

Appendix I: VAB Retreat – Basic Framework & Suggested Discussion Points

VAB Retreat: Sunday, August 5, 2018: 11 AM to 8 P.M. **Retreat/Informal Discussion on VAB’s Sustainable Future**

Basic Framework

(VAB has been in operation for two decades as a US non-profit Corporate entity with its Head Office registered in New York State and its Field Office located in Dhaka registered with the Government of Bangladesh.)

Purpose: To review VAB’s critical challenges, and agree on strategies and actionable measures for their resolution to assure VAB’s long-term sustainability.

Focus: To examine issues/problems facing VAB in an objective manner and identify approaches, suggestions and specific actions to deal with them.

Main Topics: Program, Finance, and Organization.

Suggested Discussion Points under each Main Topic: Noted below.

Participants in the Event: All VAB Directors and Officials. Additionally, if agreed and suggested by the Directors and Officials, few prospective volunteers/leaders for guiding VAB in the future.

Place and Duration of the Event: Board Room of Modern Packaging, Inc. 505 Acorn Street, Deer Park, NY 11729; Tel: ([631-595-2437](tel:631-595-2437)). Duration will be eight hours from 12 noon to 8 P.M. Participants arrive at 11 A.M. for one hour social. Lunch, Tea and Dinner will be provided.

Moderating the Event: A team of three Facilitators, one from Management, Prof. Nurul Alam, VAB’s Vice President, and two from the Patrons, Dean Mohsin Patwary and Dr. Yousuf Rahman, are suggested to facilitate the discussion. A comprehensive Report will be prepared.

Follow up on the Event: The VAB Management Committee and the VAB Board will undertake necessary follow-up action.

Suggested Discussion Points

(The “Suggested Discussion Points” were circulated before. Comments and suggestions were received from the Directors, Advisors and Officials of VAB USA and VAB Bangladesh after that. These comments and suggestions are summed up and placed under the three Main Topics: Program, Finance, and Organization. No attribution is made to the persons who provided comments and suggestions, except in one case. The latter is mentioned below: his comments and suggestions are marked by *.)

(* Dr. Haroonur Rashid, one of the two Members of the Board of Advisors of VAB Bangladesh who has been involved with VAB since the inception of its work in Bangladesh in 2000, and who is also Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the VAB Trust. He recently visited several VAB-partnered schools in Nilphamari. He informs us, “Based on this limited field exposure to the programmes of VAB and my general understanding of the problems of secondary education, I would like to make [certain] random observations.”)

Suggested Discussion Points: Program

1. Recent addition of **so many activities** under the VAB program and their relevance to achieving quality education. Has there been any practical evidence to that effect? For that matter, **how do we measure “quality education” including the significance of performance on SSC exam as a measure?**

(a) The VAB program may need to address a basic issue. With its focus on promoting quality education through innovations in the teaching-learning methods and the education environment in rural schools, the VAB program may be characterized as a development/social engineering program. This runs the risk of understating the emphasis on supporting poor rural students which has the primary appeal to VAB’s base. **A balance needs to be maintained** both in the appeal and the substance of VAB’s work; otherwise, VAB’s support base may lose interest. **The program and its fundraising appeals need to have a balanced focus on both the aspects of humanitarianism and development.**

(b) Quality education should address the **crucial problems of rural education**: (i) attendance of students; (ii) quality of teaching; (iii) accountability of teachers; (iv) accountability of school management members; (v) motivation of parents.

(c) After VAB addressed the above crucial problems of quality rural education, the **competence-enhancing activities** related to computers, English and character development can be added later.

(d) The main goals of the VAB program of quality education should be to ensure **a better teaching-learning environment** in rural schools.

(e) A **unified project proposal** should be developed by VAB including the necessary elements, such as: (i) goals; (ii) outcomes; (iii) predetermined measurable indicators.

(f) The **contribution of many activities to quality education** should be thoroughly assessed in terms of measurable indicators. These activities include: (i) students’ clubs in debating and sports; (ii) students’ participation in Science Fairs and Math Olympiads; (iii) computer literacy; (iv) English speaking; (v) character development.

(g) There is a need to re-visit the components of VAB’s Quality Education Program. **For each component, clear specification should be made about its goals, outcomes and pre-determined measurable indicators.** Recently added components on “English Speaking” and “Citizenship/Character Development” may be taken as examples.

****(h)*** Despite being a robust model, VAB’s schools did not make much difference in academic results. Poor marks in **Math, English and ICT** have been identified as the causes of low percentage of passing in secondary examinations in the last two years. **VAB’s emphasis on these subjects is a step in the right direction; these efforts need to be intensified. It must be seen that the VAB program makes a difference in the results as well,** for this is the immediate if not the ultimate measure of quality.

(i) Results in public exams of JSC and SSC should be retained as goals. **Cases of existing VAB-partnered schools not performing well in public exams (in the 2018 SSC exam, 46% of them achieved results below the national average) should be reviewed critically and solutions sought.**

(j) Should “**Science Education**” be an additional component?

*** (k) A very important program component that should be considered is provision of some lunch to the students.** There are often signs of malnutrition and fatigue among the students. Including travel time, a student has to be in school for almost eight hours. While it is a very costly proposition and its administration is going to be very cumbersome and also should rightly belong to the concern of the Government, **efforts to mobilize support of some rich philanthropic people may be worth the while in the interim.**

(l) Emphasis should be given to the **methods of implementing activities** in addition to the activities themselves. For example, innovative methods can be developed for better classroom teaching.

(m) VAB should ensure that the **teachers trained through its training program** apply the skills in their respective classrooms rather than be negligent or worse, apply the skills in their own coaching classes.

2. VAB is a Charity with extremely limited resources. Are not we **“thinning” the use of our resources** with the multitude of activities?

*** (a) Resources invested by VAB are low and spread thinly.** Resources spent on schools are too low to generate sufficient initiative on the part of the schools. To make VAB’s comprehensive program work, **the schools must take sufficient initiative.**

*** (b) Expansion of some very low cost components of the VAB program which have a very high potential of large benefits should be considered.** One such area which can produce enormous benefit with little investment is encouraging sports. For example, during a recent school visit, it was found that there was only one football for the whole school. Consequently, all the classes vie for that football and it is mostly the senior classes which get the opportunity to play. Developing some self-help device or annual donation by VAB towards providing a football for each of the classes is worth considering.

(c) **Projects at each school can be taken on a “probationary” basis, specifying the part of the costs to be contributed by the school itself.** VAB’s limited resources can thus be extended to more schools.

3. The above issues point to the decision making process on VAB Programs and the urgent need for **VAB USA and VAB BD to jointly decide what exactly VAB is aiming to achieve, and what the best way is in which its limited resources should be utilized.**

4. In the current context, especially with a serious and persistent **Youth Unemployment** adversely affecting the economy and the society in BD, there is an urgent need to review the **share of skill training in VAB program and the ways and means of expanding it to enhance the relevance of VAB.**

(a) Recognizing the risk of losing relevance, particularly the interest of grant-makers like Bangladesh Bank and prospective donors, **VAB should develop a “Skill Training” program.** As a starting point, a **brainstorming workshop** of VAB’s leaders and workshops can be considered. One option is to organize a **“Training Center for Technicians (TCT)”** for Clusters of VAB-partnered schools.

*** (b) Including vocational education in the VAB program should be a priority.** The Governor of Bangladesh Bank, when a delegation from VAB met him in connection with

the support for this year's program, emphasized that future support would be linked to employment creation opportunities.

***(c) In a rapidly growing economy, several areas of skill requirement are expanding fast in the country and also in the countryside. VAB should consider vocational training in any or all of these areas: ICT hardware repair and maintenance, autocytle and automobile mechanics, welding, milling, masonry, etc. VAB may also explore mobilizing support from enterprises and establishing arrangements so that students in their after-school hours can be linked to these enterprises.**

(d) Regarding **skill training, VAB should proceed in a planned manner**, in particular, identifying promising trades, selecting criteria of target beneficiaries, developing a job placement plan, and assigning a staff who will be responsible for implementation.

5. **A School Health Pilot Project**, proposed by Peds Global Health, to be carried out in collaboration with VAB in one Cluster of schools during the current year. This collaboration has been under discussion over last two years. Only recently, Peds (Pediatric Educational Development Society International) received its approval as a 501 (c) (3) organization, and finalized its work program (www.peds.org). Under its motto "Healthy kids make better learners" the program covers 14 activities including medical, dental and vision check-up and health education, etc. Dr. Maksud Chowdhury, President of Peds, will explain the program and potential collaboration with VAB.

Suggested Discussion Points: Finance

The optimal funding strategy for VAB may be to find a feasible and robust pathway for generating full or 75%-80% funding from asset building (including the Trust Fund).

1. **Can the funding base in the USA be expanded?** Options: seeking more individual donors? Exploring institutions such as Corporations, Foundations, city, state and Federal agencies, etc.? Organizing fundraising events?
 - (a) **VAB needs designated official(s) to visit expatriate communities in other cities of North America** to arrange and promote publicity and fundraising, possibly leading to the formation of "VAB Groups" in selected cities.
 - (b) **VAB needs to organize periodic performance publicity and fundraising events** in the tri-State area.
2. **Can the funding base in Bangladesh be expanded?** Options: Seeking more individual donors? Exploring Corporations, and Government agencies? Contacting External donors? Continue contacting American-Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce members? Organizing fundraising events? Any others?

***(a) VAB has not been able to brand itself to attract popular attention or donor interest. Besides, there is discernible donor fatigue. A donor base specific to VAB has to be developed. 100 members of VAB BD each donating/subscribing one lakh taka (about \$1,250) annually and another 100 members from abroad each donating/subscribing \$1,000 annually is good enough to generate a reasonable amount of fund for VAB. VAB may actively try to create a membership base, including collecting membership fees.**

***(b) People, particularly in Bangladesh, want to hold office, even if honorary, so that the public recognize them as important persons. Opening up the office of the Chairman and Board membership to the subscribing members may attract more people. Making the posts of Chairman/Board members elective may be one way to attract people.** In Bangladesh there is no dearth of people who can donate one lakh taka (about \$1,250) any time, provided there is the right incentive.

***(c) An alternative is to hire a professional Fund Raiser** on commission basis.

(d) Funding depends fully on the relationship of the organization with the funders/donors, and good reputation of the organization in program implementation. In addition, it helps if the head of the organization is well known in the donor community as well as in the NGO community.

(e) In Bangladesh, philanthropic funds, from individuals or institutions, are mostly used for **purposes of their own**, such as hospitals, educational institutions or religious institutions in their name.

3. **How can we build up the Trust Fund significantly?** Review our experience of Endowment and Trust Fund since 2012 and their current status. What can be done to develop the Trust Fund in next five years? Does the management and operation of the Trust Fund lend themselves to developing trust among potential Contributors?
VAB needs to develop a “Global Program” to build up the Trust Fund as soon as possible. A goal of raising 10 crore taka (about \$1,250,000) in the next 5 years can be considered.
4. **How can we utilize significant unused spaces in VAB’s Flat to add to our fund?**
A good source of income for VAB may be **renting out the excess office space. Renting garage space** is also a possibility.
5. **Need for Financial Management Rules for VAB Funds in USA and Bangladesh?**
 - (a) **These urgent needs should be met this year.**
 - (b) **VAB BD has a financial manual.** It should be adhered to.

Suggested Discussion Points: Organization

1. **How can VAB USA increase the number of volunteers?** Should there be paid staff, part time or on the basis of piece work?
If VAB cannot recruit volunteers through its contacts, **it may consider global volunteer supplying sources**, e.g., Volunteer Match, with which VAB had success in the past.
2. **How can VAB USA improve its management?**
 - (a) **With the exception of a limited few persons, there appears to be a lack of engagement and enthusiasm among the VAB USA group. Solutions need to be explored**, including: (i) alternative management models; (ii) management change; (iii) sharing with paid employees the requirements of dedicated time, disciplined approach and serious attitude to run the organization; (iv) learning from the examples of other organizations; etc.
 - (b) In VAB USA, any ideas also originate from a limited few. What is causing this inertia and how to break this must be studied. **If VAB has to survive the test of time, there**

should be a capacity, willingness and proactiveness to think, analyze, move and share at the broader Management Committee level.

(c) VAB needs to devise ways and means of ensuring compliance to the work assignments by all management officials and to the tasks and responsibilities by the Directors, as specified in VAB's Bylaws.

3. **How can VAB USA encourage the involvement of younger persons?**
4. **How can both VAB USA and VAB BD achieve effective publicity,** especially through their respective social media tools?
5. **Does VAB BD have any operational and or management issues? Examples may include: Information Management; Sustained Board Support to the Management; Staff Training and similar other issues.**
 - * (a) **Placing program Officers at the field level** may be an option to provide for more sustained monitoring and support. The capacity of the Program Managers/Officers to provide necessary leadership to the schools also needs to be strengthened.
 - (b) All VAB BD staffs are in the head office in Dhaka. The **operation can be decentralized at the field level.**
 - (c) VAB BD does not have any hierarchy in organization. An **organogram** may be developed that should address the hierarchy issue and also the issue of continuity of leadership.
 - (d) It may be more effective for VAB BD if there is a **separation of administration and program.** Administration will be responsible for policy related issues and the program personnel will be responsible for program design, staff set-up and orientation, program implementation, monitoring, and reporting, etc.
 - (e) **VAB BD has developed personnel policy and gender policy.** A child safeguarding policy is under way. All these policies need to be approved by the authorities and put in practice.
 - (f) A **Management Information System (MIS)** may be developed which will help in obtaining and disseminating information systematically.
 - (g) VAB BD may have to address the current situation with regard to the **accessibility to the services of the Treasurer.**
6. **Does VAB USA and VAB BD have a system in place to ensure their mutual interaction, for example, timely exchange of information and their participation in decision making for effective operation and management of VAB as an organization?**
 - (a) **Periodic meetings of (some of the) Directors and officials of VAB USA with (some of the) Advisors and officials of VAB Bangladesh are essential.** Such meetings should be held once a year preferably, but at least once in two years on a mandatory basis.
 - (b) **As regards VAB BD, there can be provision for an Advisory Committee,** formed by the Advisory Board of VAB BD, to advise and assist in program management in Bangladesh and to report to the Advisory Board.
7. **Does both VAB USA and VAB BD have a system in place to ensure that leadership will continue uninterrupted** in the absence of the current leaders.

This is vital for the organizational sustainability of VAB. Some possible suggestions/options on the scenarios for the future should come from the leadership, i.e., the Chair and the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors of VAB USA and of the Board of Advisors of VAB BD, the President of VAB, and the Country Director; others can complement such suggestions/options.