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Lessons in Scaling and Failing

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The challenges of scaling up programs aimed at empowering adolescent girls in Bangladesh and Uganda.

BY ANJALI SARKER, SHAMERAN ABED, & CHRISTIAN SEELOS

It is one of the few established truths in the development world that effective poverty reduction must target women and girls. Not only are women and girls disproportionately affected by poverty, but the positive spillover effects of investing in women and girls are greater than for men and boys. This became clear to us in the 1970s, and ever since then we have been learning and adapting how best to target women and girls in the new and evolving places that we work in.

When development workers find a model that works the temptation is to spread it as far and wide as possible to increase the impact. Yet the drive to maximize social impact can sometimes blind us to the need to go back to the drawing board when entering a new environment. In this article we explore several challenges that BRAC encountered in its efforts to empower adolescent girls in Bangladesh and Uganda. Then we show how analytical frameworks may help us to do a better job in designing interventions that reflect contextual differences and to learn more effectively from past successes and failures in varied contexts.

EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS

In its early days, during the 1980s, BRAC realized that organizing communities was a powerful means of empowering the poor because it helped those who were most deprived find their voices and their peers, advocate for themselves, and participate more fully in local decision making. Subsequently, BRAC began to help poor adult women form community groups, using them as a conduit for service delivery. The results were dramatic: With basic financial support, these groups were able to realize dramatic improvements in their financial and social well-being.

In 1993, BRAC launched its first initiative tailored for adolescent girls, named Adolescent Development Program (ADP), in Bangladesh. ADP focused on social empowerment. BRAC set up *kishori kendros* (girls' clubs), which were designed to be safe spaces where girls aged 10 to 19 could read, socialize, play games, sing, and exchange views about social and personal issues.

BRAC spotted a potentially rewarding connection between the two efforts. Inspired by the experience of empowering adult women by providing financial services and the potential for using girls' clubs as a strong platform, BRAC leaders wondered: If adolescents were taught to save and invest their savings in income-generating activities early in their lives, wouldn't they increase their chances of becoming socially and financially empowered? Using as a model the network of girls' clubs, in 2003 BRAC started a separate program, Employment and Livelihood for Adolescents (ELA), which offered credit and saving services to adolescent girls, developed skills training necessary for self-employment, and facilitated forums where participants could discuss social issues.

In 2008, BRAC launched ELA in Uganda with funding from the Nike Foundation (and later funding from the Mastercard Foundation). ELA in Uganda put even more emphasis on helping young women become financially literate, engaging them in livelihood training, and helping them to use microfinance effectively. The results in Uganda exceeded expectations: The likelihood of girls to engage in income-generating activities increased by 72 percent after two years of participation.[1] Teenage pregnancy rates declined by 26 percent and rates of early entry into marriage or cohabitation fell by 58 percent. As of March 2015, the program had 71,686 club members in Uganda, making it one of the country's largest youth organizations.

Meanwhile, back home in Bangladesh, where BRAC had much higher levels of experience, trust, and resources than in Uganda, ELA wasn't a success. Despite having a more than 160,000 adolescent girls as members—and despite the organization's efforts to popularize its program—the program struggled. In December 2014, ELA closed its activities in Bangladesh.

The differences in program success between Bangladesh and Uganda left BRAC wondering: Why has this financial empowerment model had a huge impact in Uganda but not in Bangladesh? What can we learn from these experiences?

THE FACE OF POVERTY FRAMEWORK

Often when organizations see one of their programs falter while a seemingly identical program succeeds, they are quick to blame the service providers and the people who deliver the programs. After all, it seems logical to expect the same outcome for apparently similar poverty-related challenges even in slightly different contexts. The problem is that this logic is flawed. It is grounded in the desire to replicate and scale up standard solutions quickly in order to speed up progress.

The Face of Poverty framework, developed by Christian Seelos (one of this article's authors), offers a potential remedy for the problem. The framework is a diagnostic tool designed to help organizations conduct a robust analysis of the similarities and differences between poverty-associated problems and needs by breaking them down into four distinct categories: economic, cognitive, normative, and power and politics.

As Seelos explained in a Dec. 18, 2014, *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article: "Economic and cognitive barriers have closely related implications for innovation and

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scaling. I thus refer to them as technical problems or needs. Similarly, I group normative and power/politics barriers into relational problems or needs. Often a mix of technical and relational barriers defines problems."

USING THE FRAMEWORK

We recently explored the reasons behind the differences in outcomes of ELA in Bangladesh and Uganda. We applied the Faces of Poverty framework to see what insights it could reveal that would help us better understand the contextual differences between the two areas. Working with the framework, we saw that if the people designing the programs considered just one of the four dimensions, they might believe that one design could serve both areas. But considering all four dimensions concomitantly revealed less obvious differences—the hidden dimensions of the challenge of adolescent empowerment in each location. (See "Adolescent Girls and Financial Empowerment in Bangladesh and Uganda" below for more detail.)

In Uganda, girls have access to some business opportunities, but they often lack skills and capital. Those who do engage in business are able to control their own finances and make decisions about marriage and pregnancy. Thus technical barriers more than relational barriers seem to define the problem space for ELA Uganda. And so in Uganda, training and access to financial services are readily adopted by girls who worry about unemployment. This makes a big difference fairly quickly and efficiently.

In Bangladesh, women face much steeper relational barriers. Most women get married young and have very little power within the family. Normative barriers restrict women's participation in the social, economic, and political spheres and prevent their mobility outside their homes. Strong family bonds offer women some security, even if they do not work; nevertheless, girls are unable to take advantage of training and financial services because of the formidable normative and power barriers that they face. Programs that seek to help girls achieve financial empowerment in Bangladesh, then, must focus explicitly on changing gender norms in order to succeed. Of course, Bangladeshi girls also face economic barriers and Ugandan girls are not completely free of normative barriers. But the relative magnitude of the types of barriers is vastly different in the two countries.

FROM FRAMEWORK TO ACTION

This analysis of BRAC's adolescent empowerment programs in Bangladesh and Uganda suggests some central lessons:

Don't mistake the symptoms for the cause. Symptoms are often easy to spot. Technical issues are often readily visible as well, perhaps because we intuitively look for them. But unless an organization is aware of the causes of problems and the barriers to progress, achieving long-term positive change is unlikely.

Recognize that some barriers are easier to overcome than others. The majority of social problems are sustained by a complex blend of interrelated barriers to progress and change. Surmounting each of these barriers requires particular strategies. It makes sense to design a roadmap that addresses all barriers, taking into account their relative difficulties, and also the order in which solving them will have the desired outcome.

Build programs that can evolve as the barriers change. All barriers change over time, and as a result, previously successful approaches may become ineffective. To stay relevant, the programs addressing those barriers need to evolve with the changes in environment. Having a shared understanding of the face of poverty among program staff helps map these changes more systematically.

Looking from the outside, it would be easy to surmise that BRAC handled the management, resourcing, and delivery of its ELA program in Uganda better than it did in Bangladesh. But we believe that the ELA model effectively eliminated the barriers facing adolescents in Uganda in a way that it did not in Bangladesh. As BRAC continues to experiment with empowering adolescents through financial services in Bangladesh, the ELA experience affirms an obvious but all too often neglected lesson: Though poverty may look similar in new environments, development professionals must first disentangle what is *different* before applying lessons from past successes.

Adolescent Girls and Financial Empowerment in Bangladesh and Uganda

	TECHNICAL BARRIERS Characteristics: Change is perceived as beneficial, benefits materialize quickly, and solutions are easy to replicate.		RELATIONAL BARRIERS Characteristics: Change is perceived as a threat, benefits take time, and solutions are difficult to replicate.	
	Economic Barriers	**Cognitive Barriers**	**Normative Barriers**	**Power Barriers**
Bangladesh	For example, most young girls don't have access to savings or credit facilities. Adolescent girls in school get government stipends, but fewer than 20 percent of girls reported saving any of that money.	Though girls outnumber boys in primary and secondary schools, they don't learn employable skills.	66 percent of girls are married before age 18 and 58 percent are pregnant by age 19. Married women are expected to stay home, do housework, and raise children. 64 percent of rural women are not part of the labor force.	Household decision-making and spending are controlled by men. Women, especially adolescent girls, are perceived to be incapable of making decisions.
Uganda	Girls lack access to the resources they need to be self-employed, such as land and capital. Many cannot afford school.	The hidden costs of education keep Ugandan girls away from schools. 60 percent of girls worry that they will not find a job in the formal economy as adults.	Fewer than 50 percent of girls are married before age 18. Women face fewer restrictions to their mobility outside the home. 76 percent of women are in the labor force, and 72 percent are involved in small-scale farming.	Women and adolescent girls are more involved in the time-consuming aspects of farming (e.g. weeding and planting) and men dominate the remunerative activities (e.g. selling produce). Therefore men have more control of money.

Note

1 Oriana Bandiera, Niklas Buehren, Robin Burgess, et al., "Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa," http://www.povertyactionlab.org/publication/women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-action-evidence-randomized-control-trial-africa