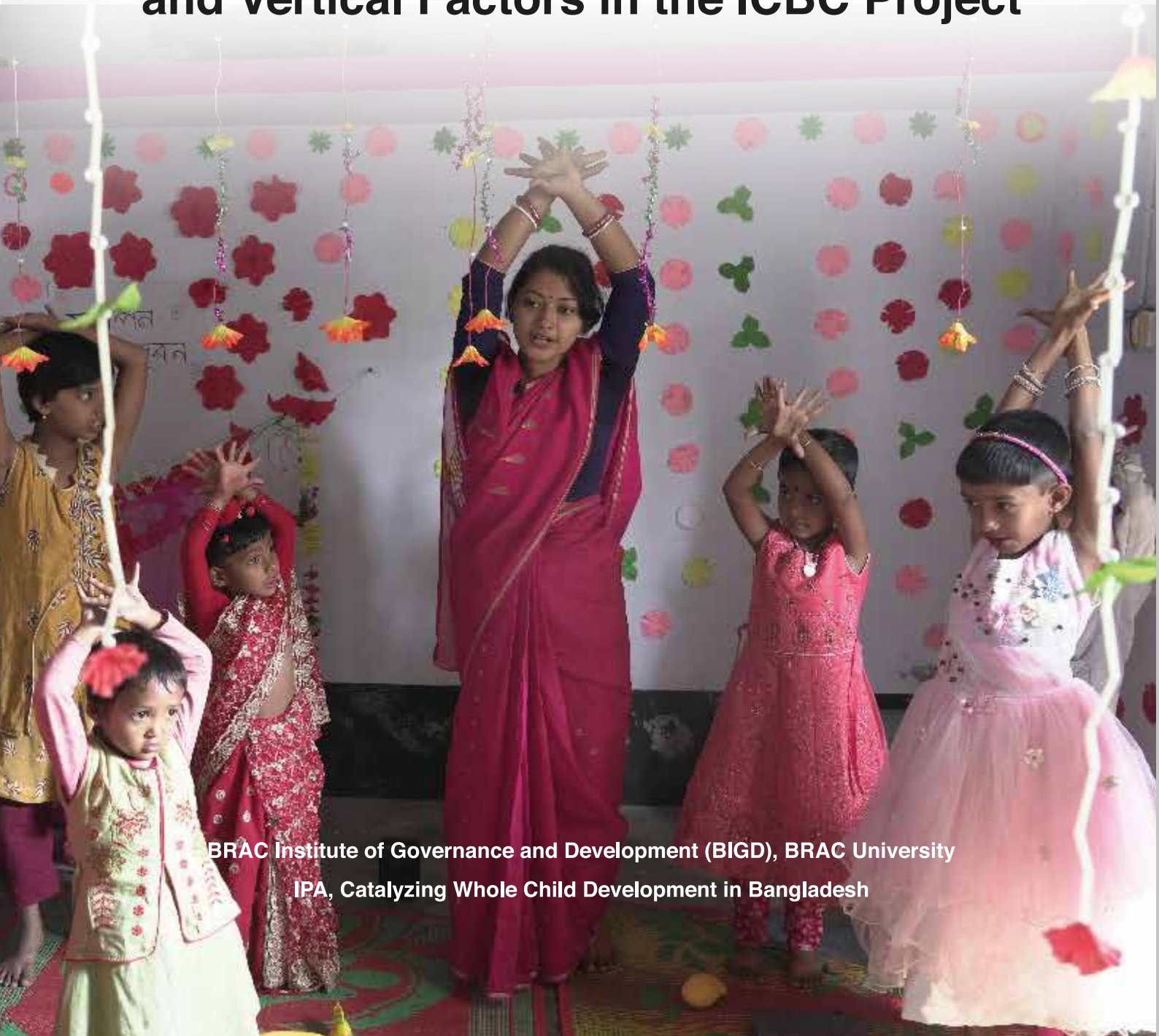




Learning Brief on **Scaling for Sustainability: Horizontal and Vertical Factors in the ICBC Project**



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Collated by: **BIGD and IPA**
Catalyzing Whole Child Development in Bangladesh

The ICBC Project aims to enhance ECCD across 46 Upazilas in 16 districts of Bangladesh, benefiting over 200,000 children. Its sustainability depends on a balanced approach to both horizontal and vertical scale-up. Key factors include inter-ministerial collaboration at various levels, strong operational coordination between government officials and implementing NGOs, adherence to standard infrastructure, community engagement, and participatory monitoring and evaluation. This brief highlights the ICBC Project's potential to contribute to national ECCD goals, offering valuable insights for future scale-up strategies.

Project Context:

The Integrated Community-Based Center for Child Care, Protection, and Swim-Safe Facilities (ICBC) Project, primarily funded by the Government of Bangladesh, has been operating from 2022 to 2025 across 46 Upazilas in 16 districts. The project being implemented by Bangladesh Shisu Academy (BSA) aims to deliver integrated early childhood care and development (ECCD) services to promote the safety, well-being, and holistic development of children under five. It supports children through childcare centers (ages 1-5) and swim-safe training (ages 6-10), engages caregivers—particularly parents—through awareness activities, and strengthens institutional capacity through cross-ministerial coordination. Expected benefits for children include enhanced cognitive, linguistic, social-emotional, health, and nutritional development.

The project has established around 8,000 childcare centers and 1,600 swim learning setups, serving more than 200,000 children. Given the project's wide coverage and multi-stakeholder engagement, questions of feasibility and sustainability frequently arise. For example, during an event on January 11, 2025, the District Commissioner of Chandpur recommended verifying the quality and number of the 1,000 centers in the district to assess implementation fidelity and long-term viability.

Scope and Process of Learning Brief:

The brief explores the scale-up factors for implementation viability and sustainability. Findings are organized into two types of scale-up factors: horizontal and vertical (WHO and ExpandNet 2010, Hartmann and Linn 2020, Anandajayasekeram 2016). Horizontal scale-up refers to replicating an intervention across different locations or populations, with field teams and local organizations as the main actors. In contrast, vertical scale-up involves the adoption and institutionalization of changes at the level of policy, regulations, and organizations, where policymakers and government agencies take the lead.

The learning brief draws on primary data collected from field visits to seven childcare centers and observations of regional workshops on bridging leadership in three districts—Mymensingh, Chandpur, and Satkhira. Workshop participants included the Project Manager (PM) and Assistant Project Managers (APMs) of ICBC, the District Children Affairs Officer (DCAO) of BSA, Project Coordinators (PCs) and ECCD Officers from implementing NGOs, and technical partners of the ICBC Project.

In Mymensingh, data collection included interviews with two DCAOs, one PC, and one childcare center supervisor; a focus group discussion (FGD) with implementing partners, government officials, and technical partners; and another FGD with community members and parents. In Chandpur, similar interviews were conducted with one DCAO, two APMs, two PCs, and one ECCD Officer. In Satkhira, primary data sources comprised interviews with two DCAOs, one APM, one PC, and one Area Coordinator (AC).

To validate the findings, peer review, participant feedback, and triangulation of similar data across different contexts were employed.

Horizontal Scale up Factors for Sustainability

Relevance: During childcare center visits, community members expressed their satisfaction, noting that children attending similar centers previously supported by other organizations demonstrate noticeable learning improvements that impress both parents and educators. A school teacher in Chandpur observed that these children are more attentive, regular, and perform better academically, often described by teachers as "responsive and smart." These outcomes highlight the potential value of the ICBC centers as an effective preparatory step for formal schooling.

The visits and interviews highlight a strong demand for childcare centers, particularly in busy and semi-urban areas with many water bodies, where child safety and early education are major concerns. Parents regard these centers as reliable solutions that address both the safety and developmental needs of their children. The project director of the ICBC Project during her visit of project activities in Habiganj district observed, *"The huge demand of such child centers was observed because of busy socio-economic lives of the parents. This indicates the big potential and relevance of the project for the care and development of the children."* Consistent with findings from Alonge et al. (2020) and WHO (2014), scaling such initiatives across more communities could significantly reduce drowning rates and prevent other childhood injuries on a national scale.

Infrastructure: Adherence to standard infrastructure in childcare centers is crucial for ensuring safety and creating an environment conducive to playful learning. Assistant Project Managers (APMs) believe that most centers have met the required standards, though a few have smaller spaces that fall short. Achieving uniform standards across all centers, especially those in remote areas, is essential. A participatory monitoring system involving both the project team and community members can improve oversight of the quantity and quality of key infrastructure elements, such as room size, ventilation, toilet facilities, toys, and mandatory sections.

Role of Caregivers: The availability and retention of at least 25 children at the centers are mandatory criteria for a standard childcare center. All caregivers received training on facilitation and center management. More than three-fourth of the children were present during the visit days in three districts. Younger children require more support than older children, which underscores the importance of the roles of assistant caregivers. Workshop participants unanimously emphasized the need for increased remuneration for caregivers and assistant caregivers to enhance motivation and improve service quality.

Role of Parents and Community: The establishment and large-scale operation of childcare centers seem achievable with active community and parental involvement. Parents often visit the centers, ensuring consistent oversight of caregivers, which encourages caregivers to be more sincere and transparent. Monthly parent meetings and quarterly community meetings which are yet to be regular in all places are likely to promote collective ownership and transparency. During interactions at the childcare centers, parents and community members expressed their willingness to contribute to maintaining and improving the centers' infrastructure and services. This practice of community contribution can strengthen the sense of ownership among the stakeholders.

Role of Implementing NGOs: APMs in each district are the full-time government officials for the project, and beneath them, implementing NGOs serve as the frontline actors in extending horizontal reach across communities. Evaluating their performance and systematically documenting their feedback on working with government agencies and community members will be critical for scaling efforts to additional communities and districts. The NGOs' liquidity capacity and commitments to ECD issues were also found to be important factors in their selection. A significant challenge was keeping NGO staff unpaid, as implementing organizations delayed salary payments due to their cost-reimbursement agreement with the government.

Vertical Scale up Factors for Sustainability

Policy Alignment: The initiative aligns with the 2013 ECCD policy, which emphasizes early childcare and pre-primary education even before schooling. Extending ECCD services to younger children complements government efforts and ensures alignment with national policies related to children. The five-hour safety and developmental care provided at the centers are likely to support holistic development and readiness for

primary education. The proposed formulation process of the Child Affairs Directive by the Government, if actualized, should further strengthen its implementation process.

Inter-Ministerial Coordination: The success and sustainability of the project depend heavily on the formalization and institutionalization of inter-ministerial services for children. Findings indicate that officials at the District, Upazila, and project levels have yet to fully recognize the project's potential to mobilize inter-ministerial services, likely due to an initial focus on expanding reach and infrastructure. Moving forward, prioritizing the mobilization of cross-ministerial services for the children in these centers is essential.

While comprehensive coordination among ministries is still evolving, foundational steps have been taken, such as the referral strategies for the ICBC Project, formation of monitoring committees at Districts and Upazila, and the bridging leadership workshops. ECCD committees, once activated, may be another institutional setup supporting the project activities. Strong leadership commitments and actions from senior officials, especially the role of MoWCA (Ministry of Women & Children Affairs), are crucial to turning the referral strategy and monitoring committees into a functional reality.

Operational-Level Coordination: Similar to strategic-level coordination, effective operational-level coordination among district-level officials—including DCAOs, APMs, and PCs—is crucial for addressing implementation challenges. Communication gaps or weaknesses at this level can directly impact the quality of implementation and project outcomes. Discussions and observations suggest that a more proactive role from DCAOs and a supportive supervision by APMs on implementing NGOs can significantly improve monitoring, accountability, and learning mechanisms.

Monitoring and Evaluation: Establishing a comprehensive M&E system, supported by structured reporting and feedback mechanisms, is vital for strengthening accountability and fostering continuous learning. While monitoring committees are operational at the Upazila and District levels, their actionable mandates require further clarification to effectively address emerging priorities. The project's M&E framework is yet to be finalized, and although some monitoring templates have been shared, they are not yet fully utilized. Implementing a regular management information system (MIS) could further enhance accountability and promote learning practices. Additionally, a WhatsApp group has proven effective for sharing activity photos, important updates, events, and achievements.

To ensure credible evidence, a rigorous evaluation plan—incorporating cost-effectiveness analysis—should be shared with stakeholders in advance. This proactive approach will enhance the validity and rigor of the evaluation process.

Way Forward:

To ensure the sustainability of the ICBC Project, a balanced focus on both horizontal and vertical scale-up factors is essential. Horizontally, it is crucial to maintain the relevance of childcare centers by ensuring standardized infrastructure, enhancing community engagement, and increasing caregiver remuneration. Active participation from parents and communities will also foster a sense of ownership, enhancing service delivery and long-term sustainability. The capacity and commitment of implementing NGOs are critically important for the quality of their services.

Vertically, strengthening inter-ministerial coordination through clear regulations and operational guidelines is necessary to secure long-term institutional support. The leading role of MoWCA is critically important here. Although mobilizing government services through effective coordination between Upazila officials and implementing NGOs is a core strategy of the project, this commitment has yet to be fully realized. Establishing a comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system—supported by structured reporting and feedback mechanisms—will be vital for driving continuous improvement, strengthening accountability, and guiding future scale-up efforts.

By addressing these factors, the ICBC Project can serve as a model for scaling sustainable ECCD interventions across Bangladesh, contributing meaningfully to national child development goals.



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