



Partners in Aid

AUSTRALIA

SYMBIOSIS BANGLADESH GARMENT TRAINING PROJECT AND JAMUNA RIVER DEVELOPMENT PROJECT ANNUAL REPORTS, 2022

Background

Symbiosis International Australia is a charitable trust which was established in Brisbane, Australia in late 1993. It was registered as Symbiosis Bangladesh in February 1995 with the NGO Affairs Bureau of Bangladesh. Symbiosis's emphasis is on assisting poor and marginalized communities. It seeks to empower poor and marginalized people socially and economically so that they can live the community with dignity.

Partners in Aid (PIA) began supporting projects in Bangladesh when it was still a young organization with limited donors and resources. In the year 2021-2022, as in preceding years, Partners in Aid has funded two projects in Bangladesh through Symbiosis Bangladesh. However, in early 2021, the year before this report, Partners in Aid gave Symbiosis Bangladesh notice that the coming year would be the last year that PIA would be funding any of their projects. There were a variety of reasons for this decision, mostly focussing on the administrative difficulties of funding projects in Bangladesh, and particularly the difficulty for PIA representatives making field trips to the projects to monitoring ongoing activities. However, underpinning this decision was the recognition that Symbiosis Bangladesh has grown and now have a number of major donors, ensuring that the work the organization undertakes will continue. We wish them every success in their continuing efforts to improve the quality of the lives of the many Bangladeshi families they help.

GARMENT TRAINING PROJECT (WITH COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT, MYMENSINGH)

Introduction

The living conditions of poor people have improved dramatically throughout most of Bangladesh since the 1990s when our present partner Symbiosis Bangladesh was founded with the help of PIA. PIA's involvement with Symbiosis Bangladesh has led to successful projects centred around the Mymensingh area in northern Bangladesh.

The Mymensingh area has been very badly affected by Covid, the effect of which this during our last year funding this project has been profound. In understanding this report, it is important to note our project has not been implemented in isolation of other donor organisations supporting similar work through Symbiosis. When the Covid virus struck the area and the entire country was put into intermittent lockdowns, PIA offered to have its contribution used to pay the ongoing salaries of Symbiosis staff, in the same manner 'Job keeper' was used in Australia. In implementing this agreement, no clear distinction could be made between staff on PIA projects and those on other

similar projects. All the work done, wherever possible, was credited as PIA supported, on the understanding that the usual work supported by PIA would continue after PIA ceased supporting its project. It has been a difficult time for all concerned but I believe that the outcome is satisfactory with respect to PIA's objectives.

Regardless of the challenges, 2021-2022 was not a write-off so far that PIA supported projects were concerned. Apart from keeping the project staff together, significant project achievements were made, although it has been difficult to understand the interaction of all activities in detail.

The Local Context

Despite impressive improvements in recent years, Bangladesh remains a very poor country. With an estimated population of around 160 million split 30:70 between urban and rural, and an average population density of over 1,000 people per square kilometre, challenges to development remain. The World Bank suggests that 31.5% of the population live below the National Upper Poverty line and 43.3% living on less than \$1 per day.¹ Literacy remains low: 43.7% of rural women are estimated to be completely illiterate².

Rural outcomes are consistently lower than national averages, particularly in areas such as access to information and education, poverty rates, and literacy. Maternal mortality remains high at 194 deaths per 100,000 live births, despite significant improvement in recent years. Child marriage also continues to be a problem with 64% of women aged between 20-24 married before the age of 18.³ Combined with limited access to sources of information such as newspapers, TV radio and the Internet (less than 50% of rural women have access to TV or radio and less than 20% internet or newspapers⁴) women are particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged.

Large sections of the population in the Mymensingh area have little or no education and no formal training in marketable skills. This leaves employment options for these people extremely limited, especially members of the rural population which is focused primarily on the agriculture sector. For most households, income security is poor with a significant number of rural households dependent on day labour either in the agriculture sector or non-agricultural sector. Women's contribution to household income is limited. Families are therefore vulnerable with high dependence on the physical labour of the male head of the household.

Goals

Broadly, the goals of the Garment Training Project proposal submitted to PIA were:

- to provide textile training, primarily in sewing but at all levels, including marketing, mainly to women in impoverished circumstances,
- to provide life skills, especially related to the pandemic and savings groups, and
- to provide general health support to the community.

¹ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "Millennium Development Goals: Bangladesh Progress Report 2012"

² Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "Literacy Assessment Survey 2011"

³ Plan, "Child Marriage in Bangladesh: Findings from a National Survey 2013"

⁴ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "Population and Housing Census 2011: Socio-economic and Demographic Report"

Expenditure

The budget for this past year of this three-year project was AUD12,600, composed of two payments of AUD6,300. These funds were sent as agreed, but the second payment was delayed until the 2022-23 financial year in response to our demand that proper accountability of expenditure in Bangladesh be supplied for the full financial year.

Intended and Achieved Actions

As noted above, the project was not able to be implemented in its original form, but those parts of the original project that could be implemented were, and, as well, in the name of PIA, those parts of related project work normally financed by other NGOs (most notably Symbiosis Australia) were implemented in PIA's name before PIA withdrew from Bangladesh. Symbiosis Bangladesh is expected to implement any unfinished project work from our original project, in the name of Symbiosis Australia or whatever other NGO that supplies the remaining funding. However, with this understanding of the change in the project, I believe that our project work has been satisfactorily completed.

Those parts that were dropped out of the project relate mainly to the running of the *shomati* groups, these being self-help groups generally with savings activities whereby funds are pooled to enable loans to group members. The savings aspects of the *shomati* groups worked extremely well. Despite the hardship caused by the lockdowns and the virus, savings have accumulated strongly during the pandemic. However, the educational aspects of the *shomati* groups have suffered, as speakers and coordinators could not always access the project areas, and health support could not always be provided as needed. It is expected that there be increased activity in these educational aspects during the present new financial year to compensate. Any deficit in the target for the year 2021-22 in textile training is also expected to be made good.

Risks and Management Actions

With hindsight, PIA, with the help of Symbiosis Australia, has responded well to the difficult circumstances and shown flexibility designed to minimise the disruption to the local economy, while maintaining our desired position to leave this project on expiry. However, PIA has left itself exposed to uncertainty in Symbiosis Bangladesh's works program, under the new direction and full responsibility of Symbiosis Australia and any other involved NGO, as to whether the original aims of its projects will be totally fulfilled. However, given that the aim of all NGOs is to improve the living standards of the communities that they serve, there is no reason to believe that these NGOs will not see our original proposal completed with the funds that they did not spend during this past year of the pandemic.

JAMUNA RIVER DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Introduction

The Jamuna River Sandbar Project started as a private project supported through PIA. Possibly because of its unusual character, it grew into one of PIA's most identifiable projects. It involves a community that was established by landless people on an island that is slowly washing downstream as a result of floods. The project has been administratively combined with a similar project on the western riverbank, with PIA being mainly associated with that part of the project remaining on the island. However, PIA ceased to finance this project in July 2022.

Local Context

The project is located on the sandbar island (or char) in the middle of the Jamuna River. Infrastructure in the working area is poor, with no electricity or road connection to the island as the government is reluctant to build on land that is vulnerable to inundation by flood waters and in danger for river erosion. Frequent flooding of sizeable portions of the island and erosion of the riverbanks as the river changes course are common. Most of the community are landless people and have been forced to live on the island when their homes and fields elsewhere were lost to river erosion.

Fortunately, the island community managed to stay sufficiently isolated from the 'mainland' off the river, that it did not suffer from Covid. It was still nonetheless subject to nationwide lockdowns but did not otherwise suffer from the virus. The staff of Symbiosis Bangladesh on the mainland have had little access to the island. However, for the main part the Jamuna River Project has been able to proceed normally.

Goals

The purpose of this project was to provide both primary school and preschool education to students on this remote and mobile island, and to provide a holistic program of savings groups, adult support, and health support similar to that of the Garment Training Project. (Several other schools which do not fit within PIA's part of the wider project are on the riverbanks and, while they have experienced some Covid outbreaks, they have remained less affected by the pandemic than the Garment Training Project). The goals of this project are:

- to provide primary (and preschool) education to some of the children on the island,
- to provide life skills including skills related to the pandemic and the development and running of savings groups, and
- to provide general health support to the community.

Expenditure

Expenditure on this project has occurred without complication with a total PIA contribution of AUD20,400 consisting of two payments of AUD10,200. Again, the second payment of AUD10,200 was delayed until after the conclusion of the financial year 2021-2022 so that the Board of PIA could receive an account of the full expenditure on this project.

Intended and Achieved Actions

Some schooling was missed because of the national lockdowns. Similarly, some of the adult classes in life skills could not go ahead. However, otherwise the project ran much as outlined in the original plan drawn up before the Covid pandemic. At every stage of our projects on the island the support for the primary school has been the main focus of the project, with other activities added that were needed to make the project holistic. As our activity on the island finishes, it is noted that island life now is quite different to it was when PIA originally became involved. At that time there were no schools, primary or secondary, and no preschool on the island. Now there are numerous primary schools and a government secondary school. Symbiosis Bangladesh's activities on the island, funded entirely by PIA, have shown schooling on the island is workable and opened the island to schooling supported by the Government. It is my view that this opening is our greatest achievement in our partnership with Symbiosis Bangladesh, and comparable to some of our other great achievements in

Bangladesh over the years since the early 1960s. I say the above based not on the past three years but on the series of projects that we have had on this island.

Risks and Management Actions

It is possible that as we pull out of our involvement with this project that the existence of the particular school (and preschool) that we have been involved in establishing will cease operation. However, they have been the seed for many schools for the community on the island. There is little or no risk. Climate change may cause the river to rise, but the hydrologic processes by which it has brought this island into existence, will continue to maintain it just above the water level. The specific projects helping individual children and adults may fade but they leave a better educated community. The project has been a great success showing its resilience even in this time of pandemics.