

# **Organisation of Community Learning Centres for Lifelong Learning and Community Development**

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Lifelong learning is a process that involves purposive and directed learning. Each individual sets a series of learning objectives and then pursues these by the means available. In a learning society everybody learns and also teaches others throughout life. In such a society, schools and colleges as well as other organisations such as factories, business and social agencies work as education providers. All agencies provide opportunity for learning toward empowerment of the people, so that they can contribute to community development.

In a country like Bangladesh, with its low literacy rate and widespread poverty, it is a big challenge to make a visible impact through non-formal education on the life of the neo-literate. Without opportunities to retain newly acquired literacy skills, the new literate is in danger of losing much of the impact of the skills. One of the devices to retain the literacy of the neo-literate, particularly adolescents and adults who do not intend to enter into the formal system of education, is organising multi-purpose community learning centres at their doorsteps. Again, to offer opportunities to those who are difficult to reach for education and continuous updating of knowledge and life-long learning, there is need for institutionalized education and information support services in the society. DAM's Ganokendra (community learning centre) programme started functioning to meet these needs.

## **Objectives**

The general objective of organising the Ganokendra is to provide learning opportunities to the people through institutionalized information support services for improvement of quality of life. The more specific objectives are the following:

- To organise an institution through which non-formal education and training can be provided to those who remained out of school or have completed basic literacy courses.
- To organise a community library stocked with easy-to-read materials, wall magazines and newspapers, making available to remote communities information that is relevant, practical, and can be understood by people who have limited literacy skills.
- To build up an institution that brings people of a community together, enabling them to network with non-government and government agencies and to access services that are available to them.

## **Features of the programme**

Ganokendra are locally managed institutions, and, as such, each Ganokendra can be developed differently according to local needs and expectations. Essentially, Ganokendra

- provides services to neo-literates and other learners who are not in school that help them increase literacy and life skills
- arranges for basic education of illiterates
- promotes schooling of out-of-school children
- arranges skills training for members
- promotes a reading habit for increasing knowledge and skills
- creates opportunities for further training and retraining in activities that are felt need of the community or individual members
- promotes community development activities
- creates leadership in solving local problems.

Each of these objectives reinforces the others. Teaching basic literacy skills promotes the use of materials on issues such as health and hygiene. The availability of useful and attractive materials facilitates the retention of literacy skill and promotes lifelong learning. The availability of reading materials in the Ganokendra brings the community together. The provision of development services encourages the community to ensure that the library services are maintained.

## **How it works**

Ganokendra in its most simple form is a community library. The booklets provided to the Ganokendra are simply designed as follow-up materials to suit the difficulty levels of the new learners. There are also books and materials for the advanced learners.

Promoting basic education for the out-of-school children and illiterate adults: Ganokendra works not only for post-literacy and continuing education; it also plays a significant role in promoting basic education to illiterates and out-of-school children. Campaign programmes are arranged for enrollment of children in primary schools. Literacy courses are organised for the out-of-school children and illiterate adults and adolescents in the Ganokendra. Follow-up courses are organised for the semi-literate and people with limited reading skills. A brief synopsis of these three programmes is presented below.

*Adult Literacy programme:* The adult literacy programme is run for illiterate adults between the ages of 15 and 35; it provides functional literacy so that they can solve their day-to-day problems by themselves. This is a centre-based programme organised in a Ganokendra, having 25 learners in a centre. The duration of the programme is nine months, divided into two packages. The first package covers a set curriculum frame with three levels, basic, mid-level, and self-learning, within a period of six months. The second package is for follow-up education, covering a period of three months. Two primers with four major functional areas relevant to the needs of the learners cover the three levels of literacy under the first package. The functional areas are family life, economics and income, organisation building, and civic consciousness. The second three months are used for consolidation of literacy skills acquired during the first six-months. During the follow-up period, graded follow-up books or easy-to-read materials are supplied to the learners for guided study. Monthly newsletters supplement these. The learners in adult literacy programmes are simultaneously linked with Ganokendra activities for literacy practice and life-long learning.

*Literacy programme for adolescents:* The objective of the adolescents' literacy programme is to prepare illiterate boys and girls between 11 – 15 years with necessary education, skill training, and awareness of various socio-economic fields for their life ahead. The children of this age group have their own needs and desires. Taking this into consideration, DAM developed a curriculum for this age group and reading materials based on that curriculum. The duration of the adolescents' literacy programme organised in a Ganokendra is also nine months, divided into two packages. The first package covering the set curriculum frame has three levels within six months. The second package covers three months, which is essentially for follow-up education to consolidate the literacy skills acquired during the first six-month period. During this period follow-up graded books and easy-to-read materials are provided supplemented by monthly newsletters and wall magazines, where local news of interest to the neo-literates concerning family life, social and legal issues, income generation activities, and so on, are included.

*Non-formal primary education for children:* The Non-formal Primary Education programme has been designed to cover unschooled children of six to ten years and dropouts of primary school. The duration of the course is four years and covers the primary education cycle (i.e. Grade I to V of the formal primary schools). While the national primary education curriculum is followed in this programme, DAM-produced primers up to class III are used to shorten the course duration. From class IV onward the national textbooks are used. The main purpose of this programme is to provide a second chance to children to re-enter the formal system. Children who do not desire to go for further formal education are attached to the Ganokendra so they can retain their newly acquired literacy skill.

*Promoting a reading habit:* As a resource centre in the village, Ganokendra initiates activities to promote a reading habit among the people, dissemination of information, and counseling services toward the development of life skills. The means of arranging the information, counseling, and resource services vary from Ganokendra to Ganokendra. They include, for example, arranging study circles, inviting local experts (a local craftsman) to facilitate discussion groups, getting assistance of outside resource persons (such as government health workers), collecting information from local branches of national organisations (such as on methods to detect arsenic poisoning).

*Arranging skill-training programmes for the members:* At the initiative of the Ganokendra, vocational training courses are organised to increase income-generation skills of members. Courses are organised either in the Ganokendra or in other convenient venues. Local-level resource persons for government and non-government agencies are invited to facilitate the training sessions.

*Promoting community development activities:* A number of community development issues are addressed in the Ganokendra. These include gender sensitization, environment conservation, income generation, health awareness, water and sanitation, early childhood development, and socio-cultural development. DAM provides training support to the facilitator, who in turn orients the members. All such training courses are organised at the field level and, where appropriate, local resource persons (from government or other NGOs) are invited.

**Facilitating Networking Functions:** An important function of the Ganokendra is that they can link up with other service providers. Gradual strengthening of the Ganokendra fully realizes their potential for accessing services that are already available to the community. Examples of current networking functions of the Ganokendra are its use as an immunization centre, availing veterinary services from the government, collecting educational materials and organising local events on national days, availing micro-credit to members, and networking for primary health care services.

## **Implementation, supervision and management**

Organisational steps of Ganokendra include a survey, organization of the learner-community group, formation and orientation of the management committee, training of facilitators, finalization of Ganokendra infra-structure (landscaping), physical construction or renovation of the centre house, and supply of materials, equipment and books to the centre.

The Ganokendra is organised and managed by the groups of neo-literates with back-up support from DAM, in collaboration with the local community. One facilitator is recruited from the community who works as the Community Worker. She initiates the activities and looks after the smooth functioning of the Ganokendra.

The overall management of the Ganokendra is the responsibility of the Management Committee, formed by people of the locality. Local people, actual and potential users of the Ganokendra are consulted in the process of the formation of the Management Committee. The Committee is equipped to develop plans for the activities that the centre is to undertake (training courses, networking activities, community library, and so on) and to ensure that the activities are implemented satisfactorily.

DAM equips all Ganokendra with basic furniture, including benches, news boards and bookshelves. Each Ganokendra is supplied with booklets that have been designed as follow-up materials to the literacy courses and other easy-to-read materials (all in Bangla). There is regular communication between the facilitators, management committee, and DAM field staff, all of who attend monthly management meetings at the Ganokendra. DAM's supervision personnel supervise the functioning of the Ganokendra and maintain close liaison with the Ganokendra committee. DAM technical, material, and financial support is provided during the initial year(s) of its operation. Ganokendra members raise funds for undertaking activities at local level. Gradually DAM's support is phased out.

## **Innovative aspects of Ganokendra**

- It is organised and run by the community.
- Its post-literacy learning support is not time-bound. It addresses learning needs of the neo-literates for indefinite period.
- An advanced literacy level beyond the highest level (level three) of the national adult literacy curriculum is targeted by the users of Ganokendra.
- It is accessible to all people in the area, not limited to the neo-literates from literacy centres. Out-of-school children, people with limited reading skills, local school students and youths attend Ganokendra for reading newspaper and playing games.
- It is used as training and issue-based discussion centre.
- Socio-economic and environmental programmes are linked with Ganokendra activities.
- It works as an information centre where daily/periodical newspapers, newsletters, and information-communication materials of other agencies are available.
- It is used as a platform to provide educational and financial services both by DAM alone or in co-operation with other NGOs.
- It is used as a service delivery centre by other agencies, including government extension departments.

### **Lessons learned**

- There are demands among the adults and adolescents in the rural communities for learning life skills. These need to be delivered in flexible modes and using simple language.
- Learning materials should always be suitable to the difficulty level of the users.
- It is not only books that attract learners to the community libraries. People enjoy joining in recreational programmes, and learning can be integrated into those activities.
- Neo-literates have the potential to produce an information bulletin for the community.
- Literacy and community development activities can be integrated at any point of delivery of the service package of the organisation.

### **Limitations and challenges**

- Finding a permanent venue for Ganokendra that suits everyone is not easy.
- Facilitators often face difficulty in management of multi-sector activities.
- Absence of scope for professional development of facilitators threatens the quality of operation of such centres.
- An irregular flow of information materials, particularly in remote areas, affects smooth running of Ganokendra. The supply of a daily newspaper becomes a big challenge where roads are poor and travel is difficult.