



# Leading the Way

Young people leading change in Bangladesh

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# Building the Youth Momentum

## Introduction

Youth<sup>1</sup> as drivers of poverty reduction and economic growth can be one of the most valuable human assets in the world if and when they are fully integrated in their societies. To ensure that this integration is inclusive, there has to be concerted effort on and for marginalised and disadvantaged youth. This will enable young people living in poverty to actively participate in governance structures, dialogues and claim their rights in society. ActionAid calls on governments and civil society to work collectively to harness the potential of young people and ensure their participation, voice and needs are addressed in taking forward national development priorities.

Providing youth with a platform for meaningful participation in social and political decision making processes, economic empowerment via skills development and advocating for effective policy design and implementation responsive to youth enables the promotion of equality and inclusiveness.

ActionAid endorses the UN Global Call on Youth<sup>2</sup> and encourages the calls on national and international stakeholders to continue its commitments in upholding the World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY) and to partner with young people in its implementation. ActionAid is actively engaged in advocating both nationally and internationally in ensuring that young people's concerns are

addressed in the Post 2015 Development goals and targets, as well as, in its implementation and monitoring at local and national levels.

## Background

Over 40% of the global population today are below the age of 25 years and approximately 87% of these young people reside in developing countries.<sup>3</sup> In Bangladesh, a country with approximately 150 million, youth consist of 55 million or 34%<sup>4</sup> of the total population. As the world prepares for defining the Post 2015 Development Goals,<sup>5</sup> youth both globally, as well as, here in Bangladesh are demanding for quality and access to education (formal and non-formal), decent work (with specific focus on young women), health (adolescent and youth friendly health services, sexual and reproductive health rights), good governance and accountability, peace and security and sustainable environment.<sup>6</sup> With sustained action, investment and acknowledging the valuable human resource, young people's energy, creativity and potential can be harnessed to drive social change in Bangladesh.

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1. When we use the term "Youth" we refer to a heterogeneous (diverse) category. This is why at ActionAid we refer to "the many faces of youth." Our definition of youth focuses first on the socio-political identity of young people who are seeking the rights and independence that adulthood should bring. It is by its very nature therefore contested, and hence age definitions vary across the world. We use 15-30 as a guide only.
  2. [http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-Global-Call-on-Youth\\_3-June-2014.pdf](http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-Global-Call-on-Youth_3-June-2014.pdf)
  3. The United Nations Inter-agency Network on Youth Development – 'Uniting 4 Development', 2013
  4. BRAC University – 'Giving Youth a Voice – Bangladesh Youth Survey 2011', 2012
  5. [http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-Global-Call-on-Youth\\_3-June-2014.pdf](http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/The-Global-Call-on-Youth_3-June-2014.pdf)
  6. [http://www.worldwewant2015.org/www2015\\_trends\\_outcomes](http://www.worldwewant2015.org/www2015_trends_outcomes); <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/>; <http://data.myworld2015.org>



## Advocating for Change

ActionAid firmly believes that the promotion of youth as agents of social change and in positions of leadership will yield the highest return on investment – the nation's development. This is fundamental as youth shape social and economic development and build the foundation for the country's future.

ActionAid in Bangladesh has over 30 years of experience engaging with adolescents and young people across its programme sectors.<sup>7</sup> We understand what problems and solutions are relevant to the many faces of young people and at different stages of the lifecycle. Therefore, our youth programme is based on the lifecycle approach where we engage with the most marginalised and vulnerable young women and men.

During its fourth Country Strategy Period (2012 – 2017), ActionAid will focus its efforts on developing soft and hard skills of youth leading to opportunities for decent work, providing a platform for voicing concerns and engaging in decision making processes across various levels, and enhancing youth knowledge and skills in addressing climate change and disaster risk reduction.

We will advocate and lobby for youth to have a crucial and dynamic role to contribute towards national participatory monitoring and accountability<sup>8</sup> of the national development plans, as well as, the post-2015 framework.

We will also lobby with key decision makers on youth both nationally and regionally, as well as, the Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy on Youth and the Inter Agency Network for Youth Development (IAYND) to ensure the implementation of the UN Secretary General's Five Year Action Agenda.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, ActionAid will develop programme experience of youth best practices and apply lessons learnt to the organisation's national and international experience for advocacy and campaigns work focused on the above mentioned areas of work.

## Call to Action

### Call to the Government

- Ensure that all national policies are youth friendly and ensure that the implementation and revision of the relevant policies (i.e. National Youth Policy, National Skills Development Policy, etc.) engage youth;
- Design and implementation of development programmes focused on provision of opportunities for skills development and alternatives for youth through adequate resource mobilisation nationally and internationally;
- Establish enabling spaces for youth to engage in dialogue with government and other decision makers; and
- Provide opportunities for youth representation and participation leading to inclusion in participatory monitoring and accountability processes.

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7. Women's rights and gender equality, democratic governance, disaster risks reduction and climate justice, education, food security and sustainable livelihoods, land rights and justice for the excluded and marginalized.

8. ActionAid views accountability as that which enhances our efforts to build democracy, advance justice, and fight poverty. Most particularly, development and humanitarian organisations which are firmly grounded in the Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) are interested to know how civil society actors can use the notion of accountability to strengthen their own advocacy and development work (AA Denmark, 2006). It is important to understand the transition from accountability as an obligation to serve youth - to accountability as a culture of working for the youth with the youth (as a direct factor of increased youth demand for the same). It is a process and an end in itself whereby increasingly empowered people seek feedback on plans, and resources invested.

9. The Youth SWAP focuses on employment and entrepreneurship, protection of rights and civic engagement, political inclusion, education, including comprehensive sexual education and health.

## Call to the International Community

- The mobilisation of resources to ensure that youth priorities for the country are met in the areas of skills development and economic empowerment, participation in decision making processes, and climate change and disaster risk reduction; and
- Network with countries, donors and likeminded organisations to ensure that youth participation in decision making, monitoring and accountability is included in the Post 2015 Development Agenda.

## Call to Youth

- To develop a strong network of youth in urban and rural communities across the country and the region to critically analyse and challenge unequal power structures in local and national spaces; and

- Network and linking with youth nationally, regionally and internationally to take forward common agendas.

## Conclusion

ActionAid reiterates that youth are key drivers in economic growth and poverty reduction as we approach the unveiling of the Post 2015 Development Goals and Targets. As such youth need to be provided with the opportunity to participate in decision making processes and be promoted into positions of leadership. ActionAid is committed to working with the respective governmental departments and ministries and the international community to ensure policy change through programme design and implementation, and international campaigns.



Photo: Activista Bangladesh



যুব সম্মেলন  
YOUTH ADVANCING TOWARDS CHANGE  
YOUTH CONVENTION

## Stories of Change



## DISSOLVING CRISIS THROUGH YOUTH POWER

*Young people advocating with duty bearers for better public service delivery*

The Bangladesh Institute of Theater Arts (BITA),<sup>10</sup> which works towards issues pertaining to youth in their communities, came forward to aid the residents of the Madarbari zone in Chittagong by empowering local youth with the skills to identify problems along with the solutions to mitigate them. The youth identified that in the community, access and availability of water is a key issue (similar to other locations of the country). The large population living in the area has to buy water from costly external sources to meet their daily requirements. The limited availability of water also gave rise to issues related to hygiene and sanitation.

As such, the community youth came together to identify potential solutions to this problem which led them to approach the local Ward Councilor where Dustho Sahajjo Songstha (DSS) - a local NGO, expressed their interest in assisting the youth in their search for a way out.

After conducting a thorough investigation along with the local youth, representatives from DSS presented a field report to the local Municipality Authorities. Simultaneously, the youth mobilised funds by themselves which was later supplemented by DSS who approached the Water Supply and Sewage Authority (WASA).



Photo: Shafiqul Karim/ ActionAid Bangladesh

**Location:** Madarbari, Chittagong  
**Group Members:** 75  
**Established:** 2013  
**Areas of Work:** Sanitation, Governance and Livelihood

WASA officials assured them of supplying a daily quota of water that should optimally meet the minimum needs of the people residing in the locality. This initiative by the youth was praised by the community members who believe that young people are crucial in addressing social challenges and are indeed agents of change.

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10. BITA is a Local Rights Programme (LRP) of ActionAid Bangladesh.



## FIGHTING FOR RIGHTS – AN UPHILL STRUGGLE MADE EASIER BY YOUTH

### *Campaign for the constitutional recognition of indigenous people*

Since 2005 the *Panchbibi Upazila Adibashi* Multipurpose Development Organisation (PUAMDO)<sup>11</sup> has been working to uphold the dignity and rights of indigenous people in Joypurhat district situated in the Northwest of Bangladesh. The indigenous population is not constitutionally recognised – which means they are susceptible to losing their land at the hands of land grabbers, and the youth are not eligible to apply for higher studies or jobs in the country.

In 2013, amongst other activities, PUAMDO along with local community youth organised two roundtable meetings with high ranking political leaders to place their demands for a separate land commission for the plain land indigenous population, improved engagement in *Khas* (government held) land, and incorporating the indigenous identity in various publications of the Ministry of Culture. Five hundred youth came together and organised two human chains as an expression of solidarity with this action. A discussion regarding the roundtable meetings was also organised by the Balighata Youth Organisation in association with other Community Based Organisations (CBO), Nongovernmental Organisations (NGO) and journalist groups in the district.

This long-running campaign reached its intended outcome when as a result of a parliamentary discussion and subsequent decision, the



Photo: Md. Mahbubur Rahman / ActionAid Bangladesh

Location: **Panchbibi, Joypurhat**  
Group Members: **80**  
Established: **2012**  
Areas of Work: **Livelihood, Education, Land Rights and Indigenous People's Rights**

populations of various excluded indigenous groups were officially recognised in an amended government gazette (pending publication). PUAMDO along with the Panchbibi *Upazila* residents believe that very soon the youth of their community will not be excluded from the education or job sector any longer and that young people, through their perseverance and support from adults, will be able to achieve this tremendous feat for their own future.

11. PUAMDO is a Local Rights Programme (LRP) of ActionAid Bangladesh.



## HELPING TO RECOVER

### *Young people's contribution towards post-disaster recovery efforts*

Amongst the many different initiatives in which youth have been engaged with, the Activista engagement following the April 2013 collapse of Rana Plaza which affected several thousands of Ready Made Garments (RMG) workers stands out due to the proactive nature of their engagement.

Forty five young people consisting of Activista members and their peers from Dhaka University, as well as, friends from neighbouring universities joined the ActionAid Bangladesh (AAB) Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA). They were involved in conducting meetings with 1600 individuals who had been rescued from the building at their home or hospitals following a daylong orientation session conducted by the members of the NARRI (National Alliance for Risk Reduction and Response Initiative) Consortium.

They were involved in data collection, verification and analysis which involved long days at the office despite keeping on top of their university schedule. Moumita Irfat who attends Jahangir Nagar University stated that “It is time we all do our bit. I got together with my friends and decided to take part in any activity that could help the victims” which is a similar sentiment echoed by all volunteers.

They went ahead over a full week to ensure that all information was obtained and during days where they worked late into the night. The efforts of the Activista members were formally recognized by ActionAid Bangladesh as well the Dhaka University 83rd Batch



Photo: ActionAid Bangladesh

**Location:** Dhaka  
**Group Members:** 121  
**Established:** 2011  
**Areas of Work:** Disaster Risk Reduction, Climate Change, Governance, Education, Women Rights and Gender Equity

Foundation for their voluntary contribution towards the post-disaster recovery efforts.

The opportunity to work alongside seasoned and well experienced personnel also further supported the knowledge sharing and capacity development of the youth team. According to Abdullah Al Nakib, the week of work helped to consider the future direction of his career and also improved focus as he looked towards the future.

# STANDING UP FOR THE RIGHTS OF THE MARGINALISED

## *Young people leading change in their community*

In the Chilahati *Upazila*, ActionAid supports one youth group in working closely with the partner organisation, *Udayankur Seba Sangstha* (USS)<sup>12</sup>, in taking forward initiatives related to local governance and land rights. Youth from the group have representatives at the Reflection-Action Circles or community groups where they are actively engaged focusing on community development.

In March 2014, a female member of the community group raised concern over the loan disbursement scheme of a State Bank's local branch and a non-governmental organisation's programme to support hardcore poor households. The situation was such that a fraudulent scheme was operating which involved hardcore poor households being targeted for signing on to loan programmes for which they did not submit applications.

Following the receipt of this news, the youth group members mobilised to seek additional information. Basically through their proactive information research, documentation, linking with government, media and others – they were able to bring to the attention of the national media the fraudulent scheme.

“We got the courage to fight against the injustice we faced because we had the youth group members who supported us and stood beside us during this entire process” noted one of the female victims of the loan scheme. While the over one hundred victims still need the official documentation that exempts them from the loan repayment plan, the



Photo: Md. Sadi/ ActionAid Bangladesh

**Location:** Chilahati, Nilphamari  
**Group Members:** 24  
**Established:** 2011  
**Areas of Work:** Child Marriage, Land Rights, Governance, Education

support of the youth group members in lodging complaints, regular follow up and ensuring lobbying is undertaken at various levels provides the much needed hope and encouragement for the community.

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12. USS is a Local Rights Programme (LRP) of ActionAid Bangladesh.



# AGAINST ALL ODDS

## *Mina's journey towards empowerment*

In Amirabad, a village located in Sitakunda sub-district lives a young girl named Mohsena Aktar Mina. Mina was born in 1993 to a family in which she was the oldest and had three younger siblings. Her father was employed as a wholesale fruit seller while her mother looked after the family. However, due to the untimely death of her father, the family faced dire circumstances.

It was during this time, that a community development worker of Young Power in Social Action (YPSA)<sup>13</sup> identified Mina to receive ActionAid's sponsorship support. In addition, they were able to support Moriom Begum, Mina's mother, to secure position as a support staff for YPSA.

Currently, Mina is in her second year of studying towards a Bachelor Degree in Business Studies at Sitakunda University College. Education has opened many avenues for Mina and she considers that community awareness building is key to affecting change. As a graduated sponsor child who is also a member of the local youth group – *Somaj Unnoyone Jubo*, Mina has taken part in several initiatives in the region, most notably the campaign on 'Decent Employment for Disabled Youth' which took place in December 2011. Mina participated in a week-long workshop and was joined by youth from across the country to form a human chain demanding employment opportunities for young people with disabilities. Mina has also been involved in the YPSA community radio centre known as *Radio Sagar Giri* as a Programme Producer in which she is responsible for developing the content of three programmes focused on adolescent health, primary education and discussions on contemporary issues.



Photo: Shah Sultan Shamim/ ActionAid Bangladesh

**Location:** Amirabad, Sitakunda  
**Group Members:** 40  
**Established:** 2011  
**Areas of Work:** Governance, Livelihood and Rights of Person with Disabilities

In looking towards her future based on her experiences and support structures, she noted "I have been lucky to have received the support to achieve my goals and dreams from the sponsorship programme, but there are still a lot of children in our country who are now in the same situation in which I found myself earlier. I will try my best to change our community but I need collective help. Therefore, I wish to work in media through which I can use mass media and communications to mobilise the communities and create awareness."

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13. YPSA is a Local Rights Programme (LRP) of ActionAid Bangladesh.

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