

Meet Our Partners

Meet the People



“The Secret of Change is to Focus All of Your Energy, Not on Fighting the Old, But on Building the New”
Socrates

It’s easy to lose hope sometimes, especially in the world we live in today. A world where man kills man over God and a world where children turn terrorists to fight oppression, appears to be the world that generations have painstakingly chiseled away at to build over centuries. Abundant collective human effort is cultivated in nourishing the negative, whereas the power of positivity remains at threat to shrivel in the sidelines, clamoring for a ray of light, a breath of fresh air. But that does not mean good is dead. Good continues to live even amidst the bleakest of hours. And the best thing about good? The multiplying effect of good outstrips that of bad. Too simplistic and naïve a claim? Let us take a simple case of Ms. X and her family.

When Ms. X has something happen to her or commits an act that has negative repercussions, her natural and logical instinct is to hide and/or fix that (depending on moral standards of course). But when Ms. X has something happen to her or takes part in an act that has positive consequences her natural instinct is to share that experience and/or bring others under the purview of that positive experience. Anomalies exist in all walks of life, but at least for the majority, this may be deemed naturally applicable. A drop in

the ocean does not bear implications of that mere drop; it also embodies the ripple effect caused by that single drop. Similarly, when we strive to bring change to the life of a single beneficiary it rarely stops there. Rather it holds the power to touch the lives of the beneficiary's family, friends and an entire community. That is why UNDP chooses to work with communities. That is why UNDP prefers the people as its most powerful partners.

Early Recovery Facility (ERF) of UNDP aims to bridge the gap between response and recovery efforts to sudden-onset as well as recurring disaster events, with the overarching objective of enhancing people's resilience. Against the backdrop of the 2015 floods that hit Northwest Bangladesh, UNDP participated in a Joint UN Response, funded by DFID, in order to create employment for 11,000 beneficiaries, provide shelter support for 2,250 beneficiaries, and raise plinths to make households more resilient in the target communities. The project facilitated by ERF, was undertaken in a manner that not only worked with the community, but emphasized their proactive engagement, and created space for community feedback to turn into community action.

As UNDP Bangladesh's Assistant Country Director, Mr. Khurshid Alam, would say, the aim is to enable a support paradigm for communities, initiating a shift from the existing control paradigm. ERF engages with the community, provides technical expertise as necessary, helps engineer durable solutions and implement them as sustainable ones. That is why UNDP's most important partner is the people – and on a recent monitoring visit, I was fortunate enough to be able to interact with a few of them.

Meet Md. Amir Hossain

Twenty year-old Md. Amir Hossain of Kurigram, hails from a family that believes in education. However, he has had to halt his studies temporarily, so that his younger brother is able to complete his education first. He paused his studies realizing that his responsibility towards his family at the moment is more



significant than his responsibility towards himself. Desperately looking for work but unable to find any opportunity in the area, when Cash-for-Work (CfW) activities were announced by ERF UNDP, he quotes it to be a godsend for his family and him. For the first time in his life, he engaged in a job that paid. 3700 of the 6000 Tk. he earned that month, was put forth towards his brother's Intermediate exams¹. That was the amount needed for his brother to be able to appear for the examination necessary for his eligibility to continue studies any further. With another 1800 Tk. Amir bought a lamb. He plans to raise

the lamb, and be able to sell it at a higher price later. According to Amir, the Mobile Money Transfer (MMT) method used by ERF to hand out payments, was a key factor in him being able to purchase the

¹ Intermediate exams in Bengali medium schools are comparable to O Level examinations.

lamb. He fears he may have used his salary towards more consumable expenses otherwise. But having cash in his mobile wallet, rather than physical cash, allowed him to be able to hold on to that amount and purchase the lamb from the marketplace, when he did cash in.

Amir: *“This was my first boro (big) income. Although I had to stop my studies, I feel relieved I was able to pay, so that my brother can continue his. For me too, it’s just a pause. Next time I earn, I’ll be putting it towards my exams so I can finally continue. This is not how I want to live life, but I have no choice. I wish there were more opportunities as such, giving us a chance to an income. I have to be able to earn to further what I really want to do – which is pursue my education!”*

Meet Chobiron Begum

Chobiron Begum is a 50 year old woman from Gidaree, Gaibandha. Years ago her husband left her for another woman and since then she has been fending for herself and her daughter. Any assets or savings she may have had, was spent two years back when she got her daughter married off. Since then, she has been living at the mercy of the well wishes of others.

A roof over one’s head is what most would call a basic necessity but for Chobiron, it has been no less than a luxury. She has spent the last 2 years living in her neighbours’ homes within the Gidaree community. The neighbours took turns to let her spend the week at their place – in exchange, she would help them with their household chores and farm activities. Chobiron was getting by, but somewhere in the process lost all semblance of self-worth and dignity. Living under others’ roofs meant she was deprived of living on her own terms. But that changed in the month of May, 2016.

Chobiron who was a CfW beneficiary, took this as an opportunity to accumulate her earnings – and put it towards a house she could call her own. With 5000 Tk. she purchased CGI sheets, wood planks and paid for the installation costs of her new home – however, it wasn’t a home she just installed. She had installed her dream.

Chobiron: *“I never thought I would be able to live in a house that I can call mine again. But I am now. I don’t know what to say. It was a dream and it came true.”*



Meet Kawser Ali & Rabeya Khatun

They raised 4 sons and 2 daughters, but now the elderly couple, Md. Kawser Ali and Begum Rabeya Khatun live on their own. When asked what they did with the 10000 Tk. they received in shelter support, 65 year-old Kawser Ali, said with pride in his voice that his house now has tin-fencing. He also spoke of the wooden posts they purchased and the green turfing they did around the house. Rabeya chimed in then to say that even more than those, what she felt most grateful for was their raised homestead.



Every year during monsoon, their house would be flooded forcing them to temporarily move out. But this year would be different. The plinth had been raised well above the level that the water usually reaches. And this is the first time in years that they are anticipating the wet season to be a dry and comfortable one.

Rabeya: *“Every year we have to leave our home during monsoon. It’s hard to move around you know, especially with the livestock. We usually seek refuge next door, which happens to be the home of our daughter’s in-laws. In our culture, it’s embarrassing to ask anything of our in-laws and every year we feel we are a burden to them. Although they have been very kind and generous to us, it’s something that slowly eats away at our self-respect. But not anymore. Now, my home has been raised and with it, my life.”*

Innovations - Collective Growth through Combined Efforts

We hear innovation these days and we think fast-paced technology and many things ICT. But personally I believe, this is a gross misrepresentation of the full potential of such a powerful word. Innovation. It stands for change, it stands for that which is new, it stands for advancement. Innovation can happen anywhere, it can be instigated by anybody. I was fortunate enough to encounter a few such innovations, on this very short visit of mine.

A Fisherman's Tale

Abdul Sheikh fishes for a living. His family and he eat the fish he catches, and he is able to save some to sell to the markets too. He mostly deals in shrimps and has an ingenious way of catching them. Sheikh uses the local "Lifebouy" soap as fish-bait. He sticks one or two small pieces of soap in the middle of the "fish-catcher", which are crafted by him too. Shrimps flock to the bait and the catcher closes. Sheikh is



Abdul Sheikh and his innovative shrimp-catchers

able to catch a decent amount of shrimps on the average day, using his own innovative method. However, having a large family and living on land that is highly flood prone, he is unable to save any of his earnings. House repairs take up a large portion of their family income every year.

But this year it's going to be different – With the materials procured and installed for house refurbishments under the

guidance of the ERF technical officers, Sheikh is confident about the coming monsoon. He is excited to finally be able to save some of that money, with which he hopes to initiate a small-scale shrimp business.

Protecting Land, Protecting Households - Jute Geotextile Turfing

Another innovation I was able to observe on the visit, was one being led by ERF itself – jute geotextile turfing. ERF plans to launch jute-geotextile lining for side-slope protection in 3 of the shelter clusters, as a pilot initiative. These clusters, on the river bank, have been severely affected during flood season every year, eroding the land and forcing numerous families to be displaced.

ERF chose to work with a few of these vulnerable communities and raised the plinth, at least 2 feet above



Clusters selected for Jute Geotextile implementation

Highest Flood Level². However, in some clusters, the communities claimed that merely raising plinths would not protect them during monsoon. The river attacks their land with much force, often breaking and carrying with it large chunks. They approached ERF, seeking a feasible solution to the problem. ERF answered.

Jute geo-textile lining, with gunny bags to layer on top, will prevent further breakage of land from these shrinking clusters. Not only will it prevent people from forced displacement, but the material is also cost-effective and environmentally friendly. Jute also happens to be one of the major crops cultivated in Northwest Bangladesh.

Every time I go on a field visit, I realise I bring back something new with me – be it knowledge of a local or new-age innovation, or a simple smile captured, I feel I come back a little richer than I left. The work that we do bears no meaning till we are out in the field, seeing with our own eyes, the results of what we help create. Communities embrace us with open arms, it's only fair we reach out to them so as well. When we remove ourselves from a position of omnipotence and truly engage with the people, we often realise it is communities who lead us to find sustainable solutions - solutions we create together, solutions that empower!

² Highest flood level is being taken as per flood level of 2007 floods.