BRAC's Education Support Program: Scaling through Local Partnerships

BRAC's Director of Education, Dr. Safiq Islam, sat in his office thinking about how BRAC could best support the Government of Bangladesh's goals of providing education for all. BRAC's own programs had scaled up significantly under his leadership. Yet 20 years ago, BRAC lacked the infrastructure required to effectively set up its programs in the most challenging areas of the country. For these reasons, BRAC established its Educational Support Program (ESP), which supported local organizations to replicate BRAC's highly effective non-formal primary school model. In 2012, over 400 partner organizations managed 4,700 schools, and achieved a pass rate of over 99%.

With the growing challenges facing the education system: questions about integrating technology, increasing life skills, and ensuring quality, now more than ever, innovative ideas were needed. Informally, BRAC had adopted some practices from the ESP schools, but they hadn't deliberately solicited ideas to scale up across BRAC and partner schools .Safiq and his colleagues, such as Monwer Khondoker, who had assumed management of ESP in 2009, had a new vision for the program: to foster leadership and capacity in local NGO's, and to create a bi-directional dialogue between partners and BRAC. "Why can't small NGOs come up with good ideas? Good ideas are not specific to BRAC only. I want to learn from our partners how they are innovating," Safiq said.

A woman is heard: origins of BRAC's non-formal primary education model

In 1984, Bangladesh's literacy rate was just 24%.The world's largest non-governmental organization, BRAC, founded in Bangladesh in 1972, ran a functional education program for adults. One woman participating in the program asked the chairperson, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, "But what about our children? Must they grow up illiterate and wait until they are old enough to come to your program?" The following year, BRAC launched a non-formal primary education program. The first year there were 22 schools.

 BRAC's primary schools were created to reach the 40% of school-aged children who were not enrolled in government schools. Some children lived too far to walk to the existing schools, and others had dropped out or never enrolled and were now too old to enter the formal system.

The core components of the BRAC school model are that it is free for all, the teacher is a woman from the community, the hours of instruction are flexible and determined by the community, and the curriculum is engaging, including many songs and physical exercise. The school accepts only poor students, and usually enrolled more girls than boys. In addition to standard school subjects, the curriculum included life skills, touching on subjects like health, social issues such as early marriage, and human rights. The school buildings are structurally simple. There is no homework, as school children do not have the time to complete it and their parents will most likely not be able to assist them with it. Teachers were closely supported and monitored, receiving regular visits from their program organizers and monthly trainings. BRAC helped organize parent committees to help parents understand and value the students' education and keep the school accountable to the communities. Through continuous contact with the community, BRAC was able to prevent two major issues troubling the public system: teacher absenteeism and extortion of informal school fees. Early results were promising. Most students

were not only completing the four-year curriculum, but going on to enroll in the mainstream schools. Within five years, the BRAC schools had reached 20,000 students.

Spreading vs. scaling: to go far, go with others

After a few years, word spread throughout Bangladesh about BRAC's school model. External organizations were intrigued, and approached BRAC to purchase their books and other materials. It wasn't long before BRAC began to ask these organizations how they were using the materials. This led to BRAC organizing trainings for external organizations on the curriculum. But BRAC's leadership recognized that the curriculum was only one component of the model's effectiveness. Abed's early investments in systems, such as monitoring, training, and accounts, were also critical to achieving and maintaining good performance. Could small NGOs be expected to develop these types of systems on their own? The commitment from the leaders of local organizations was inspiring. It was clear that they were excited to create high quality schools in their communities. BRAC saw an opportunity for change beyond what it could do by itself. In many areas, BRAC had not yet established a local field office to manage local operations, without which the education program could not be implemented by BRAC directly.

There was also a strong sense that it was better, in some way, for the non-formal primary school to transcend BRAC's own efforts. Abed often quoted the African proverb, "To go fast, go alone. To go far, go with others." Through other NGOs, the model could be more widely implemented; BRAC could contribute to a growing civil society across the country, and help support local NGOs, particularly those with women leaders. BRAC could provide its system, experience, and proven tools.

Formalizing: the development of BRAC's Educational Support Program

With the intention of scale in mind, and the knowledge that many external organizations were very interested in their non-formal primary school model, it wasn't long before Sir Fazle Abed and Kaniz Fatema, then director of BRAC's Education Programme, decided to create formal partnerships with other organizations. BRAC would support them to implement the BRAC model in their own schools. This initiative would be called the "Education Support Program" (ESP) and managed separately from BRAC's non-formal primary education program.

In 1991, the BRAC education team developed rigorous criteria for partner selection. They exclusively looked for partners in areas where BRAC was not working. By the end of 1991, 26 partners representing 130 schools had signed three year contracts with BRAC. In the first year of the program, BRAC funded over half of the partner organization's related expenses, including books, trainings, rent and the teacher's salary. As in BRAC's own model, a program organizer was employed to visit the school regularly to support the teacher and ensure local accountability. However, ESP encountered some initial difficulties with this model. Program organizers were not visiting the schools often enough. Teachers were not being paid on time, and as a result many were quitting. After observing this, BRAC decided to alter their strategy to fund all related educational expenses and to increase BRAC's oversight role. Even with these additional expenses included, the total cost was slightly less than the non-formal primary education model. In 1993, ESP entered partnerships with an additional 47 partners.

Systems of support: how BRAC worked with local partners

"There is a reason we call this the 'Educational Support Program.' We see this as a partnership between BRAC and the local NGO. We aren't a donor or a monitor—we want the NGOs to know that we are there to support them, to help them solve their problems as much as we can." –Monwer Khondoker, BRAC Education Programme

BRAC's criteria for screening potential partners had evolved with their experience. Through BRAC field offices and other informal channels, ESP solicited applications annually. ESP looked at NGO capacity and financial practices. Motivation was also an important factor to evaluate; ESP staff interviewed leaders of applying organizations to understand their commitment to the program. Monwer stated that, "Often, NGOs looking at our program tell us that the system looks like too much work—there are too many rules, too much structure. So we send them to talk to other NGOs implementing the model, to see the results and talk to them." Once selected, the NGO signed a 3-year contract with BRAC, which was the amount of time it took to complete one full school cycle.

Leadership from new partner organizations underwent several days of training once they joined ESP. The training combined visits to existing BRAC and ESP schools. Participants learned about pedagogies, BRAC's values, financial practices, and other operational information. Program organizers also went through a twelve day basic training, which included topics like school management and train-the-trainer sessions so that they could lead the monthly teacher trainings. All teachers received their first 12-day training from BRAC.

BRAC set up quarterly meetings for program organizers to discuss their issues and receive support. "It's not like the answers to the challenges facing program organizers are written in a book somewhere! But some of us working in ESP have been with BRAC for many years; we've had a lot of experiences and can share the learning that we have," said Monwer.

Formally, BRAC provided partner NGOs with technical support, financial support, supervision from a program organizer, and monitoring. Yet many NGOs gained even more from the relationship. Some took the practices and applied them across their whole organization, beyond the schools. In other cases, people were so inspired by the values and Abed's philosophy, that they were inspired to scale their own organizations (see **Exhibit A**).

Some partners required additional technical assistance and supervision from program organizers and BRAC field staff. In general, program organizers visited each organization twice a week, and BRAC staff came monthly. As partners became more self-sufficient, BRAC visited only a few times a year. In general, few partners dropped out or had their contracts end early. When a partner NGO was not performing well or seemed to lack commitment, ESP would wait for the existing group of students to finish the three year cycle, and then end the partnership. The most common reasons for terminating or not continuing a contract was scarcity of BRAC funds, followed by irregular or non-payment of teachers and program organizations. From 1995 to 2003, 108 NGOs (25%) were dropped.

For the first five years, BRAC funded ESP from its own core funds generated from social enterprise. In 1996, it included ESP in its proposal to BRAC's Education Donor Consortium, a mechanism set up to encourage a closer and more coordinated relationship with donors. A mission report in 2003 found that on average, ESP school cost per child was around US $12, compared to US $19 for BRAC schools.

The same report noted that ESP partners gained a number of benefits. The authors wrote:

> *All of the NGOs visited by the review team found that the credibility that BRAC had earned in development work throughout Bangladesh had increased the visibility and credibility of the partner NGOS, in turn. It enabled many of the NGOs to expand their programs and activities through other donor funding, thereby creating a wider integrated approach to poverty alleviation. In a few cases, national and international donors saw partnership with BRAC has a positive selection criterion and enabled NGOs to proceed through the selection process much more quickly. In other cases, NGOs that had started their operations by running NGPE schools under ESP were able to expand their programs to micro-credit or other small business endeavors. The partnership with BRAC ESP increased the capacity of NGOs to manage education programs and the confidence to do it well. Also, it increased mobility and career opportunities of both small and large NGO staff as the program organizers and teachers were seen as competent and skills by outsiders. They were, therefore, given increased opportunities to transfer their new knowledge and skills to other jobs*.

BRAC's Research and Evaluation Division conducted assessments of graduates' competency in 1996, 1998, and 2000. In the first studies, ESP graduates had slightly lower proficiency in basic skills than the BRAC school graduates. However by 2000, ESP students were outperforming the BRAC school students by several points.

From scaling to intensifying: focusing on underperforming areas

In the 2000s, BRAC's non-formal primary education program underwent significant growth. By 2008, they had over 38,000 schools in operation, accounting for 11% of all graduating primary school students, roughly 600,000 annually. Government primary schools had also scaled up tremendously; Bangladesh was on its way to achieving the Millennium Development Goals for education. Yet the gains had not come evenly; some places in Bangladesh, particularly those with challenging geographies or ethnic minorities, had not seen the improvements in educational status that much of the country had seen. Abed requested that ESP increase its focus, partnering with organizations in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where non-Bengali speaking ethnic minorities were concentrated.

After the release in2010 of a UNICEF research report detailing where the greatest educational needs in the country were (see **exhibit B**), BRAC Education Program revised its strategy to intensify coverage in underperforming areas. The *Haors*, submerged areas in eastern Bangladesh, were one area where BRAC would give "blanket coverage," that is, ensure that all children had access to a school. ESP also narrowed its regional focus to prioritize the underperforming areas. In addition, the ESP model was strengthened—the curriculum was extended (i.e. cover the five years of primary school curriculum in four years, which is what the BRAC schools had used since 1999). In addition, BRAC's multi-strategy language teaching was introduced to partner NGOs working in areas with ethnic minorities, most of which were in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. BRAC also supported partners to establish more schools in reach to ethnic minority children.

However, working in the most remote areas is challenging. In many instances, these areas are largely inaccessible by road and experience more natural disasters than other areas. Population density is lower, so in a few cases the class size dipped below the required minimum of 30 students, particularly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. It was often difficult to find qualified teachers and program organizers in the most remote areas, or to ensure that program organizers visited schools and held teacher trainings regularly. BRAC's management structure for ESP was relatively lean, and program organizers were not directly responsible to BRAC. ESP program organizers had a difficult job; often their responsibilities required them to work long hours. It was also a bit lonely; unlike the BRAC program where there were

many program organizers sitting in the office together, the program organizers for NGOs lacked peers, seeing other program organizers only at the quarterly meetings. When program organizers quit, which they often did after a few years, replacing them was hard. When necessary, ESP tried to use its network of NGOs to identify program organizers who might be willing to transfer to a new organization.

Remote areas also posed challenges when transferring money. BRAC typically paid its staff on a monthly basis, but it was more difficult to disburse funds to partner organizations in remote areas. As a result, BRAC transferred larger sums to these organizations twice a year, creating more scope for mismanagement or misappropriation. BRAC's audit team routinely reviewed ESP partners' financial activities, and thus far issues had been minimal.

What's next: learning from a network of innovative leaders

By 2013, ESP partners had graduated over 750,000 students across Bangladesh. The support network included a total of 407 partners operating close to 4,700 schools. In recent years, the percentage of students passing the national exam had surpassed 99%. While most of the ESP partners still needed significant support from BRAC, Safiq and Monwer noted that there was a small percentage that had the potential to become completely self-sufficient, "When I spend time with these NGO leaders, I learn so much. I run a program, but they are running a whole organization." BRAC wanted to help these passionate leaders learn to build the capacity to scale their organizations. It would create new types of support for high-performing NGOs to increase their self-sufficiency, even if it eliminated their need to partner with BRAC.

In addition, this type of engagement could enable BRAC to better learn from its partners. In essence, each organization represented its own laboratory. "We have 400 partners; that means we have 400 opportunities to learn," Safiq explained. The ESP team planned to invite 25 of their best NGO partners to Dhaka to brainstorm and discuss a pilot of a smaller, modified network. Out of that group, they would select about 15 organizations with which to move forward. They were considering asking partners to increase their contribution—either by paying for a larger portion of the program themselves or for increasing the in-kind community contribution. Safiq said, "The moment they start sharing resources, they will start challenging us and we encourage them to challenge us." BRAC was optimistic that this type of partnership will lead to more innovation at BRAC and throughout Bangladesh.

References

Interviews with the following individuals:

 BRAC ESP Staff

- Dr. Safiqual Islam, Director of Education Programme, BEP
- Md. Monwer Hussain Khandker, Programme Coordinator, BEP
- Md. Kabir Ahammed, Programme Manager, ESP
- Md. Habibur Rahman, Quality Manager, ESP
- Shahriar Susmita Akhand, Senior Sector Specialist, ESP
- Malay Sarker, Regional Manager, Mymensingh region
- Mymensingh area manager

Partner NGO Leaders

- Abdul Khaleque, Executive Director of GRAMAUS
- Begum Rokeya,Executive Director of SUS

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Exhibit A: NGO Leader Profiles

Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS)

Rokeya is a vivacious, older woman who founded and leads Sabalamby Unnayan Samity (SUS), an NGO that provides education, health care, legal aid services and assists women with handicrafts. She was married at thirteen, and as a result of her experience she is an advocate of women's rights and access to education. She always dreamt of becoming a teacher, and in 1986 she started by teaching children from a slum in her home. With assistance from some European donors, her organization grew to include 15 schools. In 1991, she heard about BRAC's ESP program from her son-in-law and applied. She was selected and with BRAC's assistance SUS expanded to include 24 schools. She runs104 non-BRAC schools. She and her donors both prefer the BRAC curriculum, materials and pedagogy, so SUS's other schools are very similar to the ESP schools. She considers the curriculum "psychologically appropriate" for students. To date, SUS has had almost 3,000 students graduate from the ESP schools.

Grameen Manobic Unnayan Sangstha (GRAMAUS)

Abdul Khaleque founded his organization, Grameen Manobic Unnayan Sangstha (GRAMAUS) when he was in the eighth grade. In 1994, religious extremists were criticizing BRAC and he led a student protest defending BRAC. After this, BRAC became interested in him and his organization. In 1994, GRAMAUS began working with the ESP program. To date they have created98 schools and they are currently leading 22 ESP schools. Khalequealso began Grameus Model Academy, which is a fee-based school for grades one through ten. The school uses the BRAC books and curriculum, and they followed BRAC's example of emphasizing student's handwriting and asking for a community contribution.

Khaleque has closely observed BRAC's managerial and strategic approach and tried to replicate them in his own organization. Many of the details of BRAC's approach have made a big impression on him. He mentioned that every month BRAC would send a letter, informing him what day to report to Dhaka to be paid, and that the check would be prepared when he arrived. He has tried to re-create that degree of organization and discipline in his organization, and it seems that he has succeeded.

He shared that he admires Sir Fazle Abed's unique attitude of putting the impact of the work before media opportunities. He also appreciates BRAC's transparency. He mentioned that they publish their budget in newspapers throughout the country annually. Like BRAC, he is striving to make GRAMAUS financially self-sufficient. GRAMAUS has developed social enterprises (eg fertilizers, fisheries, training center, handicrafts).

Although his organization is external to BRAC, Abdul feels that he is a member of the BRAC family. The BRAC culture of addressing each other with *bhai* (brother)and*apa* (sister) makes him feel like a part of BRAC, and his organization has adopted this practice as well.

He encourages NGO colleagues to work with BRAC as a way to develop themselves. Additionally, he describes experience working with BRAC as an external seal of approval to donors and other NGO's. It increases their confidence and trust in the organization.
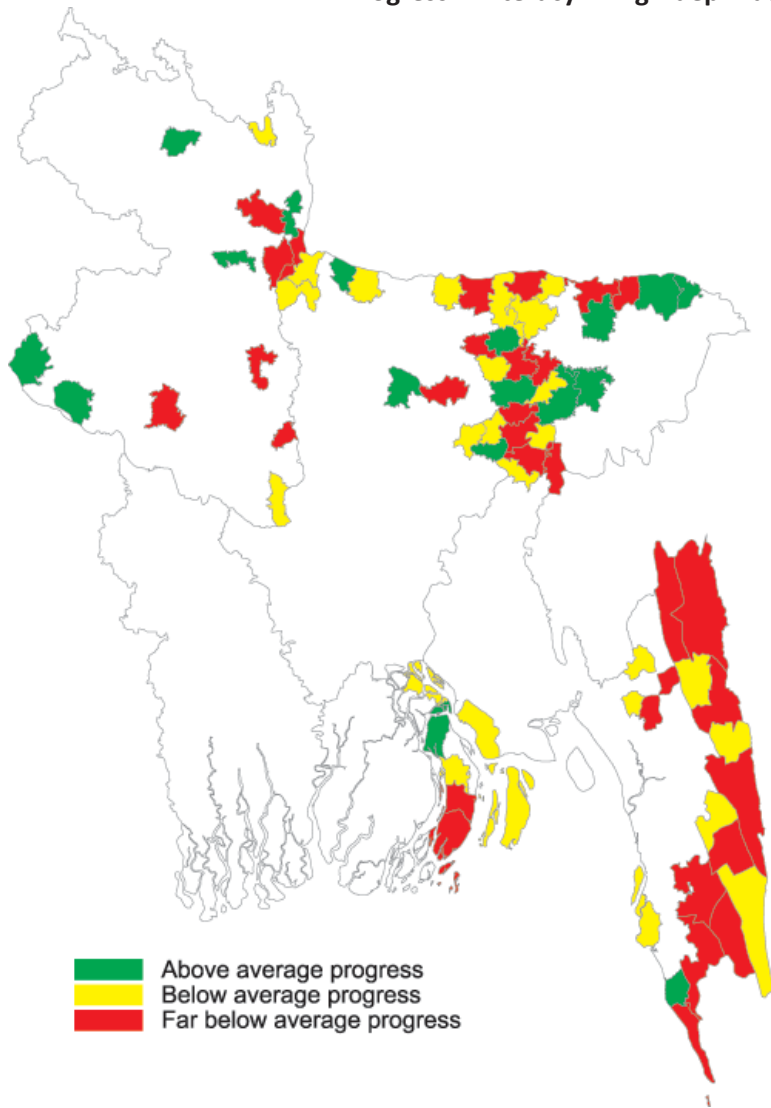
Exhibit B Graph and Map Highlighting Bangladesh's Regional Progress in Literacy
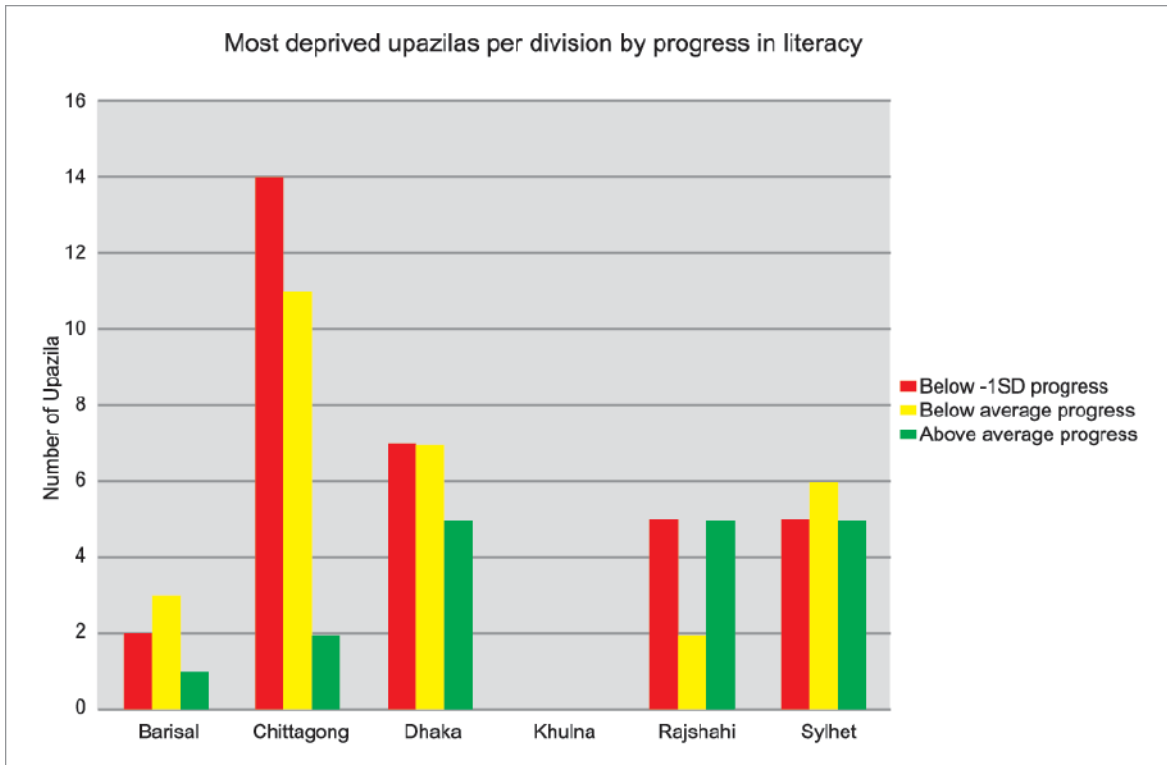
Source: UNICEF report

Progress in literacy in high deprivation upazilas

Above average progress
Below average progress
Far below average progress

Source: UNICEF report