BIGD
Reflections
2020

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Letter From the Executive Director

Reflection on Our Approach to Changemaking

As a university-based social science research institute working on improving development and governance outcomes, BIGD aspires to contribute to sustainable and equitable socioeconomic changes in the society—a just and prosperous Bangladesh. But I know a fundamental challenge in our line of work is the wide gap between research and how changes happen in the extremely complex real world.

Social science research often fails to strike a balance between maintaining theoretical rigour and adapting to reality, both in terms of doing the research and contextualising the learning. It is true that real changes are difficult to come by and often not under our control. But, to begin with, too many research studies fail to gain any traction in the desired direction.

I have found that organising our thinking around a simple framework of *Research-Learning-Change* has been helpful for us to focus our energy on closing this gap. This way of thinking in BIGD has gained some real thrust in 2020, which I would like to reflect on.

> **Organising our thinking around a simple framework of Research-Learning-Change has been helpful for us to focus our energy on closing the gap between our research and how changes happen in the complex real world.**

I believe high-quality research is our foundation. We are striving to adopt cutting-edge methods as well as quality control and analytical tools in our research in two ways. First, we are collaborating with reputed international researchers and research institutions, particularly those who are interested in long-term partnership and our capacity building. For example, we have significantly expanded our engagement with the London School of Economics (LSE) and the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex and started new relationships with many others like the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Second, we are heavily investing in our researchers. In 2020, we recruited two research fellows, trained in advanced experimental research methods, and are in the process of recruiting more, both in the areas of quantitative and qualitative research. We are also providing a stimulating environment for young Bangladeshi researchers to learn and grow.

> **In our framework, learning involves making sure that our research is relevant and actionable.**

We have been trying several strategies towards this end. I will discuss a few. First, strengthening our multidisciplinary understanding of an issue by creating a better alignment across different strands of research. Multidisciplinary research is challenging, but there is an increasing realisation of its need in solving the complex, real problems of the society. It is a work-in-progress. But as a tightly knit organisation, we are trying to foster a sense of mutual respect and identify projects where a multidisciplinary angle would add real value. One example is our study on how

RMG factories are ensuring workers' health and safety in the COVID-19 context. In this study, we are integrating econometric methods—to understand the impact of physical measures on health and safety outcomes—with qualitative methods—to understand how gender comes into play here; after all, 65% of the RMG workers are women. In another study, our qualitative process evaluation has helped design different packages of an intervention targeting handwashing behaviour change during the pandemic, implemented by BRAC. Now, in collaboration with Behavioural Insight Team (BIT), our researchers are evaluating the relative effectiveness of the standard intervention and the two different packages involving two types of behavioural nudges.

> **We are always challenging ourselves to take a thoughtful and intentional approach in mixing methods to enrich our research insights and evidence base with a focus on improving practice.**

Second, we are actively engaging with our stakeholders, trying to create an alignment between what we can offer and what they need. We are fortunate to have BRAC as our key strategic partner—the world's biggest development lab, reputed for bringing innovation with scale—which allows us to be at the forefront of actionable research.

With colleagues, I have recently taken part in several field visits with BRAC to learn about how people are coping with the post-COVID socioeconomic realities and to brainstorm ideas about how they could be supported. The insights are going to be valuable in informing our COVID-19 recovery research agenda.

Post-lockdown field visit with BRAC

We are also increasing our collaboration with government partners. This year, we have signed an MoU with the Access to Information (a2i) program of the Government of Bangladesh to collaborate on the digital agenda of the government.

We have also organised a short course, titled Pandemic and Public Policy ,for the senior officials in the government as well as NGOs and the private sector. The purpose was to equip senior decisionmakers with knowledge and skills to respond effectively to the COVID-19 crisis, by bringing in the existing and emerging concepts, research, and experiences in Bangladesh and other countries. Because of high demand, we organised a second short course with additional topics. Resource persons came from the world of policy, practice, and research, like the secretaries of finance and health and Dr Shahaduz Zaman, a leading expert in Medical Anthropology, who brought his research insights on communication during the pandemic.

❝ Change, the last and the most important component in our Research-Learning-Change framework, involves intentional and strategic action to create a sustaining momentum.❞

As a relatively small research institute, we realise that we must focus on a few most important agenda to become a credible source of insight and remain committed to taking them forward. Digital innovations—specifically how they can be scaled effectively to benefit everyone equally—emerged as a critical cross-thematic agenda for BIGD across our thematic work on development economics, gender, and governance, where we want to create a body of knowledge around digital equity and effective scaleup of digital innovations. In 2020, we have taken several strategically important initiatives on this agenda, which we would like to grow in the coming years with a hope to create a real momentum.

> **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.**

BIGD takes the responsibility of building a cadre of promising, early-career social science researchers very seriously. We expose young researchers with the world of rigorous social science research, provide them with intensive on-the-job training, and mentor them to start academic publishing as soon as possible. We expect many of them to become motivated to pursue advanced training and a career in high-impact research, inspiring, in turn, future generations of researchers, eventually bringing a cultural shift in forming virtuous interlinkages between research, policy, and governance and development outcomes. I am glad to find that promising young researchers are finding BIGD an exciting place to work.

But ultimately, change is a collective endeavour. We took the Rapid Research Response (RRR) initiative soon after the pandemic hit Bangladesh, and we managed to deliver and disseminate about 20 studies on diverse issues within a short time to ensure that the studies did not lose relevance. It would have been impossible if we did not have partnerships like the one we forged with the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC). Researchers from BIGD and PPRC joined forces to implement

and disseminate the most significant RRR survey on the livelihoods and the coping mechanisms of the vulnerable people during the pandemic. We managed to leverage our unique values—BIGD's capability to conduct large-scale surveys in a quick turnaround time and PPRC's strength in the policy engagement arena—to bring the attention of the right stakeholders in time on this important issue.

> **The governance and development challenges of emerging Bangladesh are much more complex and global. This will require the knowledge actors to craft new forms of alliances and platforms that have deep local relevance and use strong global leverages.**

As the old African proverb goes, "If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together". We need to go far, but fast too. We need to find ways to come together quickly.

Imran Matin

Transforming Experience From Practice Into Knowledge
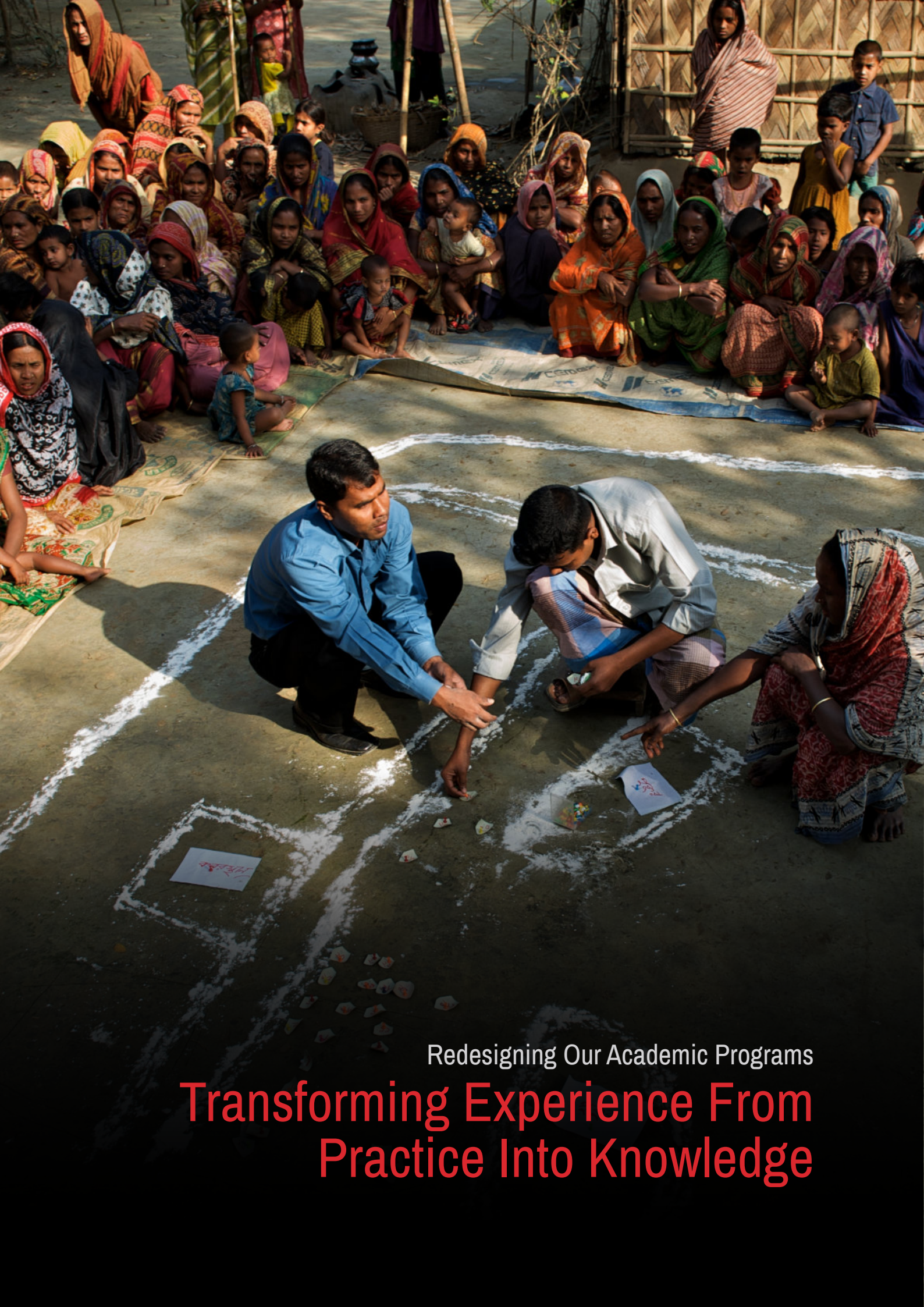
Redesigning Our Academic Programs

Master of Development Studies (MDS) at BIGD is a pioneering development studies program in Bangladesh. MDS has turned 18 this year. The program has always had a strong focus on bringing in the learning from the world of practice to complement the theoretical understanding of the students.

Alongside, the MDS curriculum equips the students with basic skills in social science research, and our MDS faculty closely supervise the students selected for the dissertation track.

A good balance between theory, practice, and research in our MDS curriculum helps our students develop a critical understanding of the developing world; we hope this will help them become high impact changemakers in their endeavours.

To further strengthen the theory-practice-research aspect of MDS, we have come up with a plan to incorporate new MDS modules related to BIGD's priority research areas, initially on three strategically important topics—poverty, migration, and digitisation. In these areas, BIGD cultivates a deep relationship with practitioners for producing actionable, empirical research. This allows us an opportunity to combine the insights of the practitioners with our research knowledge in the modules so that the students can enhance their understanding of how the theories they learn in class translate into real-world action and, eventually, impact.

In 2020, we started designing the module on poverty to incorporate the learning from BRAC's Ultra-Poor Graduation (UPG) program, globally recognised as one of the most effective models for reducing extreme poverty. BIGD researchers are engaged with the UPG program from its beginning. In this module, we are incorporating the learning from our two-decades-long research on the UPG program along with the experience of veteran BRAC leaders implementing the program. This module will be included in the MDS core course: Poverty: Concept, Measurement, and Policy.

This initiative is a good example of our research-learning-change framework in action. We are trying to transfer our contextualized research knowledge on an important development issue into academic learning, with an aim to better equip our students to bring meaningful changes with their work. To make the module more useful, we are also planning to offer it as an independent course to practitioners working in this field.

DigiDev
Digitisation for Inclusive Development

Digital technology has infinite possibilities for improving human well-being. It helps people transcend traditional barriers to realising their potentials by opening the world of knowledge, information, communication, sharing, and exchange. It offers an opportunity to government, non-government, and private institutions to employ innovative solutions to problems and create value for the people they serve.
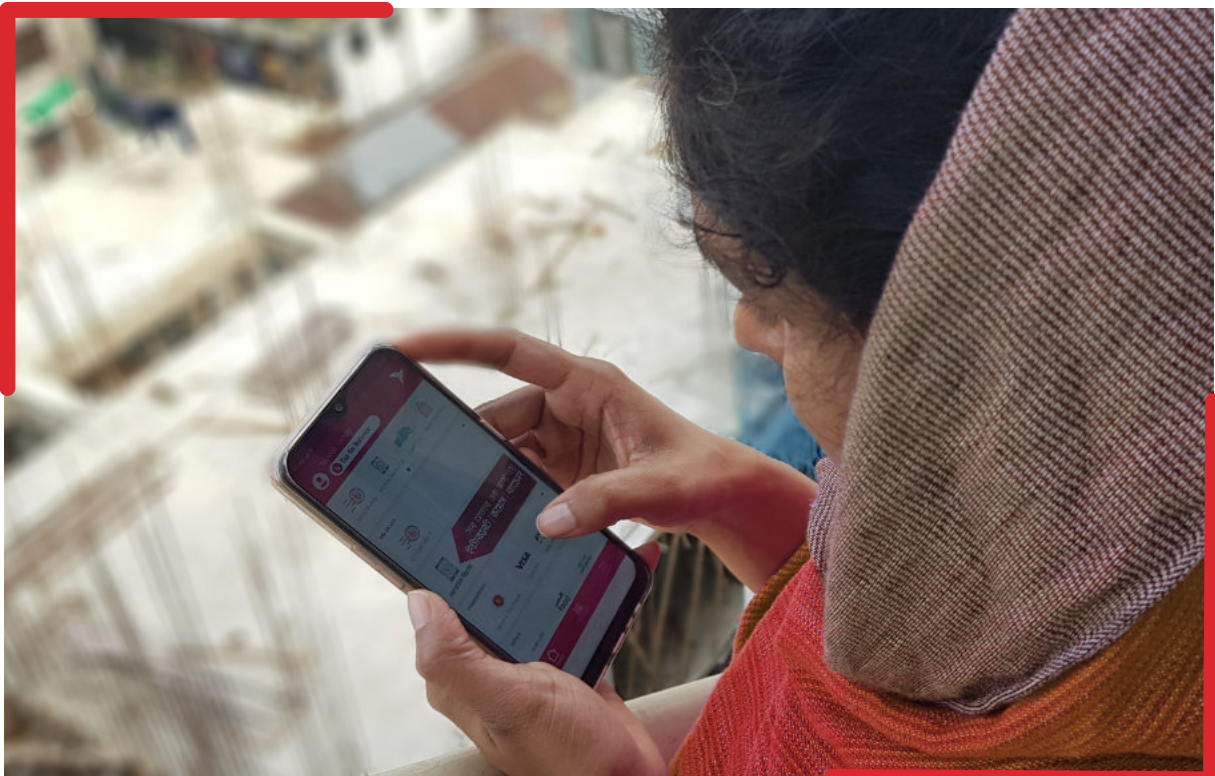
However, there are challenges. First, digital readiness—access to digital technology and the capabilities to use it—determines whether and to what extent the well-being enhancing power of digitisation can be harnessed. But in developing countries like Bangladesh, both citizens and institutions serving them have many limitations in their digital readiness, creating barriers to the effective use of digital technologies.
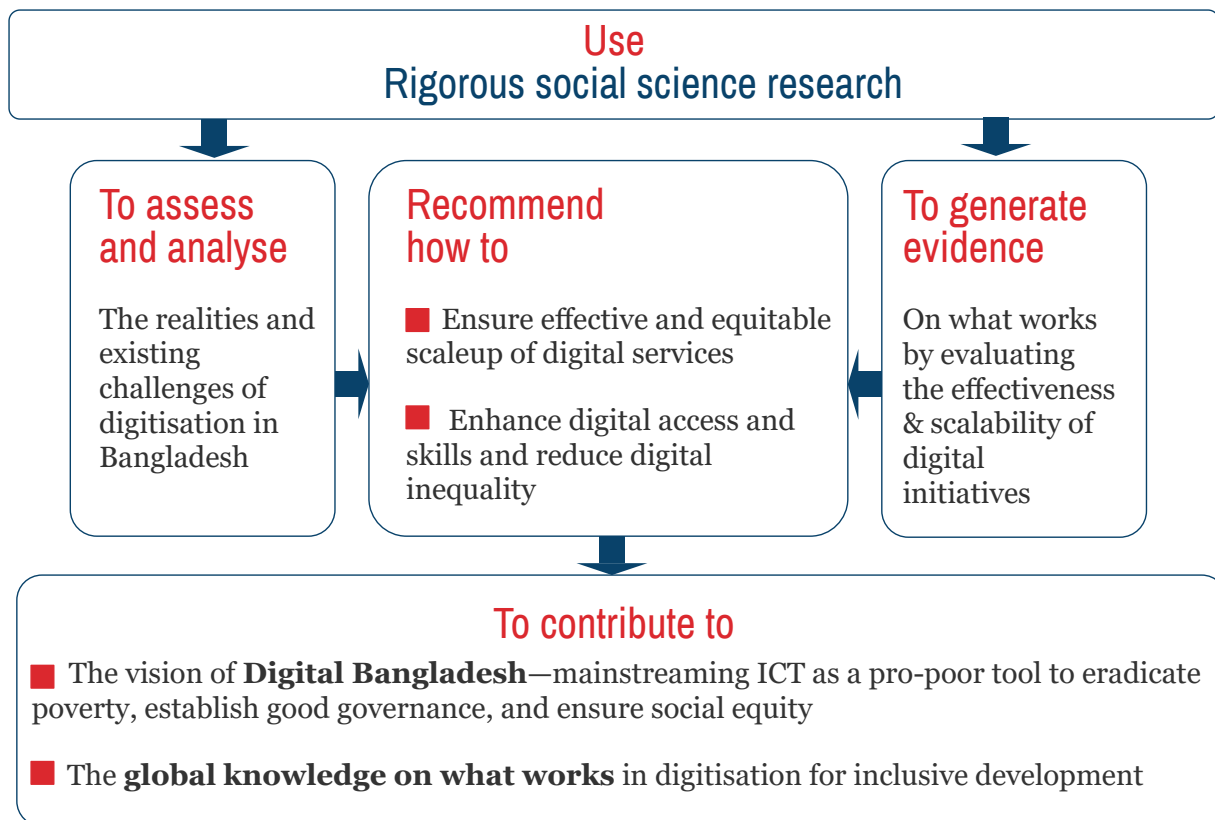
Second, digital inequality has become a major concern in Bangladesh and globally, which means that the benefits of digitisation are unlikely to be shared equally. Since digital inequality has a strong, positive correlation with sociocultural inequalities, digitisation can in fact exacerbate existing inequalities. For example, rich people can use their better digital access and skills to further enhance their riches, and the poor with inadequate access and skills may not be able to utilise opportunities offered by digitisation; this process may expand the gap between rich and poor.

Finally, digital technology is also creating new types of risks for societies and individuals, e.g., scamming, surveillance, misinformation, and radicalisation.

So, we must understand how to maximise the benefits of digital technology to enhance human well-being—reducing poverty and inequality and empowering citizens, for example—while minimising its negative impact. **Digitisation for Inclusive**

Use	
Rigorous social science research	

To assess and analyse

The realities and existing challenges of digitisation in Bangladesh

Recommend how to

- Ensure effective and equitable scaleup of digital services

- Enhance digital access and skills and reduce digital inequality

To generate evidence

On what works by evaluating the effectiveness & scalability of digital initiatives

To contribute to

- The vision of **Digital Bangladesh**—mainstreaming ICT as a pro-poor tool to eradicate poverty, establish good governance, and ensure social equity

- The **global knowledge on what works** in digitisation for inclusive development

The DigiDev framework

Development (DigiDev) thus has emerged as a significant research agenda for us, through which we are committed to providing continuous research support to our stakeholders on how to address the challenges with digitisation. We have several research programs and independent studies dedicated to this end. Among others, in 2020:

- We published the results of our nationwide, comprehensive digital literacy survey of 6,500 rural households and developed a digital literacy index, **DLit_BIGD,** for methodically measuring and tracking the level of and inequalities in digital literacy in rural Bangladesh.

- In collaboration with Oxford University, we have produced a **Digital Readiness Assessment** to provide a thorough analysis of the digital readiness of Bangladesh across four main pillars of digital economy— infrastructure, human capital, finance, and policies.

- We have stared the **WEE-DiFine** initiative, a five-year program funding rigorous research studies across South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa to a) generate generalisable evidence on the impact of digital financial services (DFS) on women's economic empowerment (WEE) outcomes and the mechanisms through which these impacts are achieved, b) generate evidence on the most effective ways to design and deploy DFS for maximum impact, and c) support financial service providers in integrating gender into their work.

- We are **evaluating a program on online marketplace skills development for disadvantaged young women.** Coderstrust—a skill-development training organisation—is providing free training and post-training apprenticeship on online freelancing to underprivileged young women. Using a randomised control trial (RCT) as well as qualitative methods, we are evaluating the project. If proven effective, this type of programs can be taken to bridge the economic, educational, and gender gaps in online marketplace participation.

Evidence From BRAC's STAR Program

Does Skill Training Improve the Employment Prospect for the Underprivileged Youth?
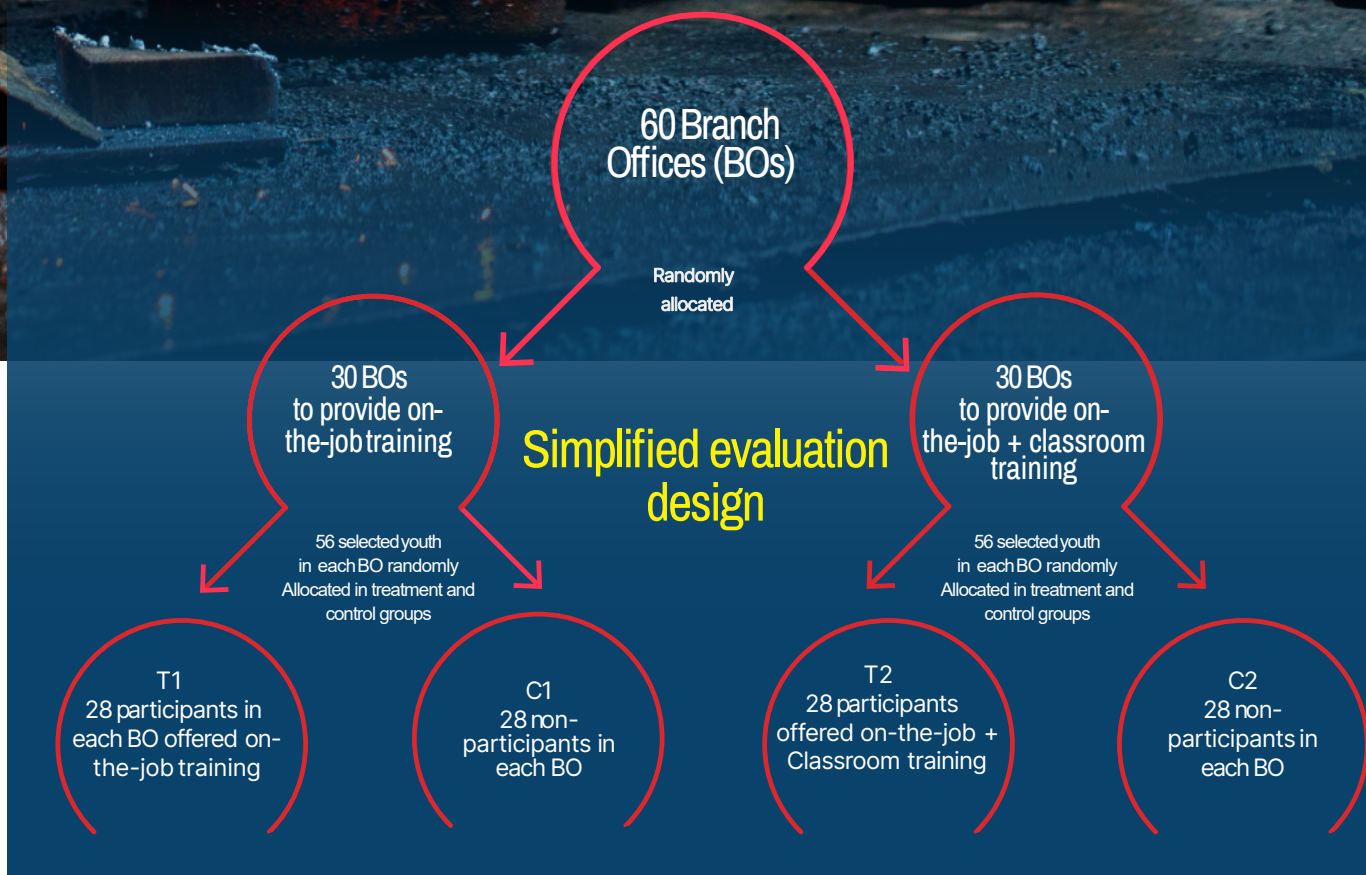
Why the study?

Underprivileged youth in developing countries like Bangladesh usually do not have the right skills to find productive employment. Especially at risk are the youth who drop out of school. Typically, they lack both proper education and practical experience, and thus, remain unemployed or find low-productivity, informal jobs. They also tend to come from poor families, which means that school dropouts may fall in a perpetual poverty trap.

BRAC's Skills Training for Advancing Resources (STAR) program trains and supports vulnerable school dropouts to find productive employment. STAR provides both on-the-job training in the form of apprenticeship with a Master Craft Person (MCP) and classroom training, on diverse trades like tailoring, furniture making, fridge/AC repairing, and graphic designing. STAR program expanded to 120 branch offices (BOs) in 2016, providing an opportunity to rigorously evaluate the impact of apprenticeship programs in Bangladesh and measure the additional impact of classroom training. The researcher, Dr Narayan Das, Senior

Research Fellow of BIGD, was motivated to do this study because there were a handful of rigorous experiments in the developing country context on the impact of apprenticeship with mixed results, and there was none on the marginal impact of classroom training, which is a costly intervention. If proven effective, similar programs can be taken to help underprivileged youth change their life trajectory.

The results of this study have been published in the Journal of Development Economics, in an article titled "Training the Disadvantaged Youth and Labour market Outcomes: Evidence from Bangladesh", authored by Dr Narayan Das in 2020.

Simplified evaluation design

60 Branch
Offices (BOs)

Randomly
allocated

30 BOs
to provide on-
the-job training

30 BOs
to provide on-
the-job + classroom
training

56 selected youth
in each BO randomly
Allocated in treatment and
control groups

56 selected youth
in each BO randomly
Allocated in treatment and
control groups

T1
28 participants in
each BO offered on-
the-job training

C1
28 non-
participants in
each BO

T2
28 participants
offered on-the-job +
Classroom training

C2
28 non-
participants in
each BO

What was the study method?

Dr Das designed a randomised control trial
(RCT) in 60 selected BOs. The simplified
design of the RCT is provided in the figure
above. The baseline survey conducted in
2016 could reach 3,186 youths in the study.
The first and second follow-up surveys were
conducted six and 22 months after the
completion of the training, and 2,581 youths
from the baseline were successfully
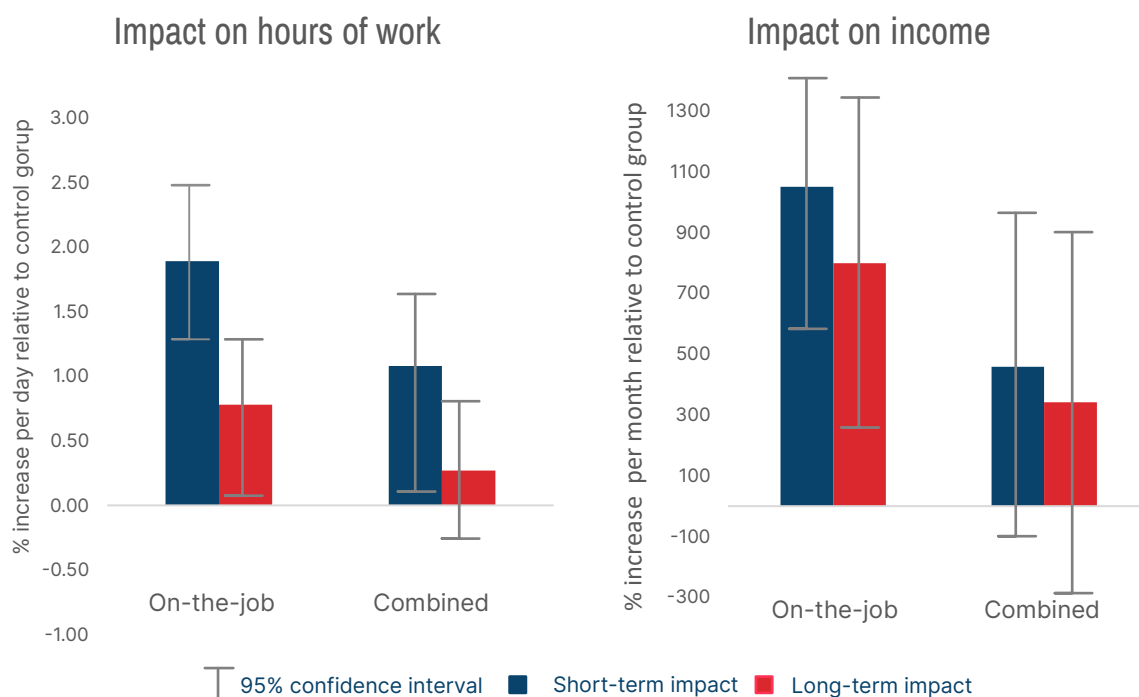interviewed in both rounds.

What did we find?

Not everyone who was offered the training
accepted it; the acceptance rate was 65% for
the on-the-job training and 60% for the
combined training (on-the-job + classroom
training). Of those who participated in the
six-month-long training at least for a month,
**on-the-job training increased hours
worked per day by 65%, almost two**
hours, on average, in the short-term,
compared to the control group (non-
participants). Combined training (on-the-job
+ classroom) had a smaller impact, 37% or
about an hour**,** which implies that **the
classroom training did not have any
additional benefit in the short run**.

In the long-run, 22 months after the
completion of the training, the impact of
both the treatments declined, but on-the-job
training retained a statistically significant
impact of 27% ,or 47 minutes per day.

Also, the **impact of on-the-job training
on income, though diminished over
time, remained positive** and statistically
significant. On average, the training
participants earned, per month, BDT 1,050
higher than the non-participants in the
short-run and BDT 799 in the long-run. This
is mainly because of a **long-term shift
away from casual labour to better-**

Impact on hours of work

Y-axis: % increase per day relative to control gorup
Values: 3.00, 2.50, 2.00, 1.50, 1.00, 0.50, 0.00, -0.50, -1.00
Categories: On-the-job, Combined

Impact on income

Y-axis: % increase per month relative to control group
Values: 1300, 1100, 900, 700, 500, 300, 100, -100, -300
Categories: On-the-job, Combined

Legend: 95% confidence interval — Short-term impact — Long-term impact

paid wage employment. The study found a statistically significant long-run increase in wage employment and a simultaneous decline in casual day labouring among the on-the-job training participants; this implies that the training had shifted a significant number of youths from low-productivity, low-paying informal sector jobs to higher productivity, better-paying jobs. Consequently, on-the-job training has also been found to have a **long-term, positive impact on productivity**.

Combined training had a positive impact on product on wage employment in the short-run, but the impact fizzled away over time.

What are the implications?

Wage employment increased both in MCP as well as other firms, which means that STAR is not just a placement program. But the impact is much higher and longer-term for the MCP firms. This is mainly because **STAR prioritised firms with active demand for workers as MCP firms.** This has important implications for the design of successful on-the-job training programs.
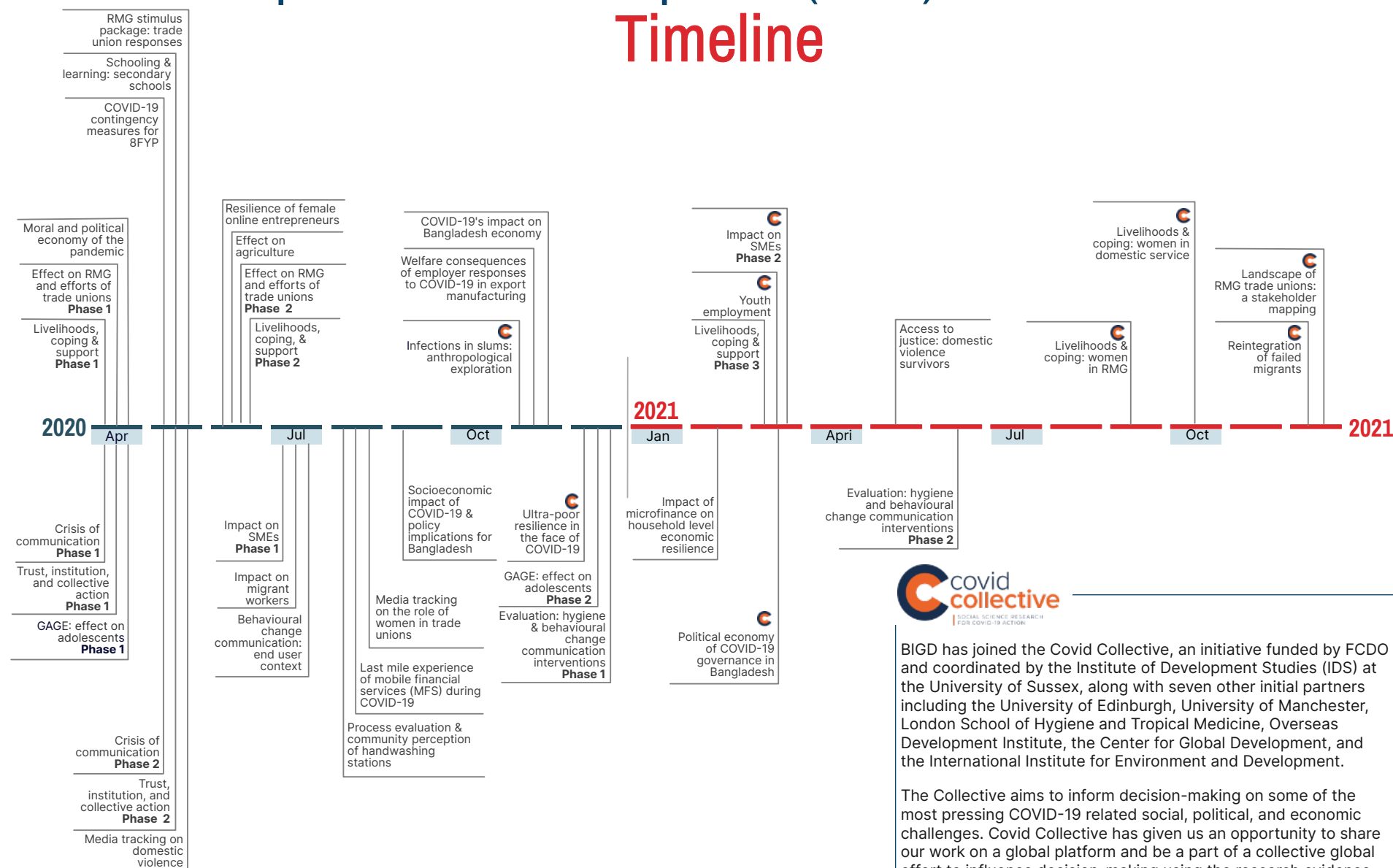
Overall, the combined training does not have a favourable benefit-cost ratio; thus, the expansion of the **combined training does not make much financial sense**. On the other hand, the on-the-job training has a benefit-cost ratio of 1.48 and the aggregate benefit is estimated to surpass the cost in four years after the training. Thus, the **on-the-job training can be potentially scaled up cost-effectively.** In a country where the vast majority of the people are employed in the informal sector, characterised by low-productivity, creating formal employment opportunities for the underprivileged youth is a shift in the right direction.

Rapid Research Response

to

COVID-19

Rapid Research Response (RRR) to COVID-19
Timeline

RMG stimulus package: trade union responses

Schooling & learning: secondary schools

COVID-19 contingency measures for 8FYP

Resilience of female online entrepreneurs

Moral and political economy of the pandemic

Effect on agriculture

COVID-19's impact on Bangladesh economy

Impact on SMEs
Phase 2

Livelihoods & coping: women in domestic service

Effect on RMG and efforts of trade unions
Phase 1

Effect on RMG and efforts of trade unions
Phase 2

Welfare consequences of employer responses to COVID-19 in export manufacturing

Youth employment

Landscape of RMG trade unions: a stakeholder mapping

Livelihoods, coping & support
Phase 1

Livelihoods, coping, & support
Phase 2

Infections in slums: anthropological exploration

Livelihoods, coping & support
Phase 3

Livelihoods & coping: women in RMG

Reintegration of failed migrants

2020 Apr   Jul   Oct   **2021** Jan   Apri   Jul   Oct   **2021**

Socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 & policy implications for Bangladesh

Impact on SMEs
Phase 1

Crisis of communication
Phase 1

Ultra-poor resilience in the face of COVID-19

Impact of microfinance on household level economic resilience

Access to justice: domestic violence survivors

Evaluation: hygiene and behavioural change communication interventions
Phase 2

Trust, institution, and collective action
Phase 1

Impact on migrant workers

GAGE: effect on adolescents
Phase 1

Behavioural change communication: end user context

Media tracking on the role of women in trade unions

GAGE: effect on adolescents
Phase 2

Evaluation: hygiene & behavioural change communication interventions
Phase 1

Last mile experience of mobile financial services (MFS) during COVID-19

Political economy of COVID-19 governance in Bangladesh

Crisis of communication
Phase 2

Process evaluation & community perception of handwashing stations

Trust, institution, and collective action
Phase 2

Media tracking on domestic violence

*The timeline indicates approximate completion dates of fieldwork/study

covid Collective
SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH FOR COVID-19 ACTION

BIGD has joined the Covid Collective, an initiative funded by FCDO and coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, along with seven other initial partners including the University of Edinburgh, University of Manchester, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, Overseas Development Institute, the Center for Global Development, and the International Institute for Environment and Development.

The Collective aims to inform decision-making on some of the most pressing COVID-19 related social, political, and economic challenges. Covid Collective has given us an opportunity to share our work on a global platform and be a part of a collective global effort to influence decision-making using the research evidence generated by all platform members.

Policy Relevant Methodological Innovation

When COVID-19 hit Bangladesh in March 2020, our first thought was how we could be of any use in tackling its disastrous socioeconomic fallout in our country. As a social science research institute, our logical response was to provide real-time, reliable assessment of how the pandemic was affecting the lives of different vulnerable groups, with a hope of generating useful information for the stakeholders responding to the pandemic on the nature and types of action and support needed and where it was needed the most. At that time, we did not think about where the resources would come from, or who else would join our effort. By the end of March, we announced our **Rapid Research Response (RRR) to COVID-19** initiative.

Our RRR strategy quickly evolved to accommodate the needs of the time. We scoured our available resources and discussed with donors to repurpose some of the flexible funds, took advantage of our vast mobile phone databases coming from recent national-level surveys, employed the trained enumerators who were out of work because of the pandemic, and started acting immediately.

Then we sent an email to all our partners— government agencies, NGOs, researchers— requesting them to collaborate with us in whichever capacity they can. Last year, we have produced around 20 studies under RRR, some of which we conducted ourselves, but for most studies, we collaborated with other research institutions from Bangladesh and abroad.

For our RRR study on the livelihoods of vulnerable people during COVID-19, we had an early discussion with Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) to get deeper intellectual and policy muscle behind the project. We were well-aligned in terms of our broader social commitment but also clear about the unique values we brought—

BIGD's strength in quantitative field research and PPRC's in policy-engagement— and the synergy we could create. The two organisations quickly joined hands and started working almost immediately. "Livelihoods, Coping, and Support during COVD-19" became our flagship RRR project. The first and second rounds of the study were conducted in April and May, respectively, and the third round will take place in February 2021, charting a one-year story of the pandemic and its effects on the livelihoods of the poor.

The study helped us test and further improve our RRR strategy; the project also best exemplifies our RRR strategy in action.

The experience of PPRC-BIGD partnership on this study has recently been documented and published as a Viewpoint article in World Development, titled "Finding Out Fast About the Impact of COVID-19: the Need for Policy-relevant Methodological Innovation", authored by Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, PPRC; Dr Imran Matin, BIGD; Dr Nicola Banks and Dr David Hulme, University of Manchester .

The authors pinpointed four innovate strategies that helped us produce and effectively communicate this useful and timely research study. The strategies are:

■ **The opportunistic use of pre-existing, national-level, mobile phone interview sampling frames:** BIGD used two large-scale national household databases—from surveys conducted in recent years in urban slums and rural areas—to draw a sample of 12,000 households. We managed to interview 5,471 households in the first round and 7,638 in the second round. The sample in the second round included all the participants in the first round and an additional new sample from the original urban and rural sampling frames.

■ **Strict boundary conditions to minimise interview length:** The need for accuracy in a phone-based survey and the quick turnaround time forced us to focus on the essential. Our researchers put a great deal of effort to strike the right balance between the need for gathering useful information and the need for simplicity. We kept the survey instrument, i.e., the questionnaire, simple, well-defined, and short, enabling us to quickly collect accurate and essential information over the phone. The analytical framework of the study included only five components important from the policy perspective—household mobility, livelihoods, coping strategies, needs/expectations, and recovery dynamics. All questions were close-ended, and the questionnaire was thoroughly pretested and piloted.

■ **Non-hierarchical, participatory research process:** The entire research cycle—developing the framework, designing the instrument, analysing the data—took the form of a group exercise, where senior researchers from both institutes, including Dr Rahman and Dr Matin, participated in regular group calls alongside senior and junior research associates. This process proved to be more efficient and speedier compared to the traditional hierarchical approach.

■ **Two-stage dissemination strategy:** Thanks to the strategies discussed above, we were able to complete our initial data analysis within a few weeks in the first round. Soon after, we organised a joint workshop, mainly targeting the media. This was necessary as the government was deciding on the social protection policy at that time. Later, after further analysis, we organised a second workshop mainly targeting the academics who are at the forefront of poverty-related research in Bangladesh.

The BIGD-PPRC study has provided a strong case for the possibility of using large-scale, mobile-based surveys to generate useful insights about national emergencies like this. It has also created a new space for quantitative methods in 'rapid research', which has been primarily a territory of qualitative/participatory methods. While the importance of qualitative methods is rapid research is undeniable, relevant, and timely quantitative surveys like this one can provide crucial insights.

Our study was able to bring an attention to the perils of the 'new poor', a vast section of the non-poor made poor by the pandemic. The concept was later taken forward by many other organisations working in this area. The government also recognised the needs of the new poor.

Building on Knowledge Partnership to Support Policy and Practice

COVID-19 has presented an unprecedented challenge to the policymakers worldwide, simultaneously affecting almost all major areas of public policy at a massive scale, requiring fast, costly, and complex policy responses. This requires bold innovations in institutional service delivery, drawing on contextual realities and strengths. At the early stage of the pandemic, we felt the need for developing a policy response framework based on a theory-based conceptualisation of this complex challenge so that policy interventions could be systematically assessed against the framework.

In April 2020, BIGD Executive Director discussed this idea with Dr Shamsul Alam, a Member of the General Economic Division (GED) of the Planning Commission, in the context of adapting the 8th Five Year Plan (8FYP) to the short- and medium-term economic recovery challenges brought by the pandemic. With support from the International Growth Centre (IGC), BIGD partnered with Professor S R Osmani,

Professor of Development Economics at Ulster University and a distinguished visiting fellow of BIGD, to accomplish this task.

During the early months of the pandemic, societies around the world were caught in a cruel dilemma—the economy had to be shut down to ensure effective physical distancing, otherwise, too many lives were to be lost; and yet shutting down the economy had its dire consequences on the economy. For a country like Bangladesh, the choice was not simply between lives and the economy; but between lives to be saved from the virus and lives to be saved from hunger inflicted by the loss of livelihoods, caused by the measures to control the pandemic.

The challenge required a judicious combination of three types of policy instruments: (a) physical distancing as a means of containing the infection, (b) bold measures of economic support as a means of mitigating the consequence of physical

distancing on the economy and livelihoods, and (c) a powerful system of public health support. While the trade-off between the first two policies was already painfully clear—stricter physical distancing means a lower rate of infection but a greater economic cost—Professor Osmani demonstrated how a strong public health support system can soften the trade-off and play a central role in a smoother economic recovery.

He developed a model demonstrating how COVID-19 infection fatality and the overall mortality rate increase with lowering stringency of social distancing and how the strength of the public health system comes into play in this equation. To reduce economic damage, the economy must be reopened sooner than later, which is likely to escalate the infection rate and deaths from the virus. But when the public health system is capable of testing and tracing the people getting back work at a massive scale and treating those who become infected, COVID-19 infection and deaths due to reopening can be minimised, and people can be reintegrated in the economy more quickly.

BIGD, IGC, and GED jointly organised a high-level dissemination seminar on 9 June 2020, in which Professor Osmani presented his framework and policy suggestions, and the Hon'ble. Minister of Planning Mr M. A. Mannan, MP; GED Member Dr Shamsul Alam; and other distinguished economists made comments. A report was then shared with the Hon'ble Minister of Planning. We believe it was useful for the government as it was shared ahead of the formulation of the national budget 20-21 and the adaption of the 8th Five Year Plan to accommodate the realities of COVID-19.

Professor Osmani, in his work, demonstrated the centrality of a robust public health response in the successful recovery from the COVID-19 induced economic crisis. However, the public health systems in Bangladesh has many challenges, including weak governance and severe resource constraint. BRAC has been active in responding to the crisis and interested in developing a community based, integrated health response to support the public health system. BRAC requested BIGD to do a conceptualisation and framework building exercise on this with a focus on the health governance challenge. BRAC intended to use the framework to structure and further develop its response model and discuss it with development partners and the government. For this assignment, we partnered with Dr Mushtaq Khan and Dr Pallavi Roy from the Anti-Corruption Evidence (ACE) research program of SOAS
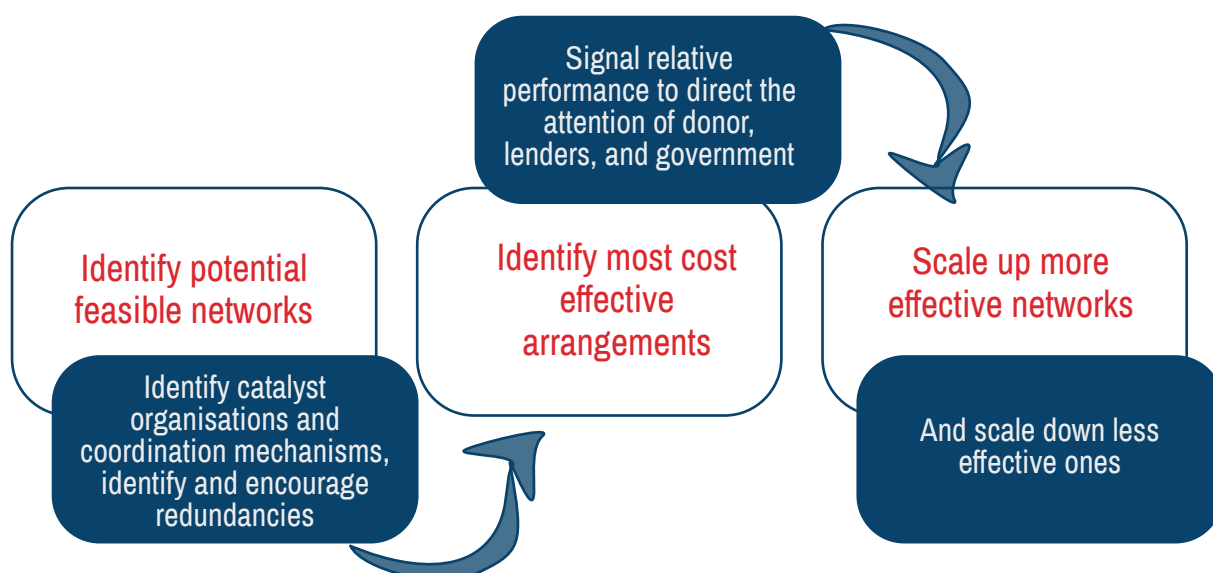
**An adaptive and integrated response strategy**

University, and Dr Rajiv Chowdhury, Associate Professor at the Department of Public Health and Primary Care, University of Cambridge. The work has recently been published in World Development as a Letter on Urgent Issues.

We argue that effectively responding to the fast-spreading pandemic would require an innovative arrangement with an unconventional network of players like NGOs, private service providers, and even community members. A weak, centralised, vertical public health system is most likely to fail in motivating behavioural changes and providing service at the grassroots at scale and cost-effectively in such a short time, as was needed by the situation.

We cited evidence, from COVID-19 management practices in places like the Dharavi slum in Mumbai, on how a horizontal network of service providers—working in coordination yet in parallel with the central public health system—can bring in their unique values for a quick, cost-effective scaleup of health services related to COVID-19. For example, an NGO with grassroots operational capacity can provide testing and tracing services, in coordination with the government, effectively extending the capacity of the public health system.

Since these networks are parallel to the central system, it is possible to engage multiple parallel networks to amplify the impact. We cited examples of multiple horizontal networks working successfully in scaling critical public health interventions even in fragile contexts like Somalia, Afghanistan, and Gaza. We suggested intentionally building in redundancy in employing different delivery networks because this allows identifying and expanding the most effective networks. To make this happen, simple, clear assessment criteria need to be developed and communicated with network participants, which would also incentivise performance. In this approach, we stressed the importance of effective coordination agencies, either in government or NGOs, for maintaining oversight and reporting on outcomes in each network for assessment and transparency.

We hypothesize that in countries with a tradition of social self-governance, a collaborative, horizontal delivery mechanism would be successful in managing this type of emergency health situations.
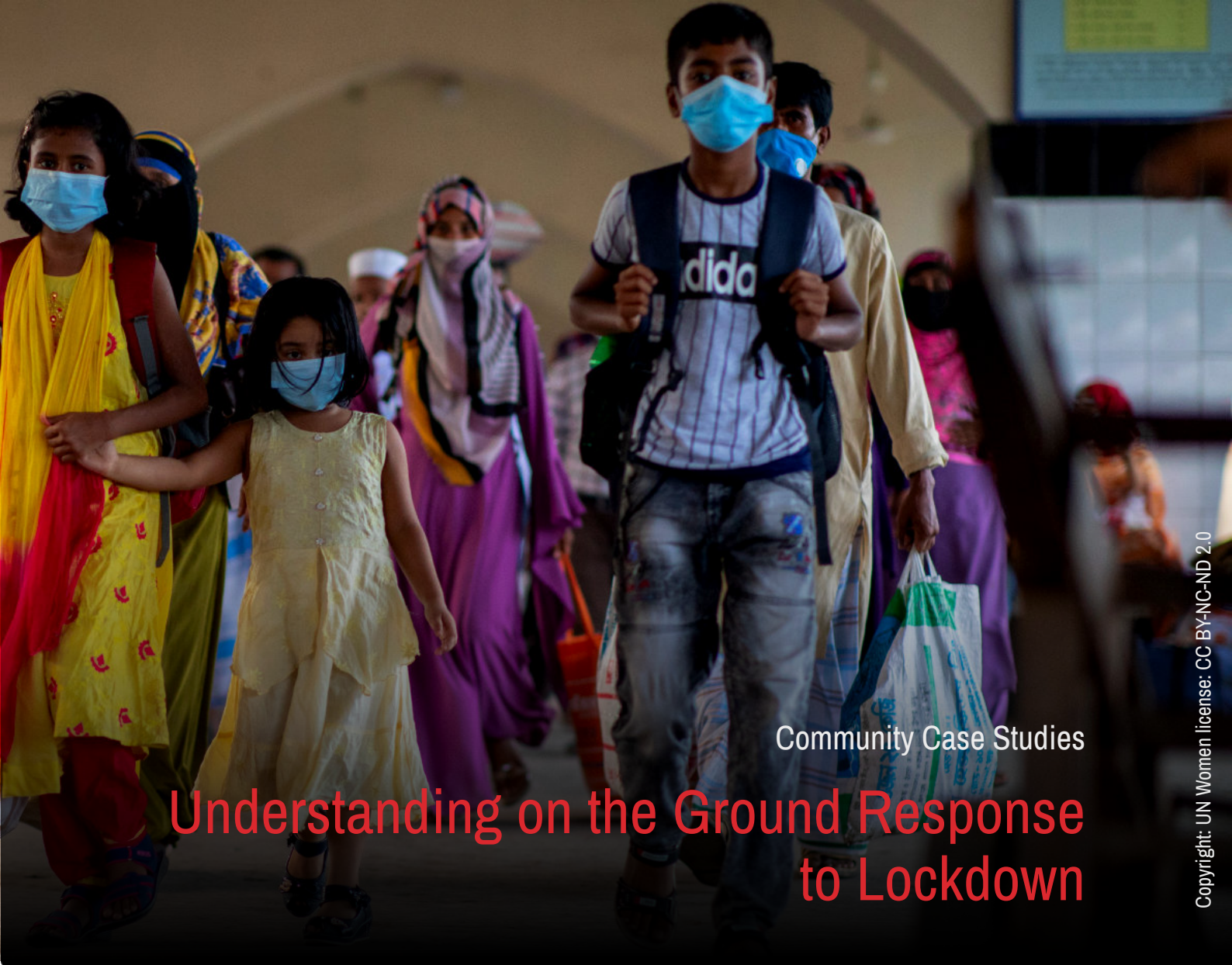
Community Case Studies

Understanding on the Ground Response to Lockdown

Successfully controlling a pandemic like COVID-19 depends equally on government measures and the compliance of the citizen. But when compliance is required from every citizen, government enforcement, understandably, is unlikely to be effective and needs voluntary mass participation of the citizen. But what conditions are needed for the citizen to participate voluntarily in tackling the pandemic?

In early April, the Government of Bangladesh attempted to enforce a nationwide lockdown to contain the virus. The citizen, in various degrees, tried to comply with the government decree for the first few weeks. But by mid-May, the lockdown was largely abandoned by the citizen. Why did the lockdown hold at first, despite the economic hardship that came with it? And what made the citizen become non-compliant, despite the rising rate of infection? What prompted the government to completely withdraw the lockdown?

To find answers to some of these questions, BIGD undertook a rapid telephonic qualitative survey in 20 communities and collected information about how policies and communications are being received and acted upon by the communities. Three broad topics covered in the research were: experiences of the lockdown; community needs; and institutions, key actors, and trust. In this study, BIGD collaborated with Development Research Initiative (dRi) in Bangladesh and researchers from the Accountability Research Center at American University and Georgetown University in the United States.

The researchers—Dr Tariq Omar Ali, Georgetown University; Dr Mirza Hassan,

BIGD; and Dr Naomi Hossain, Accountability Research Center, American University—wrote an academic article based on the original phone-based research in six selected communities. The article was published in the World Development journal, entitled "The Moral and Political Economy of the Pandemic in Bangladesh: Weak States and Strong Societies During COVID-19". The paper explores why Bangladesh, a densely populated country, proved unable to sustain a lockdown, which was deemed necessary to contain the pandemic. The researchers draw on the theories about state capacity to make and enforce policies and examine how the state exercised its capacities for coercion and control over lower factions within the political society and sought to preserve and enhance its legitimacy.

Even though the capacity of the Bangladeshi state has vastly improved over the past decades and political incentives to manage the pandemic was also strong, the government did not manage to maintain a strict lockdown long enough. Chronically unable to enforce its authority over local political elites, the state could not ensure a fair and timely distribution of relief. The pressures to sustain legitimacy with the masses forced the state and its front-line actors to tolerate lockdown rule-breaking,

conceding that the immediate livelihood needs of the poor overrode national public health concerns.

> The weakness of the Bangladeshi state contrasts with the strength of widely shared 'moral economy' views—political-cultural beliefs in citizen's right to subsistence and the responsibilities of public authorities to act to protect this right. This provided powerful ethical and political justifications for the citizen of Bangladesh to disregard the lockdown and for the officials to forbear or deliberately avoid the enforcement of rules. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights both the importance of state capacity in managing novel shocks like this and the challenges in settings where weak states strive to govern strong societies.

Understanding the Role of Workers' Representation Bodies in the RMG Sector

Many mainstream Trade Unions (TUs) in Bangladesh have affiliated themselves with political parties (Siddiqui, D. 2017) and thus have been criticised for their clientelist relationship with owners and ruling parties. And TUs that promote labour rights face various forms of backlash from both the government and factory owners. The crisis is most visible in the ready-made garments (RMG) sector, the largest industrial sector in Bangladesh. According to Trade Information 2019, there are only 877

registered TUs in the RMG sector for 4,621 factories registered with Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). Besides, TU bodies are male-dominated where women's leadership is discouraged (Nawaz & Haque, 2020), even though women still make up the majority of workers in the RMG sector.

During the COVID-19 crisis, when the RMG factories were closing to avoid the spread of the disease and, more importantly, because

of mass deferment or cancellation of orders, safeguarding workers right became a major concern, and despite their weaknesses, TUs were expected to act. The Gender and Social Transformation cluster at BIGD has been closely following how the TUs and other workers' representation bodies were pursuing the agenda of RMG workers during this crisis, through media monitoring as well as under the multi-country research program "Sustaining Power: Women's Struggles Against Contemporary Backlash in South Asia".

We found that the TUs appeared to have high-level access to relevant government, BGMEA, and international organisations. They were also initially successful in using the media to keep the workers' issue at the forefront of public attention. Female trade union leaders were effectively engaging through social media; however, they were side-lined in tripartite committees and meetings.

The end of the lockdown and reopening of the factories brought its own set of challenges. The COVID-19 infection rates in factories started rising, and terminations, retrenchments, and lay-offs became everyday news. Workers and TU leaders had no choice but to stage physical demonstrations of rallies, human chains, and sit-ins to claim their jobs, livelihoods, and health security. But ultimately, they struggled to influence the provisions around health and safety in the workplace. The RMG sector received the earliest stimulus package, now worth BDT 10,500 crore, in which the BGMEA leaders played an active role, but the TU leaders were all but absent. Print and TV media gave relatively greater coverage to the loss of orders for factories and the economic losses for the country instead of the sufferings of the workers of these factories.

The capacity and credibility of TUs have important implications for the sector, and ultimately the lives of the workers. The present state of the tripartite relationship between government, employers, and workers has already resulted in policies and institutions in the RMG sector that have contributed to inefficient industrial relations, lack of trust between workers and owners and between owners and global actors, continuing labour unrest, and growing risk of reputational loss of the sector, both locally and globally. While all stakeholders have their share of weaknesses in this matter, the pandemic has revealed the urgency for more effective workers' representation to safeguard workers' rights during a crisis like this.

Given the context, we are now conducting an empirical analysis of the current landscape of workers' representation in the RMG sector. We aim to develop a thorough understanding of the factors affecting workers' representation in this sector at the meta-level (social, political, and legal environment in which the workers' representation bodies are embedded), meso-level (social and political power and institutional and managerial capacity of relevant stakeholders), and micro-level (stakeholders' incentives and interests). We believe that such research is urgent to understand the current dynamics of the interactions between employers and workers as these impinge on the maintenance of disciplined, peaceful, productive, and positive-sum industrial relations in the sector, which is highly valued by all stakeholders, including government regulatory authorities and international actors.

Reference

Siddiqi, D. (2016). Before Rana Plaza: Towards a history of labour organizing in Bangladesh's garment industry. In Labour in the clothing industry in the Asia Pacific (pp. 78–97). Routledge.

Farzana Nawaz, & Tania Haque. (2020). A Guide to Ensuring Gender Equality for Women Workers in Trade Unions in Bangladesh [Research report]. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

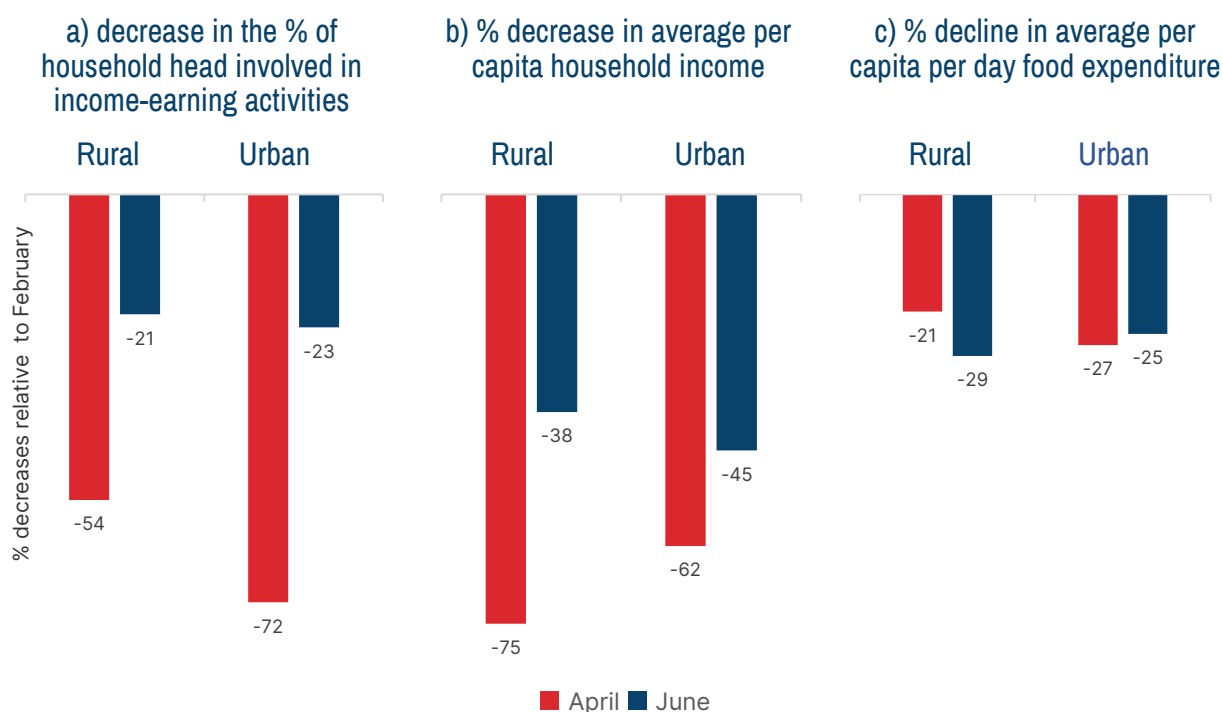## Reversals and Resilience

The Early Recovery Story of the Livelihoods Impact of COVID-19

Although COVID-19 is affecting the global economy, countries differ in their ability to cope with the crisis. It is particularly worrisome for developing countries like Bangladesh that risk undoing decades of progress in reducing poverty. Can the people who were economically vulnerable even before the pandemic—those who were on their path out of poverty or living close to the poverty line—weather the storm and not fall into a long-term poverty trap? Can easing of social distancing measures ensure a fast enough economic recovery for these people? These are all concerning questions.

In an attempt to find answers to some of these questions, two Bangladeshi research institutions, BIGD and PPRC, have been closely monitoring the fast-evolving economic realities of the vulnerable population of Bangladesh, using a large-scale phone survey. Findings from the two rounds of the survey—the first in April, during the height of the government-imposed lockdown, and the second in June, about a month after the lockdown was relaxed—tell us a cautionary tale.

People are getting back to work since the lockdown was lifted. However, the 'post-lockdown' income recovery has been slower than the headline job recovery, i.e., improvement in the percentage of household heads involved in income-earning activities, as can be seen from figure a and b.

a) decrease in the % of household head involved in income-earning activities

b) % decrease in average per capita household income

c) % decline in average per capita per day food expenditure

■ April ■ June

The figures indicate % decreases compared to the pre-COVID levels in February

Before the pandemic, almost all household heads were earning, majority of whom lost their livelihoods in April. The situation vastly improved by June. More than three-quarters managed to retain or get back their pre-COVID occupation. But even for them, income remained significantly lower than the pre-COVID level. About seven percent of those who were employed before the pandemic changed occupation in June; desperate to earn something, most were now doing whatever they could find—pulling a rickshaw, trying out a petty business, or joining farming as marginal family labour.

As a result, despite quicker job recovery, the poverty rate, based on the calculation of per capita per day income, changed little from what it had been during the lockdown. In April, the income of the vast majority of vulnerable non-poor—with earnings above the poverty line but below the median national income before the pandemic—fell far below the poverty line; approximately adding a staggering 23% of the population to the category of 'new poor', people made poor by the pandemic. In June, the rate of new poor did decline, though by a meagre one percentage point.

Of course, as the economy continues to recover, the income of the vulnerable people is likely to increase further and most 'new poor' are also likely to regain their pre-pandemic, non-poor status. However, there are reasons for concern.

During the lockdown, per capita food expenditure was reduced by 21% in villages and 27% in urban slums. Overall, 38% of households said that they were cutting down on food consumption to cope with the income loss. Though far from pre-COVID levels, earnings recovered substantially by June, yet food expenditure barely increased (refer to Figure c) and about 30% were still cutting down food consumption. Apart from reduced consumption, diet diversity remained low; for example, a vast majority of the households had not consumed any meat or dairy products a week prior to the survey in June. For vulnerable groups like

growing children, this extended food poverty can have grave long-term consequences.

In April, three-fourths of the households were using their savings and 45% were borrowing to feed their families. By June, the use of savings came down to 30% but borrowing including the use of grocery credit increased to 60%. This may indicate that months of low income forced many households to use up their savings and becoming indebted, which can put people living on the fringe at risk of long-term indebtedness and poverty.

But why were they still using savings and credit for meeting food need when their income increased but their food expenditure did not? Along with slow income recovery, accumulating non-food expenditure like rent, utilities, and medical costs may be a reason; indeed, the survey found a substantial burden of non-negotiable, non-food expenditure on the households.

The burden of non-food expenditure was particularly problematic for the urban poor. Unlike the rural poor, most urban slum-dwellers live on rented property. Despite the severe contraction in income, two-thirds of these urban households were regularly paying rent; a quarter was deferring payment, which means their rent was accumulating. Besides expenditures on rent, higher food prices had been a double whammy for the urban slum-dwellers. Even though findings show that per capita food expenditure was relatively higher for urban households, the proportions of slum households skipping meals and reducing consumption were double those of rural households. With high costs of living, accompanied by months of low or no income, many slum-dwellers have had their backs against the wall.

Like many developing countries, Bangladesh has witnessed massive rural-urban migration in the last few decades, with the majority migrating in hopes of carving a better life for themselves and their families. The pandemic has induced a wave of reverse migration among urban residents, as findings show. About 13% of the households migrated to another district after the pandemic hit, most of them moved from two largest cities, Dhaka and Chattogram, to less urban districts. Most likely the migration was not motivated by better opportunities elsewhere but by the inability of many slum-dwellers to sustain the expensive urban living. This reverse migration is expected to be short-term. However, poor people are often reluctant to migrate to cities because of uncertainties, even when potential gains are high (Bryan, Chowdhury, & Mobarak, 2013).

Depletion of savings and indebtedness, nutritional deprivation at the crucial developmental stage, and reverse migration, the three processes described above, can have long-term economic consequences for many, if not for all.

The world has made major progress in poverty reduction in the 21st century. Yet the pandemic may cause a major setback in our war against poverty. We must, therefore, keep a close eye on the livelihoods of vulnerable populations and find ways to support them in dealing with this crisis.

Reference

Bryan, G., Chowdhury, S., & Mobarak, A. M. (2013). Escaping famine through seasonal migration. *Yale University Economic Growth Center Discussion Paper*, (1032).

A photo captured by a peer-researcher

Innovations in Qualitative Data Collection Methods in the Time of Pandemic

Quantitative field research during the pandemic is challenging and has many limitations, but qualitative research is outright impossible. At least that is what appeared to us initially. But our researchers demonstrated their resourcefulness in the choice of methods and collected some rich qualitative data. The methods innovation applied in the qualitative exploration of the end users' context of BRAC's behavioural change communication for pandemic management is a case in point.

In studies that involve an assessment of a behaviour, shadowing—observing study participants in their natural context—is an essential technique.

Since physical shadowing was impossible in the pandemic context, in addition to in-depth telephonic interviews, the researchers used the technique of **virtual visual observation**. Study participants were requested to capture pictures and videos of how they were dealing with the pandemic in their daily lives, e.g., handwashing, social distancing, and using masks, and share the content with the researchers on social media platforms. This proved an effective tool for collecting rich observational data remotely. The sample was purposefully selected from BIGD's earlier survey on digital literacy to

make sure that the participants in the virtual visual observation had necessary devices and skills. The participants were compensated for the cost of data used in this exercise.

In addition, the researchers identified, trained, and deployed **peer-researchers**, who belongs to the communities or the informal 'social bubbles' that emerged during the pandemic. The peer researchers collected observational data on the pandemic related behaviours in their communities or 'bubbles'. They shared their observations in the daily debriefing organised by the researchers. The debriefing was held in the format of '**researchers' adda**'—informal group conversation—which helped them overcome the uneasiness associated with online communication, facilitating a reflective and deeper discussion.

The research team also had in-depth telephonic interviews with the front-line BRAC officials on their observations and analysis of the issue, yet another way of substituting physical shadowing. Finally, the data from the three sources were used to **triangulate and validate** the data collected in these innovative methods and to get a fuller picture of citizen's experience with managing the pandemic.

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