



## Letter From the Executive Director

Photo // Zehad Al Mehedi

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.



“ Though I was assigned the role of researcher for the UPG program, called then Targeting the Ultra-Poor (TUP), my initial primary focus was not on formal research, but to unlearn and understand through immersion, observation, and reflection.

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.”

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.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Imran Matin', written over a horizontal line.

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