

***Education and Training for Social Change:
Analyzing a Social Welfare Model for Grassroots Development in Bangladesh***

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Abstract

The shortage of skilled workers is the major barrier to economic prosperity in Bangladesh. A third of its population falls between 10-24 years old but the youth forces are not well-trained with technical education and social knowledge. The present study shows how philanthropic endeavors can contribute to improving the vulnerable conditions of the rural population by providing social services, training, and skill development programs in a developing nation. Recent research findings show that private philanthropy plays a key role in financing education in developing countries. According to OCED reports (2019, 2020, and 2021), domestic foundations supported the education sector above all other sectors while the giving capacity of private foundations is endangered by the recent global economic crisis. Amidst the economic vulnerability and pandemic, a domestic private philanthropic organization namely SIMEC foundation continued its support for the ongoing training and social development projects. The present study examines the social welfare mechanism by private and domestic philanthropy in Bangladesh and the disruption during COVID 19 pandemic. It indicates how such endeavors can be effective in the implementation of SDGs in Bangladesh. The study has been conducted following a mixed method. For the data collection survey, FGD and interviews were conducted among 300 recipients of the skill development training and educational support by the foundation. Research findings indicate an effective contribution of the initiative to the individual and social development of the respondents.

Keywords: Domestic Private Philanthropy, Social Welfare, Social Change, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Skill Development, Grassroots Development, Bangladesh

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Introduction

Bangladesh has passed its 50 years of Independence in 2021. The country has celebrated its golden jubilee of liberation with jubilant festivities, as it leaped ahead of social and economic backwardness in recent decades. Despite all its socio-economic advancement over the years, the country is still struggling to cope with the rapidly changing globalization at a good pace like many other countries. The over-population with unskilled youths continued to disrupt the country's growth and socio-economic development.

In spite of employing comprehensive efforts, it is never sufficient for the government alone to bring social change and ensure social development in a nation holistically. In order to tackle the challenges of the new millennium, the government of Bangladesh paid significant attention to digitalization, skill development, and outcome-based education. In recent years, along with new policies, various governmental bodies took initiatives for making Bangladesh digital, providing skill development training to reduce unemployment. Given the void and need, the country is trying its best in different ways to bring socio-economic wellbeing, where youths are taken as flag bearers. Youths are considered as the key force of socio-economic change of a nation; in the case of Bangladesh it is very obvious where UNFPA says, young people aged between 10-24 years make up 27.5% of the total population in Bangladesh (UNFPA, 2021). Education and training of the youths for a better contribution to society, has been one of the top most priorities of the government of Bangladesh in recent years to accomplish the SDG goals and to facilitate the fourth industrial revolution in the coming days. Along with the government, a very few organizations from home and abroad have come forward to contribute to this initiative till now. There is a huge gap between the 'need and supply' of the demand in society in terms of vocational training and skill-based education.

Bangladesh has multifaceted challenges for ensuring grassroots development. Grassroots innovation, developing human capital in the margins, increasing income-generating capability at the bottom of the pyramid, and creating employment for youths in rural Bangladesh are some of the prime concerns. International donor agencies tried to play a partnering role along with some local NGOs. Sad but true, there has not been much attention paid to examine the role of local philanthropic organizations and community activities for social development in Bangladesh.

Philanthropic foundations across the world are playing a growing role in alleviating human suffering, promoting social justice and fair economic growth, and also developing and supporting a wide range of civil society objectives and activities. In recent years, philanthropy is on the rise globally. According to a study on "private philanthropy for development" by OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) Centre on Philanthropy 2018, "Philanthropists favor investing in stable, middle-income countries" and "Philanthropic foundations based in developing countries operate to a large extent domestically". But in the case of Bangladesh, there is a lack of research and data regarding the role and contribution of domestic philanthropic organizations. In order to examine the role of private domestic philanthropic organizations we have studied one case, a social welfare model for grassroots development. The study shows that such initiatives can help to pull out a good number of people from poverty and social misery. The following discussion of the paper will shed some light and analyze the issues in the aspects of education and training for social change and welfare focusing on rural Bangladesh.

Philanthropy for Education: A review of literature

Before we provide the detailed findings of the case in hand, it is imperative to reflect on some of these initiatives for socio-economic development in rural Bangladesh. This may help us to get familiar with the present context and flag the gaps where philanthropic initiatives can intervene to make socio-economic progress at the grassroots level of the country.

The skill-based professional education and training have not been popular in the newly independent countries in Asia till 1970s, especially in the South Asian countries that had been struggling for economic progress. The demand for skilled labor-force has been increased multiple times by the last two decades of the 20th century when the countries started to export labor-force to overseas, i.e. Middle-East and East Asian countries. The growing demand for a professional skilled workforce has led the governments to come up with policies and facilitate the Vocational Education and Training program at a larger scale at the institutional levels. To develop the technical and vocational education system, *the Directorate of Technical Education* was established in 1960 in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), which came into force to supervise, regulate and facilitate technical education in 1969 under the Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) (Agrawal, 2013).

The philanthropic activities for socio-economic developments are mainly classified as religious philanthropy and corporate philanthropy. Corporate philanthropy gained popularity in recent years, particularly in the last decades in Bangladesh, but unable to meet the necessities in the grassroots. Important to note that the banks are the only organizations that adhere to the CSR guidelines and through the channel of Bangladesh Bank one can access the data of banking sector philanthropic contributions. There are a handful of business organizations and corporate groups that participate in a sustained manner to support rural populations for development. Multinational Companies are more active and have performed well in providing support to the marginalized section of the society through CSR (Alam et al. (2010).

Religious philanthropy has a long-standing role in the context of Bangladesh. For example, Karim and Murad (2018) studied the Waqf (The Islamic endowment system of property to be held in trust and used for a philanthropic, charitable, or religious purpose) in Bangladesh. As the country is mostly Muslim-populated, the Waqf system is an important part of the social contribution of philanthropic activities. However, as the authors have highlighted that other religious people bestow their property to the common philanthropic activities like school establishment, digging ponds for water resources, but the Muslim Waqf system is still going to the religious purpose in most of the cases. When it comes to the charity, we see the Zakat system, (a mandatory philanthropic rule for affluent people who own a certain amount of wealth) plays a crucial role to support the poor communities. Nabi et al. (2021) argue that proper estimation, distribution, and management of *Zakat* can alleviate poverty. But it is important to note that the Zakat system is a pure charity activity that can barely play a role in growth and development. Needless to say that the culture of charity and social philanthropy has a long history in Bangladesh as well as in South Asia, but how this support can add to the development of society with sustainable economic growth remains a matter of critical inquiry.

Islam (2016) has studied the emergence and contribution of the NGOs in Bangladesh and in the light of contemporary debate of their social service Vs social exploitation by their micro-finance and commercial activities. Making a profit in the name of social contribution is a

long-term conundrum in the socio-economic aspects of the grassroots level in Bangladesh. The paper argued that the NOGs had a positive contribution to the economic progress and poverty alleviation in rural Bangladesh though there are lots of debates and complexities around it.

Anthropologist Filippo Osella (2018) has given an overview of the charity and philanthropic activities in South Asia. Where he identified the practice of philanthropic activities in South Asia is common and the countries in the region are in a good position of 'World Giving Index-2014' on charitable and philanthropic activities. He mentioned that India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh are in the list of top 10 countries for philanthropic activities towards society. And all the South Asian countries are in the top 75 of the list of 135 countries surveyed. The culture of social philanthropy is deeply rooted and historical in South Asia where people feel sharing is a virtue in the aspects of all major religions practiced across the region.

The government of Bangladesh has prepared the National Sustainable Development Strategy 2010-21 (NSDS) to address a critical development aspiration that includes *Sustained Economic Growth* as one of the strategies. It is expected that the implementation of different strategies under sustained economic growth will ensure sustained accelerated growth. It will also facilitate poverty reduction through employment generation. The policy paid due attention to the youth labor-force (aged between 15-29) which comprises 37 percent of the total labor-force. The unemployment rate of youth labor is 7.5 percent which is 3 percentage points higher than the national rate. Hence the government encourages skill development, vocational training, and motivation programs for the youth to generate self-employment and wage employment for youth.

Newaz et al. (2013) have tried to find out the constraints of the vocational education and training in Bangladesh, where they focused on the criteria of a knowledge-based economy, struggle for social inequality, awareness of the highly qualified vocational framework from the institutional level to make the skilled-based professional education system successful in a country like Bangladesh. They argued that, in Bangladesh, the initiatives and infrastructure are good enough, but "poor formulation and implementation of strategies" are the key drawbacks of flourishing professionalism in the skilled-based education system in the country.

The above literature has given an overview on the nature and practice of philanthropic activities in the society largely in Bangladesh as a specific and South Asia in a common discussion. Most of the charity and humanitarian activities are related to financial assistance to needy people. There is very little practice of philanthropic activities, especially in Bangladesh where NOGs, CSR of MNCs, Charitable Trusts, Humanitarian organizations are promoting the skill development of the marginalized portion of the social community to pull them out from poverty and make a sustainable solution for their economic misery.

Education and Skill Development for Positive Social Change

Accompanying the government's initiatives to educate and train the youths to be skilled enough, some NGOs from home and abroad are working to increase the professional capabilities of the youths in different sectors of work. Multinational companies are also coming forward with CSR programs for social wellbeing in different aspects i.e. education, health, environment, humanitarian assistance in natural calamities, and so on. Philanthropic activities by individuals, groups, different foundations, and organizations along with social

workers and others' initiatives are playing important roles to pull out a good number of people from poverty and social misery in Bangladesh.

Education has always been a key component of the socio-economic changes of a nation. In a populous country like Bangladesh, Vocational Education and skill-based training are essential for economic progress. Professional training can transform the population into a workforce that can contribute to the economy. Bangladesh is struggling to move forward in socio-economic aspects since its independence, and in recent decades it has brought some significant changes when the youths started to come up with their skillful labor and professional efficacy. The scenario in urban, peri-urban, and rural areas has changed a lot in the last three decades, after vocational education and training have been spread all over the country, especially in rural Bangladesh (Islam & Mia, 2007).

Vocational education and training have a significant contribution to the socio-economic development of Bangladesh. In rural Bangladesh, where students from poor and marginalized communities cannot afford to go for general education, they prefer vocational education with a low cost for quality skill development. Like many other developing countries, Bangladesh could not ensure 100% quality education for all, in spite of Education being one of the basic human rights. So, this education system is contributing to prevent the dropout of students from secondary and higher secondary education in the country. In the aspects of the production of skilled manpower, vocational education and training are playing a significant role in human development in the remote areas of Bangladesh for the last four-five decades (Alam, G. M, 2008).

Vocational education and training provide employment opportunities to persons with disabilities. These people in rural Bangladesh are full of misery in their individual life where most of the family considers them as 'burden' unless they can financially contribute. The skilled-based education system helps them to come out from the physical inability to overcome the financial distress and empower them in social aspects. Nuri et al. (2012) have studied the impact of the vocational training program for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, where they have deduced with field data that after vocational education and training more than 74% have improved their life and livelihood with a better social acceptance.

Overall, for the holistic development of society, everyone should be taken on board and the approach should be reached to the outreach people. In Bangladesh, vocational education and training are contributing to human development by providing skilled-based education among rural communities.

Social Welfare Model for Positive Change: A Case of SIMEC Foundation

We have conducted qualitative fieldwork followed by a baseline survey focusing on a particular social development initiative by SIMEC Foundation to examine how such efforts contribute in grassroots development. The subsequent discussion will reflect on the issues in elaborative ways.

With the motto of helping the poor and improving the life and livelihood of rural Bangladesh, SIMEC Foundation was established by the chairman of SIMEC group Eng. Sardar Md Shaheen. Imperative to note that the main slogan of the SIMEC group resonates with the activities foundation undertakes, which is 'Improve the Possibilities'. The foundation in

nature is domestic and private that is mainly funded by a business group called SIMEC group. It is run by its dedicated members and volunteers who are keen to help society and believe that they have responsibilities towards society.

SIMEC Foundation works on various areas to improve the rural society including awareness building, training, counseling, and health services. We have studied three major programs to understand the subject matter of this paper, which are: *Sahiya Majid Scholarship program*, *Afsana Khanom Sewing Training Program*, and *Abul Kalam Mondol Computer Training Project*. These programs are being conducted in the rural location namely *Dhala*, located in *Balipara Union Parishad* of *Trishal* Upazila that falls under Mymensingh district in Bangladesh. We can see the outcomes of the projects and the implications of these projects in rural development briefly.

Annually around 200 students at the level of primary, lower and higher secondary from 25 schools and colleges are beneficiaries of the *Sahiya Majid Scholarship Program*. The scholarship has been distributed to the students of grades 5, 8, 10, and 12th. Providing scholarships to the poor but meritorious school students has contributed to reducing the causes of dropout in the locality. In terms of financial benefit, the amount is not sufficient to cover the educational and livelihood costs of a student. But the amount contributes to buying their educational materials. Moreover, the students get an edge in convincing their parents, so that they are not been asked to leave the school. Here, it is important to mention that the dropout rate remained around 30 percent and economic hardship is the major reason behind the dropouts. Grade 5, 8 and lower secondary has higher dropout rates as per the UNICEF country report on education. The out-of-school rate in the primary, lower secondary, and higher secondary is quite high in Mymensingh division. Which is in percentage 14 at primary, 23 at lower secondary, and 36 at higher secondary (UNICEF, 2021). More importantly, the scholarship has significantly contributed to reducing the cases of child marriage in *Balipara*. Many school-going girls capitalized on the fact that they are scholarship recipients and continued their studies while facing the social or family pressure to get married at an early age.

Abul Kalam Mondol Computer Training Project started in the year 2015 and so far it has trained around 1400 young both male and female. Since the program was initiated, the youth population including the post-secondary students got attracted to this skill development training and computer certificate course. The course is composed of basic MS word, Excel, Web page browsing and multimedia basic learning with hands-on training and tutorial. Initially, the young boys took the opportunity to access the free training, and eventually, the girls became more interested to join this skill development program. The computer training program is not only supported the young groups to get jobs at home and abroad, but also contributed to building confidence among the students who joined higher education. A selected section of the recipients of the training also became entrepreneurs as they had set up a computer-based business and digital solution centers in remote locations of the locality.

Jannatun Nayem, a 27 years old residence of *Balipara* who set up his business after taking training from SIMEC foundation's computer training and skill development program. According to him, the training made him confident in taking an initiative of his own in the local set-up. He got motivated to become an entrepreneur by opening a small computer shop in the local market of *Dhala*. Within a year time, the shop turned profitable since he started getting customers who come for purposes of computer compose, photocopying, making bio-data, filling up various forms online, and downloading official documents. *Nayem* was a

student of the first batch of SIMEC's free computer training. Some of his batch-mates have joined as service holders in government offices as well as educational institutes as computer teachers or operators. While he acknowledges their success but does not carries any regrets for his business. He is kind of a role model for many youths who have gained computer skills. Following his success, there are other candidates who set up a small business of digital centers in the remote localities, known as *chars*, of *Balipara*. *Chars* are floodplain sediment islands across the river and often the inhabitants of such islands are disconnected from modern facilities including electricity and easy communication. A small center in such a location that can provide internet facilities with computers has contributed significantly to the lives of farmers and students. Villagers have identified and assessed the socio-economic benefit of the skill development program and encouraged their kin to pursue computer training. *Mawlana Md. Abdul Gaffar (57)* stated that he motivated and sent his daughter for this computer training course even though it is a co-education while from a personal belief he is against the institutional set-up where boys and girls study together.

Finally, we will reflect on the Sewing training project for rural women. Under this project around 500 unprivileged and under-privileged women got skill development training from 2017 to 2021. After receiving the training almost 50 percent of them have bought their personal sewing machine and started a business at home. Those who could not manage a sewing machine arranged to use the neighbors' or relatives' machine to provide customer services in sewing clothes. Women who did not have any source of income earlier gained the confidence to earn from 100 to 200 USD monthly from their business. A section of the respondents stated that they gained motivation to open a tailoring shop in the local market. Despite the fact that there are various forces against women's entrepreneurship in rural society, the women trained under this project got motivation and confidence to launch their own businesses. One respondent named *Rahima Khatun (45)* said it is almost impossible that the women would think of opening a business shop in the rural market due to the social norm and values in their locality. Therefore, she began the practice at home as well as taking orders from customers from neighbors and other villagers. She started getting a good amount of orders and earned sufficient money to run the family constitute of five members. Since her husband returned from the capital city during the pandemic and still struggling to find work, who was only earning member before, the family is fully dependent on her earnings. As a consequence, her husband granted permission to set up a tailoring shop in the local market. This case may be considered as an example of some qualitative and positive development towards social change in rural Bangladesh.

We can have a quantitative overview of the findings from the field where the survey data show,

➤ The majority of the beneficiaries of the skill development training programs fall between the age group of 16 to 21.

□ Almost all the respondents recommended others to take part in the training for skill development.

□ In the computer training program, more than 45 percent of the participants benefited in the job sector, while the rest credited the training for making their educational and daily digital life smooth.

A majority of the respondents recommended for upgradation of the computer training program further, which should include: Graphics Design, Digital Marketing, and other creative skills development courses that may benefit the learners for freelancing in the online

platforms. Almost all the respondents under current scholarship programs have demanded for an increase in the amount in the coming years.

Relevance to SDGs Implementation: A long way ahead

With a view to the SDGs implementation, as a private player, SIMEC Foundation has been conducting its philanthropic activities for skill development of the youths and women in rural Bangladesh to make them skillful and prepared for building a sustainable economy and society. Skillful people can contribute to the family, society, and to the country in a dignified manner for their life-long economic solvency. SIMEC Foundation has a noble vision to extend its philanthropic activities to the society where it will contribute to the skill development of the youths, and women in rural Bangladesh to make them capable enough for their livelihood.

SIMEC Foundation- as a charity organization has incorporated the agenda of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) declared by the United Nations that is to be accomplished by 2030. Along with the Bangladesh government, the Foundation is working on some specific goals to implement these at the grassroots level. The specified goals of the SDGs that SIMEC Foundation is working with through its three major programs can be understood from the below:

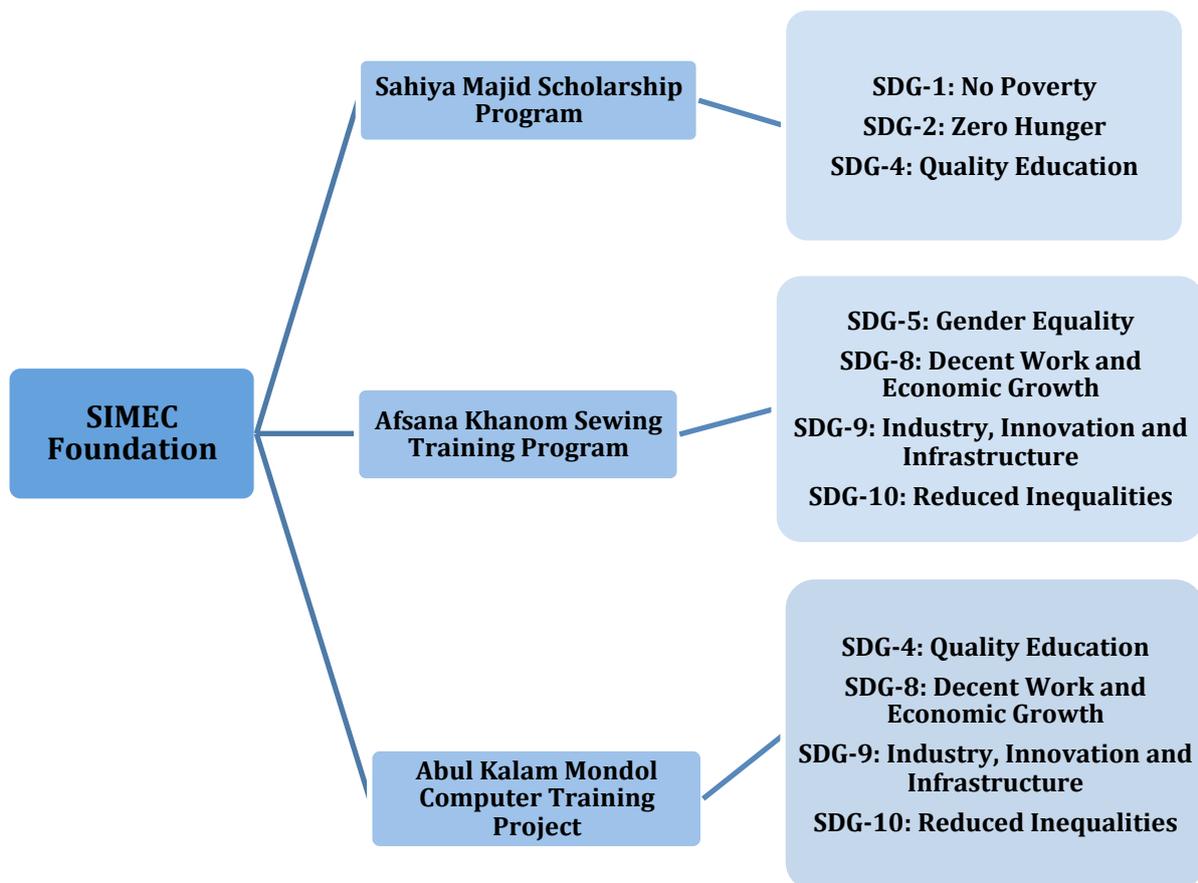


Figure 1: Activities and programs implemented by SIMEC Foundation resonates to the SDGs.

By providing skill-based training to the youths and women, the SIMEC Foundation is trying to pull them out of poverty. Training facilities for women help them to be financially

independent that helps empower them and reduce gender inequality in society. Computer training programs are contributing to employment opportunities with quality professional education in an innovative manner. The Foundation aims to expand its philanthropic activities in the coming days with the support of government and partner organizations from home and abroad.

There are many such initiatives taken by homegrown philanthropic organizations like SIMEC Foundation in Bangladesh. There is a crying need for knowledge sharing and exchange of views among these philanthropic organizations to make the efforts more fruitful and sustainable for the coming days. Collaboration among the homegrown philanthropic organizations that work for human development through education and professional training activities should be more tangible to make the efforts more effective. Along with the government's initiatives and policymaking, the collective approaches from the non-governmental philanthropic organizations can address the unemployment issues that still exist at the grassroots level of Bangladesh. Some of the drawbacks can be identified as-

- The unwillingness of the family to let their girls step out for higher education and vocational training on religious grounds.
- Lack of awareness on Vocational Education and Training and looking down upon it in comparison with the general education curriculum.
- High dependence on the agriculture sector for the rural economy.
- Lack of internet facilities and rural and remote areas.
- Lack of skilled and experienced teachers/trainers and inadequacy of equipment in technical educational training institutes.
- Sloth of government's initiatives and implementation of policy at the grassroots level to promote Vocational Education and Training.
- Bureaucratic procrastination on approving the private technical educational institutions.
- Corruption and lack of professionalism among the officials in rural community development programs and vocational training sectors.

There should be a combination of government and non-governmental initiatives in the aspects of professional and skill-based training programs, so that these can be spread all over the country, especially in remote locations where people have lesser facilities of technical education. Some special initiatives should be taken for the outreach communities in the hilly and coastal areas of Bangladesh. The tribal communities both in the hill and plain lands of the country are lagging behind in the aspects of economic progress, where vocational training and education programs can play a vital role to improve their life and livelihood.

Conclusions

Bangladesh is one of the leading countries that export human-resources to the Middle-East and South-East Asian countries. But, unfortunately, these huge numbers of migrant workers contribute very little because of their low-skill and lack of language and professional efficacy. It is a great opportunity for Bangladesh if the country can provide them with skill-based training and language proficiency facilities before sending them abroad as migrant workers. Migrant workers from the neighboring countries of Bangladesh i.e. India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal are contributing more to their economy with better professional skills. A successful labor market along with a high and constant flow of foreign remittance depends on the skillful migrant workforce of a country. As the economy of Bangladesh is merely dependent on two-three sectors, where foreign remittance is the top most together with Ready-made Garments (RMG), and agriculture; the country has to be more careful to develop

the vocational and technical education sector to get a proficient workforce that can contribute more to the national economy. The syllabus and curriculum in the vocational institutes should be incorporated with the working sectors of the potential migrant workers for a better output in their professional fields. Government has to provide training at low-cost and facilitate the non-governmental institutions so that they can come forward to this sector in rural areas. There should be extensive research both at the academic and field level to understand the role, responsibilities, and challenges of community development in rural Bangladesh.

Internet accessibility has spread in the country over the last decade, especially since the current Awami League government came into power in 2008 with a vision of making Digital Bangladesh. Youths are becoming tech-savvy with their quick learning skills, and they started contributing to the national economy by freelancing in different virtual job platforms. This can be accelerated by the sponsorship of the government from an institutional level. The government of Bangladesh has already set up some universities and IT (Information Technology) parks to develop a skilled workforce with technological knowledge, but in comparison to the huge number of unemployed, these are not sufficient. Along with all the initiatives to promote the *Digital Bangladesh* concept, the government should set up more technical education training centers at district and sub-district levels to train youths from rural communities so that they can be capable enough to show their skills in digital job platforms. It is the high time that public-private partnership made some positive changes in socio-economic aspects in Bangladesh.

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