

## **Delivering inclusive microfinance with a poverty focus:**

### **Experiences of Brac**

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#### **I. A critical reading of 'inclusive microfinance'**

Reading discourses right is important. The discourse around microfinance has been and is being shaped by interplay of ideas and forces, and it is important that we understand these dynamics and their implications for a poverty and social performance-centric microfinance future.

The rhetoric of 'inclusive microfinance' employed by global microfinance discourse power centres such as CGAP, is an interesting one and we need to read it right (CGAP, 2003). It allows the debate on poverty and microfinance - especially depth of poverty outreach, trade-offs, impact, and social performance- to be absorbed within a wider discourse of inclusiveness. Does this matter for the future of poverty and social performance-centric discussions about microfinance? Apparently, the language and the spirit behind inclusiveness should bode well for those who come to microfinance from a poverty perspective. However, a closer reading suggests that the framework on 'inclusiveness' will not necessarily advance the agenda of a more poverty focussed microfinance future.

There are two core elements that describe what CGAP means by 'inclusiveness' in microfinance-- promoting institutional diversity, and promoting diverse financial services to a broad range of clients ([http://www.cgap.org/docs/CGAP\\_III\\_Strategy.html](http://www.cgap.org/docs/CGAP_III_Strategy.html)). The real question of how such diversity contributes towards poverty alleviation is not made an explicit element of the inclusive microfinance agenda. This has real implications for debates and conversations that are important and relevant for developing a more poverty focussed microfinance future. For instance, 'mission drift' (i.e. providers veering away from its mission of serving the poor and the poorest), an important issue to keep microfinance focus on the poor, can easily be seen as a non-issue—after all, it should not matter as long as providers are 'diversifying' its client base which is, according

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to the new inclusive microfinance agenda, an end in itself. Similarly, financial product innovation and diversification will itself be important, irrespective of its focus on deepening poverty outreach. Initiatives to serve poorer market segments become no more important than initiatives to go upmarket. The search for supporting market segments that create greater poverty alleviating effects becomes as important as not strategizing upmarket interventions with a poverty focus. The progress of the sector will be measured in terms of increases in the range of providers and broadening of products, and client pool--- there is no weightage scheme to prioritise the many different ways of attaining inclusiveness. It is interesting to note that the rephrasing of CGAP's abbreviation (from Consultative Group to Assist the *Poorest* to Consultative Group to Assist the *Poor*) and the language of inclusiveness as the centrepiece of their (and global) microfinance discourse followed each other.

Yet, the concept of inclusiveness, if framed from a poverty and social performance lens, could have been very powerful. Framing inclusiveness from such a perspective would not by definition preclude serving non-poor market segments, or ask of every microfinance provider to directly target the poor and the poorest. It would not also by definition delimit microfinance provision to certain types of providers such as NGOs, nor would it stifle new financial product innovation.

The only 'constraint' that inclusiveness from a poverty and social performance perspective would place is an explicit recognition that whatever microfinance does; ultimately, it should have a poverty alleviation argument at its core. This would mean that the 'proof' of poverty outreach would not only lie with microfinance providers claiming to reach the poor, but providers serving non-poor market segments would also have to think through carefully, develop strategies, monitor and demonstrate how their services are delivering on poverty alleviation, however indirectly. This would have been very powerful as the strength and power of a range of diverse players -from donors, to commercial investors, from NGOs to banks- all could be harnessed towards supporting microfinance as a poverty alleviation tool that works. We could have been inclusive in ways that matters for poverty alleviation -a real inclusiveness with an overarching vision, as opposed to an inclusiveness that is merely a strategy without a meaningful end.

This paper is a case study on how microfinance institutions can deliver on inclusive microfinance with a focus on poverty alleviation. It is based on how Brac, a large development NGO of Bangladesh has managed to serve various market segments -the poorest, the poor and the non-poor- with microfinance, but always having at the core a poverty focussed argument, thinking,

strategizing and monitoring. There have been challenges and things have not always gone as expected. The important point however is that these challenges and unanticipated consequences are identified and very much made to be a part of the 'organisational discomfort' that provides the fodder, language, and arguments for new innovations. In this paper, my aim is mainly to elaborate on how such challenges and fissures are made to count within an organisational culture.

## **II Brac's microfinance canvas**

The poor are a heterogeneous diverse group with diverse livelihoods, needs and potential, which change over time due to lifecycle, new opportunities and external shocks. This diverse and dynamic reality of poor peoples' lives forms the canvas within which Brac conceptualises and designs its repertoire of development programs, in which microfinance is a core element. In this section, we first provide a glimpse of Brac's microfinance canvas and then focus discussion on how it has challenged itself to deliver on including the poorest within not only the operational focus but also conceptual focus of microfinance.

A number of points emerge from table 1. First, the poor and the poorest constitute over 97% of Brac's microfinance clients. Interestingly, almost 26% of Brac's microfinance clients are the poorest, those who join its core microfinance programme -Dabi- through the Income Generation for Vulnerable Groups Development (IGVGD) programme. Second, expansion of Brac's microfinance programme for the 'non-poor,' i.e. Progoti and Unnati, is much faster for the agricultural credit programme (Unnati) than it is for the non agricultural credit programme (Progoti), suggesting a focus on supporting the agricultural sector for more robust local economic growth, which has been argued in the literature to have far stronger poverty alleviating effects. Third, the interlinkage between the various microfinance programmes is worth mentioning. For instance, about 70% of the IGVGD clients who come from the poorest segment of the population graduate to Brac's Dabi microfinance programme; over 13% and 40% of our Progoti and Unnati programme clients respectively are 'graduates' from Dabi programme. Thus, the range of Brac's microfinance programmes are not only designed to serve various market segments, but the focus is very much on supporting sectors that have greater poverty alleviating effects. More importantly, programmes have a strong element of supporting various levels of graduation. In the rest of the paper, we focus on the experiences of Brac's programmes for the poorest of which microfinance is a core component of the programmatic strategy.

Table 1: Brac's microfinance canvass: inclusive microfinance with a poverty focus

Programme name	Started from	Main arguments	Target group	Product summary	Total no. of clients (as of Dec 03)
IGVGD	1985	The poorest need grant based entry points into microfinance.	Poorest women receiving food aid under the Government of Bangladesh /World Food Programme (WFP) Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) programme.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monthly food aid for 2 years</li> <li>- Social awareness and Income Generating Activities (IGA) training</li> <li>- Health support</li> <li>- Savings</li> <li>- Microcredit (av. 1<sup>st</sup> loan taka 2,000)</li> </ul>	1,085,114
Dabi	1974	The poor women can successfully use and repay loans	Moderate poor women from households owning no more than 50 decimals of land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loan repayable in 46 equal weekly instalments</li> <li>- 1<sup>st</sup> loan taka 5,000</li> </ul>	2,984,886
Progoti	1996	<p>Micro entrepreneurs face major credit constraints in expanding their business.</p> <p>Expansion of micro enterprises can generate employment and local economic growth</p>	Micro entrepreneurs in rural and peri-urban areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collateralised loan repayable in monthly instalments.</li> <li>- 24 month, 36 month and 48 months loan.</li> <li>- Interest rebate in case of early repayment</li> <li>1<sup>st</sup> loan size from taka 20,000</li> </ul>	41,633
Unnati	2001	<p>Small farmers face major credit constraints in diversifying into cash crop and non-crop sectors.</p> <p>Expansion of employment opportunities for the poor and a boost to agricultural production</p>	Small farmers (owning 3 acre or more land) involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collateralised year long loan repayable in weekly instalments</li> <li>- 1<sup>st</sup> loan size taka 12,000</li> </ul>	64,534

### **III Building opportunity ladders for the extreme poor: designing grants that build livelihoods**

Brac long realised the difficulties of reaching and addressing the needs of the extreme poor using conventional microfinance. But for Brac, the challenge was in developing mechanisms through which the extreme poor too could be included within its microfinance programmes using the window of opportunity provided by grants to build sustainable livelihoods in a way that is cost-effective and yet goes beyond grants.

#### ***IGVGD Program: Including Those Left Out***

In 1985, Brac approached the World Food Programme (WFP), which was already providing a time-bound food assistance to the extreme poor under its Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) program, to implement a new linkage and sustainable model for the vulnerable group. The IGVGD programme was thus designed to link extremely vulnerable women to mainstream development activities. Under this initiative, extreme poor women were organised into groups and provided with skill development training in sectors, such as poultry, where large-scale self-employment can be created. During the programme period, these extremely poor women received food transfers, a savings scheme was developed, and later, small amounts of programme credit were also provided so that the training they received could be more meaningfully used for a more secure livelihood.

The whole programme was focused on developing a systematic approach to take advantage of the window of opportunity in the lives of these extreme poor women while they received the food transfers and the short-term security. It provided support so that the women could stand on more solid ground once the transfer period was over. An independent study by WFP found that through this strategic linkage, more than three quarters of those who receive the VGD card in every cycle end up becoming regular clients of Brac's microfinance program.

A study by Hashemi (2001) found that the subsidy per VGD women is about \$135, which according to the paper, '[...] represents a small subsidy, given the overwhelming majority of IGVGD women who graduate out of a need for continuous handouts'. Needless to say the greater the proportion of the VGD women who graduate to Brac's microfinance programme and the better the quality of graduation, the more the possibility that over a period of time this cost of subsidy is recouped.

*CFPRP/TUP: building more solid opportunity ladders*

Brac's IGVDG experiences demonstrated the possibility of creating opportunity ladders from safety nets for those who are left behind by conventional microfinance. This made Brac even bolder in carrying out further experiments with this concept.

Brac noticed that though for a great majority the IGVDG approach led to an increased ability to benefit from regular microfinance programs, for a significant minority, this was not happening. More worryingly, those that failed to 'make it' were among the poorest and most vulnerable (Sattar *et al.*, 1999).

There were several reasons for this. Brac was at times dissatisfied with the targeting carried out by the *upazilla*<sup>2</sup> representatives who sometimes selected participants based on political and other motives. More importantly, the VGD women often failed to get the full benefits of the window of opportunity provided by the food transfer. This is because one VGD card was often unofficially shared between two or more. Sometimes, VGD cards had to be 'bought' and more often than not, this would mean advance selling of VGD cards to wheat dealers to raise the money for the 'payment'. Brac felt the need for a programme where we would have more control over the processes and one where the window of opportunity would be specifically designed to build the solid ground from which the extreme poor could move forward.

An opportunity came when Brac was approached by the European Commission to design an asset grant based support scheme for the poorest flood victims in Jamalpur, a very poor district of the country as a part of its 1998 flood rehabilitation support<sup>3</sup>. This project was known as the Jamalpur Flood Rehabilitation project (JFRP) and had a two year duration from 1999-2001. A set of targeting indicators based on a review of poverty profile literature of rural Bangladesh was developed for targeting the poorest. A range of assets, in which Brac had prior technical support experiences, such as cage rearing of HYV poultry, livestock (cows and goats), and nursery, were provided as one-off grant to the poorest flood victims. In addition, all associated inputs needed, such as poultry feed until the birds start laying eggs, cattle fodder, seed and fertilizer for the

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<sup>2</sup> One of the administrative units of Bangladesh.

<sup>3</sup> This was financed out of EC's humanitarian assistance component (ECHIO).

nursery plants, etc. were provided for free during the first cycle of these enterprises. A monthly food ration was also provided to ensure food security before the enterprises started generating income. Intensive income generation training and follow up of the enterprises were carried out.

In 2001, an assessment of the JFRP found that over 60% of those supported by the project had already started taking micro loans from Brac and joined its village organisations. Those that did not take a loan had socio-demographic structures (female headed without any adult male support, households where the husband was disabled etc.) that made it difficult for them to take loans and use them well. The study also found that though the targeting methodology used was quite effective, as it relied just on an indicator-based methodology, it sometimes failed to include the poorest who lived in interior parts of the village and/or lived in households that could be missed out. More importantly, the community did not have a sense of ownership over the targeting, as they were not involved. This led to hostility between those selected and those who were not, which adversely affected the overall aim of the project. Poor health, which was not adequately addressed was also found to be an important reason for those who failed to do as well as expected (Matin and Begum, 2002).

These lessons were incorporated in a new experimental programme with these challenges in mind. This is called, 'Challenging the Frontiers of Poverty Reduction: Targeting the Ultra Poor (CFPR/TUP)', or TUP for short, that Brac started in January 2002 with support from the Brac Donor Consortium<sup>4</sup>. There are two broad strategies in TUP: one, 'pushing down' and the other 'pushing out'. First, the Programme seeks to 'push down' the reach of development programs through specific targeting of the ultra poor, by using a careful targeting methodology that combines participatory approaches with simple survey based tools. The selected ultra poor are then brought under a special investment programme that involves asset transfer, intensive social awareness and enterprise training, and health care services for a period of two years<sup>5</sup>.

Secondly, it seeks to 'push out' the domain within which existing poverty alleviation programs operate, by addressing dimensions of poverty that many conventional approaches fail to address. Specifically, this involves a shift away from the conventional service delivery mode of

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<sup>4</sup> Brac's major development programmes are funded by Brac donor consortium consisting of DFID, CIDA, EC, Novib, and the WFP. Currently, there are two programmes being funded by this consortium: CFPR/TUP and Brac Education Programme. Brac's microfinance programme is totally self-financed since 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Brac's Research and Evaluation Division is carrying out various studies on this programme. On the targeting methodology and process, see Brac (2004a) and Matin and Halder (2004).

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development programming to focusing on human capital, and the structures and processes that disempower the poor, especially women, and constrain their livelihood. It is an approach that puts social development, specifically a rights-based approach to health and socio-political empowerment, at the heart of the agenda. The five-year programme aims to cover 100,000 ultra poor women from some of the poorest districts of the country<sup>6</sup>.

The whole idea behind the CFPR/TUP approach is to enable the ultra poor to develop new and better options for sustainable livelihoods. And this requires:

- A combination of approaches -promotional, such as asset grants and skills training, and protective, such as stipends and health care services, etc.
- Addressing constraints at various levels -households and the wider environment of institutions, structures and policies

The CFPR/TUP approach challenges itself to deliver on all these fronts and the hope is that the initial subsidy that this approach entails, which is heavier than the IGVD, will reap benefits by building a more solid and comprehensive base for the extreme poor to participate in mainstream development programmes, such as microfinance.

**Table 2: Reaching deeper: TUP and VGD members<sup>7</sup>**

Variables	TUP	VGD
Average land ownership (in decimals)	2	5
% of landless households	93	87
% of households not owning homestead land	54	43
% of households having outstanding loan from any source	2	36
% of households reporting that they can manage two meals a day regularly	12	61
% of households reporting that their economic condition deteriorated over the last one year	44	35

As can be seen from table 2, where we compare the profile of the TUP members with VGD members over some key indicators, it is clear that the CFPR/TUP programme is indeed targeting a group of the poorest who are on average significantly poorer than those that Brac's IGVD

<sup>6</sup> See Brac (2001).

<sup>7</sup> This table is based on the baseline study of the CFPR/TUP programme. See BRAC (2004b).



programme serves. This is the group of among the poorest who either do not get VGD cards or are drops out from the IGVGD programme within a year or so once the food aid period is over.

The first entrants into this programme have now gone through the special investment phase (first two years) and have been organised into separate village organisations. They are being offered the full range of Brac's development services, including microfinance. One lesson from our previous experiences of working with the poorest population is that forcing them to take on microcredit can backfire -this is the reason why we are being flexible in our approach where taking on microcredit is seen as a choice by the members rather than an institutional goal setting exercise to 'prove' graduation. Already, about 70% of the first entrants into the programme have taken their first loan averaging taka 2,000 and are repaying regularly. We are also planning pilots to develop the most appropriate microfinancial products for this group of the poor, as our experiences suggest that for many of the poorest, the regular microfinance product and regime may not be the most appropriate.

**Table 3: Comparing the selected and not selected ultra poor over time<sup>a</sup>**

	Selected Ultra Poor		Not Selected Ultra Poor	
	2002	2004	2002	2004
% of HHs who reported to be in...				
Always deficit	62	2	41	25
Occasional deficit	35	21	51	50
No deficit	3	77	8	25
% of adult women who reported that their overall health status was...				
Good	43	55	45	47
Fair	36	27	35	31
Not good/bad	20	18	20	22
% of adult women who reported that their overall health condition over the last year has...				
Improved	25	51	24	24
Remained the same	26	25	27	36
Deteriorated	50	24	49	40
Total food intake in gm (mean)	759	998	795	807
Total energy intake in kcal (mean)	1911	2093	2017	1820
Cereal as % of total energy	88	78	87	83

Early assessments of change suggest that on average, the food intake levels of the CFPR/TUP programme participants have increased and become more diversified, with less reliance on cereal.

<sup>a</sup> From Ahmed *et al* (2004).

Perceived levels of food security and health status have registered significant positive changes which are also reflected in more direct measures of health seeking behaviour, and anthropometric measures (see table 3)<sup>9</sup>.

#### **IV What does it take? Lessons from Brac's experiences**

In 1985, when Brac approached WFP to pilot the idea of IGVDG that later became a nationwide programme, Brac's microfinance was at a stage where it was gradually becoming more professionalised. Yet, even during such early stages, Brac realized that the types of efficiency enhancing measures that would be needed to serve a large number of poor people would also create structures and incentives which may not be the most suitable for the poorest. This is the reason why Brac, while taking steps to scale up its regular microfinance, also looked out for opportunities that would allow it to experiment and develop mechanisms through which even the poorest could also be brought within microfinance.

Throughout most of the 90s, but especially during the mid 90s, both IGVDG and Brac's microfinance operations grew exponentially. Various internal and external research studies suggested that such rapid growth was leading to the poorest being further excluded. As the IGVDG approach relied on its linkages with microfinance after the food aid period was over, the efficiency-equity trade-off in microfinance started adversely affecting the poorest of the IGVDG members and many of them dropped out or were inactive after the food aid period was over (Chowdhury, 2000; Matin, 2002; Webb *et al.*, 2001). Moreover, as the IGVDG was a partnership programme, due to various types of bureaucratic constraints, it became difficult for Brac to provide the training and credit to all during the period in which food aid was being provided, leading to reduced overall impact of the programme<sup>10</sup>.

These findings and extensive discussions within Brac led again to further research to better understand the unique constraints faced by the poorest in participating and benefiting from existing development approaches (Halder and Husain, 2001). The JFRP pilot followed along with extensive scoping studies in several poorest districts of the country, all contributing towards the proposal for CFPR/TUP that Brac started preparing since 1999/2000, which was finally approved in 2001.

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<sup>9</sup> A comprehensive baseline study on the ultra poor was carried out.. See Brac (2004c) and Ahmed *et al* (2004).

<sup>10</sup> For a study on how Brac managed the scaling up challenges of its IGVDG programme, see Matin and Yasmin (2004).

As this phase of the CFPR/TUP programme reaches its third year with two more years remaining, based on research and field level experiences, Brac is already preparing to take several steps to make the model more efficient and pilot some new ideas that will address gaps and new areas that have emerged until now. All these will prepare Brac before this phase of CFPR/TUP is over, to not only suggest new ideas, but also have real on the ground experiences of how to make the current model more effective and efficient, and also have experiences of piloting new ideas for further expansion. The next phase of the CFPR/TUP will be a comprehensive business plan to attain the Millennium Development Goals for the extreme poor in Bangladesh.

The argument through which Brac approached the question of including the poorest in microfinance is an interesting and a strategic one. Broadly, there are two schools of thought -one, arguing that sustainable microfinance, especially microcredit, cannot and should not attempt to serve the poorest who according to Marguerite Robinson, a leading proponent of this view, need 'poverty programmes for such purposes as food and water, medicine, and nutrition, employment generation, skills training, and relocation' before they can use microfinance (Robinson, 2001). The other school suggests that the main constraint is product design: if we can find ways to design and deliver more appropriate financial products that are more suitable to the circumstances of poorer clients in a cost effective way, then, even they can be served (Rutherford, 1999). This latter school of thought, however, does not present a counter view to the first one -while the first school of thought refers to absolute measures of poverty, i.e. the extreme poor, the second view is more about deepening poverty outreach rather than serving the poorest with microfinance in an absolute sense. As a matter of fact, the first school of thought embraces product innovation as a way to deepen poverty outreach, while maintaining the view that the poorest in an absolute sense is best left to be dealt with 'poverty programmes', and not microfinance.

Brac took a middle position -yes, the poorest need some key interventions before they can use microfinance, but these interventions on their own will not be effective in building sustainable livelihoods for them, unless the link between those interventions and microfinance is made to be a part of an overall strategy of including the poorest. Yes, new financial products will help but not without addressing the key constraints faced by the poorest.

It is such intelligent and practical positioning in debates, with experiences of piloting alternative solutions that allows Brac to mobilise intellectual support and resources needed to scale up

unconventional ideas. It goes from such positioning in debates to piloting, to improving effectiveness, to improving efficiency, to scaling up. In 1975, when Brac was operating only in a few districts, it set up its own but independent research and evaluation division entrusted with the core task of evaluating the effectiveness of its programmes and looking ahead to identify emerging areas that require attention. It is this twin focus on improving existing practices and a constant obsession with maintaining its relevance as a development organisation that is key behind the ability of Brac in managing the pressures of scaling up ideas that work and searching for new ones. This has allowed Brac's microfinance to develop its canvas in a way that is inclusive but firmly rooted in its focus on poverty alleviation, where new ways of including the poorest are not perceived as beside the point for microfinance, but very much within it.

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