

## **Workshop on Advice Ecosystems for Business and Inclusion in South Asia: summary report**

BRAC Learning Centre, Dhaka, 6 August 2023

### *1. Introduction*

The workshop was part of the ongoing research project on ‘Ethnographic Solutions to Inequalities in South Asian Advicescapes’. The project seeks to map the landscape of business and entrepreneurship advice, explore issues of access, quality and inclusiveness, and generate ideas for making advice work better. By advicescape, we refer to local and national ecosystems of advice providers. By advice, we refer to formal mentoring, consultation and training by government, private and non-governmental agencies, as well as to advice provided informally by family and friends.

The research is ethnographic in its approach, and is being conducted in two South Asian countries - Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, between September 2021 to December 2023. It is funded by the Atlantic Equities Challenge Fund at the International Inequalities Institute of the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).<sup>1</sup> Research partners are the BRAC PROMISE programme in Bangladesh and the Centre for a Smart Future in Sri Lanka.

The Dhaka workshop was jointly organised by BRAC and the research team. Its purpose was to document the views and experiences of a mixed group of advice seekers and advice providers. The structure followed the format of a similar workshop held in Colombo on 12 June 2023, with focus groups of advice seekers in the morning session, and a round table discussion for advice providers in the afternoon.

The research team of Prof David Lewis (LSE), Tasmiah Rahman (BRAC), Dr Becky Bowers (LSE), Anjali Sarkar (LSE), Shifur Rahman Shakil (BRAC) and Tasnim Akhter Ema (UPG, BRAC) first welcomed the participants and discussed the background and purpose of the research, and aims of the workshop. Workshop participants introduced themselves.

### *2. Morning session*

This was attended by 15 people with a variety of backgrounds. Participants included small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs, including some from BRAC’s PROMISE and Ultra Poor programmes, aspiring entrepreneurs from Dhaka’s ‘Bihari’ community, and a tech start-up founder. A full list of participants can be found in Annex 1.

Two focus groups were formed, one facilitated by Tasmiah and the other by Shifur and Ema, assisted by Anjali. Each focus group discussed three questions: ‘what does the ‘advice ecosystem’ look like from your perspective?’; ‘what have been your experiences with

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see <https://afsee.atlanticfellows.lse.ac.uk/en-gb/projects/atlantic-equity-challenge/ethnographic-solutions-to-inequalities-in-south-asian-advicescapes>

seeking advice?'; and 'what could be done to improve quality and access of advice available to entrepreneurs?'

Groups began by considering a simple generic map of the advice ecosystem provided by the team with different possible sources of advice: government, private sector, NGOs, community, and family and friends. People were invited to add to this, or change it according to their point of view and experiences. People agreed with the map in theory, but most said they mainly relied on informal advice. It was felt that formal advice provision, particularly from government agencies, was limited other than for urban-based start-ups. Formal advice tends to be available in Dhaka (with the exception of decentralised NGO training programmes like PROMISE) but is less available outside the capital. There are some international NGOs such as World Vision that provide advice, but shorter term and using a project approach. It was suggested that social media needs to be added to the map as a useful source of advice. There is great value in 'peer-to-peer' learning, and in some cases, it was reported that clients can also sometimes provide advice, as in the case of customers to tailors. Overall, it was generally felt that there was more advice available for those *setting up* an enterprise, rather than during subsequent stages of *running a business*.

In relation to the second question, useful experiences were raised of both successful and unsuccessful advice seeking. The importance of an individual's informal social networks in accessing advice and information was emphasised. For example, a participant setting up a beauty parlour business accessed useful advice after a chance meeting with an NGO worker led her to enrol on a paid-for business training course. This meant that building wider networks gave access to advice resources outside her immediate community. Different responses based on gender were noted, with women and men tending to approach advice differently. Both formal and informal advice provision can sometimes lead to 'bad advice', if the adviser is not well matched with the advisee, or when misleading information is provided by business owners who fear competition. Unequal power relations are important to recognise, and gender norms can make it difficult for women to start businesses without first getting approval from male family members. Forms of social exclusion can also restrict access, as in the case of a Bihari camp resident who faced opportunities for accessing either formal or informal advice, and sometimes also this is the case for Hindu entrepreneurs.

Finally, ideas were discussed for improving advice availability and quality. These included: (i) the need for agencies to be more proactive in communicating opportunities for accessing advice; (ii) more decentralised government advice provision beyond Dhaka; (iii) more follow-up advice opportunities after training courses end, to create more sustainable enterprises; (iv) the need to explore more use of technology to spread information about advice opportunities, and for accessing advice; (v) using mass media advertisements to increase knowledge about government advice provision; (vi) advice to be more specific, based on the nature of a particular business, rather than generic.

### *3. Afternoon session*

This was mainly attended by business advice givers from a range of public and private organizations, including the government's SME Foundation and ICT Division, private sector

consultancies such as LightCastle and Innovision, non-governmental groups including B'YEAH and Better Stories, along with individuals with experience mentoring entrepreneurs. The session took the form of a structured round table discussion with these diverse advice providers based around the question of 'what does good advice look like?', leading to some ideas about how advice availability, access, quality and inclusivity can be improved.

The round table was facilitated by Tasmiah, assisted by David. There was an animated discussion of a wide range of advice issues among the round table participants, including:

- Access to advice is seen as important by people setting up or running businesses, but it is a neglected 'soft skill' element of business services provision.
- Advice comes in two main forms – generic basic advice about how to do certain things, and more nuanced advice tailored to specific types of business, problems and contexts.
- Advice is just one of several important elements involved in establishing and running a business, alongside financing, skills training, etc. A person giving advice - such as a mentor - needs to gain a broad understanding of all the different elements involved in a particular business if advice provided is to be useful and effective.
- Good advice should not be directive, but focus on providing options and choices that can put people in charge of their own decision making, and widen their understanding of the range of possible options.
- Medical treatment provides a useful analogy for thinking about business advice: good practice requires that a person has regular check-ups, sees the same physician who gets to know a patient well, and before issuing prescriptions, makes a careful and thorough diagnosis.
- Advice is rarely useful when it is generic and vague – which means advice givers need to take time to understand the specifics of a particular person's business and locality. This also extends to the marketing of a business - it needs to be context-based and suited to the specific community.
- Power imbalances are important - low-income advice seekers often don't feel they can challenge advisers who are insufficiently informed, or are trying to impose unhelpful ideas; power asymmetries also lead to unequal access to advice among women, minorities and provincial business owners.

#### *4. Next steps*

Anjali facilitated a discussion about possible ideas for the planned advice toolkit. Part of the toolkit will include short video clips that were recorded by some of the participants during the day, containing experiences and insights relating to advice.

Ideas discussed included providing updated information about advice sources, notes of advice 'best practice', and ideas for improving identification of mentees and matching with mentees.

While the afternoon session did not produce any specific ideas for concrete next steps in relation to improving advice provision, it was agreed that further reflection and follow up would be encouraged as part of continuing the conversation about issues of advice.

Participants were also encouraged to write and submit short blogs for the project website that can form part of the toolkit.

Materials from the workshop will be added to the website and made available to participants.

The team concluded the workshop by thanking the everyone for their participation and ideas, and the LSE team thanked Tasmiah and the other BRAC staff for organising the workshop.

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## *Annex 1: List of Participants*

### AM

1. Afsana Hossain Poonan, District Manager, SDP-Promise, BRAC
2. Md Farhad Hossain, District Manager, SDP-Promise, BRAC
3. Md Askender Ali, UPG, BRAC
4. Md Abdus Salim, UPG, BRAC
5. Md Rashid, BRAC, Promise programme, Cox's Bazar
6. Rashaba, Promise user, BRAC, Cox's Bazar
7. Farida Yasmin, Promise user, Cox's Bazar
8. Shamanta Hoque Rahala, Promise programme mentor, BRAC Cox's Bazar
9. Olin, self-employed small businessman
10. Md Al-Amin, aspiring entrepreneur, Geneva Camp, Dhaka
11. Farzana, aspiring entrepreneur, Geneva Camp, Dhaka
12. Simran Akther, aspiring entrepreneur, Geneva Camp, Dhaka
13. S Faisul Hossain, aspiring entrepreneur, Geneva Camp, Dhaka
14. Simron Akther, aspiring entrepreneur, Geneva Camp, Dhaka
15. Mehnaz Aziz, Teach for Bangladesh, Deputy Director

### PM

1. Farhad Ifaz, CEO iFarmer
2. Dr Sheikh Touhidul Haque, Research Fellow, BIGD
3. Kazi Akib Annaf, Project Manager Specialist, Centre for Entrepreneurship, BRAC
4. S.M. Khaled Mahfuz, PKSF
5. Tasnia Khandaker Prova, CPJ
6. Md Ashkander Ali, Regional Manager BRAC
7. Afsana Hossain Poonan, SDP, Promise, BRAC
8. Syeda Sultana Yasmin, SME Foundation
9. Siddhartho Goshami, Head of Operations, Innovation Design and Entrepreneurship Academy (IDEA), StartUp Bangladesh, ICT Division, GoB
10. Dr Pinki Shah, ULAB
11. Palash Das, UPG, BRAC
12. Mehad ul Haque, Senior Business Consultant, LightCastle
13. Rashed Mamun, BYEAH
14. Minhaz Anwar, Chief Story, Better Stories
15. Nafees Maharuf Shafakat, Portfolio Manager, Innovision
16. Sumik Siddique Plabon, Research Associate, Innovision
17. Tasnim A. Ema, UPG, BRAC