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Practitioner Paper

Implementation of the UNCRPD for Ensuring an Inclusive Society in Bangladesh: A Joint Venture of the Ministry of Social Welfare and German Cooperation

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Introduction

Disability is a universal element in the human condition from which no one is protected. Considering it as a human diversity, disability has been included in different sectors of development initiatives. Many people in Bangladesh view disability as a curse and a cause of embarrassment to the family. In Bangladesh, there have been only a few systemic interventions to raise awareness about persons with disabilities at the community level. According to WHO (2011) around 15% of any population have disability. Present surveys (GIZ & READ, 2012) emanates from the current knowledge gap, which exists on the prevalence of disability in the context of Bangladesh. Besides, the survey also tried to identify the interventions needed to be addressed as per the specifications of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [UNCRPD] (United Nations, 2006) at the District, Upazila (sub-district) and Union levels.

The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) worked as a chief implementing agency for the implementation of the UNCRPD project

successfully in Bangladesh. The Department of Social Services (DSS) played the vital role to implement the project at the field level. Sector heads of the Department of Social Services in district, sub-district and union levels were the key personnel to communicate and implement the project in every level successfully. German Cooperation (GIZ) has an aim to minimize the challenges related to its crosscutting issues to develop an inclusive society through its different kinds of projects for the vulnerable community. One of the various projects includes successful implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (UNCRPD), which started its journey on January 2012 and ended on September 2013. In this project, German Cooperation (GIZ) played the supportive role for the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) to implement the project effectively in field level. GIZ with its two partner organizations in two pilot sites in Madaripur and Netrokona assisted the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) to achieve the goal of the project to build an inclusive society. In the total process, GIZ and its partner organizations supported the Ministry through advocacy, capacity building, knowledge management, awareness raising, policy consultation with the government bodies and other stakeholders.

The role of GIZ in this project was to make the government officials aware about the rights of person with disabilities based on the UNCRPD. GIZ made attempts to activate the Disability Welfare Committees at District, Sub-districts, Pourashava & Union level and influenced those committees to ensure the adequate distribution of resources to the person with disabilities, under the UNCRPD project. The committee members were the local stakeholders who have the resources and power to utilize those for the betterment of person with disabilities. GIZ throughout its various initiatives tried to raise awareness of these respective sector heads to distribute the resources among the most vulnerable groups especially the person with disabilities. This paper aims to address how this right-based project attempted to improve the living condition of people with disabilities through ensuring their inclusion in every sphere of life.

Goal and objectives of the project

The overall goal of the Implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) project was to support the Government of Bangladesh for development of local CRPD activity

plans and to strengthen the capacity of state bodies and non-governmental organizations working with persons with disabilities at the selected pilot areas (Madripur and Netrokona). GIZ supported a participatory and inclusive drafting process for local activity plans by involving the government officials and civil society organizations, including organizations working for persons with disabilities, especially the Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs) and human rights organizations.

Major articles of the UNCRPD covered

The purpose of the UN Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is to promote, protect and ensure the full and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities, and to promote respect for their inherent dignity.

Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their participation in society on an equal basis with others.

To include the excluded in our society, GIZ focused on some major activities based on the major 11 articles of UN Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to ensure their rights like other citizens. The articles are listed below:

- Awareness raising (Article 8 CRPD)
- Accessibility (Art. 9 CRPD)
- Situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies (Article 11 CRPD)
- Freedom from exploitation, violence and abuse (Article 16 of the CRPD)
- Living independently and being included in the community (Article 19 CRPD)
- Education (Article 24 CRPD)
- Health (Article of the 25 CRPD)
- Habitation and Rehabilitation (Article 26)
- Work and employment (Article 27 CRPD)
- Adequate standard of living and social protection (Article 28 CRPD)
- Participation in political and public life (Article 29 CRPD)

Major strategies applied to include the excluded

The first and foremost way of changing a society is to change the mindset of the people in the society. Several sessions were conducted to develop the knowledge level of community people and local stakeholders on different disability issues, causes of disability, its impact, how to prevent disability, how to minimize harmful practices, where to go for getting support, competences and roles of person with the disabilities etc. Some initiatives were taken for consciousness building on rights of education, consciousness building about disability related law and about social evaluation program. Community people were made aware through media programs, family level counseling; group discussions, Uthan Baithak (community meeting) and street drama and songs.

Another crucial factor for ensuring the UNCRPD is that local government needs to make the representative aware regarding the equal human rights issues of the person with disabilities. In order to achieve this objective, local government took the major responsibility of building awareness among community people at sub-district and union level also. In support of those initiatives, GIZ and its partner organizations made the community people aware through different activities. Activities included discussion about the disability related issues at school in parents' gatherings, at union council committee meetings and at health campaign. Some sessions were further conducted to orient people with disabilities regarding the situations of threats of armed conflicts, humanitarian emergencies and natural disasters.

To build self-empowerment among the persons with disabilities, GIZ and its partner organizations worked for enhancing their employment opportunities. A number of meetings and sessions were conducted with the local leaders to create more employment facilities for them and fulfill the 5% quota with person with disabilities. There were number of awareness raising sessions and meetings conducted with the district disability committee members, local stakeholders and other community members as well as person with disabilities for creating more opportunity to include children with disabilities in mainstream schools. Since German Cooperation was playing a supporting role to the Ministry of Social Welfare, no direct training or resource support were provided to the persons with disabilities to extend the education facilities. But German Cooperation and its partner organizations made the respected sector leaders

clear about the education rights of person with disabilities and the need for inclusive education instead of special education. Special education is a system which segregates between the regular students and students with disabilities.

Moreover, several sessions were conducted with civil surgeons and other health personnel to ensure that the persons with disabilities receive essential health support from the health centers free of cost and they get disability certificates from them to use that for availing quota facilities for them. Previously the civil surgeons didn't know about their responsibilities to the persons with disabilities. After the intervention, they assured that they would do their best to ensure support services for persons with disabilities on a priority basis. The UNCRPD project advocated for their rehabilitation of persons with disabilities in wider context. In regard to health related services, the person with disabilities and their families were informed about where to go to obtain health supports, such as physiotherapy for physical disabilities, surgery of clubfeet etc. For economic empowerment related issues, the German Cooperation took measures to explore job opportunities for the persons with disabilities and specific measures were taken for ensuring 5% quota in the government recruitments. For social rehabilitation issues, awareness-raising initiatives of family members of persons with disabilities were done. Community people and local leaders were also covered by the awareness-raising sessions arranged by the GIZ so that persons with disabilities and their families have the right to an adequate standard of living, adequate food, clothing and housing and continuous improvement of their living conditions.

Success milestones of the UNCRPD project

After completing the one-year period of the UNCRPD implementation project, the target participants were evaluated to find out achievement of the project activities. The disability welfare committee members, government officials, local stakeholders and other community members were evaluated by interview, survey and investigation to find out the project achievement. GIZ and its partner organizations collected all those data and saw that a huge number of participants are now aware and knowledgeable. Besides that, Research Evaluation Associates for Development Ltd. (READ) conducted the baseline survey and the end-project evaluation. READ also submitted Baseline Assessment Report and

End Evaluation Report of the Implementation of UNCRPD Project to German Cooperation and the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW). These two reports showed the difference between the previous situation and the present status of the pilot areas.

The project focused on 11 major articles of the Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (CRPD) and resulted in a great success in the two pilot sites (Madaripur and Netrokona). All those activities and initiatives brought a radical change in the livelihood of the person with disabilities. Reflections were taken from the stakeholders after completion of different awareness interventions. The most important outcome was that the person with disabilities became empowered enough to raise their own voices to achieve their rights and to make others aware about their rights. Some of other success milestones were as follows:

Previously the District Disability Committee members didn't know that they are in the committee. The same condition was noticed in the sub-district, union council disability committee. But now the committee members are active in committee and they conduct meeting regularly for the inclusion of person with disabilities in the society, as they are now aware that one society cannot move ahead without a large group of members who have some sorts of disabilities. The committee members and government officials are now keep in mind about the person with disabilities and their rights in their regular planning and activity, budget and other interventions as well.

After the interventions taken, it was further observed that local government people became aware about the issues related to equal participation of persons with disabilities in the society. For example, reflection from the local stakeholders revealed that they came to know that persons with disabilities have the equal right to participate in political and social life as well as they have the right to include their name in voter list, they can stand for election and also they can vote for their selected candidates.

After the project implementation, the government officials and other sector heads understood the need of ensuring accessibility and they agreed to keep in mind the issues related to person with disabilities when they would construct any building, road, culvert, bridge, or school building. The family members became aware that the accessibility in house is very

much needed for the person with disabilities. The Bus owners' committee members became very much concerned that they would give priority to the persons with disabilities when they would travel by bus. A large number of people were unaware about the exploitation and violence issues. GIZ's UNCRPD project was successful to make the members of the local government or other stakeholders understand differential forms of support needed for men, women and children with disabilities to prevent exploitation, violence and abuse.

As a result of running the project, the community people, teachers, school managing committee (SMC) members and other government officials came to know that education is the fundamental human right for all. Also there was a wrong impression in the community that the persons with disabilities would attend only the special schools. However, this project made it clear that all children would receive education in the same school, which known as inclusive education. With the help of GIZ and its partner organizations, persons with disabilities and their family members became well-versed about the availability of different types of support that include physiotherapy; education stipends; social Services, disability allowances, wheel chair issues etc. The civil surgeons and other health personnel became more concerned about the health care issues of persons with disabilities.

Conclusion

The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) and German Cooperation (GIZ) jointly worked for the successful implementation of the UNCRPD in Bangladesh, which would build an inclusive society through inclusion of the excluded. After completion of the project, the outcomes showed that significant change has occurred by creating mass awareness among the key stakeholders and community people about the rights of persons with disabilities and their inclusion strategies in the society. Primarily, the project was piloted in two districts (Madaripur and Netrokona) and the result was satisfactory. So it would be important to implement the UNCRPD project in all districts of Bangladesh to endorse the rights of person with disabilities to make an inclusive society in regards to education, health, employment, economic development and finally living independently in a society.

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