

Prospects and challenges of building skills for disadvantaged youth



The Daily Star and Swisscontact organised a roundtable titled "Building skills for disadvantaged youth: Opportunities and challenges in the context of Bangladesh" on October 22, 2017 at The Daily Star Centre. Here we publish a summary of the discussions.



Dr Salehuddin Ahmed, Adjunct Faculty, Independent University, Bangladesh

This roundtable is about skills development and how to reach the poorest. It is not easy to reach the poor. I have worked in BRAC for thirty years and learned that even microfinance could not reach the bottom 15 percent. So if Swisscontact can reach the moderate poor through a project like B-SkillFUL, it is going to do a good job. The purposes of this roundtable are: (i) disseminating information of B-SkillFUL, (ii) building a network amongst ourselves, and (iii) talking about the opportunities and challenges of skills development in Bangladesh.



Brig Gen (Retd) Shahedul Anam Khan, Associate Editor, The Daily Star

In order to add value to a person, s/he has to be skilled. I thank Swisscontact and the organisers for venturing upon such a task in which 40,000 people will come within the ambit of training whereby about 10,000 have already been trained to be absorbed depending on the market demand. We know that demand creates supply but supply also creates demand. More people with multifarious skills will also create demand on its own — creating a two-way relationship. Media should be used as a relevant source of information to project what is happening and how it can be improved.



Matiur Rahaman, Team Leader, B-SkillFUL Project, Swisscontact

Every year about two million people enter the labour market, mostly in the informal economy. We do not have adequate training institutes. Only one-fourth of the people can enter the available training institutions while others have no training before entering the labour market. These are a few reasons behind undertaking the B-SkillFUL project, funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the European Union (EU). B-SkillFUL targets 40,000 disadvantaged men and women to be trained in demand-driven skills by 2020, out of which 55 percent are women in six districts: Gazipur, Tangail, Bogra, Dinajpur, Joypurhat and Jessore. The project also aims to build awareness about decent work agenda amongst informal enterprises. So far, the project has enrolled 11,689 (49 percent male, 51 percent female) trainees; 9,798 (48 percent male, 52 percent female) trainees have graduated and 4,279 (51 percent male, 49 percent female) graduates have been placed in jobs where average income is BDT 5,800 per month.



Derek George, First Secretary, Deputy Director of Cooperation, Embassy of Switzerland in Bangladesh

Four key features that define B-SkillFUL are: (i) ambitious targeting of disadvantaged groups, lowering entry barriers, and tailored to the needs of poor; (ii) focused on informal economy; (iii) attempt to address labour rights and decent work issues; (iv) result-based financing of training and combination of classroom and workplace-based training. As for the first feature, B-SkillFUL has done a good job of investing in training and removing barriers to enter training for these people. One example is outreach centres that bring training to people's doorstep. There is also pre- and post-counselling support for trainees and attempts to bring more women into male-dominated occupations. Regarding the second feature, it is important for youth to overcome obstacles to enter the informal economy. As for the third feature, the solution is to communicate with SMEs in informal economy in a constructive way, to show them that there are cost-neutral measures to uphold labour rights. Finally, the combination of classroom and workplace-based training allows to ensure labour market relevance of trainings and to improve productivity of employees.



Manfred Fernholz, First Secretary, Food and Nutrition Security and Sustainable Development, Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh

We can use the lessons learnt from projects like B-SkillFUL to be strategic and enlarge the actions that we are trying to implement nationwide. For Bangladesh, such a huge



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Media should be used as a relevant source of information to inform what is happening in skills development arena and how it can be improved.
- TVET is essential for disadvantaged youth, particularly for women, people with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities in the informal economy to become more employable.
- The demand of employers should be at the centre to understand how training needs are evolving in the market.
- Broadening the scope of TVET is important and one option could be to transit to Technical Professional Vocational Education and Training (TPVET) because professional training is critical for the country's growth.
- It is vital to make the market rights-sensitive and gender-sensitive; otherwise producing skills may not be effective.
- Showcasing a comprehensive model of how challenges in skills development for informal economy can be addressed is crucial for proving success and then can be replicated for better results in future.

population is a challenge but also an asset for economic growth. Sustainable growth is important for the country's quest to become a middle-income country. Increased growth is dependent on more jobs and manufacturing which requires both job creation and workers—especially disadvantaged youth—to become more employable which is why Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is essential. Skills development is the third binding constraint to economic development after transport and energy for the European Union. As such, we should treat it with utmost importance.



Anirban Bhowmik, Country Director, Swisscontact

Swisscontact has been present in Bangladesh since 1979, establishing what is now Bangladesh Industrial and Technical Assistance Center (BITAC). Swisscontact works with systems, in creating sustainable solutions at scale by working with core market actors, understanding their incentives. We need to keep the needs of employers at the centre and understand how the market is evolving. We also need to see how training centres are responding to this need since they are the conduit between an aspirant worker and employer. If this triangular relationship does not work, we see a failure in the system. This is where many critical issues come up such as capacity of training service providers or employers investing in skilled workers — there is a big question as to who pays for training, particularly when it comes to disadvantaged people. Are government initiatives enough? Can private sector play a bigger role? Will the training market eventually emerge to meet these needs? Moreover, labour rights and quality of job also need to be addressed. These are all complex issues which bring out B-SkillFUL in this space of discussion.



Nepal Chandra Karmaker, Deputy Director (Policy, Research and Project), NSDC Secretariat, Ministry of Labour and Employment

It is important to understand sector demands for workers. If we do not know the demand, we will not know which sector and what area we should train people in. At the same time certification is very important. In the National Skills Development Policy (NSDP) 2011, there are six main levels and two sub-levels. We have to certify the disadvantaged groups if we want to train them according to the levels. If we only target national demand, then we will be ignoring international demand. Employees of neighbouring countries like Nepal, Sri Lanka and India earn more than our employees because they are certified.



Esoev Abdusattor, Deputy Chief of Mission, IOM Bangladesh

When we talk about two million people entering the labour force every year, between 200,000–300,000 can be absorbed by the market; so about 1.7 million people will remain unemployed. As such, from migration perspective, we look at the overseas market. Around 12 million Bangladeshis are working abroad as expatriates. Vast majority of them are unskilled. In 2015, remittances stood at USD 15 billion. We should recognise the importance of knowledge of the people who are coming back, of certification and of involving them in skills training.



Dr Jakir Hossain, Professor, University of Rajshahi and Lead Researcher for B-SkillFUL Enterprise Baseline

The unique feature of B-SkillFUL is that it promotes decent work in informal enterprises for disadvantaged youth, focusing on women, ethnic and religious minorities and people with disabilities. The

study found that many enterprises do not ensure decent working environment due to lack of awareness and not necessarily for financial burden.

There is a misconception that the Labour Act 2006 does not apply to informal enterprise workers; indeed it does. With some exceptions, all enterprises, shops or establishments come under the ambit of Labour Act. While B-SkillFUL promotes decent employment, the department of inspection for factories may monitor and enforce this.



Professor Masuda M Rashid Chowdhury, Vice President, National Association of Small and Cottage Industries of Bangladesh (NASCIB)

I emphasise on the importance of partnership between enterprise associations and development programmes whereby enterprise development is promoted as decent work opportunities, not just in urban but also in rural settings. It is important for enterprises to have skilled workers and ensure decent workplace for higher productivity and profitability.



Salauddin Kasem Khan, Co-chairman ECNSDC & Member, National Skills Development Council

We were one of the first countries to propose a National Skills Development Council. We have 22 ministries and it is very difficult to coordinate so we have been proposing to the government that it should be under the Prime Minister's Office — and this has been accepted. Recently, the National Human Resources Development Fund, also proposed by the private sector, has been formed. These instrumentalities are important if we really mean business. With regard to disadvantaged groups, I stress on the inclusion of people with disabilities in education, skills training, apprenticeships and internships. National Board of Revenue in a gazette has mentioned that employers will receive tax incentives if they hire people with disabilities and such laws should be put into action. Simultaneously, employers have to invest in creating access for people with disabilities in workplaces. Market-driven skills have never been important at this critical juncture of our country and business chambers can come forward to address the skills gap that is persistent in Bangladesh. Broadening the scope of TVET is important and one option could be to transit to Technical Professional Vocational Education and Training (TPVET). We earn USD 15 billion from unskilled labour force, whereas this number is only 5-6 billion from skilled workers. Therefore, professional training is also critical for the country's growth.



Snehal V Soneji, Chief Technical Advisor, Skills21, ILO Country Office for Bangladesh

Since 2007, ILO has been working very closely with the government of Bangladesh as well as workers' and employers' organisations. The issue of inclusiveness in skills features prominently in NSDP 2011 — in particular there is a specific reference to 20 percent admission quota for women in the TVET programmes and 5 percent admission quota for students with disabilities in all TVET institutions. Consequently, enrolment of students with disabilities in TVET institutes has risen to 357 in the academic session of 2015–16 from 56 in 2014. In relation to this, I also want to highlight the important role of the private sector in creating linkages between disadvantaged groups and private

businesses. A case in point is Bangladesh Business Disability Network which was recently launched as a mechanism for companies to hire people with disabilities.



Sheepa Hafiza, Executive Director, Ain O Salish Kendra

This is an opportunity to make the market rights-sensitive and gender-sensitive; otherwise producing skills may not be effective. As Amartya Sen said, individuals differ greatly in their ability to convert the same resources to a valuable product.

Therefore, a pregnant woman and a person with disability will use their skills differently. So simply giving skills is not enough; we also need to give them that enabling environment. Whenever we talk about skills training, please ensure inclusion of attitudinal training and gender sensitivity for both men and women.



Farzana Kashfi, Head of Programme, Skills Development, BRAC

It is critical to stress on the importance of targeting and the social dynamics while designing projects. Good targeting leads to lower dropout rates. They sustain through the training because they need jobs. Thinking of market systems is important, but it is more important to know the population we are serving for better results and value for money in projects. Forty-one percent of 15-24-year-olds in Bangladesh are neither in employment nor in education nor in training. The younger the age group the more vulnerable they are. Also, low percentage of women in the labour force is again perpetuated by the high level of child marriage rate. With skills training, it is important to create market linkages for employment opportunities, especially for women.



Farkhunda Jabeen Khan, Treasurer, Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI)

BWCCI has partnered with B-SkillFUL in order to provide entrepreneurship development training and facilitate financial linkage workshops for self-employed graduates. As the formal economy is more difficult for women to participate in, the informal economy offers a much more inclusive environment. Also, skills training is highly gendered, where technical jobs are dominated mostly by men. This is a social construct and there should be sustained advocacy to bring about change in people's mindset to include women in technical jobs.



Sohel Rana, DGM, Merchandising and Marketing, Mondol Intimates

RMG sector has great opportunities to employ unemployed youth right now. Mondol Intimates is the smallest factory of Mondol Group. We have around 2,000 employees—80 percent being women. Our target is to increase that to 90 percent in the next two years. We are a partner of Swisscontact and I shared with them the fact that we have a shortage of skilled workers. This is true for every factory so, employing the whole 40,000 target of B-SkillFUL is very small compared to the needs of the RMG sector alone. The industry needs basic-level skilled workers, not even specialised ones.



Dr Manzoor Ahmed, Professor Emeritus, BRAC University

I think the right kinds of concerns have been raised. Out of approximately 60 million in the workforce, more than 50 million are in the informal economy. The skills and opportunities in informal economy need to be made more productive. Appropriate skills training for informal workers, links with the market, assessing the needs, decent jobs, etc, are all needed but these are fragmented interventions, not a systemic approach to address this challenge. Swisscontact can perhaps take a few upazilas and showcase a comprehensive model of how these challenges can be addressed which can then be replicated for better results in the future.