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BIGD REFLECTIONS

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Letter From the Executive Director

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The year 2022 happens to be a significant year in my professional life—fortunately, perfectly aligned with my ethos and philosophical orientation, something that is inextricable from my identity. This year, I completed my fourth year at BIGD, and as I start my next four years' journey here, I desire to take BIGD, with my colleagues and our partners, to a new height of relevance and excellence, truly creating knowledge for a better world. This year, BRAC, which changed the course of my life, turned 50, and the Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program turned 20, with which I started my career at BRAC.

So this year, I take the opportunity to reflect on what I have learned as a researcher working intimately with UPG, arguably the most consequential anti-poverty program of BRAC, which is now a proven global public good. In the process, I want to reflect on how research can more meaningfully support development practice to remain relevant and be more effective in the fast-changing world.

The first thought that comes to my mind is that the process of developing a successful intervention or program is not linear; it is extremely messy and

organic, with surprises and discoveries. Second, it is also about deep cultivation of praxis—iterative application of the theories on the ground to learn and update program design and theories. And, the two are intertwined. I will try to explain how they are intertwined and what kind of research-practice interface can facilitate the process.

The UPG program was born out of the realization that BRAC's Rural Development Program (RDP), which was meant to support the poor, was increasingly unable to include the poorest, primarily driven by the priorities like rapid scaleup and financial sustainability. The formal assessment of the program through its four phases provided food for thought, substantiated by the intensive field observations: the program, particularly its microfinance component, was systematically excluding the poorest due to its focus on financial sustainability, which would provide greater resilience and independence to BRAC's development programs. And, the immersive learning from the field—gleaned by zealous frontline staff as well as the leadership including Sir Abed—about the challenges, aspirations, and motivations of these people provided the basis of the program, how the ultra-poor would be targeted, what the support package would be, and how the program would be delivered.

I spent the best part of my two years in the field with my program colleagues.

Photo // **Nusrat Jahan**

We focused on enhancing our understanding of the context of the program and its mechanics on the ground. We studied the effectiveness of "targeting" to understand whether the elaborate, innovative method was indeed identifying and selecting the ultra-poor—the whole point of the program. We also studied the challenges in program delivery as well as those faced by the ultra-poor beneficiaries in effectively utilizing the services and benefits they received. These quick, formative studies provided some crucial inputs in improving and fine-tuning the program in its early years. Then we documented those processes to ensure that the learnings become embedded in the program design.

For example, one of our key findings was that many ultra-poor participants were facing resistance from their community, preventing them from putting their new productive assets to use. Community members would complain about the stench coming from the poultry and the livestock breaking into rice fields and vegetable patches. In worst cases, their poultry or livestock would be stolen or killed. To address these challenges, Gram Shohayok Committee (village assistance committee) was introduced, including the empathetic village elites to champion the cause of protecting the assets of the ultra-poor participants. We then qualitatively assessed the success of the committee. We found that while it was quite successful in protecting the ultra-poor's assets, it also reinforced the benefactor-beneficiary relationship between the elites and the ultra-poor. Based on our suggestions, the ultra-poor representatives were included in the committees, trying to level the playing field and enhance their vertical and horizontal social networks.

Countless other adjustments were made to the program based on continuous field observations. For example, in the second phase, the stipend package was varied based on the type of asset given (due to their different return periods) and more emphasis was given on providing a mix of assets to ensure a balance between immediate and longer-term cashflows.

> "I believe the growth of the UPG program through various revisions was made possible by the close interaction between the research and program staff, and, perhaps more importantly, the research mindset of the program staff and their desire to improve the ambitious new program through close observation.

UPG found the great partnership of a group of young, curious researchers deeply interested to understand the nitty-gritties of the program and the everyday implementation and innovations. Nothing was too small.

An impact assessment of the first phase of the program was going on simultaneously, where we used the difference-in-differences method in comparing the participants and the near-eligible non-participants for the period between 2002 and 2005. However, our formative and observational findings on the ground helped us interpret the findings with nuance. A large-scale, longitudinal

impact evaluation was introduced much later, in 2007, by when the program went through several rounds of modifications and fine-tuning.

The program has continued to evolve till today. The first major change came during the second phase in 2007—bringing diversity in the support package: (a) a grant-based package for the most vulnerable, called the Specially Targeted Ultra-Poor (STUP), and (b) a credit-based package for the relatively less vulnerable, called the Other Targeted Ultra-Poor (OTUP). Each group was subdivided into two groups. This change was based on the field observations and realization of the diversity among the ultra-poor groups, which provided an opportunity to reduce the cost and thus scale the program. In the third phase, the subgroups were merged into STUP and OTUP. This change was also based on field insights—while the two larger groups were indeed different in terms of their socioeconomic deprivations, the difference between the subgroups was not large enough to treat them differently. Since 2017, the program has been providing three support packages—differing in their composition of grant vs loan—based on age and other vulnerabilities. Again, these changes were based on the assessment of the changing economic status of the rural poor and the diverse needs on the ground.

Throughout the process, research continued to play a supportive role, of course through evaluations of the modified versions but also qualitative and pilot studies and dialogues with program staff for continuous improvement of the program.

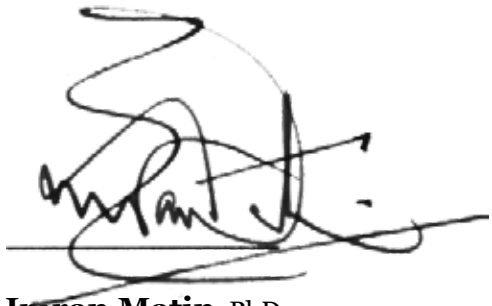
> Research-program relationship depended on the questions—deeply interdependent when the focus was on formative and operational questions and, as needed, robustly independent when the focus was evaluative. The two ways of working required leadership and maturity but were hugely rewarding and brought out the best in both domains.

Photo // BRAC

Let me finish by reiterating my conviction. Human society is a complex system, and so are the challenges in making it better. In complex systems, it is most often impossible to find a magic bullet. And in today's world, these challenges are becoming even more complex and volatile, due to forces like climate change and globalization.

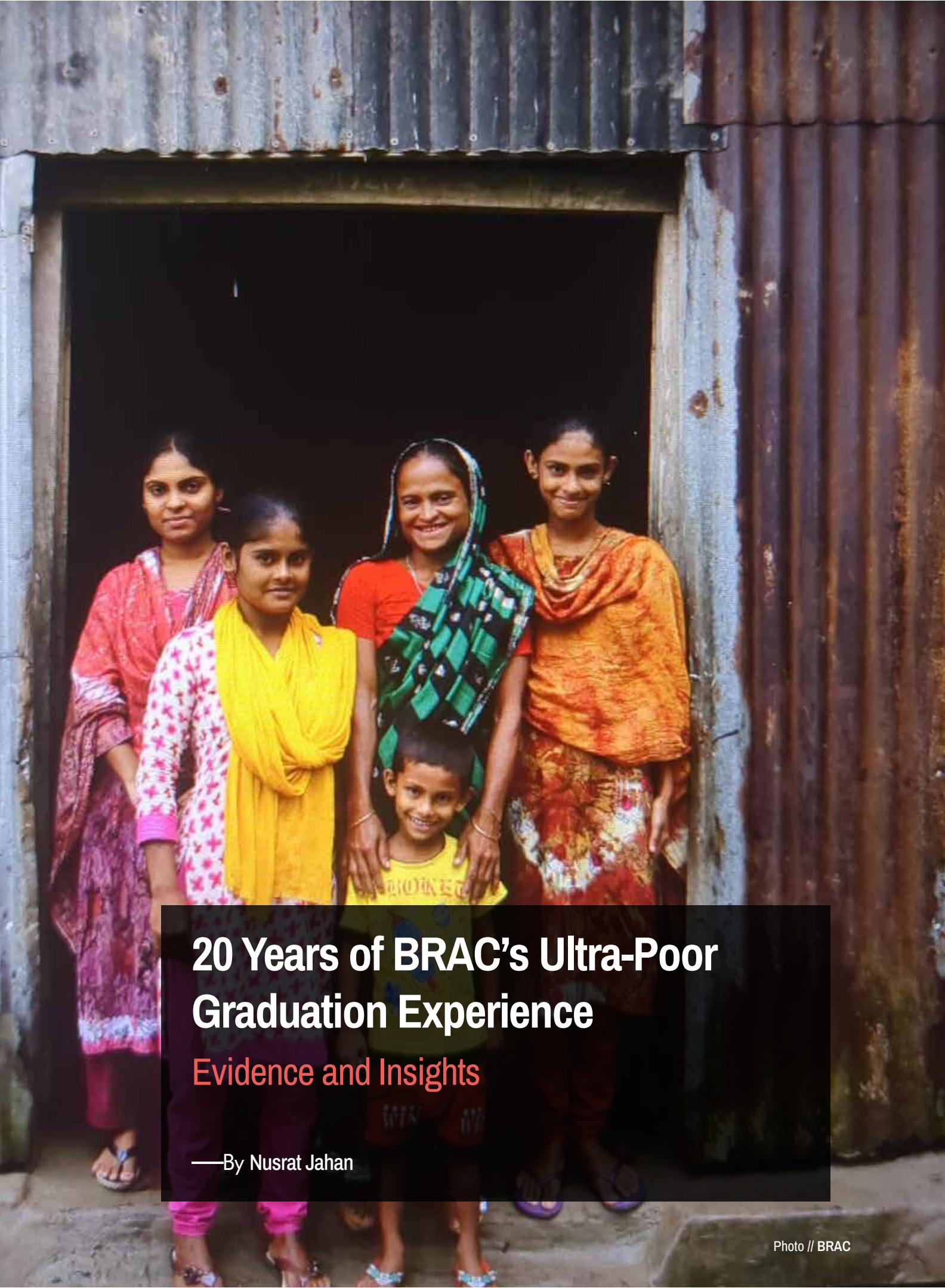
> So to be effective, development programs need to be agile, learning-driven, and iterative. Cultivating a researcher mindset and a culture of learning orientation is thus more important than ever.

In this process, social science researchers can provide more meaningful support by going beyond evaluations, taking part in the journey through close interaction and dialogue with programs and their target groups, and being agile in their choice of methods based on what is needed.



Imran Matin, PhD

Executive Director
BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University



20 Years of BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation Experience

Evidence and Insights

—By Nusrat Jahan

Photo // **BRAC**

Introduction

Poverty, by nature, is extremely heterogeneous, and often it is the extreme poor who face the most complex and unique challenges, creating a trap of interlocking constraints that makes it extremely difficult for them to use existing opportunities for escaping poverty. Often the condition of extreme poverty is intergenerational.

With the growing realization that its mainstream development programs were often not reaching or working for the extreme- or ultra-poor and that reaching them would require specially designed, targeted, and multifaceted interventions, BRAC came up with the Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP) program in 2002. Later renamed the Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program, the model is designed to help ultra-poor households graduate out of poverty. In this program, the poorest beneficiaries are selected through a multi-staged process and are offered a multifaceted support package—asset transfer, matched savings, entrepreneurship training, and health and social awareness, coupled with coaching and mentoring for 18–24 months. The program is built around four pillars—livelihoods promotion, financial inclusion, social inclusion, and social empowerment.

Graduation is a proven model for tackling extreme poverty in the Global South, so far helping 14 million ultra-poor people in 3.1 million households in about 50 countries through more than 100 government and non-profit partnerships.

Since its inception 20 years ago, UPG has been going through continuous experimentations and modifications based on program experience and the evolving needs and contexts of the target population.

> This article is an attempt to summarize some of the key evidence and insights from the numerous studies done, primarily in Bangladesh, across different phases of UPG and on the major outcomes of interest.

Targeting

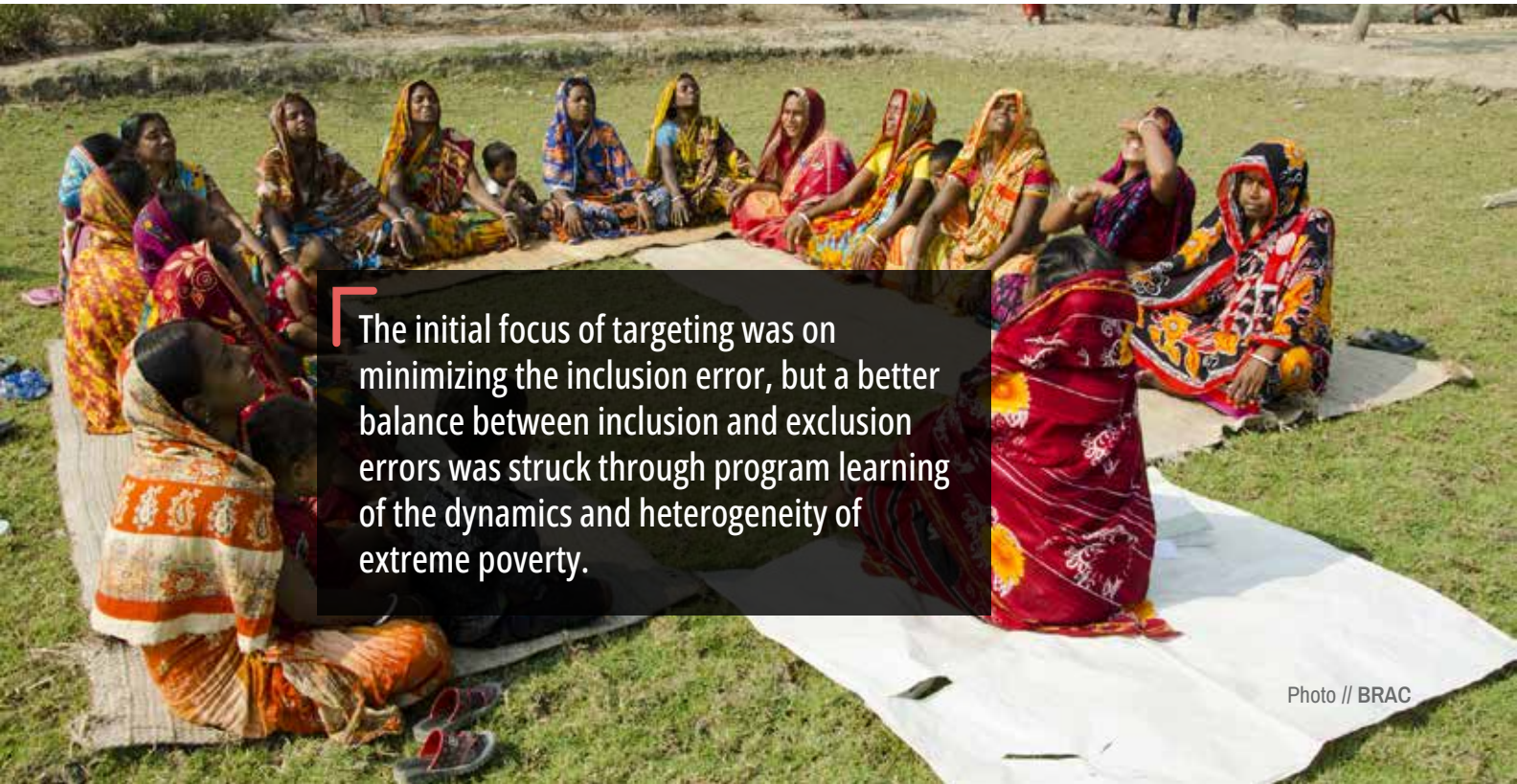
The idea of a specialized, focused program for the ultra-poor was inspired by BRAC's growing realization that with increasing emphasis on financial sustainability and scale, its Rural Development Program (RDP), especially the

program's microfinance component, was not reaching or benefitting the poorest. Thus, targeting the most deserving households was a crucial part of UPG, so much so that the program was initially called Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction: Targeting the Ultra-Poor. An innovative, multi-staged, elaborate method was introduced for targeting—combining different conventional and non-conventional approaches—which is being used till today.

Process documentation at the program's formative stage (Noor et al., 2012) revealed the complexities and practicalities of the targeting method. The study also illustrated how the close relationship between BRAC staff and the community played out in effective targeting, by bringing in the diverse streams of knowledge in making a decision. The study observed the instrumental role played by the BRAC staff in synthesizing the diverse, rich knowledge and tackling frequent unanticipated difficulties arising in the process.

Early research by Matin and Halder (2004) focused on targeting, which found that the method was indeed effective: three-quarters of the program beneficiaries belonged to the poorest group, which translated to 82% of the poorest households in an area (considering the maximum number of households that could be selected in an area). The authors further found that the primarily selected households or the bottom group in the wealth ranking exercise, the principal method of targeting, were significantly different from the households belonging to the next group in the ranking—in their deprivations, opportunities, security, and empowerment. The finding indicates to a structural break, not a continuum, in the socioeconomic realities between the identified ultra-poor and the rest of the community, consistent with the hypotheses in literature and observations in the field.

In other words, the targeting method used in the UPG program was effective from the beginning. It was also an early validation of BRAC's multifaceted, specialized approach to supporting the ultra-poor to escape poverty.



> The initial focus of targeting was on minimizing the inclusion error, but a better balance between inclusion and exclusion errors was struck through program learning of the dynamics and heterogeneity of extreme poverty.

Photo // **BRAC**

Does the Model Work?

A large body of literature provides evidence for the graduation model's effectiveness across different contexts and on various outcomes of interest. In this section, we highlight the key findings from the major studies across the broad outcomes of interest.

Income, Asset, and Escape From Poverty

Early impact

A longitudinal quasi-experiment conducted by Krishna et al. (2012) on the earliest graduation model found that, three years after getting into the program, ultra-poor households (treatment) experienced a 72% increase in average income compared to the 29% increase for the non-selected ultra-poor households (control)—those belonging to the bottom group in wealth ranking but did not meet at least one of the other selection criteria.

Over the next three years, the difference shrank significantly, yet the ultra-poor maintained a 10-percentage-point higher growth rate than their counterpart. Though 7% of program households saw income decrease over the six years, the rate was almost double (13%) among the control group. The value of assets among the treatment group, after a surge in the first three years due to asset transfer, decreased by 12% for the next three years, while it increased by 41% in the control group. But land-holding among the participants increased significantly compared to the control group for both periods. Another encouraging finding of the study was that even though the dramatic short-term increase in the incidents of cash savings—from 8% to 94% of the households—was a direct result of the program requirement, the rate continued to increase and reached 98% by the sixth year, indicating to a successful nurturing of the habit of saving.

Further analysis in the study identified a vulnerability to negative events, including illnesses and house damage, which resulted in asset and income losses for several assisted households, indicating to the need for better social protection measures (Krishna et al., 2012).

Another round of data was collected on the same cohort in 2011, which allowed Asadullah and Ara (2016) to perform a long-term (nine years) impact analysis, which demonstrated a diminishing yet positive impact on most of the outcome variables.

Diversity among the ultra-poor and support variation

Informed by program experience and observations, BRAC introduced two slightly different support packages in the graduation

model in 2007: (1) a grant-based package for the poorest ultra-poor households (Specially Targeted Ultra-Poor [STUP] package) and (2) a credit-plus-grant package for the "better-off" ultra-poor households, in which a combination of soft loan and a grant was provided (Other Targeted Ultra-Poor [OTUP] package).

A large-scale randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted by Bandiera et al. (2017) on the households receiving the grant-based support package—covering over 21,000 households in 1,309 villages, surveyed four times over seven years—found a 21% increase in income and a 14% lower probability of being below the extreme poverty line among the program participants compared to their counterparts in control villages. Though the increase in consumption expenditure was modest (11%), the values of their household durables, productive assets, and landholding increased by 57%, 159%, and 139%, respectively.

> The study shows that the impacts on UPG households after seven years were at least as large as those after four years, indicating that many program participants were on a sustainable course out of poverty (Bandiera et al., 2017).

In a non-experimental study on the 2012 cohort of the grant- and credit-based support packages, Das et al. (2016) found that both models significantly increased self-employment, total labour supply, per capita income, consumption of high-value food products, and productive asset base in the short run though the magnitudes of positive impacts were much larger for the grant-based model.

Another RCT conducted by Rahman et al. (2021) on the 2016 cohort of the program who received soft loans instead of grants found a 19% increase in household income and a 135% increase in productive assets, on average, compared to control households. The study also found a positive impact of the program on consumption and savings. The impact came through the increased labour supply primarily of women and, to a lesser extent, of men in livestock and poultry rearing.

Towards a scalable graduation model (2017–present)

Matin and Rahman (2018) explain the impact of persistent economic growth in Bangladesh on the economic dynamics and realities of ultra-poor households. So, in this new socioeconomic context, BRAC redesigned the program in 2017 for a greater scale and reduced aid dependency without compromising effectiveness.

In the redesigned program, a combination of grants and loans is offered to the credit-plus-grant beneficiaries to create a sense of ownership of the received asset and preserve the asset quality in the face of inflation. These beneficiaries are further divided into two groups. One group is poorer than the other and receives assets directly from BRAC, being required to pay back 30–50% of the initial asset value (Group 2). The relatively better-off group receives interest-free loans to purchase the assets themselves and is to pay back 80% of the asset value (Group 3). Another major change in the program is getting rid of consumption support and introducing matched saving to create a better foundation for a sustainable livelihood.

The pure grant-based package is reserved for the older (50+) and destitute ultra-poor (Group 1). The objective for this group is not graduation per se, but providing them with a dignified life and trying to link them with social safety net programs such as the Old Age Allowance.

BIGD, in partnership with Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA), Northwestern University, University of Maryland, and Yale University, conducted an RCT among the 2019 loan-plus-grant cohort (Group 2 and Group 3) of the redesigned program. In their analysis of the RCT, researchers found significant positive impacts of the program on labour market outcomes for the program participants—employment and self-employment rates, working hours, and income. Consequently, UPG households saw a significant reduction in poverty, increases in assets and savings, and improvement in food security.

These results provide strong evidence of the effectiveness and scalability of the new UPG model. However, one interesting result of the study is the consistently larger impact of the program on Group 3, the better-off ultra-poor, compared to the poorer Group 2, who were offered a more generous package. The results indicate that initial conditions matter.

What keeps poor people poor?

Most poor people are involved in low-paying, low-productive jobs and thus stay poor. Why then they are involved in jobs that keep them poor? There are two major schools of thought in response to this question. One posits that poor people have the same job opportunities as others, but the poor simply do not have the skills or motivation to get and hold better jobs. And the other indicates to a potential poverty trap, which prevents them from taking up productive employment and escaping poverty.

> Exploiting the data from the RCT conducted by Bandiera et al. (2017) on the grant-based model, Balboni et al. (2022) established the existence of a poverty trap, an asset threshold below which a household is unable to escape poverty.

In their analysis, a third of the participants had so few initial assets that the asset transfers from the program failed to bring them to the threshold level, and they slid back into poverty. On average, their asset value decreased by 16% by year four (from the level after the transfer). For the rest, the transfer was enough to move past the threshold, and they kept on accumulating assets, which was 14% higher than the level after the transfer.

As mentioned earlier, the IPA-BIGD study on the 2019 cohort finds a significant difference in the impact of the program on the households that were relatively better off economically at baseline (Group 3) compared to the poorest households at baseline (Group 2). On most outcomes of interest, the impact was greater on Group 3. For example, on average, Group 2 households saw a 37% increase in per capita income and Group 3 saw a 59% increase relative to their control counterparts; consequently, 20 percentage points fewer in Group 2 and 24 percentage points fewer in Group 3 treatment households lived below the extreme poverty line. Thus, the IPA-BIGD study further establishes the poverty trap argument presented by Balboni et al. (2022).

This finding has a crucial policy implication. Small transfers, even when it is accompanied by a host of other support services, may not be effective in lifting people out of poverty.

> To be effective, transfers have to be large enough to bring people beyond an asset threshold.

Thus, relatively large transfers in UPG, though expensive, make perfect sense. It is the "big push" that is necessary to overcome the extreme deprivation that ultra-poor households face.

Children's Education and Nutrition

Impact on Education

Access to education is usually found to be highly correlated with household income and wealth, and consequently with human capital accumulation. Using the data from the RCT by Bandiera et al. (2017), Sulaiman (2015) measured the effect of UPG on children's schooling. He finds a limited impact of the program on enrolment though the beneficiary households are found to have increased their expenditures on education. This increase in educational investment, however, has not affected educational attainment during the evaluation period.

Sulaiman (2015) also finds that the program increased the extent of child labour immediately after asset transfers, which declined two years after the interventions ended. The increases in child labour were concentrated in activities related to livestock rearing, which were the primary type of asset transferred in this program. However, he does not find any evidence indicating a trade-off between children's enrolment and work.

The findings of the most recent RCT by BIGD and IPA are consistent with the earlier findings. While the enrollment rates of school-age marginally increased in the UPG households, their participation in income-generating activities also increased.

Evidence suggests that the spillover effect of asset transfer on educational outcomes is weak. Improving children's education among ultra-poor households will need focused investment.

Photo // **BRAC**

Impact on Child Nutrition and Health

The UPG households have been found to have greater food security, including in the latest IPA-BIGD study. Increased household-level food security is likely to have a positive impact on child nutrition. This is a crucial outcome in Bangladesh, a country with a high prevalence of child undernutrition.

Using the data from the RCT by Bandiera et al. (2017), Raza et al. (2018) analyzed the impact of the program on the nutritional outcomes of under-five children over a four-year period. Their study found notable improvements in nutritional outcomes of children in participating households—improved food security, sanitation, and duration of exclusive breastfeeding, with potentially significant long-term positive health effects.

Photo // BRAC

Women's Empowerment

Since the primary program participants in the graduation model are female household heads, the program is expected to have a positive impact on women's empowerment.

> The evaluation by Bandiera et al. (2017) found that the positive economic impact of the program on the participating households came mainly through ultra-poor women's higher engagement in more productive livestock rearing and their reduced engagement in casual, precarious, and undignified occupations like agricultural labour and domestic service, with an overall increase in their labour supply.

Increases in ultra-poor women's productivity and income are strong indicators of their economic empowerment.

However, to what extent the economic empowerment and other support provided by the program translate into their overall empowerment is not yet clear.

A mixed-method study by Das et al. (2013) that used the data from Bandiera et al. (2017) finds that while women tend to own the assets transferred by the program, new investments resulting from the transfers are controlled by men. The findings indicate that despite focusing on women, the program does not necessarily increase women's intra-household bargaining position. The study also finds no impact on the rate of women working but a shift of work from outside to home as the transferred assets, mostly livestock, needed to be tended at home. This phenomenon could actually reduce the mobility of women.

Das et al. (2013) also find that the program significantly decreases women's voice in a range of decisions, including control over their own income, purchases for themselves, and decision-making for household budgeting. This is not surprising given that overall men's control over resources increased relative to women's, both through direct ownership and through women's reduced mobility, limiting their ability to control resources.

However, the qualitative work in the study suggests many intangible benefits to women. The training and support provided by the program, combined with their improved economic circumstances, make women more confident and increase their social capital, channelled through their improved social status in the community and household, active contribution to improving the economic condition of their household, being able to send children to school, and so on.

Despite the limited impact on the indicators of empowerment, participating women found the program beneficial. Overall, these findings highlight the fact that outside work that the ultra-poor women find—manual labour and housework, for example—is often poorly paid and stigmatized. That is why many participants took the opportunity given by the program to generate income at home.

Another recent quasi-experimental study by Jalal et al. (2022) finds a significant improvement in subjective well-being, with a decrease in the negative effect of life by 33.5% and dissatisfaction with life by 42.5%, which are attributable to the program. The study also finds that women in UPG households encountered 12% or fewer incidences of domestic violence than the women in the comparison arm.

The IPA-BIGD study on the 2019 program cohort finds substantial improvements in female members' labour market outcome of the participating households. But the study does not find any significant impact on their social empowerment outcomes. Most women across treatment and control groups mentioned having an influence on a range of household decisions, both in baseline and follow-up, with no significant change. On the questions about influence in several day-to-day purchasing decisions (asked only during follow-up), far fewer women responded in the affirmative, with no significant difference between treatment and control.

The lack of detectable impact and the seemingly anomalous results across different relevant indicators reconfirm the well-established challenges of social empowerment. First, whether and to what extent the economic empowerment of women results in their social empowerment. There is limited evidence of this happening. Second, the results also reestablish the illusive nature of the measures of social empowerment.

Then the question for the program is what should be the optimal balance between economic vs social empowerment initiatives, and how greater social empowerment of women can be achieved. The limited and often contradictory findings on the program's impact on women empowerment also call for investing in developing methods and measurements for better capturing these outcomes.

Conclusion

How to make the model even more cost-effective and simpler by calibrating different components of the model and how to make it more inclusive—reaching the urban, young, climate-migrant, and disabled ultra-poor, for example—are some of the next-generation questions that BIGD wants to explore. We are also interested to do further research on the impact heterogeneity to identify strategies for reducing variability and accelerating impact. Finally, BIGD is committed to work with BRAC and other development partners to research on how to mainstream the UPG model with social protection programs for maximizing the scale, sustainability, and impact of the program.

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UPG & Me

20 Years of the Graduation Approach

The year 2022 marks the 20th year of BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program, a pioneering approach to unlocking the trap of ultra-poverty, which combines asset and aspiration, capital and care, and is now a globally proven idea that works for large segments of the ultra-poor in varied contexts. To celebrate this fascinating journey, BIGD, as a research and evidence partner of BRAC, launched a blog series where researchers and practitioners were invited to write about their personal reflections on how their engagement with this program experience has shaped their views and ideas about poverty and development.

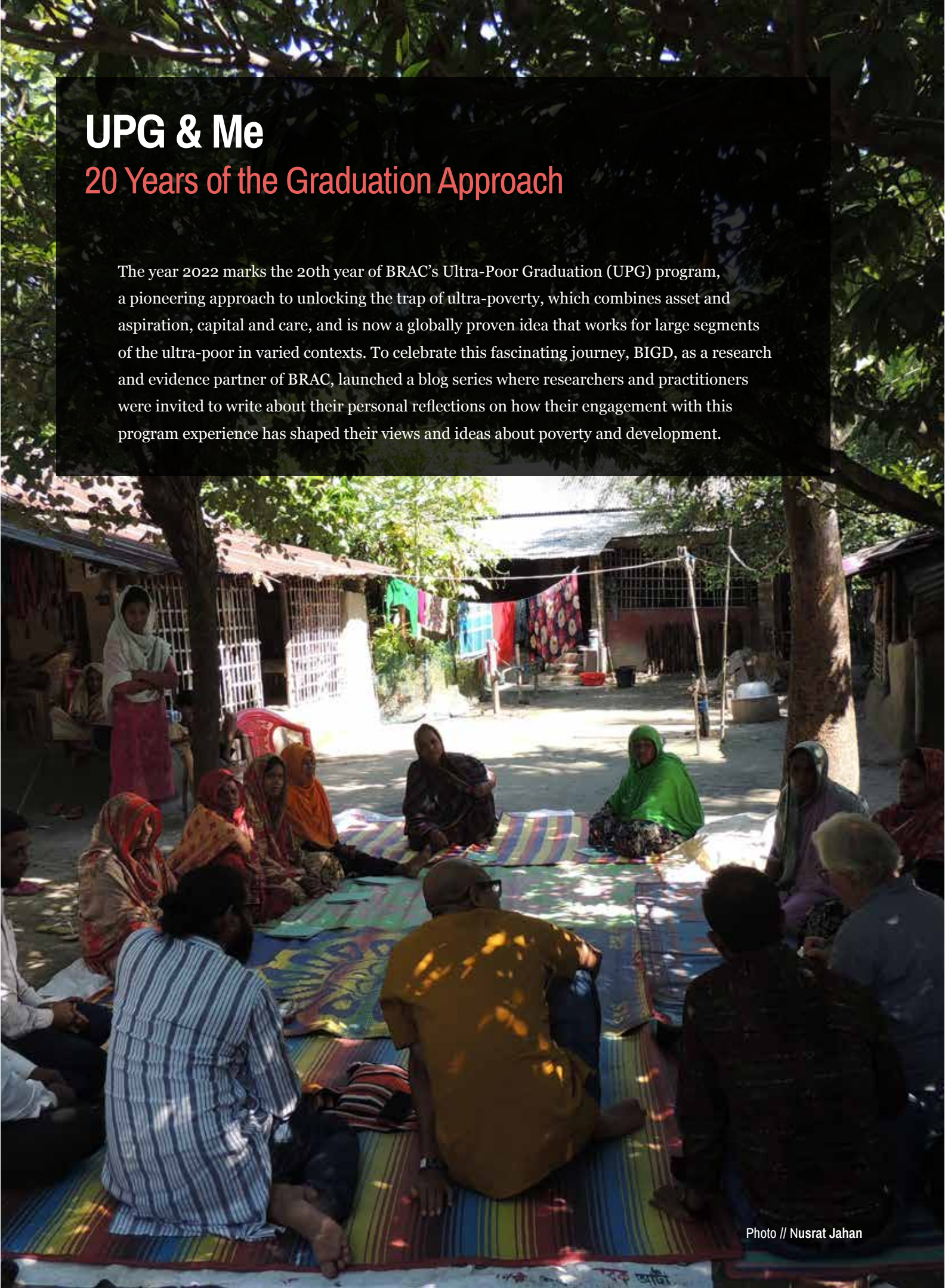


Photo // Nusrat Jahan

UPG and How I Look at the World

—Dr Imran Matin

As BRAC celebrates 20 years of the Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program within the broader context of the Golden Jubilee of BRAC and Bangladesh last year, I reflect on how my intimate involvement with the program in its formative years has fundamentally shaped my approach to the problem of poverty and, more generally, development and my lifelong passion for learning from people and their lived realities as a principle source of knowledge to design solutions that work.

A fresh PhD graduate with no clear idea about what I wanted to do with my life, I came back to Dhaka after a stint at the World Bank in DC and joined BRAC in 2001. Looking back, I consider myself extremely lucky to have made that decision—leaving an exalted world of high development bureaucracy that has a tenuous, distant connection with the people it aims to support and landing into BRAC, an organization born out of the deep connection with the people of this land in their most desperate times.

At that time, BRAC's UPG (Targeting the Ultra-Poor or TUP at that time) proposal writing was going on. Immediately, I confronted a vibrant organizational culture of debate, based on research and programmatic challenges faced in the field. The integrated Rural Development Program (RDP) had already run for 20 years in four phases. Each phase had an impact assessment system, from which a critique was already emerging about the failure of microcredit not reaching the poorest. I participated in animated, active conversations on how research should inform program design. There were also a lot of lively debates on who actually the poorest were and what their real problems were. I realized that I came upon the mecca of on-the-ground, research-based, critical development.

I spent the best part of my first two years in the field, doing mostly informal, formative research. Most importantly, a city person with little experience with rural life, I absorbed everything I observed like a sponge. To me, research and program became intertwined, with the people at the centre. I observed how the targeting was done, and what the targeting verification process was, and tried to understand why. I travelled with program colleagues and lived and breathed in the everyday lives and details of the program—learning intensively about design, ongoing iterations, and implementation.

I was fascinated to see how the participatory wealth ranking (PWR) method that I had known as a research tool was now being used as a program targeting tool in the UPG program at scale. Targeting criteria were based on the national estimates, i.e., Household Income and Expenditure Survey data, but it would be customized with PWR. I was thrilled by the idea of integrating national and formal with local and tacit knowledge, and the possibility of developing an effective, localized, and yet standardized model of targeting.

The idea for the first few years was to learn intensively. Only 5,000 households in the *monga*– (seasonal famine) affected region in the north of the country were targeted in 2002, and I was given the responsibility for the research of the program. It was an opportunity for deep immersive learning, a phase of action learning.

> “During this time, I worked hard to imbibe in my small team a culture of action research and a dialogical relationship, where the researchers would be excited and hungry to learn about small program details, and the program colleagues would actively co-create the research questions based on real programmatic challenges. We were enlightening each other.

We were not in a hurry or focused on producing formal research outputs per se. We just wanted to learn so that we could use it to improve the program’s outcome. We, of course, ended up producing an impressive range of journal publications and creating a lot of global interest in this important innovation.

I particularly remember two moments of epiphany during my UPG field visits. These events sealed in my mind the criticality of the context in which people live, the relational nature of poverty, and the crying need for considering both program design and research.

The first incident was around targeting. After the PWR, a mini-survey on the bottom group in the wealth ranking would be carried out to select final participants. It was quickly discovered

that some households were not even on the list prepared during the PWR. We initially thought that this was due to a deliberate exclusion by the PWR participants due to village politics and power. We wanted to dig deeper. We found out that these "excluded" households were mostly without any homestead land of their own and were staying as "dependents" in other people's homesteads. Economically, these households were independent, but socially, they were not considered independent households. We realized that the "exclusion" was not deliberate but due to the terms we used for households during the PWR exercise—we used the word *khana*, while these types of households were locally termed as *utholi*, those who stay in other peoples' homestead. We immediately took a number of steps to incorporate these learnings. The importance of questioning received ways of seeing and thinking, and the centrality of social and local in development knowledge generation and action got hardwired in me since this experience.

Then came the question of protecting the asset given to participating households. Most of these households did not have space in their homestead to rear the poultry and livestock and would keep them next to where they slept by extending their room. Some did not have their own homesteads. The cage rearing of poultry would create a stench, while the goats would stray into neighbours' vegetable plots. Neighbours would demotivate the UPG members and there would be frequent conflicts related to assets.

For the first time, I observed first-hand the relational nature of poverty and the importance of genuine community engagement who were not the direct beneficiaries of the program. To address this challenge, we came up with the idea of the Gram Daridro Bimochon Committee, finding and organizing people in the community who were more empathetic and helpful to the poor people.

I have been involved with UPG ever since in some capacity, albeit my hiatus for a few years when I was working with Save the Children International. But, my immersion with UPG in its early years has changed me forever, not only as a researcher but also in how I look at the world and the possibilities of making it better as a person.

Remembering My First Days of Domar

—Mehnaz Rabbani

In 2004, I joined the BRAC Research and Evaluation Division (RED) as a Research Associate. A fresh graduate from the United States (US), brimming with theories of Economics, I thought I knew it all. Little did I know that my real education was just about to start—when I was asked to spend a week at Domar, Nilphamari, on the very first week on the job to learn about the Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program (then called Targeting the Ultra-Poor, TUP for short).

Without any prior experience of travelling within Bangladesh alone on public transportation, I started on this epic journey with a backpack and a contact number I was supposed to call once I reached Domar. Back then research associates were not entitled to cars. So I had to travel by bus. The only instruction I got was to make sure I got on the express route. Dhaka to Rangpur was a smooth ride, and I already felt proud of myself for making it that far all alone. At the Rangpur bus station, I was bombarded with several bus helpers coaxing me to get on their bus for Nilphamari. I remember asking one of them if it was an express bus, and I think he had said yes. Once on the road, I quickly realized that this was definitely not the case, as it stopped every five minutes to board passengers. My dismay at the prospect of spending hours on the bus faded quickly as I observed the busy passengers on the bus, getting off at local markets and getting on from schools. Some had their produce with them. Some were going home for holiday in their best attires. Already I felt a tinge of excitement at being exposed to a new world within my own country. And true to my first instinct, my tenure as a researcher at BRAC was the most eye-opening experience of my life, shaping my career and my life from then on.

It was well past midnight when I finally reached Domar—a quiet and dark village town. When I called the number I was given, a young friendly

anthropologist stationed at the research office received me. The research station was one of the few brick buildings at Domar. It was a tiny apartment with three small bedrooms, a mouldy bathroom, and a kitchen. It also had a small common space where the researchers convened for meals and conversations. We hardly ever had electricity. When I asked how many times a day they faced power cuts, our field colleagues laughed and replied, "The question should be: 'How many hours a day do you actually get electricity?'"

This dark, stingy, and mouldy apartment, although scary at first, became my second home for the next few years. And the small group of young researchers working on this program became my teachers, comrades, and friends for life.

The TUP program, still in its early stages, had a mighty ambition. The sceptic in me secretly grimaced at the idea of giving cows and goats to poor people and hoping that this would bring them out of poverty. The cows and goats, mind you, were not of the best quality either.

> "We used to joke that TUP cows were the size of goats and the goats were the size of cats. In a remote and underdeveloped town like Domar, that was the best that money could buy.

I went about exploring, and talking to TUP members, field officers, local leaders, and shop owners. My job was to understand what works to change the lives of the poor. Slowly I learned the tricks and techniques of fieldwork—how to approach respondents, how to make them feel comfortable to share their experiences with me, how to find out the right people to talk to, and how to blend in and screen out the truth from the myriad of stories we heard.

Domar TUP members at that time were predominantly widows, single mothers, and beggars. Most did not have more than a shack to live in and barely had a meal a day. As I spent more time with these women, trying to understand where they were coming from, what their daily lives were like, and what they aspired to be, one thing became very clear to me. The program changed the lives of these women, but not so much by giving them a cow or goat but primarily by boosting their confidence and aspirations—not only from owning a valuable asset but also from being heard and seen in their community. One member explained this phenomenon to me: "Previously when I saw the local chairman on the village road, I would run to him like a beggar and ask for help. He did not even stop to look at me, let alone listen to my problems. But now, I first go to his office and ask him if he has some time for me. Usually, he asks me to wait, and I wait patiently until he is free. When he can give me his full attention, I present my problems to him. He knows I am a TUP member, and he listens to me carefully. Now I am not scared of any problem, as I know I can get help to solve it."

We measured numerous indicators of well-being in our several rounds of surveys to capture the impact of TUP on its members. But we were never fully able to capture the one true impact—the restoration of hope and a will to improve one's life. This is what brings people out of poverty. This is what works.

What It Means to Truly Care

—Dr Munshi Sulaiman

The Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program is 20 years old; so is my professional life as I started my research career with this program. Trying to write something about the journey puts me in a state of mind full of hope and inspiration about possibilities and, at the same time, makes me nostalgic—a feeling that the best days are behind us! I guess this is what psychologists label as "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia. Anyway, I will not even attempt to give a coherent story, but share a few snippets of several interactions that come to mind as I think of the "good old days."

After submitting my dissertation as part of my Master of Development Studies (MDS) program at Brac University, it finally hit me that I needed a job. I knew I wanted to work in research and deal with data. The naive me thought that my career would be in research on international trade as this was my dissertation focus. One fine morning, I just walked into the office of the Director of the then Research and Evaluation Division (RED) of BRAC, Dr Imran Matin, with a copy of my dissertation at hand, and, suffice it to say, without any appointment. I was lucky to have an impromptu interview and was offered a job as a Junior Research Associate.

On the first day of my job, he asked me about my research interest. I replied, very confidently, that I was interested in international trade and specifically in free trade and fair trade. I was, obviously, at the wrong place if that was truly my

passion. Handing me a bunch of stapled papers, he said, "There is a program for the ultra-poor that BRAC started this year. Read these and see what research ideas you can come up with. It's not about international trade, but I think working with this program will make you interested in ultra-poverty." There could not have been a more accurate prediction about the next 20 years of my professional life.

The most enjoyable part of my job was being in the field. I have been amazed by the depth of human interactions among people who work with BRAC. I got tagged with a team of enumerators in one of my early field visits. The first surprise was after we got off the bus in Nilphamari and asked a rickshaw puller if he could take us to the BRAC office. He asked, "Do you want to go to BRAC BDP, education, or TUP office?" The graduation program used to be known as Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP). Amused by his knowledge, I asked him more about the program on the way and got my first field orientation from someone who would probably not be considered a "stakeholder."

On the same trip, we went off to collect some data, with the names of some TUP members, in a village. I was quite unsure of how to find them in the village with just their names. As we were approaching the village, one of the enumerators stopped our rickshaw van. Pointing at a woman walking with a cow (possibly taking it to the grazing land), she said, "Look at her, looks like a TUP member." Obviously, our enumerator sister got it right! The TUP member gave us directions to all the participants on our list and was a bit disappointed that she was not on the list. Later I asked the enumerator how she knew that it was a TUP member. She explained that it was the appearance of both the woman and the cow and the fact that this village had a new cohort of beneficiaries, and both matched her "profiling."

> "It became a thing in our team for the rest of that trip to compete for "who can spot a TUP member first" in every village we went to. It was surprising to me at the beginning, but less so later, that we got it right more often than not.

And every time someone got it right, we would shout, "Next time you are going to design a study where we will interview the cows to understand the change in their confidence level."

The level of engagement by the program staff was obviously much deeper than our profiling exercise. During another field visit, our research team was chatting (read "gossiping") with the TUP branch manager after the Jum'a prayer. Suddenly he got distracted by the microphone announcement someone in a rickshaw was making. He got up and we went outside the office. The rickshaw was coming closer to the office. The announcement was about someone losing a cow and a request to anyone with information on this to get in touch. It turned out, the husband of a TUP member sold the cow and was trying to stage a story that it was lost. When I asked the branch manager what caught his attention, he said, "I thought I heard the name of one of my

beneficiaries." While we were all relaxing on a weekend, the branch manager was working 24/7 (literally).

I have been lucky to see such ethos, "We need to do everything in our power so that the beneficiaries have successful enterprises," of the program continue as it went global (and I with it). But sometimes the staff on the ground must deal with more urgent matters of lives than livelihoods. On a visit to Pakistan, I got to hear the story of how the TUP program manager ran around all night for a beneficiary who was pregnant and in critical condition. By arranging transport, accompanying her to the hospital, collecting blood for the c-section, and assuring the facility management that he would manage all costs, he did not just perform his professional duty but he literally saved two lives. I shall always remember the names of my colleague, the mother, and the newborn. After giving birth to a boy, Amina (the beneficiary) asked Saifullah (my hero) to name the child, and he named the baby boy, "Abed."

I know each story is an anecdote. We live in the world of numbers, key performance indicators, professionalism with transactional relationships, and dominance of process or compliance over outcomes. But as an individual, I try to find inspiration (if not purpose) from these memorable interactions. I am thankful to many people who made the program, starting with the rickshaw puller who took me to the right office.

The Story of Becoming a Grounded Development Economics Researcher

—Dr Shaila Ahmed

BRAC is celebrating two decades of its flagship Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program this year. On this occasion, I reflect on how my close involvement with UPG as a fresh graduate has profoundly shaped my perception of poverty, enhanced my empathy for the poor, and stirred my passion for working to improve their livelihoods. After completing my undergraduate studies, I joined the UPG team—the program was called Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP) at that time and was later changed to UPG. In this blog, I would like to share a few stories from my UPG fieldwork that influenced me the most.

Once I was visiting the field to observe the selection verification process of the UPG member in the Madaripur district. On this trip, I met a bright little girl, 14 years old, in a village who was keen on our work and was accompanying us the whole time. She told me that she lived in the next village and was just visiting a relative's house in this village. And she requested I take her to Dhaka so that she could continue her studies. Her family was very poor, and her mother, the only breadwinner, wanted to marry her off, which the poor girl did not want. But we could not help her as the program was not operating in her village that year.

The next year, the UPG program started in her village, and I met her again. But I was shocked. In just a year, she transformed from a lively little girl

into a single mother of a newborn. Her husband abandoned her swiftly as her mother could not pay the promised dowry.

Now she was taking care of her child and her younger siblings and was also doing all household chores while her mother was working outside. This time, I got the opportunity to help her by selecting her as a UPG member with a pang of guilt, as we could not help her when she needed it the most. If we could, she probably would not have to be a child bride or a poor single mother; instead, she could be a happy school-going teenager with dreams and hopes.

On another field visit in the Gopalganj district, I had to face local fundamentalists who did not want poor women to become UPG members as they would have to leave the house and go to the market or for training. I felt they were afraid of poor women being empowered. Initially, I was fearful of meeting those people with religious conservative thoughts. I had to overcome my fears to help these women. Along with the Social Development Regional Manager, I managed to convince those people after hours of argument. As a strategy, we also included them to become members of the Gram Daridro Bimochon Committee (GDBC), put together by UPG to get local buy-in for the program participants. Later, I was pleasantly surprised to find that this particular GDBC became one of the best-performing committees.

Talking about my experience with UPG would be incomplete if I did not talk about the hard work and dedication of the UPG field staff. In 2009, when Cyclone Sidr hit Southern Bangladesh, a colleague and I were in the Barguna district for work, and we got stuck. But it also gave me a chance to see how all the program staff worked 24/7 to reallocate UPG members from their homes to safety. Seeing their fearless work in helping the UPG members made me realize that UPG was an effective program not just because it was well-designed but also, perhaps more, because of the dedication and passion of its field staff. While returning to Dhaka from that visit, our ferry got stuck in the middle of the Padma River, and we had to spend the whole night in the car stuck on the ferry. Then I learned that earlier, a few UPG staff from the north managed to get an engine boat to cross the river so that they could join the effort of relocating the UPG members and their livestock. They took the risk of travelling to a storm-stuck region to help even though it was not their area. Such was the sense of ownership of UPG field staff.

I also went to Haiti to participate in the exercise of adapting the UPG to better suit the Haitian culture and to oversee its rollout. What works in one country may not work in another. These international assignments broadened my understanding of applied economic development complexities and deepened my cultural competence.

Through UPG, I also met people like David Hulme and Martin Greely. Their commitment to improving the lives of the poor through their research inspired me deeply. While I was presenting a paper on the program in Kampala, Uganda, with David Hulme, not only did he enrich my understanding of development research but also planted a dream within me. Like Hulme and Greely, I wanted to dedicate my life to researching development solutions that worked.

They convinced me to pursue higher studies in Economics to become a high-impact researcher.

So I took a break for a few years to first take a Master's degree in Public Health and then and then to complete my PhD in Economics. I was so into UPG that I focused on a cash transfer program for my PhD. Working with UPG has shaped my interest in behavioural and experimental economics, particularly the dynamics of the ultra-poor population's social networks. I believe my higher studies have helped develop a solid theoretical understanding and equipped me with the necessary tools to undertake advanced, applied development research. I feel my field experience, combined with my academic training, would be invaluable in doing research that touches lives.

UPG has deeply impacted both my professional and personal life. Professionally, the compassion for the underserved people I developed through my experience with the program gave me the inspiration to continue working in the development sector. It also gave me the strength to take the long, often strenuous, journey of becoming an economist with a focus on development. At a personal level, my UPG experience taught me patience and teamwork.

> "It also helped in my self-discovery—that I have the resilience to take on new challenges and fight against the odds.

On the road "to be nobody but" myself, I have encountered twists and turns and some detours in my journey from program to researcher; it was unquestionably the hardest battle I have fought. However, the process was also invaluable for me because it has moulded me into the person I am today. And I know that dedicating my life to research for good is my destiny.

Learning the Art of Looking and Listening Attentively

—Dr Tariq Omar Ali

The years 2004 to 2006, when I worked as a researcher on BRAC's newly-started Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program, are the most valuable learning experience of my life. I was immersed in a workplace charged with curiosity, with a desire to try to know and understand the world. The culture of curiosity was, I think, grounded in a tenet of the graduation program in its early years: that solutions to extreme poverty required development practitioners to suspend deeply held assumptions and to think anew about the complex, multidimensional nature of poverty.

In what I now think of as true BRAC fashion, our curiosity sent us to the field. The field, for much of my two years, was in Domar, Nilphamari, though I also spent considerable time in Netrokona, Madaripur, and Nachole. Domar, however, was a long-term base, where I and my UPG colleagues researched and spent weeks at a time, living in a small two-bedroom apartment with a questionable bathroom, riding around villages on a rickshaw van, stopping to interview people, or sitting under the shade or in a tea shop to discuss our research. From my colleagues at Domar, I learnt the arts of looking and listening attentively, of paying attention to people and their surroundings, and of trying to see the world through the eyes of people very different from myself. My colleagues demonstrated to me every day and in many ways–with words, gestures, and bodily comportment–how to approach the world with curiosity, humility, and empathy, not with ready-made solutions and fixes.

Probably because I had a degree in History, of all subjects, I was assigned unusual research projects. My first assignment was to examine theft and poverty in villages around Domar. I spent three weeks wandering around villages, asking various people if anything had been stolen from them, how they attempted to secure their possessions if they thought the poor were particularly vulnerable to theft, what kind of people were thieves if they thought poverty was a cause of theft, did they think it was morally acceptable for a poor person to steal to survive, etc. At first, I was

too shy, too urban, and too awkward to approach villagers, whether ultra-poor or elite, and ask them about thefts and thieves. A colleague, Mamun bhai—now the director of a qualitative research organization—came to my assistance, and with his characteristic charm introduced me around villages, rephrasing my questions in ways that could actually be understood.

What does theft have to do with the graduation program, one may ask? First, the program was transferring assets to vulnerable poor women living in households without able-bodied men. BRAC, obviously, was concerned about the security of these assets. Second, the program was attempting to engage rural elite support for the uplift of the extreme poor. Could elites be interested in addressing extreme poverty in their locality if they thought it would improve the security of their property? I did not, of course, come up with this research project; it emerged out of the curiosity and creativity of UPG research.

I left BRAC in 2006 to do a PhD in History and have since gone on to teach, research, and write about South Asian history.

> “As a researcher and a teacher, I learnt more from my colleagues and bosses in the UPG research team and from the field at Domar than I have from classrooms or books.

People, Stories, & Dreams: My Journey Beyond Numbers

—Atiya Rahman

In my younger and more vulnerable years—like Nick Carraway would say—as a post-graduate student of Economics at the University of Dhaka, I developed a distinct preference for working with numbers. I thought, as many of you who are also from the same field would be able to sympathize, that a dataset was enough to tell a story. I carried this notion with me when I joined the research team of the Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program in 2015. Little did I know that my naivety was about to be shattered, that a revelation was at hand.

When I first got the chance to play with the program dataset after joining the UPG research team, I wasted no time in trying to analyze whether it could reduce participants' anxieties about life—a particular interest of mine. Unfortunately, I could not explain the findings. How could it be, it puzzled me, that if the program was improving participant women's financial well-being, they were still anxious? It was my first clue that I was missing the bigger picture. The second clue came from my colleagues, who shared their vivid, dynamic experiences from the field. These experiences held within them insights that mere black numbers on a white page could not capture. I soon realized that I was only looking at the binary conclusion, and it was evident what I needed to do.

Though a little fuzzy on the exact date, I remember a group of survey enumerators who were recruited for the evaluation study of the UPG program in Jamalpur. I, of course, tagged along. During my stay in Jamalpur, I talked to both program participants and non-participants. And I had found the missing piece to my puzzle! Indeed, both groups were experiencing stress but of a very different nature. The women who did not receive any support from the UPG program were experiencing stress due to hunger and suffering. On the other hand, the beneficiaries—who, thanks to the UPG program, were now engaged in the labour market and made financial decisions—were stressed by their new-found responsibilities. While the stress of the former arose from the winter of despair, that of the latter sprouted out of the spring of hope. This extraordinary

complexity of the socioeconomics in action revealed itself to me only after I left the comfort of my swivel chair and talked to the people.

> I learned that connecting as many dots of dimension as possible was of utmost importance to get a clearer view of the bigger picture. It was as if the researcher in me was acquiring more pixels.

This was the first of many invaluable lessons that I would learn over the years. I tried to embody each of them, as did virtually everyone involved with the UPG program, especially in implementing randomized controlled trials (RCTs)—a popular and effective tool in evaluating the program's impact. But RCT as a tool is only as effective as its targeting—select the wrong people, and you will get biased estimates. To maintain the rigour in the selection process of RCT implementation—and I was fortunate enough to get the chance to implement more than one—we, particularly the program-implementing colleagues, had to become part of the community and even the households. Of course, in the process, we faced the inescapable as well as the ineffable dilemma of denying support, at least for the time being, to an equally needy group for the sake of knowledge and rigorous learning.

The UPG program helped us develop a critical awareness of the nuances of people's experiences. Thus, those of us who worked closely with the people at the field level, including branch managers and program officers, accumulated insights that can give a reality check for any researcher. For instance, once I was discussing with one of the branch managers whether we could show awareness-building videos to poor women and their families. He instantly explained the importance of using the local language in such videos. I realized that culture varies not only across countries but also within countries. So, solutions must be modified even though the problem is the same.

Since joining the UPG research team seven long summers ago, I have learned and grown with the program. I have seen the UPG program not only tell the stories of the poor and the marginalized but also equip them with the tools to change those stories—from stories of sorrow and suffering to stories of success and security.

There still exist several benefits of this program to be explored, especially psycho-social benefits such as the impact on mental health, aspiration, confidence, etc. So many benefits, challenges, and opportunities lay intertwined and hidden, awaiting many researchers like me to take the journey beyond numbers.

The Logic of Hope and Pragmatism

—Dr Oriana Bandiera

"They're going to eat the cow."

That was the gist of the reaction I received from virtually every economist I talked to when I told them about an innovative program designed to eradicate extreme poverty. That was 2007 and the program was, of course, the Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG), known at the time as Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP).

I could follow the logic that warranted this reaction—any asset given to these poor and marginalized people, who are constantly struggling with the most basic necessities of life, had to be used for the most basic necessity: food. Counter to that was Sir Abed's logic of hope, and the conviction that the poor, like everybody else, want to improve their lot and that of their children. What I also knew was that BRAC would not take an ambitious program like that to the field without a solid understanding of the realities of these people. What I did not know was how this graduation program, unique in its approach, was going to work.

So, when I came to Dhaka in 2006 in preparation for the UPG program evaluation, it was also an opportunity to educate myself about the workings of the program. I stayed in Dhaka for a week, and the things I learned during my short stay have remained with me ever since.

I remember working with BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division (RED) team, all of us gathered together in a room for long hours, trying to prepare a baseline questionnaire. I think—in fact, I am sure of it—that to an outsider, we were working like people possessed. But to us, it was a frenzy of knowledge, of ideas, of insights. For instance, at one point, one of the RED members pointed out that the target population was not unemployed. In these villages, nobody was; everybody did something. That did not mean they were doing what they were best at or what made them happier. They did what they could because they had to. This forced us to think deeply about the nature of their labour.

I immediately realized that this was the kind of insight that one could not gain from designing questionnaires from the comfort of one's office. My fear that we, Northern researchers, risk misinterpreting data by seeing it through the lens of a Northern economy became a certainty and shaped my collaboration with BRAC ever since. They do nothing without first developing an acute sense of the lived realities of the intended beneficiaries. I believe this approach, this philosophy that defined BRAC since its inception was a *sine qua non* for the UPG program's success.

However, not everybody shared the idea of success. After two years of its implementation, when the UPG program did not increase beneficiaries' consumption, at least not as much as one would hope, many called the program a failure. But what the critics failed to notice was that the program did not increase people's consumption by a large margin because, as we soon found out in our evaluation, it was increasing their savings and investment. Thanks to the program, people were buying more cows, goats, and other rearing assets, which would reproduce and multiply, increasing their productive asset base. Some were also buying land, which, prior to the program, they could only dream of doing.

> That is what the program did—it made the ultra-poor realize their dreams; it ignited hope; it fuelled aspirations, aspirations of a better tomorrow.

I bemoan the fact that I never had the good fortune of visiting these people in person. Nevertheless, I could see, vividly too, their incredible life journey, the potential they harboured to escape the vicious, unforgiving cycle of poverty in the figures that came up in our evaluation reports—increase in annual earnings, increase in savings, increase in hours devoted to more stable, productive work. BRAC had given them a rare chance to turn their lives around, and it was evident that they were not going to throw it away by eating a bit more for a short while.

Since it was first introduced in 2002, the UPG program has been proving its critics wrong, both in Bangladesh and abroad, and has shown that poverty traps exist and that they can be broken. In the process, it has evolved a lot too. In 2007, for instance, the program started offering selected beneficiaries credit along with the grants it previously provided. Due to their existing heterogeneity, these selected credit-plus-grant beneficiaries were further divided into groups in 2017. These changes reflect BRAC's willingness to learn; they echo how deeply the organization is in tune with the people's everyday lives.

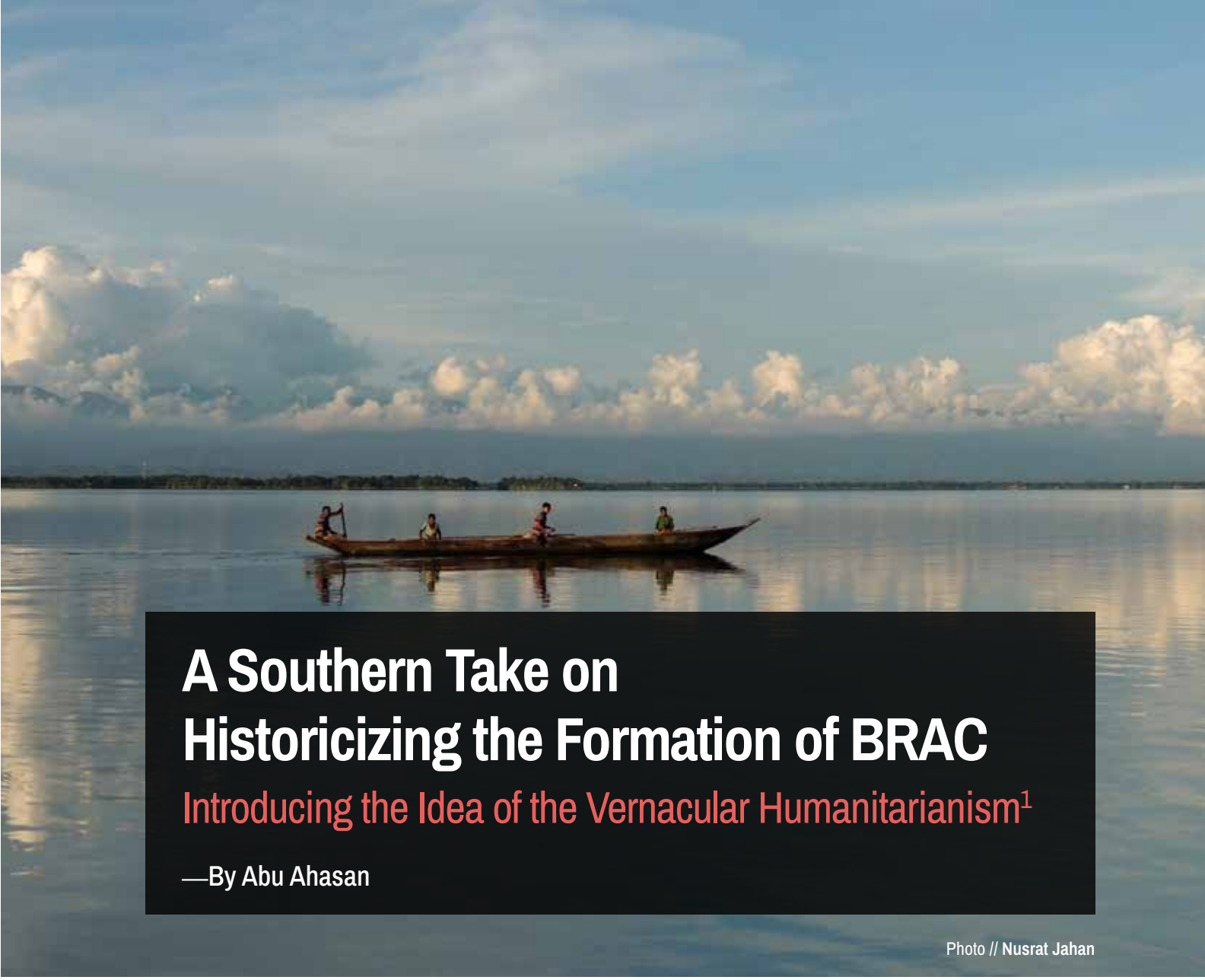
As the program caters for a more diverse set of ultra-poor and relies more on loans, instead of grants, partly due to the changing nature of poverty and partly for scalability, two things will be crucial.

First, the transfer amount. These ultra-poor people, by definition, are very far from the poverty threshold. As such, they require a large enough transfer to reach that threshold; anything below is only useful for consumption. Unfortunately, this is one area a significant number of anti-poverty

programs get wrong; for instance, microfinance loans are a fraction of the size of the loans the UPG program offers—you cannot put out a wildfire with a bucket of water.

The other essential element is the loan repayment period, yet another area in which too many microfinance programs come short by asking for the loans back too soon. Even when ultra-poor households are given large amounts, it takes time before it yields any results. In our estimation, it takes at least a good five years for the ultra-poor to be in a steady state. Couple large transfers with long repayment periods, and they will be able to repay the loans many times over.

The BRAC UPG program masterfully blends large transfers with a host of other services to successfully support ultra-poor people get out of poverty. It has shown that the ultra-poor can engage in productive work but lack the means to do so and that giving them those means is an investment with extremely high returns, not just for them but for society at large. I myself could not be happier to have witnessed this incredible journey.



A Southern Take on Historicizing the Formation of BRAC

Introducing the Idea of the Vernacular Humanitarianism[1]

—By Abu Ahasan

Photo // **Nusrat Jahan**

It began with a storm,[2] or did it?

Understanding the life-changing experience not as personal but a social phenomenon

At the beginning of November 1970, local and international weather forecasters issued red alerts of an intense cyclone brewing in the Bay of Bengal. However, instead of any sign of urgency, the then journalist Hameeda Hossain (1970) observed a bizarre "festive mood" in Dhaka's admiration. High- to low-ranking civil servants came to the capital city of East Pakistan from every district to prepare for the grand Asian Highway Rally.

[1] This brief is based on the larger BRAC History Project, a BIGD-BRAC knowledge partnership. Under the project, we have already published two BIGD Research Monographs (Ahasan & Iqbal, 2022; Ahasan et al., 2022), where the arguments presented here are further developed and elaborated.

[2] (Macmillan, 2022)

On 12 November, the Bhola Cyclone struck the deltaic region. The *Pakistan Observer*, a West Pakistan-based national daily, reported moderate storm intensity and a low death rate. A couple of days later, the *Daily Mirror*, the British media, received gruesome news from its local correspondents (Francis, 2020). Coinciding with the full moon when tides rise to their highest point, the storm generated an astronomical tsunami-like oceanic upsurge from the Bay of Bengal. A wall of water as high as 35 feet crashed into the coastal region and offshore islands with thunderous roars and forked lightning. On the way, the tidal bore washed away nearly half a million people, ten million cattle, numerous crops, houses, farms, and villages (Frank & Husain, 1971).

Unlike the 1943 Bengal Famine, which caused three to four million deaths but remained largely unreported in international media, the 1970's Bhola Cyclone occurred during the heydays of international journalism. Scientists declared it one of the most lethal natural disasters in recorded history, making the catastrophe the most headline-grabbing event of the year. Journalists, volunteers, and humanitarian organizations from across the globe flew to Pakistan's most marginalized and murky province. "History's deadliest storm" triggered the most significant event of international humanitarian intervention since the Second World War (Carney & Miklian, 2022).

Writers trace the genesis of BRAC in the involvement of its founder, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, with emergency relief operations in the aftermath of the 1970 cyclone. In Monpura, a triangular-shaped sandy coastal island that had lost two-thirds of its inhabitants, he came across a horrific scene of cattle carcasses interspersed with clusters of human corpses. The life path of Abed, a corporate elite and aristocrat, had never crossed before the everyday life of the destitute forced to dwell in perilous offshore islands. He described the lived experience of witnessing such an enormous human tragedy as a watershed moment in his life. "The fragility of [the] life of poor people" led him to reflect critically on the privilege he enjoyed in the most impoverished corner of the earth and contemplate the meaning of life itself (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 2).

Not just Abed, his biographers and development scholars also describe the incident as a "life-changing" event that radically transformed his life world. They use Abed's own words to explain the qualitative shift in his professional life (N. Hossain, 2020; Smillie, 2009). Leaving the corporate sector, he would become a leading development actor, founding BRAC to run a relief and rehabilitation program in war-torn Bangladesh after its independence. Eventually, the Bangladeshi organization would evolve into the world's largest non-governmental organization (NGO). Abed would also be renowned globally as a champion for anti-poverty action, women's rights, and girls' education. However, it would be mistaken to treat the Bhola Cyclone as a personal "life-changing" moment for Abed. In an interview by Dr Shahaduz Zaman for the BRAC History Project, Shireen Huq (2021) reminds that it was not a unique and personal story with individualized experience. Several volunteers who walked the landscape of devastation experienced a similar kind of transformation in their cognitions, behaviours, and life courses.

Young Shireen Huq took part in an emergency relief effort during the post-cyclone humanitarian crisis. The organizers, including the poet and feminist activist Sufia Kamal, and many volunteers had been deeply involved in political and cultural activism in demand of Bengali's right to self-rule, cultural autonomy, and women's rights.

> Huq remembers several individuals who organized and volunteered for the humanitarian mission to play pioneering roles in Bangladesh's development sector and social justice movement. In the wake of Bangladesh's independence, they came forward to forming voluntary organizations as part of post-war rehabilitation and reconstruction.

Integrating with international aid apparatuses, those home-grown organizations turned into NGOs. They all shared common characteristics, such as a solid moral striving to work with and for ordinary peoples' well-being. They demonstrated profound attentiveness, greater sensitivity, critical knowledge of their surroundings, and greater capacity to respond to the country's emergencies. The life trajectory of Shireen Huq (2021), who would later become a prominent gender activist, also followed this trend.

Three things become clear from her observations.

> First, the "life-changing" effect of the post-cyclone humanitarian work, at the margins of the state with the most marginalized and isolated people, in the life of an urbanite like Abed was not individual but a social and shared phenomenon. Second, the advent of home-grown *NGO movements*, not just BRAC, in independent Bangladesh can be traced back to the post-cyclone humanitarian work.

Third, the independence of Bangladesh as the youngest postcolonial state of South Asia, primarily driven by the nine-month-long guerrilla warfare, enabling the condition of alliance between peasants and educated youths, ushered in a qualitative shift in the region's developmental landscape. Notably, Northern experts, quasi-religious humanitarian and development organizations, and local bureaucrats dominated the developmental scene of the eastern province of Pakistan (1947–1971). However, the formation of local actors-led development organizations created a distinctive fabric of the Bangladeshi Third Sector. In contrast to the dominating blueprint approach to rural development and technology transfer programs during the 1960s, a people-centric approach to rural development and social

mobilization programs characterized the developmental landscape in the 1970s. Bangladeshi NGOs produced a series of innovative low-cost but highly effective models of building institutions, rural financing, poverty reduction, education, nutrition, and health and played a critical role in Bangladesh's developmental success.

Vernacular Humanitarianism

To make sense of the post-cyclone humanitarian work's "life-changing" implication and its relation to the emergence of Bangladeshi NGOs, especially BRAC, we need to go beyond a generic and Euro-centric understanding of humanitarianism.

> In the BRAC History Project, where we try and historicize BRAC, we introduce the concept of "vernacular humanitarianism" in explaining the formation of BRAC and the local NGO-dominated Third Sector in independent Bangladesh. While the logic of international humanitarian operations and organizations follow an explicit distinction between morality and politics, which was the basis of the advent of the Red Cross in 1863, vernacular humanitarianism, in contrast, refers to a particular historical episode of volunteerism, trigged by not just the humanitarian crisis wrought by the 1970 Bhola Cyclone but also by the Pakistani state's inertia and slow reaction to mitigate the crisis. The enactment of vernacular humanitarianism was deeply rooted in the region's politics, movements for self-autonomy, and political temporality, as Abed recalled the catastrophe as an event that "tremendously shook the region's *collective consciousness*" (Mortoza, 2006, p. 23).

However, grassroots humanitarianism activities during the emergency did not operate in isolation from the Northern aid industry or the geopolitics. Nor was the formation of vernacular humanitarianism limited to ethnic exclusiveness. Indeed, the apparatus of international aid, its "will to improve," and development discourses are integral to the Third World's history of development. Yet, they are not the sole agents and forces that have shaped our developmental trajectories. We offer a Southern history of humanitarianism as an outcome of the intersection of the political and ecological trajectories of the deltaic region—in other words, the political ecology of the 1970 Bhola Cyclone (N. Hossain, 2018; Pelling, 2011). The conceptualization of vernacular humanitarianism therefore is not exclusionary but opens up multifaceted correspondence and interdependencies between diverse local and global actors, historical currents and events, across multiple times and temporalities, and in metropolitans and peripheries. However, in fundamental ways, the radical historical episode

of post-cyclone vernacular humanitarianism "interrupt[s] and punctuate[s]" (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 67) the Western grammar of humanitarian emotion and intervention.

The visual representation of distant suffering catalyzes Northern spectators' humanitarian impulses and activates international humanitarian action in the Third World. International journalism showed little interest in reporting on the humanitarian crisis of the 1943 Bengal Famine. Likewise, the event did not generate any visible attempt at international humanitarianism. Thanks to the extensive media coverage of the Great Bhola Cyclone, the deltaic region, coming out of the shadows of geopolitically significant Pakistani and Indian nation-states, for the first time, caught the world's attention (N. Hossain, 2020). The mere biological existence of living and dead beings in this part of the world was the most salient feature of journalistic reporting. Hence, people of the deltaic region came under the Western gaze mainly through the mediated images of the sheer biological reality of human existence rather than their tradition, culture, politics, or history. The spectacle of suffering introduced the region to the Western audience "as an entire land of bare lives," devoid of material resources and administrative capacity, incapable of protecting the population (N. Hossain, 2018, p. 4). The grim discursive effect of the natural calamity, N. Hossain argues, laid the moral ground for provoking the Northern spectator's humanitarian emotion and the most significant event of the international humanitarian intervention.

The metaphysic of knowing provides a perfect point of departure for comparing vernacular volunteerism with international humanitarianism. The international media treatment of the catastrophe, following anthropologist Tim Ingold (1993), represents an aerial or "birds-eye" view that pursued a singular representation of the plight of the Third World. Ecologically alienated people who map the world from the ivory tower of global aid and media industries produce such knowledge. Nevertheless, during the prime time of political struggle for regional autonomy, the politically aware volunteers did not perceive cyclone-affected people through the grid of "bare life." Instead, the suffering of those marginalized people became the embodiment of the suffering of East Pakistan and a visible manifestation that West Pakistan-based ruling elites did not at all care to protect the life of the neglected deltaic province of Pakistan. However, vernacular humanitarianism operated against the politics of othering of international humanitarianism. The suffering subjects of the natural catastrophe became an integral part of "we" in the eyes and minds of vernacular humanitarian actors in the context of national resistance against the hegemony of the Pakistan state.

The post-cyclone local volunteerism exposed politicized urban youths to the most marginalized rural folks' material, social, and political worlds. Contrary to the cartographic knowledge, humanitarian actors, who led into the world of devastation, walked the ground, breathed the air, and became knowledgeable through their terrestrial movement on the landscape of devastated life, carefully attending to their surroundings and engaging with the life of the poor. Such a way of learning is not about accumulating information. The wayfarer's knowledge grows as the individual travels parallel to their "own development

and maturation" as an ecologically embodied, rather than alienated, being. It enables a greater awareness of the world where the wayfarer dwells, to the environmental cues, and a greater capacity to respond to them with judgment and precision (Ingold, 1993).

In the history of Bangladesh, the politicization of the 1970 cyclone created a "critical event," following Veena Das (1996) whose idea of the critical event follows François Furet's interpretation of the French Revolution, which instituted a new modality of historical action. One of its outcomes was a new modality of humanitarianism, which we are describing as vernacular humanitarianism. We define the concept, first, as a radical historical episode of humanitarianism, a series of circumstances, constituted by the interweaving of civic engagement in humanitarian assistance and political resistance against the Pakistani oppression during the formative era of the nation. The intimate entanglement of political and philanthropic, against the grain of international humanitarian, shaped its substance, ethos, actions, and direction. It was a trajectory that became more radicalized along changing political temporality and through intermingling with the nation's liberation war. Secondly, vernacular humanitarianism entails distinct ways of knowing, feeling, and responding. The growth of wayfaring knowledge creates the condition of emotional, embodied, and sensorial relationships between people and the landscape.

> "For an anthropologically-informed historical enquiry of the ways BRAC, a Bangladeshi development NGO, emerged, envisioned development, felt its need, responded to the problems, created its workforce and became knowledgeable, and devised a uniquely proximate participatory model of development, we need to consider vernacular humanitarianism as a frame and lens of historicizing to understand, critically navigate the landscape, and chart pathways ahead.

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As a civil servant, Dr Khan was exemplary at a time when integrity and objectivity had been progressively eroding in the culture of the bureaucracy.

Photo // **Brac University**

The Legacy of
Dr Akbar Ali Khan

—By Tahmid Hasan

Former advisor to the caretaker government, Dr Akbar Ali took his last breath on 8 September 2022. Dr Khan lived an illustrious life and traversed many paths as a bureaucrat, freedom fighter, teacher, public intellectual, social thinker, economist, and historian. But he will always be remembered for his courageous opinion on public matters, sound analysis of social issues, and fearless attitude in speaking the truth—an unwavering commitment to standing up for what is right, hard-to-find traits in contemporary public and intellectual spheres. His unwillingness to make peace with the authority on matters of public interest made him unique and popular.

The Illustrious Life of Dr Akbar Ali Khan

After completing his bachelor's and master's degrees in History from Dhaka University, securing first class in both, Dr Khan went on to study at Queen's University, Canada, and obtained MA and PhD in Economics. Then he joined the Civil Service of Pakistan in 1967. When the liberation war began, he supported the freedom fighters with arms, ammunition, food, and money despite being a civil servant of then Pakistan, a testament to his fearless nature. Because of civil disobedience, he was sentenced to 14 years imprisonment in absentia by the junta army. He contributed to Bangladesh's bureaucracy and public service with critical acumen and utmost dedication. He served as the chairman of the National Board of Revenue (NBR), the secretary of the Ministry of Finance (MoF), and finally, the cabinet secretary. He was also chosen to serve as an advisor to the caretaker government of Bangladesh in 2006. He demonstrated the highest dignity by resigning from the coveted position when he feared that the election would not be free and fair.

A bureaucrat turned scholar, Dr Khan published 15 books and numerous articles on economics,

history, public administration, and literature. He had deep knowledge in disciplines including public economics, poverty, governance and development, democratic institutions, civil society, political parties, judiciary, informal justice, and bureaucracy. Intriguingly, he never lost his social scientist's lens while venturing into these diverse subjects.

Dr Khan and BIGD

Realizing the need for research-based evidence and insights to support continuous innovation for development, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed established the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) in 2005 and tasked Dr Khan with running the institution. Dr Khan served as the director of the centre for two years, which was later renamed the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) in 2007. In 2013, BRAC Development Institute (BDI) and IGS were merged to form what is known today as BIGD.

Dr Khan was the architect behind BIGD's unique Master of Arts in Governance and Development (MAGD) program. He conceived and designed the program to teach exclusively targeted mid-level public servants about people-centred, scholarship-oriented, and entrepreneurial leadership in bureaucracy. The program primarily consisted of Bangladeshi mid-level bureaucrats but also included 73 government officials from Afghanistan, Nepal, and Myanmar. More than 170 students have graduated from this residential and fully funded program since 2005. Recently, the program has been redesigned to match the increasing complexities of government functions in the developing world.

Dr Khan as a Public Intellectual

As a public intellectual, Dr Khan was committed to making his specialized knowledge accessible to a wide range of people. His writing was fluent and lively. He used expressive, communicative language and witty terms to explain complicated matters. It is evident in his numerous books—in curious book names and the use of stories and tales to illustrate complex ideas. He had the expertise to see the big picture and connect disparate dots, provoking thoughts and curiosity among general people and inspiring them to learn more. Although some might argue that his way of using stories reduced the weight of his writing, his successful writing career hints that he could connect with people and engender their interests. Although his writings were academic in structure, the easy-to-understand language and Bengali translations made it simpler for the general reader.

Thoughts on the Politicization of Bureaucracy

Through his writings and speeches, Dr Khan kept preaching the importance of having a "good bureaucracy" for institutions to perform effectively. According to him, the politicization of bureaucracy is not uncommon in the public service of different states. What is important to understand is whether the political bureaucrat holds the power and accountability to build an efficient bureaucracy. He emphasized time and

again on driving out "bad bureaucracy" to create a more innovative and empathetic bureaucratic system. Otherwise, bad bureaucracy will drive out good bureaucracy, and many youths will lose interest in the system.

Dr Akbar Ali Khan's Story of Entrepreneurship

An op-ed published in the *Dhaka Tribune*, authored by Syed Akhtar Mahmood, reveals an entrepreneurial side of Dr Khan. When Dr Khan was the chairman of the Regulatory Reform Commission, he discovered that the private courier services of Bangladesh were not operating on solid legal grounds though they were performing better than the government postal service. The Postal Act of Bangladesh, which was more than 100 years old, gave the Post Office a monopoly on delivering letters and parcels. Dr Khan was the first to identify this, and he took immediate steps to reform this law. His quick and bold initiative gave this sector a clear legal ground and probably even helped it flourish in later years.

> More than anything else, Dr Khan was always a people's man and a true patriot. Despite personal tragedies and prolonged health issues, he never stopped speaking for the public interest. His passing leaves a huge void in our intellectual and public sphere.

The Legacy of Dr Akbar Ali Khan: Webinar on Thursday, 20 October 2022

To commemorate Dr Khan's life, work, and meaning in our times, BIGD organized the above-mentioned webinar. Speakers in the event included scholars and colleagues who have known Dr Akbar Ali Khan and his work for decades. The article is based on the discussion taking place in the webinar.

BIGD mourns the death of Akbar Ali Khan and pays tribute to a giant public intellectual and a rare breed of scholar bureaucrat.

Against all odds, he was tireless in his pursuit of knowledge for a better Bangladesh. We are committed to continuing the work that Dr Akbar Ali Khan started through CGS to support the creation of a people-centred and scholarship-oriented bureaucracy for a just and prosperous Bangladesh.

The Struggle for Representation

An Exploration of Trade Unions in the RMG Industry in Bangladesh

—By Raeesa Rahemin

Photo // BRAC

Ready-made garments (RMG) is one of the most important industries in Bangladesh. It contributes significantly to the country's gross domestic product (GDP) and non-farm formal employment, especially for women. The RMG industry also provides a unique opportunity to understand the critical state-society relations—between the industrial workers, the powerful actors like the owners and management, and the state.

BIGD's study on the political economy of the landscape of RMG trade unions in Bangladesh allowed us to take a deep dive into these state-society relations. The study shows that in these triangular relations, the state's interests are skewed in the interest of the capital—owners. Most often the RMG owners are able to influence the actions of the workers' trade unions and the terms of trade and engagement in their favour. Occasionally, collective protests and actions are successful in compelling the state and the owners to act in the interest of protecting the labour. The de facto rules of law can both enable and constrain the ability of the trade unions to mobilize their workers and consolidate their interests. Our study looks at all these aspects.

> Trade unions are meant to help workers bargain for their rights by providing legitimacy and appropriate forums and tools, but in reality, being involved in trade unions can be a source of fear and contention for the RMG workers in Bangladesh, leading to dysfunctional and largely ineffective trade unions.

Why do the trade unions, despite their legitimacy, fail to unionize the workers?

The inception of trade unions in Bangladesh is historically rooted in the huge industrial protests in the 1980s and 1990s, which led to the formation of the first federations in RMG. The first organized labour movement started in 1979; however, it was not until much later that these labour movements started to be recognized formally. There has been a lot of resistance to the formation of these groups, both from state and factory owners. Owners believed that allowing trade unions would disrupt the growth of the RMG sector, which was still in its formative stages in the 1980s. Successive decades saw violent suppression of labour movements in the form of extreme surveillance of trade unions, increasing use of laws of the dissent, and sedition against labour organizers—ultimately creating a culture of fear among the workers and their leadership and stemming the growth of RMG trade unions in the country.

A primary reason for many workers' reluctance to join trade unions is the very real fear of losing their jobs. Although factory management may not be able to directly take action against them for unionizing, they use other forms of manipulation and coercion to discourage their workers from formally unionizing. Some tactics include filing cases against workers or transferring them to other roles. In some cases, the management fire workers on a pretext, whereas in reality, it is understood that it is because the workers tried to unionize. As such, workers tend to use trade unions as a last resort when it comes to resolving their grievances. Many believe that a good rapport with their factory management is a better strategy for solving their problems as joining or going to trade unions always comes with a risk. Often, many workers find that they can solve their grievances through the help of trade unions without actually joining one. In such cases, they can avoid the risks of joining a trade union and the need for paying the monthly fee as trade union members.

The RMG owners also influence the meta-level structural factors, including the formulation of laws and the de facto practices of industrial relations in their favour. Thus, often the relevant regulatory systems are not conducive to trade union operations. For example, getting registrations from regulatory agencies is very difficult for any new trade union. Resistance from owners makes the process more difficult for trade unions to register, adding a layer of challenge to the growth and institutionalization of trade unions.

Thus, despite having a moderate degree of legitimacy, trade unions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh have struggled to establish themselves as the primary and secure source of grievance management among RMG workers. The mix of diverse social traits and associated incentives of workers influence their choices about trade unions and hence the entire relational domain of the workplace.

The traditional and unique sociopolitical values in Bangladesh continue to dominate the trajectory of trade unionism, one which is rather different from the standard route of the evolution of industrial democracy in other Western parts of the world.

Online Gender-Based Violence

An Emerging Issue to Explore

—By Shravasti Roy Nath

Photo // BIGD, Brac University

As the virtual world gains traction, it is increasingly affecting all aspects of society, directly impacting social, political, and economic ideologies. The increased digital access among Bangladeshi citizens has made it an effective medium for spreading awareness. The COVID-19 pandemic period was an example of the usefulness of digital space in education, banking, and other white-collar jobs. However, digital inequality is stark in the country due to existing socioeconomic, notably gender-based, inequalities, and digital skills—consequently, awareness about safe digital practices—are limited among a part of the population.

BIGD's study on "Adolescent Girls' Vulnerabilities and Transitions in the Context of COVID-19" revealed an increased use of social media among adolescents during the pandemic. It found that female adolescents and their parents have a greater fear of social media negatively impacting their reputation in the neighbourhood and, in the long run, impacting their marriage prospects. On the other hand, male adolescents and their parents seemed only concerned about the misuse of time.

This difference in comfort was quite telling. While men reaped the benefits of impersonal interactions and the ability to share opinions without the fear of judgement, women seemed warier of the lack of accountability.

> Over the years, online interactions have proved to be a double-edged sword whereby the lack of accountability and fact-checking allows people to discuss and promote anything that comes to mind. At times, this includes direct and planned violence.

Being only a reflection of everyday society, the interactions in the virtual space reflect common social norms. Ethnic or gender minorities or those expressing unconventional views face both overt and anonymous attacks, in the form of hate speech, obscenities, and derogatory words against people for seeking their rights or merely expressing their gender identities. Such behaviour has become commonplace in digital spaces.

Though online violence most often does not lead to physical harm, it is seen to have a direct impact on the mental health of internet users. A 2022 BIGD study titled "Tracking Gender-Based Violence and Backlash Against Women's Rights in the Digital Space: Cases From Bangladesh" shows that perpetrators are often active members of society, coming from both rural and urban areas, with a multitude of educational and career backgrounds, including students of renowned universities. The study also revealed different ways these online perpetrators organize themselves. Trends were also seen in the "hate comments," with many tactics reflecting what marginalized people have already experienced in the offline world—moral policing, character assassination, and explicit and derogatory comments.

Bangladesh lacks the required legal framework to address online violence. The government has formulated the Digital Security Act 2018 to maintain national stability and security. However, the protection of users is weak and there is no specific law regarding online violence against vulnerable groups. The government has put into place mechanisms to deal with misinformation, blackmailing, hacking, stealing, defaming, and most established/recognized forms of violence/crime. However, the forms of gender-based violence we found in our study are not well recognized and acknowledged. Women also feel hesitation accessing the scarce police and legal support given the widespread social stigma and difficulties in accessing justice. Besides the lack of a legal framework, there is also a lack of digital education in terms of how to behave on social media.

While gender-based violence in public and private spheres has been widely studied in Bangladesh, research on online gender-based violence is scarce.

> As the country is rapidly adopting digital communication methods, it is becoming incredibly important to develop indicators and measurements for online gender-based violence and determine how it relates to existing studies on violence in society.

This lack of commonly accepted understanding of online violence is hindering large-scale quantitative or in-depth qualitative studies on online gender-based violence in our context, which in turn conceals the extent and severity of the problem. BIGD aims to fill this important gap through focused qualitative research on understanding online gender-based violence.

IPA and BIGD Sign MoU

for Creating Greater Impact of Development Research in Bangladesh

Photo // **BRAC**

Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), Brac University, have signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU), creating a collaboration to use high-quality research to support evidence-informed development solutions in Bangladesh.

IPA is a global research and policy organization with a presence in 20 countries across Asia, Africa, and the Americas. IPA works with partners to generate and use rigorous evidence to guide smarter development investments and ultimately improve the lives of millions of people living in poverty. Over the past 20 years, IPA has conducted over 900 studies in 50 countries to identify what works, what does not, and why. BIGD, a Bangladesh-based social science academic and research institute of Brac University, does a range of research work—from large-scale impact evaluation to deep qualitative inquiry to formative research—on important issues around development and governance. It combines the academic excellence and independence of a university with unique access to BRAC, one of the leading global social innovation platforms, to do high-quality, relevant development research.

The organizations' complementary strengths will have a catalytic impact in Bangladesh. IPA's strong technical capabilities around evaluation and its global network of researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and funders will complement BIGD's intimate knowledge of research in Bangladesh, its unique relationship with BRAC, and its ability to attract Bangladeshi researchers. It is expected that the collaboration

will strengthen BIGD's technical capacities and attract global researchers and funding for research and policy work in Bangladesh.

IPA and BIGD will jointly design research initiatives, raise resources, and pursue an institutional strengthening program for BIGD through exchanges with IPA staff globally and partner universities. BIGD will offer IPA and its researcher network meaningful partnership opportunities for rigorous and more context-driven development research in Bangladesh.

The two organizations will also explore fundraising opportunities for new research initiatives in areas of common interest to better attract researchers from low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). The organizations believe that these initiatives will increase and improve locally relevant development research agendas.

IPA and BIGD are considering setting up a team within BIGD to provide advisory services and capacity exchange on monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) in collaboration with IPA's Right Fit Evidence unit, which is dedicated to developing resources and offering services to help funders and implementers make learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation a reality. Bangladesh has a thriving ecosystem of development innovations, both within the government and nonprofits. Yet MEL practices in the country often fail to support learning and improvement, which can limit effective scaleups. IPA's technical expertise, combined with BIGD's grounding in the Bangladesh context, will help to address this shortcoming. The new collaboration will also accelerate dissemination and policy outreach activities, both within and outside Bangladesh.

> "Our partnership with BIGD will further our mission by strengthening the capacity of, and partnering with, a strong local organisation to conduct high-quality research and cultivate deep, long-lasting relationships needed to effectively engage with decision-makers to support evidence uptake and ultimately to improve the lives of people living in poverty.
>
> —Annie Duflo, Executive Director, IPA

Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director of BIGD, said, "BIGD and IPA share the basic belief that good evidence matters in developing effective, scalable solutions. Bangladesh is a rich country of social innovations that can be useful globally. We hope to join forces to empower social innovators with high-quality evidence to create global public goods. I am super excited about this ambition."

With millions of dollars invested in poverty reduction in Bangladesh, the stakes for finding what works to improve lives are significant. International research organizations have made some progress in ensuring that high-quality evidence is moving beyond mere publication and into the hands of policymakers. The collaboration of IPA and BIGD in Bangladesh will further this process, generating evidence, disseminating learning, and ultimately benefiting Bangladesh.

Qualitative Program Research
QualPRO

Photo // BRAC

What Is QualPRO?

Recognizing the urgency of expanding the use of rigorous qualitative methods in social science research on development programs and policies, BIGD has assembled a unit dedicated to Qualitative Program Research (QualPRO).

> The QualPRO unit aims to bring in advanced, new-generation qualitative research methods, train young talents, and use BIGD's deep local knowledge and strong connection with organizations like BRAC to conduct high-quality research on development programs and policies that matter.

The unit's primary focus is to explore programmatic questions and needs, ranging from program designing to operational research to process evaluation.

Through our Young Researchers' Fellowship (YRF) program, we recruited eight Trainee Research Associates (TRAs) in 2022 for QualPRO and provided them with six-month-long theoretical and practical training on different aspects of qualitative research.

The ultimate aim of QualPRO is to help researchers and practitioners better understand the realities of their people of interest. This will inform the design and adaptation of development programs and policies for effectiveness. This understanding will also enable researchers to develop sound theoretical models and bring

nuance and informed explanations of the outcomes in quantitative studies.

The QualPRO "Method"

The goal of generating insights to support intervention design and identifying gaps in existing designs is distinctly different from the target of generating evidence on the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions.

Comprehensively grounded in social science theory and research practices, QualPRO will incorporate qualitative methods such as participatory and ethnographic research to conduct research that is inherently formative: it will improve our understanding of program design and the factors that contribute to the success of social and economic interventions. QualPRO is also intended to be iterative, not only contributing to the formation/formulation of development programs but also their continuous and seamless improvement over each iteration.

Why QualPRO and Why Now?

In recent decades, impact evaluation using quantitative methods like randomized controlled trials (RCTs) has become the most influential category of social science research on development programs and policies. The emphasis on qualitative research has somewhat diminished in the process. However, arguments are compelling for using rigorous qualitative methods in empirical social science research, on their own and as part of mixed-method studies, especially now. Rapid change is the defining characteristic of our time.

> Phenomena like climate change, environmental degradation, digital revolution, and globalization are constantly and profoundly changing every aspect of life everywhere. Understanding these constant changes is essential for finding solutions to pressing problems like poverty, inequality, and injustice. Such understanding can only come through nimble yet deep qualitative enquiry, which can provide useful insights for designing and adapting solutions, as opposed to quantitative evaluations, which tend to be expensive, lengthy, and more inclined to answer the "what" question instead of "how" and "why."

Domain knowledge is indispensable for developing sound theoretical and analytical frameworks, as well as for better explaining the outcomes in quantitative studies. And developing domain knowledge requires intimate qualitative reflection. It also sharpens the necessary nuance for explaining any social phenomenon by becoming more empathetic through close interaction with the subjects of research. In a 2022 paper titled "Can Economics Become More Reflexive? Exploring the Potential of Mixed-Methods," World Bank economist Vijayendra Rao explains, with examples, how development economics can benefit from using well-designed mixed methods. He argues that it can generate *cognitive empathy*, as defined by Mario Luis Small, among the researchers by reducing their distance from the subjects of their research, who are most likely to be from very different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

Domain knowledge is also becoming invaluable for cutting-edge research methods like causal modelling, a method borrowed from computer science and promoted to the social sciences by the eminent computer scientist Judea Pearl. With the advancement of computing and the explosion of digital data, causal modelling—the prediction of causal relationships in a system—is likely to become a powerful tool for impact evaluation. In causal models, variables are the building blocks, and the appropriate variables can only be found through careful observation and understanding of the system of interest.

Also, in the age of digital data science, powerful techniques like natural language processing, which is becoming more powerful every day, can be used to analyze a vast amount of qualitative data, in the form of narratives, to generate insights, something that was impossible until recently.

Finally, a rigorous qualitative examination is an ideal method for process evaluation—close, qualitative observation of how the outcomes come about. It can help design effective interventions. It can also validate the outcomes of impact evaluations; after all, the validity of a program or policy impact depends on the extent of its fidelity of implementation.

By utilizing its deep local knowledge and networks, invaluable connection with BRAC, and accumulated expertise and global research network in both qualitative and quantitative research, BIGD is in a unique position to unleash the power of qualitative research on development programs and policies.

Offering Redesigned MAGD for Excellence in Public Policy

Starting in Fall 2023

Photo // **BIGD, Brac University**

Why Did We Redesign the Master of Arts in Governance and Development (MAGD) Program?

BIGD's Master of Arts in Governance and Development (MAGD) program has been playing a significant role in nurturing promising policymakers, enabling them to take on multifaceted, complex governance and development challenges with confidence.

The program has been blessed with globally- and nationally-acclaimed faculties, who carefully designed and delivered the program to build the required skills, knowledge, and, more importantly, an analytical mindset of its students. However, with the impressive economic growth in Bangladesh and across South Asia and intensifying forces like globalization, digitalization, and climate change, government functions are becoming increasingly greater in scope, scale, and complexity. So, we have comprehensively reviewed the program and redesigned it to match the needs of future policy analysts.

Target: Providing Value for Both Government Officials and Public Policy Professionals

Until now, MAGD was offered only to government officials in Bangladesh and across South Asia as a full-time residential program. In addition to them, the newly-designed MAGD will be offered to young professionals aspiring to build a successful career in public policy analysis and advocacy.

With the escalating scope, scale, and complexity of government function, policy and governance mechanisms must be more sophisticated, agile, and advanced, and thus the role of high-quality policy analysis and research-based advocacy is becoming crucial.

> So, alongside government officials, we have opened the program to professionals in non-profit, research institutes, journalists, think tanks interested in public policy and governance, and fresh graduates and young professionals aspiring to build a career in public policy.

Objective

MAGD will offer a unique blend of teaching by globally acclaimed academics and the insights of locally rooted practitioners to build a strong theoretical foundation on governance and development and the capabilities to successfully implement learned theories into practice. MAGD aims to enable policymakers and professionals to successfully address the 21st-century challenges and meaningfully contribute to the sustainable, inclusive development of their country.

With a strong foundation of modern, advanced theories and practical skills relevant to on-the-ground realities, MAGD will cultivate critical thinking among the students and develop their soft and hard skills to turn them into strategic, agile, efficient, and responsive actors of governance and development.

What Are the Core Features of the Redesigned MAGD?

The MAGD students will have an opportunity to network with national and international scholars and practitioners in the public policy space—both the high-profile faculty and successful alumni of the program.

The new MAGD program will be non-residential, giving the necessary flexibility to working students. Further flexibility will be provided by the hybrid class structure—the opportunity to take a combination of online classes and strategically important in-person workshops and classes.

> MAGD and Master of Development Studies (MDS) students will share core courses and have access to a wide range of shared elective courses. This will allow the students in both programs to experience a "cross-learning" environment.

Also, this will provide MAGD students with the option to explore specialized topics of MDS and vice versa. Essentially, this will allow MAGD students a richer, diverse menu of elective courses.

The redesigned MAGD will be offered from Fall 2023.

Integrity and Anti-Corruption Module for MPSM Students

Photo // BIGD, Brac University

Fostering Integrity and an Anti-Corruption Mindset Among Procurement and Supply Chain Management Professionals in Bangladesh

It has been a decade since the Masters in Procurement and Supply Chain Management (MPSM) was introduced at BIGD, Brac University.

Procurement and supply chain management are high-stake, complex, sophisticated functions, particularly for governments and large non-state entities including businesses. The fast-growing economy and ever-expanding scope of organizational functions mean that procurement and supply chain management is becoming even more critical.

MPSM has been designed to meet this critical need—developing the capabilities of professionals to successfully take on important roles in procurement and supply chain management across the public and private sectors in Bangladesh and beyond. The MPSM in BIGD follows an international standard of education, closely aligned with the curriculum of the Chartered Institute of Procurement and Supply (CIPS) certification program.

Criticality of Promoting Accountability and Transparency Through the MPSM Curriculum

Advanced technical and managerial skills are on the one side of the equation in procurement and supply chain management. The other, and perhaps more important, side of it is the question of ethics and morality. Large monetary values associated with these functions work as strong incentives for corruption and thus demand superior levels of accountability, transparency, and trust.

MPSM curriculum has an extensive coverage on compliance, which is aimed at promoting integrity and reducing irregularities and mismanagement. However, knowledge and skills of compliance are not sufficient in this case, particularly in countries with weaker rule of law and widespread corruption where often integrity is not rewarded and non-compliance or corruption remains unpunished.

Cooperation Between BIGD and FJIAC for Building a Culture of Anti-Corruption Through the MPSM Program

BIGD has partnered with the Foundation for Justice, Integrity and Anti-Corruption (FJIAC) to cultivate a culture of accountability, transparency, rule of law, and trust in Bangladesh's procurement and supply chain system. FJIAC's specialists have extensive experience in strengthening integrity systems around the world, at different levels of government, civil society, and increasingly in the corporate sector.

> The FJIAC approach is to help procurement and supply chain management professionals from the government and the commercial sectors learn how to identify and mitigate risks, how to deliberate on moral questions, and how to make moral judgments based on weighing the rights, interests, and wishes of all involved.

It is expected that this understanding will develop a higher level of prudence in their own roles and responsibilities, and ultimately increase public and commercial sector accountability and transparency.

FJIAC has worked with BIGD staff to develop and implement customized course content on integrity and anti-corruption. The content has been integrated into the MPSM program, and BIGD faculty members were trained in teaching the content. The content, as modules in MPSM's foundation and core courses, is being offered to the students from 2022.

We hope that the introduction of the integrity and anti-corruption courses would equip our graduates with the necessary frameworks and skills and encourage them to pursue a higher moral standard in their procurement and supply chain management roles.

My MDS Story

A Journey to Find My Feet

—By Jahid Nur

Photo // Zehad Al Mehedi

I distinctly remember my first day as a Master of Development Studies (MDS) student at Brac University. I entered the computer lab on the sixth floor of the BIGD building just before 6 pm, the scheduled time of the first lecture. I was surprised that there were only two of us. My surprise soon turned into a sense of concern when no one else entered the room by the next few minutes. I contacted an MDS program official and checked my email to find out that I was in the wrong building. I crossed the road, asked different support staff of Brac University, found the right building, and thankfully was able to rush to the classroom by 6:15. It was just the beginning of my struggle to find ways as an MDS student since social science was quite an unknown territory for me. But that was the first and the last time I found myself in the wrong place in my MDS journey.

Honestly, I got into the MDS program with no clear purpose. As a fresh graduate, I was trying to figure out "Where do I fit in?" as I felt that Statistics—the discipline of my undergraduate degree—did not agree with my appetite. After participating in quite a few workshops arranged by UNICEF, I had a hunch that I would get along well with the realm of development studies. With only that hunch, I enrolled on the MDS program and began my endeavour to find the turf where I belong. I was a bit concerned about the unfamiliarity of my chosen path. But soon after I started participating in the lecture sessions, I had a sense of assurance in myself around the learning environment and the discussed topics.

I owe a part of this confidence to the interactive, multidisciplinary learning experience that the MDS program offers. The instructors were experts in different branches of knowledge who had extensive experience in both the domains of academia and practice. Whereas, each of my classmates, coming from diverse backgrounds, brought in their unique perspectives.

> The enthusiasm of both teachers and students to share knowledge made the lecture sessions constructive and reflective, helping me to get exposed to and develop a strong grounding in the concepts of contemporary development discourse, simultaneously with their practical applications.

I found myself absorbed in the issues of gender, livelihoods, and development, along with the concepts of gender roles and norms, gender divisions of labour, capital, capabilities, and intersectionality. Moreover, I became quite attracted to the qualitative approach to research since I perceived that to have a keen understanding of the issues of my interest, I need to delve into the stories and experiences of the people who are at the centre of them.

My fascination for qualitative research evolved into a passion during my MDS thesis. In fact, I was a recipient of the award supported by the "Covid Collective" research platform to conduct my thesis. I used case studies to qualitatively analyze the socioeconomic constraints that the female workers living in urban informal settlements in Dhaka faced in re-entering the labour market during COVID-19 and their adopted strategies to cope with the challenges arising from their struggle to secure livelihoods.

The opportunity to apply my interdisciplinary conceptual understanding to observe how this unprecedented crisis impacted the livelihoods of low-income informal female workers was a chance of a lifetime for me. However, conducting a study during those turbulent times, combined with my discovery of the pandemic experiences of those vulnerable women, took its toll on me as I was mentally and emotionally distressed. But with proper guidance from my supervisor and a clear theoretical understanding from the "Advanced Research Methods" course, I was able to keep myself focused, and navigate the challenges to complete my thesis.

This achievement, although a small one, turned out to have a significant impact on my life as it sowed a seed of aspiration that I can become a qualitative researcher. To actualize my aspiration, I applied to BIGD's Young Reserachers' Fellowship (YRF) program, and am currently serving as a Trainee Research Associate (TRA) with the institute's qualitative research group.

> This engagement has been a privilege for me as I am learning the ethos of qualitative research and getting hands-on exposure to fieldwork experiences while being able to sensitize the young researcher in me amidst the devoted research minds.

I know this is just the beginning of an endless quest for knowledge to contribute to a better tomorrow. And I feel that the experiences of MDS and the YRF program have given me the foundation, belief, and mental resilience that I require to constantly push through that endeavour.

For someone like me, who was struggling to find his feet, MDS was a guide that showed the right direction. I got into the program with a clean slate but finished it with inspiring ideas, an influx of confidence, and a path to explore. I hope MDS will continue to motivate young minds, as it had done to me, to take part in the journey of making a difference.

Notable Events
2022

Photo // BRAC

Applying Evidence to Achieve Long-Term Development, Poverty Eradication, and Inclusive Growth

8–10 February || Webinar || BRAC Regional Dialogues || Co-hosted with BRAC, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and partners

As a part of the "BRAC Regional Dialogues: Applying Evidence to Achieve Long-Term Development, Poverty Eradication, and Inclusive Growth" dialogue series, two webinars were organized by BIGD, BRAC, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and other partners. At the dialogue, representatives from organizations including BIGD, UNDP, World Bank, African Development Bank, Government of Rwanda, and West Africa Civil Society Institute discussed how governments and their partners can expand existing programs to drive sustainable and inclusive growth and human development.

Mamta Murthi, Vice President for Human Development at the World Bank; Mansour Ndiaye, Global Head of Inclusive Growth at UNDP; Cynthia Kamikazi, Chief of Policy and Partnerships, African Development Bank; Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD; Dr Stephanie Levy, Guest Lecturer at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Department of International Development; and Palash Das, Director of BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program, were among those who spoke at the webinar series.

In Search of Justice: Untold Tales of Domestic Violence Survivors

8 March || Book Launch || Co-hosted with the Rule of Law Programme of GIZ Bangladesh

BIGD and the Rule of Law Programme of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) jointly organized a program on 8 March 2022 at Radisson Blu Dhaka Water Garden to launch a book titled *In Search of Justice: Untold Tales of Domestic Violence Survivors*, which explores the justice-seeking journeys of domestic violence survivors during the pandemic.

Unveiled to observe the International Women's Day and celebrate 50 years of German Development Cooperation in Bangladesh, the book was launched by Mr Anisul Huq, MP, Honourable Minister, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, and by H.E. Achim Tröster, Ambassador, the Federal Republic of Germany to Bangladesh.

The publication is based on research commissioned by GIZ's Rule of Law Programme, a joint initiative under the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs (MoLJPA) and the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA). BIGD undertook the study in partnership with Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), BRAC Social Empowerment and Legal Programme (SELP) (formerly known as BRAC HRLS), and RDRS Bangladesh.

Presentation of Dissertations by MDS Graduates 2022

29 May || Webinar

BIGD organized an exciting virtual session where recent Master of Development Studies (MDS) graduates presented their final dissertations and shared findings from their research on diverse development domains, such as labour, public health, education, and migration during the COVID-19 crisis.

The event was the culmination of a yearlong effort to develop and run an advanced research methods course for MDS students choosing the dissertation track. Selected students from the course were awarded with an opportunity to do their dissertation on existing BIGD projects with intensive supervision. It is part of BIGD's ongoing effort to strengthen the research-practice nexus in the MDS program.

Adolescent Girls' Vulnerabilities and Transitions in the Context of COVID-19

1 June || Research Dissemination Event || Co-hosted with the Rule of Law Programme of GIZ Bangladesh

The event was jointly organized by BIGD and the Rule of Law Programme of GIZ Bangladesh. The research has been supported by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). The study aimed to shed light on women and girls' access to justice in Bangladesh by analyzing adolescent girls' life transitions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opening remarks by Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD, were followed by speeches from Mr Md. Golam Sarwar, Secretary, Law and Justice Division, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs (MoLJPA); Ms Ummey Kulsum, Joint Secretary (Opinion), Law and Justice Division, Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs (MoLJPA) and National Project Director, GIZ Project; Mr Javed Patel, Deputy High Commissioner, British High Commission; and Dr Angelika Fleddermann, Country Director, GIZ Bangladesh.

PPRC-BIGD COVID-19 Panel Survey Phase V: Inflation, Coping, and Recovery Challenges

5 June || Webinar || Co-hosted with Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC)

The webinar was organized to share findings from the fifth round of the PPRC-BIGD national survey which started in April 2020 with a large sample of urban slums and the rural population to capture the evolving economic crisis among low-income communities in Bangladesh due to COVID-19.

Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), and Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director of BIGD, presented the findings at the event. According to the study, per capita daily incomes were steadily recovering after the second lockdown but started reversing again between January and May 2022 due to inflation, disrupting the expected recovery of real incomes to that of pre-pandemic times.

> During the webinar, the researchers emphasized on government's action for the informal sector and the poor to protect both consumption and production capabilities and reimagining social protection to align with our challenges and ambitions.

BRAC@50: What Can We Learn From the World's Largest NGO?

15 June || DSA 2022 Pre-Conference Roundtable || Co-hosted with Development Studies Association (DSA)

This roundtable session was jointly organized by the Development Studies Association (DSA) and BIGD, bringing together leading experts on BRAC to share critical lessons from BRAC's 50 years of building a Southern approach to development.

Speakers of the event were Dr Shahaduz Zaman, Professor in Medical Anthropology and Global Health, Brighton and Sussex Medical School; Asif Saleh, Executive Director, BRAC Bangladesh; Tamara Abed, Managing Director, BRAC Enterprises and Chair of Board of Trustees, Brac University; Marty Chen, Adjunct Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School and Senior Advisor, WIEGO Network; Sohela Nazneen, Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies (IDS); Nobonita Chowdhury, Director, Preventing Violence Against Women Initiative and Gender Justice and Diversity, BRAC; Syed Hashemi, Professor at the School of General Education, Brac University; Aude de Montesquiou, Senior Advisor, Strategy and Digital Innovations for Scaling Economic Inclusion, BIGD; and Greg Chen, Managing Director, BRAC Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative.

The speakers discussed BRAC's unique approaches to development and highlighted three key success factors—contextualization and learning orientation, problem-solving lens, and social enterprises. Then they talked about BRAC's philosophy and strategies for ensuring gender equality and women empowerment—treating women as the agents of change, women-led development, and, more recently, targeting patriarchy through focusing on changing harmful gender norms. Finally, they discussed how BRAC's learnings are communicated and fed into development initiatives in other parts of the world.

The event was chaired by Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

Digitalization and New Frontiers of Service Delivery: Opportunities and Challenges

20 June || International Conference

BIGD organized a three-day international conference titled “Digitalization and New Frontiers of Service Delivery: Opportunities and Challenges” from 20 to 22 June 2022 at the BRAC Center Inn Auditorium, Dhaka.

Researchers, practitioners, and policy actors from around the globe shared their experiences and insights on a wide range of issues regarding digitalization and development. The three-day conference comprised of 12 sessions.

The overall objective of the conference was to share global learnings and experiences on the ways to use digitalization for inclusive development. Digital inequality, which prevents marginal groups, e.g., women and the poor, from taking advantage of digitalization, was a major topic of the conference. The other topics focused on the technical, political, bureaucratic, and social challenges of utilizing digitalization for inclusive development as well as opportunities and possible solutions.

In his keynote speech, Stefan Dercon, Professor of Economic Policy at the University of Oxford, provided a synthesis of global knowledge on the opportunities, risks, and conditions for improving public service for all and creating inclusive economic opportunities using digital technology.

Speaking about the achievements, future challenges, and opportunities of digitalization in Bangladesh, Anir Chowdhury, Policy Advisor

> “There is a real potential to improve governance and development outcomes in Bangladesh through digitalization. But that would require real collaboration between the social scientists and practitioners and technical experts to develop digital solutions, critical analysis, sharing of learnings, and acting on the global and local learning to design a digital solution that is inclusive and welfare-enhancing.
>
> —Imran Matin
> Executive Director, BIGD

Photo // BRAC

to Aspire to Innovate (a2i), highlighted how the strong commitment of the government leadership has transformed the use of digital technology for development.

In one session, the speakers took the case of online birth registration to reflect on the various types of challenges citizens, especially marginal people, may face in accessing digital services of a similar type. In several sessions, speakers discussed the implications, both opportunities and pitfalls, of digitalizing the social safety net, health, and education services. Another session focused on the platform services like Uber and Pathao, discussing the opportunities and challenges in these emerging sectors—working conditions, labour rights, and structural changes in the labour market, for example.

Another session focused on learnings from delivering education through digital and hybrid methods during COVID-19 to marginal groups like children coming from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and with disabilities.

Politics, governance, bureaucracy, and power dynamics were other important strands of the conference. The speakers focused on the conditions necessary as well as possible strategies to navigate and take advantage of the status quo in promoting inclusive development through digitalization.

The three-day conference came to an end with a commitment from the policymakers, practitioners, and researchers alike to work together towards the goal of using digitalization to make lives better for all citizens.

Women's Skill Development for Freelancing Marketplaces Program

3 August || Validation Workshop || Co-hosted with CodersTrust Bangladesh (CTBD)

The workshop was organized to disseminate findings from a randomized controlled trial (RCT) conducted by BIGD that evaluated the impact of a freelancing training program conducted by CodersTrust Bangladesh (CTBD), targeted at women aged 18–35 years. The program provides different ICT-related skills and builds their confidence through post-training technical mentorship and career advising support.

The study found that online freelancing training can have a significant positive impact on the employment and income of underprivileged women. However, success in freelancing may be hindered by steep competition in the online marketplace, the resultant loss of confidence, and time constraints in learning and building their portfolio due to household responsibilities.

The workshop brought together government officials, trainees, and implementers to discuss the ways forward to developing an inclusive and sustainable ecosystem for women freelancers in Bangladesh. Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director of BIGD; Ataul Gani Osmani, Country Director, CTBD; and Lopita Huq, Research Fellow, BIGD, spoke at the event.

Young People and Work in South Asia

3 September || Workshop || Co-hosted with the University of Cambridge, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), and Azim Premji University

BIGD, in partnership with the University of Cambridge, Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), and Azim Premji University, organized a workshop on "Young People and Work in South Asia" as a part of a new initiative to scope a commission, which will work to focus on the unheard voices of marginalized youth.

Work is critical to people's lives, not only as a source of livelihood but also as providing a sense of identity and belonging. Work allows young people to make a contribution and be respected in their communities. The workshop brought together youths from different institutions who discussed the barriers that marginalized young people in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) face to accessing meaningful work.

Photo // Nusrat Jahan

A Talk by Michael Carter, Distinguished Professor, UC Davis

6 September || In-House Presentation

BIGD hosted a talk by Michael Carter, Distinguished Professor, Agricultural and Resource Economics, University of California, Davis, on 6 September 2022. He talked about his research study, a five-year RCT in Northern Kenya, which explores the psychological dimensions of a graduation model known as Rural Entrepreneur Access Project (REAP), the BOMA Project's flagship program which provides training, mentorship, and asset grants to small groups of women to start businesses. The research also assesses if women's levels of depression have any impact on who would benefit from the program.

Engaging Youths in Shaping Bangladesh's Future in a Transforming World

18 October || Seminar || Co-hosted with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Bangladesh

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Bangladesh and BIGD jointly organized this seminar at the Brac University Auditorium to engage young minds and hear their perspectives on the implications of the issues highlighted in the latest Human Development Report (HDR) 2022.

Dangerous planetary pressures, sweeping societal transformation, and increased polarization—the three sources of uncertainty mentioned in the HDR 2022—are causing stress and anxiety among the youth at an unprecedented level. Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD, moderated the panel discussions. In the first panel, Dr Rohini Kamal, Assistant Professor and Research Fellow, BIGD; Dr Nazneen Ahmed, Country Economist, UNDP Bangladesh; and AKM Fahim Mashroor, Founder and CEO of Bdjobs.com, spoke on the main themes of the HDR.

The second panel consisted of the youth representatives, where Tazrean Alam, General Secretary of the Green Planet Club of the Independent University of Bangladesh; Golam Mostafa Shuvo, Advocacy Lead, Youth Policy Forum; and Labby Hasan, President, Brac University Research for Development Club, spoke about youth's perception on the themes. Stefan Liller, Resident Representative, UNDP Bangladesh, also joined the discussion.

Dynamics of State Craft, Governance Reform & Public Intellectualism in Bangladesh: The Legacy of Dr Akbar Ali Khan

20 October || Webinar

BIGD organized a webinar to commemorate eminent economist and former caretaker government advisor Dr Akbar Ali Khan on Thursday, 20 October 2022. The webinar titled "Dynamics of Statecraft, Governance Reform & Public Intellectualism in Bangladesh: The Legacy of Dr Akbar Ali Khan" was joined by scholars and colleagues who have known Dr Khan for decades and are familiar with his work and research.

Dr Mirza M Hassan, Senior Research Fellow, BIGD, delivered a trigger presentation on the intellectual legacy of Dr Khan. Mr M Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan, Former Cabinet Secretary, Government of Bangladesh and Senior Advisor, BIGD, chaired the session. Dr Asif Shahan, Associate Professor, Department of Development Studies, University of Dhaka; Dr Syed Akhtar Mahmood, Former Lead Private Sector Specialist, World Bank Group; Dr Ahrar Ahmad, Director General, Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation; Professor Rounaq Jahan, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD); and Professor Rehman Sobhan, renowned economist and Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), were present as panellists at the event.

Read more about the legacy of Dr Akbar Ali Khan on page 44.

Sustaining Pathway Out of Poverty-Integrated Market System Development

7 November || National Workshop || Co-hosted with World Vision and Overseas Development Initiative (ODI)

World Vision's Nobo Jatra, in partnership with BIGD and Overseas Development Institute (ODI), conducted a study investigating sustainable pathways to address poverty in South West Bangladesh, evaluating the role of access to finance in empowering women.

To disseminate the findings of that research, the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief and World Vision Bangladesh jointly hosted a lessons-learned workshop on "Sustaining Pathway out of Poverty-Integrated Market System Development" on 7 November 2022 at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon. Disaster Management and Relief Secretary Md Kamrul Hasan attended the workshop as the chief guest. Dr Rohini Kamal, Research Fellow, BIGD, attended the session as a panellist.

Knowledge for a Better World

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