

# Using Theater and Radio to Empower Communities and Women

An Assessment of the Strategy of BRAC'S Programme in Bangladesh



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## Abstract



*Hunger is a dividing line. Hunger pushes every human boundary: weakness, desperation, hope. Hunger separates and tears apart. Hunger divides and breaks apart. Food insecurity is one of the largest and most dire issues in the world. The right to a meal is an inalienable human right. What is the solution to food insecurity? The million dollar question looms before all of us, lurking in the shadows, staring the fortunate in the face. The array of solutions are complex and difficult but can be accomplished. Food insecurity must be solved.*

*Years of political and cultural oppression have weakened the rural population of Bangladesh. BRAC, a Bangladesh-based NGO, plays an important role in strengthening the rural community and providing access to vital information. The purpose of this study is to assess the impact and effectiveness of the Polli Shomaj, Radio Pollikontho, and Popular Theatre programs, three of BRAC's Community Empowerment Programmes (CEP). Covering more than empowerment, the CEP combats issues regarding independence in rural Bangladesh as well. Common issues of the Bengali population lie in food insecurity and government corruption. The goal of the study is to show that improving each individual program will make significant steps in creating food security and government transparency. By examining previous reports, personal interviews, and primary and secondary sources, it becomes clear that each program, while already advanced, could be expanded in unique ways to continue to combat these issues and foster a better Bangladesh.*



## **1. Introduction**

Every second, the number increases. A constant upward motion, never stopping, never slowing. The concept is unimaginable. The global population has reached 7 billion. Population growth is a major international concern. In the heart of Bangladesh, the capital of Dhaka City is the most densely populated municipality in the world. Poverty seeps from the buildings, roads, and people. All the issues associated with poverty are present in Bangladesh: hunger, homelessness, and inequality. Inequality acts as a barrier for economic, social, and political progress. Worldwide, many programs already focus on targeting women's empowerment to end inequality. The goal is to create an equal and fair society for women. I am fascinated by the subject and strive to find the most effective and efficient methods for ending inequality. An often overlooked solution lies in community institution building, radio, and theater. With BRAC's Polli Shomaj, Radio Pollikontho, and Popular Theatre programs, I was able to observe the impact of the arts on poverty and empowerment. The combination of entertainment, information, and efficiency drove my research to find improvements for existing problems and programs.

### **1.1 Bangladesh History: A Brief Overview**

The independent nation of Bangladesh grew from an intense history involving political evolution, power shifts, and bloody conflicts. Originally part of India, current Bangladesh was located in the Bengal region. The British arrived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century taking complete political control of West Bengal and would maintain their hold until the 20th century. As years passed, tensions began to grow between the Hindus and the Muslims of Britain's Indian colony. In 1947, the British relinquished their control and the area divided into India and Pakistan, a Hindu and a Muslim state. Pakistan was further divided into two non-contiguous sections: Punjab, Sindh, Baluchistan, and Pakhtunkhwa in the west and Bengal in the East. The movement of the Muslims and Hindus to their respective territories was a bloody exodus ("Brief History").

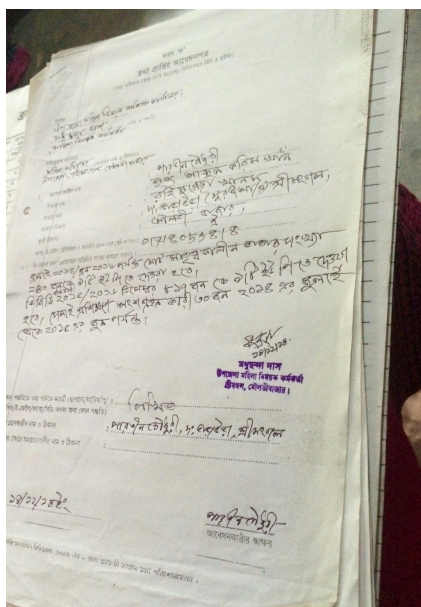
West Pakistan and East Pakistan, though sharing their Muslim religion, shared nothing else. Cultural differences, geographical separation, and different languages caused the two countries to grow apart. Economic disparities caused a major strain ("Brief History"). East Pakistanis believed the West was unfairly distributing resources and the administration was unfair. When West Pakistan outlawed Bangla, the native tongue of East Pakistan, a war began. After the bloodiest and shortest war of this century, Bangladesh emerged as an independent nation. ("Bangladesh, A Brief").

### **1.2 Issues of Bangladesh**

Bangladesh is bursting with issues ranging from sanitation to overpopulation. Two problems are the most prevalent to the rural population of Bangladesh: local government corruption and food insecurity. Corrupt local governments halt the flow of information to a community, eliminating any empowerment and independence of the villagers. Food insecurity creates the deepest forms of poverty and desperation, making it impossible to climb the economic ladder. The following information will discuss the issues and why they persist in rural Bangladesh.

## A. Local government Corruption

The local government bodies in Bangladesh have never been independent or “self-governing”. They are currently an extension of the central government with guided and limited local participation. Local governments are poorly managed, institutionally and financially weak, and lack political credibility. Due to the absence of autonomy, a strong patron-client relationship has formed between the local and national government, creating a sense of mistrust in the political environment (Sharmin). Despite poor execution, the local government is democratic in theory. In 1973, a three-tier system was created with directly elected members: Union Porishad (council consisting of 9 villages with a chairperson and 12 members), Upazila Porishad (council with a chairman, vice chairman, and woman chairman), and Zela Porishad (district level body, the highest level of local government). In urban and affluent areas, a different form of government is implemented due to the larger population and the wider range of issues called Pouro Shobha (“Evolution”).



Corruption in the government system is a common issue in Bangladesh. In most cases, the transparency of each local body depends on the Chairperson and his generosity (or lack thereof). Due to the hierarchy of the Bangladesh government and society, it is difficult to receive benefits and services promised to the villagers. If one has a connection with the government, the benefits are much greater than they are for other villagers. For example, to receive information from the local government regarding stipends or government processes, a person is required to fill out and submit a form. If he or she established previous connections with the governing body, the request is answered almost immediately. If no relationship exists, the process is significantly slower. In addition to the dishonesty, local governments are typically limited in their funds, making it difficult to fulfill their promises to the community and creating a systems where scarce resources are distributed unfairly.

Despite the flaws in the Bangladesh government, efforts are made to improve the community. In 2009, the national government passed the Rights to Information Act which aims to create a transparent government and ensures the free flow of information to the people (“Right”). Local governments instituted the Jubo Unnayan Odhidoptor (Youth Cultural Development Centre) where young people can learn new trades and break away from merely relying on the government for support, aiming towards a system where the people can provide for themselves. In addition, local governments supply scholarships to girls for education and distribute VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) cards to families trapped in poverty which dispense 30 kilograms of rice per month for 2 years. When corruption is not present in governments, local bodies are still extremely limited in their power over the locals.

## **B. Food Insecurity and Stipend (Bhata)**

With a population of 160 million, almost one third of the population in Bangladesh lives below the poverty line and a significant proportion lives in extreme poverty (“Bangladesh Population”). According to a 2010 survey of income and expenditures conducted by the government, the poverty rate is highest in rural areas, at 36%, compared with 28% in urban areas. Sixteen percent of the population is undernourished and 36% of children are malnourished (“Bangladesh”). Food insecurity is one of the greatest issues in Bangladesh. The population is growing by 1.8 million each year and the current food supply is not large enough to feed the future population. In addition, the arable land is shrinking by 0.6% each year, which is especially troubling because of the agrarian-based economy (“Bangladesh”). To combat malnutrition, villagers need to change their diet: shying away from rice and consuming more quality food (Hossain). However, rice is the dominant crop in Bangladesh and accounts for one-half of protein supply (“Rice”). Nutritional and health issues arise based on the poor quality, low consumption, and health aspects of common meals like a lack of daily nutrients and an unbalanced diet.

To combat food insecurity, local governments distribute stipends for rice and other foods, called bhatas. These bhatas are extremely attractive to the poor and are essentially the most valuable service of the government. Unfortunately, the corruption of governing bodies compromises the bhatas. If 20 people are promised to receive a bhata, typically only 10 or less are actually satisfied. Local Chairmen often take the bhatas for their personal gain or use them as tools of manipulation for political gains. Bhatas are also denied due to the large demand that cannot be satisfied and the government is unable to divide the limited supply equally. A combination of shady local government deals and the growing population is detrimental to the food security of the Bangladesh people, particularly in rural areas.

### **1.3 Introduction of BRAC**

With a plethora of destructive problems arising in Bangladesh, a hero emerged in 1972 to come to their aid. BRAC, the largest NGO in the world, originally provided relief and rehabilitation operations in Sullá, Sylhet, following the end of Bangladesh’s War of Liberation. After many successes, BRAC evolved into the organization it is today which emphasizes on eliminating poverty through sustainable solutions. Programs include Microfinance, Human Rights, Education Nutrition, Health, Water Sanitation, Primary and Secondary Schools, and many more. BRAC’s programs are present in all 64 districts of Bangladesh in some form and due to national successes, BRAC expanded its efforts to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Philippines, and Haiti. BRAC employs over 100,000 people and roughly 70 percent of whom are women. Benjamin Barber, a political theorist and author said, “BRAC’s idea was simple yet radical: bring together the poorest people in the poorest countries and teach them to read, think for themselves, pool their resources, and start their own businesses” (*BRAC*).

BRAC’s success is not unnoticed. Sir Hazal Hasan Abed, the chairperson of BRAC has received many awards for his inspiring work. Sir Abed will be honored as the 2015 World Food Prize

Laureate for his leadership of BRAC, one of the most effective poverty-reduction organizations in the world.

## **2. Objectives**

The primary objectives of the study are to assess the methods of communication instituted by BRAC's Community Empowerment Programmes of Polli Shomaj, Radio Pollikontho, and Popular Theatre and search for maximum effectiveness in relation to government transparency and food security. Specific objectives of the study are:

- Overview BRAC's Community Empowerment Programme.
- Explain and assess the Polli Shomaj program.
- Expand on and evaluate the Radio Pollikontho program.
- Discuss and comment on the Popular Theatre program of BRAC.
- Review the effectiveness of BRAC's programs and how the expansion of the programs could create food security and a transparent local government.

## **3. Methodology**

The methods used in the study are a combination of anthropological observations, personal interviews with villagers, and research from previous studies, program heads, literature, and primary and secondary sources. Interviews were conducted in villages of the Srimangal area, involving at least one woman and her children in each village but often including input from other villagers. Ten households, three Popular Theatre troupe members, and multiple Radio Pollikontho workers were interviewed to discover their knowledge, level of participation, and thoughts on each individual program. The most valuable opinions of program quality are of those involved. The availability of each program in the respective villages varied, creating interesting community dynamics and living situations. To gain accurate information on each program, the department heads provided me with a detailed summary of their respective areas. Additional information has been presented in this study on the basis of various works, mainly involving previous BRAC reports and studies. The combination of observation, communication, and research envelop the topics covered to give a wide range of information.

### **3.1 Limitations**

In a two-month internship, I could conduct only limited research. The largest roadblock I discovered was a time constraint: a limited amount of time caused the population in my study to be relatively small, consisting of about 20 villagers. My research and interviews were constrained to the area of Srimangal. More time would have provided more accurate research with a larger population and greater area of study. The language barrier also presented a major limitation. Communication sometimes became difficult and occasionally frustrating. Socializing and discussion were shortened and often confusing. Additionally, my inexperience in research provided a personal limitation by acting as a barrier for certain aspects of research.



### 3.2 Srimangal: Area of Interest

While driving in the north-east section of Bangladesh, the flat rice paddies suddenly spring into beautiful, magnificent hills. It seems as though the entire world is green. Tea plants sprawl for miles. The trees, grass, and even the road lighten up and absorb the natural wonder. Srimangal is the tea capital of Bangladesh and is famous for its natural beauty. Srimangal is an upazila (subdistrict) in the Division of Sylhet, Bangladesh. Tea is the second largest export cash crop of Bangladesh and Srimangal thrives on tea estates. With extensive amounts of tea plants comes a large number of workers. Srimangal has a population of around 300,000 and most workers are plantation laborers (“Tea”). Tea workers live in labor lines, which are houses owned by a tea estate owner or company, meaning the workers have no property ownership. With no access to market-based interventions or proprietary rights, tea garden workers fall under the ultra poor category of economic status. BRAC’s programs are extremely effective in areas like Srimangal by giving stipends for the ultra poor, elderly, pregnant women, widows, disabled children, and migrants; microcredit and microfinance loans; and helping empower community members.

## 4. Research and Discussions



*A Polli Shomaj Meeting*

### 4.1 BRAC: Community Empowerment Programme

One of BRAC’s most successful and popular programs is the Community Empowerment Programme (CEP). The aim of the CEP is to build and strengthen community institutions and ensure stronger accountability of the local government towards the poor. A large focus is on women in leadership; women are the key to development. This involves motivating local women to raise their voice and take collective action in their community. It strengthens the local government for poverty reduction actions and creates transparency. The CEP has four main areas of focus: community institution building, strengthening local governance, access to information, and addressing violence against women (“Community”). The study will focus on the areas of access to information: Polli Shomaj, Radio Pollikontho, and Popular Theatre.

## 4.2 Polli Shomaj

Amartya Kumar Sen, a Nobel laureate, inspired a generation with these words: “Empowering women and girls with more choices and more freedoms is crucial to achieving a better future for all” (“Empowering”). BRAC’s Polli Shomaj program intends to do exactly that. Polli Shomaj serves as a forum through which the poor can raise their voices and claim their rights. The purpose of the Polli Shomaj is to secure positions for women in the rural power structure, encourage participation in local government development activities, prevent violence against women, and help their local communities to access GO-NGO services and resources. Polli Shomaj meetings occur in 55 districts of Bangladesh. Each group has an average of 55 members, all of whom are women (“Community”). Eleven leaders are established who bear the weight of the entire group on their shoulders. Planning and running the monthly meetings is entirely community-driven. Meetings discuss local issues and the women search for innovative and self-sufficient solutions.



A purpose of Polli Shomaj is to create leaders in poverty-stricken villages. After a few years of involvement in the program, Polli Shomaj leaders are typically very involved in the community, articulate, and powerful, showing the improved empowerment of the women.

The implementation of Polli Shomaj programs is partially designed due to address the inadequacy and inconsistency of governments. Circumlocution and lack of trust cause the villagers to solve problems independently. Empty government promises have created a system where the governing body typically no longer meets the needs of the people. Wells, bhatas, and food insecurity are some of the most common programs where the government does not follow through. Government-provided bhatas are the most talked about subject during Polli Shomaj meetings because they have the biggest impact on the villager’s lives. The lives of the poor revolve around food. However, bhatas do not contain enough rice or money to adequately impact the villager’s lives. Additionally, acquiring a bhata or VGF card is difficult: if thirteen names are submitted (even by a powerful community member), typically only 2 cards are provided.



Ineffectiveness leads to frustration and impatience. By creating the Polli Shomaj program, villagers will be aware of their rights and claim entitlements through generations of social capital.



Parveen Chowdhury lives in the village of Shurobhipara. She is the Vice President of her local Polli Shomaj group. Parveen is a successful woman in her community. She works as a *tottho bondhu*, also known as a friend of information. By collecting information from local units, she contributes her input for is eligible and who receives the bhatas from the local government and from BRAC. Even as a trustworthy member of her society, Parveen often finds it difficult to collect information from the community due to hesitation and embarrassment from villagers. Additionally, Parveen ran in the 2009 local elections. Polli Shomaj has helped Parveen channel her leadership and become an affluent society member.

One unique quality of the Polli Shomaj program is the ability to pinpoint local problems and find individual solutions. In the Sylhet area, there is a mass migration to London: London holds promises of well-paid jobs, education, and most importantly, a British passport. Young Bengali men often migrate abroad to seek a better life. In turn, families hope for a finer situation for their daughters and often attempt to marry their daughters to a “Londoni” man. In the hurried attempt to tie the knot, legal marital processes are often overlooked. Marriages can occur over the phone or Skype, depending on the desperation of the bride’s family. Without binding marriage procedures, the husband can easily escape all responsibilities, often abandoning wife in her home village and finding a new wife. The previous wife now struggles to find a new husband because of her now tainted reputation. Polli Shomaj meetings in the Sylhet district will discuss the commonality of this issue and explain ways to avoid the situation, with the message aimed at mothers and young women.

When problems arise that are larger than the range of Polli Shomaj, it can be intimidating to approach the local government due to previous experiences and disappointments or intimidation. One issue faced during meetings is the access to local government. Women who work as *tottho bondhus*, like Parveen Chowdhury, advocate for confrontation of the government. Often, an entire Polli Shomaj group will approach the government to present issues and concerns. The Right to Information Act of 2009 includes causes intended to create government transparency and accessibility. BRAC staff, Presidents, and Vice Presidents of Polli Shomaj groups highly encourage Polli Shomaj groups to pursue this right. The government is more responsive when groups present an issue rather than an individual. A goal of the Polli Shomaj program is to create independent communities that are able to request services from the government when necessary.

Komola is an educated, literate woman. She is a mother of 4 with three sons and one daughter, all who attend school. Komola receives a widow's bhata from the government of 1200 taka every 3 months. However, she does not have enough to send all her children to school. When confronting the local government, they refused to offer any additional support due to the existing bhata she is already receiving. It is extremely difficult to support her family, raise her children, and send them to school. Komola also lives in the labor lines on top of a hill and access to water is difficult. After many failed attempts to acquire a water source through the government, her and her fellow Polli Shomaj members pooled funds together and bought their community a well. The effectiveness of BRAC can be directly contrasted with the local government.



The majority of problems dealt with by the Polli Shomaj are self-solved. A common scenario in rural Bangladesh is one of a single mother: she is poor and illiterate, cannot work, her children have married, and has no source of income. In these situations, Polli Shomaj members will create a fund and each member will donate a small sum of money per meeting. The collection will then be passed onto the struggling woman. Not only are the Polli Shomaj women helping a fellow villager, they are also improving the community and creating good habits among members. Another example lies in marital problems. In the village of Shyamoli, a woman's husband abused her kicked her out of their house with no warning or cause. During a Polli Shomaj meeting, the couple will be brought together in the presence of mediator to try and resolve their problems.

Anthropological observations are valuable in respect to the Polli Shomaj program. After personally observing a Polli Shomaj meeting, there was noticeable empowerment with the women. All comments were welcome, all members were encouraged to speak their mind, and all ideas were valued. Even outside of the meetings, there was a sense of pride in the air. In villages where Polli Shomaj was present, men rarely spoke during the interviews, if present at all. In the Srimangal area where Polli Shomaj groups were not present, women were submissive and quieter during interviews. Many regarded their housework work as nonessential in comparison to a man's work. In a community where independence is encouraged, there was an evident change in attitudes of and towards women.

In addition to the amazing empowerment opportunities for women, Polli Shomaj also has significant social effects on a community. Focusing on the village of Fulchura, major strides have been achieved. Child marriage is basically nonexistent. The legal marital age is eighteen and the local government will involve themselves if hearing of an underage marriage. Almost all children attend school. Dowries are also very rare, no interviewed women had given or taken a dowry. These results were replicated in the majority of villages interviewed where Polli Shomaj was present. Polli Shomaj has a clear impact on the daily lives of the rural Bangladesh people for the better furthering social and economic status, confidence, and independence. Additionally, in villages where Polli Shomaj is present, BRAC typically has a variety of other programs such as

Microfinance, Law Enforcement, Health, and Education. The Polli Shomaj programs opens doors to rural women which never would have been available without the efforts of the CEP.

### 4.3 Radio Pollikontho



*Radio Pollikontho Worker*

Radio programs are everywhere: cars, phones, the Internet. Typically, one uses the radio to blast the latest pop song or listen to a talk show. BRAC, however, had a different idea. They combined the ideas of music, culture, and education to further the development of rural areas of the Sylhet district. This program is called Radio Pollikontho, the voice of the rural people. The goal is to develop a sustainable information dissemination mechanism to ensure people's access to information towards reduction of socio-economic poverty of the poor.

To acquire and operate a community radio program in Bangladesh is a complicated process. There are currently only 23 community-run programs in all of Bangladesh. The Ministry of Information (MOI) has a strict and precise process one must undergo to be broadcasted. In 2008, the MOI established a new policy on community radio which, theoretically but not practically, allowed radio programs to develop more easily. BRAC received its Primary license in 2010 but due to frequency testing, test transitions, and license extensions, did not air until January 12, 2012.

Headquarters of Radio Pollikontho are located in the Molori Bazar area of the Sylhet district of Bangladesh. Its signals cover 17 kilometers, 60% of which are in the Sylhet area. The program is made up of 29 workers with two full time staff members. Most of the workers are student volunteers with personal interest in Radio Pollikontho or radio and development relates to their area of study. Out of the 29 staff members, 51% of them are women. Jobs range from collecting data and information on a program to running the soundboard to broadcasting live shows.

Research for each program is extensive. For the sake of accuracy, it takes about three days to craft and perfect a 20-minute program. All information delivered is thorough and correct, ensuring a proper means of communication. Because of the precise programming and audience requests, Radio Pollikontho broadcasts for 12 hours a day, expanding from two hours at the



beginning. The demand for Radio Pollikontho is growing with the community, desiring at least 14 hours of radio broadcasts.



*A Harmonium, A Common Bangladeshi Folk Instrument; In the recording studio*

The variety of Radio Pollikontho's programs is outstanding. Forty-one programs are aired daily covering a population area of 399,100. The most popular programs show the impact of the Radio Pollikontho programs on locals. Radio Pollikontho prides itself on its local folk music sections. Popular community artists are recommended and perform live on the radio to keep the traditional culture alive and present a reminder of local history. An extremely powerful program is the agricultural segment. Neighborhood farmers are brought to the studio and discuss problems on their farm. Each farmer is paired with an agricultural specialist who presents solutions to the problem. The process not only helps the farmer but impacts all the listeners with a similar issue. The mass output of information can improve an entire community's agricultural lifestyle. Additionally, a follow-up with the same farmer is arranged to observe if the solution is implemented and the effectiveness of the radio session. Another popular segment is the English program, sponsored by the US Embassy. The aim is to teach English to the rural Bengali people. To create the best experience for the listeners, Radio Pollikontho prints the English script in a local paper the day before the broadcast. Listeners can follow the English during the program, creating another dimension to the segment. Essentially, Radio Pollikontho is generating a sense of globalization and a new level of knowledge to the rural, often isolated, areas. To solidify the co-mingling of BRAC's programs, Radio Pollikontho broadcasts a Polli Shomaj section. During this segment, local Polli Shomaj members present their issues and findings from the most recent meeting. This creates a sense of healthy competition between different Polli Shomaj groups, inspires change and creativity, and grants local women leadership roles.

The objectives of Radio Pollikontho is to provide information, education, entertainment, and motivation to its listeners. Change is inevitable. With an overwhelming amount of information available, the local population only needs to take advantage of the excellent opportunities to redefine their lives. Radio Pollikontho has worked with BBC, UNICEF, and the EU, demonstrating great potential. While Radio Pollikontho only covers 17 km, they are in the process of expanding their area, having received approval from the MOI for increasing the coverage area. Additionally, Radio Pollikontho runs a website where radio programs, schedules, and information are accessible all across Bangladesh.

#### 4.4 Popular Theatre



The social and political theatre movement has been sweeping the world. Augusto Boal, a 20th century Brazilian director, writer, and politician, instituted the Theatre of the Oppressed, where theatre is used as a tool of innovation, inspiration, education, and change, especially in developing areas (Paterson). Motivated by the growing trend, BRAC decided to create a similar program called Popular Theatre. Popular theatre is an effective communication medium for disseminating information within rural communities, particularly to those who are illiterate (“Access”). The program produces plays that discuss prominent community issues creating a sense of right and wrong, social norms, and encouragement for change. The plays stimulate the audience, develop awareness, and generate dialogue on issues that affect the lives of the Bengali people.

Popular Theatre is one of the most widely-implemented programs run by BRAC. It is present in 61 of the 63 districts in Bangladesh. Each upazila (subdistrict) has one troupe, totalling to 417 troupes executing 4,170 performances a year. After 17 years of adaptations and tweaks, each drama is now customized to the individual areas: the show is performed in local dialect with local actors discussing local issues.

All characters are based on real people and experiences as to appeal to the people and design relatable shows. The magic and fascination is created by the Popular Theatre troupe. Each troupe consists of 10 members, three of which are female. Troupe members often lack academic qualifications for theatre but by no means lack talent. Often, troupe members are famous in their community which draws in an audience and guarantees the program an authentic vibe. All work from troupe members is purely volunteer-based and is done to further their community and for a love of their work.





Baul (meaning folk singer) Hamid has been a Popular Theatre troupe member for 13 years. He is a musical artist who records folk music to remind the community of the Bengali folk roots. Additionally, he owns land and runs a fish business. Hamid also mentors aspiring theatre students and musicians in his area to create the next generation of musicians and artists.

Musical selections are extremely important in the dramas. Troupe members often have musical backgrounds in addition to acting experience. The show opens with a piece of devotional music which asks God for forgiveness, invites villagers to watch, and establishes a sense of spirituality. The next song is based on the theme of the show and the issues being discussed. Music is used to further the emotions and solidify the important aspects of the performance. Troupe members are well versed in theater, music, and their community. Because troupe members are prominent community members, they inspire others to attend shows and to become involved with Popular Theatre and BRAC.



Popular Theatre performances are a large spectacle in communities. Shows typically happen at night or on Sundays with about 300-500 attendees. All villagers are welcome and locals press to make the shows happen more frequently. Popular Theatre shows in the Srimangal area inform population about the Right to Information Act instituted by Bangladesh Government in 2009 which creates government transparency. Performances focus on government communication and access to government resources, particularly on how to receive bhatas, allowances under the government's social protection program. One important aspect of the performance is to

demonstrate the difficult process of dealing with local governing bodies. The troupes choose to portray this through humor: the protagonist has to run in circles, speak to an outrageous number of people, fill out multiple forms, and in the end, nothing was accomplished. The audiences responded well to the humorous aspects and their most vivid memories of the performances were funny scenes.

An issue with the Popular Theatre shows is a lack of communication. Information on upcoming shows is typically delivered by word of mouth and banners, which creates room for miscommunication. In certain villages, the date of the next show is announced during a Polli Shomaj meeting but often, the troupe simply arrives without prior notice. In the Shambolic village, Shalina Bum, a prominent community member, has offered her home as the set for a show. Often, she is not even informed when the next show will be performed: the troupe members simply show up at her doorstep and begin setting up. The performance discussed corruption and taking goods on credit. However, many villagers did not attend the show because of a lack of communication between the troupe, BRAC, and the villagers on the date of the performance. Due to the low attendance and surprise of the locals, the show was mainly perceived as entertainment and topics discussed were not implemented. Lack of communication causes a loss of efficiency and effectiveness in the show.



*Popular Theatre Shows are often performed in the yard or house of a villager*

While some performances are viewed as entertainment, memorable performances will inspire change and create a need for improvement. The message will always be clear and the issues highlighted. Awareness is created and information is delivered, fulfilling the major goal of the CEP and Popular Theatre program. The entertainment aspect is a front to draw an audience and spur conversations. Whether used for entertainment or education, each performance is highly discussed creating curiosity and excitement in relation to future performances.

The majority of the performances have a large impact on the community and are viewed as a teaching session with a focus on social change in addition to entertainment. Many villagers had taken the messages to heart and instituted the messages in their daily lives. The newfound openness in the local government came as a surprise to communities and with their new knowledge, members began seeking help from their local government. Villages learned about government training available to locals which covers sewing, fishing, domestic animal care, and

mobile servicing. Being aware and taking advantage of government services is a major advantage for villagers and will greatly improve their well being. In addition to the rights to information in the Sylhet area, Popular Theatre shows have also covered Malaria, nutrition, child marriage, and dowries. Each show delivers a unique message and an individual solution. The combination of variety and consistency ensures a successful delivery of information and a large focus on social development, empowerment, and improvement.

## **5. Conclusion**

### **5.1 Comparison and Conclusion of the Effectiveness of BRAC's Programs**

Each program discussed has individual strengths and weaknesses. Analysis is best conducted based on the thoughts and opinions of professionals and those affected by the programs: the villagers themselves. The most important factors besides active change in the programs are inclusiveness, coverage, and memorability.

A program can only be a success if the entire community reaps the benefits. While each CEP program targets a different audience, possible expansions could be groundbreaking for a village. The Polli Shomaj program, while extremely empowering and beneficial, is the most exclusive in relation to Popular Theatre and Radio Pollikontho. Being an all-female group cuts off other viable input from the community. The goal would be finding a spot where men can be included but not overpower the women's ideas and leadership, ideally creating equality between gender. Popular Theatre and Radio Pollikontho are all-inclusive, partially because both programs are passive and involve listening or watching and also because they are entertainment-based. Polli Shomaj is an active, involved program and gender and size limitations can make an easier environment to address issues but creates a smaller community.

Effectiveness of a program can be closely tied with coverage. The more available a program becomes, the more involvement and reliability it builds. The Polli Shomaj program is the largest and most present program of the three. Polli Shomaj meetings are regular and more widely known than Radio Pollikontho and Popular Theatre. In some areas, Popular Theatre shows are scarce and only happen a few times a year, making the program almost completely nonexistent. There is a need for repetition to continually inspire communities. The Radio Pollikontho program only covers a radius of 17 km. While an Internet transmission is also available, many villagers do not have access to Internet or are unaware of the option. Coverage is an important aspect in any program, especially one which focuses on community empowerment.

A program is inefficient if content discussed is immediately forgotten. An important factor is memorability. Popular theatre is effective in delivering information and the messages are typically more vividly remembered. Polli shomaj discussions are more useful than popular theatre in finding solutions: fewer people, easier to have a discussion, can go more in depth but the discussions are more difficult to remember because of a lack of excitement presented in Popular Theatre shows.

Collaboration between the programs improves each individual section. Polli Shomaj and Popular Theatre often combine to improve the village and create a sense of community and partnership.



Polli Shomaj will inform members about an upcoming Popular Theatre show. Shows will often spark discussion points in Polli Shomaj meetings. By extending the relationship between Polli Shomaj and Radio Pollikontho, together they can raise awareness and participation about the other program.

## **5.2 Creating Food Security and Government Transparency**

The issues of food security and government transparency in Bangladesh go hand in hand. Government legitimacy will create accessible aid programs like bhatas. In a poverty-stricken land, the Bengali people are desperate for food and information. The reliance of the Bangladeshi people contributes to the poverty. With the empowerment and access to information available through CEP, food security, government transparency, and more can be overcome with small expansions of the Polli Shomaj, Popular Theatre, and Radio Pollikontho programs.

Polli Shomaj expansion will solve food insecurity and continue to strengthen government transparency. The key is to increase the number of meetings and expand the membership. By presenting women with empowerment opportunities, BRAC is enabling them to change their community. The Polli Shomaj program educates women and gives them a place to discuss common problems and find effective solutions, often independent of the government. The new independence places the government emphasis on essentials, like bhatas. The rising level of empowerment and education will create accountability if bhatas are not received and can limit the corruption of the government. The government will become a backup instead of a crutch. The rising movement of women's empowerment can impact communities and generate self-sustaining environments. Expansion is crucial in order to raise awareness and encourage participation.

By increasing the frequency of the Radio Pollikontho program, villagers are essentially receiving a free education due to the variety of programs. With the knowledge from Radio Pollikontho, society will be able to conquer problems small and large. With farming tips, farmers can increase their crop yield, use safer and more efficient farming methods, learn from other's mistakes, and eventually create food security for their family. The information distributed automatically creates transparency because the people will be aware of government actions, their individual rights, and the rights of their community. Knowledge in issues and solutions will create confidence to take a stand in their community and create a better life. A program with a potential this large needs to be expanded. The effects are unimaginable if Radio Pollikontho was expanded country-wide like other BRAC programs.

Informing the people about the Rights to Information Act through Popular Theatre is very effective. By increasing the number of shows and the districts covered could present this vital information to as many people as possible. The government will become more transparent the more that people get involved thereby creating more government responsibility and accountability. If the community is empowered and educated, they can stop the corruption of the local government. Government transparency was created by the RTI Act but is not fully utilized. The expansion of the Popular Theatre program will create a more informed, independent, and educated society that has full access to the government, to rights, and to freedoms.

Tackling the issues of food insecurity and government corruption are not easy. BRAC has had enormous success in these areas. Each program is delicately crafted to target a different issue not only in Bangladesh but worldwide. The Community Empowerment Programme has developed incredible models of a self-reliant programs which empowers communities. The Polli Shomaj, Popular Theatre, and Radio Pollikontho programs demonstrate amazing examples of independence and creativity. With certain tweaks, expansions, and collaborations, these three programs could, by themselves, fight issues like food insecurity and government corruption

## **6. Personal Remarks**

### **6.1 Beginning the Journey**

When Iowa is mentioned, the mind automatically jumps to agriculture. Iowa is loaded with cornfields and soybeans and is the largest producer of corn in the United States. Even though I was born and raised in Iowa, I have never spent more that twenty minutes in a cornfield. I grew up in Des Moines, the capital of Iowa. I was first exposed to the World Food Prize Foundation when the Downtown Library building was bought and re-molded into the beautiful home of the nonprofit organization centered around the life and work of Norman Borlaug. Originally, I only associated food security with crops and farming so I did not realize the significance of the World Food Prize. My love for literature and the arts shadowed all other subjects. Luckily, the outgoing teacher for my environmental science class, Scott Schoneberg, persuaded me to participate in the Iowa Youth Institute in the spring of 2014. He explained the wide range of food insecurity and the multiple solutions outside of agriculture. I suddenly found myself at the Global Youth Institute in the fall of 2015. I began investigating the previous interns and their research and was shocked by the variety of projects assigned. Many were not associated with agriculture and focused on how social development contributed to food security. My love for theatre was discussed during the interview process and I found myself exactly where I wanted to be: combining the arts with solving global issues. I was granted a Borlaug-Ruan International Internship working for BRAC in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

### **6.2 Cultural Shock, Adaption, Awareness, and Perspective**

It is difficult to understand deep poverty growing up in the United States. Until I came to Bangladesh, I thought I understood poverty. I had seen beggars on the road or tents under bridges. My mindset was completely altered from the first moments in this new country. The ride from the airport to my hotel was sadly fascinating. First off, the traffic is almost unexplainable. Being used to road signs and controlled streets, the free-for-all roads were terrifying. The constant honking, swerving, roads with no lanes provided many moments of horror. In addition, the road is packed with beggars but not those who stand on the side of the road with a sign. It caught me off guard when an elderly woman ran to the car window and began tapping on it and pleading for money in Bangla. It is impossible to ride in a car without at least one woman or child desperately begging through the window. Rickshaws often rule the road, as Bangladesh is the rickshaw capital of the world. Sidewalks are deadly, being cracked and covered in garbage or filthy water. These difference caused me to step back and redefine poverty.

My Bengali experience was much more than poverty examination and research. I grew to truly appreciate and love some of the amazing customs. The traditional clothing worn by women is a

shalwar kameez, a tunic with pants and a scarf. Each piece of clothing was beautiful, colorful, and unique. The delicately crafted articles are made of lightweight materials and bode well against the tireless heat. My love for the uniqueness led to many purchases. Transitioning from Western clothing to more traditional garments created a personal sense of comfort and adaption.



Another custom I appreciated was eating with the hands. While it sounds sloppy, it is an art. After often dropping many pieces of chicken and grains of rice on the table, floor, and my clothes, I finally began to get the hang of it. Using only your right hand and using your knuckles to your fingertips, eating with your hands seems elegant and definitely makes picking bones out of fish a whole lot easier. My sojourn encompassed the entirety of Ramadan, the holy month of fasting. While working in the BRAC Centre, there were many who did not fast but in the field, I was one of the only few. After eating a few meals alone, I decided to fast. It is an interesting process: the first meal, Sehri, is at sunrise which is around 3 AM. Everyone gathers in the eating area to delve into their first meal of the day. After completion, there is no food or water until 7 PM, called Iftar. Eating Iftar for the first time was one of the most satisfying feelings I've ever had. When your body is not focused on food, your mind is free to focus on other things. Unfortunately, I cheated a little bit by drinking some water, but other than that, my 4 days of

fasting were a success. Complete exposure to an entirely new culture was shocking and at first, very difficult. However, after a few weeks, I began to feel comfortable and the country that felt so strange started feeling a little bit like home.

There is no better way to understand world issues and poverty than to be completely surround by it. My perspective has grown and changed in terms of global poverty and its solutions. Poverty is deep and riddled with multiple other problems. There is not one simple answer to the question of food security. The people impact and scope of poverty's horrible grasp is often overwhelming. My internship with BRAC exposed me to creative and innovative solutions. I was unaware of the amazing work already underway to combat poverty. This incredible internship has opened my eyes to a world of which I was unaware. I have begun to understand how poverty controls a population. Humbly, I hope to continue my search for poverty solutions. The world should put a large focus on improving the lives of so many innocent individuals. I never expected two months to change my entire view of poverty, food security, and the world. I will return from Bangladesh with a new respect for my opportunities and lifestyle, constantly thinking of the poor child following me on the street begging for money or the elderly woman with no source of revenue living in a tiny tin shack in the countryside. Images of poverty and food insecurity will always be embedded in my mind and will impact all my future decisions.

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### 8. Appendix Additional Photos





## Individual Interview Questionnaire

Respondent's Name \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: Male\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_ Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_

Family Size \_\_\_\_\_ Number of children \_\_\_\_\_

How many years of education have you achieved? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years of education has your spouse achieved? \_\_\_\_\_

Are all of the children in school? \_\_\_\_\_

If no, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

Does the local government play a large role in village issues/activities? Y N

**POLLI SHOMAJ**

Have you attended any lectures, speakers, or forums in your village? Y N

(If yes) What topic was covered in the last meeting you attended? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

(If yes) What did you learn from them? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Are you a member of Polli Shomaj? Y N

(If yes) Are you the president/an organizer? Y N

How often (if ever) do you attend a Polli Shomaj meeting? \_\_\_\_\_

(If attended a meeting) What topic was discussed at the last meeting?

What have you learned from the Polli Shomaj meetings? Have they affected your life at all? \_\_\_\_\_

**RADIO POLLIKONTHO**

Do you listen to the Radio Pollikontho (BRAC'S community radio program)? Y N

(If yes) Where do you listen to the program? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a radio in your home? Y N

(If yes) Where did you acquire it? \_\_\_\_\_

(If yes) How often do you listen to the program? \_\_\_\_\_

(If yes) What topics do they discuss? \_\_\_\_\_

(If yes) What was the most recent program you listened to? \_\_\_\_\_

(If yes) What is your favorite program? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

How did you hear about Radio Pollikontho? \_\_\_\_\_

What have you learned from Radio Pollikontho? \_\_\_\_\_

## **POPULAR THEATRE**

Did you see the latest Popular Theatre show discussing rights to information? Y N

### **IF ATTENDED SHOW**

What was your favorite part about the show? \_\_\_\_\_

What were three things you learned about the right to information from the performance? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you often receive information from the government? Y N

Do you trust the local and national government of Bangladesh? Y N

Have you seen any other popular theatre shows before? Y N

(If yes) How many? \_\_\_\_\_

(If yes) What topics did they discuss? \_\_\_\_\_

Have the Popular Theatre shows changed your life in any way? (Made you change a behavior, stop doing something, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_

Which BRAC program do you like the best? Popular theatre, lecture, pamphlets, Community radio? \_\_\_\_\_

**IF DID NOT ATTEND SHOW**

Why didn't you attend the show? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you attended a Popular Theatre show in the past? Y N

How much do you know about your rights to information? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you often receive information from the government? Y N

Do you trust the local and national government of Bangladesh? Y N

**ALL**

Do you think that BRAC has helped your community? Y N

(If yes) How? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you think that BRAC is an accessible organization in your community? Y N

Is BRAC more accessible than the government, especially when it comes to delivering



information? Y N Why? \_\_\_\_\_

Which BRAC program has had the largest impact on you? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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### Popular Theatre Troupe Member Questionnaire

Respondent's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: Male\_\_\_ Female\_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_

Family Size \_\_\_\_\_ Number of children \_\_\_\_\_

How many years of education have you achieved? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years of education has your spouse achieved? \_\_\_\_\_

Are all of the children in school? \_\_\_\_\_

If no, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

How many members of the household are literate? (define literacy?) \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been involved in the Popular Theatre program? \_\_\_\_\_

How did you get involved with Popular Theatre? \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you like working with BRAC and popular theatre? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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Is it difficult to engage the audience in your performance? Y N

Which age group is most involved in the show? \_\_\_\_\_

Who do you most want to educate? Children, females, adults? \_\_\_\_\_

### Radio Pollikontho Worker Questionnaire

Respondent's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: Male \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_ Marital Status \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Household Head \_\_\_\_\_ Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Family Size \_\_\_\_\_ Number of children \_\_\_\_\_

How many years of education have you achieved? \_\_\_\_\_

How many years of education has your spouse achieved? \_\_\_\_\_

Are all of the children in school? \_\_\_\_\_

If no, why not? \_\_\_\_\_

How many members of the household are literate? (define literacy?) \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been involved in the Radio Pollikontho program? \_\_\_\_\_

How did you get involved with Radio Pollikontho? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you like working with BRAC and Radio Pollikontho? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is the most popular broadcast/segment? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How do you choose the topics for your radio broadcasts? \_\_\_\_\_

How many listeners are there, typically? \_\_\_\_\_

How many staff members work for Radio Pollikontho? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you think radio is the most effective way to educate the people on major issues? Y N