Projects For Peace 2023
Final Report

Train track to Right Track:
Supporting Bangladeshis Who Call the Train Tracks their Home

Location
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Project Leader
Ariha Shahed
Bard College, New York, Expected Graduation 2026
Mahindra United World College of India (MUWCI), Graduation Completed 2022

Summary

Project, "Train-track to Right-Track," aimed to address the living conditions of communities residing in the slums alongside major railway tracks in Bangladesh, particularly in Dhaka. This included partnering with NGO BRAC Bangladesh to construct poverty alleviation plans and provide homeless populations around urban railways in Bangladesh sustainable and long-term support.

Project Description

The specific community targeted by this project comprises the residents of the slums alongside the railway tracks in Bangladesh. This demographic faces severe poverty, with a particularly pronounced impact on women and children, who often lack the essential resources, skills, and opportunities necessary to break free from the cycle of poverty. Our chosen approach involved a strategic collaboration with BRAC Bangladesh, encompassing the integration of BRAC's "Ultra-Poor Graduation Initiative". We aimed to empower them to achieve sustainable income by equipping them with productive assets. We implemented short-term relief measures through the distribution of sustainable water filters and micro-financial initiatives, such as the provision of sewing machines for women.
We selected Dhaka’s Tejgaon Railway Station as our host site due to their substantial populations residing in slums along railway tracks. BRAC Bangladesh had already established valuable relationships with residents in these communities, which indicated a high potential for providing enduring support in these specific locations. Notably, we benefited from local relationships, particularly those with clients enrolled in BRAC’s Microfinance Program. These individuals proved instrumental in providing us with critical information, such as identifying particular neighborhoods in dire need of water filters amidst clean water crises and identifying families with members employed in garment factories who were skilled in operating sewing machines. The workshops, thoughtfully designed and executed over the course of a week, covered a spectrum of crucial topics, including family planning, proper nutrition, disease prevention, and comprehensive guidance on sanitary and menstrual hygiene. More importantly, we emphasized empowering women to retain agency within their households, encouraging them to prioritize their own financial standing and sending their children to school. We provided numerous families with microgrants to start or restart microventures and businesses. We also provided insights on effectively utilizing grants to establish and nurture microbusinesses, and establish economic independence and self-sufficiency among women in these communities. These discussions aimed to bring about not only individual growth but also positive shifts in the broader societal dynamics. In total, our efforts impacted members from 105 households. Leveraging the insights of BRAC workers and the resources of the organization, these workshops ensured the delivery of comprehensive and culturally sensitive classes.

During the project’s initial developmental phases, numerous elements remained subject to refinement, including the projected impact, which was estimated and not definitively confirmed. It was anticipated that adjustments would be necessary as we accrued further information and insights, with a particular focus on guidance from BRAC. We made significant adjustments to our approach based on advice from BRAC officials. Instead of continuing with the food drive, we decided to re-allocate that fund toward micro-financial initiatives such as sewing machines to initiate microbusiness ventures by empowering women specifically and aid people in areas affected by a long-term water crisis through provision of water filters. This change was motivated by the belief that investing in sustainable solutions would provide more effective and lasting relief, rather than a one-time meal box. The overall impact of our project reached an estimated total of 500 people, which differs from our initial target range of 600-800 people. Unfortunately, we faced a heavy reduction in funding amounting to $3000 due to New York State tax considerations, and had to make the difficult decision to remove Chattogram and Sylhet city from our project scope due to the unavailability of sufficient funding for those areas. Recognizing Dhaka as the most populous and economically demanding city, we placed a strong emphasis on delivering high-quality work over pursuing sheer quantity. Our strategic decision to prioritize the quality of our efforts in Dhaka was driven by the understanding that this densely populated area required substantial attention and effective interventions to make a meaningful impact on the lives of its residents.
To date, further fundraising initiatives have not been initiated, yet we remain receptive to the exploration of supplementary avenues for securing support. In the pursuit of continued efforts, BRAC Bangladesh will assume an expanded role in overseeing and fostering sustainable transformations in the circumstances of these vulnerable populations.

**Reflection**

We define peace as the absence of suffering, where resources are collectively owned and distributed equitably, eliminating the unjust concentration of wealth and power. Peace can be realized when certain powerful individuals cease capitalizing on resources and instead prioritize collective well-being.

Our project contributes to peace by addressing the needs of impoverished communities, enhancing their well-being, and empowering them with knowledge and resources for a hopeful future. In the short term, our project aimed to bring immediate relief to such communities by providing an essential resource, access to clean water. This directly addresses the daily challenges and insecurities that these communities face. Over the long term, our focus on poverty alleviation and women empowerment will lead to lasting changes. By educating communities about family planning, hygiene, gender dynamics and microbusinesses, we empower individuals to make informed decisions about their lives. This can contribute to improved economic stability, and ultimately greater social harmony.

A significant conflict we encountered is skepticism from some of the households we aimed to help. To navigate this, we built trust through community engagement and ensure transparency in our efforts. The conflict highlighted the importance of understanding the local context and cultural nuances in our work that should be noted by every project leader.

This project has served as a profound reminder of the significance of collective social welfare and the value of selflessness over self-interest. It has reaffirmed our belief that true progress and peace are achieved when individuals and communities come together to support one another, rather than pursuing self-centered objectives or amassing resources for personal gain. In the context of our work, we witnessed how selfless acts of volunteerism and a commitment to addressing poverty at its roots can have a transformative impact. It has challenged us to think critically about the systemic issues that perpetuate poverty and inequality, and to actively seek solutions that prioritize the greater good.

“"The poverty trap is a relentless cycle, and while initiatives like this one can provide a helping hand, they underscore the urgent need for systemic change.”