



PHOTOS: STAR

PRIORITISING HEALTH CARE AND SPORTS FOR THE YOUTH

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Very recently, at a roundtable organised by the Daily Star, youth leaders and students from Dhaka came together to talk about how the latest budget of the fiscal year 2017-2018 should have prioritised the youth, in terms of education, food business, entrepreneurship and so on. Ejaj Ahmed, President and Founder, Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center, however, also emphasised on health and sports for the young people. "The young people of this country have very limited access to sports facilities, especially women," he mentions. "Why should that be the case? In addition, they need to stay healthy -- both physically and mentally -- only then can they become global citizens."

"Given the fact that more than 52 percent of our population is below the age of 25, it is high time for us to invest in the next generation," Ejaj adds. According to him, this fiscal year, only 0.3 percent of the national budget of USD 51 billion is allocated for the Ministry of Youth and Sports, which is definitely not enough. "Of course, the youth is a cross cutting issue and different ministries work with youth. What would be useful, however, is if we can have a youth budget in each of the different ministries. For example, how much of the expenditure of the Health Services Division and the Medical Education and Family Welfare Division would be allocated for youth? In future, a break-down of allocation for youth would help us understand exactly the priorities of youth in the national budget."

Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center

(BYLC), the country's first leadership institute, exists to build connections among youth from diverse backgrounds, equip them with leadership skills, and enable them to have high impact in public, private, and civil sectors. "All our efforts aim to strengthen prosperity, justice, and inclusiveness in societies worldwide," says Ejaj. Regularly working with education and educators, Ejaj also feels that the budget allocated to education is inadequate with regards to quality education.

"The new budget proposed an allocation of Tk. 50,432 crore for 2017-18 fiscal year for the education sector, increasing the allocation by around 14 percent from the 2016-2017 fiscal year. The rise in allocation is primarily due to the increased budget size and not because of greater investment in this sector," explains Ejaj. "This number is inadequate for ensuring quality education, especially because 68 percent of the education budget is spent on non-developmental purposes, mainly for teachers' salaries, leaving only 32 percent for development of quality education. Lack of development in the national curriculum will make the curriculum and books outdated. This will directly impact the quality of education, which, in turn, will make our youth entering the workforce less competitive in global standards."

Health is wealth. And a healthy workforce is central to having a productive workforce -- says Ejaj Ahmed. "To

ensure overall development of the country, we must invest in both health and sports because both of these are related," he says. "When we grew up in Dhaka, we had fields and spent an hour every day playing football, cricket or badminton. Children these days don't have the opportunity to play because we have lesser fields and open spaces. Sports is replaced with Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. Therefore, you

know that physical fitness is directly linked to your health bills. Therefore, the government should invest heavily in sports and this will have multiple ripple effects. Engaging youth in sports can also be effective in promoting peace in society and ensuring better mental health. Also, we need a mindset shift to have more of our girls and women engaged in sports and physical activities. Many schools do not push

Ministry could focus on as it moves forward in the coming weeks and months to develop a National Action Plan based on the National Youth Policy 2017:

1. To ensure that every young Bangladeshi is a productive member of the workforce.
2. To ensure good health and well-being for all youth.
3. To encourage exercise of leadership and civic responsibilities among young people to strengthen social cohesion.
4. To create an environmentally conscious and technologically aware youth population.
5. To promote inclusive, equitable, and sustainable development among the youth.

To the young changemakers of Bangladesh, Ejaj says that communication and interactions must take place every day. "Our physical interactions are being replaced with online conversations. Social media can be a catalyst, but change happens in the real world, in real conversations. So we should invest more time and energy in physical interactions and less time on social media."

Secondly, Ejaj says that the young people must make the effort to making the change happen. "Change doesn't happen overnight," he says. "It's a process which requires both patience and persistence. Building anything takes time. But because of social media we are used to getting instant gratification. This needs to change if we are to become meaningful changemakers and doers."



have a generation that is growing up in virtual reality and without much physical activity. This lack of physical activity is directly linked to fitness and productivity. Research shows that children who play sports do well in their studies, have stronger personality, and also perform well when they enter the workforce. Furthermore, parents who were involved in sports during their teens are more likely to encourage their own children to play sports. And we all

female students towards sports, resulting in fewer number of girls active in the area. Many parents don't encourage their daughters to get involved in sports so we need to change this mindset also. There is a lack of space and playing fields in our country. We cannot change it overnight. However, making current facilities more women friendly can be a good step forward."

At the roundtable, Ejaj also put forward five key objectives that the

ASROY a youth initiative

SHABABA IQBAL

It is a harsh and known fact that a large sector of Bangladesh's children under 18 are underprivileged and do not have access to proper diet and nutrition, health care, clothing, shelter, and education. Asroy, a private non-profit organisation formed in 2009 by a group of dedicated and enthusiastic young individuals, began with the mission of working with the wider community to change the negative attitudes and stereotypes towards the street children of Bangladesh, in addition to focusing on providing education and healthcare to these children. Most of them, after all, are deprived of these basic needs and rights.

PHOTOS: FACEBOOK.COM/ASROY4LIFE



The story behind Asroy is quite heartening. "One winter night in December 2009, we wanted to bring warmth to the people sleeping on the streets of Dhaka," says Dr Saeem Arafat Hossain, the President of Asroy. "We distributed warm clothes to them. But in trying to find the root of the solution to end the vicious cycle of poverty, solving the problems of education and proper health care would have to be prioritised. Hence, we decided to work on providing education and healthcare." Dr Hossain completed his MBBS from Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College. At the very beginning, the organisation had a mobile or a floating school at a park in Farmgate. The whole idea of the school was to reach out to children, who were otherwise unable to attend. The student body of this school consisted of the children on the street. However, according to Dr Hossain, maintaining the floating school became logistically challenging. Eventually, the founders of the school moved to a permanent address in Hazaribagh, and began providing low-cost education to slum children.

In terms of funding, Asroy runs completely on personal donations. People from all walks of life and several organisations provide both financial and struc-

tural support for the day-to-day activities of this noble initiative. The organisation also encourages people to donate a certain amount of money on special occasions and holidays, raising funds through street and social media campaigns, according to Rokaiya Shatadru, the Communications Officer at Asroy, also a third year Microbiology student at the University of Dhaka.

The school follows the national curriculum from Play Group to class 5 and prepares the children for the Primary Education Completion examinations. "We also offer extra-curricular activities like music, art, and moral science lessons for the cultural and mental development of the children, as we believe that by engaging in these activities, they will become responsible and well-rounded individuals," asserts Sumit Biswas, the Head of Education at Asroy and a Biochemistry student at North South University. The volunteers at Asroy are mainly students of different public and private universities of the country.

After class 5, the children at Asroy are affiliated with different mainstream schools. "All the students who finished class 5 from our school in the last two years are now in different high schools, including two government high

schools," says Dr Hossain proudly. The students of Asroy have had a 100 percent pass rate in their Primary Education Completion examinations since they first appeared in 2015.

Furthermore, a regular programme of Asroy is "Health Camps," during which groups of doctors and medical interns



volunteer free health check-ups and some basic over the counter medicines to the underprivileged families. In November 2016, Asroy hosted a Dental Health Camp for its students, which included oral hygiene maintenance procedures, brushing techniques, management of immediate tooth pain, and

dental check-ups, bearing in mind that slum children of the country do not have the privilege of paying regular visits to dentists.

Since its inception in 2009, Asroy has served around 11000 patients in 16 different medical camps throughout Bangladesh, and most recently, sent

immediate help to Nepal during the earthquake of April 2015. They have also helped rebuild a school in Nepal. Although the members of Asroy have had many notable triumphs, their beginnings were certainly not without obstacles. According to Dr Hossain, one of the biggest challenges on their journey

to opening Asroy was convincing the parents to send their children to school. "The parents would rather use the labor of their children as the treatment for poverty than allow them to pursue an education, but they need to understand that having an education is the path to a brighter future -- for their children and the country," he says. Echoing Dr. Hossain's views, Dr Naima Afroz, a graduate of Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and the Vice President of Asroy, says that these children are most vulnerable, so without the proper guidance and knowledge, they do not reach their full potential and often end up picking up bad habits, or giving in to the allure of crime. This is something the team of Asroy hopes to change. So, they made it their mission to go from door to door of the slums and persistently speak to the families to make them see why their sons and daughters deserve an education.

The dedicated individuals behind Asroy truly show the value of sharing what you have for the betterment of others. Moving forward, the Asroy team hopes to establish schools and clinics in each district of Bangladesh, and enhance the position of social work in the country.

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The author is a literature student at North South University.