

## **AudioCane: Promoting Social Justice for Visually Impaired Students in Bangladesh through Education and Sustainable Infrastructure**

Country of Project Implementation: Bangladesh

Nominating College: Bennington College

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<http://audiocane.com>

### **Summary**

AudioCane is the first digital platform that endeavors to democratize education for visually impaired students in Bangladesh by offering accessible audiobooks. By using a network of volunteers across Bangladesh and four other countries and setting up cloud recording and editing studios, we have converted all books from class 1 to class 10 in the National Curriculum of Bangladesh into audiobooks and made them available in our online library. We also developed partnerships with different schools and organizations to supply them on-demand audiobooks for primary to tertiary education in Bangladesh.

### **Project Description**

The need to address the significant educational gap for visually impaired students in Bangladesh was identified due to alarming statistics from the 2010 WHO and IAPB study, which reported around 800,000 blind Bangladeshis and emphasized the global urgency of the problem. With a person going blind every five seconds and a child every minute, the call for an inclusive education system is imperative. AudioCane started as a personal project when I started making books for my cousin, who is blind. It turned into a passion project after I shared it with friends, and we dove deep into the world of accessibility in education in Bangladesh. To our surprise, there is no open resource to make education accessible for blind students, so I decided to take up the task along with my friends, and later, we were joined by students from all over Bangladesh, forming a solid network of volunteers. From the beginning, AudioCane's approach involved creating and distributing audio/talking books via a volunteer network for content production and dissemination.

The initiative was rooted in Bangladesh due to the pressing local need. Collaborations, such as the partnership with SoJJa, an organization from the University of Bangladesh, and schools pledging inclusivity, fortified the project's reach and impact. With the supply of on-demand audiobooks to students connected to SoJJa, AudioCane started a journey to make accessible tertiary education more structured for visually impaired and blind students in Bangladesh. Students can now request audio formats of their required readings, ensuring that they have equitable access to critical academic resources. As visually impaired students often have limited or no access to specialized academic content, this work promises to be a game-changer.

While the initial framework remained largely consistent, AudioCane expanded by entering into tertiary education, offering on-demand audiobooks to college students. The original plan was to move most virtual audiobook production to on-site physical locations by forming school clubs and encouraging them to produce audiobooks for local students. However, I later realized that this goal was less fruitful, since supervising grassroots-level clubs requires long-term resource support. Projects for Peace has played a pivotal role in shaping AudioCane's operations and amplifying our impact by enabling the design and launch of the official AudioCane website. This platform not only hosts our services, but it also provides an intuitive interface for our users, ensuring ease of access to the audio content. As our collection of audio books and resources grew, the need for a robust storage solution became paramount. The grant allowed us to acquire ample server space, ensuring our audio archive remains secure and easily accessible.

Our volunteers are the backbone of AudioCane. To ensure they produce high-quality audio content, we invested in top-tier recording equipment. This has not only enhanced the clarity and quality of our audio books, but also made the recording process smoother for our dedicated team. Beyond just equipment, we realized the importance of a conducive environment for recording. A portion of the funds was channeled into setting up on-site recording studios in different cities. This involved some volunteers relocating to oversee the establishment and functioning of these studios. To ensure our volunteers remain plugged into our virtual production process, we allocated resources for them to purchase data packs. This has ensured uninterrupted communication, facilitating smoother coordination and quicker turnaround times for our projects.

The continuum of opportunities for AudioCane appears vast and deeply promising. Starting with our initial focus on primary and secondary education in Bangladesh, the horizon beckons us towards the largely untapped terrain of tertiary education. Ensuring visually impaired students are continually supported throughout their scholastic journey, from their early steps to more advanced stages, becomes imperative.

The role of technology in our mission cannot be overstated. As we're anchored in the digital age, the evolution of artificial intelligence and machine learning offers unique prospects for our platform. We are working on systems where voice recognition tools enable students to actively interact with their content, asking questions and receiving responses in real-time. Further, adaptive learning algorithms can tailor educational experiences to the individual needs of each student, thereby optimizing their learning pathways and reinforcing areas where they may struggle. Moreover, as we expand our reach, building stronger, sustainable partnerships with educational institutions, both at home and abroad, can help proliferate our impact. We envisage a future where, beyond just textbooks, AudioCane becomes a hub of diverse content. This could range from recreational reading material that ignites the imagination to essential skill development courses, which equip our students with tools for a brighter future.

Policy advocacy and awareness campaigns can further the cause of inclusive education, making it a more mainstream conversation. As AudioCane grows and gains more traction, we also find ourselves in a strategic position to garner the attention of philanthropists, tech giants, and global education influencers. Their involvement can amplify our resources, both in terms of technology and funding, allowing AudioCane to stand tall as an emblem of inclusivity and progress in the educational landscape.

### **Reflection**

To me, peace is a society where equality transcends mere words and becomes a tangible, lived reality for all. AudioCane contributes to peace by promoting inclusivity and equity in education. By ensuring visually impaired individuals have access to knowledge through audiobooks, we're bridging the divide between those who can and cannot access traditional written content. In the short term, this has empowered numerous individuals, providing them with the resources necessary to pursue their educational goals. They've gained confidence, felt more integrated into their communities, and no longer felt left behind. In the long term, we believe that this initiative will lead to a more informed and educated society where visually impaired individuals can participate fully in societal conversations, leading to more cohesive communities and reducing feelings of isolation or marginalization.

One significant conflict we encountered was resistance from certain educational institutions that were initially skeptical about the efficacy of audiobooks as a learning tool. They held onto traditional methods of teaching and were hesitant to incorporate our resources into their curricula. This experience highlighted the need to understand deeply entrenched educational biases and methods to effectively communicate the benefits of innovative solutions like AudioCane.

AudioCane has been a transformative journey. Before embarking on this initiative, it was easy to overlook the disparities faced by the visually impaired community. However, witnessing their zeal to learn and the barriers they encounter has been an eye-opener. It challenged our team to think beyond conventional solutions, pushing us to innovate and adapt. The resilience and determination of our beneficiaries have been a constant source of inspiration. Seeing the tangible difference we're making in people's lives solidifies the belief that when equipped with the right tools, everyone can shine.

### **Personal Statement**

AudioCane has underscored the profound impact of empathy-driven innovation and has galvanized the commitment to creating a world where inclusivity isn't just a word, but a lived reality for all.