



Integrated Development Programme for Indigenous Peoples of Plainlands in Bangladesh

Lessons learned

Background

As per the 2011 census, Bangladesh's indigenous population stood at 1,586,141 people. But according to the indigenous population in Bangladesh, approximately five million people belong to indigenous communities. The majority of the indigenous population live in the plainland districts of the country and rest in the Chattogram Hill Tracts (CHT). Despite significant development and recent economic growth in the country, many of the indigenous communities residing in the plainlands still have a high prevalence of poverty and vulnerability.

Project summary

In line with the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the organisation's strategic priorities, the BRAC Integrated Development Programme (IDP) focuses on supporting the most marginalised communities to improve resilience by reducing their vulnerability to shocks. As indigenous communities living in the plainlands are some of the most marginalised communities in Bangladesh, a specific project has been operational between 2012-2020, which has singularly focused on supporting their unique needs.

The goal of the Indigenous Peoples Project has been to empower the poorest and most marginalised indigenous communities living in the plainlands, facilitating them to gain greater access to and control over their resources, decisions, and actions. The project has focused on holistic development and collective programmatic interventions, to have a synergistic impact on a small number of specific communities. During the project period, around 40,000 people have been reached out to.

The key geographical areas covered by the project have included the indigenous communities of Patnitala and Mohadevpur sub-districts of Naogaon district, Panchbibi sub-district of Joypurhat district, and Nawabganj sub-district of Dinajpur district.

Project objectives

- **Improved socioeconomic condition:** Improve livelihood conditions through a cohesive support system such as skills development and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- **Improved social position:** Promote greater unity, cultural integrity, organisational capacity, voice and dignity.
- **Improved governance/create an enabling environment:** Create awareness on and advocate for indigenous peoples' issues among the non-indigenous community, service providers and policy actors at multiple levels.

Key activities

The project's nodal points have been its village development organisations (VDOs), where the majority of the participants are women. The VDOs are awareness-raising platforms and act as support delivery hubs, through which the following key services are provided:

1. **Livelihood:** Selection of ultra-poor participants, who will then receive training focused on income-generating activities and livelihood security, asset transfers to start micro-enterprises, and skills such as homestead gardening, beef fattening and goat rearing.
2. **Education:** Career counselling for higher education, grant support for education and linking students to nearby pre-primary and primary schools.
3. **Health, family planning and WASH:** Family planning awareness for eligible couples, health and hygiene practices and linking communities with health services in government-run and other recognised private healthcare centres.
4. **Community mobilisation and capacity building:** Raising awareness on different socio-economic issues relevant to their life and livelihoods are done through discussion in regular VDO meetings. Cultural preservation, community empowerment through providing leadership training for participating in household decision making and supporting communities to resolve their own problems and to respond to social issues as needed.
5. **Addressing human rights and violations:** Ensuring support, counselling, and legal aid to support survivors of violence and their families.
6. **Advocacy and networking:** Between indigenous and non-indigenous people in local media and administration minimise the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous people and to avail social safety net services and other government and non-government services.

Key lessons learned

1. **Education support was essential.** Most children attended school, and parents felt the need for and understood the importance of education. Education stipends have the potential to provide hope for pupils from indigenous communities at the Secondary School Certificate level, Higher Secondary School Certificate level, and university admission.
2. **Students strongly valued career counselling at the local level and youth conferences.** These initiatives supported them to find direction and build networks with other indigenous people, boosting their morale.
3. **Networking opportunities are crucial for safeguarding culture and identity.** The project has been providing networking opportunities for the indigenous communities living in north-western Bangladesh through ethnic festivals (Sidu Kanu for the Santal and Karam for the Oraon community) in each sub-district around the year.
4. **Various initiatives of the project helped to increase the leadership skills of women.** It was evident that many women were very articulate in voicing their problems. A total of 600 VDO members received gender training over the years. There are indications that women have begun to make family decisions and to have control over



their household assets. The shackles of patriarchy are strong, however, and child marriage and dowry are still somewhat prevalent.

5. **Awareness about health, hygiene, and other social issues improved.** More reliance on doctors (who have graduated with Bachelors of Medicine and Surgery) was reported. Traditional medicinal practices continue to exist for common seasonal diseases.
6. **Providing sanitation facilities contributed to improving the overall health of the community.** A total of 3,074 households received these facilities. The awareness-raising interventions on healthcare and hygiene practices at the sessions in VDO meetings boosted behavioural change to use cleaner sanitation at the household level. Due to lack of money, some households were not able to install their sanitary latrines despite 50% cost-sharing by the project.
7. **VDO members showed keen interest in handicrafts with support from BRAC during the period when agricultural involvement was minimal.** It was evident that the Santal communities' wall art could be used in some product designs while preserving their intellectual property rights. The fact that marginalised ethnic groups in Bangladesh make these products is likely to appeal to urban consumers, given that there is a market for ethnic aesthetics. Such approach might ensure sustainability and lessen the need for direct livelihood interventions by private sectors/non-government organisations.

Short-term recommendations

1. **Focus on young people:** Resources should be allocated to scale up youth group activities. The main focus of future projects should be young people, while their parents focus on income generating activities. Young people from these regions are generally underrepresented in national and international platforms, even though they are ready to take up challenges such as intercultural practices, critical thinking and digital literacy.
2. **Formalise traditional institutions:** Institutions such as the *Pargana Parishad* for the Santal communities and *Paddapanch* for the Oraon communities need reviewing in the light of evidence that these institutions are not very effective at their current capacities - not only in Bangladesh but in South Asia. Experience shows that such organisations work well when institutionalised by the state, so initiatives should be taken to formalise these institutions with the local government. These institutions can stay relevant by arranging initiatives such as leadership capacity development and gender training.
3. **Fully fund sanitation initiatives:** Projects should provide full economic support to fund and install sanitary latrines. Expenses related to transport, carrying cost, labour should be paid by the participants.

Long-term recommendations

1. **Support sustainability of local institutions:** Indigenous peoples all over the world have traditional social organisations and institutions (ie, *Pargana Parishad*, *Paddapanch*). These institutions are symbols of their identity and existence, and can still mobilise local indigenous people to build unity and solidarity to protect their integrity, and culture, access to land, economic resources and fundamental human rights. These social institutions should be institutionally strengthened so that they can play a vital role in society and development after the project phases out.
2. **Prioritise solidarity meetings:** Solidarity meetings have the potential to sensitise office bearers at the upazila parishad (sub-district council) and union parishad (local government) levels and act as a potent reminder that indigenous people are strong contenders for receiving benefits through the government's social protection policy. Projects should prioritise organising solidarity meetings/events where indigenous and non-indigenous people can participate. Meetings should also be held within indigenous communities to build unified actions for common goals.
3. **Review income-generating activity strategies:** Some income-generating activities are clearly more successful than others. Internal reports clearly show that the project participants were often not successful with poultry businesses, but that they were mostly successful in other skills-based work and entrepreneurship. More technical assistance is required when it comes to farming, i.e. beef fattening, duck rearing, goat rearing and sheep rearing. The member selection mechanism of the income-generating strategies should be reviewed.
4. **Formalise the traditional structures to save culture:** Continued focus needs to be put on reviving traditional institutions (ie, *Pargana Parishad* for the Santal communities and *Paddapanch* for the Oraon communities), as well as cultural festivals of the different indigenous communities in the region. These activities were strongly appreciated and such an emphasis will provide a strong identity for project participants.
5. **Human rights issues:** Strong advocacy initiatives should be considered for protecting indigenous peoples' rights, considering the remarkable progress in recognition of indigenous peoples' rights at the global level.

6. **Phase-out in 5-7 years:** Scaling down some activities (ie, conducting training in communities) is possible, but it would not be prudent to phase out at this stage. Project participants remain socioeconomically vulnerable. Projects need to run for a further 5-7 years with a combination of income-generating activities, institutional development via VDOs and youth-centred activities. In the coming years, the focus needs to be on the development of soft skills, job placement, and career growth of young people.

Programme innovation for the future

1. **Involve women in handicrafts.** Create market linkages for products made by indigenous women and look for niche markets. Think of other products based on the Santal communities' aesthetics, while upholding their intellectual property rights.
2. **Formalise traditional structures to save culture and identity.** Develop a training module and protocol to be operationalised at the community levels involving VDOs and members of the community/traditional structure.
3. **Organise a regional festival comprising all indigenous people in a suitable location in north-western Bangladesh.** Make it a regular feature in the calendar of events. A special day can be selected for the event (ie Sidhu Kanu day or international day of the world's indigenous people). Consult project participants to fix the place and date.
4. **Arrange for soft skills development for young people, appropriate for the digital age.** Consult what they would like to learn and what opportunities are lacking in the locality.
5. **Commission quantitative research to see whether the income-generating strategies are effective for economic empowerment and income diversification,** including what needs to be done to improve their economic vulnerability.



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