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## New Directions for Youth Leadership Development

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We don't believe in or support celebrating a day for something specific, but when something good comes out of it, which is rare, we can embrace it. International Youth Day 2010 was one such rare occasion. Around 22 people came together for a roundtable discussion at The Daily Star office under the banner 'New Directions for Youth Leadership Development' organised by the Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC) and Star Campus.

The roundtable meeting was moderated by Shahnoor Wahid, Editor, Star Campus. Yamin Jahangir, Sub Editor, and Sameeha Suraiya, Assistant Sub Editor, represented Star Campus, while BYLC's President, Ejaj Ahmad, and Project Manager, Ivdad Ahmed Khan Mojlish, along with 13 Building Bridges through Leadership Training graduates, BYLC's signature programme, participated from BYLC. The three most important components of BBLT are: Building Bridges, Leadership Training, and Community Service.

Special guests of the event were Sabhanaz Rashid Diya, Cofounder and Advisor, One Degree Initiative, Zubair Idris, Founding member, One Degree Initiative and CommunityAction, Nabila Idris, Founder President, CommunityAction, and Korvi Rakshand, Founder Chairman, JAAGO Foundation. Each of these special guests have contributed remarkably to encourage youth and have influenced and initiated substantial community service activities around the country. It was great to have them all to discuss the future of youth leadership in Bangladesh.

Three areas came up prominently in the discussion: quality of public leadership, multi-tiered education system and youth engagement in the community. Before we began discussing public leadership, Shahnoor Wahid asked us our views on the current political system. Needless to say, gross inadequacies were found. Unlike any other occasion, we diagnosed the real issue instead of simply criticising. Nabila brought up an excellent point, "One definition of leadership is 'service', but we don't see it being implemented." She suggested a person from a privileged background should rather develop his/her own community, promote and exercise grassroots leadership to build credibility before entering politics.



BYLC-Star campus roundtable meeting in progress.

### Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC)

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One of the most important qualities we want in a leader is a strong educational background, regardless of his/her status. It was clarified that “education” here not only means pedagogical learning on a certain subject, but a diverse and concrete background on many different aspects -- economics, public relations, community service etc, so that a leader can diagnose the problems of a community and understand ways to adapt in a rapidly changing world. It was acknowledged once again how dynastic politics is systematically hindering our most brilliant minds from gaining access into politics. The participants unanimously pointed out that politicians usually have to spend so much money during the elections that after getting elected, they spend much of their time salvaging the election cost, indicating public service as not the primary goal. Transparency should be built in the system to prevent such unethical practices.

Public leadership is all about commitment. To instill commitment among youth, involvement in their community is necessary and to increase involvement, we need people from different backgrounds to come and work together, so that they learn to respect each other's values. On that note, BYLC participants positively shared their views on the importance of building bridges.

Next, we moved on to the topic of education system in Bangladesh. The most conspicuous fact about our schooling system is that we have three different schooling mediums: English medium, Bengali medium and Madrassas. Unfortunately, our society tends to view Madrassa students as incompetent and potential militants, and even in the field of higher education, a qualified Madrassa student faces blatant discrimination. However, any BBLT student who has worked with Madrassa students will testify that they are as aspiring, enthusiastic and educated as we are.

The discussion gave a wonderful opportunity for the BBLT Madrassa participants to get their voices heard. They expressed their offence at not having full freedom to apply to universities, and even if they do get accepted, Madrassa students are barred from taking several important subjects. Although, many Madrassas may offer education below standard, there are some which are simply outstanding.

Just like the Madrassa faction, other mediums feel that they are discriminated too. English medium students complained that to get into a public university in Bangladesh, an English medium student has to memorise the HSC syllabus in four months. This gives HSC examinees an advantage because they have already studied this curriculum for two years, but for the English medium students, to learn all the material in four months is an insurmountable task. Yamin of the Star Campus team defended those who pursue higher education abroad by asserting the lack of better options. To reduce the effects of brain drain, Zubair opined that these students should be motivated to come back to Bangladesh by creating adequate job opportunities. Moreover, Diya pointed out that these students will have to change the mindset of being overvalued in the market as the real scenario often turns out to be different.

Shahnoor Wahid wrapped up the topic by emphasising on improving the quality of teachers. He also stated that higher education should only be for the brightest of minds, everyone else should opt for technical and vocational training, so that they can quickly enter the job market and earn a living while the best minds should be fostered to conduct research and build new ideas.

Finally, we moved to the topic of community leadership. Public leadership refers to playing the a role that affects people in general, while community leadership is exercised within one's own community. We strongly urge the youth to explore the area of community service before considering taking up the role of a public leader.

It was brought up that the parents and school authorities see community service as a distraction, and whenever a student tries to approach a problem, he/she faces a lot of resistance. The group urged the youth not to back down due to these small hurdles, but rather continue working on issues that they are passionate about. Korvi suggested that community service clubs like JAAGO provides a platform for youngsters to get involved to develop a compassionate mindset among them.

Zubair explained that 10 degree Initiative has two goals: community service and youth-led development. Through their projects, the youth is trained to work in different environments, adjust to different people and eventually lead their own projects. This not only makes them efficient, but also changes their mindset towards the work they do and towards life itself. Zubair beautifully phrased the notion by saying, “Even a one

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degree change is just as necessary to affect a community as it is necessary to turn ice into water.” Nabila gave three wonderful examples of active community leaders working with the CommunityAction.

So how exactly do we take the first step? Either we contact an organisation of our liking and join one of their current projects, or we simply start at home. Leadership begins at home just like charity. Helping to educate your domestic help can be one form of leadership. That can be the first step to make a difference in our community. And it is not a difficult proposition at all if we nurture compassion. As Ejaj Ahmad aptly puts it, “At the heart of leadership is compassion and organisations like JAAGO Foundation, One Degree Initiative and CommunityAction are all doing impressive work to develop a more compassionate young generation. A bright future awaits Bangladesh if more such initiatives are taken by the young generation.” The time is ripe for us, the young generation, to step up and exercise leadership in our community. We need to stop blaming authorities and start looking at ourselves and ask: What can I do for my society?

*(The authors are graduates of BYLC's signature Building Bridges through Leadership Training (BBLT) programme)*

**URL:** [http://www.thedailystar.net/campus/2010/08/04/going\\_global.htm](http://www.thedailystar.net/campus/2010/08/04/going_global.htm)