



# **Mobilising communities for empowerment**

Creating the  
preconditions for scale



**Photos: Shehzad Noorani**

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*The purpose of this case study is to provide context and analysis about complexities of scaling social impact in South Asia. It does not intend to serve as endorsement or illustration of effective or ineffective organisational practices. The full series of cases can be found at [innovation.brac.net](http://innovation.brac.net).*

*We always say that we want to create platforms for the supply and demand side of development to come together. We have achieved that, at least to a certain extent, with the model ward initiative.*

Constantly looking for ways to overcome nagging financial and human resource constraints, this was how Anna Minj, director of BRAC Community Empowerment Programme, summed up its model ward initiative. The initiative was an example of BRAC's continuous efforts to innovate frugal yet effective ways to scale its community mobilisation work. At the heart of which were its *polli somaj*, groups of women organised to empower the poor, particularly women, by increasing their human, social and political capital so that they are aware of and have the ability to exercise their rights, claim their entitlements, resist exploitation and play a more active role in public life.

BRAC started as a relief operation in 1972 soon after Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan. After the initial crisis, it channelled its experience to pursue development. From the beginning, BRAC approached human development in a holistic way. Even its earliest interventions included adult education for women and men, health and family planning, and village group formation for collective economic activities and agricultural programmes. Deeply affected by the work of Paulo Freire, BRAC's founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed integrated activities to disrupt local power dynamics across its programmes, believing that development really happened when marginalised populations, such as poor women, worked together to help themselves. "The poor are poor because they lack power. We must organise people for power. They must organise themselves in such a way that they can change their lives," said Abed.

Over the years, BRAC grew to be the largest organisation in the world, touching the lives of 135 million in Bangladesh alone. In 2002, it expanded to Afghanistan and by 2014 worked in 12 countries worldwide. It operated 38,000 schools, provided health services through over 100,000 community health workers and had nearly 5.5 million microfinance borrowers.

## Ideas in brief

- 1 Changing mindsets and overthrowing deep-seated traditions takes time. Working on issues that call for a breakdown of entrenched power dynamics affecting socio-economically poor populations requires patience, a long end game, and ongoing commitment.
- 2 Securing the preconditions for scale is crucial to expanding interventions meaningfully. Particularly in a social mobilisation context, this means experimenting with and developing strategies and performance metrics to accurately assess implementation effectiveness.
- 3 Social norms and behavior vary significantly across contexts. If one is scaling an intervention that addresses such issues – as opposed to a technology or a service delivery programme – the emphasis should first be on piloting the idea on a very small scale with the objective of understanding how it works. The next dimensions to focus on are how the model fares in different local conditions, and whether the existing management structure is appropriate.
4. Human and financial resource constraints are a perennial challenge. Supporting staff to learn and experiment constantly not only promises potential solutions, but can itself be a way to motivate them and identify transformative innovations.

To create value chains that were accessible and supportive for the rural poor, BRAC established multiple social enterprises including Aarong (Bangladesh's leading lifestyle brand), BRAC Dairy and Food Project and BRAC Chicken. These social enterprises were owned by BRAC and they contributed a percentage of their profits to funding BRAC's development programmes.

Though the spread of BRAC's work grew substantially, community organisation remained at the heart of its approach. In its earlier days, the "village organisation" that was created by all participants in BRAC's microfinance group served as a platform for education and conscientisation. BRAC's first community health workers were selected from the village organisation by the other members.

Over time, there was discussion at BRAC about the need to expand services and mobilisation beyond those that accessed microfinance. BRAC decided to separate its comprehensive rural development programme into several targeted programmes, including one focussed on social development. Thus, in 1998, BRAC established the Social Development Programme and dedicated it to forming community-based groups of rural women called *polli somaj*.

## Experimenting with community empowerment

**Although** BRAC had exhibited great commitment and adherence to a long-term vision by establishing the Social Development Programme, the initiative had its problems. Reflecting the nagging lack of resources, the programme did not have its own senior leadership; instead its manager reported to the director overseeing microfinance and other development activities. It also meant that often, other priorities superseded those related to strengthening the *polli somaj* groups. For example, staff whose primary responsibility was to facilitate the regular *polli somaj* group meetings would get pulled into collecting overdue loan instalments. Under pressure to meet targets, *polli somaj* meetings, and, at times the groups themselves, only existed on paper. In 2009, to introduce the necessary leadership structure and internal controls, and to narrow the focus on community mobilisation and empowerment further, Anna Minj was appointed as director and

*To manage and sustain a programme of that size that works on something as abstract and sophisticated as conscientisation through social mobilisation is challenging to say the least.*

the programme was renamed the Community Empowerment Programme. Her first actions involved engaging her team in articulating, clearly and explicitly, the purpose behind the programme and its *polli somaj* platform and organizing its various sub-streams of work into well defined components.

Empowering women to take action against social injustice and facilitating their active and effective political participation by strengthening local governance were made the programme's core objective.

It would be operationalized by dividing its interventions into community institution building (working with the *polli somaj* on the demand side of development and governance) and strengthening local governance (the supply side). Once that was done, Anna turned her attention to making the programme more result oriented. She developed specific indicators to evaluate group performance and created categories to rank them. In addition, she also initiated a review of the programme's management information system. This was particularly important because stories of staff meeting targets of creating a thousand *polli somaj* groups in one week abounded. Findings from the review made the team decide to throw away most of the information collected from the inception of the programme and to start new records beginning in 2009.

By the end of 2013, BRAC CEP worked in 55 out of Bangladesh's 64 districts. It had created over 13,000 *polli somaj* mobilising nearly one million rural women. Overcoming financial and human resource constraints, scaling up while deepening engagement and impact, and keeping programme participants and staff excited about the work while ensuring that short term needs did not hurt the achievement of long term goals – all were strategic

challenges that the programme faced. And as part of its continuous efforts to address them, the Community Empowerment Programme team tried out promising ideas from within and outside of the programme all the time.

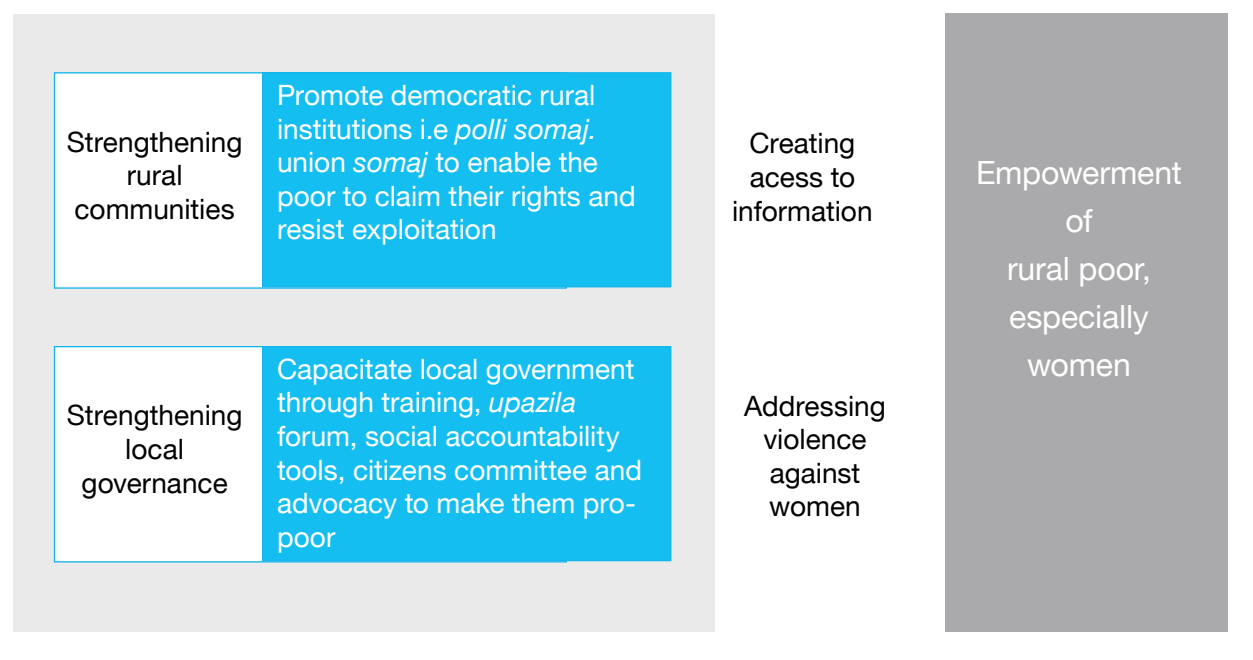
For example, due to funding constraints, the strengthening local governance component was active in only 21 districts. In the districts that did not feature that component, there was no staff dedicated to making the union council members aware of what the *polli somaj* were about and what they did. Since *polli somaj* members went to them on a regular basis, council members knew they worked with BRAC. But they confused them with BRAC's microfinance groups, which were older and better known. This was a real challenge since without the support of the union council, the *polli somaj* could not do what it needed to achieve the desired impact. Since it was an all women's group coming from a neglected socio-economic background, *polli somaj* leaders often found it difficult to bargain with the union council. So, BRAC experimented with the idea of forming citizens' committees, consisting of men and more influential members of the community. They could function as intermediary bodies that were more sympathetic to the needs of *polli somaj* groups and together with them, could lobby the union council more effectively. About 600 citizen committees were formed as part

of a pilot which did quite well in terms of getting local government to take on and execute initiatives that addressed needs surfaced by the *polli somaj* – like paving mud roads and handing out more sanitary latrines. But there were doubts regarding how scalable the idea was since staff strength was insufficient to provide the kind of intense follow up that the committees demanded.

Kazi N. Fattah, Programme Coordinator and second-in-charge of BRAC CEP, spent a lot of time thinking and looking for potential solutions. One day, out of nowhere, he got an email from an Indian NGO based in Andhra Pradesh named Balavikasa. It was a flier that mentioned that the organisation had developed an 'ABCD' or 'asset based community development' approach. Fattah googled it and found it very interesting. He managed to mobilise some funds to pay for a couple of his best managerial staff and himself to visit India to see the intervention and learn about it first hand. The visit proved to be inspirational. Humayun Rashid, one of the managers who accompanied Fattah to India was so impressed that he felt confident it could be a new, frugal idea that they could try out to address the challenges their programme faced.

Fattah and Humayun returned from India in July 2011. One evening in September, Fattah got a call from Humayun in which he expressed his desire to try out Balavikasa's 'ABCD' approach by creating

## The BRAC community empowerment programme's model

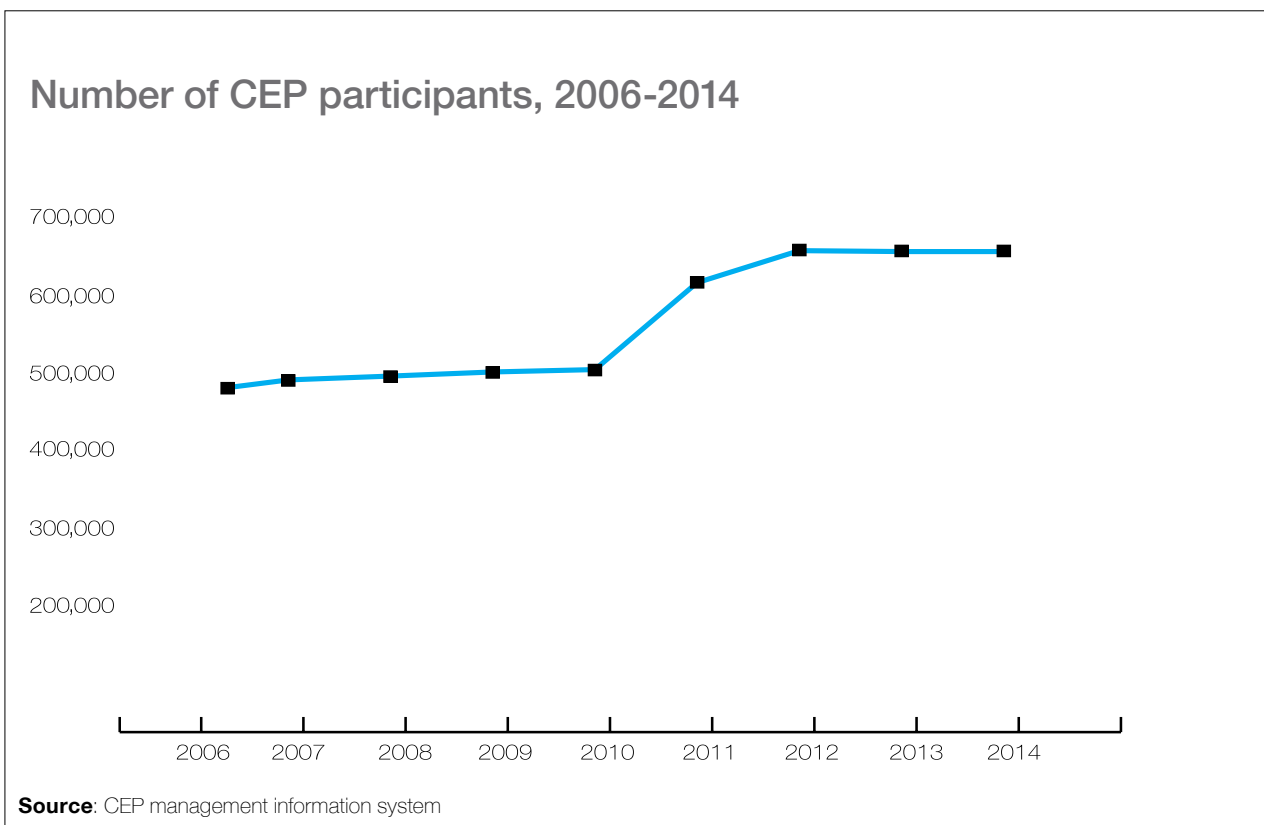


an ideal ward. Humayun's plan was to continue using the *polli somaj* groups as the core platform and attempt to bring the union council on to it as well. Then, the *polli somaj* and the union council would engage other stakeholders in the community like private citizens and other NGOs and together, identify the ward's assets, development challenges and figure out how to prioritise and address them. The key to catalysing this collective action would be the idea of becoming an ideal or 'model ward'. After getting the director's consent, Humayun finally got the green signal to experiment with the model ward concept without any resources except for existing local staff and see how it went.

## Piloting the model ward initiative

An active *polli somaj* with strong leadership along with a union council that was also diligent and supportive were determined to be critical factors to ensure the success of the pilot. Humayun thus chose Ward 6 of Boragari union in Nilphamari - a district in the far north of the country - as the most suitable site. Boragari was also the area that had Abdul Majed Sarker, regarded by Humayun as his best field organiser. Northern Bangladesh was also where BRAC's work was the strongest overall. And, like other BRAC programmes, the Community Empowerment Programme's strategy while trying out a new idea was to select an area which provided conditions that maximised the chances of successfully piloting it. If it worked there, then the pilot would be scaled up to the next best locations and so on, all the while testing the model and refining it until it was deemed ready for scaling up.

Under Humayun's close supervision, Majed started talking to the *polli somaj* and the chairman of the union council about the idea. The first step was to describe the vision of becoming a model ward and getting them excited about it. Everything else



depended on that. Different actors and stakeholders within the same community - but often with conflicting interests - needed to be mobilised to identify and collectively strive to address its most pressing development challenges. Model wards would be established through first creating an ultimate goal that, once achieved, everyone could be proud of. The key was to unite everyone in the community under a vision for its future that transcended prejudice and petty, self interest.

Majed used his deep knowledge of who the key individuals to influence in the community were and helped them understand the idea. And he used the relationships he had built up with them over many years to get them to trust it. Then, to gather information on what the community's needs were, a survey covering every household was carried out. Given the absence of any external funding and to instil a sense of ownership and involvement, the survey was carried out by the volunteers from the community itself, including staff employed by the union council and Majed himself. The information collected was then discussed in separate cluster committees and union council workshops.

The cluster committees were the same types of committees that the programme had experimented

with previously that had proved to be effective in engaging community members that the *polli somaj* did not include – men and adolescent boys. In Bangladesh, even a ward can have as many as ten thousand people. So, to introduce the model ward concept effectively, the households were divided into smaller clusters of ten neighbourhoods. The union council workshops were held to do the same with the union council members, politicians, businessmen, professionals, and managers and employees from governmental and non-governmental organisations – including other BRAC programmes - with operations that affected the community. Both of those forums sent representatives to the model ward committee which held multiple meetings to determine the indicators that would embody the development challenges the community needed to overcome to become a model ward and developed a plan regarding how the community could utilize the resources and assets it already had to do so. The indicators that the people of Boragari chose ranged from 'number of birth and death registrations', to the 'number of households that had sanitary latrines', to 'whether all school going children were going to school' and even 'child marriage and violence free society for women'. To catalyse the community's understanding of and excitement around the model ward concept, popular theatre performances were staged.

### The community's definition of a model ward

- 1 All community members have birth registration certificates
- 2 All deaths are registered
- 3 All eligible couples adopt family planning methods
- 4 All roads are repaired and paved
- 5 All infants get immunised
- 6 All expecting mothers know the importance of breast feeding
- 7 All deliveries are done by trained birth attendants
- 8 All households have sanitary latrines
- 9 All tubewells had their bases paved with concrete
- 10 All children of school-going age go to school regularly
- 11 No early marriage takes place
- 12 No illegal polygamy takes place
- 13 No videos played in tea stalls during school hours
- 14 Child marriage-free society
- 15 All marriages are officially registered
- 16 Girls go to school without being teased
- 17 Violence-free society for girls and women at home and outside
- 18 Social forestry along the side all of the ward's roads

The cluster committees were charged with initiating development activities in each neighbourhood. Of course, the achievement of some of the indicators required financial resources. The community mobilised some of it by intensifying the union council members' efforts to lobby the district council to allocate more funds to it – this was particularly helpful for targets like installing sanitary latrines, paving the base of tubewells so that underground water was not contaminated and repairing roads. The community members also pooled their own resources – through donations made by every household, sometimes as little as 10 cents – to buy saplings. The district council was the authority that owned the rural roads and the metre or so of unpaved space on either side of them. The community managed to convince it to agree to allow them to plant the saplings by the side of the roads. The agreement was that once the trees had grown and were harvested for timber, a portion of the proceeds would go to the district council as rent and the remainder would go back to the community to finance further development work.

The Model Ward pilot had begun in Boragari in September. By July the following year, Majed, Humayun and the model ward committee felt confident that they had achieved most of the indicators they had set for themselves. So, another survey was carried out.

The results surprised many; they were shocked by the gains that the initiative had inspired so quickly. Fattah said, "Although the community had given itself a year to achieve the targets, everyone became so pumped up and acted with such determination that it managed to do so in 10 months."

News of the success reached BRAC's head office in Dhaka and a big event with lots of media coverage and fanfare was organised. District and union council members from neighbouring unions and BRAC's senior leadership attended the event where Borgari's Ward Number 6 was declared a model ward by the district's member in the national assembly.

## Community-reported results, ten months later

School enrollment	Before: 87.21%
	After: 100%
Play CD in tea stalls during school hour	Before: Exists
	After: Banned totally
Birth registration	Before: 92%
	After: 100%
Death registration	Before: 66.66%
	After: 100%
Inclusion into EPI	Before: 95%
	After: 100%
Sanitary latrine	Before: 54.06%
	After: 100%
Tubewell with concrete base	Before: 42.48%
	After: 100%
Receive maternal health care	Before: Not known
	After: 100%
All roads repaired and paved	Before: Not all
	After: 100%
Social forestry alongside all roads	Before: Not all
	After: 100%
Breast feeding	Before: Not known
	After: 100%
Rate of early marriage	Before: 40%
	After: 0%
All marriages officially registered	Before: Not all
	After: 100%
Illegal divorce	Before: Case existed
	After: Not happened
Incidence of teasing/sexual harassment	Before: Existed
	After: Protected
Human rights violation	Before: Case existed
	After: Not happened

**Source:** Survey conducted by BRAC CEP staff and local community members.

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## Mymensingh and the Second Model Ward

**The encouraging** results from Boragari gave Fattah and Humayun the confidence to try out the model ward concept in another part of the country. Why did they choose just one more site to try to test the pilot in? Why not just try to replicate it in ten or twenty other locations? There were three principle reasons. First, the initiative was a complex one with numerous socio-political variables; it was not simply a matter of, for example, rolling out a service delivery model or a new technology. Second, the initiative involved BRAC getting communities to mobilise resources even though it did not contribute any funds at all; this added an additional layer of variability and enhanced the model's dependence on how communities acted and reacted to this. And lastly, the initiative warranted the skilful intermediation by experienced and talented staff with a large degree of acceptance within the target communities.

Gouripur in Mymensingh district was chosen to be the next site for the pilot. Mymensingh was a lot closer to Dhaka. That meant that if it proved to be a success there as well, it would be easier to entertain the numerous requests that had started to flood in to see the model ward concept in the field. It was also more urban. Seeing how its rural model fared and learning how to effectively practice community mobilisation in urban areas was a top, strategic priority for BRAC. Moreover, Mymensingh also scored well in terms of the strength of its *polli somaj* groups. Staffwise however, there was a problem: Mymensingh was in another region and lacked champions like Humayun and Majed. James Khakshi, who was given charge of supervising and coordinating the model ward initiative from BRAC's head office, saw an opportunity at this important stage of testing the model. He organised a workshop on the model ward Initiative in Dhaka. It brought together senior managers such as Humayun and their best front line staff from all over the country. The purpose was to a) describe the initiative and the pilot experience to the participants, b) get their thoughts on it, and c) identify those who understood the complex idea behind the model and exhibited interest in trying it out. James chose to use a methodology called outcome mapping to enable the participants – both frontline and managerial staff - articulate and reach a shared understanding of the what BRAC wanted to achieve through the model ward Initiative and how to implement it. The workshop not only helped identify the appropriate staff person to be transferred to Mymensingh, but

by teaching the whole team about the concept, it also laid the foundation to scale up broadly if and when the decision to do so was taken.

It became clear almost from the outset that the Gouripur model ward would be a very different case. The local government representatives and the overall political situation were completely different. The chairman was a decent man but had a weak academic background, which meant that he depended a lot on the union council secretary. The secretary, on the other hand was a smart, better educated young man with very close ties to Mymensingh's member of the national parliament. The member of parliament was a man infamous for numerous allegations of corruption against him and liked to be in total control of his constituency, which severely handicapped the local government – something that was symptomatic of most other urban centres of Bangladesh, especially those close to the capital city. This made it very difficult for the *polli somaj* and other stakeholders who participated to do meaningful work in collaboration with the union council. Any idea or activity that went against the interest of Mymensingh's political hegemony was shot down.

James made multiple visits to Mymensingh and tried to involve local teachers, and other respected and influential people including local government administrators at the district level. But it didn't help. One of the keys to success in Boragari was how Majed had managed to motivate the community. Though the staff person chosen for Mymensingh was also capable and experienced, she lacked depth both in terms of her knowledge of the community and her own acceptance in it. These factors slowed down even work that did not involve the union council.

In the meantime, Majed, who successfully motivated the first ward in Nilphamari to achieve model status had failed to use it as an example to catalyse the same being achieved by the rest of the union. Even the ward right next to ward number 6 itself, where the first pilot took place, had struggled to emulate its success. Political adversaries of Ward Number 7's union council chairman felt that any development successes would benefit the incumbent and hurt their chances of getting elected. Parents of adolescent girls thought that if child marriage was abolished then they may need to leave the ward or even the union to find grooms for their daughters. It was not like these challenges did not exist in the first ward, just that Majed, the field organiser was able to devote the time necessary to leverage his existing knowledge and relationships and where needed

establish new ones to convince people to be more optimistic and consider the bigger picture. Social issues such as child marriage and paying dowry were unique in the sense that even if one family did it, the others would be almost compelled to follow suit.

Weaknesses also surfaced with regard to the achievement of the targets in Borgari's Ward Number 6 itself. Though the union council chairman and leaders from the *polli somaj* were proud to show visitors around their ward and its tree lined paved roads and sanitary latrines, they were far less comfortable when it came to backing claims related to the achievement of targets such as stopping violence against women and abolishing child marriage. Staffs also noticed that it was mostly the chairman and male members of the community who represented the community and showed visitors around while the women just followed them around staying in the background. This reflected the disturbing fact that patriarchal gender roles remained as entrenched as ever. In the process of engaging men, the Model Ward's cluster committees may have even hurt progress made by the *polli somaj* groups.

## Plans for scaling the model wards

Despite the mixed results, the BRAC Community Empowerment Programme believed that there were several invaluable components to the model ward approach, and it was committed to finding ways to make it more effective. However, its present funding would end in 2015. The next phase was from 2016 to 2020, and the programme wanted the model ward initiative to remain a part of its portfolio. In fact, there were plans to scale it up. They had two important features.

First, the number of goals would be reduced. The pilot for the model ward initiative left it entirely up to the community and frontline staff to identify development goals. Ideologically, from an empowerment and customization perspective, the approach made sense. But it resulted in the establishment of far too many goals – the first model ward community set itself no less than 18 – many of which were not articulated in a quantifiable manner – for example, 'no child marriage' and 'violence free society for women'. So, they would be brought down to five or six. And while continuing to encourage communities to identify their key



challenges, senior management would be much more involved in finalising and stating them. Second, on top of conferring communities the model status up on the achievement of the indicators, the Community Empowerment team would also use it as a 'graduation event'. Graduation implied that the programme felt the community had developed a strong leadership and ability to act on its own to preserve and further the progress it made in partnership with BRAC. The programme would then only maintain periodic follow up activities regarding such graduate communities and move onto working with communities it had not worked with previously or reinforce efforts in those with which it was already familiar.

Though quantitatively the achievements of the Model Ward project were relatively small, BRAC had gained deep, hands-on learning about how the model played out on the ground, greater visibility in certain communities, and demonstrated its commitment to supporting its staff to innovate.

## Reflections and closing thoughts

**Changing** mindsets and overthrowing deep seated traditions takes time. Working on issues that call for a breakdown of entrenched power dynamics affecting socio-economically poor populations requires patience and ongoing commitment. BRAC's development practice began through organizing communities in the early 1970s. Over the following decades, despite facing the same financial and human resource constraints, while most other NGOs shifted their efforts away from social mobilisation, BRAC stayed the course. Through creatively tagging its community mobilisation programme to its well endowed ultra poor programme, BRAC not only retained its interventions but actually managed to scale them up.

Securing the preconditions for scale is crucial to expanding interventions meaningfully. Particularly in a social mobilisation context, this means experimenting with and developing well defined strategies and performance metrics to accurately assess the effectiveness with which they are implemented. Although BRAC had exhibited great commitment and adherence to a long-term vision by establishing and scaling its community mobilisation programme, initially, it did not have its own senior leadership. Staff often got pulled into doing the work of other programmes meaning activities related

to many of BRAC's community groups existed only on paper. However, once the necessary leadership structure and internal controls were introduced, the programme was able to articulate clearly the purpose behind its interventions and organise its sub-streams of work. It also became more result oriented. The development of specific indicators to gauge how well each of its groups performed introduced accountability and enhanced performance.

Social norms and behaviour vary significantly with varying contexts. While scaling an intervention that addresses such issues – as opposed to a technology or a service delivery programme – the emphasis should first be on piloting the idea on a very small scale with the objective of better understanding how it fares in different local conditions, as well as how the implementer's management needs to adapt to accommodate that variability. BRAC piloted the model ward Initiative first in one rural location in the far north of Bangladesh. After observing it for a year, and due to promising, preliminary results, it tried out the pilot in a second area – a city very close to the capital. Though the staff person chosen for this second site was also capable and experienced, she was not originally based there and had been transferred specifically for the pilot. She thus lacked depth both in terms of her knowledge of the community and her own acceptance in it. Coupled with the hostile political conditions of the city, the intervention, by and large, failed. This made the management team review not only some of the decisions that were taken but also how closely it had been involved with them.

Human and financial resource constraints are a perennial challenge. Supporting staff to learn and experiment constantly not only promises potential solutions, the tactic itself can be a way to motivate them. The whole idea of creating model wards to supplement the work and bolster the impact of BRAC's community groups for women was realised by a field operations manager who was inspired by a project he got to see as part of a learning trip to India. Despite senior management's awareness of some of the frailties of the idea, they allowed it to be tried out. While some of them materialised, they were in addition to valuable learning that had the potential to inform the programme's future implementation and scale up strategy.

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*Information for this case was collected over the course of a year as part of the “Doing while Learning” project. Methods included field visits, regular discussions, logbooks, and analysis of the Community Empowerment Programme’s existing management information system.*

### **Interviews were conducted with the following individuals:**

Kazi N. Fattah, BRAC  
Palash K. Ghosh, BRAC  
James W. Khakshi, BRAC  
Anna Minj, BRAC  
Zillur Rahman, BRAC  
Humayun Rashid, BRAC  
Abdul Mazed Sarker, BRAC

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