



Bangladesh is suffering from a dearth of health-care professionals, especially in rural areas. To alleviate this difficult situation, Novartis and Swisscontact, an independent foundation, have helped set up training programs for paramedics aimed at improving the community healthcare network in what is one of the world's poorest countries.

Priming paramedics

Masum Billah is proudly standing in front of his pharmacy...

... in the little village of Mostafapur, in the coastal district of Patuakhali in Bangladesh.

The 26-year-old opened his ward last year. Motivated by his father, who urged him to pursue a career as a healthcare practitioner, he gave up his job as an NGO worker and underwent a two-year training course – supported by Novartis and Swisscontact – to become a community paramedic.

He is now selling medicines and providing basic healthcare services and check-ups to the local population and acts as paramedic in his home town, often visiting distressed patients during the night. “My mobile phone is always on,” he says with a satisfied but serious smile. “If someone calls me, I am on my way.”

The need for professional healthcare workers such as Masum Billah is high. While there are roughly 5 physicians and 2 nurses per 10,000 people in Bangladesh, most of them work in bigger cities, such as the country's capital Dhaka, according to a 2011 study published in *Human Resources for Health Development Journal*. In rural areas, where three-quarters of

Bangladesh's 160 million people live, professional doctors are rare. On average, there are about 12 unqualified village doctors and 11 salespeople at drug retail outlets per 10,000 people in remote regions, the study found. In comparison, Switzerland has about 40 doctors and a similar number of nurses per 10,000



Fatima Moni



Fatima Moni
in her ward in
Paschim.

people. The hospital situation is equally dire: Per 10'000 people there are 0.8 hospital beds, compared to more than 40 in Switzerland. Another crippling factor is poverty. Nearly 50 million people in Bangladesh are earning less than 2 US dollars per day, forcing many to seek alternative medical treatments from traditional healers, who have limited means to treat common diseases such as tuberculosis, respiratory infections and heart disease, which are the leading causes of death in Bangladesh. To help remedy this situation, Swisscontact and Novartis have been supporting the government in Bangladesh since 2011 to develop a functioning healthcare network in underserved regions. As part of the joint program Swisscontact and Novartis have helped introducing community paramedics – a profession that before did not exist – and have worked towards guaranteeing that this new class of healthcare professionals is officially recognized. The partners are also working to increase health aware-

ness and to provide training for the teachers who educate aspiring paramedics. "Our organization has many years of experience in strengthening the vocational training systems in developing countries," says Annina Stoffel, who works for Swisscontact's head office in Zurich. "Our goal is to establish a sustainable model that can help address some of the most urgent healthcare needs in the country. With the creation of community paramedics, we provide lasting change on the ground." So far, several hundred young adults have completed the two-year training course and today work as independent community paramedics. By 2018, Swisscontact aims at facilitating the training of around 500 young adults, of which around half should be self-employed. One of the early graduates is 35-year-old Fatima Moni. A political scientist by training, she moved to Patuakhali with her husband a few years ago. After completing the paramedic training course, she invested



People stand in a
queue during a
health camp event.



Suma Rani Boudha is making check-ups during a health camp.



Suma Rani Boudha is studying at home.

Suma Rani Boudah



Professional assistance during pregnancies and childbirth is extremely important in Bangladesh. Although infant mortality rates have dropped sharply in the past few years, more than 30 infants are still dying for every 10,000 births. In comparison, the infant mortality rate in Switzerland is 3 per 10,000 births.

“Strengthening trust is one of the key factors to making the community paramedic scheme work and improving the country’s healthcare network, says Ehasanul Huq, the local Swisscontact project manager.

For this reason, Huq and the local project staff also support marketplace meetings and theatre performances to raise awareness on nutrition, hygiene and health amongst the local population. “Such activities are important because they also heighten confidence in the skilled health workers,” explains Ehasanul Huq.

In the past few years, Swisscontact and Novartis have managed to raise healthcare awareness in several districts, reaching nearly 200,000 people. Many patients also participate in the regular check-ups that are offered as part of community gatherings, which give the paramedics an opportunity to prove their skills to a wider group of patients.

Several hundred patients recently gathered at a health camp event in Pataukhali, which gave Suma Rani Boudha the opportunity to meet potential new customers. Active as a community paramedic since

around 200,000 taka –around 2500 US dollars – to open her ward in the village of Paschim.

Since opening her office, she has become a respected healthcare worker in her village, known for her midwifery skills. “I am proud to be a paramedic, especially because I can assist during childbirth,” said Fatima Moni. “It means a lot to me that expectant mothers put their trust in me.”

Bellal Hossain



2014, Suma Rani Boudah recently moved here and currently works from her home in Nondi Para, offering a wide array of primary healthcare services, including midwifery. "It makes me proud when people regard me as a doctor, though I am not", she says. Meanwhile, 23-year old community paramedic Bellal Hossain is seeking to grow his paramedic business in the village of Umitpur. Besides running a cash vending point at his ward, Hossain wants to broaden his healthcare offerings to reach more people and improve the medical situation in his home region. "I want to

expand my ward and offer more services to my patients," he says. "I am planning to build up a mini-clinic with more medical equipment." Leo Wyss, who is overseeing the project for Novartis, was impressed by the entrepreneurial spirit of the young paramedics when he recently joined Annina Stoffel during a project visit. "Swisscontact's ability to find the right local and governmental partners and work towards sustainable solutions that help strengthen vocational skills really makes a difference," he said. "To see the progress on the ground is very satisfactory."



Bellal Hossain on his way to a patient.



Ehasanul Huq, Annina Stoffel and Leo Wyss during their project visit in Patuakhali.

Swisscontact was founded in 1959 and has been involved in hundreds of projects in developing countries ever since. One of its key areas of expertise is the development of vocational training programs. More information can be found at www.swisscontact.ch