

Preliminary Report on the School Visit by Dr. Jasimuz Zaman

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Preface

The school visit was undertaken in order to ensure transparency and accountability in the execution of projects funded by APW. It was also intended to demonstrate the interest and commitment of APW in the improvement of the quality of education in the schools. The visit was also expected to be useful in determining whether we had the right choice of projects for the schools.

While visiting the schools, I found a commonality of the problems and consequently a commonality of solutions. I therefore compiled a general report describing the issues of importance and actions that are needed.

I hope the report will give the APW Board of Trustee a fair assessment of the needs of the schools and help the Board select projects to make the most effective utilization of the funding allocation. Our donors, sponsors, patrons and our funding partners like the Government of Alberta Community Spirit Program would be able to understand and appreciate the urgent need for helping the schools improve their educational opportunities. On their part, the schools will be able to see clearly the way we are looking at their needs and performance. The schools can benefit from the merits and shortcomings pointed out in the report. They can follow up some of the recommendations that have been made.

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1.Introduction

Alliance for Progress Worldwide (APW) is a Calgary, Canada based non-profit charitable foundation that participates in various activities to improve the quality of the delivery of education in rural high schools in Bangladesh. APW has been funding various projects at different schools in Bangladesh since 1995. It obtained recognition by Canada Revenue Agency for tax exemption in 2007 and has been actively expanding its activities since then. APW got matching fund from the Government of Alberta under Wild Rose Foundation program in 2008 and from the Community Initiative Program (CIP) in 2009.

Recently Dr. Jasimuz Zaman, Chair Person, APW visited a number of schools at several locations in Bangladesh. The visit included a number of schools that has ongoing projects funded by APW and a few schools that are not currently funded by APW.& Dr. Zaman visited these schools between December 18th, 2009 and February 16th, 2010.

2.Objectives of the Schools Visit

The objectives of this school visits are as follows:

- Assess the overall quality of the delivery of education in the APW funded schools;
- Evaluate the impact of APW funding to improve the quality of education;
- Identify possible ways to expand the capabilities of the APW in improving the quality of education;
- Gain firsthand knowledge of the needs of the schools; and
- Provide encouragement to the schools, exchange ideas on ways to sustain continual progress and suggest specific ways to the schools to secure funds from local philanthropy.

3.Details of the Schools Visit

A total of twelve schools (Table 1) were visited during the visiting period. The following persons individually or in groups accompanied Dr. Zaman at different school visits: Fazlur Rahman of USA, Mahbubul Bashar of Dhaka, Mujibur Rahman of USA, Salma Zaman (APW member), Dr. Mahmudul Alam of VAB, Alim Khan of SHEBI, Dr. Dara Shamsuddin of Jahangir Nagar University, Amin Karim of DeVry University, USA, Marilyn Karim of USA, A.N. M. Shamsuddoha (APW member), Shafiqul Islam (Rotarian)

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Table 1 List of Schools Visited

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No

School Name

Location

1

Arjuna Mohsin High School

Arjuna, Bhuapur, Tangail, Bangladesh

2

Ashkola Girlsâ€™ High School

Nangola, Bogra Sadr, Bogra, Bangladesh

3

Dhukundi High School

Uzilabo Bazar, Upazilla Belabo Narsingdi, Bangladesh

4

Jamuna Palli High School

Sherpur, Bogra, Bangladesh

5

Mominpur High School

Dakkin Mominpur, Rangpur, Bangladesh

6

Morjal Kazi Md. Bashir High School

Morjal Bazar, Raipura, Narsingdi, Bangladesh

7

VIP Shahadat High School

Rangpur, Bangladesh

8

Harishangan High School

Belabo, Narshingdi, Bagladesh

9

Baluakandi High School

Baluakandi, Raipura, Munshiganj

10

D. A. Mannan Pilot High School

Middle Vaterchar, Gazaria, Munshiganj

11

Barakeshtola High School

Amtali, Monohargong Comilla

12

Jamsherpur High School

Koshba, Brahmanbaria, Comilla

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Before each visit, the Head Master of the school was contacted and briefed about the purpose of the visit. The following format was generally followed during individual school visit:

- Dr. Zaman expressed his thanks and appreciation to the Headmaster, the Management Committee members and the teachers present for giving him and his group the opportunity to visit the school. He gave a brief introduction of how APW would like to partner with the school for the improvement of the quality of education in the school. The Headmaster then provided an outline about the school, its problems and promises.

- The above presentation was followed by a discussion session where everyone present participated. In many schools, the Management Committee Chairman or the Vice Chairman and some of the Management Committee members had been present. Questions from all sides were addressed by the relevant persons. From APW side, attempts were made to obtain a good understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the school.

- Dr. Zaman then requested the Headmaster to explain how the decision to spend the APW funding was being made and how the accounts were maintained. He also examined the ledger book and the management of the account and the vouchers.

- A general tour of the school was then undertaken. The APW team looked at the general condition of the building, classrooms and furniture and the surroundings.

- The APW team looked at the actual facilities developed from funding by APW.

- The APW team visited each classroom, talked with the class teachers, talked to the students and addressed the students.

The APW team paid special attention to the following facilities.

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- Science Laboratory
- Computer Laboratory
- Vocational and Technical Option Laboratory (if present)
- Library
- Class Room (the condition of the walls, floor, ceiling, benches and desks and blackboards)
- Wash Room facilities for boys, girls and teachers
- Drinking water facilities

One of the schools organized the prize giving ceremony for the APW award for best performance in public examination at the end of grade X. The event was well organized, except being rather lengthy and lots of speeches. All teachers, members of the Management and a section of the parents were present. The school had a cadet corps and they held a march past. The boys and girls who performed the march past were bare footed. It was painful to see them marching bare footed. The reason was obvious and APW team did not inquire further about it. Like most village schools, the parents are peasants and day laborers and they cannot afford to buy proper shoes for their children. The APW chair addressed the students, congratulated the award winners and called upon students to work with diligence.

Another school had the farewell ceremony of the Secondary School Certificate examination that was going to start on February 11. The APW chair addressed the students and advised them to keep working hard.

All schools expressed great appreciation for the initiative by APW in far away Canada to work for the improvement of the educational opportunities for high schools in rural Bangladesh. One school suggested that the initiative by APW has been an inspiration to them that triggered the latent desire to consolidate their own efforts to set up high quality facility for science lab, computer lab and library and make the school a model not only for the locality but for the whole country.

4.Outcome of the Visit

Positive Features

- All teachers have B. Ed. Training. The government also provides short term retraining and teachers do take advantage of them.
- The teachers are aware of modern concepts of teaching like encouraging creativity and the teacher's role as a facilitator. Lecture plan is given for individual subjects. Some schools take frequent tests for continuous assessment. Group work is also given in some schools.
- There are also opportunities for the school management for training about their roles and responsibilities. Such training may be quite useful, because in some cases the Management seemed to be overbearing.
- The teachers and members of the Management Committee are proactive in encouraging the parents to send their children to schools. They visit student homes to encourage parents and monitor children study. There seems to be dedication and commitment to the schools on the part of the teachers and the management committee members. The motivation is primarily the good name of the school and stay recognized as a good school.
- The schools hold parent teacher meeting at least once a year. Some schools hold the meeting class wise. The invitation is given to all parents. The attendance is generally low, but not wholly disappointing.
- The teachers proactively engage in coaching students in preparation of public examination. Some honorarium is provided, but the main motivating force is a good name that good results bring to schools.
- The government pays the salary of the teachers. This payment is restricted to the approved number of teachers. Some schools proactively engage additional teachers with own resources. One school appointed an English honours graduate on a temporary basis to coach students appearing at SSC examination.
- Many schools have adequate land area for student sports activities.
- The account keeping for APW funding and expenditure procedure are well defined and transparent. A separate account and record of expenditures are maintained. The purchase decisions are made with the consent of the Management Committee.
- The entry to the school is at grade six. The students finish the primary school and then

move to the high school. There is usually no bar in admission to class six. The public examination at grade five that was introduced this year will provide some quality control at the entry level.

- There are more high schools than are currently needed. So students from primary schools have a choice. This is conducive to quality improvement in high schools. Students can also get transfer from one high school to another. This also helps the need for quality on the part of the school.

- There is a varying amount of participation in cultural, debating, sports, scouting and cadet activities in different schools.

- In most schools, there are more girls than boys. Invariably, girls do better academically. In most cases, boys and girls are in the same class room, but in an adjoining column of benches. In some cases, they are divided in separate sections and seated in different class rooms. They use the same playground.

- One school is running a primary section for very poor segment of the society. They provide small honorarium for teachers teaching in the primary section.

- In all schools without exception, we found the students eager to learn irrespective of the abysmal physical facilities. The prime need for their progress and success appeared to be the presence of learning materials and, in absence of parental support at home because the parents are mostly illiterate, some additional guidance and coaching by teachers.

Negative Features

- The constructions of the schools are generally poor. The floors in many schools are not cemented. The benches and desks are inadequate and of poor quality. Students scramble to have a place. Most schools do not have boundary wall. Some schools are located in noisy areas. The field area is not developed in many cases. The field is in many cases dusty, uneven and without grass and unfit for sports and games.

- There is generally a shortage of classrooms. In that case, the class cannot be divided into sections and many students cram into the same class room. In one case, there were over one hundred students in one class. There were not even adequate number of benches and desks.

- Facilities for science lab, computer lab, vocational lab, technical option lab and library are generally poor. Even the upkeep of these meager facilities is poor in some of the schools. The appliances and instruments were not kept tidy and ready for use. I found test tubes not properly cleaned instruments in some cases dusty and in some cases rusted for lack of use. The schools generally have no idea about how a good science lab should look and how much is required for a good facility. They also think they have a lot of books when they have half an almira full. There is an expectation gap here with an inadequate idea of how much is needed to have good educational opportunities.

- The school teachers and students in none of the schools have computer. No one has experience in internet use. The parents of students do not have adequate means to buy computers. It will be very tough financially for teachers to buy home computers and this is true for computer teachers as well.

- The villagers with extremely limited means send their children to schools with expectation of better life for their children. Some parents have two or even more children at schools. They often send a child to Madrasah, because in many cases education can be free and even board

and lodging are provided.

- The schools generally do not have proper English teacher.
- Bath room facilities and drinking water facilities are generally poor or inadequate. There is no running water and water is supplied from hand tube wells. There is risk of Arsenic poisoning; the water gets tested by government only once. There is no schedule of a periodic testing for Arsenic.
- The students mostly come from peasant and day labourer families with extremely limited means. The students do not have any one to guide and help with school work at home. The parents are unaware of education needs and children can take undue advantage of this.
- The school is generally established through philanthropy of some generous persons in the locality and with some community support. Once the school is established and gets government approval, the government becomes the main source of further development. There is generally no concerted effort to raise further funds locally. The school has no program to maintain a link with former students. In case there is some local funding, there is no mechanism for proper recognition. No donor register is maintained.
- The Management Committee is elected or made by consensus. There is generally some representation of the founding philanthropists. The teachers and employees are mostly local. While all this would act in favour of the schools, a tension can creep in when politics or personal rivalry or interest come into play. We witnessed a hot dispute regarding appointment of an employee for one school.
- The schools cannot attract qualified teachers from across the country because there is not enough incentive for a person outside the locality to seek a teaching position. The school cannot provide any financial incentive and does not have any residential facilities for a nonlocal. It is also quite possible that the environment in the school is not conducive for a person coming from elsewhere to accommodate well in the local environment.

5.Recommendations

- The infrastructure need of the schools is enormous. Infrastructure is expensive and is beyond APW capacity right now. However, there is no lack of motivation of students resulting from poor and inadequate physical facilities. The absence of educational materials is the key impediment to their success. APW should follow its current policy in keeping investment in infrastructure low. APW fund is best used to provide input that goes directly to the improvement of the quality of education.
- APW policy to equip laboratory with equipment and furniture, provide computers and furniture for computer lab, provide books and furniture for library and benches and desks for class room are appropriate areas to improve the quality of education. There are some schools with vocational and technical option. APW may increase lab allocation in these areas.
- The educational environment in the school is poor. The only inspiration for students is better results in public examinations. The most immediate way the academic results can be impacted is by providing coaching for students. APW help in coaching has been received by the schools with great enthusiasm and all the schools expect immediate returns in public examination results. Inspired by the APW contribution, the teachers are adding extra hours for coaching.
- The APW coaching is provided for preparation of public examination only. However, the students of all classes are greatly handicapped by the absence of help at home, because the parents are mostly illiterate. APW may consider extending help for coaching and guidance by

teachers for all classes. Some schools also provide coaching to students other than those in grade X. APW may encourage this further with some funding. APW may seek partnership with other voluntary organizations to initiate work in this area.

- Once the educational opportunities are provided by increased facilities in the laboratories, the students will become limited by the ability of teachers to provide quality lectures and learning materials. Continuous improvement of teacher training is an area that requires active consideration.

- The teachers displayed excellent motivation and highly positive attitude in their teaching and training responsibilities. However, we did not have one to one discussion with teachers. Future monitoring work should be done with more time. In a disadvantaged teaching environment, the attitude of the individual teachers impacts the outcome very significantly.

- The merit award provided by APW is conducive to generating interest and competition among students.

- The stipend for poor students is very much needed. APW may seek partners in this area.

- The account keeping by schools has been satisfactory. However, for the sake of ensuring accountability and transparency beyond doubt, auditing with physical verification of purchases should be done for specific schools or randomly selected schools. There may be cases where a slander of misappropriation of funds can be whispered by dissenting groups in a school system.

- APW shall provide templates to the schools to record information on the benefits of the funding. This will enable APW to better monitor, evaluate and measure the impact of the improvement projects. It will also increase transparency and accountability.

- APW should continue supporting a school progressively in different areas for five years or till an expected level of accomplishment is achieved. APW may seek partners for enhanced improvement of the schools with additional funding by partners.

- APW may advise the schools to increase community participation in school activities. The schools may link up with former students through holding events like Reunion at specific intervals of time. The schools should develop project proposals for the school and present them at the reunion event and seek support. Some schools are near milestones of their operation such as 25 years, 40 years, 60 years or even 100 years. Such schools have been advised to hold special reunions with specific targets for raising funds. APW expects these schools to come up with proposals that can be refined and made target oriented.

- APW may provide support to a project if the school comes up with a matching fund. This may become a feature of APW funding in the future. This will force the school to procure funds locally and so the sustainability of continuous quality improvement will be ensured.

- APW is partnering with the schools in designing the projects and the schools are made responsible to implement the projects. This model is the most practical and the most cost effective. The schools have the ability to implement the projects and there is no need for APW to get involved in the implementation of the projects. An increase in APW visibility is needed in the monitoring of the projects to ensure and enforce accountability and transparency. Further, APW needs to work more closely with the schools to continually assess the outcome and help the schools in devising ways to make continuous improvement a hallmark of the legacy of APW funding.

- The teachers and the Management Committee are doing excellent service under the most difficult conditions. The students are showing splendid willingness and eagerness for learning. The poor and illiterate parents of the children are showing admirable appreciation for education.

Openness exists in receiving funds as well as suggestions and this creates a congenial environment for making a useful contribution on the part of APW or any other organization.

- APW may encourage schools to take up societal programs in health, sanitation, cleanliness and environmental improvement. The schools may be asked to provide documentary evidence of the outcome of such programs. Schools providing such evidence may get priority in funding.

- APW may design programs that include health, sanitation and drinking water and seek partners and donors for such projects.

- APW may design education improvement programs employing information and communication technology (ICT) and seek partners and donors for such projects. APW should provide encouragement to get all teachers of the schools familiar with the use of computers immediately. This will be very helpful when ICT is introduced.

6. Concluding remarks The school visit was a moving experience for the team. Although all had Bangladesh background, none had any idea that all the rural schools they visited could be in such a pitiful state in terms of physical facilities. They had to marvel at the tenacity of all the stakeholders - students, parents, teachers and management in carrying out their functions under so unattractive and deplorable physical conditions. There probably would be fifteen thousand nongovernment schools in the rural areas of Bangladesh that are crying for the minimum facilities. The enormity of the task was brought home. APW's help is a drop in the ocean, but doing nothing is not an option. And we must do it now.

The visit was undertaken as a part of monitoring and evaluation effort on the part of the APW. It was a very worthwhile visit and should be carried out at least once a year. The visit has the following benefits:

- It creates the requirement of accountability.
- It demonstrates to the school that APW shares the common goal with the school.
- It encourages all the stakeholders of the school and provides a positive impetus to all.
- It builds confidence in APW donors that the projects are physically monitored and evaluated.
- It provides an insight where a physical auditing should be done.
- It provides direct feedback to the Board of Trustee of APW. It enables APW to assess the outcome of its funding, stay on track and address the pressing needs of the schools.

7. Acknowledgements The author wishes to acknowledge the APW members who facilitated contact with the schools. The schools welcomed the visit and responded to all questions and queries without reservation and the APW team appreciates this. The chair gratefully acknowledges the persons who accompanied him and made the visits very productive by their active participation. The APW funding to the schools has been made with a matching grant of Community Initiative Program (CIP) of the Government of Alberta and has been recognized and appreciated by all stake holders. The contribution of APW members A. M. Al-Mamun and A. N. M. Shamsoddoha in preparing the report is gratefully acknowledged.

Prepared By:

Dr. Jasimuz Zaman, Chair Person, APW

Email:Â jasimuz.zaman@gmail.com

Distribution:

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