

Online Freelancing: Eliminating Poverty in Bangladesh

Dinajpur, Bangladesh • Swarthmore College • Sajid Kamal

The goal of this summer project is to empower the vast youth population residing in rural areas – by providing cutting-edge knowledge of online freelancing/ outsourcing – with the collaboration of Gontobbo Youth Foundation.

Here I wanted to address the issue of extreme poverty that is affecting Khansama - a small sub-district in Dinajpur, Bangladesh - for decades. To eradicate this issue, I chose “Online Freelancing” as a viable solution. Freelancing includes all types of work such as photo/video editing, word document editing/ translating, web design, audit making, search engine optimization, etc. It is a unique opportunity for the Bangladeshi youth as the market for freelancing is growing every day and no previous experience is required for the job. It is also possible to earn in this sector in a few days with training. To conduct this month-long project, I chose Khansama sub-district as my host site because this area is known for having the largest population of poor people.

Due to the recent flooding that occurred in the northwest region of Bangladesh, I had to halt my project for one month. During the interim, I spent a portion of my grant award to help the families that were affected by the flood. This is the only obstacle I faced throughout the interim. Although I shortened the length of the project, I did not exclude any content that was mentioned in the project proposal. Alongside Davis fund, Gontobbo Youth Foundation’s emergency fund and some crowdsourcing funds were also used to implement the project.

By the end of my project, seven out of twenty trainees from our program started earning through online freelancing. Five trainees are in the process of establishing and running their stores that provide digital necessities (e.g., editing, printing, photo/scan copies, poster making) which has a high demand in Bangladesh (especially in the rural areas). The rest of them continued polishing their freelancing profile and enriching their technical skill sets. To help them achieve their goals, we are keeping our lab open three days a week, so that the trainees can work from our computers as well for outsourcing/freelancing.

Because the fundamental obstacle to initiate this project was to create the computer lab, thanks to Davis fund, now we are planning to run this project every summer for the next five years. Here our main goal is to create a cycle of producing freelancers. Witnessing the tremendous success

that this project can bring in the near future, Gontobbo Youth Foundation has agreed to sponsor my project in terms of expanding the computers and recruiting more trainees from the following years. If things go according to our plan, more than five hundred freelancers can be produced through this project in the span of five years.

Because poverty and conflict are widely understood to be closely interconnected – with poverty making countries more prone to civil war, armed conflict weakening governance and economic performance, thus increasing the risk of conflict relapse – to me, peace is being able to lead a poverty free life.

The changes, which I regard as one of my accomplishments, I have observed so far is that the people living in Khansama sub-district started showing great enthusiasm towards technologies and online learnings. Once they grasped the idea of how they could easily earn with an internet connection and a desktop/ laptop, they all started showing up to our events regularly, some of them assisted financially so that we could include more computers into our lab, some offered to provide snacks from their families during the sessions. In short, my relationship with the community members has deepened a lot. I, along with my team, was warmly greeted by the local community when they learned about our program. Everyone seemed helpful and they assisted us with whatever resources they had at their disposal. To me, the experiences that I have gained so far are invaluable.

While indulging in the activities mentioned above, I was able to interact with the rural poverty-stricken people – something that I never had experienced before. I understood how I could help them in a way that would be helpful not only to them in the short term, but also to their society in the long run. Sometimes I was challenged by the rigidness of some of the peoples' mindsets, but ultimately, I was able to make them understand how my project was extremely beneficial not only to them, but also to their communities.

Quote:

“Because of this project, even in a smaller scale, I was able to contribute towards the economic development of my country, and I learned that anything is achievable, all we need is to identify the correct approach.” - Sajid