brac

FAILURE
REPORT 2018

BRAC SOCIAL INNOVATION LAB

Is BRAC too big to fail?

That would be a grossly incorrect assumption.

Projects can fail in various ways. Even experts can miss the most obvious symptoms of failure.

For an organisation as large and successful as BRAC, it is difficult to recognise failure, much less celebrate it in the right way.

To kickstart a practice of learning from failures, Social Innovation Lab (SIL) has decided to publish an annual Failure Report - which will honestly talk about 'failures' and inspire others to learn from them.

In our **2017 Failure Report,** we published 3 of our own failure cases. For 2018, we collaborated with a number of BRAC programmes, and included relevant case studies that fall under the following 6 critical points in a project life cycle where failures occur most often:

Stage 1: Field Testing
Stage 2: Getting Strategic Buy-in
Stage 3: Engaging Partners
Stage 4: Prototyping
Stage 5: Running a Pilot Design
Stage 6: Analysing for Scale-Up

Each case comes with its own set of challenges and learnings, but if you want to give it a quick read, the one thing you should not miss are the takeaways we have highlighted from each case for you :)

Happy Reading,
Team SIL

THE 6 CRITICAL POINTS IN A PROJECT LIFE CYCLE

Stage 1: Field Testing
Not all solutions work in every context. The first step is to validate that the solution you want to implement actually works in field.

Stage 2: Getting Strategic Buy-in
Once confirmed that your solution is a contextual fit, pitch your evidence to senior management and other partners. Decide on the best course forward and define checkpoints where the project management team will regroup to assess performance.
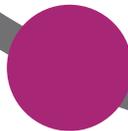
Stage 3: Engaging Partners
Map out and agree to an operational strategy with delegated responsibilities,so project stays on track, and all parties remain accountable.

Stage 4: Prototyping
Test your solution in context. See if it works as promised on paper, or if there are discrepancies. Document your findings, and be open to trying out different methods.

Stage 5: Running a Pilot Design
Modify your most successful prototype to run a pilot. Determine success metrics for measuring performance of the pilot, and review it at intervals.

Stage 6: Analysing for Scale-up
Based on the performance of the pilot, determine if this would be a worthy intervention to scale up. Always have contingency exit strategies prepared in place for your pilot.
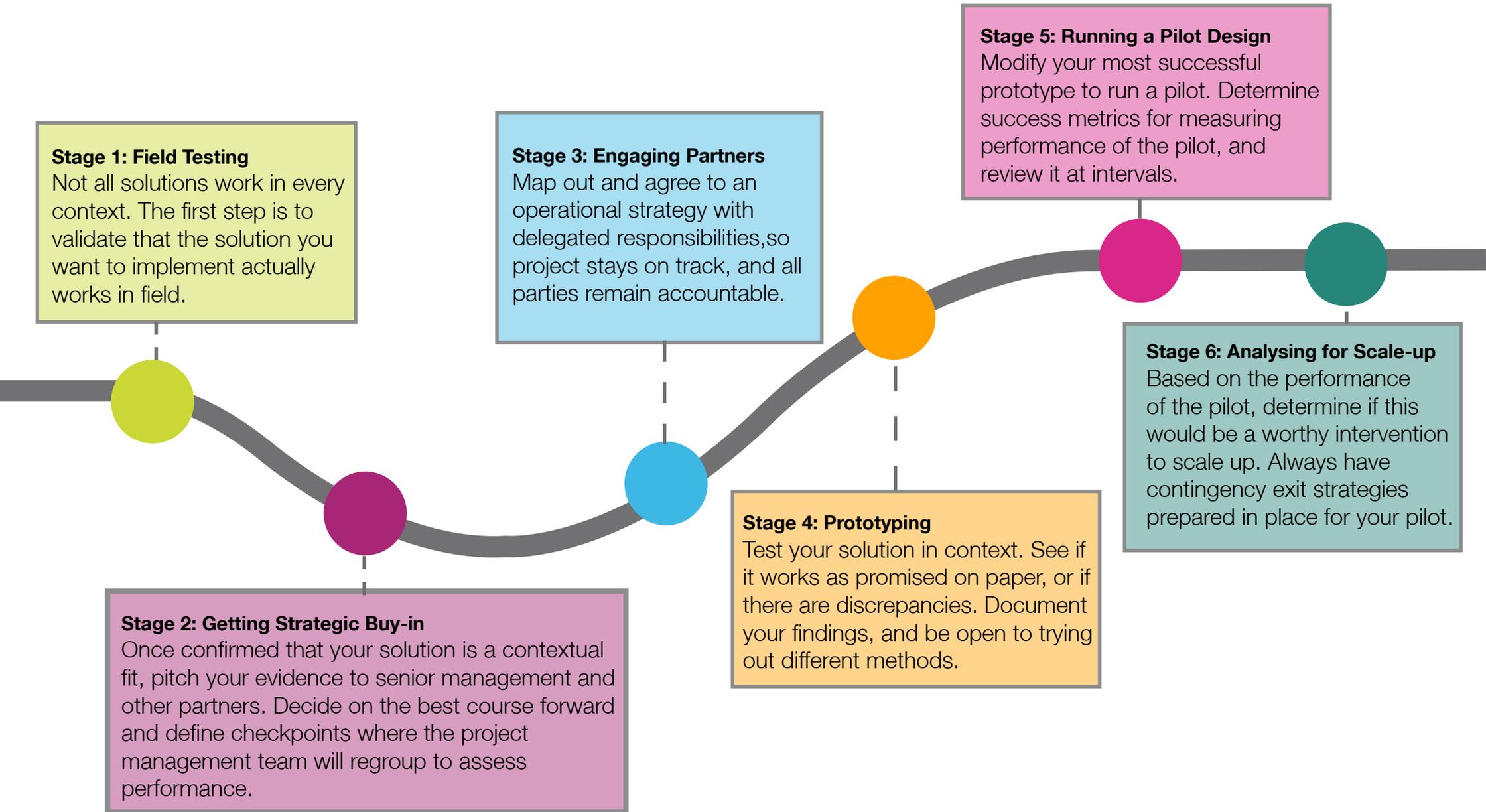
1

BACK TO BASICS

Could a screening device that worked in India perform as well in our field?

In March 2018, BRAC Health, Nutrition and Population Programme (HNPP) implemented social enterprises in Bangladesh focused towards sustainable provision of quality consultations, diagnostic care and access to safe medicines. As part of that, HNPP looked to adopt portable diagnostic kits (PDKs) for testing health vitals of patients. 2 models were tested with communities in field:

- CMED: Developed in Bangladesh, with 6-8 test options
- Health Cubed: Developed in India, with 20+ test options

During the testing phase, BRAC's Community Health Workers (CHWs) found PDKs convenient to use and observed strong acceptance from the community. Banking on the positive response, PDKs were deployed in static health centres and in field from April.

However, by the end of June, the PDKs had been recalled from operations.

WHAT WENT WRONG

PDKs provided initial screening and further testing recommendations, rather than a confirmatory diagnosis, **limiting clients' interest in paying** for services rendered.

Also, the deployed PDKs were a newer, **heavier and more operationally technical model** of the pre-piloted devices, and the diagnostic results were found less reliable in field. These PDKs were inconvenient for CHWs to use.

As the devices were imported from India, **maintenance and after-sales** support was challenging to obtain as and when needed.

LESSONS LEARNED AND WAY FORWARD

Because PDKs were not rigorously tested in field, the Team did not anticipate challenges for CHWs before deployment. Rigorous testing, if done, would have also helped identify if customers have a need for the proposed solution.

While PDKs did not have the desired initial impact, HNPP took immediate steps to mitigate risks, going on to recover 85% and 50% costs at Urban and Rural Center levels by November 2018:

- Launching a Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) care service by equipping CHWs with 2 light-weight screening devices (blood pressure and glucometer).
- Planning to meet demand at community level for pathology-based diagnostics by introducing this service from 2019.

The PDK hiccup didn't impair HNPP, but instead helped them make more informed decisions moving forward.

MAJOR TAKEAWAY

Any new service should be launched with careful planning, due diligence and rigorous field testing.

PRO TIP#1

Before launching a product or solution, always test with the exact model of device you want to deploy, to see if it works as promised on paper.

PRO TIP#2

Take feedback from both staff and potential clients. This will help you determine early on - with minimal risk - if deploying an innovative product is a worthy investment to make.

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TECH-ING UP EDUCATION

Can coding be taught to students from BRAC Schools?

We have yet to find out…

SIL approached Raspberry Pi Foundation, a UK-based organisation with a proven track record of enhancing learning of school children via coding, for a potential low-cost pilot with our BRAC schools.

Despite the partnership conversations proceeding for over 2 months, the planned prototype never happened.

WHAT WENT WRONG

The partnership crossed off every major criteria for an effective collaboration – the curriculum was customised especially for BRAC, there was local evidence of impact, the total projected cost of the prototype was less than USD 350, absorbed mostly in training the teachers, with no need for new devices to be purchased.

However, with the ongoing organisational transformation towards cost recovery since 2016, the field staff had several new and ambitious targets to meet. Because the pilot was scheduled to take place in the middle of the academic year, it would be difficult for field staff to take up an added responsibility.

SIL was enthusiastic for quick and frugal testing. Sure of the model, the team failed to generate quick internal evidence; hence, when the project did not receive buy-in from the programme, the team was left empty handed.

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

When project managers prepare to pitch a prototype, it requires a lot of time and effort; the best way to ensure the best possible outcome is to determine smart and unconventional ways of rapidly prototyping at a very low cost.

What if we had prototyped taking laptops across the street to the BRAC schools in Korail slum, or by hiring a volunteer- just to see how the children and teachers respond to it?

Would that have convinced the programme to greenlight the pilot? We don't know, but surely we would have gathered solid findings to support similar future pilots.

MAJOR TAKEAWAY

Always generate fast contextual evidence before stepping into a partnership, even when there's external proof available.

PRO TIP#1

Understand programme appetite for, and ability to take on, new initiative.

PRO TIP#2

Do not rely on available evidence of success of proposed intervention in other markets. Demonstrate feasibility through quick proof-of-concept.

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WHEELS OF CHANGE

Could a 650 BDT prototype reduce our frustrations with traffic?

SIL in partnership with BRAC Transport Department tested a solution to offer empty bus seats to BRAC employees as needed. Employees would not have to purchase a monthly subscription to travel on the staff bus; they could instead travel any route they liked by subscribing to an internal social media group.

After prototyping for 6 weeks, Shohochor was handed over to Transport for piloting, but has yet to roll out…

WHAT WENT WRONG

Despite getting initial buy-in from senior management, Shohochor got de-prioritised operationally.

For the prototype phase, SIL had dedicated one staff to maintain databases online and connect interested ride-sharers manually. The plan was for Transport to run a pilot intervention after the prototype phase.

However, that never transpired, as Transport department, despite making efforts to hire an intern, couldn't finally accommodate the workload.

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

Even though Shohochor wasn't continued, Transport has been **using insights from the prototype to make iFleet services more user-friendly.**

Employees can now rate the drivers, comment on the vehicle, and know the dos and don'ts before requesting service (which previously left huge room for confusion between employees and the transport department).

And although Transport ultimately couldn't prioritise the pilot kick-off, an online system is being developed to automate the service.

MAJOR TAKEAWAY

Even if a prototype proves successful, and there is interest to take it further, it may be dropped in the immediate term if deemed important but not urgent.

PRO TIP#1

When designing a low-fidelity prototype like Shohochor, try to make it as cost-effective and less labour-intensive as possible.

PRO TIP#2

Seek feedback from users at all stages of the process to make the system more user-friendly.

PRO TIP#3

For cross-departmental collaborations:
- Formalise project expectations
- Document process and workplan
- Delegate tasks to maximise accountability

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BREAK TO BUILD

You've heard of Credit Shield Insurance (CSI), right? It is one of BRAC Microfinance's most successful products.

But did you know it was born from an unsuccessful pilot?

When Microfinance first decided to develop an insurance product, the Team collaborated with an insurance provider and ran a pilot in 20 branches, using contractual project staff for premium collection.

The pilot was discontinued after 17 months, as the Team couldn't negotiate a more contextual product with the insurance provider, who refused to accommodate customised offerings.

WHAT WENT WRONG

Despite an extensive design phase and rigorous piloting, **the Team missed an opportunity to prototype in field.**

We heavily relied on the technical expertise of the insurance provider we had partnered with, who was eager to explore microinsurance but had low understanding of our client base and **no intention of modifying the product to meet client needs.** Collaborating on a product requires all parties pitching in to mutually assess pilot progress as well as consent to accept failure. This was missing during pilot phase.

In Bangladesh, insurance penetration is only 5%, so there is a massive knowledge gap among the masses. Those familiar with insurance products are wary of local micro-insurers who tend to charge hidden fees. For the pilot, we used **independent, contractual premium collectors who weren't well-versed in BRAC Microfinance's offerings**, and hence were unable to earn the trust of our regular clients.

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

Learning from this engagement, Microfinance designed a **second iteration of the pilot** with a more accommodating insurance partner to develop a more contextual offering. Our own field staff were involved in operations to better inform our clients of the facets of microinsurance and obtain more refined field insights.

As a result, CSI uptake skyrocketed and enrollment now stands at 77% across Bangladesh.

TAKEAWAY:
Develop and agree on a Pilot Performance Matrix

Success indicators can vary based on product nature, but setting it right can ease up the transition from pilot to scale-up.
This Matrix can:
- Be reviewed periodically, to identify if the right indicators are being assessed
- Help realise all possible gaps of a product design (pricing, benefits, financial gain, etc.)

PRO TIP#1
Always prototype before launching a pilot to identify potential pitfalls early.

PRO TIP#2
Whenever possible, prototype with your own staff to understand real operational pain points.

MORE THAN JUST NUMBERS

Does a successful pilot always result in scale–up?

For Microfinance, there has been a burning need to capture knowledge beyond numerical data, especially from the many pilots the programme runs at any given time. Microfinance's Knowledge Management Unit prototyped a reporting system with the Research and Development Unit (RDU) pilot managers by circulating a spreadsheet every month to capture the minutiae of adaptations being made to projects.

When it was proved to work, the system was incorporated onto an online platform, which was readily accessible by all Microfinance managers.

However, by that time, RDU had been dissolved and pilot management shifted under 2 cluster managers of the Product team, who were not oriented with the prototyped system, and didn't have enough time for the qualitative reporting of their wider portfolio.

WHAT WENT WRONG

For the RDU managers responsible for individual projects, the reporting prototype had been an essential part of their job, but for the cluster managers coordinating multiple projects at once, the system was an additional responsibility.

The prototype had no contingency options for data entry in a different context. Once the initial champions of the prototype were gone, there was no sense of obligation from the successors to make the system successful.

Could the system have been designed to ensure data collection from more people in an easier, less time-consuming manner?

Would an earlier trial test with cluster managers have induced them to take up the solution readily?

We can only guess..

LESSONS LEARNED AND THE WAY FORWARD

Knowledge management cannot be the responsibility of an individual or unit. An entire department has to be involved to share information more organically.

Although there is not one particular way to go about it, documenting qualitative data can be made into a target for performance evaluation or assigned as a deliverable, to obtain inputs efficiently.

MAJOR TAKEAWAY

Always analyse the context and plan for contingencies to make your pilot scale-up more full-proof.

PRO TIP#1
To obtain data more organically, always define an end outcome. For this case, internal reports were generated using the input data and shared department-wide. This made the managers more prone to updating on time.

PRO TIP#2
If you are planning to launch a similar intervention, analyse the context first.

If the target audience or requirements of the intervention is likely to change in the short term, design with the potential context in mind.

For potential long term changes, have contingency plans of action prepared.

Thank you for reading the 2018 Failure Report.

We'd love to know what you think! If you have 2 minutes to spare, please leave us feedback here.

If you want to collaborate on analysing your case stories, shoot us an email at **innovation@brac.net**