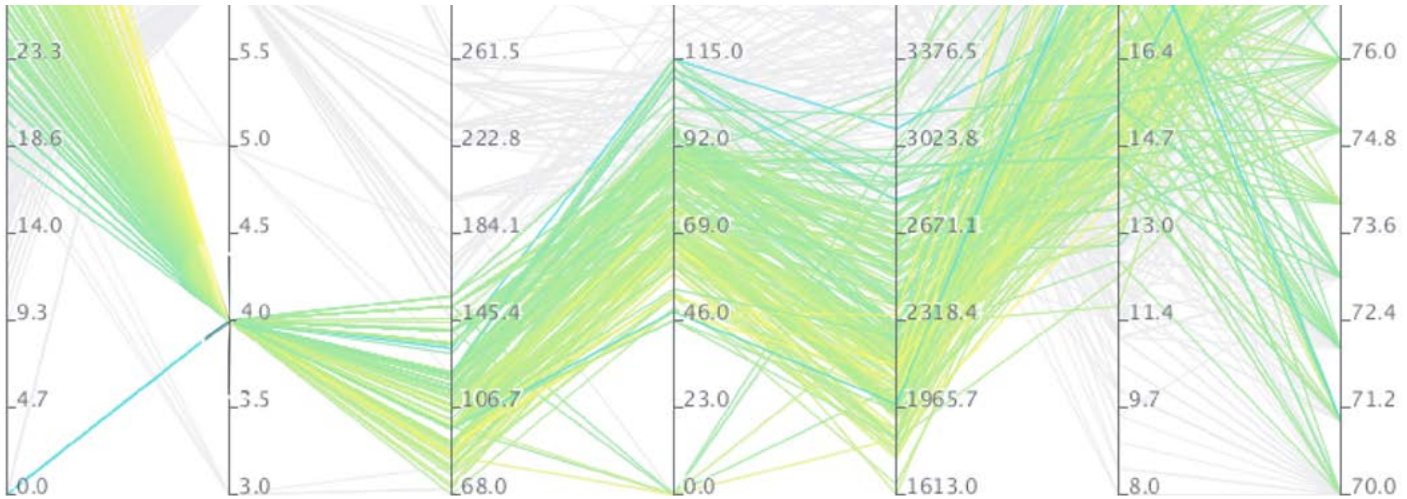


# FAILURE REPORT 2017

Social Innovation Lab



Failure is a taboo word. This isn't the first time we're analysing our failures. Though it's the first time we're talking about it. And it wasn't easy.

But while stitching up these stories together, we ended up learning more, probably by walking through every step of the journey, many times, and with many people.

No one gets into a project aiming to fail. Even then **do we not?** What is more important is to be open to quick experimentations: fail fast, and fail right.

Even the development world now celebrates failures. Why shouldn't we?

But these aren't our only failures. Quite contrary to our expectations, our youth project moved much more slowly, there was a lot we couldn't do in our mobile money pilots that are scaling up this year, we also couldn't contribute to organisational knowledge as much as we intended to. Many problems we planned to fix remained in our to-do lists.

We failed. And here are some of our stories

### How you should read it

Let's be honest, we don't like to read 'a lot'. Or read at all.

These tiny stories are for inspiration, capturing just as much as you would like to read. If you're busy, just go through the highlights **(the bold fonts)**. If you're *really* busy, then just skim through the lessons **(the giant fonts)**.

If you want to know more, we'll be grateful if you send us your thoughts at [innovation@brac.net](mailto:innovation@brac.net). We'd love to get in touch over a cup of real or virtual coffee. We like green tea too.

Sincerely,

**BRAC Social Innovation Lab**

“ We fail for real,  
when we don't  
learn from our  
failures”

# How we failed to run a fun prototype on Migration Enterprises



In the middle of an ongoing prototype, we were called in to support our Migration programme to help design their service centres. It was a considerable task, especially for the sole person engaged from our end. We wanted to test if people were actually willing to buy the services we designed.

So, while the programme continued to prep for their 12 branches for the pilot, we went to the field and collected insights and pitched it to the programme. We were waiting for the greenlight to start rapid prototyping.

But we weren't sitting idle. The ideas just seemed to be of a different shape than what the system could have absorbed. In 8 months, we called the project off.

Through this story we'll walk you through few realisations we had, and share the most important thing we learned from our role as a support programme.

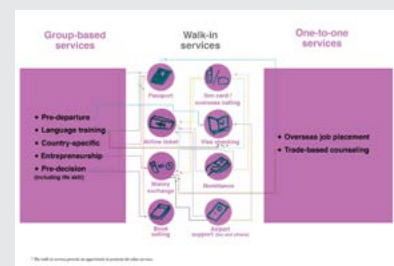
## Things we could control, but we didn't

Of the branches that were being designed for the pilot, we were allotted the last one in the sprint, which sadly, was the one with the most expectations. Why? This branch was primed to work like a flagship pilot, incorporating everything that worked successfully in the pilots that started little earlier.

Not the ideal scenario for a prototype. Although late, we realised how there was a difference

- 1 In the way we had defined the problem statement, and the way the programme saw the problem. Our assumptions weren't in sync
- 2 In what the programme expected from the prototype (perfecting a pilot), and what we wanted to achieve through it (running a full-fledged experiment with literally 'Everything')
- 3 In the risk we wanted to take, and the risk that was feasible for the programme

In all these cases, we failed to pitch; to create an equal understanding, a dedicated space, and enough touch-points with the programme.



In these cases we should have identified potential delays, and picked up a different branch for prototype earlier. Instead of creating an enabling environment for the prototype ourselves, we waited for the programme to reach us when the time is right.

**Lesson:** It isn't enough to know how a pilot is different from a prototype, if we can't translate the difference into actionable terms.

### Thought bubble: Pilot vs Prototype

[A prototype develops, tests and improves an idea at an early stage; to see if people like the service or product you are testing. A pilot makes sure everything you are trying, works and can be scaled up.]

# Unlike time, projects don't fly on their own



BRAC launched the [Urban Innovation Challenge \(UIC\)](#) in 2016, and one of the many things we offered to the winners was a [co-working space](#) in Dhanmondi.

We leased InHouse for 2017. Unfortunately, it turned out only one of our winners needed to use the space; the rest had their offices, and some were based outside Dhaka. We had from May till December to figure out what we want to do with the space, to test if it could be self-sustaining.

We realised this was a resource worth exploring for BRAC, especially at a time when the 20th floor of the Head Office was just redesigned into a co-working space. It also seemed a great opportunity to create a space for learning and sharing among the start-up community and build up on those learning experiences...

And we failed to do that. We realised that...

## We took too much time to build the business case, but failed to test

When we leased the space for the UIC winners, we didn't have a contingency plan for utilising the spare space in case some of the winners don't need it.

We planned a lot for the business case. Couple of months into the journey, we brainstormed within the team to come up

with different ways to generate revenue from the space; we thought of conducting learning sessions and trainings for BRAC and the startup communities; we even surveyed how the other co-working spaces operated, to figure a unique value we, as BRAC, could add to budding entrepreneurs.

But roll out would have required dedicated resources; something we couldn't commit at the time, given that our large scale projects were on the fly and demanded our 100% bandwidth.

## We didn't set clear success metrics for ourselves:

- 1 We did pick a [weak signal](#), but we weren't clear on our targets; *How much do we want to achieve by 2017? What would be considered as success? What's the worst that can go wrong? What's the exit strategy?* We should have been prepared for these considerations, but we weren't
- 2 We couldn't use the space internally, since the distance from Head Office was a challenge. We couldn't promote the space on social media for external events either, since we got it under lease. We became aware of all these limitations on the go, but we failed to account for it. We felt if we could detect the challenges and signs of failure earlier, it could be managed better



*Lessons in resource utilisation (In house)*

**Lesson:** Raise your red flags early and have a plan B

# The slow death of a good idea



**A**t BRAC, people have great ideas, and they are solving problems on the ground every single day. But we felt, many of these ideas went unheard, because people didn't have a channel to put these ideas in, or someone to sort them and take them to the right people. We thought this was a problem we could solve.

What we didn't realise is there was an even bigger problem we could solve: the lack of a channel that our field staff could trust enough to drop good ideas into. And we failed.

In 2013, we devised **Idea Box** – a clear plastic box placed in the then 22 BLCs to collect ideas from field staff. We launched simultaneously in the Mymensingh, Jessore and Comilla BLCs. The progress was exciting. **Chittagong BLC** even made

their own Idea box after learning about it from our feature in Setu!

Who could drop ideas? Any BRAC staff who had an idea for practical change.

Why should they drop ideas? Their ideas will be recognised at the IPC meetings, featured in internal blogs and magazines, and get them a chance to have lunch with the Chairperson!

Ideas should have been dropping like crazy, right? For a while they were, we received some great ones, except many were requests for extra office supplies and complaints and rejected CVs.

But then, the ideas slowly stopped coming. Why?

## We failed to recognise what actually would incentivise people:

- 1 We had a clear vision of why Idea Boxes would work, and we were prepared to make the ideas flourish, but that distracted us from the most basic questions: why should someone share their idea with us? Was Idea Box really a channel BRAC staff could trust?
- 2 We had every intention of launching the best ideas, but we had no way to visibly prove that to the field staff without getting actual results, so we couldn't communicate the real value of Idea Box in their career.

## We focused on the idea, and not the system:

- 3 We weren't sure how convenient the location of the boxes were for the field staff, which might make them hesitant to drop ideas. We were still figuring out if the incentives were motivating enough.
- 4 We couldn't clarify the purpose behind setting up Idea Boxes, or the type of ideas we were looking for, and hence we got ideas that were plenty in number but not feasible enough to be executed (in most cases).
- 5 Perhaps that is why, when none of the submitted ideas turned into reality, when hardly local champions were celebrated and awarded, Idea Box lost its allure of a shiny new toy and became part of the scenery.



*Lessons in developing an ecosystem for innovation (Idea Box)*

Because we failed to translate the ideas into actual solutions, people went back to doing their everyday tasks, and Idea Boxes died a slow death.

**Lesson:** Think of the problem and solution as parts of the broader ecosystem.