

Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha (SSS) Didn't able to show minimum level of work Now Time to Act!

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Stockholm Challenge Award, Ashden Awards for Sustainable Energy, and Santa Fe Conservation Trust to review their methods of award distribution around the world

Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha (SSS), a NGO, is executing several programs by boat for improving livelihood in remote Chalanbeel area in Bangladesh where people are marooned most of the time a year.

Recently this NGO got 3 (three) awards from 3 different international organizations. One from Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, another from United Nations Development Program (UNDP) named Equator Prize and another from Ashden Trust, one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts (SFCT), UK named Ashden Award.

Available document from UNDP, we found Shidulai Swarnivar Sangstha won the Equator Prize in recognition of outstanding community efforts for poverty reduction and biodiversity conservation. SSS established riverboat-based Educational Resource Centers throughout Bangladesh's Ganges River delta to deliver information on sustainable agricultural practices and market prices. Shidhulai uses Bangladesh's extensive river network to spread environmental education. Boats have been outfitted to travel from farm to farm- bringing new technologies, information, strategies, and tools. Villagers have learned and implemented ways to avoid problems such as soil erosion, ground and water contamination, over-fishing and habitat destruction.

(<http://www.undp.org/equatorinitiative/equatorprize/EquatorPrize2006/2006-winners.htm>)

Besides, Ashden Trust honor SSS's initiative for local sustainable energy solutions in the developing world. Ashden identify and reward organizations, which have carried out truly excellent, practical, yet innovative schemes, demonstrating sustainable energy in action at a local level. Here Ashden Trust sets some criteria to be fulfilled by the respective organization. (http://www.ashdenawards.org/media_summary07_shidhulai) From those websites' information disseminated by SSS for getting the different awards, they claimed their 88 boats perform to deliver services to the people.

It is told that among those 88 boats, 15 boats are specifically equipped with floating classrooms; 24 boats are with libraries, 10 boats are for 'mobile education and information centers'; 30 boats are dedicated battery charging stations, and can charge 60-120 batteries for small solar-home-systems (SHS), and 60-120 portable solar lanterns and 9 boats are used for health care and other services. All boats are facilitated with books, maximum four computers with internet access via mobile phone network, DVD/CD player, and locally produced educational media. Each library-boat carries about 1,500 books, 4 PV-powered computers with Internet access, a DVD/CD player and a wide range of information and training materials. During the day they are sometimes used for training programs for farmers, on issues such as sustainable agriculture.

SSS also told that 88 thousand families or over 4 lac people per year are being benefited from their activities.

Inspired by their work, we send an e-mail through info@shidhulai.org very positively on June 9, 2007 to learn details work of SSS. Unfortunately still we don't get any reply regarding that e-mail. This e-mail address is available from the official website of Ashden

Awards (www.ashdenawards.org), Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (www.gatesfoundation.org) and Shidhulai's own website (www.shidhulai.org). On that time we sent the e-mail to SSS, their website was under construction!! Now the website is working with disabled important link. Then we got an address of SSS from a responsible source in Rupnagar, Mirpur, Dhaka.

June 27, 2007 we (3 Journalists from Bangladesh ICT Journalist Forum- BIJF) visited the Head Office of SSS in Mirpur. That time we talked with two officers- Mr. Tarikul Hossain, Assistant Admin Officer and Ms. Tahmeema Hossain, Program Officer. As per their claim, SSS have many projects in different locations of Natore, Pabna, Siraggonj adjacent to Chalanbeel. But these officers were hesitating to provide information regarding these projects. They told- 'SSS' Executive Director Mr. AHM Rezwan is the best person to talk about the projects.' But at that time Mr. Rezwan was not in Bangladesh. And the project manager (who lives in the project area) also knows about projects. On that moment we talked with the program manager (Mr. Suproakash Pal) over mobile phone, but he felt unlikely to tell any information regarding SSS, rather told us to collect information from Dhaka Office. SSS could not give any officially prepared paper regarding their work and achievement. Program officer (Ms. Tahmeema Hossain) assured us to provide papers regarding overall activities of SSS as soon as possible. But still we don't get any paper or information officially from SSS.

June 28, 2007 Mr. Tarikul Hossain, Assistant Admin Officer of SSS sent a reply through 'bytesforall yahoo groups' where he gave a list of newspaper that published the news regarding SSS school boat projects. Actually that was the first time response from someone responsible for SSS. We sent another e-mail replying to Mr. Tarikul but still no response from him.

After this situation, 6 journalists (Member of Bangladesh ICT Journalist Forum, BIJF) went to have first hand knowledge about their works in the Chalanbeel area on July 14, 2007. At that time we talked with many government administrative officers, local people, civil society organizations, Local NGOs, NGO organizations and local journalists. We also went different project areas of SSS in Chalanbeel to locate their boats and works.

When Program manager of Shidulai Mr. Suproakash Pal knew that we were in Gurudaspur, Natore, he did not receive our mobile phone call. At last we went to SSS' office and met Mr. Suproakash Pal. That time his answers to the query of journalists were not satisfactory as he tried to avoid. He also blamed journalist for going there without informing them before. Actually their behavior was not in a level of professionalism at any stage of correspondence. We failed first time to have a look on SSS' boats but 4 boats were found later. Among these boats, one was locked and another three were under construction or re-construction level. Out of these three boats, two had solar-panel.

Our observations from the tour are:

1. Information provided by Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha by what it got different awards is not fully correct.
2. Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha has maximum 5 boats (till July 14, 2007) for all their activities, not 88 boats. Many people told the number of boats was one (1) when contacted and we saw 3 boats were under construction that time.
3. Less than 0.5% of 400 people (we contacted these people, among them there are govt. officials, local NGO officials, local journalists, school and college teachers, students, businessmen, day laborers, rickshaw and motorized van-pullers) know about their project in respective area. Most of these people live there from their birth but do not have any idea about the project.
4. Distance of local Thana (Law Enforcement Office) from SSS' office is less than quarter kilometer. But Thana officers have no detail knowledge about SSS work. District Commissioner (DC) of Natore Mr. S M Ahsanul Kabir told us he knew SSS worked as a NGO but he did not get any information about its boat project. Still SSS did not give any invitation to him to visit their project.

5. SSS has an address in Dhaka (House No. 3, Road No. 2, Shialbari, Rupnagar R/A, Mirpur-2, Dhaka-1216) which may be their head office but they use GPO Box No. as their contact address!!

6. They are trying to do deliver education and technology to isolated communities through boat but their website is not very much useful for user (most of the link is disabled)!!!!

7. At the time of enjoying Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Award, they claimed 87,500 families were benefited from their activities. In May 2007 when they submitted paper to qualify for Ashden Award, they again claimed 88,000 families already benefited from their activities. This NGO was established in 1998 but they started their river based project from 2002. So in 3 years (from 2002 to 2005) 87,500 families were benefited from their work. But in last 2 years (from 2006 to 2007) only 500 families are included in beneficiary net. Is not it confusing? Interestingly, they claimed 4 Lac people already benefited from them but when we talked with local people, we found only 3/4 people (out of 400 people) knew about boat-based education of SSS. But they are not directly benefited, they just heard of it.

8. From Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation they got prize money of one million US dollar, from Ashden Awards they got prize money of 60,000 US dollar and from Equator Prize they got 30,000 US dollar. They didn't able to show minimum level of work though they got huge amount of money from award of prize.

After having these findings, we tried to contact Mr. Rezwan to get comments on our observation regarding his project but failed. Later Mr. Tarikul Hossain, Assistant Admin Officer of SSS contacted and told that Mr. Rezwan wanted to have meeting one-to-one basis, not with the full team of 6 journalists. But as per our demand, at last July 26, 2007 we met him altogether. Interestingly, he even that time claimed, SSS has 88 boats to deliver the respective services to the people'. Though it contraries to our findings. He was firm to show 88 boats within one week after the meeting date but still failed to do anything regarding his commitment. But even he didn't give us his contact mobile phone number, rather told Mr. Tarikul would contact us. But he did not give a phone call and when we tried to call him, he didn't receive the phone.

Still we like the initiatives of SSS, especially delivering education and technology by boats to the isolated communities. If this initiative is working properly we may replicate the project to different places of Bangladesh.

Contact phone number of resourceful people regarding this report and SSS project:

1. Mr. S M Ahsanul Kabir, DC Natore – 01713-201515, Mr. Habibul Kabir Chowdhury, DC Noakhali – 01713-121154 (Ex. DC Natore), Mr. Md. Mostafizul Islam – 01712-660249, Secretary, Natore NGO Association (NNA) Chairman, NGO Network Natore, Mr. Imtiaz Alam, OC Gurudaspur Thana – 01716-428888, Mr. Moniruzzaman, UNO Gurudaspur Thana – 01711-177072, Mr. Rezaul Haque, SP Natore – 01713-373851, Abul Hasnat Mohd, Rezwan, Executive Director of Shidhulai Swanirvar Sangstha (SSS), Mr. Shu Prokash Pal, Program Manager, SSS – 01713-245143, 01818-172163, Ms. Tahmeema Hossain, Program Officer, SSS - 01713-245107, tahmeema@shidhulai.org, Tarikul Hossain, Asstt. Admin Officer, SSS 01713-245118, tarikul@shidhulai.org, Mr. Mohon, Computer Teacher, SSS Ostomonisha Center (Pabna) – 01713-245180,

It's time for 'Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation', 'UNDP' and 'SFCT' to review their methods of award distribution. We believe these awards are a great way to encourage the real practitioners but if unwillingly misused, it might damage their own image. If the awarding agencies do not have enough human resource to physically verify finalist projects by themselves, they could ask support from other international agencies e.g. One World South Asia, AMARC, GKP, IDRC, Telecenter.org APC and UNDP –Bangladesh.

Thanking you.

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