

Lessons Learnt Study



Youth and Social Cohesion Programme

Excluded People's Rights in Bangladesh Project

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Introduction:

Youth and Social Cohesion (Y&SC) was a new programme for MJF under Excluded People's Rights in Bangladesh (EPR) Project which had worked to provide opportunities for the young people to become active citizens and agents of progressive change. The Y&SC programme offered life skill education, leadership training, skill development training and other forms of support to the youth to become agents of progressive change. This programme started its journey in January 2019 with 13 downstream partner organisations and developed a 3 years plan to attain the following results:

- 8150 listed young people will be developed as leaders who will be engaged in voluntary activities;
- 1400 targeted young people will be involved in income generation activities;
- 700 youth leaders will represent in different forums and local bodies.

The EPR allocated £5,303,481 budget for 13 downstream partners for 3 years to Y&SC programme and mobilise 66400 youth in selected locations of Bangladesh. This programme implemented its planned activities with targeted youth and different stakeholders in around 3 years and achieved results as per plan. But unfortunately in 2020, UK government decided to reduce development budget globally which impacted on EPR programme. Hence, MJF planned to close down all projects under Y&SC considering reduced funding scenario. This paper has been prepared based on the learning of this closed programme for its future reference.

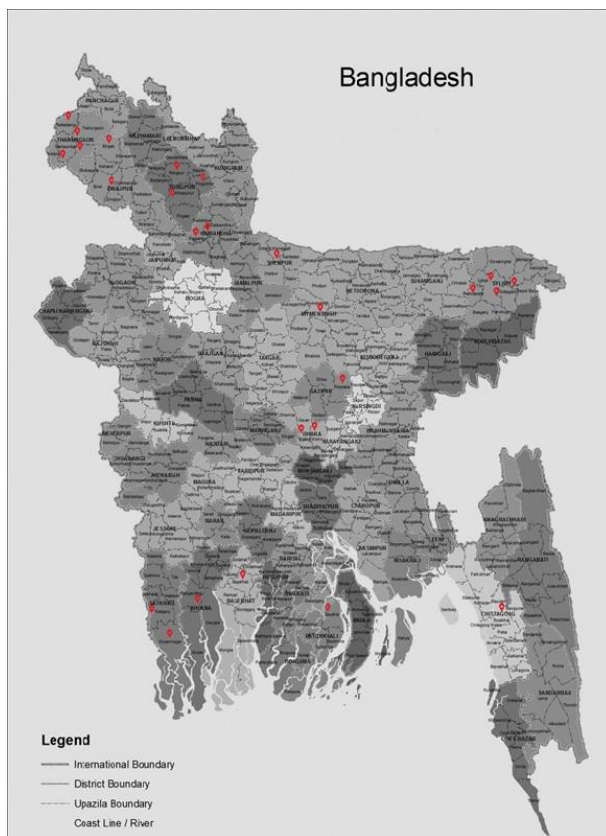
Goal and Expected Outcomes

The Y&SC programme's desired goal was to create an environment for the youth where they have opportunities to become active citizens and agents of progressive change.

The programme was planned to achieve following outcomes from downstream partners in three years (till June 2021):

- 8150 youth are developed as leaders and engaged in community level voluntary activities.
- 1400 targeted young people will be involved in income generation activities;
- 700 youth leaders will represent in different forums and local bodies

Geographical Coverage of Y&SC Programme:



GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

Youth and Social Cohesion programme covered 5 city corporations and 9 districts covering 22 upazilas.

The city corporations covered: Dhaka North ; Dhaka South; Chattagram; Mymensingh; & Khulna

The districts covered: Bagerhat, Gazipur, Rangpur, Thakurgaon, Sylhet, Gaibandha, Sherpur, Dinajpur and Satkhira.

Understating Core Strategies of Programme:

The Y&SC programme undertook a wide range of strategies to address the core issues associated with young people in urban and rural locations of Bangladesh with an emphasis to achieve few objectives. The Y&SC programme adopted the following core strategies:

a) Establishing social cohesion with an emphasis on group approach:

Group mobilization was given special emphasis with the inclusion of divergent sections of poor and marginalized youth. Thus several categories were included in the group formation process such as *dalit*, transgender, people with disability, *advashi* etc. It was done intentionally so that the spirit of social capital can be penetrated in their mindset right from the formed groups. Local influential people such as local government representatives, teachers, religious leaders, media persons and other prominent persons were also engaged to support these youth. They were informed and invited in different events so that they could realize the need of the programme as well as the need of social cohesion. At one point it was observed that the participation of all categories of youth was accepted by the elite and influential people. Media was included in the

programme activities. Local media covered the program initiatives on regular basis. Few selected youth were given opportunity to participate in national level TV program. Gradually the social environment became conducive where a *dalit* or *adivashi* youth could take the lead in any social action. This is also an indicator of a cohesive society. Special focus was given on the use of social media by the targeted youth. The program included training on ICT knowledge as activity so that the safe use of social media could be ensured. Their actions and arranged events were circulated through social media. Such participation also created vibes at community level. All categories of youth could participate in the programme activities. It allowed them to freely interact and come close to each other as peers with common objectives.

b) Life skill development to enhance leadership trait and volunteerism:

Life skill education had been the key strategy to equip the youth with necessary contents such as control of emotion, stress management, having self-confidence, communication skill, logical thinking, patriotism, social cohesion etc. The first module required 15 to 18 monthly sessions. However, it was shortened later considering the context but covered the same content in a limited manner. The program intentionally adopted monthly sessions so that they could apply the learning in their actions. There had been kind of mechanism to follow-up their level of learning and its application in actions. Thus it was also possible to get them onboard for long time so that the spirit of leadership, volunteerism and social cohesion could be penetrated in their mind. It also helped the program to select the potential youth for leadership capacity building process. The content of the module stimulated their mind to track social problems and get active in response. At one point these youth initiated voluntary activities. The program networked these youth with multi-level of stakeholders such as govt. offices, employers, training institutes etc. This strategy was effective when these youth became proactive in response to social causes. During the pandemic in many locations the youth under EPR program were included in the govt. led relief and safety materials distribution.

c) Capacitate youth for the promotion of livelihoods:

The Y&SC programme applied two strategies to engage the youth in livelihood options. At the initial stage of the project implementation, the PNGOs assessed the country and local context concerning employment. They consulted with the employers, small businessmen, and entrepreneurs, officials of the training institutes and the youth to select the appropriate skill development programmes that had market demand. It was done so that the maximum percentage of targeted could be engaged in livelihood options. Dialogues with employers and trade bodies were held for job placement. Linkage was developed with Bank, MFI & financial institutes.

d) Promotion of innovative business ideas through seed funding:

This was not for all PNGOs, only BYLC adopted this different strategy to promote innovative business ideas. Through a rigorous assessment process, the top 30 innovative ideas were selected for a business plan presentation in front a jury board consisting of industry leaders, successful young entrepreneurs, investors, and senior executives. In each cycle, the jury board selected top 5 teams from 15 presented business ideas. Each winning team received an amount of BDT 800,000 for a year disbursed in four quarters.

Main Research Questions:

The lessons learnt study has investigated and tried to understand few research questions to identify the reasons of effectiveness or less effectiveness of programme strategies which were essential to generate expected results. MJF tried to understand two main research questions for this lesson learnt review:

- i. Effectiveness of Y&SC program and its intervention model: Which strategies and components worked well or did not work well with an emphasis on local evidence
- ii. Understand the causes and evidence of effective leadership and volunteerism development and creation of livelihoods options by the EPR partners in Bangladesh
- iii. Understand the causes of less effective strategies of the programme

The Lesson Learnt Study Methods:

Lessons learnt study mainly emphasized on qualitative methods. As a part of qualitative research approach the following methods for data gathering were selected:

1. Existing secondary literature review
2. Review of program's strategy paper, coordination meeting reports, events' reports etc.
3. Review of partners' reports
4. Informal discussion with the redundant coordinators of closed down projects

Study Limitation:

The study had several limitations:

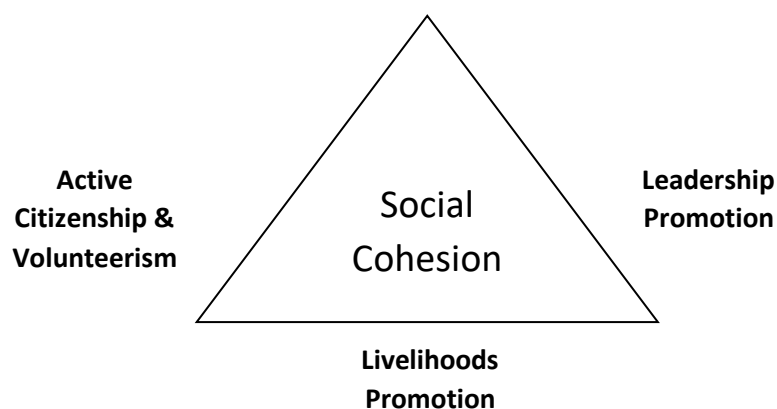
1. The key project staffs were not available for the discussion for being occupied in their current job. On many occasions their contact numbers were changed.
2. Field visit was not possible due to the unavailability of the project staffs.
3. Follow-up information on the recent situation of the trained youth or their initiatives were not captured due to the closure of the programme.

Exploring Results and Factors of Achievement

Result-1: Effectiveness of Y&SC program model and its intervention

Y&SC program and its intervention model worked well to realize the expected result. The study tried to understand which strategies and components worked well along with evidences from grassroots.

The Y&SC programme tried to build social cohesion among the different layers of youth and followed the below model. To implement the model, the Y&SC programme worked with 66,400 youth with central attention on promotion of leadership livelihoods and volunteerism.



This Social Cohesion model was proven effective because it was possible to bring multi-sectional youth irrespective of class/caste, economic condition, location-urban/rural, ethnic identities, sexual orientation etc. in a platform with a common goal. It was done intentionally so that the spirit of leadership promotion can be penetrated in their mindset collectively. It allowed them to freely interact and come close to each other as peers with common objectives. It enhanced their level of acceptance, tolerance and respecting other's opinion. Afterwards, in many cases they started working together for the betterment of the societies. The programme created space for the marginalized youth to contribute to the society who mostly remain ignored and unacknowledged. They started interacting with their peers, members of social institutions and confidently resolving social problems. The mainstream youth also started giving priority to the issues related to the lives of the marginalized section. Thus the inclusion of different categories of youth resulted in the increase the participation of youth in social activities and gradually they emerged as leaders. The story of Konika Karakata (a young woman from Indigenous Oraon community) reflects how an individual's life can be changed if s/he is given space and opportunity in the different platforms and society. This young woman belongs to an *adivasi* family in Thakurgaon. Before joining the project she was shy, timid and unable to express her opinions in front of the outsiders. She couldn't talk to other people apart from her community members. After joining the youth group she rediscovered herself as she had the opportunity to mix with many young people from different socio-economic background which boosted up her confidence. She had also been connected with

different types of stakeholders. Later this Konika became a volunteer who started awareness activity against Covid 19 on her own initiative. Her desire is to serve the humanity after finishing her education and she wishes to involve her community people to be mainstreamed as well.

Life skill sessions were effective to change the mindset and build confidence of the youth which ultimately included alienated youth in the society with their leadership and active citizenship. For instance, transgender Setu Hijra felt kind of change in her after HSC exam. Setu grew up in typical family restriction and thus tried to keep this change hidden. However, her family members never told her anything but they had to hear abusive words from the neighbors. Her family members got upset. Its impact on her mind was huge. She became frustrated and treated herself as a cursed person. However, one day she got to know about life skill education offered by Bandhuled Youth Project. She joined and received life skill education. There she got the training on controlling emotion, way of avoiding stress and enhancing level of confidence. Now she feels being different is not a sin. She is able to counsel her family members to accept her. During pandemic she played active role as volunteer in her society. She wants to do something more for her family and the community. The lives of the *hijra* revolve around uncertainty, exclusion and deprivation in the context of the bi-gendered society. But proper life skills sessions are essential to build confidence and change mindset for such excluded and alienated youth to involve them in socio-cultural voluntary activities for the society.

The spillover effect of this program model is also evident in different locations where many youth beyond the programme beneficiary pool had also been interested to act as volunteer to serve the society. For instance, In Haripur upazila, Thakurgaon, 70 youth enthusiastically formed a platform named Oxygen Group on their own initiative. These youth were not the beneficiaries under ESDO-led project but they were inspired by the voluntary activities and initiatives of the youth leaders under the EPR project. During the lockdown period Oxygen Group members took part in the distribution of relief and safety materials among the Covid affected people in 4 union parishad of Haripur upazila. In 2021 they were also involved in social works like tree plantation, cleaning the surroundings, blood donation etc.

The lesson learnt study explored few reasons behind the success and effectiveness of the Y&SC Programme:

The study found that strategies/components of the program that worked well to make the programme model successful are as follows:

1. Group approach was effective as it incorporated multi-level intervention.

The programme adopted multi-level interventions approach through engaging individuals, groups, and communities with different types of activities such as skill development training, awareness meetings, advocacy meetings, linkage with government institutions, seminars etc. This approach contributed to enhance the capacity of youth as well as connected them with community through meeting, dialogue and one to one interaction with the local elites.

Primarily capacity development of individual was done then in the second step groups were organized and trained on how to deal with social problems and get engaged in voluntary works. After that the project engaged the community and connected them with trained youths to discuss and plan for voluntary work.

Involving community helped the youth to understand local issues and problems and it was effective for building confidence of the youth and gaining trust from the community which was essential for getting their voluntary works acknowledged. Therefore on many occasions the youth received community support for their voluntary work personally and collectively. All projects under the programme nurtured the youth individually and as group and connected them with community to create their support system.

2. A cross cultural exchange opportunity creation also contributed to realize the objectives of the programme. Cultural exchange opportunities such as music, drama, sports and games allowed the youth to build wider social network and understanding of the issues that need to be dealt by them.

3. Engaging multi-stakeholders including celebrities:

Engaging multi-stakeholders including celebrities created vibes and inspiration among targeted youth of Y&SC programme. As stakeholders, both state and non-state actors were involved according to their relevance and interest during project period. The engagement of multi-stakeholders had been effective in achieving the objective of the programme. A wide range of local institutions had been involved to support the youth for capacity development, generating livelihoods opportunities, and space creation for representation in different forums. The programme also included local to national level stakeholders such youth icons, district and upazila level administration, members of local government, academicians, employers, govt. training providers, religious leaders, media persons etc. and all of them supported and inspired the youth to capacitate their skills, build confidence and enhance inner capability to emerge as leader to serve the society. For instance, Masum a skill training participant under VAFWSD -led project uttered that, 'I was being by touched when I heard the speech of Zahid Hassan, how he struggled in his life to become such a successful person. Then I thought I can also be successful with confidence and courage (*unake dekhe, unar jiboner golpo ar challenge er golpo shune... amader sahos ar monobol bariye....amrao parbo jibone sofol hote*)'.

Result-2: Understand the causes and evidence of effective leadership and volunteerism development and created livelihoods options by the EPR partners in Bangladesh

The first 3 years' Y&SC program target was 8150 listed young people will be developed as leaders who will be engaged in voluntary activities; 1400 targeted young people will be involved in income generation activities and 700 youth leaders will represent in different forum and local bodies. Within this 3 years, 11234 youth are emerged as leaders and involved in community-level voluntary activities, 1809 young people engaged in income opportunities and 1316 young male female leader evolved and represented in different committee. The program data/findings suggested that the achievement exceeded the planned target in terms of leadership development and volunteerism and income generation.

To realize the above programme result the study identified few strategies worked well. The strategies are as follows:

1. Competitive selection approach for livelihoods option creation and bridging that with life skills development approach:

The target of Y&SC theme was to engage 1400 youth in employment and different livelihoods options. Assessment of job market prior to providing capacity building initiatives, linkage with employers and special focus on entrepreneurship had also been adopted by the Y&SC programme.

Y&SC programme endorsed livelihoods promotion for the selected youth in a competitive manner from successful participants of monthly life skill session. The program also connected the successful income generation training participants with credit facilities from govt. and other institutional sources. Such strategy created competitiveness among the life skill training participants to perform better and being connected with livelihood options. The lessons learnt study explored that this approach worked well to create income opportunities for the targeted youth.

For Instance, Mita (real name is not given) belongs to gender diverse population in Dhaka. Being a transgender her life was miserable. She was trying to leave a respectful life. However, she could not avail the opportunity. At one stage she got to know about Bandhu-led Youth Project. At first she received life skill session. Because of her performance she was selected as a potential participant of the skill development programme. There she received the training on beauty parlour and started her business venture like other selected participants. Mita is now supporting her family with her income.

Another story also supports the effectiveness of the above approach. Sairul Islam lives in the norther-belt of Bangladesh. Poverty had been a constant problem in his 5-member family. He used to be involved in different types of works for earning. He joined ESDO-led project in 2019. His performance in life skill session was very good. Not all had the chance to receive vocational training. The project did the selection process in a competitive manner. Then he was nominated for vocational training. He received training on electrical trade from February 2020 to April 2020. The project considered his financial condition and connected him with credit facilities. After the

completion of the training he rented a shop and started his own business. He was earning 6000 taka per month. Sairul said, 'It is life skill education that was helpful to get prepared mentally. I received the vocational training with due seriousness and attention'.

2. Timely revision of training module contributed to generate expected results. Periodic revision of training module worked well to develop leadership and encourage volunteerism

Y&SC programme revised the life skill training module considering few practical reasons. The theme initially adopted 15-18 months long life skill training program with beneficiary youth. The programme avoided one-shot training process as youth development is an issue that requires regular nurturing. The module covered crucial issues like controlling emotions, dealing stress, patriotism, enhancing communication skill, building confidence etc. Such periodic facilitation enabled them to internalize the issues for being prepared to next level responsibilities. It was helpful for their career and personal development and to grow as agent of progressive change . But after one year the programme identified that such kind of long-term graduation program is not a prudent strategy to capacitate a wider number of youth within this project tenure. Moreover, many youth also felt less interest or showed reluctance to continue such long-term training. Therefore, MJF revised training module with accommodating all necessary training components and shortened that training from one and half year to only six months. For instance, LEDARS, a PNGO started 15-18 months long life skill sessions for 3000 targeted youth but only 30% of them attended regularly. Then the Y&SC program team enquired with the youth about the reason of their reluctance. It was found that the schedule of the session did not match with their time as they had other works. At that time Y&SC theme shortened the life skill module in consultation with all relevant stakeholders. As a result the scenario got changed once the shorter version was introduced among the youth. It was found that around three fourth (75%) youth regularly joined the sessions.

In addition to that, PNGOs started online sessions as during the lockdown the monthly sessions (physical) were stopped for 4/5 months due to the imposed restriction. That time MJF suggested the PNGOs to start online life skill session where this was possible. Like other PNGOs, LEDARS also started online sessions as alternative strategy where only 375 youth attended and completed the course successfully.

2. Strategies did not work well to achieve program result:

- I. Online-based life skill session modality was not effective for the marginalized youth who lacked digital devices and ICT knowledge. Those who attended also met trouble for slow internet. For instance, ESDO-led project covered 441 dalit and 413 Adivasi youth where Only 5 dalit and 7 Adivasi youth could join the online life skill sessions as they were not equipped with digital device and ICT knowledge.
- II. For the gender diverse population monthly session strategy did not work well as they do not stay in a place for longer period of time. Rather, they frequently change their whereabouts due to hide their identity and occupation. Bandhu Social Welfare Society implemented a youth project with Gender Diverse Population. Bandhu started monthly life skill session modality with the beneficiaries. However, it was observed that most of the training recipients abstained from joining the sessions after attended one or two. In this context the concerned PNGO adopted day long life skill sessions in consultation with MJF.
- III. In few cases, the inclusion of the excluded and youth with disability in social activities was difficult because of the dominant traditional mentality of the people. This is not easy to change the traditional mentality of the population as this is something deep-rooted and old. This also requires adequate time and efforts to address the mental differences. For the sudden closure of Y&SC programme MJF had not been able to change the mind-set of people.
- IV. MJF could not monitor the impact of the promotion of innovative business ideas through seed funding initiative due to the sudden closure of the programme.

The learning from such experience is, a particular strategy may not work for long time. It requires periodic revision based on situation and context. It is evident that timely revision of strategy is effective to achieve the expected result. Moreover, sudden closure of programme and project hamper to realize project objectives

Conclusion:

EPR Project documents suggested that Bangladesh cannot achieve its human development goal without engaging a large proportion of youth in socio-economic activities. Establishing social cohesion among youth is essential for the development of future leadership of the country. Evidence suggested that programme interventions and youth development model of MJF are effective as it has contributed to enhance leadership traits of youth and their engagement in volunteerism both locally and nationally. The results could generate multiplier effects on the society if the time of program intervention had been extended for considerable number of years.

Annex:

Implementing Partners:

Youth and Social Cohesion program was implemented by 13 downstream partners that are as follows:

1. Badhon Manob Unnayan Shangstha (BMUS)
2. Bandhu Social Welfare Society
3. Bangladesh Association for Social Advancement (BASA)
4. Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC)
5. Bangla-German Sampreeti (BGS)
6. Eco Social Development Organization (ESDO)
7. Friends In Village Development Bangladesh (FIVDB)
8. Gana Unnayan Kendra (GUK)
9. Ghashful
10. Institute for Environment and Development (IED)
11. Jhanjira Samaj Kallyan Sangstha (JSKS)
12. Local Environment Development and Agricultural Research Society (LEDARS)
13. Voluntary Association for Family Welfare and Social Development (VAFWSD)



To

Akash Sarkar
Organizing Secretary
Samakal Suridh Samabesh, Sherpur
15th December 2020

Subject: Appreciation for your remarkable contribution to the District Police's Corona Emergency Response Team.

Dear Akash Sarkar

I would like to thank you for your outstanding contribution to the corona emergency response team as an assistant coordinator started on 3rd April 2020 under the supervision of Sherpur District Police. Your logistical experience and organizational wizardry made a huge difference in how quickly and easily we dispatched food to those in needs. We are also appreciating your plan and afford for awareness-raising voluntary service, voluntary harvesting, and sanitization programs in this running COVID-19 pandemic.

Thank you once more and we very much look forward to working with you and your organization again for the benefit of our community and beyond.

13/24/12/2021
(Kazi Ashraf Azim, PPM)

Superintendent of Police (SP)

District Police, Sherpur