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ADVOCATES FOR THE BLIND BRING VISION TO IMPOVERISHED BANGLADESH

July 19, 2007, Barisal, Bangladesh: Early in his life, Ruhulamin, 17, suffered from a botched medical procedure that left him almost deaf. Today, he is one of thousands of disabled Bangladeshis who have been empowered by microcredit and accepted as an asset in their communities rather than a liability.

The approach has been pioneered by the Blind Education and Rehabilitation Development Organization (BERDO), an advocacy group whose work is being profiled this summer in the blogs of Caitlin Burnett, a graduate student from American University in Washington DC. Ms Burnett is volunteering with BERDO as a Peace Fellow of The Advocacy Project.

Advocating for the disabled is dauntingly difficult in a country that suffers from grinding poverty and repeated natural disasters. Ms. Burnett writes about recent floods which killed over 120 people in mudslides.

Adding to the challenge, Bangladesh is currently ruled by a military-backed caretaker government. BERDO lobbied successfully for passage of the Bangladesh Persons with Disability Welfare Act in 2001, but finds it hard to follow up with lobbying while parliament is suspended.

Despite the obstacles, BERDO celebrated its 16th anniversary on Tuesday on a high note. Its use of microcredit is particularly noteworthy, even in a country that produced the Grameen Bank. By the end of 2005, BERDO had made loans of \$875,000 to 10,752 groups that included disabled members like Ruhulamin and his mother, who is the loan holder.

According to Ms Burnett, the loans range between \$50 and \$200 and are usually invested in “planting vegetable gardens, purchasing a rickshaw, (or) buying small stocks of cloth.” The repayment rate of disabled borrowers is 100%.

The loans provide an incentive to the other members of the groups to support their disabled colleagues. “Somebody has hands, eyes, or legs, while others don’t,” said one group member to Ms. Burnett. “We must come together to work.”

BERDO also offers disabled students a chance to continue their studies by providing Braille material, scribes, tape recorders and the chance to go to university. Last week, BERDO presented scholarships to 20 blind students, in front of the press.

The founder of BERDO, Mohammad Saidul Huq, is himself blind. His vision for the disabled has been recognized by the organization Ashoka, which supports social entrepreneurs and awarded Mr Huq an Ashoka fellowship in 1993.

BERDO's other international supporters include Zonta International, the international women's service organization. The Dhaka branch of Zonta is supporting BERDO's scholarship program and Ms. Burnett's blogs are being followed by members of the Zonta Club of Washington, which will host a reception for her on return.

Eventually, even BERDO's innovation runs up against Bangladesh's inescapable poverty. Ms. Burnett met one 28 year-old blind woman who went through university on a BERDO scholarship and achieved a master's degree in history, but is still unemployed.

In some places, the pressure is unbearable. Landless poor move to Tongi, near Dhaka, in the hope of finding work in the garment industry. But there are no jobs in Tongi and the price of food has doubled in recent months as a result of the government's unwillingness to crack down on corrupt business syndicates.

The people of Tongi, writes Ms. Burnett "appear worn down by the difficulties of their life." One woman put it simply: "We have no power."

- For Caitlin Burnet's blogs visit <http://advocacynet.org/author/caitlin/>
- For Saidul Huq's Ashoka profile visit <http://www.ashoka.org/node/3529>

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