BIGD Reflections 2021

brac institute of governance & development

Cover photo: A little boy, whose mother is a member of the Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program in a remote village in Rampal, Bagerhat, where water and land are becoming increasingly more saline and flooding more frequent. Living off the land is unlikely to be an option for him when he grows up. For children like him, getting quality education and acquiring new skills are more crucial than ever for ensuring their livelihood security.

Photo credit: Nusrat Jahan

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Edited and designed by ***Nusrat Jahan***

On the golden jubilee of Bangladesh, we reaffirm our commitment to work with our stakeholders towards ensuring the prosperity and dignity for all Bangladeshis, today and in future.

Letter From the **Executive Director**

2021 was a year of profound significance for us as a nation; we celebrated 50 years of Bangladesh, a country rising from the ashes of the liberation war in 1971 and not just surviving but thriving against countless natural, political, and economic tragedies that followed in subsequent decades.

But celebration often provokes reflection. Our golden jubilee amidst the most consequential pandemic of the last 100 years and the climate that is changing faster than ever—a grim outlook for a country predicted to face its brunt—compel us to critically reflect on our achievements, vulnerabilities, and ways forward. For the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), it is a moment to reflect on our relevance to the future of Bangladesh.

There are solid reasons why Bangladesh is frequently cited as a South Asian miracle. Henry Kissinger, the then Secretary of State in the US government, infamously characterized the newly liberated, war-torn country as a 'bottomless basket'. In less than 50 years, Bangladesh became a lower-middle-income country and vastly improved the lives of its citizens. On many crucial development aspects, including many indicators of women empowerment, health and hygiene, and education, Bangladesh outperforms its neighbours, notably India and Pakistan, by wide margins. These achievements are no less than miracles. But we know that we have an awfully long way to go to ensure a life of dignity and prosperity for all.

> *Bangladesh has large gaps in the quality of life—access to decent jobs and quality services like health, education, and transportation, for example—and a fifth of the nation still lives in poverty. Environmental degradation and climate change are threatening to undo much of the achievements of the last 50 years.*

Bangladesh seems to have done much better, compared to other similar countries, in managing both the public health and the economic crisis brought by COVID-19. Second year into the pandemic, we have learned how to live with the fear of the virus and applied many learnings from the early stage of the pandemic. Yet, COVID-19 has laid bare some of the inherent vulnerabilities of our nation.

> *As we find in our collaborative study with Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), a large proportion of the vulnerable non-poor people in urban slums and villages have fallen in poverty during the pandemic, exposing the fragility of their relative economic prosperity—the precarity of their occupations and the shallowness of their financial buffer.*

The pandemic has also made it clear that the future belongs to those who are better educated and intellectually and technologically more advanced. Worldwide, working class people have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic compared to their wealthier, more educated counterparts who are more likely to hold jobs that do not need physical contact and have deeper pockets to withstand the crisis. As the world suddenly became more technology dependant for maintaining physical distance, people with technological capabilities have maintained a sharp competitive edge during these tough times.

Consequently, the pandemic has expedited the paradigm shift the world of work has been going through, characterized by automation, digitalization, sophistication, and complexity, bringing a fresh urgency to ensuring high-quality education for all children and youth and upgrading the skills of the workforce.

In this context, long school closure has been a double whammy for Bangladesh. In the same survey mentioned earlier, we find that very few school-going children in slums and rural areas could take advantage of the available remote learning facilities. The majority also did not get any guidance or support from parents or private tutors. Besides, long closure, uncertainty, and financial stress in the family have been found to have a negative impact on the psychology of many children. So, the possible learning loss for these children cannot be recovered just by opening schools after 18 months of closure.

The pandemic has not only deepened the learning crisis in Bangladesh but also widened the inequality in education. Unlike poorer children, better-off children, particularly in cities, were more likely to have better access to technology, online classes offered by schools, and guidance from parents during school closure, minimizing its damage.

Thus, we are expanding our research in education with a focus on what works for improving learning outcomes and future-oriented human capital formation.

Speaking of nature, we all know that climate change poses an existential threat to our country. Despite the dire warning of scientists in the Sixth

This year, we have taken several research studies around children's education and have managed to secure some dedicated funding for building our education research capabilities. In our COVID-19 recovery research strategy, education is going to be a central theme, trying to find not only the ways of repairing damages but also how to make sure that education makes our children more resilient to future shocks, be it economic, technological, or natural.

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Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report published this August—that humanity has already done many grave, irreversible damages to the climate and that without immediate, deep cuts in global carbon emission, the situation will only escalate—the promises made by the largest polluters in the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) have fallen miserably short.

As a country largely at the receiving end of its impact, we must remain hopeful about possible technological breakthroughs that could help us move beyond this depressive global climate politics. But climate change is already here, manifested in more frequent and intensive storms, increasing salinity in land and water in coastal regions, and erratic rainfall. Its adverse impact is most likely to intensify in the near future. So, safeguarding lives and livelihoods in the face of the changing climate has already become a top priority for Bangladesh. Otherwise, like COVID-19, climate change may undo much of the progress in human development that we have achieved over the last 50 years.

That is why we have also decided to venture into climate change research, more specifically on how to make vulnerable people and their communities more resilient to its adverse impacts.

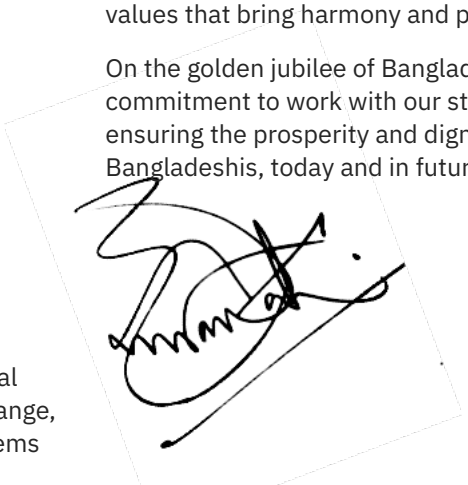
> *Our partnership with BRAC has proven invaluable in taking forward our climate change research agenda. At the vanguard of global development, BRAC is experimenting with how to address the issue of climate change across all its development programs. In partnership with BRAC, we have started several small-scale studies with different target groups affected by climate change. We believe that our involvement with BRAC at the early, piloting phases will help us find effective, scalable, and proactive adaptation solutions.*

But for bringing meaningful changes at the national level in complex issues like education, climate change, or a pandemic, the criticality of governance—systems in place, motivation of the policymakers, and the capacities of the government machinery—cannot be overemphasized. COVID-19 has laid bare many weaknesses of our governance, but also an urgency to conceptualize the governance challenge within our contextual realities with a focus on feasible entry points for new settlements.

> *In our State of Governance (SOG) report this year, we analysed these weaknesses and argued that meeting the 21st century challenges will require flexibility, collaboration, innovation, and continuous learning from experiences. We believe social science research can play a pivotal role in this, particularly in learning and innovation. BIGD commits to this new governance knowledge and action agenda.*

Finally, we must not forget the potential of a healthy and informed citizenry and the grave dangers of counter-forces, especially now. On the one hand, improving the economic and educational status of the people, as well as the ubiquity of the internet and social media, give us an opportunity to cultivate superior civic values and an informed citizenry. On the other hand, issues like growing religious extremism, oppression and persecution of minorities, and backlash against women's progress are eroding the fabric of our society, intensified by divisive content and disinformation that are spreading like wildfire on social media platforms. We must come together to find ways for harnessing the power of people, empowering them to express their voices and demand government accountability and promoting social values that bring harmony and progress.

On the golden jubilee of Bangladesh, we reaffirm our commitment to work with our stakeholders towards ensuring the prosperity and dignity for all Bangladeshis, today and in future.



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BIGD's Entry Into **Education Research**

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Education: A Domain That Needs Urgent Attention

We can achieve and sustain a high level of human development only when productive employment opportunities are available to all labour market participants. This is particularly relevant to Bangladesh, a tiny developing country with limited natural resources and a very large young population. And the ability to work is perhaps the most crucial asset that poor people can use to break out of the poverty trap; so productive employment for all also translates into equity and inclusion. Thus, how to develop employable skills of and create productive job opportunities for the underprivileged youth is an established, priority research agenda for BIGD.

However, employment-focused or trade-specific skill-building interventions tend to have limited scalability, and research indicates that the impact of these interventions is often non-transformative.

One of the most significant pieces of the puzzle in building an inclusive, productive workforce is ensuring access to quality education for all children.

In our time, science and technology have become more important than ever. Consequently, the world of work is going through a profound transformation, causing an inexorable decline in the demand—and thus wages—for an increasingly larger share of manual, lower-skilled, or predictable jobs. On the other hand, high-skilled, unstructured, cognitively demanding jobs are not just hard to replace with technology but in fact are the drivers of the new world order, and thus their demand and wages are continuously increasing. Though these trends are more pronounced in developed countries for now, they are bound to affect us soon. To safeguard our people from the negative impacts of technology and to empower them to take advantage of the emerging opportunities, high quality education has become more important than ever.

But we all know that despite making significant progress in some important indicators in education, e.g., primary and secondary enrolments, Bangladesh is struggling with the quality of education. Over half of Bangladeshi children aged 7–14 years do not demonstrate foundational reading skills, and almost three-fourths lack foundational numeracy skills, according to a 2019 collaborative study of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and UNICEF.

Another study estimates that two-thirds of those completing primary and more than a fifth of those completing secondary education in Bangladesh are not literate, i.e., they cannot read a three-sentence passage "fluently without help" or can read "well but with a little help.[1]

While the quality of education in Bangladesh is disappointing across the board, understandably the situation of children from poorer families or marginalized groups is the worst as they face various additional barriers—e.g., the inability of poor parents to make private investment in their children's education, discriminatory social norms against girl children, and inadequate facilities for physically challenged children.

During the pandemic, closing schools for 18 months without putting in place a robust alternative delivery system has made things far worse. Again, as we can imagine, its impact has been most devastating on the disadvantaged children, particularly the poor children. Parents of poor children are more likely to be ill-educated and preoccupied with their livelihoods in these hard times, and thus have been unable to guide and teach their children during the closure; neither could they afford alternatives like private tutoring and better technology.

We anticipate that without extensive remedial educations, children would not be able to recover from the learning loss caused by the pandemic, reducing their income potentials, and increasing future inequality.

Moreover, COVID-19 has accelerated the process of automation and digitalization in the world of work—and consequently, contraction of low-skilled jobs and expansion of those requiring high skills—further deepening the crisis of education in Bangladesh.

Hence, we are expanding our research in education with a focus on what works for improving learning outcomes and future-oriented human capital formation.

[1]*Kaffenberger, M. & Pritchett, L. (2017). More school or more learning? Evidence from learning profiles from the financial inclusion insights data. Research on Improving Systems of Education*

A Silent **Pandemic**

Learning Loss Among School Children During COVID-19

Educational institutes in Bangladesh are gradually reopening since September this year, after 18 months of closure since COVID-19 first hit Bangladesh. Soon after the schools were closed, the government started broadcasting classes for primary and secondary school students on a national television (TV) channel as an alternative to in-person classes. Yet, school closure for an unknown period raised many concerns.

How effective would be the hastily put together non-interactive distant classes in securing the attention of the children sitting at home and helping them learn? How many children would have access to a TV in a conducive environment? What other alternatives were available? How many children could avail these alternatives? How far the in-person alternatives could compensate for the lost in-school learning? How would it affect the future of our children?

Despite a grim outlook, the issue of children's education remained buried under the immediate public health, economic, and livelihood crises brought by the pandemic. To bring attention to this potential silent pandemic—the risk of deep learning loss among a large share of schoolchildren—we conducted a joint study with Professor Niaz Asadullah of the University of Malaya early into the pandemic. The survey was done in May 2020 with more than 5,000 school children in urban slums in all but three divisions and across rural Bangladesh.

We found that students were not only missing classes, but also spending significantly less time in all forms of studying outside school—studying by themselves or with guidance from parents, relatives and private tutors, as well as distance learning. We also found a very low take-up of classes on TV; only a quarter of those who had access to TV (38% did not have access) mentioned watching classes, 16% of the total sample. Moreover, more than a third of those mentioning it also said that the classes were hard to follow. Our study gave us an early warning of possible serious learning loss.

Subsequently, we introduced a module on children's education in the larger BIGD-PPRC study, which has been tracking the evolving livelihood status of the urban slum and rural population since the beginning of the pandemic. Of the four rounds of the livelihoods survey, data on education was collected in rounds three and four, conducted in March and August 2021, respectively.

In the survey, many children reported not studying at all, self-studying without supervision, or studying irregularly in other modes, including online classes and with supervision from family members or private tutors. The researchers identified these children to be at the risk of learning loss.

The survey in March 2021 found at least a fifth of the primary school children and a quarter of the secondary school children at the risk of learning loss. The situation got much worse over time, as found in the survey in August 2021 ***(Figure 1).***

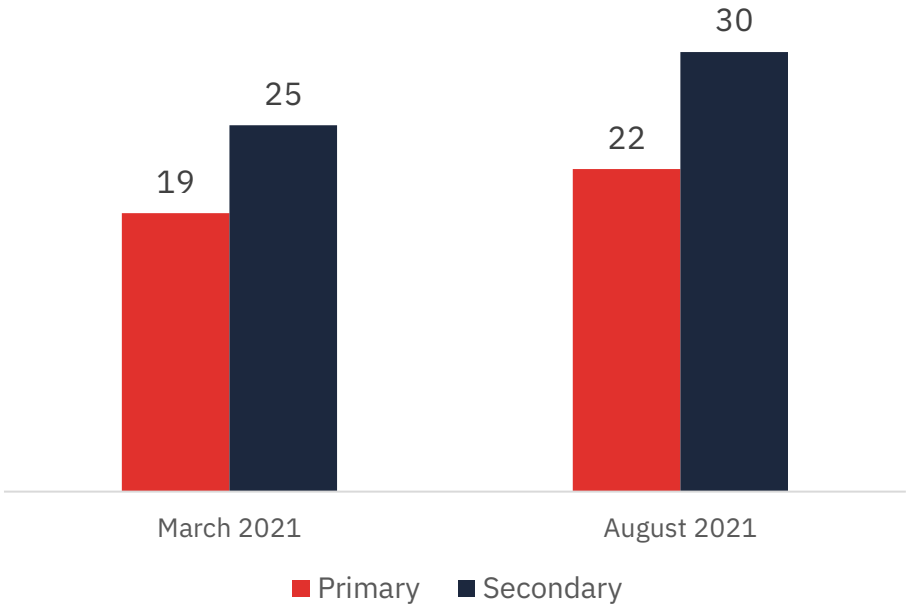

Figure 1: Share of school children in learning loss in urban slums and rural ares

Source: BIGD-PPRC livelihoods survey during COVID-19

Over time, watching TV classes became increasingly rare, only 1–2% of students mentioned it in August. Online classes were picking up, yet just 3% of primary and 11% of secondary students mentioned having them as of August. By then assignments became more popular; 18% of the primary and 38% of the secondary students got instruction over phone/online or collected assignments from school and dropped them to school after completion. But a quarter of the students did not have any connection with their schools since the closure, almost a year and a half.

The study also finds an indication of stark inequality in education during the pandemic. Access to TV, mobile, computer, and the internet is the most obvious one. More than a third of the households in urban slums and 44% of rural households did not have any device available for children's education.

But there is more. We found that the mother's education has a strong correlation with the risk of learning loss, the more educated the mother, the less likely is the child to be at learning loss risk ***(Figure 2).***

About half of the students were found to be taking private tutoring or coaching classes. An average cost of BDT 642 per month means that not everyone could afford it. Most of the students who were taking private education now were doing the same before the pandemic. Private education in absence of instructions from school most likely had a significant positive impact on the learning of those who could afford it.

Secondary male students, particularly in urban slums, were most likely to be at the risk of learning loss, perhaps from the livelihoods pressure; 9% of the school-going boys were found to be engaged in livelihood activities to support their financially struggling families. Many of these children may not come back to school at all. Our studies, both at the early and later stages of the pandemic, reaffirm our concern about the deepening of the crisis of education in our country.

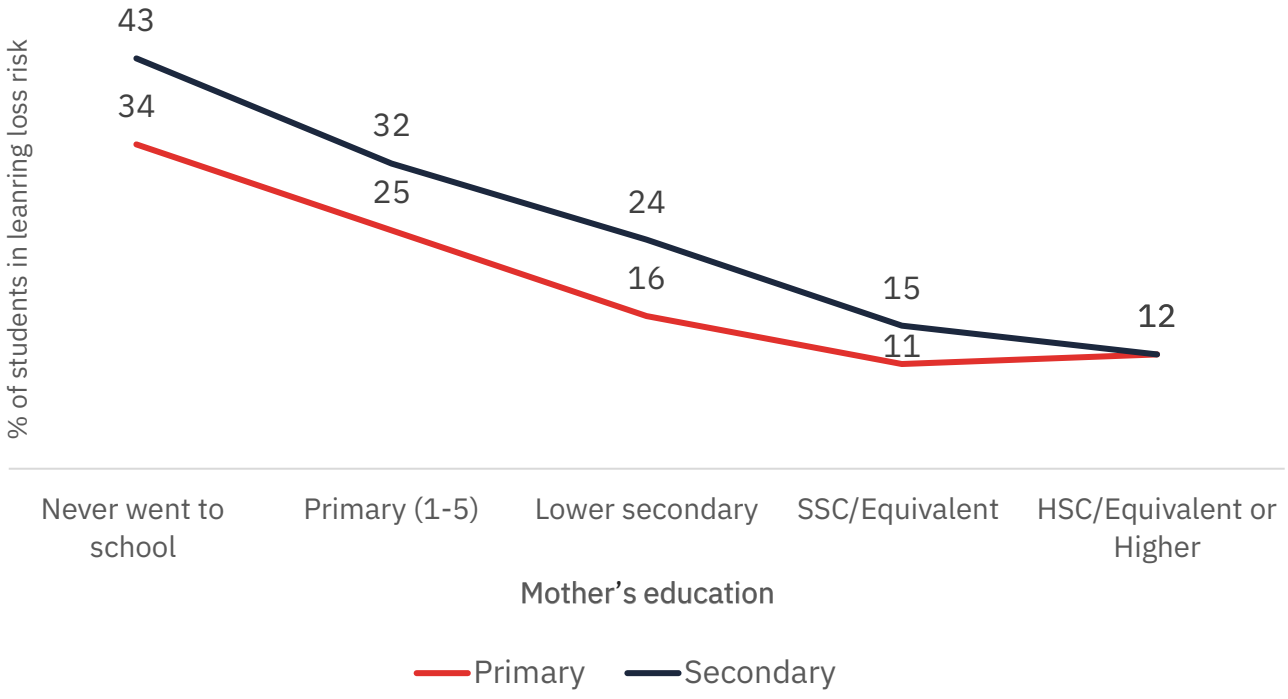

Figure 2: Correlation between students' learning loss and mothers' education

Source: BIGD-PPRC livelihoods survey during COVID-19

Back-to-School Survey

Schools have reopened, albeit not yet fully. But we strongly believe that substantial remedial education out of regular school hours is imperative for ensuring that students recover the lost learning as much as possible. Given the inequality in learning during the pandemic, poorer children could be prioritized for remedial education.

How to provide remedial education to so many children most effectively is going to be a massive endeavour. BIGD will work hand in hand with stakeholders to find ways of helping children, especially underprivileged children, catch up.

Now that schools are open after remaining closed for a year and a half, we have done a back-to-school survey to assess the situation, again, in partnership with PPRC. It was a nationally representative survey conducted with 10,000 households with children aged 5–18 years. We tracked the school attendance behaviour of the children.

A primary focus of the survey was school attendance. A World Bank survey found that in Sierra Leone, 13% of children did not get back to school when it reopened after the Ebola epidemic,[2] and in Liberia, the dropout rate was 25%.[3] Thus, we tried to measure the extent of dropout and irregular attendance after school reopening.

In the World Bank survey, the primary reasons for dropouts were found to be economic, e.g., inability to pay school fees and the need for their children to work. Thus, we also collected socioeconomic and demographic information of the households and possible reasons for not attending—which could involve early labour market entry, marriage, etc.—to understand which groups of children are more likely to drop out and what kind of support they may need.

We have also looked into their access to technology and alternate mediums of education, for example, online classes, tablet-based online learning services provided by BRAC, or any other private or public institution.

We hope this will help us understand the early state of remedial education and possible opportunities. The results of the survey will soon be shared with stakeholders.

[2] World Bank. (2015a). The socio-economic impacts of Ebola in Sierra Leone: Results from a high frequency cell phone survey
[3]World Bank. (2015b). The socio-economic impacts of Ebola in Liberia

Now that schools are gradually reopening, are all students coming back to school? It remains to be a major question.

Photo credit: Zehad Al Mehedi

Partnership for Building Our Education Research Capacity

We were seriously discussing getting into education research long before COVID-19. But the emergency in education created by the pandemic has solidified our intention, and to have a better understanding of the crisis and inform our future education research agenda, we invested our resources to do the two surveys—learning loss during COVID-19 and back-to-school—in partnership with PPRC.

COVID-19 has fast-tracked our entry into education research but considering the importance of research in this vast and complex sector, we must make long-term investments in building our education research capacity. Thus, we are thrilled about our new partnership with the Center for Global Development (CGD), a US-based think tank with extensive experience in education research in developing countries, examining the mechanisms through which education can give children equal life opportunities and build the human capital that nations need to prosper—an objective aligned with our motivation of education research in Bangladesh.

Our partnership with CGD will allow us to recruit a small team of researchers and build their capacity in education research. The partnership has also created an exciting possibility of "transfer of expertise" from CGD. We envision that this will happen through collaborative research between the two institutes, in which senior CGD researchers will work closely with our education research team and transfer some crucial expertise, both theoretical and practical, in the process.

We have identified two broad priority questions that both the institutes are interested in. The first one is about the impact of gender norms on education. Regressive gender norms permeate every aspect of our lives, and education is no exception. Crucial components of education—for example, curricula, attitude of teachers and students themselves, assessment, and teaching methods—are consciously or unconsciously shaped by gender norms, which have a negative impact on women's educational outcomes, and consequently, their economic and social empowerment outcomes. Whereas education should be a powerful means of breaking regressive norms through knowledge and empowerment, a biased education system thus may perpetuate them. We want to understand how gender norms shape the primary and secondary education system in Bangladesh. We also want to test certain interventions that were proven effective elsewhere in the Bangladesh context. For example, could dialogical lessons—a form of shared story reading that allows teachers to elicit discussion about related experiences of the children and direct the discussion to enhance their critical thinking capacities—be used to help young students start questioning gender stereotypes? Or can exposure to counter stereotypical female role models affect children's gender norms?

The second broad question concerns violence in school, either perpetrated by the authority—corporal or psychological punishment and sexual or any other form of violence—or by fellow students in the form of physical violence, victimization, bullying including cyberbullying, etc. We will try to assess the prevalence of school-based violence in Bangladesh and its effects on and the coping strategies of the children facing such violence. We will also investigate the gendered aspects of school-based violence. The ultimate aim is to find effective solutions for reducing violence in Bangladeshi schools.

Within the scope of the CGD-BIGD initiative, we will do collaborative research to answer some of the questions and useful groundwork, e.g., pilot study, on the others, which will help us develop strong proposals for large-scale research studies around the questions.

We hope to develop a strong education research team and a respectable portfolio through this partnership, which would be a solid foothold for advancing our education research agenda.

Can We Ensure the Right to Education for Children With Disabilities?

Most schools in Bangladesh are not equipped to educate children with disabilities, even though about 3% of children aged 6–16 have some kind of disability.[4] In Bangladesh, persons with disabilities are more than twice less likely to complete both primary and secondary education and almost three times less likely to complete tertiary education compared to persons without disabilities, according to the 2011 census of Bangladesh. Most children with disabilities who have access to education have mild to moderate disability.[5]

In a resource-poor education sector, like that in Bangladesh, children with severe or multiple disabilities face steep challenges in accessing formal education. Given that only a few Bangladeshi schools have necessary facilities for children with disabilities, parents are required to make substantial investments in their child's education. Thus, children with disabilities from income-poor families are most likely to be deprived of their right to education. Denying their right to education means denying them an opportunity to gain critical social, life, and employable skills, exacerbating their vulnerability and dimming their chances of having a life of dignity.

Leonard Cheshire, a UK-based charity working with children and young people with disabilities in the UK,

Africa, and Asia, is partnering with several disability-focused non-profit organizations to implement a program in 45 mainstream government schools in Narshingdi and Sirajganj, with an aim to improve access to inclusive education and enhance learning outcomes for children with disabilities. The project focuses on children aged 5–16 years who have been identified as having severe and multiple disabilities and are not currently enrolled in a formal school setting. The project will also benefit the children with disabilities who are already attending school.

The project will work with schools and selected children with disabilities and their families in specific schools' catchment areas, implementing activities such as (1) building the capacity of teachers and other school personnel to provide inclusive education, including children with severe and multiple disabilities; (2) supporting the adaptation of teaching and learning materials; (3) assessing the needs of the children and providing them with guidance and support, including access to assistive devices and technological solutions; (4) building the capacity of parents to facilitate access to quality education to their children with disabilities; and (5) promoting peer-to-peer support for enabling them to effectively participate in the mainstream school system.

BIGD, in collaboration with the University of Cambridge, is investigating how effective is the program in ensuring the development of inclusive school systems in Bangladesh.

The study is funded by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM). Specifically, the research study seeks to understand the impact of the interventions (1) on the academic and psychosocial outcomes for all children, particularly for children with moderate to severe disabilities, and (2) on their teachers' and parents' perspectives, aspirations, and practices. The study will also explore what (and how) school and community-based factors support or hinder access, retention, and learning of children with moderate/severe disabilities in mainstream schools. Finally, the study will examine the cost-effectiveness of the program being implemented.

These questions will be answered using both a randomized control trial (RCT) and qualitative methods. In the RCT, out of 120 randomly selected primary schools from the targeted *upazilas* in Narshindi and Sirajganj, 45 will be assigned to receive the interventions (treatment group), and the rest will be assigned not to get the interventions (control group). Children with disabilities will be selected in a two-step process. First, key informants from the locality will identify households that may have children with disabilities within the schools' catchment areas. Then, the Child Functioning Module (CFM), developed by UNICEF, will be used to confirm the type and severity of disability of the children in the shortlisted households and find out the eligible children. The academic and psychological outcomes of the eligible children in treatment and control groups will be compared to find the impact of the interventions.

In parallel, at the school level, a Teacher Attitude and Inclusion Scale (TAIS) will be administered and semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) will be conducted to find out whether and how the interventions change teachers' perceptions and practices of working with diverse learners, including children with severe and multiple disabilities. During the intervention, teachers' reflective journals, classroom observations, and interviews will also be used for the same purpose. The experience of children with and without disabilities will be captured through qualitative approaches to data collection. A sub-sample of parents of children with moderate/severe disabilities will be interviewed to capture their aspirations and perceptions before and after the intervention.

Through this research, we hope to find a model that could be scaled up effectively for ensuring inclusive education in Bangladesh as well as in other low- and middle-income countries.

[4]*Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2018) Bangladesh Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016-17*
[5]*Thompson S. (2020). Bangladesh Situational Analysis. Disability Inclusive Development*

Advanced Research Methods Course for MDS Students

A Strong Foundation in Development Research

A strong theoretical grounding is crucial for development professionals. It helps them understand how programs work and provides them with the tools to develop new programs with confidence. But cultivating a "researcher's mindset" is perhaps more important. It keeps them alert about whether the theories work on the ground. It also helps them stay curious, ask the right questions, and expand the horizon of development understanding. Development professionals with a researcher's mindset can learn, adapt, and innovate continuously, the most essential qualities to address the needs of our time, a time when new challenges and new possibilities are emerging simultaneously and faster than ever.

Master of Development Studies (MDS) already has three core courses on research concepts, methods, and applications, and it offers a dissertation track to the students who express strong interest and ability. But, to better prepare our MDS students, we have introduced an advanced research methods (ARM) course this year.

We offered an extensive 51-hour non-credit course to students who expressed serious interest and performed well in the core research method courses. In the first few sessions, students were introduced to the philosophy of research and major schools of thought.

The quantitative stream started with developing an understanding and appreciation for causal inference. Then it familiarized the students with all major types of quantitative methods used in causal inference: RCT, regression and matching, instrumental variables, fixed effect and difference of differences, and regression discontinuity design. The quantitative stream has been designed to help students learn how and when these methods should be applied, their pros and cons, and how to interpret and make use of their results.

The qualitative stream is more extensive, which has been designed to enable students to develop and implement qualitative research studies. First, two sessions helped students grasp the epistemological basis and the fundamental assumptions of qualitative research. Then they were introduced to the major methods used in qualitative studies: ethnography, qualitative interviewing, document reviewing, and participatory action research. They were also taught the basic techniques of qualitative data analysis, how to design qualitative studies, and last but not the least, how to maintain rigour in qualitative research. The course ended with a critical conversation between Professor Naila Kabeer and Dr Munshi Sulaiman on the comparative merits of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research in the area of social science.

Alongside BIGD's senior researchers, the sessions were facilitated by some of the best minds in development research in Bangladesh, including Professor S R Osmani, Professor of Developmental Economics, Ulster University, UK; Dr Shahaduz Zaman; Professor in Medical Anthropology and Global Health, Brighton and Sussex Medical School; Professor Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), UK; and Dr Munshi Sulaiman, Regional Research Lead in Africa, BRAC International & Research Advisor, BIGD.

We have awarded 10 selected participants with a small research grant for their dissertation and connected them with BRAC and BIGD's ongoing COVID-related projects for doing their research.

Going forward, we would like to continue offering the ARM course and the opportunity to work on real-life projects to our MDS students who are eager to cultivate a researcher's mindset in their endeavour—continuously learning, adapting, and innovating to maximize their impact in the development.

Young Researchers' Fellowship (YRF) Program

Our Commitment to Inspire the Future Generation of Bangladeshi Social Science Researchers

As a Bangladesh-based social science research institute, one of the hardest challenges we face is with finding the right people, i.e., well-trained researchers who can deliver large-scale, complex field research projects ensuring the high standard that we are striving for. The low demand for rigorous research in program designing and policymaking in Bangladesh is another tough challenge we face.

We realize that both the demand- and supply-side constraints must be addressed simultaneously. On the demand side, we are trying to forge long-term partnerships with key government agencies and non-profits to help them develop a better appreciation for rigorous research and find practical ways of incorporating research within the real-world constraints of their work. But to meet the demand, and also to generate new demand, we need to produce high-quality research outputs regularly, and hence we need to have a strong pool of skilled researchers.

In fact, to create a culture of using research for improving policy and program effectiveness, Bangladesh needs an army of dedicated social science researchers with deep context knowledge and superior competence. Right now, the number of such researchers is too small to move things in the desired direction. Because of the scarcity, young researchers are also deprived of the inspiration and guidance needed to excel, perpetuating the crisis.

Thus, it is imperative to identify and train potential young Bangladeshi researchers, who could inspire and

guide other young researchers, creating a virtuous cycle. We are committed to doing just that. We believe that this is the only way BIGD can have a profound, lasting impact in the field of social science research in Bangladesh. With a long tradition of development-focused teaching and research, we believe that we are uniquely positioned to be the breeding ground for the next generation of Bangladeshi social scientists.

> *Nurturing young researchers is our key strategy for promoting a long-term shift towards a culture of research-informed scrutiny of and support to policies and interventions.*
>
> ***—Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD***

The dedication of our senior researchers' in training their junior colleagues, opportunities to work directly on exciting, rigorous field research, and the exposure to the international research community—all these factors have already made BIGD an attractive destination for Bangladeshi young researchers. Increasingly, our young researchers are going for higher studies in prestigious institutions worldwide after spending a couple of years with us. This is exactly what we want to accomplish, but it also means that we need to regularly hire and train new researchers.

To meet our growing demand for researchers, and to better signal our serious intent to nurture young talents, this year we have introduced the Young Researchers' Fellowship (YRF) program.

The YRF program offers a four-month-long intensive training, theoretical and on the job, to potential young researchers on all essential areas of research. In the YRF program, Trainee Research Associates (TRAs) are selected through a competitive process. Based on performance, some of them are offered full-time Research Associate (RA) positions.

We recruited and trained our first batch of TRAs this year. The opportunity was advertised through relevant departments in most major public and private universities as well as social media. We received thousands of applications. Primarily selected applicants were given a written test, and those who were successful were interviewed by the senior researchers to find the most potential young researchers, eight in total.

A detailed classroom training module was designed for the TRAs, topics including research methods, study designing, instrument development, research ethics, field training, quality assurance and monitoring, data cleaning, data analysis, and research communication. They were also taught practical skills such as SurveyCTO coding and STATA.

Simultaneously, the TRAs were given an opportunity to practice their skills in real life. Each of them was tagged with specific research studies and was assigned specific tasks under the close supervision of the RAs involved in the studies. In the end, many TRAs were given major responsibilities, like conducting enumerators training, which they performed successfully. The TRAs also benefitted enormously from the on-the-job guidance and training by the senior researchers, a well-established tradition in BIGD.

In addition, each TRA was paired with a mentor, an RA or senior RA. It was the first work experience for all the TRAs. Their mentors helped them adjust to the work environment, addressed their confusions and worries, and guided them to get the best out of their opportunities.

More importantly, the YRF program, entirely financed by us, has helped us become more purposeful in our effort in promoting a culture of using research for program and policy effectiveness, leading to just and prosperous societies.

We tried to design the YRF program to be able to find and attract young talent with a hunger for learning and a mindset to accept challenges and to provide them with a stimulating environment for satisfying their hunger. There is room for improvement, but so far, we are very happy with what we could achieve through the program. At the very least, it would help us find better entry-level people.

The YRF program attracted my attention because it emphasized quantitative research methods in development economics. This was exactly what I was looking for. But the fellowship offered so much more. I was able to gain insights on each critical aspect of a full-scale social science research project, from idea formulation to data analysis to writing journal articles. I participated in some field work during my tenure, which helped me realize how complex collecting good data from the field could be. I was also given the opportunity to learn from my mistakes, which was invaluable for my career growth. As an aspiring researcher, this experience has been fulfilling for me, and will definitely be a steppingstone for my career.

—Farhana Kabir, YRF '21

Young Research Fellows '21

Photo credit: Afsana Adiba

BIGD encourages a learning environment and that is the experience I have gathered in essence. Although, people in BIGD, from support staff to the Cluster Heads and even the Executive Director himself, have gone beyond that and taught me the very essence of learning—humility. I was greeted with a warm 'Shuvo Shokal' from Tanvir Bhai every day. Narayan Dada repeatedly urged us to assign more time for our learning—a constant reminder that they care about us and our future. BIGD has embedded a part of its culture in me—a hunger to learn and an honest intention to remain humble. It may sound audacious, but I earnestly wish to leave a part of me here, however long or short my stay may be.

—Marzuk A N Hossain, YRF '21

As an aspiring development economist without a background in economics, the YRF program felt like a perfect opportunity for me to acquire and practice the fundamental skills necessary for research in economics. My favourite part of the experience has been learning about the complex insights of methodologies such as RCT, difference in differences, regression discontinuity design, etc. I have also been constantly encouraged to read papers and pursue my own research questions, helping me build a habit of reading and reviewing literature in my fields of interest, which I found to be very beneficial. I believe my experience as a TRA has given me a strong foundation for fulfilling my ultimate goal of becoming a development economist.

—Maliha Noshin Khan, YRF '21

Innovation in MDS Field Immersion During the Pandemic

What Did We Learn?

Our Master of Development Studies (MDS) program has always had a unique appeal because of our relationship with BRAC, the largest yet one of the most innovative development organizations in the world. For the last couple of years, we have been trying to increase the active engagement of our MDS students with BRAC so that they have a strong, first-hand grounding in the world of practice.

As part of this effort, we planned to introduce a field immersion module, initially focusing on BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program, in the Poverty Measurements and Concepts course, taught by Professor SR Osmani. We had to put it on hold last year as we were busy adjusting to the realities of the pandemic. But as the pandemic has kept on raging throughout 2021, we came up with a different field immersion strategy.

We decided to pair our students with peer researchers for fieldwork—graduate students or recent graduates of social science who belong to the community of interest, and thus are better aware of the local context—and use digital media for communication.

By then, we have already involved peer researchers through digital media in several research projects to work around the mobility restrictions during the pandemic. It was a steep learning curve—how to train inexperienced peer-researchers using an unstable internet connection and inadequate devices, how to ensure that peer researchers are capturing the rich observational data, and how to transfer the data and insights gleaned from the field to the researchers in Dhaka.

We used our learning from working with peer researchers in research in designing and delivering our MDS field immersion module. Peer researchers were given an intensive training—six hours a day for three days. The training covered important and relevant areas of qualitative fieldwork like rapport building, observation and interviewing techniques, documentation of findings, and ensuring ethical conduct. The training also included a thorough discussion on extreme poverty and how to discover different dynamics of poverty and transformation, as well as the specific focuses of the fieldwork.

Extreme poor is not a homogeneous group; they face diverse challenges based on their unique circumstances. To help our students gain exposure to some major diversities in extreme poverty in Bangladesh, we divided them into four thematic groups working in five geographic locations. The group focusing on Shatkhira explored how climate change

Field immersion can be an extremely powerful exercise–it helps us better appreciate their struggles and makes us more empathetic, an essential virtue of a development worker.

Photo credit: Nusrat Jahan

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Extreme poor is not a homogeneous group; they face diverse challenges based on their unique circumstances. To help our students gain exposure to some major diversities in extreme poverty in Bangladesh, we divided them into four thematic groups working in five geographic locations. The group focusing on Shatkhira explored how climate change interacts with extreme poverty. Two groups working on the UPG program in Rangpur and Jamalpur investigated the vulnerabilities and poverty trap created by natural calamities like floods and droughts. Another group looked into how the urban economy excludes and marginalizes the elderly poor and how support from BRAC helps them overcome the challenges. Finally, the group focusing on Cox's Bazar tried to understand how the influx of refugees creates pressure on the livelihood options available for the extreme poor. BIGD researchers familiar with the issues prepared a range of questions that each of the groups would explore. The peer researchers were introduced to the issues and trained on how to explore these questions.

But once the students started working with the peer researchers and realized the value they can get out of the exercise, their hesitancy about remote fieldwork vanished and they became deeply involved. What began as a humble idea of a field immersion turned into a major undertaking for the students.

The fieldwork lasted for two weeks. Each group consisted of 10 students and two peer researchers. Every day after fieldwork, peer researchers had online meetings with the students in their respective groups to discuss the findings and insights from their day's work. In addition to taking notes, peer researchers also took recordings, videos, and photos, which they also shared with the students. Through WhatsApp groups, the peer researchers and students kept close

Realizing the benefits students had, we are now thinking whether we could continue working with peer researchers in MDS field immersion—perhaps as a "hybrid model" in which students would visit the field for a few days and do fieldwork through peer-researchers for a longer duration—even after the pandemic is over.

Can Data Answer Governance Questions That Matter?

Identifying and Prioritizing the Governance Research Agenda in Bangladesh

Story by Rafsanul Hoque

Data is an invaluable resource in the modern world, used in ways that pervade almost every aspect of our lives. It influences our everyday purchasing decision, determines who will receive social safety net payment, and persuades powerful governments to make climate investments, for example. The extraordinary advancement in the digital world, which is continuing to advance at a faster rate, is making available a mindboggling amount and variety of data every moment. Data thus can help us find answers to many of the challenges we face in today's world. However, to make the best possible use of data, we need to have a clear idea about what challenges of our society could be solved by using data and data science. We also need to prioritize solutions to invest our limited resources.

The 100 Questions, an initiative of the Governance Lab (Govlab) of New York University and other partners, aims to find the most pressing questions that could be answered using data in important domains including migration, gender, air quality, future of work, disinformation, governance, and food systems sustainability.

The initiative brings together 'bilingual' experts from all over the world—practitioners who have both data science expertise and knowledge in at least one of the domains of interest—to map the critical questions in each domain that data could potentially answer. The questions submitted by the experts are reviewed, merged, and aggregated down to ten questions through multiple stages of voting. Eventually, Govlab aims to find the top priority questions, identify what specific data is needed, and initiate Data Collaboratives—exchange of data between different stakeholders for creating public goods—for answering those questions.

BIGD, along with the Asia Foundation and the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Indonesia, is collaborating with Govlab in launching the 100 questions in the 'governance' domain, which aims to find how data can make governance more efficient, effective, and equitable.

In parallel with the global voting, The Asia Foundation Bangladesh and BIGD decided to do a prioritization exercise to identify the most relevant governance questions for Bangladesh. A joint expert team from the two institutions brainstormed and shortlisted 13 priority questions for Bangladesh. Then, we organized three consultation meetings with four stakeholder groups, including academics, NGOs and activists, the government, and the donor community—validating and further prioritizing the questions, brainstorming possible data solutions, and identifying collaboration opportunities.

The 100 Questions Initiative is well-aligned with BIGD's approach to governance research. We are interested in broader governance challenges, including institutional reform and functional democracy. But we are equally or perhaps more interested in working with the government to improve public service delivery by providing research-based advocacy. We are also interested in research on empowering citizens by providing them information and making them aware so that they can demand and access those services and hold government accountable.

The use of data and data science is a core strategy in research areas such as public service delivery or access to information mentioned above. We also have a strategic research focus on ensuring digitalization for inclusive development, and our Government Engagement Team (GET) engages with government agencies like a2i to help them improve public service delivery, particularly in the digital arena. Thus, the 100 Questions in governance is particularly relevant to our work.

Through the 100 Questions exercise, BIGD hopes to develop new partnerships and find opportunities to test data and data science-based governance solutions in Bangladesh.

Overcoming Limits Through Digital Innovations

Discovering New Ways Citizens Can Make Themselves Heard

Story by Insiya Khan

The moment Geeta Rani, a woman in her 30s from a village in Sayedpur, raised her voice, everyone in the event immediately shifted their focus on her. She introduced herself as a member of the group monitoring the construction of Purbo Khalisha Dhuliya Babupara School. But since their group had been formed, the construction work was stalled for almost a year. Yet, she regularly visited the site to monitor whether all the materials that were left behind were in place, and one day she noticed that some bricks were missing. She raised the issue in the event because she was concerned that by the time the project restarts, all the construction materials would be stolen.

After learning about her concern, the chief guest of the event, the Secretary of Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) instantly called out the representative of the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) who was present at the event, and asked him to verify the news. The representative—the Upazila Engineer—conformed that the school construction was indeed withheld and elaborated that the contractor, who received the project as a bundle of five projects, was working on the other projects while keeping this one on hold. The Secretary then demanded a deadline for this project, and the engineer assured him it would be completed by December.

***Geeta Rani**, whose courage to speak up in the online citizen's forum brought the attention of the highest authority to the unfinished school building project in her village.*

Photo credit: Md. Saiful Islam Roney

At that moment, the Deputy Commissioner of Nilphamari took the stand and said that he would personally talk to the responsible contractor. He declared that he would take the full responsibility to ensure the completion of the school project by the promised deadline.

One rural woman's courage to speak up brought about a collaboration between the secretary, engineer, and deputy commissioner within minutes. This is an incident from the Citizen Engagement Forum (CEFs) in Nilphamari, which took place virtually on 20 September 2021. The CEFs have been a crucial component of the Digitizing Implementation Monitoring and Public Procurement Project (DIMAPPP) of the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of IMED. The aim of the project is to improve transparency, accountability, and efficiency in public procurement. As part of this effort, the CEFs came into being, a platform that brings together citizens and civil society groups and encourages knowledge sharing and discussion among them on how to ensure the quality and timely delivery of public work projects. The discussion is based on their experience of engaging with the monitoring of local public work projects; this engagement is another important component of DIMAPPP.

Since 2019, 10 CEFs have taken place, covering every division of Bangladesh, with the most recent one held in Satkhira. Initially, the CEFs were held physically. Organizing the physical forums was quite an involvement. A team from BIGD would travel days ahead of the event to meet and personally invite officials. The team would book the venue and accommodation for the event, order food, and organize other logistics. The preparation began days and sometimes weeks early, with permission from CPTU officials since they had to be available to travel and attend the events on the given dates.

After successfully organizing six workshops, COVID-19 took over the world, and in a time when "physical distancing" turned into the primary social norm, organizing physical events was out of the question. For almost the entire year of 2020, no CEFs saw the light of day. When COVID-19 cases started to go down, we found a scope to organize another physical workshop in December. It was held in Gazipur, maintaining a strict protocol of physical distancing and thorough hygiene practice. But just when the pandemic seemed to have come under control, the situation started to escalate. Like everyone else, we did not know when things would get normal. And since we have a long list of CEFs to organize before the project ends in 2022, we decided to go virtual.

Virtual CEFs do not require anyone to travel from Dhaka. Field officials hand out invitations to the local officials. And citizen monitoring group members like Geeta Rani gather at a location with good internet access to attend together on the event day. A field official connects them to the forum through Zoom. The process is much simpler and requires less time and resources.

But we were initially concerned whether the participants would be comfortable in this unfamiliar mode. But online participation turned out to be equally effective In some cases, it was even more effective.

Previously, higher officials from Dhaka could attend fewer events because of the time required for travelling. But now, since that is no longer an issue, everyone can make themselves available for every event. And because of their presence, the stakeholders in the field have been more enthusiastic to attend and make their voices heard by the officials.

Additionally, though the online meeting does not need citizens and officials to be in the same room, curiously it appears to have somewhat reduced the distance between the two by placing them side by side on the same screen.

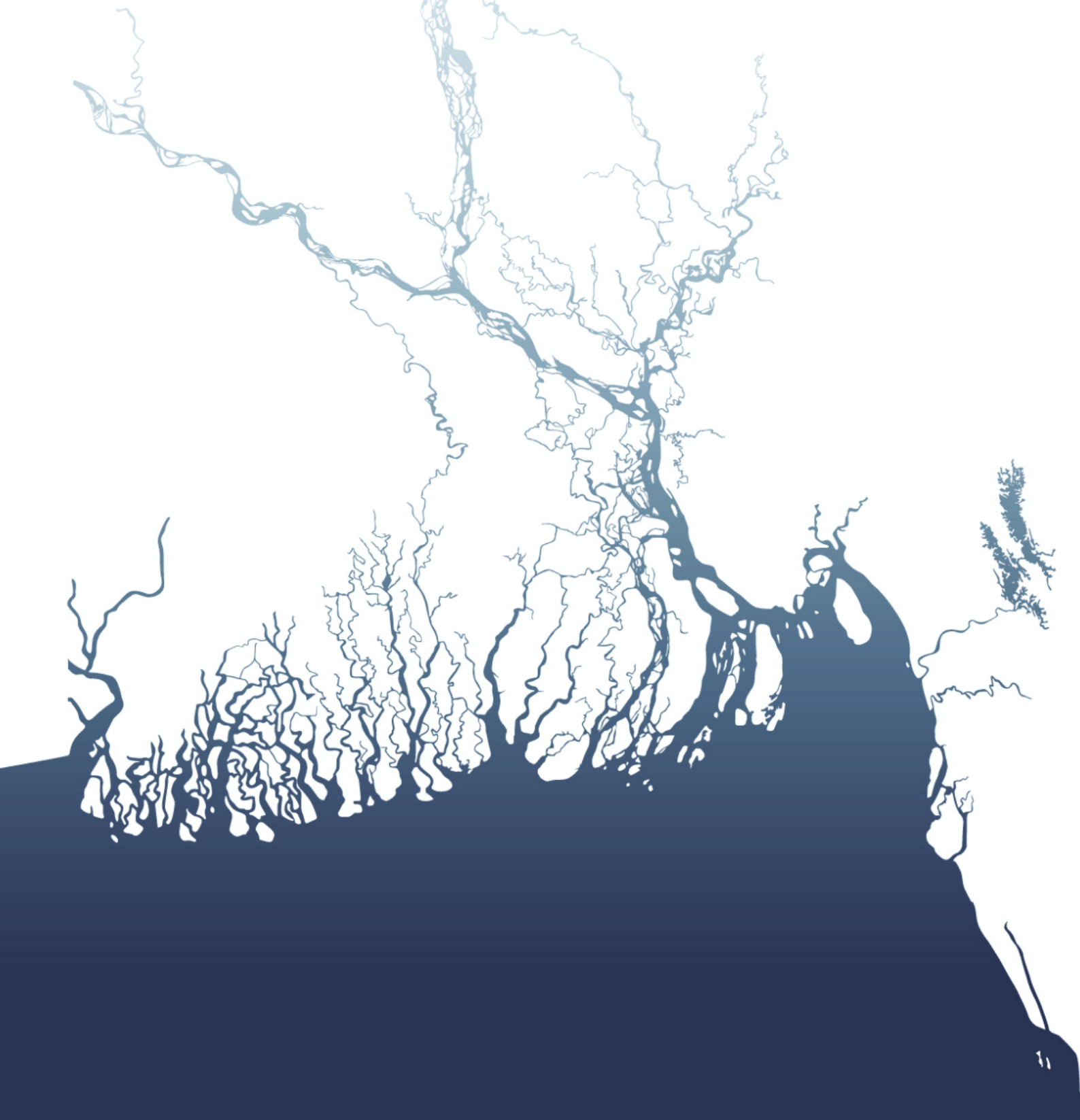
Consequently, we have seen more diverse discussions, by both panellists and participants. The courage of Geeta Rani to speak is a case in point.

The pandemic forced us to think beyond the traditional ways of things. Before the pandemic, we could not imagine that a CEF, where citizens from the grassroots need to interact with high government officials, could be held online. But it proved to be a success, particularly in ensuring the presence of high officials and encouraging citizens to speak up.

Going forward, even when life goes back to normal, we hope to opt for a hybrid model, allowing online participation in physical events to ensure better representation and engagement of all stakeholders.

A Confluence of **Influences**

Eight Years of BIGD



Development is a summative result of people's efforts and initiatives. Essentially, it is a people-centric process. Only when men and women individually and collectively work towards change in their economic, social, and political status and position, do we have development. Such change needs to be economically viable, politically just, socially honest, and environmentally sustainable.

—Sir Fazle Hasan Abed

Sir Abed's powerful reflection on what development means is the philosophy that BIGD strives to live by. Emerging from the merger of the Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) and BRAC Development Institute (BDI), and in 2017, bringing in the socioeconomic research component of BRAC's former Research and Evaluation Division (RED), BIGD has evolved into a confluence of influences—an attribute uniquely suited to inquire how development defined by Sir Abed could be achieved. On the 8th anniversary of BIGD, thus, we celebrated our unique identity as the "confluence of influences."

In his opening speech, Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director of BIGD, explained—the diverse lenses we inherited through our evolution help us enormously to investigate how economic opportunities and social lives of people, broader political and governance factors, and the global dynamics are intertwined and how to work collaboratively towards development that is holistic, inclusive, and sustainable.

It was an online event because of COVID-19 restrictions, but this allowed us to bring in guests with diverse affiliations from different parts of the world—from the masterminds steering the institute during critical inflection points to academics who maintained close ties with BIGD and its predecessors for a long time to implementing partners who have been instrumental to our existence.

In the event, Dr Sultan Hafeez Rahman, Professorial Fellow and Former Executive Director, BIGD; Dr Syed M Hashemi, Founder and Former Director, BDI; and Mr Manzoor Hasan OBE, Executive Director of the Centre for Peace and Justice (CPJ), BRAC University & Former Director of IGS, reflected on the history of BIGD in relation to our work today and in future. In his video message, Professor S R Osmani, Professor of Developmental Economics, Ulster University, explained the philosophy behind designing the MDS program and emphasized the need for a greater integration of the program with the world of practice.

In his speech, Asif Saleh, Executive Director, BRAC Bangladesh reaffirmed his conviction that program design must be evidence-based, and monitoring must be rigorous and highlighted the critical role of BRAC-BIGD partnership in this endeavour.

Professor Vincent Chang, PhD, Vice-Chancellor, BRAC University, focused on the relevance of BIGD to the university's ambition to become a truly international institute, both in teaching and research.

We also received video messages from many partners, all of whom expressed their intent to collaborate with BIGD in future and many talked about the work with us. We received video messages from people including Dr Ahmad Kaikaus, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh; Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman of PPRC & Chairperson of BRAC Bangladesh; Professor Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development, LSE; Professor Mushtaq Khan, Professor of Economics, SOAS University of London; Professor Oriana Bandiera, Professor of Economics, LSE; Professor Stefan Dercon, Professor of Economic Policy, Oxford University & Policy Advisor, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO); Mr Anir Chowdhury, Policy Advisor, Access to Information (a2i) Programme, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Division, Government of Bangladesh; Professor Mustafizur Rahman, Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) & Member, Board of Trustees, BRAC University; Ms Rasheda K Choudhury, Executive Director, Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE); and Professor David Hulme OBE, Executive Director, Global Development Institute (GDI) & Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Effective States and Inclusive Development Research Centre (ESID). The event was graced by several other longstanding partners of BIGD, notably our colleagues from BRAC University.

In the event, we also honoured four outstanding members of the BIGD family with BIGD Day Award– Atiya Rahman, Narayan Chandra Das, Nazim Uddin, and Zarine Anan Khondoker.

BIGD Star 2021

Atiya Rahman, Associate Research Fellow, is a person with a strong growth mindset and a learning-focused approach to everything, who is very effective in helping and seeking help from others. She is an extremely hardworking person, who can be relied upon in handling any time-sensitive and challenging task delegated to her. She is a role model for aspiring young researchers in BIGD.

Nazim Uddin, Deputy Manager, Admin & Logistics, moved to BIGD in 2019 from BRAC RED, where he had been working since 1987. Mr Nazim Uddin is very caring about everyone in the institute, and he played a critical role in keeping the office together during the pandemic. He went beyond his duty and made sure all the employees were keeping well, connected, and safe, whether working from home or in the office.

Narayan Chandra Das, Deputy Manager, Finance and Accounts, has a very positive attitude and tries to support everyone wholeheartedly. During the pandemic, he had to work under extreme pressure as our activities increased significantly and we did not have the Head of Finance for many months (because of transition). In the process, Mr Das developed some useful skills and demonstrated his ability to deliver under high pressure.

Zarine Anan Khondoker, Senior Officer, Communications and Knowledge Management, has been working with BIGD for less than two years. But within this short period, she became a crucial member with a sense of deep responsibility, spirit, interpersonal skills, and above all humility.

Women's Leadership Paradox in Bangladesh

Unpacking Through the Lens of Domestic Violence

Story by Pragyna Mahpara

The Bangladesh government adopted the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act or the DVPP Act in 2010. Women in leadership positions, both in the civil society/women's movement and the parliament, successfully strategized to gain access to key decision-makers and move their agenda forward during the Act's adoption. However, in the case of implementation, the presence of procedural shortcomings, lack of attention to capacity development, slow provisioning of resources, and other bureaucratic resistances suggest that the government has not prioritized the issue despite the Act's adoption. The neglect undermines the success of the strategic partnership between gender justice leaders and political leaders, creating a 'women's leadership paradox'.

In my article Unpacking Bangladesh's 'women's leadership paradox' through the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act of 2010, which was published in the Gender and Development journal this year, I tried to unpack this paradox.

I find that women leaders, both in the coalition—Citizen's Initiative against Domestic Violence (CiDV)—and in the parliament, including the minister and the Prime Minster (PM) herself, had used several strategies to promote their agendas, sustain their activism, and ensure political benefit while pursuing the adoption of the DVPP Act.

Throughout the approval process of the Act, both coalition and parliament leaders used their personal networks to engage people in the process, access and influence persons in positions of authority, and deal with resistance,[6,7] one of the most effective strategies for policy coalitions.[8,9] These informal relationships gave gender justice actors access to crucial parts of the state and helped diffuse resistance.[10]

Coalition building[11] is another effective strategy for the gender justice actors to promote their agenda through collective action and diffusion of veto players.[12] Before the DVPP Act's drafting began, many feminist leaders were mobilized to promote awareness and undertake groundwork to organize the civil society and push for a legislative change to address domestic violence. Eventually, different stakeholders came together to form CiDV and present their consolidated version of the draft law. The coalition leaders ensured ownership by all members through rotating the secretariat and promoting inclusive discussions from different organizations. Ultimately, the coalition worked exceptionally well, and CiDV has since then become a model of a democratic and participatory forum.[13,14]

The coalition leaders also used strategic framings. 'Breaking of families' is a sensitive matter in Bangladeshi society, and thus it became a significant point of argument in the Act's adoption. It was argued that the law would be misused by women and break their families. However, CiDV strategically framed[15] the issue of domestic violence as a development issue, portraying it as 'a threat to family life' and the bill as a tool to 'help protect family values'.

Certain contextual factors were also helpful for the coalition, including political junctures and international commitments. The presence of a technocratic government provided a window of opportunity for the coalition leaders to push their agendas and facilitate the Act's adoption. When Awami League came to power, coalition leaders approached the minister of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA). The 5th Periodic Report of Bangladesh was reviewed in 2004, in which the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) committee recommended that legislation be formulated on domestic violence. The PM knew that her government would have to answer to the CEDAW committee and was, therefore, eager to enact the DVPP Act before

Photo credit: UN Women/Snigdha Zaman, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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submitting Bangladesh's 6th and 7th Periodic Report on the status of women to the UN Commission. This was part of the strategy to portray her party as women-friendly and a way of securing votes from the women's movement as the war crimes tribunal was near, and she had already compromised with conservative Islamist groups, which opposed promoting gender equity policies.

But, several limitations can be observed in the Act's implementation, both in terms of service delivery (e.g., inadequate shelter homes, lack of trained medical professionals, and corruption of enforcement officers) and bureaucratic resistances such as delays in the formation of rules and forms, the inadequacy of training among MOWCA and Department of Women Affairs (DWA) officers, and MOWCA's limited resources and poor coordination with other ministries.

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has shown that domestic violence is not considered an emergency requiring immediate action. The pandemic also clearly exposed the limitations of the Act's implementation. Discussions around the implementation gaps helped CiDV strategize plans for proposing to the government. However, despite coalition leaders' multiple efforts and dialogues, minimum progress has been made, implying that the coalition leaders have limited influence in the Act's implementation. The PM and other female parliamentarians also did not make any public statements or take any steps on domestic violence during the COVID-19 period.

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Governing COVID-19 in Bangladesh

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Realities and Reflections to Build Forward Better

COVID-19 has proved to be the ultimate stress test for governance capacities all over the world. In developing countries like Bangladesh, it has exposed serious gaps in the governance of critical sectors, notably healthcare and social protection, intensifying the "lives vs livelihoods" crisis of the pandemic.

The *State of Governance (SOG) 2020–21* report analyzes the governance performance of COVID-19 management in Bangladesh, identifies crucial gaps, and provides practical suggestions about how to use the pandemic and similar crises in the future as opportunities to build an "antifragile" governance system, one that becomes stronger by facing a crisis.

The Awami League-led government, without the possibility of immediate challenges from a viable opposition, is committed to delivering high performance, particularly on the economic front. Well-aware of the economic consequences and the livelihood impact of the lockdown, the government appeared to be tentative in implementing the lockdown in 2020. The lower than anticipated infection rate last year made this approach possible. However, lockdowns and social distancing measures have severely affected the livelihoods of citizens, particularly the economically vulnerable people, most of whom depend on daily wages, and have low savings and weak support networks.

Ensuring robust economic growth has been the dominant performance strategy of the government for many years.

This growth bias was clearly reflected in the government COVID-19 stimulus package in 2020: while the package allocated more than 3% of the gross domestic product (GDP) to growth-oriented programs, e.g., large, medium, and export-oriented enterprises, less than 1% was allocated for the economic protection of vulnerable people and their employment and enterprises.

The interests of influential interest groups, e.g., ready-made garments (RMG) owners and their associations, and the relatively weak voice of marginal people and their organizations, e.g., RMG trade unions, also influenced the growth-biased design of the package.

Relief or social protection support proved to be inadequate. Efficient implementation of relief support was severely interrupted by a lack of capacities as well as issues of transparency and accountability, and they fell short of providing necessary information and support to those who needed it the most. Thus, most citizens interviewed in the study believed that there was at least some corruption in the relief distribution process. Economic hardship and the absence of adequate support forced citizens to disregard social distancing measures to return to work. As the infection situation did not escalate during winter, as anticipated, citizens became even more complacent about compliance to health protocols.

At the same time, the public health system struggled to adjust to the realities of the pandemic, which, of course, reflects the grim status of our public health. Two months into the pandemic, the country had 2,267 ventilators for its 166 million citizens and five oxygen cylinders per upazila. Procurement of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other essential supplies was also slow. The country had no framework for managing a pandemic; the National Avian and Pandemic Influenza Preparedness and Response Plan has not been updated since 2011. The highest committee for COVID-19 management reportedly met only three times during the first peak of the pandemic between March and July 2020. The weak health response is reflected in our testing rate too, which is much lower than most South Asian countries.

How much learning from the first year of the pandemic was applied in dealing with the surge of the Delta variant in 2021? It appears that some learning may have been used. For example, the communication about the lockdown and its scope seemed to be much clearer and the lockdown enforcement relatively stricter. Apparently, there was more coordination in the health sector as well; the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) coordinated with government hospitals for better preparedness.

But the lockdown in 2021 severely disrupted the process of the economic recovery of urban slum and rural households since the first lockdown, finds the joint research project of BIGD and PPRC that has been tracking the livelihoods realities of these vulnerable people since March 2020. The income of urban slum and rural households went down significantly after the latest lockdown, yet far fewer people received any kind of support compared to the first lockdown. A

significant percentage of pre-COVID vulnerable non-poor households—those above the upper poverty line and below the median income—fell below the poverty line as soon as the pandemic hit Bangladesh and could not get out as of August 2021. These people are the "new poor" of Bangladesh—people made poor by the pandemic—an estimated 20% of the national population.

Bangladesh is internationally renowned for its "resilience" to natural disasters like floods and cyclones. But mere resilience—the capacity to cope with a crisis—will not be enough in the 21st century when we are likely to face frequent crises of magnitudes similar to COVID-19.

For the last two decades, Bangladesh has consistently improved the lives of its people and became a lower-middle-income country in 2015.

Still, there is a long way to go, and fast-approaching threats like climate change and automation can undo much of the progress made so far. Thus, to remain steadfast on our journey of improving people's lives, we must build an "antifragile" governance system by enabling flexibility, collaboration, and innovation, and by learning from the crisis experience to improve the system.

The unfolding of events during the pandemic has made it clear that government must act fast to **plug the gaps** by investing in health systems and improving their governance and reorienting economic policies to protect the people rather than GDP growth rates. The SOG report suggests how to make this happen.

First, the government should **build on our strengths**. Bangladesh must capitalize and build on its existing extensive social safety net programs. The best way of tackling the problem of corruption, perceived or otherwise, is to improve transparency and accountability of social protection systems—for example, by enabling independent monitoring and scrutiny of decision-making and establishing grievance redress mechanisms that citizens can use. The government must also build on Bangladesh's long and successful history of state-society partnerships. Leveraging these major assets in social capital will require the government to provide more space, freedom, and active support to non-state actors. For example, vaccinating the critical mass of the people, and fast, will require full cooperation and trust of the citizens. In this regard, community and youth groups, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), etc. can help raise awareness, build people's trust, and motivate them to get vaccinated.

The government needs to **practice 21st century statecraft,** following an open and inclusive policymaking process for building antifragile institutions. The government must establish effective, meaningful channels for organized citizen participation in policymaking, monitoring, and feedback. The government must also recognize and acknowledge the value of informed critics in improving their performance.

Our tried and tested disaster management strategies should be emboldened and reoriented towards action on a broader range of potential shocks. The government should take a learning approach to assess why and how it has succeeded with disaster management and apply the learning to prepare for future crises.

Finally, local governments, agencies, and ministries must be empowered. They must have the operational freedom to customize interventions based on local needs; the government must eschew the strategy of one size fits all. Adaptive governance processes and decentralized authority can cope with contingent and local needs. For example, ensuring "new poor"—a large population group, most of whom are not even a part of the social safety net—get back on track is unlikely to happen within the existing policy framework. It needs a completely different approach based on the needs of this new marginal group.

Only a learning and improving state, with a functional feedback system—empowered civil servants and politicians equipped to tackle crises with flexibility and authority—can successfully cope with a systemic crisis like COVID-19.

Notable Events 2021

Photo credit: Nusrat Jahan

5 April | Launching of Strategy Primer: The Future of Digital in Bangladesh

BIGD launched the strategy primer, which provides a concrete action plan to realize the vision of a digital Bangladesh and a framework of shared responsibilities among different stakeholders within and outside the government.

In this webinar, the authors, Dr Zulkarin Jahangir, Research Fellow, BIGD, and Abdullah Hasan Safir, Senior Research Associate, BIGD, presented the key findings of the primer.

The distinguished guests taking part in the discussion included Zunaid Ahmed Palak MP, Honourable State Minister, ICT Division; N M Zeaul Alam, Senior Secretary, ICT Division; and Dr Stefan Dercon, Professor of Economic Policy, Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford & Development Policy Advisor to the Foreign Secretary, FCDO.

Organized by BIGD

> *The strategy primer rightly pointed out the challenges ahead of us for achieving a digital economy by 2041 and I hope that in partnership with academia such as BRAC University and the University of Oxford, and with our industry stakeholders, we can work together to achieve our targets and visions.*
>
> ***—Zunaid Ahmed Palak MP***
> ***Honourable State Minister***
> ***ICT Division***

1 July | Evidence to Action: COVID-19 and the Deepening Learning Crisis – How Can We Build Forward Better?

This virtual workshop brought together leading international experts who are involved with promoting equitable access to quality education in the Global South to discuss strategies—evidence-based and potential—that Bangladesh should take to address the widespread and deep learning crisis created by the long school closure.

Dr Imran Matin presented the evidence on learning loss and constraints faced by disadvantaged Bangladeshi children during COVID, and Dr Rachel Glennerster, the Chief Economist at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), presented global evidence on this critical issue.

This was followed by a discussion among the guests including Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC); Dr Rukmini Banerji, Chief Executive Officer of Pratham Education Foundation; Susannah Hares, Senior Policy Fellow and the Co-Director of the Center for Global Development; Asif Saleh, Executive Director of BRAC Bangladesh; Rasheda K Choudhury, Executive Director of Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE); and Anir Chowdhury, Policy Advisor of the a2i Programme. Based on evidence and their experience, they discussed:

1. How do we deliver catch-up education to help students recover what they lost, acquire grade-appropriate learning, and graduate each grade in time?
2. How do we ensure quality last-mile delivery of education, one that does not exacerbate inequality?
3. How do we bring the children who are vulnerable to dropping out back to schools?, and
4. How do we provide life opportunities to dropped-out children who do not or cannot come back to the classroom?

Co-hosted with PPRC

Photo credit: Zehad Al Mehedi

29 July | State of Governance in Bangladesh 2020-21: Managing the COVID-19 Pandemic

BIGD's flagship report the *State of Governance in Bangladesh 2020–21*, which focused on the performance of Bangladesh in governing the pandemic, was launched at an online event where Dr Mirza M Hassan, Senior Research Fellow and Head of the Governance and Politics Cluster, BIGD; Dr Naomi Hossain, Research Professor, Accountability Research Center, American University; and Professor S R Osmani, Professor of Development Economics, Ulster University, presented the key insights from the report.

Professor Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, CPD; Rounaq Jahan, Distinguished Fellow, CPD; Dr Morseda Chowdhury, Director of Health, Nutrition and Population, BRAC; Dr Binayak Sen, Director General, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS); Dr Mohammad Abdur Razzaque, Chairman of RAPID & Research Director at Policy Research Institute; and Kalpona Akter, Executive Director, Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), provided insight and remarks on the report.

Organized by BIGD

16 September | BIGD-Covid Collective Webinar: Governing COVID-19 in Bangladesh – Realities and Reflections to Build Forward Better

The webinar shared findings from the *State of Governance in Bangladesh 2020–21* report with a global audience, in partnership with the Covid Collective platform of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS). The report was presented by Dr Mirza M Hassan, Senior Research Fellow and Head of Governance and Politics Cluster, BIGD, and Dr Naomi Hossain, Research Professor, Accountability Research Center, American University. The discussion included Professor Habibul Haque Khondker, Professor of Social Sciences, Zayed University; Professor Dina M Siddiqi, Clinical Associate Professor, New York University; Professor Mushtaq Husain Khan, Professor of Economics at SOAS University of London & Executive Director of Anti-Corruption Evidence Research Consortium; Dr Shandana Khan Mohmand, Research Fellow and Cluster Leader, IDS; and Maheen Sultan, Senior Fellow of Practice and Head of Gender and Social Transformation Cluster, BIGD.

Co-hosted with Covid Collective Initiative of IDS Sussex

12 October | Governing COVID-19 in Bangladesh: Realities and Reflections to Build Forward Better

The Berkeley Institute of South Asia Studies invited BIGD to share the key findings and insights from our 2020-21 SOG report with their North American audience. Dr Mirza M Hassan and Dr Naomi Hossain, the lead researchers of the study, made the presentation on the study. Sanchita Banerjee Saxena, Executive Director, Institute of South Asia Studies, moderated the event. Nafisa Tanjeem, Assistant Professor of Gender, Race, and Sexuality Studies and Global Studies at Lesley University and Shelley Feldman, Retired Professor, Development Sociology, Cornell University, were present at the event as discussants.

Hosted by the Institute of South Asia Studies, UC Berkeley

4 November | PPRC-BIGD Rapid Research Response Phase IV Part II: Trends in COVID Impact on Livelihood, Coping, and Recovery

The event was organized to shared the findings from the fourth round of BIGD-PPRC national survey, which has been closely following how households in urban slum and rural areas are coping with the economic realities of Covid-19.

In the webinar, the researchers not only highlighted how the latest lockdown in 2021 disrupted the economic recovery of the vulnerable households since the first lockdown, but also pointed out—with four rounds of rich data on thousands of households across Bangladesh—some emerging long-term trends and vulnerabilities in the economic recovery. Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, Executive Chairman of PPRC, and Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director of BIGD, shared these findings in the virtual event.

The researchers reemphasized the urgency to address the needs of the 'new poor'—vulnerable non-poor households, with income above the upper poverty line and below median, made poor by the pandemic. In each round of the survey, majority of the pre-COVID vulnerable non-poor households were found to be below the poverty line. More than a third of these households have been found to be in poverty for the entire duration of the pandemic, a considerable share of the national population.

The webinar concluded with a discussion on the necessity of an integrated approach to policy measures, combining health, administrative, and economic interventions.

Co-hosted with PPRC

10 November | COVID-19 vs the Ultra-Poor Graduation Approach: Evidence from Bangladesh

In this webinar, Dr Oriana Bandiera presented the findings of recent BIGD and LSE research on the impact of COVID-19 on the 2007 cohort of the UPG program in rural Bangladesh. Based on the findings, she discussed what characteristics of the former UPG graduates, for example, type of occupation, are likely to make them more resilient in the face of crises like COVID-19.

The panel included, among others, Dr Robin Burgess, Professor of Economics and Director of the Economic Organisation and Public Policy Programme, LSE; Dr Dean Karlan, Founder and President, Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA); Dr Markus Goldstein, Lead Economist in the Office of the Chief Economist's Office for Africa at the World Bank; Greg Chen, Incoming Managing Director of BRAC Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative (UPGI); and Dr Imran Matin, Executive Director, BIGD.

Co-hosted with G²LM LIC Initiative of the Institute of Labor Economics (IZA), the International Growth Centre (IGC), STICERD at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)

11 November | Youth and Work in COVID Times: Bangladesh Case

Dr Imran Matin spoke on the impact of COVID-19 on work, learning, and mental health of the youth of Bangladesh at the seminar hosted by the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge and the Cambridge Global Challenges Strategic Research Initiative and organized by the Research for Equitable Access and Learning (REAL) Centre, University of Cambridge. The session focused on the gendered dimensions of job and income loss across rural and urban areas of Bangladesh, the impact of the pandemic on mental health, and the differences between young men's and women's mental well-being.

Hosted by the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge

18 November | Getting Back on Track to End Poverty in South Asia

Dr Imran Matin joined a panel of experts to discuss insights from the PPRC-BIGD COVID-19 Livelihoods & Recovery Panel Survey, at the webinar organized by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). The webinar invited the global community to focus on South Asia and ask how to ensure people living in poverty are not left behind while the world "builds back better."

The other speakers at the online event included Dr Manjistha Banerjee, National Council of Applied Economic Research, New Delhi; Dr Vidya Diwakar, ODI Research Fellow; Ihsanullah Ghafoor, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU); and Dr Marta Eichsteller, University College Dublin & ODI Research Associate, and the session was chaired by Dr Andrew Shepherd, Director of the Chronic Poverty Advisory Network & Principal Research Fellow, ODI.

Hosted by the Oversees Development Institute (ODI)

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BIGD Annual Reflections 2021
January 2022
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