



sense
international

My Turn to Learn

Project Summary and Impact Report
September 2021

Introduction

Sense International's three-year project (1 July 2018 – 30 June 2021), "Increasing access to inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for children and young adults with deafblindness in Bangladesh," hereafter referred to as "My Turn to Learn", was funded with match funding from the UK government and implemented in partnership with the Centre for Disability in Development and a team of seven local partners. The project was designed to:

- ✓ Work towards all children and young adults with deafblindness having genuine access to quality education and lifelong learning.
- ✓ Improve the health, education, livelihoods and influence of people with deafblindness.

What is deafblindness?

Deafblindness is a combination of vision and hearing impairments. It is also described as multi-sensory impairment. Some people are completely deaf and blind, but many have some vision and / or hearing that they can use. Some may also have additional physical and learning disabilities. People with deafblindness can be very isolated because they often experience extreme difficulties in communicating and interacting with others.

Before this project

There was widespread lack of understanding of deafblindness amongst families, teachers, community members, and government officials in Bangladesh. This led to stigma and the belief that people with deafblindness could not join in everyday activities or learn new skills. Their basic rights were often ignored, and their day-to-day needs left unmet because parents, caregivers, teachers and government workers did not know how to support them.

Although deafblindness was included in the Government of Bangladesh's Disability Rights and Protection Act 2013, change in the availability of services and understanding of the disability has been very limited.



Before the project we neglected our child [and] believed that the child would not be able to do anything in life. However, we have learned that like other children our child with deafblindness has [the] same rights and entitlements."

Focus Group Participants



Before the project intervention, persons with deafblindness were confined at home, they did not go outside, [were] not enrolled in school, did not have any friends, and people neglected them. Now they are like other people in the society. The project has done a great job!"

Primary Education Officer, Belabo, Narsingdi

Project approaches

At the start of the project parents, teachers, caregivers, government workers and others lacked the skills and knowledge to include people with deafblindness in family life, education, and social care. Whilst policies were in place, the practice was rarely seen. The strategy in "My Turn to Learn" was to help the Government of Bangladesh to implement its new policies for inclusion. We worked in eight districts to raise awareness, provide training, and demonstrate practical approaches to inclusion, which would demonstrate a scalable approach to implementation. The activities included:

- Improving school infrastructure and teacher skills to welcome 80 new children with deafblindness into school settings and offer high quality inclusive education.
- Improving infrastructure (including trained Deafblind Field Educators, also known as Special Educators) to enable community-based support for 450 children and young adults with deafblindness and their families.
- Training of families and other caregivers to support people with deafblindness.
- Vocational training and livelihoods support for people with deafblindness above school age.
- Gathering and sharing evidence from the project and delivering training to the Government of Bangladesh to support their goals for inclusion.

Working in Partnership

Over the past 12 years, Sense International has partnered with the Centre for Disability in Development and their local partners, with technical support from Sense International India, to offer basic services for children with deafblindness in Bangladesh. We established the first National Resource Centre (NRC) on deafblindness in Dhaka.

Building on this, the “My Turn to Learn” project proposed to establish a new Regional Resource Centre (RRC) on deafblindness, to support some of the poorest districts. We worked closely with Government District Offices and schools to promote inclusive practices and establish model schools.

Impacts



Project Highlights:

- ✓ As a result of advocacy, we are now seeing deafblindness recognised not only in policy but in practice. ‘Deafblindness’ has been recognised and mentioned on the Disability ID cards as a distinct form of disability in key project locations, ensuring access to Government support and benefits.
- ✓ Due to increased awareness on the special needs of people with deafblindness, during Covid-19, service organisations at government and community level included them as high priority beneficiaries in their support programmes.
- ✓ Learning documentation was produced to provide evidence on barriers to inclusion and how to include children with deafblindness in mainstream education and lifelong learning opportunities.



In numbers



Project Highlights:

514



children and young adults with deafblindness (49% female) gained access to quality inclusive education and life-long learning opportunities.

1

new Regional Resource Centre established.



175

local level government officials trained on deafblindness showed an improvement in understanding and knowledge.



906

caregivers trained in supporting a person with deafblindness.



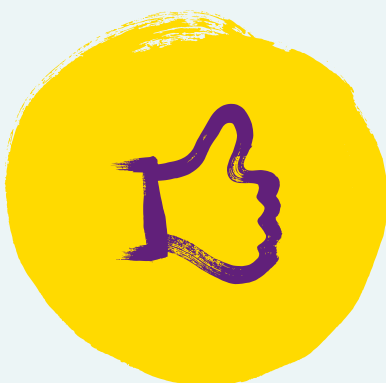
85%

of special educators trained showed significant improvement of understanding, knowledge and skills on communication and education of people with deafblindness.



20%

improvement in quality-of-life of people with deafblindness.



In their own words

The individual people we work with are often best able to capture the impact of our work:

ee

I am a partial blind and partial deaf boy. Previously, nobody used to take me to play with them. They called me 'kana' (blind) and laughed at me. This has changed. I love my school and I love playing with my friends. I want to become an engineer when I grow up."

Nasim, a student with deafblindness, Dhaka

ee

We, teachers and parents of children with deafblindness, are very happy to see that [the] children are studying, having good grades, participating in sports and receive prizes with others."

Head Teacher, Narsingdi

ee

I am so glad to see my son's improvement... I never thought he would be able to go to school."

Mother of a boy with deafblindness in Narsingdi

In Schools

The changes in school infrastructure, enhanced inclusive teaching materials and better trained teachers and teaching practices encouraged parents to enrol their children with deafblindness in school. 792 members of School Management Committees were motivated and equipped to adopt inclusive policies and practices supporting a whole school inclusive environment. Alongside this, the project successfully organised inclusive sports events which raised awareness amongst other students and parents about the capabilities of

children with deafblindness, reducing stigma and further increasing opportunities for them to participate in everyday life. Together with home learning support, this approach saw significant improvements in the capacity of children with deafblindness in socialisation, education, communication, cognition, personal hygiene, safety, motor skills, and mobility skills.

ee

My daughter can now brush her teeth by herself, wear and take off her clothes, and can count numbers. When she understood and wanted to go to school, the special educator talked with the school and enrolled her. I received a sewing machine from the project to support our livelihood and my daughter's medical expenses. They have changed our life."

Mother of a girl with deafblindness, Dhaka



Contribution to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

- Provided income generating support to 102 families (SDG-1: No Poverty).
- Increased social and economic inclusion of 514 People with deafblindness and multiple sensory impairments, and their families (SDG-10: Reduced Inequalities).
- Enrolled 98 children with deafblindness and complex or severe disability in local schools (SDG-4: Quality Education).
- Improved nutrition for 280 children with deafblindness (SDG-2: Zero Hunger).
- 514 received home based rehabilitation services and 182 received assistive devices, (SDG-3: Health and Wellbeing).
- Empowered women and girls with deafblindness through maintaining at least 1:1 ratios of women & girls to men & boys (SDG-5: Gender Equality).
- A small number of young adults with deafblindness were able to secure paid jobs, (SDG-8: Decent work and economic growth).

Response to Covid-19 Pandemic

Covid-19 and the imposed lockdowns throughout the country hampered project activities. The project teams successfully rescheduled some activities and adapted delivery of others to virtual approaches. This enabled the project to meet all its targets. For example, whilst all schools were closed from March 2020 (and only reopened in September 2021) project field staff and family members of learners with deafblindness continued to support 'education at home.'

People with deafblindness were at high risk of catching Covid-19 due to their dependency upon caregivers, as well as many having pre-existing health issues which made them more vulnerable to Covid-19. Continuous counselling and awareness raising among families and community people helped them to cope emotionally and physically. Public Service Announcements on TV ensured that communities understood the challenges of Covid-19 for people with deafblindness.

Mithu's caregivers said, **"He could hardly bathe and eat by himself when he was identified by the project. Now he can take [a] bath alone. Now he can wash his hands and maintains his personal hygiene."**

Key learnings that will inform our future work:



- Early assessment and support with need-based services and education can significantly change the future life and achievements of a child with deafblindness, even in a challenging environment.
- Family engagement is vital, and parents/ caregivers make good advocates and counsellors for other families.
- Involvement of children in inclusive sports and education demonstrates their potential and helps change negative community attitudes.
- Revised and adapted curriculum is useful for facilitating inclusive education.
- Sensitisation on deafblindness to different levels of government stakeholders is very effective to ensure increasing access to support services on a large scale.

Future Recommendations



- Deafblindness as well as other types of disability should be distinctly addressed in teachers' training on inclusive education.
- National level advocacy is needed to replicate the model of inclusive schools across the country.
- Trained staff and volunteers (to serve as special educators) for people with deafblindness should be continuously developed from the local community.
- Regular reassessment of needs and progress of people with deafblindness should be ensured, so that learning is retained, reinforced, and strengthened.

Humayra's Story

Since 2018, Sense International has supported 514 children and young people with deafblindness in Bangladesh including Humayra...

Nine-year-old Humayra has deafblindness and epilepsy and lives with her mother and grandparents. Humayra had two strokes when she was just 15 months old. These caused her to have physical problems on her right hand side, making it difficult for her to walk or hold things with her hand.

Humayra's grandmother said: "We knew that Humayra was disabled, but we were not sure of the problem. When the Centre for Disability in Development [Sense International's local partner] came to us, we found out that she had a vision and a hearing impairment. Through support, now she takes showers, puts clothes on, brushes her teeth and studies. She does it all by herself."

Humayra was supported with therapy and pre-primary education at home by her special

educator before she joined a mainstream school in January 2019. The special educators had to work closely with the school as it took a lot of persuasion to convince the teachers and the School Management Committee that she could be included in school life. Training was provided to her teachers and her special educator visited her in school to support her in the classroom. Humayra was quite shy and she took time to get used to the busy school environment – but her face always used to light up when she was singing along with her special educator and practising her counting.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, Humayra's family has experienced uncertainty and financial difficulties, and Humayra has been affected by the change in routine and her school being closed.

Sense International has provided the family with emergency funding for food and medicine. Humayra's field educator has been supporting her with daily activities and her education. She is really excited to meet her teachers again when her school reopens and she can return.

Thank you to all who supported the project and Sense International's My Turn to Learn UK Aid Match appeal.



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Find out more at:
senseinternational.org.uk

