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**Community Learning Centre (CLC):  
Developing a Learning Society in Bangladesh**

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**Abstract:**

*With a literacy rate of below 50%, Bangladesh's foremost challenge is now extending literacy and communication skills to meet the demand of the present era. This paper describes how with active involvement of local communities rural libraries in Bangladesh are effectively promoting literacy to cope with the changes and challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century. Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), an NGO, started establishing community based Learning Centers, locally know as Gonokendro, in Bangladesh in 1995 with the objectives of supporting rural people to improve their literacy and learning skills, enhance occupational skills and create avenue for socialization/healthy recreation/good use of leisure time. In rural Bangladesh, this is a new type of initiative, both in terms of services and sustainability, reaching the major segments of population including children, students, females, adults and elderly people. CLCs are open to users for 5 to 6 hours a day for 6 days a week and are run by female librarians. The Centre becomes self-financing within two years of operation in terms of recurring expenses, however, at a moderate level. Though resources may be limited, CLCs provide reading materials, maintain a section exclusively for children, display collection of local cultural heritage and offer computer literacy courses. Every CLC has 600 fixed books and 400 rotating books, which are exchanged among the 10 nearby CLCs once a year. Though, the members have access to only 1,000 books at a time but over a period of 10 years they get access to 4,600 books through rotation. Books are of different types matching to different age groups' requirements. On an average a CLC caters to 800 to 1,000 people and 400 to 500 (roughly 50% women) of them are subscribers who pay a nominal fee. Around 50 to 60 persons turn out each day, of them 15 to 20 persons borrow books and the others read newspapers and magazines. CLCs also operate low-cost mobile libraries (manually operated 3 wheelers) to promote literacy among the women, disabled and elderly people who cannot come to the Centers. The centres issue textbooks to the poorest students for an entire academic year to ease their study. CLCs are registered with the government, secular and inclusive in nature, and works to bridge the gap between different social groups, particularly rich and poor and rural and urban. CLCs organize various socio-cultural activities on occasions such as Bengali New Year, Independence Day, and arrange multimedia presentations on important issues (e.g. contaminated water). It also organizes skills development training for youth with limited literacy and links them with different micro finance organizations for accessing finance in order to apply their new/improved skill for livelihood improvement. So far a total of 55,679 youth (54% women) received skills development training from these centers and majority of them became self-employed. Most of the CLCs have computers and are offering computer literacy programmes to students and youth at reasonable cost with a provision of waiver for the very poor and disabled. Most recently 10 centres have been connected with internet on a pilot basis. There are now a total of 1,830 CLCs with 757,607 members (almost 51% women). Over the years, CLCs emerged as 'peoples own organization' which are sensitive to contemporary and future needs, developed mechanisms to reach all segments of people in the society without comprising its pro-disadvantaged approach, services that contribute to improve literacy and developing a literacy-promoting environment.*

## 1. Context

Bangladesh is a poor country with limited natural resources. With a population of 150 million in 147,570 square kilometer area, human resource is the only resource that it has in plenty. To materialize its endeavor to become a middle income country by 2020, Bangladesh's key emphasis needs to be on developing its human resources and utilizing it for national development. Education plays a key role in human development. During the last two decades, the status of education in Bangladesh has undergone significant changes. We are approaching 100% enrolment in primary schools. However, we know that literacy and basic education alone are no longer adequate to meet the needs of this age. To survive in this highly competitive world, one needs knowledge, skills and a capacity to cope with changes in order to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

While we are having a great success in primary education, enrolment in the secondary level is unfortunately closer to 52.3%. Therefore, preparing the young generation for the future is a great challenge. Children's involvement with income generating activities at an early age makes it further difficult. It has been observed that in time of need, the poor segment of population usually cuts the education expenditure on their children and engages them in different income generating activities "Several studies found that the children in Bangladeshi villages are economically active from the age of six."<sup>1</sup> The outcome is a large number of semi-literate unskilled population without any opportunity to further continue their education or develop their skills. Due to the lack of learning opportunities and materials, many eventually lose their ability to read and write, which ultimately court up a vicious circle of poverty.

In this situation, the libraries of the country can play an important role providing access to reading materials as well as skill development opportunities. But, to the rural people library is a very urbanized concept. The prevalent notion of libraries is - these are places for educated and rich people. The poor and semi-literate do not have any access there. Such perception refrains them from going to the libraries. In addition to these, most of these libraries are situated in district towns. As a result, the rural people who live in remote villages do not get an easy access to them. Consequently, the use of public libraries becomes limited among the educated and rich town people. Alienation with reading materials creates an information gap among the rural people regarding ongoing developments, which affects their way of living and makes them vulnerable to exploitation. The limited access to technology makes it difficult for them to cope with the advanced technology-based society and increases the rural-urban divide.

## 2. BRAC CLCs: Goals and Objectives

In response to the above situation, Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), an NGO, started establishing financially self-sustainable Community based Learning Centers (CLC), locally known as Gonokendro since 1995 with a goal to facilitate development of a learning society which is secular, liberal, democratic and sensitive to both short and long-term needs of the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Education Watch, 2005

The Community Learning Centres (CLCs) of BRAC are an endeavour to create a place where children, students, semi-literates, women, the elderly as well as the people of all level, all sect and cast have equal access, right and opportunity to avail services. Aiming to support rural people to cope with the changes and challenges of 21st century, the CLCs are operating with the following objectives:

- To create access to printed, electronic, and other types of continuing education materials to the rural community to promote literacy
- To provide life and livelihood support to the people, especially the younger ones to assist in eradicating poverty
- To create opportunities for rural citizens to get easy access to Information Technology (IT) in order to develop their learning capacity and increase their technological competency.

The activities of the CLCs are linked to the extended understanding of 'basic education' derived from the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000 and as such also conform to the international Millennium Development Goals but not limited to it. Its mandate is larger both in terms of target population and services or activities.

### 3. CLC's Reach: People

CLCs are a new type of initiative both in terms of services and sustainability, reaching the major segments of population including underprivileged. It welcomes all groups of people without any segregation in terms of economy or status and encourages the less privileged. Library is the centerpiece of a CLC and is designed according to the needs of the people of all level including children, students, females, adults and elderly people. On an average a CLC caters to 700 to 800 people and 400 to 500 (roughly 50% women) of them are subscribers who pay a nominal fee.



*People reading newspapers in a CLC*

Around 50 to 60 persons turn out each day, of them 15 to 20 persons borrow books and the others read newspapers and magazines. Due to its inclusive nature, people of different ages, sects, cast and social status come here and interact. Such interactions develop amity among the members and enrich and update them regarding ongoing affairs. As a whole, apart from promoting literacy, CLCs promote social interaction and give the local people a place to spend their leisure time well.

#### 3.1 Children

CLCs have Children's Corners exclusively for children of 6 to 10 years old. The Corners are specially designed for children with 100 to 150 child-friendly books, several charts, pictures, blackboard and various indoor games. The children can read, borrow books and play games here. The objective is to develop reading habit in children and thus increase the number of child reader. To boost up creativity in children, CLCs arrange drawing and storytelling sessions every

week. The art competitions arranged in different occasions encourage the children to pursue their hobby. The combination of Children's Corner with CLC creates an opportunity for interaction between elders and children and develops a cooperative attitude among them. At present, 90% of the CLCs have a Children's Corner.

In its activities CLCs always make efforts to meet the need of the rural poor. Considering poor children's early childhood needs, CLCs initiated Toy libraries – an endeavour to create a favourable environment for children's development. Poor children aged 4 to 8, who do not have any toys at home, can play with different toys coming here. Toys that are suitable for children, easily available, reusable and stimulate children's senses are kept here. To keep the initiative cost-effective Toy libraries receive secondhand toys as donation from the villagers.



*Children in Children's Corner*

### 3.2 School Students

Considering the need of the poor students, CLCs also keep textbooks of all grades and lend those to the poorest students. It has been observed that usually 20% to 25% students of a class, which means around 80 to 100 students of a school, are unable to buy books<sup>2</sup>. These students can borrow textbooks from the CLCs for a full academic year. At the end of the academic year, s/he can borrow another set for the next class returning the current set of book.

As the CLCs are situated in the secondary school premises or in close proximity, a major segment of its members are secondary school students. To increase their interest towards library use and reading, a separate period in their class routine is kept for library use. Students of a class use the library once a week during that period under the guidance of a teacher. Estimate shows that roughly a half of the students are first generation learners and economically poor thus they have no printed materials at home. This library class exposes them to the non-textbook literacy world.

*Student CLC members who do not have libraries in their schools are among the largest group of readers. In the school-based CLCs the rate of use for students is slightly higher than in the CLCs based in premises other than schools whereas the use by non-student members is almost the same whether the CLCs is in a school or elsewhere.*

*Source: Kassam et.al, 2003*

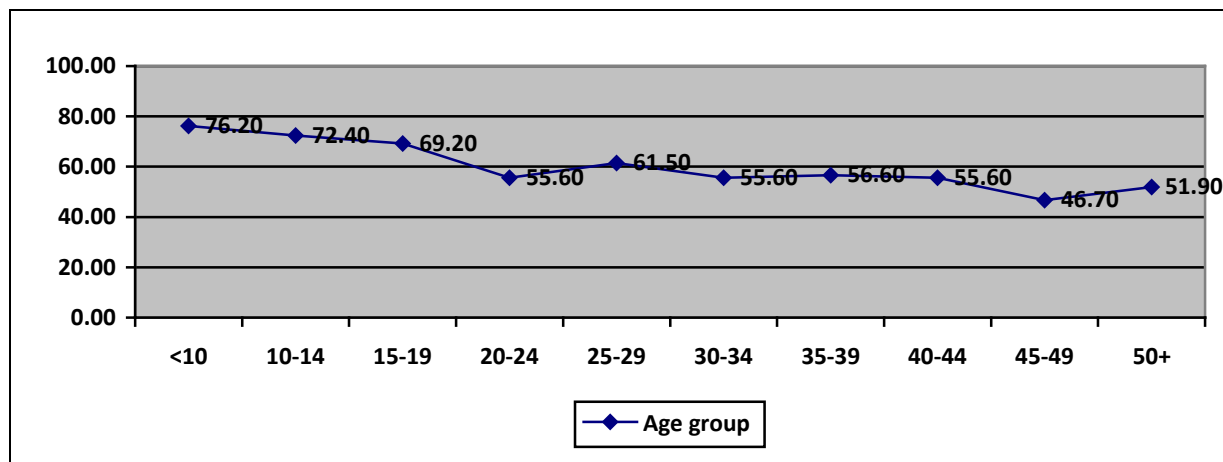
### 3.3 Adolescents, Youth, Adult and Women

CLCs have a number of services targeting the requirements of the adolescents, youth, adult and women. The collection of books CLCs have is satisfying the need of all ages. Computer training and skill development training programme focus on the unemployed youth and adults as well as

<sup>2</sup> The average number of students in a typical Bangladeshi school is around 400;

the professionals who want to further develop their skills. Mobile library programme targets the women, elderly and disabled who cannot come to the CLCs. In a nutshell, CLCs aim to cater to the need of everyone of the community.

**Figure 2: Regular attendance of members by age group  
(Percentage of sample population)**



From an evaluation<sup>3</sup> on CLCs it has been found that the majority of library members can be segregated into three groups: children aged 8+, adolescents, youths and the adults. However, majority of the users ranges from 8 to 24. Ninety-six percent of the members are involved in book reading and over 70% in newspaper reading. While the level of book reading is almost the same for males and females, the newspaper reading is higher for males (72% males and 58% females). The study found that almost 60% of the members of CLCs share books with non-members and a further 60% share the content of what they read with friends and family. In this way the impact of the libraries extends beyond the registered members and occasional users of the libraries.

#### 4. CLC Services

CLCs are not a library in conventional sense but CLCs' services are related to library. With a modest attempt to create access to the printed materials for a group of people who are alien to the library concept, CLCs offer an array of services related to promoting literacy, acquainting with technology, developing livelihood skills, raising social awareness as well as enhancing cultural sensitivity.

CLCs' services include a library facility with 1,000 books for people of all ages, a corner exclusively designed for children with child friendly posters, books and indoor games, musical instruments such as harmonium and tabla for members to learn singing, where fund allows arrangement for computer training with one to two computers with a printer, and in a few libraries a micro museum containing local historical items representing cultural heritage. Among

<sup>3</sup> Ryan, Anne, James Jennings, and Jill White. *BEP 2004-2009: Mid Term Review Report*. Dhaka, 2007.

the CLCs, 520 have a outreach programme known as mobile libraries for people who cannot come to the CLCs (i.e. women, elderly and disabled). Apart from these, CLCs arrange skill development training for youths on different trades in collaboration with Directorate of Youth Development and organize various cultural programmes to celebrate different remarkable days.

Bangladesh is a developing country with a poor economy. Expecting a conventional library for all across the country is not realistic. However, CLCs, in terms of concept, have every sense of promise as well as a strong potential to eventually create a much larger library structure.

#### **4.1 Books**

The library is the centerpiece of a CLC and contains 600 fixed and 400 rotating books, which make a collection of 1,000 books. The collection includes literature, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, prose, drama, historical books, science magazine, religious books, books on famous people, agriculture etc. A central committee formed by BRAC selects the books for CLCs considering the age, test and need of the target population. The committee even goes to the CLC spots and discuss with the children, students, women and community people about their choices and needs. While selecting books attention is given whether the books represent secular values, whether those are consistent with liberal and democratic values and whether those are age relevant. In addition to these 1,000 books, CLC keeps 2-3 magazines and 1-2 daily newspapers.

To give the members access to a wider range of books in a most cost-effective way, the 400 rotating books are exchanged among the 10 nearby CLCs once a year. Though, the members have access to only 1,000 books at a time but over a period of 10 years they get access to 4,600 books through rotation<sup>4</sup>.

CLCs receive donation of books; however, they are very cautious about the type of books donated. CLCs do not receive any book which contradicts secular and democratic values. The local BRAC staff plays a key role in this inspection.

#### **4.2 Readers Forum**

CLCs also form Readers Forum to encourage reading, to increase book transaction of CLCs, as well as to increase reading habit among its members through competition. There are two types of Readers Forum – Student Readers Forum and General Readers Forum. The Student Readers Forum is formed with 15 to 30 students of the adjacent secondary school and the General Readers Forum is formed with at least 10 ordinary members (youth/adult) of the CLCs. The members of the Forums are given a separate book transaction card in addition to the library card. Using the cards the members can borrow more than one book (2/3) at a time. The duration of each Readers Forum is two to three months; a member usually reads 8 to 10 books during this period. The members of the Forum sit together fortnightly and discuss about the books they read. When a Forum ends, a 3 to 5-member evaluation committee selects champion readers (best three) from the members by analyzing different information and records. Usually 700 to 800 CLCs run Student Readers Forum and 50 to 60 CLCs run General Readers Forum at a time. The

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<sup>4</sup> Each CLC gets 400 new books (rotating books) each year through interchange. In a period of ten years they get  $(400 \times 10) = 4000$  books by turn. Including the fixed 600 books, the total number of books is 4,600.



student's forum ensures that at least a half are female and the general member's forum has a similar proportion of female. Readers Forum has increased the number of readers to a large extent. It has also enhanced the depth of knowledge of the readers as they share their understanding and opinion in the fortnightly meeting.

### 4.3 Outreach Van

CLCs also operate low-cost mobile libraries to promote literacy and to develop reading habit among the women, housewives, disabled and elderly people who cannot come to the centers. To some extent, it is an extension of CLC services to reach better. The mobile library is managed by a part-time assistant librarian who usually carries about 100 books to the doorsteps of rural households by a rickshaw van (manually operated 3 wheelers) once or twice a week. S/he also carries a list of 1,000 books that are available in the CLC and lets the reader choose from it to deliver the next day/week. A mobile library usually sits twice a week in a spot from where on average 10 to 12 books are borrowed each day. The village women, housewives, dropped out students and elderly people are mostly the members of the Mobile libraries. At present, 520 CLCs have Mobile Libraries with 21,320 members (73.61% per cent female)<sup>5</sup>.



*People borrowing books from Mobile Library*

### 4.4 Micro Museum

Micro museums are the most recent inclusions in CLCs acquainting the new generation with the culture and heritage of rural Bangladesh. In the CLC, a separate shelf is kept for this purpose. On this shelf, local historical items such as mementos of local martyrs who died in the liberation war, old copper utensils which are not used these days, old coins and money, coins of different countries, and miniatures of different kinds of items such as the dheki (husking tool) and plough are kept. These items are either donated by the community or collected. Such museums give visitors and CLC members an idea of the local heritage. At present, 85 CLCs have micro museums.

*In each of the CLCs visited, those present, especially older people, were particularly keen to talk about these displays and to discuss the former use and significance of each item and where it had come from. The MTR (Mid Term Review) team sees Micro Museum as one that has the potential to be developed further. Reflecting on the past generates an awareness of change and a questioning of what constitutes progress which is important in empowering people to shape their future. It also provides an opportunity for older members to engage with younger members.*

*Source: Kassam, et al., 2003*

<sup>5</sup> BEP At a Glance, March 2009

#### 4.5 Socio-cultural Events

CLCs promote socio-cultural activities, organizing competitions on drawing, essay writing, recitation, preparing wall magazines, publishing annual magazines as well as celebrating important days, for example International Mother Language Day, Independence Day and Bangla New Year. Such initiatives increase creativity, build up confidence and tends children to engage in cultural activities at an early age.

#### 4.6 Awareness Building

CLCs arrange multimedia presentation for rural people on different social issues to raise awareness among them. Usually these are one-day program with 2 to 3 sessions, which includes children's session, students' session and session for general people. Different educational and social awareness raising CDs, cartoons, documentary, and dramas are shown in these sessions. From a field study it has been found that the villagers have become knowledgeable of many health issues from CLCs, such as basic cleanliness in daily life, preventing diarrhea, making oral saline, taking care of a pregnant mother, family planning, the importance of vaccination, awareness of AIDS and arsenic and the use of organic fertilizers in their agricultural fields<sup>6</sup>.



*Multimedia presentation in a CLC*

#### 4.7 Skill Development



*Women receiving training on tailoring*

One of the objectives of CLC is eradicating poverty and to do that in addition to providing library support CLCs organize skill development training for youth with limited literacy. The trainings are on different trades such as computing, electrical work and electronics, livestock rearing, horticulture, fish culture, poultry etc. and arranged in collaboration with the Directorate of Youth Development. Approximately 9,500 trainees receive training from the government annually free of cost. Where appropriate, the training takes place on the CLC premises. After receiving training the trained youth are linked with different micro finance organizations for accessing finance in order to apply their new/improved skill for livelihood improvement. So far a total of 55,679 youth (54% women) received skills development training from these centers and majority of them became self-employed.

<sup>6</sup> Ashraf, Mahfuz, Jo Hanisch, and Paul Swatman. "ICT intervention in the 'Chandanbari' village of Bangladesh: Results from a field study". Adelaide: Springer, 2008.

The role CLCs are playing in mobilizing the youth for skill development training is quite fascinating. The Coordinator of a Youth Training Centre indicated a desire to develop even closer working arrangements with CLCs because of CLCs' ability to identify and marshal young people in rural areas who need this kind of training.

#### 4.8 Information Technology (IT)



*Students using computer in a CLC*

Bangladesh only has 0.8 PCs per 100 inhabitants, 19.04 Internet users per 10,000 inhabitants and 0.19 Internet cafes/tele-centers (estimated) per 10,000 inhabitants<sup>7</sup>. Computers are too costly for individual households in the villages to purchase and there is a dearth of computerized facilities for public use. Students or youth who want to develop ICT skills must travel long distance and pay high fees for ICT training. In such a situation, the CLCs with IT are playing an important role ensuring rural people's easy access to technology.

At present, out of 1,830 CLCs 800 have computers and printing facility. These CLCs offer computer literacy programme to students and youth at reasonable cost. There are three packages under this programme: Children's package, Students' package and General. The durations of Children's package and Students' package are one month each and the duration of General package is 3 months. The course fee of these packages is less than the local IT training centers. In each batch of Children and Students' package, a handicapped or an ultra poor student is given training free of cost. The librarian of the CLC facilitates the training packages. She receives a 12-day basic, 18-day advance and 6-day refresher training on IT from BRAC to run the computer training packages effectively. In addition to receiving computer training, anyone can practice computer in the CLC being a member of the Users' Club paying a nominal fee (paying 8 taka per hour). So far, a total of 31,565 people (49.55% female) received computer training from CLCs.

*The availability of computers and low cost computer training in the CLCs are generating employment opportunities suitable for a range of people including those who might otherwise find it difficult to work. The IT capacity is also becoming a basic competency that students in particular need in order to enter the labour market. The location of CLCs in secondary schools and the availability of the training in the CLCs make it feasible for students to acquire IT skills even if these are not taught in their schools. Source: Ryan et al., 2007*

CLCs with IT have a collection of 15 to 20 CDs on different educational and social awareness raising issues, general knowledge, health and games. BRAC also has developed two materials: 'Sustho Jibon' (Good Health) and 'e-Gonokendro'. The first one contains information on different hospitals of Bangladesh and general health (i.e. diseases and its protection) and the second contains the process of operating computerized CLC. There is also an IT Corner in the

<sup>7</sup> Kundu, Ashis K. "Country Paper on Information Society Statistics: Core ICT Indicators." 2007

CLC which has the latest IT related news and paper cuttings to upgrade the members about latest IT interventions in the country.

The growing demand of IT is putting pressure on CLCs to increase their number of computers and to expand their services. However, such initiatives need support and networking with other similar organizations. BRAC is trying to develop such relationship. It has already provided 10 CLCs with Internet connection in collaboration with BRAC-Net. The librarians of such CLCs are given special training on Internet browsing. Anyone can browse here paying a nominal fee per hour. The villagers are becoming much benefitted from the initiative. Nowadays, they can contact with their relatives, living abroad, quite easily using Internet whereas previously they had to go to the district town which is in a distance<sup>8</sup>.

## **5. Special Features of CLC**

### **5.1 Community Involvement**

One of the important features of the CLCs is involvement of community in all of its activities from mobilizing fund to ensuring smooth running of the Center. CLCs are established with the financing of both BRAC and the community. The community not only provides a space to set up the CLC but also helps to create a supportive environment for the users to use the facilities offered by it. Where CLCs are situated in secondary schools, it is the teachers and school administration that help to ensure that the students are benefiting from the available opportunities. The initial committee and the Trust board both are formed with the members of the community. The initial committee plays a crucial role in mobilizing fund from the community and supervising operation of CLC. After forming Trust, the Trustee board takes the responsibility of the CLC. The members of the board meet quarterly and discuss issues related to development of CLC. The librarians of the CLCs are also recruited from the local people.

To support the Trustee Board, there is a youth committee in CLCs formed with the youth of the locality. They help in mobilizing fund for CLCs, in collecting cash and crops as donation, in mobilizing youth for skill development training, as well as organizing different socio-cultural activities. The work of the youth committee encourages young people towards doing voluntary work which was declining in our country.

CLCs are also dependent on community for their sustainability. Though they become self-financing Trust, the money on the interest is not good enough to meet all of its expenses. The members' annual subscription fee and the seasonal donation received in cash or kind from the community add to its sustainability. This fund is used for additional expenditure, such as to buy new books or to organise socio-cultural events in the CLCs.

As a whole, from the beginning – the mobilisation of the community to set up the Centre, to recruit a librarian, to form a trust - and throughout the subsequent operation and development, the community plays a leading role.

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<sup>8</sup> Uddin, Mohammad, K. "BRAC Gonokendro Library Activities at Narshingdi." Letter. The Daily Sangbad 17 Nov. 2008

## 5.2 Gender and Inclusiveness

CLCs are quite gender sensitive in terms of operation and services. 99% librarians of the CLCs are female. This recruitment empowers the women both financially and socially. Being an earning member of the family, they can take part in household decision-making. The impact of their functions as role models in Bangladesh is very significant.

The Mobile unit of CLC was initiated with the aim to reach the women of the villages and the outcome is noteworthy. In addition, by providing reading materials and basic computer training, CLCs are making the women more conscious and informed. Thus, CLCs overall treatment of women goes in line with the UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG) that is 'promoting gender equity and empowering women'.

However, the number of female members in CLC initial committee and in trustee board is still low. To increase the number, it has been decided that the initial committee will have at least two to three female members out of 7 to 9 and keeping a female member in the trustee board has been made obligatory.

The CLCs are inclusive. It pays special attention to ethnic and disabled/differently abled population. 80 CLCs cater directly to ethnic population and there are around 60 ethnic librarians. The number of disabled users/members in these CLCs is 4,112.

## 5.3 Cost-effectiveness

CLCs are cost-effective in terms of establishment, maintenance and the services it provides. As CLCs are established in a space donated by the community, the space does not involve any capital or recurring expenditure (e.g. rent). The inputs from BRAC in establishing CLCs are roughly costs for staff and administration, purchase of 1,000 books and computers (but 50% of training fees are used to refund the computers), furniture and a matching grant of taka 50,000. The community raises at least taka 30,000 before the CLC is opened and then at least additional taka 20,000 in order to convert the local committee to a Trust. These are the cost involved in establishing CLCs.

The running/recurring costs of CLCs are salary for librarians, electricity bill, paper bill, and repair of computer in CLC. These expenses are usually met from incomes of the CLCs which are interests from the Trust fund, members' annual subscription fee, training fees, mainly from computer related courses and seasonal donations.

The limited resources of CLCs are utilized in an economic way to get the highest benefit from those. Rotating the books among nearby CLCs, receiving books and toys as donation, mobilizing fund through donation given in cash/kind contribute to it. The Mobile Libraries are established based on the income of the CLCs. The costs involved in operating a mobile library, are the price of purchasing a three wheeler rickshaw and the honorarium of the assistant librarian. CLCs usually buy a rickshaw and when the rickshaw is not in use in library transport, it is rented out in the locality. The income of the rickshaw is used to repay the investment. Further income finances the running cost.



The experience made so far is that the system of CLC is near to self-sufficiency at a moderate level with strong emphasis on local ownership and control.

## 6. Sustainability and Management of CLC

CLCs are established with the support of both BRAC and the community. Within one year of establishment, they are transformed into full-fledged trust and become self-financed, however at a moderate level. The centres are usually established in locations such as close to bazaar, post-office, Union Council, bank or non-government secondary school where people get together for private reasons. The advantage of placing the CLCs in such locations is that people can use the library coming otherwise to these places. However, most of the CLCs are nowadays located in the premises of non-government secondary schools where students do not have access to school library services. Less than 21% of 17,000 secondary schools have libraries of their own.

To establish a CLC, at first BRAC makes an agreement with the community who are willing to provide a room (400 to 500 square feet) free of cost to host the library. Next, a CLC committee (7 or 9-membered) is formed taking representative of the donor institution (school, Union Council), people of the community, and one BRAC staff. This initial committee contributes in raising fund, increasing members, forming youth committee and recruiting librarian for CLC. Within a year the committee raises minimum Tk. 50,000 from the community. With this amount, BRAC provides a matching grant of Tk. 50,000 and 1,000 books with necessary furniture such as bookshelves. The total fund of Tk. 100,000, raised by the committee and granted by BRAC, is then put in term deposit in a bank, and gets the CLC registered as Trust with the government. The interest earned from the deposit is used to pay the regular expenses of the library, including paper bill and the salary of the para-librarian. After forming trust, the CLC become self-financing and the board of trustees supervises its activities. The members of the trustee board meet at least 4 times a year and make decisions about different operational issues and upcoming activities of the CLC. They also play a crucial role in mobilizing fund for CLCs at the time of need. Usually it takes around 1 year to form the Trust. In the interim, BRAC bears the regular expenses of the CLC.

*Over the years many different approaches to local 'resource centres' have been tried out, in Bangladesh as .... One of the main problems has been lack of institutional and financial sustainability. The tendency has been that centres have been inserted as some alien organism in localities, with no energy to survive when external assistance has been withdrawn. CLCs are to a large extent free from such problems. The investment of considerable amount of money in the Trust fund and sharing the CLCs' operational responsibility by the local societies develop a form of ownership among the community people.*

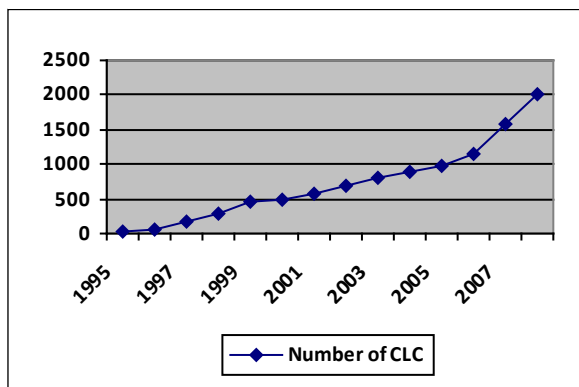
*Source: Kassam, et al., 2003*

Usually, a locally recruited woman works as the librarian and keeps the CLC open for 4 to 6 hours a day and 6 days a week. Preference is given to females and disabled or ultra poor while recruiting librarian. The educational qualification of the para-librarian needs to be minimum of SSC (Secondary School Certificate) level. The librarians receive a 12-day training from BRAC on basic aspects of library record keeping.

At present, there are 1,830 CLCs with 757,607 members, 49.02% of whom are female (see map in Appendix). Out of these 2,108 CLCs, 1,512 have become self-sustainable being transformed

into Trust. Depending on the ability and opportunity, the CLCs also provide computer related services. Currently 800 CLCs have computer facility.

Figure 1: Number of CLCs (1995 to 2008)



The activities in the CLCs are closely followed up by the field management team of BRAC which includes Programme Organizers (a university graduate) and Area Managers (a university graduate with few years of work experience). The ICT organizers of BRAC (computer diploma) provide all kinds of technical support needed to CLCs with IT. However, the librarians are also able to do simple troubleshooting of computers.

## 7. Challenges

Limited number of new books poses a challenge for the CLCs. CLCs have developed reading habit among people and increased the number of readers in the locality. The growing number of readers has a growing demand for new books. To meet the demand of new books, CLCs rotates 400 books annually. However, it has been found that in some old CLCs the readers have already read most of the books and in some comparatively new CLCs there are still books to be read. As a result, book rotation does not address everyone's demand.

Small number of newspaper is another challenge of CLCs. Due to limitation of fund most of the CLCs cannot afford to buy more than one daily newspaper which is inadequate for such a large number of readers. There is a demand for special magazines (e.g. sports, women development) but most CLCs cannot address it.

Running the class routine programme is also a challenge for the CLCs. Most classes usually comprise of more than 60 to 70 students that CLC cannot accommodate at a time. Seating capacity in the CLCs ranges from 20 to 25 persons. As a result, all the students cannot get the benefit of the initiative.

It has been observed that some people in the community who were not familiar with reading books in their youth-hood consider reading books as wastage of time and discourage students in reading non-academic books. A research study<sup>9</sup> of CLCs shows, female students face more problem in this regard compared to male. Motivating such members is a challenge for CLCs.

Frequent drop out of librarians is a challenge that the CLCs are facing. After joining in CLCs, the librarians receive IT training and become competent in operating different computer software. It creates scope for them to get a better job with a better salary elsewhere. As a result they often leave the CLCs. To minimize the rate of drop out CLCs are trying to increase CLC's fund to raise the salary of the librarians.

<sup>9</sup> Imam, Nuzat, Raihana Karim, and Rabiul Awal Choudhury. Evaluation of Selected Components of Gonokendro. Dhaka, 2008.

## 8. Impact of CLCs

CLCs are liberal and secular in nature and over the years have emerged as 'peoples own organization' which are sensitive to contemporary and future needs. Being an institution of mass people, CLCs provide an intergenerational meeting space where people of different age, sex, cast, and status interact. The Centre creates an opportunity to develop a habit of reading at an early age which opens a door for the members to mould themselves differently with higher consciousness and self-awareness. Access to a wider range of printed materials, skill development opportunity, information technology, and cultural activities enhance people's knowledge, skills, creativity, and help in their cognitive development. Mobile libraries have reached a substantial segment of people who otherwise would have been deprived of library facility. Over 47% of the members who read books from the CLCs and 38% from the mobile libraries did not have a habit of reading books before they joined<sup>10</sup>.

*The CLCs are instrumental in reducing the cultural gap between those who have and those who have not. In the CLC, poor people find a place where they are considered equal, where they have the same rights, where they can receive training, knowledge, skills. They can come in contact with a world of the written word, and even modern technology as computers. Source: Kassam, et al., 2003*

CLCs have also created occupational opportunity for housewives appointing them as librarians and thus contributed in empowering women.

Many indicators related to development of the CLCs show that they are satisfying local information and cultural needs and aspirations. For many rural people the BRAC CLCs are the first 'formal institutions' they are involved with and even become members of. Rural people getting used to planning, budgeting, reporting, decision-making in general, taking account of various interests and working towards common goals might represent an important positive aspect of the CLCs. The long term outcome of which is an enlightened society free from poverty and hunger.

### ***BRAC CLC: A New Horizon of Knowledge - A Case Study***

*Montala High School is situated in rural Muktagachha, an upazila of Mymensing district, 120 km in the north of capital Dhaka. In a room of that school BRAC established a Community Learning Centre with the assistance of the school authority and the community. Abdur Rahim is a student of grade VIII of Montala High School and a member of the CLC. He stood first in the Mymensing District Essay Competition of that year. According to Abdur Rahim, it is the CLC which contributed most in his success. He said that it would not have been possible for him to collect so many books and get relevant information for his essay without the CLC. He added that there are many renowned schools in Mymensing district, the students of which also competed in the essay competition. He would not have got a chance in the midst of them. It is only because of CLC he earned the success. Source: Uddin Md. Rehan. "BRAC has opened a new horizon of knowledge."*

*Source: Uddin, Md. Rehan. "BRAC has opened a new horizon of Knowledge." Setu. BRAC Publication Department. Winter - Spring edition. Dhaka: BRAC Printers, 1997. 9*

<sup>10</sup> Ryan, et al., 2007



Appendix: Position of CLCs (As of June 2008)



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