

"We started through street drama": Mustafizur Rahman, Mohammad Rofiqul Islam and Anupam Sengupta on creative ways to raise awareness and generate demand

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

May 14, 2024

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

Mustafizur Rahman: My name is Mustafizur Rahman, I'm the manager of the RGIL Project [Reading Glasses for Improved Lives] of BRAC.

Anupam Sengupta: My name is Anupam Sengupta. I'm the program manager of the Reading Glasses for Improved Lives program. RGIL.

Mohammad Rofiqul Islam: My name is Mohammad Rofiqul Islam. I'm the executive director of Clear Vision Collective. CVC.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Mustafizur, can you tell me a little bit about RGIL and talk about how the pharmacists are related?

Mustafizur Rahman: We started our RGIL program in 2006. At first, we started a pilot, the four sub-districts in Narsingdi and Manikganj districts. Now we cover almost the 61 districts all over Bangladesh, except our hill tracts. We are implementing this RGIL operation all over Bangladesh and in this program, our main focus is to identify the place by the cases at the community level and correct them with the appropriate glasses. And under this program, we give the service at the doorstep, at the community.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And you do that, how do you do that?



Mustafizur Rahman: Mainly we have the volunteers, we call them the Shasthya Shebika, health volunteer. They play the main role in this program. Every day they visited the households and they spread awareness to people about their personal hygiene and personal health issues. At that time they identify if they have any people with eye related problems.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you started the program, in order to do this partnership with them, did you work with BRAC? Did you work with the government? How did you start this partnership?



Mustafizur Rahman: At first, [when] we started the program in 2006, we partnered with VisionSpring. They gave us technical support. After that, they also gave us financial support. And from the beginning until now, VisionSpring is our main partner.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How did you get the community health workers? Who hires them? Who trains them? Who pays them their wages?



Mustafizur Rahman: Community health workers mainly, we select the community health workers from the community. They're the community people.



We have two types of community health workers. One is the paid worker and another is the health volunteer. We don't pay them anything, but they get some incentive. They work on an incentive basis. If they identify any presbyopia cases and we correct them with the appropriate glasses, they get 35 taka for a case.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And who pays the other community health workers?

Anupam Sengupta: I'll just add to what Mustafizur said. Actually, this is under the BRAC Health Program. Eye care is one component of the BRAC major program called BHP.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Since 2006?

Anupam Sengupta: No, from the beginning, 1978.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: So what changed in 2006?



Anupam Sengupta: BHP is the BRAC mother program, BRAC NGO. So within BHP, there are separate programs based on donor funds, based on their innovation or some inclusiveness. So usually by BHP, they support the PNC, ANC support to the village level people by the Shasthya

Shebika or community service workers, CSWs. There is some pay if you give some other support, like for example, diabetes checkup, and other things, because they are income related with the BRAC enterprise.

And another is voluntarily because they don't know the full knowledge, they're just aware of the people. But all the work done by the change staff is called program officer or field officer.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How many volunteer workers do you have right now?

Mustafizur Rahman: Almost 35,000 thousand. [They are] all over the country [doing] all health activities. Eye care is one part of what they do.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And when did the BRAC Health Program start incorporating reading glasses?



Anupam Sengupta: In 2006. There are two parallel organizations, BRAC and DHPI.

This is their direct program. So they handle some staff and also RGIL with VisionSpring is dedicated to the reading glasses. That is another part of a staff operation line. So there are these two parallel [programs] that they work together. For RGIL, we have 164 field level staff [across] 61 districts. There [is a chain of] supervisors from area manager, then manager, then program head, then up to director.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And are all of those people BRAC employees?



Anupam Sengupta: Yes, they are BRAC employees. They give us the projection for the operation. If they need money, then we give the reimbursement to them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And who trains them on how to do the screenings and things like that?



Anupam Sengupta: For the training customs, there is a doctor, then the government, and also we have our Jordan manual. They have their own trainer, and also Mustafizur trains. Sometimes I also train. We are the master trainers of this one.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me a little bit about the training, how long it is and is it in person? If you can describe it a little bit more, that'd be great.



Mustafizur Rahman: At first, when new staff is joining, after joining they go to the field and they do some on-job training. They do on-job training for at least one month. Then, we call them for residential training. It is a three-day training, two days is theoretical and one day practical.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And how does this program relate to the Clear Vision Collective that you're doing?

Anupam Sengupta: Clear Vision Collective is our initiative. We chose one district in Sherpur where we were. So we think we have a separate program, like RGIL is doing by the BRAC, BNSB is doing the camp with the myopic patients, pharmacies have theirs.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you tell me why you did this campaign?

Mohammad Rofiqul Islam: We started the campaign on the 5th of February this year because of our findings through our partners in our local council meeting that said that the awareness level of the people is very, very low. Basically, they do not know where the center is, where to go if I have some eye problem.



The thinking is that we [should] raise people's awareness. We want to give the message to them [so] that they know there is the center, there is the pharmacy, there are the RGIL people, there is BNSB eye care centers or Eye Mitra.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: It's a media campaign?



Mohammad Rofiqul Islam: It's a media campaign. We started through street drama, gathering in places. One of the organizations we selected, they performed the street drama with five or six episodes, so the people raised awareness. And also, side by side, today there are two camps. One is organized by BNSB, Bangladesh National Society for the Blind. Dr. K. Zaman, BNSB Eye Hospital. They are the eye care hub in this area and they're Clear Vision partners. [The other camp is] by BRAC RGIL.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: In the campaign, you did the dramas. Did you also use billboards?

Mohammad Rofiqul Islam: No, at the moment we have put on dramas, posters, leaflets, festoons, stickers. And the main thing is the miking, loud-speaking in the community area.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Did you feel the campaign was successful?

Mohammad Rofiqul Islam: The partner can answer that. I feel it is successful.



Mustafizur Rahman: Yes, this is successful because the people had neglected the big problem. So it is fine if you give them some message through the drama or folk songs, like this. People are more attracted to this event, so that through the drama they know something about the eye care facilities and the importance of the eye care.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Do you do dramas at the eye Camps? Or how do you help people make the connection between the message and actually getting screened and getting the glasses?



Mohammad Rofiqul Islam: There was a BNSB-organized camp that started today.

Yesterday night the organization called Sundarban Theater gathered at one of the house owners of a school or club. So from the place they organized the drama, they gave the message to all the participants [that] the next day from 9:00 to 2:00 [you can have] your eyes checked free of cost. Eye checks will be free of cost, and you may purchase glasses at the very minimum cost of 150 taka, starting at 150 taka.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: And do you feel like that price is reasonable for most people in Sherpur?



Mohammad Rofiqul Islam: It is reasonable, but some people are very ultra-poor in this area. So we have the provision that if you have the government red card, then you'll get free services.

ICON LEGEND



Advocacy



Money



Supply



Demand generation



Partnerships



Technology



Distribution channel



Regulation



Training



Media campaigns and marketing



Screening

Ambika 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.*