
STORIES FROM THE FIELD AND BEYOND

“Child Bride to Bookworm” Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Plan International Bangladesh (PIB) hosted a writeshop on 30 July, 2023 to document learnings and insights from the **“Child Bride to Bookworm”** project. Bringing together project staff from both PIB and the partner organization (SUROVI), the interactive workshop provided a platform to reflect on project interventions and synthesize key takeaways. Participants shared their learning, stories and findings in their respective articles highlighting the project's impacts on reducing school dropout, and improving literacy and education access for adolescent girls.

The resulting learning brief compiles these writings to showcase innovative approaches, best practices, and lessons learned for supporting future programming. By illuminating what worked well and where challenges remain, the brief offers guidance for adapting and building on the project model. With child marriage and gender equity as persistent issues in Bangladesh, these real-world insights can inform policy and programming to accelerate progress.

This collaborative writeshop and learning brief demonstrate the value of participatory, evidence-based reflection to further our programmatic interventions. The knowledge generated by this learning brief will strengthen Plan International Bangladesh's efforts to alleviate school dropout, and in turn child marriage and its consequences.



Photos: Activities during the writeshop

EMPOWERING STUDENT VOICES: THE JOURNEY OF CABINET ELECTIONS IN 22 SCHOOLS

Writer: Al Emran, Programme Officer, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI



In the pursuit of fostering democratic values and nurturing leadership skills among the youth, Surovi in collaboration with Plan International Bangladesh (PIB) embarked on a transformative journey – the "Child Bride to Bookworm" project. One significant facet of this project has been the organization of Student Cabinet elections in 22 schools, a remarkable initiative aimed at engaging students in the decision-making process. This article describes the journey, highlighting its benefits, challenges, valuable insights, and future plans.

Engaging the school community:

The process commenced with the approval of cabinet elections by the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), which was followed by comprehensive discussions with the School Management Committee (SMC) and teachers. These discussions served to sensitize them to the significance of the Student Cabinet. Subsequently, class-to-class interactions involving teachers and students were conducted, ensuring that everyone grasped the importance of this endeavor.

In a collective effort, SMC members, teachers, and students convened a discussion meeting, during which Surovi's officials articulated the objectives of the cabinet. This approach proved to be very successful

in garnering unanimous support for a fair and orderly election process. The date for the elections was set, and Surovi officials, along with teachers, diligently informed all students about the impending elections.

Empowering student leadership:

One of the remarkable aspects of this initiative has been the empowerment of students to take charge of the entire election process. The Election Management Committee, Election Commissioners, Polling Officers, and Agents were selected from the student body itself, while teachers, SMC members, and Surovi officials provided steadfast support.

This approach not only instilled a sense of responsibility and leadership among students but also enhanced communication between teachers and their students. Notably, the Student Cabinet elections contributed to an increase in overall student attendance, including irregular students, fostering good relations, friendships, and a heightened sense of responsibility within the school community.

An impressed observer:

The cabinet elections gained recognition beyond the school as Mr. Khaled Saifullah, Assistant Director of DSHE, presided over the elections and declared the results. In the process, his initial apprehension transformed into resounding confidence.

Learning and challenges:

The experience of organizing these elections was a rich learning opportunity. It illuminated the importance of motivation and careful planning in accomplishing significant tasks efficiently. Moreover, it unveiled the hidden talents among students and demonstrated their ability to make informed choices in a democratic and orderly manner.

While the journey has been inspiring, it has not been without its challenges. Convincing SMC members and teachers about the importance of the elections, dispelling concerns about costs and potential political discord, and addressing fears related to disruptions in education were formidable hurdles.

Photo: A student in the role of 'Polling Officer' during a cabinet election



STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Looking ahead, the following points should be considered while arranging such cabinet elections in the future:

- Approval from the DSHE for cabinet elections should be sought by December.
- The issuance of the letter from DSHE for elections in all schools should be ensured by January.
- If the budget needs to be increased for the cabinet elections, it should be done to ensure all procedures are followed.
- Students will be encouraged to have the Director General of DSHE or any other official present on the day of the Student Cabinet election.
- Sufficient time should be allocated for campaigning and related activities to promote the Student Cabinet election.

The student cabinet elections in 22 schools have empowered the students and fostered democratic values.

The journey has not only increased student attendance and leadership skills but also facilitated better teacher-student communication.

BREAKING BARRIERS: THE TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY OF GEMS

Writer: Farzana Akter Rupa, Gender Specialist, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, PIB



In the heart of Bangladesh's urban slums, a transformative initiative is reshaping the landscape of education. Plan International Bangladesh, through its *"Child Bride to Bookworm"* project, embarked on a mission in January 2020. The goal was clear - to reduce school dropouts and bridge the gender gap in secondary education in Dhaka's urban slums. At the center of this endeavor stood the Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS), a remarkable initiative that would go on to revolutionize the behavior of students and educators alike.

The birth of GEMS:

GEMS was born from a vision of ensuring gender equality and equity at the school level while challenging harmful social norms, behaviors, and gender discrimination. At its core, it aimed to instill gender-equitable attitudes and empower adolescents with knowledge about puberty and life skills. Under the GEMS initiative, Plan International Bangladesh set out to train teachers, establish GEMS corners in schools, and conduct GEMS sessions for students.

Success stories:

The journey of GEMS began with the training of 125 teachers from 22 secondary schools. These trained educators, in turn, conducted GEMS sessions with students in grades six and seven. The impact was immediate and profound. Students participated

actively in GEMS classes, gaining vital insights into puberty, adolescence, and emotional management. The once-prevalent issue of eve-teasing began to wane, while the bonds of friendship between boys and girls grew stronger. The transformation extended beyond students; teachers, too, underwent significant behavioral changes. In the classroom, they started giving equal importance to all students, distributing tasks impartially. Leadership opportunities were extended to both genders during school events.

The role of GEMS corners:

GEMS corners, established within project intervention schools, became hubs of activity. Here, students engaged in various activities like Dos Unisher Mor, Hard Break, Ludu, Chess, Carom, and Nutritional initiatives. These corners also provided supplementary books, which students diligently managed using a checkout register. The Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) closely monitored the implementation of GEMS activities, solidifying its commitment to the cause.

A vision for wider impact:

Professor Mohammad Belal Husain, Director (Secondary) at the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, expressed the need to extend the GEMS initiative to all secondary schools in Bangladesh. He envisioned a nationwide circulation from the govt.

and thus endorsing the GEMS and model school fair programmes. This vision held the promise of taking the GEMS movement to every corner of the country.

Empowering student leaders:

The impact of GEMS extended beyond the classroom. Students, after receiving GEMS sessions, gained confidence in their studies and actively led school-based child protection committees, community scorecards, student cabinets, model school fairs, tree planting initiatives, etc.

A GEMS legacy:

The remarkable achievement of the GEMS program lies in its integration into the daily routine of project intervention schools. Trained teachers have successfully conducted GEMS sessions, which should give us hope.

Key takeaways:

Introducing GEMS in schools has significantly reduced gender-based discrimination, transformed student behavior, and empowered girls and boys to become exemplary leaders. GEMS has not only challenged stereotypes but also reshaped societal norms, promoting gender equity in schools, families, and communities.

CHALLENGES & MITIGATION MEASURES

Challenges faced:

While GEMS achieved significant successes, challenges arose. GEMS sessions were initially limited to grades six and seven, leaving students in higher grades untouched. Some teachers, driven by misconceptions, did not conduct GEMS sessions effectively, assuming extra allowances would be provided.

Overcoming challenges:

The path forward involves conducting GEMS sessions with all grade levels, providing comprehensive GEMS training for all teachers, and considering allowances for teachers engaged in GEMS activities. Regular training and refresher courses for teachers are essential for sustained success.

Photo: Girls and boys using the GEMS corner



EMPOWERING INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY: A JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

Writer: Maksudul Kabir Mondal, Documentation & Reporting Coordinator, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI



In the realm of education, the philosophy of inclusive pedagogy stands as a beacon of hope. Its mission is clear: every student, regardless of their background, abilities, or needs, should have equal access to quality education within the mainstream classroom. Inclusive pedagogy strives to create an environment that nurtures individual differences, ensuring equitable learning for all.

Plan International Bangladesh embarked on this transformative journey with the "*Child Bride to Bookworm*" project, a beacon of hope since 2020. Across 22 schools, the project has set out to enhance the quality of education. A key facet of this endeavor is providing teachers with specialized training in inclusive pedagogy. As we delve into the experiences of these educators, it becomes evident that this training has brought about significant changes in their teaching methods.

Through inclusive pedagogy training, teachers have gained valuable insights into students' behavior and inclusive teaching techniques. They've learned how to tailor their approach to cater to the unique needs of each student. The training delved into the art of engaging inattentive students, making lessons more accessible to them. Armed with these newfound skills, teachers now apply them diligently in their classrooms.

The CBB project, with its goal of reducing secondary school dropout rates in urban slums in Bangladesh, has been instrumental in providing the necessary training. This multiphase initiative focuses on strengthening teachers' capacities, creating an enabling environment, and ensuring essential materials and support for marginalized learners. It's a comprehensive approach aimed at empowering schools, teachers, and students to achieve academic success.

A pivotal moment in this journey occurred in 2021 when Plan International Bangladesh, in collaboration with the Department of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) and SUROVI, provided teacher training on Inclusive Pedagogy. Twenty-one school teachers, representing both genders, actively participated in this training, fostering their ability to implement inclusive pedagogy in their classrooms. However, the impact extended even further in January 2022 when 675 teachers, comprising both male and female educators, underwent extensive training in Inclusive Pedagogy. This training aimed to foster inclusiveness in education and improve classroom practices in project schools. Guided by teachers who had previously received Training of Trainers sessions on inclusive pedagogy, the Programme Officers of SUROVI facilitated the sessions.

SOME SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

In conversations with these dedicated educators, the transformative impact of this training becomes evident:

- The training provided a bridge between their previous government curriculum training and inclusive pedagogy, aligning their teaching approaches effectively.
- Teachers now recognize the importance of treating all learners equally, regardless of disability, merit, or family background.
- Their training has enhanced their classroom management skills, enabling them to address student problems and psychological aspects effectively.
- Previously unused techniques, such as group work, pair work, and active participation strategies, are now common in their classrooms.
- Limited class time remains a challenge for implementing these methods effectively.
- Teachers recommend adding a module on Autism to the Inclusive Pedagogy curriculum.



Photos: Inclusive pedagogy training

Hurdles along the way:

Despite these remarkable strides, implementing inclusive pedagogy in secondary schools has not been without its challenges. Some educators were initially unfamiliar with the strategies needed to address diverse learning needs effectively. Moreover, resource constraints and overcrowded classrooms hindered the implementation of inclusive practices. Attitudinal barriers, such as stereotypes about disability and gender, also posed significant challenges. Engaging parents and caregivers proved essential but sometimes challenging.

Addressing the challenges:

Addressing these obstacles requires a multifaceted approach, encompassing government support, teacher training, community involvement, infrastructure enhancements, and cultural perception shifts about inclusive education. Collaboration among various stakeholders is vital to surmount these hurdles and create truly inclusive learning environments across Bangladesh's secondary schools.

LEARNINGS FROM THE EYES OF EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

The learning from experienced teachers in project schools offers several perspectives:

- Trained teachers who have implemented inclusive pedagogy see positive outcomes in student engagement, academic performance, and social-emotional development.
- Some educators, while acknowledging its importance, find it challenging to meet the needs of all students, especially in large classes with limited resources.
- Continuous professional development and inclusive teaching strategies are vital.
- Acknowledgment from school administrators and authorities is essential, along with financial and logistical support.



HELPING PARENTS UNDERSTAND: FIGHTING CHILD MARRIAGE TOGETHER

Writer: Helal Uddin, Programme Officer, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI



In the fight against child marriage, one important way to make a difference is by talking to parents. This article shares how we talked to parents about why child marriage is a problem, and the things we have learned along the way.

Getting parents involved:

We started by asking schools to have meetings with parents. We explained why these meetings were important, and the schools agreed. Once we set a date, the head teacher wrote a notice, and teachers helped get the students to come to the meetings. It is great that parents came to these meetings without being asked too much. They listened carefully and understood why we were talking about this. The head teacher even arranged the seats nicely, and the School Management Committee (SMC) helped make the meetings special.

How we talked to parents:

These meetings followed a simple plan. We began by telling parents why we were all here. After everyone signed in, we talked about the main topic, thanking everyone for coming. We also gave out helpful materials like books, posters, and special cards. To end on a fun note, we had a quiz to see what parents have learned, and we gave prizes to the winners. It was a nice way to finish things up. We made sure to tell parents how bad child marriage can be. It is not good for kids because they

miss out on school and become parents too early. This can lead to problems like having sick babies too soon or even losing the baby and the mother during childbirth. Child marriage can also cause more divorces and make things harder economically for families.

The learnings and challenges:

From these meetings, we have seen some good things happen. Parents are interested in learning about issues like gender discrimination. They also understood the importance of education, which is great.

But we have also faced some challenges. Some parents could not come to meetings because they were busy with work. Fathers could not make it because they were working during the day. Some people just did not know much about these issues, and some schools did not see the point of these meetings. Sadly, some parents thought coming to these meetings was a waste of time.

Planning for the Future:

Looking ahead, we should have plans to do more. Different methods like plays, giving out leaflets, and having meetings in the community can be pursued. We should also talk to leaders in our area to help spread the word. And we should make people aware of the use helplines - 999 & 1098 – so that they use it more.

SUPPORTING LEARNING AT HOME: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR PARENTS

**Writer: Kulsum Akter Lipi, Programme Officer, Child
Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI**



In the pursuit of fostering a conducive learning environment for students, schools often engage parents through meetings. These gatherings serve as a platform for discussing vital topics and understanding the significance of parental involvement in education. While parents wholeheartedly participate in these meetings, a common concern arises – the inability to provide an ideal study environment at home. This article delves into the insights gained from these interactions, highlighting both the learnings and challenges faced by parents.

Photo: Meeting with parents



OUR LEARNINGS WORKING WITH PARENTS

While working with parents regarding the activities under the CBB project, we have learned the following things:

- **Parents want to be involved:** Parents really want to understand their kids' education, and these meetings help.
- **Why education matters:** Parents see that education is a ticket to a better life, including better jobs and marriages.
- **The right place to learn:** When kids have a comfy place to study at home, they do better in their exams.
- **Spark for learning:** A good study setup at home makes kids more interested in reading and learning.
- **Family learning:** When older brothers and sisters study at home, the younger ones want to join in, and thus everyone benefits.

SOME HURDLES TO CONSIDER ALONG THE WAY

There are some hurdles along the way that should be considered while designing similar interventions in the future, and they are as follows:

- **Busy parents:** Many parents have jobs and cannot always come to meetings.
- **Fathers at work:** Fathers often cannot join because they are working outside.
- **School skeptics:** Some schools think these meetings are a waste of time.
- **Dim lights:** Poor lighting at home makes it tough for children to read.
- **No space:** Cramped homes do not leave much room for studying.
- **Missing supplies:** Money problems mean no desks or chairs.
- **Family distractions:** Other family members watching TV during study time can be distracting.
- **Parents not educated:** Some parents do not have much schooling themselves, so they do not understand how important it is to study, which might lead to their children being dropped out of school.
- **Sibling duty:** Older kids often have to look after younger siblings instead of studying.

The parents meetings are our chance to tackle the challenges of creating a great study space at home.

By understanding what parents face, we can work together to make sure every child has a comfortable and enabling environment to learn and grow.



EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTIONS ON WORKING WITH SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Writer: Badrun Serina, Technical Coordinator, SUROVI



In the realm of education and child development, the Child Bride to Bookworm project has taken up the noble task of working with 22 secondary schools in the Dhaka South City Corporation area. While several private and government initiatives have focused on primary education in Bangladesh, my journey in this endeavor has been a long and transformative one. I spent about six years working on PEDP-2 and PEDP-3 projects under the Directorate of Primary Education. However, this project marks my first direct involvement with secondary school children, and as far as I am aware, there has been no other organization or government entity undertaking the kind of work our project is pioneering for secondary school children in Bangladesh.

Through my extensive experience in the field, I have gained a profound understanding of the primary education landscape. Comparatively, working with secondary schools is an entirely different experience, one that I find both challenging and rewarding. In this narrative, I aim to share the insights gained from working with secondary schools, highlighting what we have achieved, where we faced challenges, and how we overcame obstacles.

A mixed bag of experience:

Working with secondary schools has proven to be a diverse, complex, and

very rewarding experience. It has been marked by moments of satisfaction, frustration, and everything in between. This mixed bag of experiences is an invaluable part of my journey as a development worker. It not only validates the importance of our work but also equips me with the resilience needed to confront similar challenges in the future. Furthermore, these experiences contribute significantly to shaping our recommendations for effective project management.

Assessing project activities:

Now, let's delve into a comprehensive assessment of our project activities. We have succeeded in the majority of our endeavors. One notable achievement is the *"Big Brother Big Sister"* (BBBS) program, which exceeded expectations. Despite not being part of the project's original design, this program was swiftly conceptualized and implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Its success was evident from the high demand among schools and communities, with outcomes surpassing national results.

Additionally, we have effectively executed a vast range of activities, including GEMS, inclusive pedagogy, leadership, psychosocial counseling, flexible learning packages, and various training initiatives. Our efforts extended to tasks like repairing and renovating facilities, providing income-generating

activities (IGA) and referral support, as well as financial assistance for tuition fees and uniforms. Furthermore, we have made commendable progress in various school and community-level activities. These accomplishments can be attributed to several factors:

- Effective communication among project stakeholders at different stages.
- Alignment of project activities with the needs and circumstances of stakeholders.
- Meticulous planning and implementation in collaboration with Plan International Bangladesh and SUROVI.
- Support and participation from the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE).
- Enthusiastic cooperation and involvement of teachers in most schools.

Photo: BBBS Learning approach training



CHALLENGES & MITIGATION MEASURES

There were challenges that hindered our performance in certain areas, particularly when working with teachers and students in larger schools.

The primary reasons behind these shortcomings include:

- The sheer volume of activities within the project, which, in some instances, overwhelmed the project's timeline.
- The delayed start of project works due to the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a backlog of tasks.
- Difficulty in synchronizing project activities with the regular school schedule, leading to occasional frustrations among head teachers.
- Frequent changes in project plans and the unavailability of necessary resources, impacting the quality of work.

Overcoming the obstacles:

While these challenges posed significant hurdles, our commitment to the project's success drove us to find solutions. In cases where program officers faced issues during their work, senior members of the team intervened and resolved them. However, challenges related to local public representatives remain unresolved to a certain extent. Whenever possible, we engaged representatives from Plan Bangladesh and DSHE to visit schools and facilitate discussions to address these challenges. In some instances, my personal involvement in various events and tasks was necessary to ensure successful outcomes.

GUIDING INSIGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

To pave the way for future projects in this domain, the following insights should be considered:

- **Realistic timeframes:** When planning projects encompassing various activities, it is imperative to establish realistic timeframes that align with the project's duration.
- **Dedicated workforce and scope for professional development:** Working with secondary schools necessitates a dedicated workforce equipped with opportunities for professional development. Time allocation for skill enhancement is crucial.
- **Evaluating additional activities:** As projects near completion, the inclusion of new activities should be carefully considered. Assessing the cost-effectiveness and impact of these additions is vital to maintain project quality.

It is essential to recognize that working with secondary schools demands a distinct approach from primary education projects.

The Primary School Managing Committee and Secondary School Managing Committee differ significantly in terms of power, capacity, temperament, and influence.



Photos: BBBS approach in action

TRANSFORMING LIVES THROUGH COLLABORATION: THE TALE OF A SCHOOL MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

Writer: Gaid Hossain, Project Manager, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI



Nestled in Dhaka District, Mohammad Bag Adarsha High School became a beacon of hope through the *Child Bride to Bookworm* project, supported by Plan International Bangladesh and implemented by SUROVI. As the world grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic, this institution's story unfolded. It was not just about facing the pandemic-induced challenges; it was about the School Management Committee's (SMC) unwavering commitment and their remarkable journey.

What worked well:

The success story of Mohammad Bag Adarsha High School is woven with the threads of collaboration, commitment, and a shared vision. Here is what worked exceptionally well:

- **Regular monthly meetings:** The SMC held monthly meetings, ensuring continuous dialogue and decision-making.
- **School development plan:** They meticulously crafted a school development plan, outlining targets and responsibilities.
- **Documenting discussions:** Every meeting, every decision, and every attendance record were carefully documented and signed.
- **Progress review:** Each meeting saw a review of previous decisions, assessing progress and addressing challenges.
- **Participation in training:** SMC members actively participated in the

the trainings and orientation sessions organized by the project.

- **Engagement in activities:** They did not just oversee; they actively engaged in both school and project-supported activities.
- **Mobilizing local resources:** Local resources were harnessed to further school development.
- **Monitoring efforts:** Vigilant monitoring of both school and project activities was a key practice.
- **Admission Campaign:** An admission campaign was organized to boost enrollment.
- **Home visits:** Teachers ventured into students' homes to ensure their well-being.
- **Supporting the needy:** Vulnerable students from marginalized families received support from both the project and the school.
- **Ensuring and maintaining a girls-friendly environment:** Training and awareness efforts led to the creation of a girls-friendly school environment.
- **Enhanced parental engagement:** Regular parents' meetings and awareness sessions fostered parental involvement.
- **Community support:** The local people really rallied behind the SMC and teachers.
- **Enriched educational experience:** Co-curricular activities, competitions, and library support enriched students' educational journey.

SOME SIGNIFICANT RESULTS

The Mohammad Bag Adarsha High School achieved substantial milestones:

- **An enabling environment:** The school established a nurturing and protective environment, particularly for girls.
- **Increased parental involvement:** Awareness and parental participation soared, ensuring home support and school attendance.
- **Enhanced rate of enrollment and attendance in the school:** Enrollment and attendance, especially among girls, saw a remarkable upturn.
- **Reduced dropout and early marriage:** Dropout rates dwindled, and early marriages were curbed.
- **Empowered SMC members:** The SMC members gained confidence and capabilities to effectively manage the school.

There were several factors behind achieving these results. These factors behind success are as the following:

- Facilities like a girls-friendly toilet, GEMS corner, opinion box, CPC, and CP Focal Person played a pivotal role.
- SMC facilitated parent meetings, heightened awareness, and ensured support for marginalized families.
- Sessions on the consequences of early marriage, the importance of girls' education, and youth forums addressing gender-based violence contributed.
- Training, exposure, and budgetary support empowered SMC members to play an active role in school development and management.



Photos: Project's activities with SMCs

Some challenges faced:

While the Mohammad Bag Adarsha High School achieved remarkable success, some challenges persisted:

- **Unaddressed budgeted activities:** Ambitious budgeted activities, like constructing a computer lab and classrooms, remained unaddressed.
- **Budget constraints:** Limited community resources and project funds, combined with Plan manager policies, hindered major construction projects.

Overcoming the challenges:

To overcome these existing hurdles, implementing partners orchestrated meetings and visits with the SMC, Plan Manager, DSHE representatives, and Partner Staff. These efforts aimed to rebuild trust, resolve confusion, and secure funding for vital projects.

The Mohammad Bag Adarsha High School's transformation from a struggling institution to a thriving hub of education is a testament to the power of collaboration, dedication, and trust. It showcases the potential for positive change when stakeholders unite behind a common goal.

Through the creation of an inclusive and nurturing school environment, increased parental involvement, and targeted support, this project has not only reduced dropouts and early marriages but has also empowered SMC members to confidently manage the school.

CHALLENGES & MITIGATION MEASURES

Learning from the experience:

This journey illuminated some crucial lessons:

- **Trust and capacity building:** Building trust and enhancing the capacity of SMC and teachers are pivotal to reducing dropouts and increasing secondary completion rates.
- **Experienced staff:** Effective staff, particularly for capacity building and motivation at the secondary school level, are indispensable.
- **Staff stability:** Staff turnover can disrupt project delivery, so maintaining stable staff pool is vital to successfully implement.

What could have been done differently during implementation:

If a few adjustments could have been made during implementation, the project could have yielded more effective results. Some of the proposed adjustments are:

- **Redesigned activities:** A more reasonable activity plan, tailored to accommodate stakeholder engagement, could have been adopted.
- **Investing in staff capacity:** Allocating budget for staff capacity building could have enhanced project outcomes.
- **Trust-building:** Fostering trust and providing technical capacity building support are more effective than fault-finding.

IMPROVING MINDSET: COMBATting SCHOOL DROPOUT WITH THE CBB PROJECT

Writer: Farzana Bari, Project Manager, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, PIB



In the battle against school dropout rates, the *"Child Bride to Bookworm Project"* emerged as a powerful force for change. This initiative was more than just an educational program; it was a passionate advocacy to ensure that every student received the support they needed to stay in school and flourish. By focusing on improving mindsets and reshaping perceptions, we aimed to break down the barriers and taboos that led to dropout, empowering these girls to become enthusiastic learners and champions of their own education. The Child Bride to Bookworm Project envisioned this transformative journey as we combated school dropout and nurtured a generation of resilient, educated individuals.

Changes through advocacy focusing on capacity building:

- . Capacity-building for teachers through different training enhanced pedagogical methods, instructional strategies, and classroom management, resulting in improved student learning outcomes, increased attendance, and reduced dropouts.
- . Capacity-building sessions and School Management Committee (SMC) meetings strengthened the administrative and organizational capabilities of educational institutions. It led to efficient school operations and better resource allocation.
- . Collaboration and Networking through various interventions, such as the Child Protection Committee and Community Scorecard process, fostered collaboration among educators, administrators, and stakeholders. Improved networking facilitated the exchange of best practices and resources.
- . The CBB project focused on reducing school dropouts. Capacity-building sessions, student cabinets, and day observation activities equipped and empowered students with critical skills like problem-solving, leadership, and communication and led them to become future leaders.
- . Positive changes in attitudes and mindsets made teachers more open to new methods and parents more supportive of their children's educational aspirations, especially for girls.
- . Involving local communities in capacity-building efforts garnered increased support for education through social accountability tools like CSC, CPC, and the Citizen Charter.
- . Regular Communication and Collaboration with Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) influenced government officials to improve service delivery, fostering trust and support. This led to the expansion of beneficial activities throughout Bangladesh as a part of sustainability.

Changes through advocacy focusing on improved mindset regarding school dropout:

- The project conducted baseline surveys to gather comprehensive data on dropout rates and their causes. This data was used to build a compelling case for change.
- Relevant stakeholders, including government officials, educators, parents, and youth groups, were engaged to ensure a collaborative effort.
- Sharing well-detailed reports on project accomplishments and challenges helped maintain communication with government officials and provided recommendations.
- Awareness campaigns through various channels raised public and policymaker attention to the dropout issue.
- Establishing trust and collaboration with the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) helped align project activities with national objectives.
- Workshops informed about the importance of dropout reduction and shared successful strategies.
- Collaborating with media outlets amplified advocacy efforts, highlighting challenges and potential solutions.
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of impact guided advocacy strategies.

EXTERNAL & INTERNAL CHALLENGES FACED DURING IMPLEMENTATION

We faced some external and internal challenges during project implementation, and they are as follows:

- **Dealing with COVID-19:** We faced challenges because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It affected how we could carry out our work and required us to adapt to new situations.
- **Political unrest creating issues:** The political unrest in our area posed difficulties. It disrupted our plans and made it challenging to carry out our projects smoothly.
- **Facing natural disasters:** Heavy rain and a heat wave caused natural disasters. These events made it tough for us to continue our work as usual.
- **Dealing with social taboos:** Some actions faced challenges due to social taboos. Overcoming these taboos was important to move forward with our projects.
- **Slum eviction:** Evicting people from slums presented difficulties. It was a complex issue that needed careful handling to ensure fairness and understanding.
- **Migration due to COVID-19:** The COVID-19 situation led to families in low-income slums moving away. This migration created challenges that we had to address in our project.
- **Staff turnover:** Our team faced issues with staff leaving their job.
- **Miscommunication with DSHE:** Midway through the project, we faced miscommunication with DSHE due to the assertiveness of PIB focal. This led to delays in implementing project activities.

MITIGATION MEASURES TAKEN TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES

The hurdles along the way were addressed in certain ways. The following mitigation measures were taken to ensure a smooth implementation of the project:

- **Changed how we do programs:** We switched from focusing on schools to involving the whole community. This made our programs more effective by considering the community as a whole.
- **Made detailed plans and backup plans:** We planned everything carefully and had a backup plan ready. This helped us be ready for any challenges that might come up during the program.
- **New way of learning with BBBS Support:** We tried a different way of teaching with the help of 'Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS)'. This made learning more personalized and engaging for the students.
- **Helped students based on their needs:** We provided extra support tailored to each student's needs. This helped stop students from leaving school early.
- **Special spaces for adolescents in all schools:** We created special spaces called "*Adolescent Corners*" in all schools. These spaces focused on helping adolescents with their unique needs and concerns.
- **GEMS sessions for everyone:** We organized special sessions called GEMS for all students. These sessions went beyond regular studies to provide a complete learning experience.
- **Teachers offered emotional support:** Teachers played a big role in giving students emotional help. This made sure students' feelings and mental well-being were taken care of at school.
- **Increased salaries for partner staff:** We recognized the hard work of our partner staff and offered them increased salaries. This made them happier in their jobs and helped them do better.
- **Kept talking to different people:** We kept in touch with many different groups involved. This helped everyone understand each other better and work together.
- **Shared information openly:** We were open about what was happening. Regular updates and news about future plans were shared with everyone involved. This made sure everyone was on the same page and could make informed decisions together.



MONITORING AND EVALUATION DEPARTMENT AS A SUPPORT SYSTEM OF CBB PROJECT

**Writer: Fatematuz Zohra Ritu, M&E Coordinator,
Child Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI**



In today's project management landscape, the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) department stands as a linchpin for success. Its involvement spans from project design to well beyond completion. Recognizing this, the Child Bride to Bookworm (CBB) project, initiated its dedicated M&E department in March 2021, appointing a Monitoring and Evaluation Coordinator. In this article, I shed light on the various facets of the CBB project's M&E department.

What went well:

As we near the project's conclusion, the M&E department's exceptional progress in data management shines. With support from project personnel and guidance from PIB's M&E Specialist, we meticulously compiled a comprehensive list of beneficiaries, tracking their monthly participation. Creating a school-wise, year-wise updated student database for higher secondary schools, though challenging, was accomplished.

An equally significant success lies in cultivating awareness among project team members, particularly front-line staff, about the importance of post-activity data organization. We conducted 5 capacity-building sessions that covered monitoring basics, result frameworks, and our project's relevance to indicators.

Moreover, our project's field staff's

openness, and cooperation in sharing challenges faced in the field were crucial. When encountering delays or disengagement from school authorities during my field visits, I actively intervened to address the issues, emphasizing the benefits of supporting our initiatives. This approach has led to increased cooperation from school authorities.

We also successfully conducted a *"Project Interim Assessment"* in collaboration with PIB's M&E specialist and SUROVI management, providing insights into our project's current status.

What did not work well:

Two significant challenges emerged during our journey. First, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to overhaul our result framework. Initially designed to work with ten primary and ten secondary schools, we expanded to 22 secondary schools in Dhaka South City Corporation due to pandemic-related circumstances. Consequently, we had to revise our result framework, altering and adding output indicators.

The second challenge arose from delays in collecting detailed information about our direct beneficiaries - students. The pandemic disrupted our ability to gather accurate information as schools remained closed. It took until September 2021, when schools reopened, to start collecting student's

data comprehensively.

The above mentioned challenges made the smooth-running of the project troublesome, and overcoming them required concerted efforts.

The solutions we sought:

The M&E department worked diligently to establish a robust data management system, and frequent communication with PIB's M&E Specialist was instrumental in this process.

Furthermore, the M&E department collaborated closely with Programme Officers to emphasize the importance of timely reporting and data management.

Photo: M&E staff observing a GEMS activity



STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

To enhance project interventions in similar contexts, I would like to propose the following recommendations:

- If any new M&E personnel is hired, s/he should receive detailed orientation from M&E specialists from donor organizations.
- Develop data collection and analysis tools based on the project's result framework at the project's inception.
- Establish dedicated monitoring departments for projects.
- Prepare detailed beneficiary lists at the early stage of the project.
- Conduct orientation on learning capturing mechanism.
- Seek education department's permission for training the relevant school authorities in ICT/software-based student tracking.

The journey of CBB Project's M&E department has been marked by challenges and achievements.

The relevant learning from this project underscores the importance of adaptability and cooperation in project management, even in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

NAVIGATING THE CBB PROJECT FROM A FINANCE POINT OF VIEW

Writer: Kamrun Nahar Borna, Finance Specialist - Budget & Reporting, PIB



Embarking on the ambitious journey of the Child Bride to Bookworm project, our sails were filled with hopes of empowering communities and fostering education. This article unveils the highs and lows encountered from a finance lens during the project's lifetime, highlighting prudent budget management, and resilience.

What went well:

In the project's budget management side, several things could be labelled as 'went well', and they are:

- . **Increased funding:** Through relentless efforts, the project secured three additional funds, elevating the initial DKK 7,512,480 to an impressive DKK 8,154,449.
- . **Utilization rate:** Despite the hurdles presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the project's fund utilization rate soared to an exemplary 85%. The team reprogrammed activities and revised budgets twice, aligning the logical framework with the evolving project landscape.
- . **Timely reporting:** A testament to the dedication of our partners, all donor reports, both narrative and financial, were submitted timely. Proactive collaboration and a commitment to deadlines allowed us to navigate challenges seamlessly.

Notable challenges and responses:

- . **Overhead management:** With an overhead charge of 80% on the actual cost, we devised a meticulous process to manage and recover the country-apportioned cost. A dedicated code was created to handle the overhead amount, ensuring compliance with donor regulations.
- . **Budget changes and grant additions:** The project experienced 5 budget revisions, necessitated by reprogramming, additional funds, result framework revisions, and a no-cost extension. Managing these changes required continuous monitoring, meticulous budget preparation, addressing queries from donor agencies, and maintaining clarity in expenditure reporting.

Notable achievements:

- . The project underwent a thorough donor audit covering the period from January 2020 to December 2022, without any major findings—an affirmation of our robust financial management.
- . The project's ability to secure additional funds reflected the trust bestowed upon us by donors, recognizing our commitment and impactful endeavors.

ACHIEVING MILESTONES BY NAVIGATING CHALLENGES: ADMIN & ACCOUNTS

Writer: Tanjia Mehjabin, Admin and Accounts Coordinator, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI



Our journey with the CBB project commenced in April 2020, thanks to the generous support of Plan International Bangladesh. From the very outset, our mission was clear: to reduce school dropout rates in 22 schools within the Dhaka South City Corporation area. With an array of ambitious programs, our project carried a significant budget to implement its initiatives. As a part of this incredible endeavor, I have had the honor of watching our team grow and our impact expand.

What went well in the project:

In our pursuit of empowering the community, one aspect stands out - our effort to support underprivileged students and their families. We stepped in to cover tuition fees for those unable to pay, ensuring they could take school examinations and continue their education. Many parents, facing financial difficulties, were unable to provide school uniforms for their children. We alleviated this burden by providing financial support for school dress expenses, reigniting students' enthusiasm for learning. Recognizing that economic challenges often led to student dropouts, we extended support to struggling families, helping them establish businesses and regain financial stability. This intervention had a profound effect, allowing children to pursue their education happily.

Some of our achievements:

Despite numerous challenges, we find ourselves nearing the end of our project's duration. Over the past four years, we have successfully executed our targeted action plan and maintained accurate financial records. We faced internal and external audits, including those by Plan International Bangladesh and Surovi, and received commendations for our meticulous work. This success is a testament to our staff's unwavering dedication and the invaluable collaboration with Plan International Bangladesh.

What went wrong in the project:

However, working on such a massive scale came with its own set of challenges. The role of an Admin and Accounts Coordinator proved demanding, given our extensive monthly and quarterly tasks. The workload occasionally pushed us to the limits, but our unwavering commitment to meeting deadlines kept us on track.

Very often, the challenges and achievements in any project's administration, accounts, and other relevant systems aspects are overlooked while documenting project's learning, but these are important areas for a project to be successfully implemented.

CHALLENGES AND MITIGATION MEASURES TAKEN

There were some hurdles along the way that were addressed in certain ways. These mitigation measures can guide the way for the future, and they are as follows:

- **Financial vigilance:** With multiple donors and a consistent program, ensuring accurate financial tracking was paramount. We collaborated closely with Plan International Bangladesh to maintain transparent accounting practices.
- **Adapting to changing plans:** As program plans evolved, we learned the importance of seeking approval from Plan International Bangladesh for any budgetary adjustments.
- **Coordinating with DSHE:** Close coordination with the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) was essential for arranging teacher training and workshops. Often, the availability of DSHE personnel dictated our training schedules, leading to challenges in managing venues and materials on short notice. Yet, we persevered, ensuring all requirements were met before each training session.
- **Procurement of computers:** Our project budget included purchasing 22 desktop computers for schools, requiring an open tender process. With no in-house IT expertise, we sought assistance from Plan International Bangladesh's IT team and our admin staff, successfully completing the procurement through an open tender.
- **Office relocations:** Over two years, we relocated our office three times in search of suitable space. Finally, we found an ideal working environment for our team.
- **Salary concerns:** Addressing the issue of low salaries for Program Officers was a priority. With the support and approval of Plan International Bangladesh and Surovi management, we raised the salary structure for Program Officers, resulting in reduced staff turnover and increased dedication to their roles.



ENHANCING QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE PROGRESS

Writer: Zakia Sultana, Technical Specialist, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, PIB



In the Child Bride to Bookworm project, every action was meticulously observed and assessed. From the watchful eye of technical specialists to the diligent program focal points at Plan and Surovi, our commitment to ensuring the highest quality was unwavering. To maintain a real-time overview of our efforts, we diligently updated our students' database on a quarterly basis, capturing the essence of our progress in the field.

Regular visits by Program Officers (POs) and program personnel from both Plan and Surovi allowed us to witness the tangible impact of our intervention activities. We sat down with headteachers, penned down crucial points for improvement in our field task records, particularly when issues related to beneficiary attendance arose. This feedback was not confined to our team meetings; it was actively shared in School Management Committee (SMC) gatherings, fostering collaborative problem-solving with all stakeholders involved. During Surovi's monthly meetings, we delved into the specific challenges faced by schools and activities, seeking solutions to pave the way forward. PIB team members also ventured into the field, contributing their observations and proposed solutions to address challenges, ensuring our learnings were widely disseminated.

Challenges and opportunities:

As our project advanced, the collaborative spirit among SMCs, headteachers, Project Coordinators, and Programme Officers was commendable. However, a pivotal area requiring refinement is our quality assurance process. Currently lacking a solid foundation, it hampers demonstrating concrete results in preventing beneficiary dropouts and early marriages. The absence of program activity-based quality standards and specific checklists for progress monitoring, coupled with the simultaneous execution of numerous school activities, emphasizes the need for systematic tracking of project personnel performance. Additionally, a structured feedback management system is lacking, hindering participants from openly voicing their needs.

Ensuring sustainable progress for similar future interventions demands an enhancement of our quality assurance processes. Implementing result-focused interventions and robust impact analysis will provide a holistic understanding of field interventions. As we envision future projects to prevent school dropouts and boost secondary-level completion rates, proactive planning, comprehensive monitoring activities, and recognized program standards are crucial for effectively navigating challenges and positively influencing program results and impact.

ENSURING CONTINUOUS LEARNING THROUGH THE BBBS APPROACH

Writer: Anwar Rana, Programme Officer, Child Bride to Bookworm Project, SUROVI



During the Covid-19 pandemic, schools across the country closed, and there was a worry that many students, especially those from slum areas in Dhaka, would stop going to school. To help the students and keep them learning, the "*Child Bride to Bookworm*" project came up with the "Big Brother Big Sister" (BBBS) approach.

Here is how BBBS worked:

In the slum areas where the project was happening, groups of 8-12 students in grades 6 to 8 were made. These kids were tutored by senior students from their school, like big brothers and big sisters. The senior students received an honorarium from the project for their efforts. Most of the students in these groups were from families that did not have much money, so they could not pay for private tutors. The groups met five days a week, three hours each day, and they made sure to maintain physical distancing and follow safety rules like wearing masks and using hand sanitizer.

The BBBS centers also had things like drawing materials, storybooks, and toys to make it a nice place for the students. When things got really strict with the lockdown, the BBBS talked to the kids' parents and set up times for each child to learn using their parents' phones.

And guess what? When schools opened again, only 6% of the students from BBBS centers stopped going to

school. In the whole country, the dropout rate was much higher, around 37-39%.

But, looking back, there were some things that could have been better:

- . The honorarium given to the older students was not a lot, so many of them opted out of the initiative.
- . Because of Covid-19, it was hard to properly train-up the BBBS properly, which might have compromised the quality of the approach.
- . Because of the struggles caused by Covid-19, some parents wanted their kids to work for money instead of going to the BBBS centers.
- . One Programme Officer had to coordinate with 12-15 peer educators, and that was a bit hard considering the Covid-19 situation.
- . Some parents did not want to send their kids to the BBBS centers in the fear of getting infected with Covid-19.

In summary, while the BBBS approach was apparently successful, there are things to think about for next time, especially with all the learnings from Covid-19 situation.

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About Plan International

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion, and discrimination - and it is girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organization, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters, and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

