



For Us, With Us: Bangladeshi Youth Voice in Program Design

In May 2022, IREX and Save the Children co-led an event *with* diverse Bangladeshi youth leaders (ages 18 to 35) with experience and expertise in different sectors in Dhaka, Bangladesh with the aim of understanding their needs and ideas and centering them in program design and implementation.

So often, youth are seen as program participants, rather than collaborators in program design. By listening to youth perspectives before designing programs, solutions developed can more meaningfully engage them and enable them to lead in all cycles of a program from design to implementation and evaluation. The insights from the intervention are provided to support the meaningful engagement of youth in program design for implementers and funders.



Challenges Impacting Social and Economic Development for Youth in Bangladesh

With youth making up one-third of Bangladesh's population, they have a vast potential to shape positive outcomes for themselves and others throughout the country and beyond. As the country faces a myriad of challenges, the voice and contributions of young people are essential for shaping current and future solutions. The Bangladeshi youth leaders identified challenges that program implementers and funders should prioritize when designing interventions aimed at addressing social and economic development.



Economic Opportunities

Youth leaders cited lack of job opportunities and enabling environment for youth-led enterprises as key factors that limit youth potential. Based on their experiences, these issues cause young people to migrate to the capital and contribute to financial instability. This is evident in the limited access to funding for youth-led organizations and businesses. In addition, youth leaders shared that when funding opportunities were available, their narrow focus stifled creativity and innovation. Compounding this reality are difficulties in obtaining formal jobs as companies seek candidates with experience and youth face exploitation through low compensation and unsafe work conditions in formal and informal work.



Education and Training

A skills gap for jobs informed youth leaders' perspectives that education and training is not adequately equipping young people to earn. For these leaders, the core challenge was the lack of quality education and skills development opportunities that result in unemployment or youth vulnerability to risks such as exploitation and violence. Even where quality education is available, cost can be a barrier to access, especially for tertiary education. Lack of skilled teachers was also cited by youth leaders as a challenge to quality that, if addressed, could enable all youth across the country to acquire the education and skills they need to participate in the social and economic development of the country.



Mental Health, Social Stigma and Gender Inequality

While mental health, social stigma, and gender inequality are distinct, youth leaders brought light to how they are inextricably linked and require interventions that address them cohesively. For instance, challenges in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) as well as water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) affect young women's social and economic development, through stigmatization in their communities, and can affect their mental health as a result. Yet, the lack of broad awareness about mental health issues negatively affects positive youth outcomes, as young people navigate stress "balancing education and proving oneself." While there are services provided by the government to support youth mental health, social stigma, and gender inequality, youth leaders believe that young people are unaware of them.



Climate Change Challenges

As climate issues affect livelihoods across Bangladesh, youth leaders identified it as a key challenge to their social and economic development. As climate change threatens people's way of life, from food and water to economic opportunities, youth leaders described that it contributes to displacement, migration, and health issues. Youth leaders cited that these issues not only affect youth, but are even more of a challenge for young women who must navigate the compounding effects of social norms and access to resources for their well-being and economic growth. For youth leaders, adequately addressing climate change issues in Bangladesh requires solutions that integrate young women's needs.

Key Themes

Across the challenges that youth identified as critical to address in Bangladesh, several factors were consistent and these should be integrated into solutions.

- ✓ The role of parents, families, and/or guardians in youth lives. Youth leaders believe that these stakeholders play a critical role in the development of youth and can be engaged in adequately addressing challenges.
- ✓ Gender issues are inextricably linked to youth outcomes. Youth leaders believe that across issues gender must be prioritized in solutions and young men must be engaged along with young women in learning and addressing gender disparities.
- ✓ Address power balance issues among youth and adults. Youth leaders often cited power imbalance as a core issue to collaboration on solutions, especially when with government. If addressed, they believe solutions will be stronger as youth and adults will ideate and act together for change.
- ✓ Mental health affects youth across issues and can limit young people from the motivation they need to thrive. Youth leaders often saw burnout or lack of self-belief as barriers to growth and a challenge that should be tackled.
- ✓ Geography should not be a barrier to access to resources for social and economic development for youth. Youth leaders often cited that youth outside of urban areas should receive the information and resources to lead and navigate their lives positively.



Youth-led Solutions for Effective Program Design

While each challenge that youth identified has specific interventions that are needed to address them, we focus here on the activities that youth leaders cited as “meaningful youth engagement” that can be used across programs in interventions that address them.



Before Program

- ✓ Provide youth access to information about challenges
- ✓ Conduct youth-led resource and/or stakeholder mapping
- ✓ Engage youth in consultation to understand challenges
- ✓ Engage youth in development of activities



During Program

- ✓ Incubator or Accelerator program for developing youth businesses/organizations
- ✓ Mentorship
- ✓ Access to opportunities to grow youth-led organizations and/or businesses (e.g. entrepreneur marketplace creation)
- ✓ Certificates
- ✓ Counseling
- ✓ Co-develop toolkits with youth
- ✓ Long-term funding opportunities for youth-led organizations with youth friendly and adaptive mechanisms
- ✓ Provide opportunities for youth dialogues with policy makers and collaboration on solutions
- ✓ Provide education and awareness about issues as well as existing activities and advocacy campaigns?



After Program

- ✓ Youth included in evaluation process
- ✓ Continued partnerships with youth-led organizations
- ✓ Continued funding opportunities .
- ✓ Connect youth with adult networks for future growth
- ✓ Recognize youth for their work and contributions to solutions



Contributors

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About IREX

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About Save the Children

Save the Children believes every child deserves a future. In the United States and around the world, we work every day to give children a healthy start in life, the opportunity to learn and protection from harm.

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