

VAB Retreat, August 5, 2018, Deer Park, NY

Report

The Volunteers Association for Bangladesh (VAB) is a US non-profit corporate entity with its Head Office registered in New York State and its Field Office in Dhaka registered with the Government of Bangladesh. After two decades of work of VAB promoting quality secondary education in rural Bangladesh, the Retreat is a seminal VAB event organized for the purpose of reviewing critical challenges facing it and formulating strategies and actionable measures for successfully addressing such challenges, with a view to continuing its work effectively and ensuring its long-term sustainability. Three main topics were under consideration: Program, Finance and Organization. (Please see **Appendix I** for the “Basic Framework and the Suggested Discussion Points” of the Retreat.)

Directors, Patrons, Officials and Volunteers of VAB had a day-long session consisting of three segments on the above three topics, respectively. Each segment was conducted by a Moderator/Facilitator. The deliberations were of a free-flowing nature with participants expressing their ideas unreservedly, intended to serve the purpose of the Retreat. (Please see **Appendix II** for the “Program and the List of Participants” of the Retreat.)

The Retreat started with participants introducing themselves. The idea of the Retreat was suggested originally by the Vice Chair of VAB Board of Directors, Mr. Mohammad Saleh. Invited by the Founder and President of VAB, Dr. A T Rafiqur Rahman, Mr. Saleh elaborated on the idea. He noted that VAB has worked very successfully to promote quality education. However, lately certain challenges have been foreseen, especially in financial matters. Solutions need to be explored. He expressed his hope that at the conclusion of the Retreat some constructive suggestions will emerge for the benefit of the disadvantaged rural children and the country at large. He thanked Mr. Syed Zaki Hossain, Director, for his benevolence and specifically, for his hospitality in providing the facilities for the Retreat.

Program execution in the field. To give an idea about the overall work of VAB with the focus on quality high school education in rural Bangladesh, Dr. Jasimuz Zaman, VAB’s Country Director, made a PowerPoint presentation. (Please see **Appendix III** for the “Powerpoint presentation”.) Some highlights of his presentation are mentioned below.

1. Inherent advantages in rural setting. He pointed out that while education in rural Bangladesh poses well-known challenges, it can also take advantage of certain inherent opportunities offered by the rural areas which include: free environment, flexibility of time of students, caring by rural teachers for rural children and respect of rural children for their teachers and elders.

2. VAB accountability. He emphasized that VAB's work is transparent, and upholds accountability to management, donors, and the NGO Bureau, the governmental agency in Bangladesh overseeing the work of the NGOs.

3. Sustainability of program. VAB's goal is to provide sustainable quality education in rural schools. Regarding sustainability, he explained that VAB plans to work with a school for 5 years, and the school is then expected to have a self-propelling mechanism to continue with the quality education measures introduced by VAB. In response to a query later, he explained that VAB tries to ensure sustainability by creating an environment in the community regarding rural education so that it will have an expectation about the school to continue to perform well moving ahead. To the same end, VAB is trying to engage parents, School Management Committee (SMC) members and local government officials using its 4E model for quality education, as further explained below.

4. Stakeholder empowerment program. He then explained that with the conviction that quality education can be achieved only if the major stakeholders of rural education – students, teachers, schools and communities – are empowered accordingly. Thus, the VAB measures of quality education can be divided into measures of 4E's - Student Empowerment, Teacher Empowerment, School Empowerment and Community Empowerment. To elaborate on the concept of "empowerment", he gave the example that student empowerment means students should be able to "achieve" learning on their own.

5. VAB donors in Bangladesh. Speaking about donors, he pointed out that lately, some Bangladesh sources, e.g., Bangladesh Bank (initially 10 lakh Tk (about \$12,500) each for two years and this year 45 lakh Tk (about \$56,250)) and Chevron Bangladesh (2 crore Tk (about \$250,000) for 2 years in the past for schools in Sylhet) have been contributing.

6. Cluster schools. As for working with rural schools, VAB is focusing on cluster schools, and also on 9 clusters of schools in 3 upazilas (sub-districts). Cluster

schools – 5 schools in geographical proximity – foster competition and cross-learning, and also reduce administrative costs. Concentrating on a few upazilas may attract the attention of the Government to VAB’s success in quality education which, in turn, may help mobilizing assistance from it.

7. School system in Bangladesh and public sector support. Dr. Zaman informed that in Bangladesh, there are 3 kinds of schools: (a) government schools; (b) non-government schools; and (c) private schools. Among the 20,000 high schools in the country, most are non-government schools. Non-government schools are of two types: (a) schools where the Government provides MPO (Monthly Pay Order) to the teachers; and (b) non-MPO schools. Under the MPO system, the Government provides a relatively decent amount of salary to all the teachers; it also provides certain guidelines, and exerts pressure to ensure proper functioning of the schools. All the other costs are borne by the schools. The main source of income of the schools is tuition fees of students. All the rural schools with which VAB is partnering are MPO schools.

8. VAB’s quality education measures. Dr. Zaman pointed out certain important features of the VAB quality education measures. There is complementarity among the measures. Scholarships and tutoring assistance to students and teachers’ training are good examples. Community linkage runs through the whole set of measures. He also reiterated that VAB’s program is considered effective; VAB’s model program is recognized by the Ministry of Education, and the Government is currently sponsoring VAB’s program.

VAB’s Program

Moderator’s guidance. The segment of the Retreat on “VAB’s Program” followed. The Moderator was Prof. M Nurul Alam, Vice Chair of VAB. In a PowerPoint presentation he highlighted the main issues to be discussed. (Please see **Appendix IV** for his PowerPoint presentation.) He explained that VAB’s program has evolved over time. It started out as an equity-based program to help the underprivileged students in rural Bangladesh. As the country witnessed economic growth and became a (Lower) Middle Income Country, VAB also reflected a development orientation in its program. However, a balance has to be achieved between the equity and the development orientation. He explained that the program is a manifestation of what VAB does, and, at the same time, it should represent a

converging point for aspirations of stakeholders in rural education. He emphasized that the program, its focus, its results, and its funding are inter-related.

He highlighted certain key questions/issues which lie at the heart of a successful VAB program, and VAB management and its Country Office need to underline these issues in their periodic reports for substantive accountability to its management and stakeholders: (a) are the various measures of VAB aligned with the needs of rural youths and with VAB's mission; (b) are good academic results achieved along with good quality of education; (c) are equity considerations maintained along with quality considerations; (d) are resources too spread out in achieving various goals; (e) is quality education, including competence enhancement, leading to employability; (f) does the vocational component of the VAB program need to be strengthened.

Discussion. During the discussion a number of significant issues came up; also a number of actionable measures were suggested.

A critical issue is the survival and sustainability of the organization. Along with the program, it is the people involved in the organization that is important. In this context, bringing in young people is vital, despite the fact that various efforts to this end were made in the past with no avail.

As for the vocational component of the VAB program, it was explained that in Bangladesh, some schools have a vocational stream side by side with the general education stream. Among the 78 schools VAB is partnering with, 10 have vocational stream, and VAB is strengthening the stream in all of these 10 schools. It was also added that the measures which VAB implements to strengthen competency, in computers and English for example, increase employability of the students. With additional funds, the vocational stream in the 10 schools can be further reinforced. Training Instructors is central to such efforts. An alternative was given some consideration – an outside-the-school center called the Technical Center for Technicians (TCT) which will produce technicians in various promising technical areas who can be employed at home or abroad.

The linkage of the VAB program with what donors expect of the program was underlined.

Suggestions. The following ideas were suggested for improving the VAB program:

- The 4E (Empowerment) program for sustainable quality education was endorsed as viable and should be continued as VAB's model program for the coming years.
- An integrated and measurable set of indicators should be developed for measuring performance of schools and assessing results achieved by the VAB program. Certain measurable indicators, such as the pass rate and performance in the SSC exam (which have wider public acceptance as measure of success) should be duly recognized in performance measurement criteria.
- The achievement of VAB-partnered schools in terms of these indicators should also be highlighted in the Annual Reports. This was important for the VAB contributor stakeholders.
- The VAB program should be tailored, after identifying what is achievable and sustainable. The VAB's donors and sponsors need continuous reassurance that donation provided is worthy, properly utilized in a cost-effective manner, and reaches the needy.
- It was suggested that interactive and group-based learning-teaching methods should be built within the classroom setting.
- A suggestion was made to consider introduction of a "tiffin program" for students, on a selective basis. This would be a humane measure, but is also justified from a health and nutrition perspective. This is also expected to be conducive to better learning. This should be carefully appraised by the Country Office based on an assessment of cost and funding implications.
- Sports measures are very low-cost ones that could have a great impact on motivation of students. Such measures should be strengthened.
- As for the equity-versus-quality issue, it was suggested that donors should be apprised and assured that VAB takes the equity consideration as a fundamental principle, and supports the underprivileged students with quality enhancing measures so that their potentials can bloom as they graduate out of high schools. VAB's Annual Reports can stress this achievement of the balance.
- For stretching VAB's limited resources, it was suggested that efforts should be made to streamline the set of quality education measures and execute it at a lower cost. It was further suggested that sharing of costs by schools should

be explored. Also, the set of measures could be classroom-based; the central focus should be on training existing teachers and changing the entire mode of classroom teaching.

- Attention was drawn to the important issue of technical training and employable skills, and time is opportune to consider the introduction of these streams in schools. It was suggested that ways and means should be explored for building on the experience VAB has already gained through its existing vocational program in a number of schools. A technical committee should be formed for assessing the current technical program and additional resources and facilities needed for expansion of the program. A draft proposal with feasibility options would be prepared by VAB Bangladesh during the course of the year.
- A new proposal on healthcare for rural students was introduced by Dr. Maksud Chowdhury, VAB's Director and President, PEDSI (Pediatric Education Development Society International) Global Health. PEDSI is developing a children's health monitoring project with the ultimate aim of improving the overall health and well-being of children, including, among others, medical checkup, dental, vision and hearing evaluation, and thereby reducing morbidity and mortality of children in Bangladesh. The collaborative project with VAB will be of a pilot nature in 3/4 VAB-partnered schools. The costs of the low-cost pilot project will be borne by PEDSI, VAB, sponsors of the schools, or a combination of these sources. It was agreed that the VAB Management Committee will discuss the proposal with the Country Director and would make a decision soon.

VAB's Finances

Moderator's guidance. The segment of the Retreat on "VAB's Finances" was moderated by Dr. Yousuf Rahman, Advisor and Patron of VAB. Since VAB is a donor-dependent organization and since the participants in the Retreat were donors (money/skills/time) to VAB, Dr. Rahman started the discussion in an innovative way: he asked everyone why they "give" to VAB. Although various reasons were offered, one common theme emerged: emotions are behind everyone's "giving" to VAB. Dr. Rahman stated that his research, particularly on the websites of Charities, confirmed this: charity is emotionally driven. This having been established, Dr. Rahman steered the discussion to one of the major funding issues

for VAB: how to expand the funding base in the U.S. (Please see **Appendix V** for Dr. Rahman’s paper on “What VAB Can Do To Achieve Long-Term Sustainability”. The Appendix is a revised and expanded version of his paper for the Retreat.)

Dr. Rahman emphasized that VAB must make extra efforts to ensure that the expectations of its donors are met. In this context, it will be helpful if the donors could be brought closer to the beneficiaries of their donation, e.g., students and teachers. He added that VAB has not succeeded in stirring up the humanitarian side of giving; instead, it has overly concentrated in publicizing its wide array of measures. He questioned the effectiveness of activities outside the classroom included in the VAB program for improving education standards in rural schools. VAB should focus on improving the quality of education in the classrooms with the help of local leaders, village elders and the teachers.

Discussion. One idea came up for mobilizing funds for VAB is to organize a Fundraising Event on a regular basis. However, a current lack of an “organizer” in VAB who will carry out the responsibility was concurrently added.

A number of reasons were mentioned for the current challenges faced by VAB for its financing; although in many cases it was not mentioned directly, it was implicit that the “other side of the coin” would offer solutions. A lack of strong community connection was mentioned. Poor name recognition, including an absence of an effective “slogan”, was cited. Similar reasons were mentioned: there was a lack of effective messaging and branding. A lack of connection with young people, including first, second or third generation Bangladeshis, was listed. Failure to get any corporate donation was another reason.

The discussion then moved to expanding the funding base in Bangladesh. It was mentioned that in Bangladesh, personal contacts are important. Unfortunately, discussions were shortened because of time constraints.

Suggestions. The following ideas were suggested for improving VAB’s finances:

- As for involvement of young persons in VAB, it was suggested that they should be allowed to have a specific identity within VAB, creating a separate wing for the young in order to manage their affairs by themselves with full independence. A prospectus of VAB can be created for young people and circulated to them, including to student bodies in various

educational institutions. It was stated that there are numerous Bangladeshi students' associations affiliated with the U.S. universities.

- As for applying for grants, Dr. Rahman stated that he knew of more than 100 grant-makers who could be approached. However, their procedures are to be followed strictly. In this connection, appointment of third party consultants can be helpful. There are also service agencies and academic bodies which can train VAB how to approach the grant-makers. Dr. Rahman volunteered to provide guidance, Mr. Mizan M Rahman, Director of VAB and Chair, Fundraising and Endowment, volunteered to undergo such training, and Mr. Mohammad Hossain, Volunteer, expressed his willingness to join.
- Regarding prospective donors in Bangladesh, a suggestion was made for each VAB Director to use his/her contacts.
- As to messaging, VAB must develop a strong, attractive, effective and an easily recognizable message, as well as a brief but appealing slogan. It was strongly suggested that the VAB website must be improved. VAB could take ideas from websites of other large charity organizations. This should be considered primary for VAB's long-term sustainability. It was also suggested that the images of classroom setting, students' attires and physical condition are to be included in the website, Annual Reports and other means of communication, to attract and get the sympathy of potential donors.
- Making a concrete proposal and protocol how to reach and contact potential donors, and raise funds in Bangladesh was suggested.
- Finally, regarding sending money from the U.S. to the Trust Fund in Bangladesh, mention was made of an organization in Singapore which could be helpful. VAB should explore with this organization about a resolution of its issue. It was strongly suggested that VAB must make utmost efforts to build up the Trust Fund to 10 crore Tk. (about \$1,250,000) in the next five years.

VAB's Organization

Moderator's guidance. This segment of the Retreat was moderated by Dean Mohsin Patwary, Patron of VAB. He stated that the key elements of a well-organized and successful organization are: (a) a well-defined organizational structure; (b) an effective program with clear and realistic goals; (c) secure funding; and (d) a stable and pragmatic leadership with vision and achievable program goals. He then specified the requirements for a well-defined organization:

(a) allocation of responsibilities; (b) coordination; and (c) supervision. (Please see **Appendix VI** for Dean Patwary’s paper on VAB’s organization.)

Discussion. Asymmetric engagement of members of the organization was pointed out as a problem. Lack of involvement of young people and a poor website were identified as structural problems of the organization.

A need for new leadership was highlighted. Article 17 of the Bylaws of VAB dealing with transition from old leadership to new was cited in this context. Article 11 dealing with allocation of responsibilities was also cited.

VAB is a voluntary organization; thoughts were given to what can be done, including using incentives, to motivate everyone in the organization, particularly the Directors. VAB is unique in that it is a corporate entity as opposed to other Bangladeshi organizations around, which are community organizations. Additionally, VAB’s program activities are all carried out in Bangladesh, and not in the USA. This makes it difficult for VAB to connect with expatriate communities since it does not provide any direct services to these communities. Still, in this context, an issue was raised whether there is a need for introducing the “community aspects” and for a balance to be sought between the “corporate aspects” and the “community aspects”. Perhaps, with the introduction of the community aspects, new people may be brought into the organization.

Moving on to the organizational structure in Bangladesh, the desirable “pyramid structure” is there. It was mentioned that the “tip of the pyramid” should be well-designated. It was pointed out that the composition of the Board of Advisors in Bangladesh suffers from the same problem regarding the predominant older age group as does the Board of Directors in the U.S. As to the Chairmanship, it will be difficult to get someone of the stature and recognition of the current Chairman, in case a need for replacement arises; however, replacement by someone competent will be possible. The replacement of the Country Director may pose more difficult problems.

VAB Bangladesh received good publicity in connection with the Award Ceremony held in 2017, celebrating “Excellence in Performance by Rural Schools”. The local newspapers, including The Daily Star, mentioned VAB on several occasions.

Suggestions. The following suggestions were put forward:

- The Board of Directors should reflect diversity, in age and gender.
- There should be a well-defined system for change of leadership. The Bylaws of VAB should be reviewed with a view to incorporating the above.
- The Board of Directors should elect officials for every term. Directors can also remove officials; the Bylaws should include such a provision. The Bylaws should also include a provision for term limit of the officials.
- Above all, clarity must be ensured in re-drafting the Bylaws.
- VAB USA may use the services of paid staff, full-time or part-time.
- The publicity efforts, both in the U.S. and in Bangladesh, must be reinforced.
- An Annual Event should be held, bringing in a larger group and offering recognition for outstanding contributors, Directors or otherwise, particularly for the highest donor.
- Bearing in mind that most people would like to have recognition, opportunities must be sought to provide such recognition. In this context, giving awards to distinguished community leaders for their outstanding services to VAB can be considered.
- Another suggestion was to take out an advertisement in the local Weeklies and TV channels, which will include the names of the Directors.
- It was suggested that the Board of Directors should request the Board of Advisors of VAB Bangladesh to look for a Country Director.
- A strong suggestion was made that a meeting of the Board of Directors should be held on September 30, 2018, to review the recommendations/suggestions of the Retreat and decide on follow-up actions.