**Handout 1**

When Bangladesh was created in December 1971, the literacy rate was a mere 16.8%. Thanks to the work of government and non government organizations, by 2001, the literacy rate had been increased to 47.9%. However, between 2001 and 2008, the literacy rate had shown an improvement of barely one percentage point – from 47.9% to 48.8%. Quality of education was found to be a major area of concern. A literacy assessment report released by the Bangladesh government in June 2007 stated: “To accelerate the growth of literacy, mere increase of access to education is not enough. More emphasis and efforts are needed to ensure quality of education so that all primary school graduates turn out to be literate, whereas at present 40 percent remain illiterates even after completing primary education.”

Later, a report released by UNESCO, proposing solutions to increase the stagnating literacy rate, urged the country to “institute a decentralized operation system involving local bodies, NGOS, CBOs and communities including learners to ensure community ownership and sustainability of National Educational program, structures and facilities for lifelong learning.” Many NGOs, government programs, and other initiatives came with funds to address the problem by providing targeted services. However, often these programs failed to make a dent. Like many development programs, they came with top-down programs that did not engage or empower the community as active participants.

Bangladesh follows a three-tier education system with the government running schools at the primary, secondary and higher secondary levels. While it is a highly subsidized system, school dropout rate is high. The Bangladesh Education Board has been trying to improve the system, while rooting out practices of the past, which have not been giving results.

Founded in 1990, the Institute of Educational Development (IED) is a community-based organization that works with some of the most marginalized groups in Noakhali district to improve learning outcomes. In May 2001, a well-known education activist, Aadila Sheikh, was appointed as its regional director. Under Sheikh’s leadership, IED’s work was guided by the principle that people should not be turned into passive beneficiaries of aid, but encouraged to find and sustain their own solutions. The IED strategy concentrated on involving diverse community stakeholders, such as local government officials, teachers, librarians, non-profits and parents to seek and sustain their change.

Majidee, a town in Noakhali district, with a community of 75,000 residents, had been showing some of the worst educational outcomes for over a decade. Schools lacked sufficient infrastructure and faced many problems, such as teacher motivation, which was leading to poor learning outcomes. Encouraged by the policy shift within the Bangladesh Education Board, which had made it focus on learning outcomes, in 2008, the IED proposed starting a community mobilization program in Majidee, to the Board. The community mobilization program seeks to integrate the community organizing methodology so that communities can be empowered to find their own solutions.

In 2005, a former Vice-chancellor of Dhaka University, Jamail Hussain, had been asked to head the Bangladesh Education Board. While the Board is mainly responsible for conducting examinations, under Hussain’s leadership, it had been trying to improve educational outcomes as well. Hussain had several decades of experience in the education sector. He had risen from being a school teacher in Chittagong district. He was highly respected by the entire teaching community for his integrity and his focus on improving learning outcomes. He had played a key role in mobilizing teacher support in the past years to introduce innovative programs, which had been hugely successful.

After becoming the regional director of IED, Sheikh had moved out of Majidee, but had hoped to return someday to work with the community. Sheikh was pained to see the social rifts that had occurred in the diverse community of Muslims, Hindus and Christians in Majidee. Growing up in this community, she had participated in festivals of different faiths as people interacted with each other without feeling the divisions of religion, ethnicity or class. She had felt safe in the midst of what had seemed like a large family. Poverty, coupled with local interest groups had led to a situation where the community could be torn apart for the slightest reason. Children’s education had suffered the most. Teachers lacked interest and infrastructure that existed had crumbled.

In recent years, on the few occasions that she had visited Majidee, the community had poured its complaints to her. Community members wanted her to change things, without sharing the responsibility for participating, leading and sharing accountability. The fragmented nature of the community had made the work of local NGOs difficult. But the task of reconnecting the community with their values was not impossible. Sheikh was known for the success of her work in neighboring Noakhali town.

The community- led centers that Sheikh had started in Noakhali town had contributed immensely to improving local learning outcomes. Fighting several odds, Sheikh had managed to bring together the local government officials, teachers, librarians, other non-profit leaders and parents to support the program. Students went to the community centers for additional reading, learning from their peers, and finding tutoring support from youth volunteers. In addition, families of the areas took on the responsibility of providing healthy snacks for the children as they studied there. Often, mothers accompanied the children and they too were motivated to acquire literacy skills. An evaluation conducted by Bangladesh Education Board had found literacy in the area had improved from 30.1% to 44.5 % within five years. The success of the program had made other NGOs try out a similar approach.

On January 19, 2009, a call from Hussain gave her hope. He had read her proposal and wanted her to meet him in Dhaka the next day. He wanted to develop a partnership with IED, based on its unique model. Sheikh believed she could bring back the cohesiveness in the community that she had seen growing up. With Hussain’s support, she could mobilize the teachers. Mothers would be willing to set aside religious and ethnic differences to support the children. She could find support from female volunteer community workers and librarians who felt disheartened by lack of improvement of the literacy rate. In addition she knew Hussain would prove to be a supportive ally. She had admired his ability in the past to take bold and innovative steps. She decided to take the very next train out of Noakhali to meet Hussain in Dhaka. **(Continued…)**