

# FOCUS

## UCEP

# Giving Street Children a Chance

by Sabrina Shabab

**H**ALIMA is 11 years old. She used to work in a garment factory. She lost her job because child labour laws forbid children under fifteen from working. Now she spends her time roaming the streets, sometimes begging, her clothes in tatters, her stomach empty.

The above story is a familiar one. From state planners to intellectuals, housewives to labourers, nearly everybody at sometime has come across or thought about the plight and the problems of our street children. They have all faced the following dilemma: should poor children be allowed to work, thus giving them at least a chance to survive? Or, does making children work violate their basic human rights, hampering their mental and physical development? The recent dispute between American human rights activists and the BGMEA has only brought these issues into sharper focus.

While most of us have wasted valuable time bickering over these issues, supporting one side or the other, UCEP has made a genuine effort to solve them practically and ingeniously. UCEP stands for Underprivileged Children's Educational Programmes. The title itself gives an idea of goals, objectives and activities of the organization. UCEP is founded on the philosophy that, (a) a working child is capable of getting education; working itself does not hamper a child's physical and mental development, and (b) education and marketable skills give underprivileged children an opportunity to escape poverty and improve their socio-economic condition.

Who gave birth to such a philosophy? The origins of this organisation can be traced back to a report titled "Our unfortunate children as labourers", written by Dr Ahmadullah Mia, Professor at the Institute of Social Welfare and Research, Dhaka University. The study described and analyzed the life situation of urban poor children who lacked any schooling and instead were en-

gaged in selling their physical labour in order to earn a living. The same study suggested some approach and programme outlines aimed at alleviating the deprivations and improving the life situation of these working children. This study inspired the late Allen Cheny to give birth to UCEP. UCEP came in to exist as a voluntary social welfare organization in 1972. Therefore UCEP can be called the actualization of a dream of giving the street children a hope, a chance for a better life. A person dared to dream and another person dared to make that dream a reality.



Now after 23 years, UCEP is a thriving dynamic organization which has expanded and intends to expand further in the future. The number of children attending UCEP schools now stands at fourteen thousand and five hundred. The number of UCEP schools has increased to thirty three (General schools: thirty; Technical schools: three). These schools are spread all over Bangladesh, 14 in Dhaka, 8 in Chittagong, 6 in Khulna and 2 in Rajshahi.

What are the programs offered by UCEP? This question naturally comes to mind when visiting UCEP. The general schools provide a three year course of basic learning which brings the children to an academic standard equivalent to grade five in the public school system. These schools also provide a one year bridging course aiming at preparing

the students for vocational training or further regular education. Technical schools offer "hands-on" vocational training in the fields of electronics, repair, carpentry, painting, tailoring, welding, textile, garments etc.

The most important program of UCEP is its Job Placement Program. UCEP ensures jobs for its students by providing them with marketable skills and keeping continuous communication with suitable employers. In order to carry out its job placement program UCEP

employs a job placement officer for each of its schools. His duty is to prepare a job seeker list and potential employers list. His most important duty is during job hunting week when 3 or 4 students accompany him to various organizations to seek jobs. This aggressive style pays rich dividends for UCEP's children.

The second question which may come to mind is, what is behind the success of UCEP? Talks with various UCEP personnel give some insights. These are: (a) vigorous recruiting process, i.e. establishing schools close to working children, making direct contact with their families and employers, and motivating them for the schooling of children; (b) providing special schooling facilities for these children, i.e. flexible school shifts, a curriculum designed for the working children taking into account

their special needs, shortened school hours — a UCEP student spends only 2 hours in the classroom — and very close supervision of the students; (c) choice and training of teachers: strict recruitment process is followed when choosing teachers. Teachers are also given training on the socio-economic conditions of the working children, the ways to cope with it, alternate approaches to education, techniques of monitoring and evaluation of the progress of learning and accountability to UCEP management as well as other concerned bodies; (d) very efficient follow-up, reporting and feedback system. Teachers routinely evaluate students performance especially of those who have learning and coping problems and a tendency to drop-out. Teachers visit the employees and parents of these students to help them to cope with their difficulties. Routine evaluation of attendance rate, drop-out rate, passing rate and job placement rate of the students gives a continuous feedback to the relevant managers of

different levels of the program.

A tour of UCEP schools gives one a special sense of wonder and joy. One comes across happy, confident children and dedicated teachers who love their job.

Take the case of Mahmuda, a UCEP student. Her life history is tragic. She was deserted by her father, her mother died, she was sold to a woman in the prostitution business. Now, looking at the confident child, who could tell she had such a terrible time? It is no wonder that one teacher says "she would never leave UCEP even if given better employment opportunities elsewhere". UCEP staff are justifiably proud of their organization.

The success of UCEP is a phenomena when considered against the socio-economic backgrounds of its students and the constraints they face.

Its passing rate is 89 percent, dropout rate is 2.6 percent and job placement rate is 75-100 per cent. The success story of UCEP is also spreading abroad. The UCEP model is being implemented in Nepal and Indonesia.

But success cannot be



## A Hobby with a Difference

by Abul Kashem

**W**ILL his name be published in any book of world records? At present it is uncertain. But he has done a tremendous job, no doubt. His name is Liakat Hossain Khokon. He is a 43 year old gentleman who lives in Ajampur government colony. He is a service holder of the government's agriculture department. No, all these features of his identity are not widely circulated. In a quite different way he has become a man of celebrity. Many people know him by name throughout the country. Most of the editors of Dhaka based vernacular newspapers know him personally. Why? Because, he is a regular writer for letter-columns of different newspapers for the past 28 years. Uptill now, he has written and published at least 22 thousand letters. It was in the year of 1967 when he started writing 'letters to the editor.' Then he was a student of class eight in Pirozpur government high school. In the beginning his letters were published in different cine-magazines including Chitral and the recently defunct weekly Purbani. Eventually he became a passionate fan of film stars. Afterwards he joined the government service. Now he is a joint editor of the government's agriculture information service. By the way, he works in different weeklies and dailies as a freelancer.



Liakat Hossain Khokon — Writer of 22,000 letters

film stars of the country are personally known to him. They maintain a kind of friendship with him. In course of time he became dedicated to seeing his name and address in print. Gradually it seemed unstoppable for him to write letters. At this stage many editors used to call Khokon and talk with him about his letters. They asked him to write regularly in article form. To respond to these editors' requests, today he is a special assignment writer of various different periodical.

About the purpose of his letter writing Khokon said, "I never think so deeply about what I have gotten or not. Since my university life in the seventies, many dreams have remained unfulfilled. So to get or achieve something by writing letters was never my target. When a letter appears in a paper in print I simply feel good. It brings pleasure for me, anyway. That's all. There is no other purpose." Khokon recollects some events of his letter writing life. Many editors and journalists praise him for his extraordinary venture. When he wrote regularly in the letters column of the Daily Dainik Bangla, one day Ahmed Humayun, the Editor of the paper, called him to his office and praised his letters. There are many other similar recollections in his memory that inspire him. Recently Khokon has learned that successful attempts have been taken to form forums of letter writers in some other countries. He thinks if somebody takes the initiative, this kind of forum can be established in our country also.

This boy who was reduced to wearing sacks, sleeping on verandas, and scavenging for food after his parents died in the famine of 1974, is now an electrician living in Kuwait with a monthly income of Tk 12,000.

This change in his life was brought about by UCEP, the organization which not only gave him education and employment, but also a special sense of purpose, a feeling that he was also a human being with the right to dream and to make that dream come true.

For thousands of Halimas and Badshas, UCEP offers a hope, a dream, and an opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty and deprivation, ensuring a normal life for themselves and their children.

In the meantime Khokon's life has travelled a long way. During this journey he continued his letter writing almost regularly. His last two letters have been published in the weekly Purbani and daily Ittefaq. He covers various subjects in his letters. There is no district of Bangladesh about which he hasn't written repeatedly. He can remember instantaneously many headlines of his letters. Some of them are: 'Save Kantajir temple', 'only males responsible for dowry?', 'BTV's negligence', 'Misrepresentation of Kanandeni's songs', 'Tourist spot of Tetulia', 'We want Pramathesh Badua's Debadas in BTV', etc. Thousands of letters of this kind have been published during the last 28 years. Many of them have attracted the attention of common people as well as concerned executives of different ranks.

Letter writers of the press may be seen as something like the nerve of a society. Journalists produce news and views in papers. Society assimilates them. But the reaction of the members of the society to these published materials hardly appear in the paper. Letter-writers like Liakat Hossain Khokon perform this duty. He deserves appreciation.

Why this hobby with a difference? Khokon says, in his early life he was a passionate lover of film stars. He wanted to make contact with them, so he started writing about them in letter-columns. In this way he became interested in writing letters to the press. At now most of the

**G**OVERNMENTS across much of the world are not at all sure how to handle non-governmental organisations (NGOs) — a growing force whose business is at least in part to make those in authority uncomfortable.

On the one hand, governments see them as capable of taking a lot of work off them at little cost and recognise that NGOs are often better at achieving results on the ground than they are themselves.

On the other, NGOs are not controllable. They keep saying things governments do not want to hear. What is more, dammit, they do so even though their funding sometimes comes from these same governments. For the bureaucrats it can sometimes all be very unnerving.

The dilemma was raised again in Wellington, New Zealand, recently when 150 delegates from almost every country of the 51-nation Commonwealth met to discuss ways of reducing poverty.

The aim of the Commonwealth NGO Forum convened by the Commonwealth Foundation was to work out proposals to put before the next Commonwealth Summit in Auckland in November.

From the outset, officialdom was made uncomfortable. The welcome speech was by one of the most eloquent of New Zealand's Maori speakers, Moana Jackson. In cool, quiet tones he spoke of the long deceit of his country's governments in hiding the plight of his people.

New Zealand and Commonwealth officials sat stony-faced. And Prime Minister James Bolger missed Jackson's speech by coming on to the platform late because, it was said, of pressing government business.

The officials should not have been perturbed, but they were. They should know that NGOs are there to make them squirm a little and it is time they learnt to take it. In fact Jackson's opening speech gave much-needed spice to what could have been a boring occasion. The rest of the week was full of sharp and uncomfortable ideas and home truths from delegates on the reasons for poverty the leaders need to hear.

It is clear that in New Zealand, as elsewhere, even the most sophisticated would still rather shut their ears to realities. Yet there is a real

# Squirming a Little over NGOs

Non-government organisations are growing in number and influence by the week. They are a manifestation of people-power that governments find uncomfortable and untidy, but with which they have to live. A gathering of NGOs from 51 countries, reports Gemini News Service, has just made a few more waves in New Zealand.

by Derek Ingram from Wellington

## A growing role for NGOs

**Britain: more than 500,000 NGOs. Turnover of the 175,000 registered charities is estimated at \$27bn a year**

**Zimbabwe: 800 NGOs have spent \$35-47m since independence**

**Canada: The Environmental Network of NGOs contains 2,000 groups**

**Australia: more than half the country's welfare services are supplied by 11,000 charitable organisations, with a turnover of \$4.4bn a year**

**Sri Lanka: one rural development NGO alone has 50,000 fieldworkers in 10,000 villages**

**India: Estimates vary from 100,000 NGOs to 25,000 registered "grassroots" organisations in Tamil Nadu state alone**

**Bangladesh: at least 12,000 local groups receive government financial support. One credit NGO has 900 branches, and works in 23,000 villages**



Maori problem. True, it is now being addressed, but not with the urgency many New Zealanders believe necessary.

A parliamentary Bill now before parliament acknowledges that colonisation led to Maori suffering through land expropriation, and it is believed Queen Elizabeth will make a public apology for the injustices Maoris have suffered. This would be unique in post-colonial history and it would be done because the critical document for Maoris remains the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi which they signed with the British Crown (then worn by Queen Victoria).

The NGO Forum wants a strong message about world poverty to be sent, unambiguously, to Commonwealth leaders in Auckland. The leaders will be told that the failure of their countries to reduce poverty is a horror that must stop. Delegates said

free market policies are often applied indiscriminately and without due regard to local circumstances.

Some Commonwealth countries continue to deny democracy, full human rights and just and honest government. Leaders will be pressed again to cancel debts, revise structural adjustment programmes and review trade liberalisation regimes.

Poor and marginalised peoples, NGOs will say, must be involved in planning decisions that affect their livelihood. The greed of individuals, corporations, governments and elite groups and classes is condemned.

The Forum wants the creation of "NGO windows" within government departments and mechanisms created for institutionalising the participation of NGOs.

The Wellington Forum

brought together people working under an exotic array of acronyms. A random sample: YUVA, LINDA, SLANGO, TANGO, NANGO and PIANGO — Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action in Bombay, the Leeward Islands Network of Development Agency, the Sierra Leone Association of NGOs, The Association of NGOs of The Gambia, the National Association of NGOs of Zimbabwe, and the Pacific Island Association of NGOs. Dozens of others were also represented.

In the long-term it is probably the personal networking that results from meetings like this that provides the most lasting benefits. But a major achievement from the meeting was a document that is a product of three years' work and is claimed as a "first" in NGO history: a manual on Non-

Governmental Organisations: Guidelines for Good Policy and Practice.

The hope is that the document will be adopted far beyond the Commonwealth by regional organisations and eventually by the UN.

The manual deals in detail with such matters as funding policies and practices, international linkage, relationships with government, the legal and institutional frameworks within which NGOs operate, the political dimension, relationships within NGOs, and monitoring and evaluation.

One important passage in the guidelines points to the fact that laws lag badly behind the reality of NGO activities and structures in many countries. Increasing NGO diversity is not generally reflected in the laws under which they operate.

These laws often still re-

fect the context in which 19th Century charitable law was framed. NGOs are still referred to as "welfare organisations" or as "charities." Today the NGO reality is quite different and the problem is that there are no laws based on the definition of NGOs set out in the report.

As a result, some legitimate NGOs and activities may not be recognised and activities regarded by some as illegitimate are permitted.

Most delegates in Wellington accepted that NGOs need to sharpen up their act, to be more professional and more accountable. The Forum final statement says:

"The NGO sector is facing a crisis of identity and purpose as a result of increasing scarcity of resources, growing needs and demands for their services... and greater demands for accountability from external founding bodies.

This crisis presents opportunities as well, forcing NGOs to reflect on basic values, principles, and ethics, and to find pragmatic ways to address issues of poverty and injustice. It is forcing NGOs to confront... their need for greater professionalism — professionalism defined and enunciated on their own terms, rather than on terms imposed from outside.

NGO activists tend to be enterprising ideas people who would rather be exercising their minds on how to contribute to their fellow-citizens betterment than to drawing big salary cheques. Most NGOs are run on a shoestring and by people who have varying amounts of business instinct.

In this market-driven age governments are less tolerant of NGOs that do not run their affairs properly. NGOs are well aware of this. NGOs funded by government agencies (itself a contentious issue within the NGO community) know that the agencies are all too easily able to squeeze them. In Canada, which led the world in its support for NGOs, the government has cut help to hundreds of them. Many have gone out of existence.

In succumbing to pressures to become more professional, NGOs face the danger of finding themselves becoming part of the establishment elite which must be the target of their criticisms.

About the Author: Derek Ingram is Consultant Editor of Gemini News Service.

## World Bank Willing to Fund NGOs in Bangladesh

by Rosaline Costa

**S**INCE NGOs (non-governmental organisations) are well-known in Bangladesh for being able to reach the grassroots people with effective development, the World Bank has expressed an interest in funding poverty alleviation programmes through NGOs to the extent of \$75 million within a nine-month period. The money would be given as loans, repayable at low interest, but would have to pass through the Bangladesh government for approval. Because the World Bank is affiliated with governments, it cannot deal directly with project recipients.

The World Bank representative in Bangladesh, Dr Pierre Landell-Mills, accompanied by his wife Joslin, International Monetary Fund adviser to the Bangladesh Bank, announced this welcome news to a gathering of more than 2000 rural poor women early this month (July 1) in Netrakona, a northern district town. The women work under a credit-giving project of ASA (Association for Social Advancement) for small income generating schemes.

The Executive Director of ASA, Shafiqul Haque Chowdhury, proclaimed it an "astonishing event" that the World Bank representative should come such a long distance to an out-of-the-way place to meet grassroots women.

ASA perhaps is the only NGO in Bangladesh which has achieved complete financial self-sufficiency in its programmes. It charges a 12.5 per cent service fee for its loans to the poor women, from which it pays for the salaries and overhead of the small local offices. The remaining amount is remitted to Dhaka and supports the central administration. The workers are paid from the

loan repayments so that there is a strong incentive to collect the loans, and there is strong group pressure to repay since additional loans to other members depend on it.

One of the secrets of ASA's success has been keeping the offices small and uniform. Because of its simplified management structure ASA is the only NGO to have a near perfect loan repayment from the women groups. In Netrakona district alone ASA has formed within three years 1,129 women groups, embracing 21,613 members. They have a total savings of \$328,058. Loan disbursement to 20,337 group members (some of them receiving more than once) has been \$4,407,671, with a rate of recovery of 99.95 per cent. There is insurance provision for those who experience disasters in their projects, e.g. the death of a cow bought through an ASA loan.

The President of the ASA Executive Committee for the past 10 years, Holy Cross Father Richard Timm, told the gathering that there were three basic ways to help people: by relief or works of charity; by development, which is usually top-down and remote from the "target" people; and by social justice, through which "we" work with people for their own self-reliant development rather than for them as "beneficiaries" of "our" benevolent aid. This type of social justice ASA is trying to carry out by its credit programme for poor women.

The World Bank has been operative in Bangladesh for 25 years. Dr Landell-Mills said that it would be happy to support the work of ASA, since he had seen that it could use significantly large amounts of money efficiently and effectively for poverty alleviation.