

"They can be our ambassador": Amirul Islam Bappy of VisionSpring on the Clear Vision Collective, marketing, and distributing reading glasses via pharmacies in Bangladesh

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you start by introducing yourself and telling me more about your role and what you do?

Amirul Islam Bappy: My name is Amirul Islam Bappy. I'm the Executive with the Pharmacy Program [at VisionSpring in Bangladesh].



In 2003 we were running 100 pharmacies in Sherpur. And we are partnering with ESGF, Eco-Social Development Foundation. It is another NGO. They work for us. They were not ensuring the quality of the pharmacies. Every week, the field sales officer, who is responsible for this, visits at least once to counsel them, motivate them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you know that the quality wasn't good?

Amirul Islam Bappy: There were 100 pharmacies. They were not visiting the pharmacies properly, and not at their skill level. Their salary and other transportation costs were limited to move [around] the whole district. So there is a combination of many things they were not delivering properly and we decided to discontinue them.



We kept a record of 20 out of the 100 pharmacies who were selling good numbers. So when we discontinued and we started by ourselves, we started first with these 20, and gradually,

we are now at 35. So each of the pharmacies are doing well. There is no pharmacy who is selling below average. Everyone's average is 6 or 7 [glasses per month]. Overall average is 8 [glasses sold per month].

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And where are they getting supply from, for the glasses?



Amirul Islam Bappy: From here in Sherpur. We have one dedicated field officer from VisionSpring who brings stuff like glasses, and he's a distributor too. An onboarding distributor works with us. For reading glasses sold, he's getting 15 taka [\$0.13] [commission] for each pair.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How many glasses have been sold and how much do they sell the glasses for?



Amirul Islam Bappy: 281 glasses [have been sold] from pharmacies, about 35 per month. [They sell for] 150, 200 and 250 taka [about \$1.25, \$1.70 and \$2.10].



The distributor gets a commission of 15 taka [\$0.13] from each [pair sold]. He's only giving us his space to store our reading glasses. In Sherpur we don't have any room to store our reading glasses and marketing material. They give us a little space, and he's also an optometrist, our distributor. Sometimes he visits the pharmacy, and he's a technical person, and he shares knowledge in the pharmacies. It is also improving in Sherpur.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me a little about the pharmacy program in relation to the Clear Vision Collective (CVC)?



Amirul Islam Bappy: For the pharmacy program, we are working in two districts Gazipur and Sherpur. In Gazipur we work for the garments' worker, focusing on the second pair for the garments worker and they are marginalized people. So our main objective is to give them affordable reading glasses with quality.

In Sherpur, we are working under CVC. So we select those two areas purposefully. And I believe, the pharmacy program is the only way to sustain all the programs because the onboarding of pharmacy is very cheap and they can be our ambassador. In every district, there are thousands of pharmacies and if we onboard them and give training for one day, then they will work as our ambassador. And this is a very effective way to reach the community, where our main challenge is lack of awareness.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you feel like there was competition amongst different delivery methods?



Amirul Islam Bappy: We are working collectively with nine organizations. Among us, we don't have any competition. Our competition is with other organizations, like the government, and the main challenge is lack of awareness. People think, "Eyes are sensitive. We cannot take service from the pharmacy or [a community health worker]. We should go to a big doctor." So that's how the eye is neglected for a long time. So his whole life, like 40 years, he has not visited any doctor and he's thinking, "It is very sensitive. We cannot take service from the pharmacy." So we need to work with this hurdle as well.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You were saying all of the pharmacists are rural community workers?



Amirul Islam Bappy: Yes. [Pharmacists are] RMP, Rural Medical Practitioners. Because in the village area there are no doctors available, so they are considered as doctors, and there are many things like fevers, colds, and other things, people usually come to the pharmacy and take medicine from them. If a serious thing happens, they go to the hospital with the help of the pharmacist. So they have acceptance in the community. When they're saying something, people accept it.

But there are a few challenges, as you are already saying. There is a trust issue. If we overcome this trust issue, people are sensitive. So we have to take it very seriously, and we need a specialist eye doctor, so people think it's sensitive, and they're not going to the doctor as well. Today we interviewed a 45 year old woman who did not go to any doctor. No, [eye care] is sensitive. We cannot take service from here and there. But they are also not going to the doctor as well. So we are trying to break those beliefs.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you break that belief? Those are really deep cultural beliefs.

Amirul Islam Bappy: Yes, it will take time.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I know that having partners is very important for all eye programs and health programs. Can you give some advice on how to get good partnerships?



Amirul Islam Bappy: In my opinion, there are three important things to make a good partner. The first one is mission alignment. Second one, is a skilled human resource and an established process.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you do that in a partnership? How do you figure out the power dynamic? Who's telling who what to do?



Amirul Islam Bappy: When we make a partnership, we should investigate their process and their capabilities. So to have partnership, we should see those things while visiting and their work activities and the others.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me a little bit more about the pharmacies we're about to go to see?



Amirul Islam Bappy: We are going to the Mukla Upajala Pharmacy, which is under CVC. And there are two camps happening, associated with those pharmacies. So currently, pharmacists are boosting up. Their selling is also boosting up, for the camp and surrounding areas. [The pharmacist] was also promoted, in the camp, as he specialized in near vision training. And he got training from VisionSpring.



In the community, they have got an acceptance for that. He also talked in the campaign. And I have got several calls from the poster and banner, as my number is in there. So when they call me, I refer to the pharmacy. So customer flow is also boosting up.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say the camp, you don't mean the same type of camps we did yesterday?

Amirul Islam Bappy: Yes. Same types of camps yesterday. [But it's] in a pharmacy. And the pharmacy does this screening.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do people hear about the camp? And if people don't come to the pharmacy during the camp, they can just come during other hours and get the screening, right?



Amirul Islam Bappy: Yes. When we're making our service, it reaches many people. The people are not, they don't know a pharmacy exists. So after the making, there is a cultural program as well, so altogether they're coming in big numbers, and scan their eyes, then they know about the pharmacy. They're getting glasses from there.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Even if they don't come to the camp hours?

Amirul Islam Bappy: Yes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Okay. We're going to two pharmacies, right? What's the second pharmacy?



Amirul Islam Bappy: [With the] second pharmacy, there is no camp happening, but on the 27th we'll organize a camp. They're a good pharmacy in a remote village, in a bazaar or market. There are a few pharmacies, but we provide a reading glasses-only pharmacy. And he has been doing business with us for the last two years.



He also created some markets there. They are getting customers and selling eight to nine pairs on average per month. So they also get a market there.

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Money



Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



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Distribution channel



Regulation



Training



Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*