the joint national coordinator of the National Youth Ending Hunger Forum in Bangladesh and one of the facilitators providing British Council and The Hunger Project’s Active Citizens Youth Leaders Training countrywide. He is also leading a number of Social Action Projects by the youth in his community under the Active Citizens Project.

Shain sums up how he feels about Active Citizens as, “different from what I’ve been involved with in the past; it’s more interactive, it’s fun and most importantly it provides the young people with a solid platform for community work.”

If Shain’s example is anything to go by, there is no end to what the youth of Bangladesh can achieve given the right opportunities and encouragement.

Introducing our Active Citizens programme



“Active citizenship” is the philosophy that citizens should work towards the betterment of their community through economic participation, public service, volunteer work, and other such efforts to improve life for all citizens.

This Next Generation Report marks the starting point for a programme called Active Citizens that aims to empower tomorrow’s young leaders to bring about positive change in their communities. Working in 10 countries, the project will promote trust and understanding between communities by building networks of young people across the world that can work together to address global challenges.

OUR AIMS:

By 2012 we aim to have equipped 10,000 young leaders in Bangladesh to:

- develop a stronger sense of their own culture and identity
- increase their knowledge and understanding of how their local community works and its links to the rest of the world
- take action to address social issues in their communities
- access decision making processes; and
- contribute to building community cohesion with people of all generations.

THE ACTIVE CITIZENS PROGRAMME WILL:

- Work with partners to provide capacity building for young people that includes leadership, communication, advocacy,

citizenship, volunteering, social action project delivery, fundraising, entrepreneurship, partnership and network building

- Develop youth networks, both face-to-face and online, between the UK and Bangladesh, enabling young people to share their ideas, knowledge and experiences to develop new relationships and understand their roles as global citizens
- Develop youth-led social action projects where young people address their own priorities and involve people of all generations to make a positive difference to their communities. We will develop an award scheme to celebrate achievement
- Facilitate policy dialogue to stimulate debate about active citizenship and youth policy and practice at national, local and community levels.

We will work with partners committed to citizenship, volunteerism and community participation from civil society, government and the business sectors in Bangladesh and the UK.

MORE INFORMATION

Check out the latest news on Active Citizens at www.britishcouncil.org/bangladesh

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DATA SOURCES

1. Data from Data International Survey for British Council: The Youth of Bangladesh: Status, aspirations and attitudes, July 2009.
2. Data from BBS, Report of the Labour Force Survey, Bangladesh, 2005-2006.
3. Bangladesh Leaders of Influence Survey, 2007.

“GREAT CONSEQUENCES CAN ONLY BE BROUGHT ABOUT BY THE ENERGY AND DEVOTION OF OUR YOUTH... WE LIVE IN AN AGE WHEN TO BE YOUNG AND TO BE INDIFFERENT CAN BE NO LONGER SYNONYMOUS. WE MUST PREPARE FOR THE COMING HOUR. THE CLAIMS OF THE FUTURE ARE REPRESENTED BY SUFFERING MILLIONS; AND THE YOUTH OF A NATION ARE THE TRUSTEES OF POSTERITY.”

Benjamin Disraeli

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