



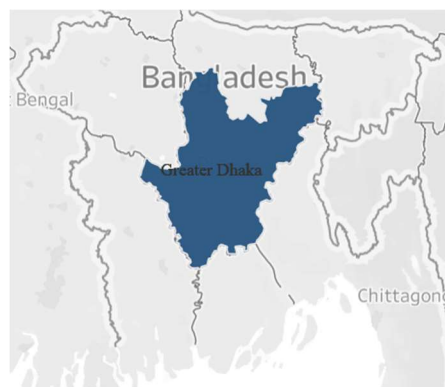
BANGLADESH AFM REPORT:  
BUILDING THE RESILIENCE OF UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

Prepared for  
12th Board Meeting  
9 June 2020

## **1. Introduction**

1.1 The Holey Artisan Bakery attack that occurred in July 2016 was partially perpetrated by middle-class university students. It challenged some assumptions, such as that perpetrators of violent extremism (VE) originate from rural areas or from religious schools. It showed the need to engage and build the resilience of educated youth against violent extremism.

1.2 In response to this scenario, GCERF initiated in 2018 a new programme called Social Action and Mobilisation for Prevention of Radicalisation and Extremism through Enhanced and Targeted Interventions (SAMPREETI) through its Accelerated Funding Mechanism (AFM), committing USD 2.2m through 39 small grants. The focus of the programme was students from madrasas, public, and private universities in the Greater Dhaka Area, including Dhaka, Gazipur, Manikganj, Munshiganj, Narayanganj, and Narsingdi districts.



1.3 To manage and operationalise the programme, GCERF signed a partnership agreement with the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), a civil society organisation with extensive experience that was already leading a consortium funded by GCERF through its Core Funding Mechanism (CFM). MJF served as a hosting organisation for disbursing small grants between the value of USD 5000 and USD 100,000.

1.4 MJF established a team of local staff (seven people) focused on providing micro-grants – including to academic, student, and community-based organisations, media houses, as well as to private sector actors. The idea of such a mechanism was to enable a vast number of small and highly specialised organisations to access funding and implement several specific projects, mainly targeting university students but also in some cases school management committees and parents. The interventions were implemented by 39 private and non-governmental organisations during an intensive ten-month period, from October 2018 to July 2019.

1.5 In order to support the design and implementation of SAMPREETI interventions, GCERF funded a perception study to investigate youth perceptions of violent extremism and their level of resilience in the beginning of the programme, surveying their perception about VE among 2,496 university students (1,047 females and 1,449 males) aged 18-29 in six districts of

the Dhaka Division and from 76 educational institutions. The study used an adapted BRAVE-14<sup>1</sup>, complimentary questions as well focus groups discussions to better understand the perceptions of university students towards violent extremism in the Greater Dhaka region.

1.6 Following the end of grant activities, GCERF contracted an organisation - Conflict Management Consulting (CMC) - to conduct an external and independent end-of-grant evaluation of the AFM in Bangladesh, assessing the project across the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability. A summary of the Evaluation findings is provided in **Annex 1A** of this report, below.

## **2. Activities by GCERF Leverage Point**

2.1 Through GCERF funding under the AFM, the local team hosted by MJF launched more than 300 activities. These activities aimed to strengthen youth resilience to violent extremism by contributing to the four leverage points as follows:

### **Social Cohesion**

2.2 Grantees under the AFM organised extracurricular activities focused on sports, arts, and culture to strengthen social cohesion among 39,000 students from public, private universities, and madrasa schools. These activities include *Palagan* (Folk song) performance, impromptu speech, street festivals, sports competitions (including cricket, chess, football, etc.), and youth carnivals. Grantees invited different stakeholders to these events, such as religious and community leaders, local authorities, medial partners, as well as well-known celebrities to sensitise the youth on PVE.

2.3 Extracurricular activities served as a social bridge between youth from different schools, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds. While youth enhanced and built new relationships with each other, they also learned more about the issue of violent extremism and their role in its prevention. For example, students from public, private universities, and madrasa higher-education schools worked together to develop the content and scripts required for events such as theatrical plays, TV dramas, movies, animations and comic books, in which they mainstreamed PVE narratives.

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<sup>1</sup> The Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE) Measure is a questionnaire, developed by Deakin University (Australia) and Dalhousie University (Canada), that enables an assessment of the risks and protective factors regarding youth resilience to VE.

### ***Community Agency***

2.4 The programme created platforms to bring together university students and key institutional actors to engage in topics relevant to their needs and concerns. Activities such as roundtable discussions and stakeholder workshops contributed to more effective dialogue between youth and government elected representatives, local authorities at the Upazila<sup>2</sup> and district level, and other decision-making institutions. Different institutions such as ministries, the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit, law enforcement agencies, and local administration, mobilised along with students to raise awareness on PVE and discuss initiatives to address the drivers of youth to violent extremism.

2.5 Grantees also organised a training with 289 madrasa teachers and imams from 55 different mosques for promoting tolerance and peaceful coexistence in the community, as well as on the issue of VE and their role in prevention. Following the training, imams took oaths to stand against violence, and started to promote religious harmony and PVE narratives during religious preaching and prayers.

### ***Equal Access to Social and Economic Opportunities***

2.6 The AFM programme trained more than 2,500 youth on entrepreneurship, marketing, advertisement, and information technology to support them in achieving their aspirations and increase their access to employment opportunities. University students gained the skills required to develop an android application and to use media platforms effectively to promote peace and tolerance with the broader community. Several young people were trained in entrepreneurship and business skills, and they have now become positive role models for their peers.

### ***Sense of Purpose***

2.7 The AFM programme reached 19,894 students with tertiary education through activities designed to strengthen their critical thinking and analytical skills, develop a stronger and more positive sense of self, and enhance their capacity and knowledge to become advocates for peace and PVE. These activities included intensive training on critical thinking skills, cyber-crime reporting, leadership, PVE, photography, debating, acting, and painting workshops, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Upazila is an administrative region in Bangladesh, a sub-unit of districts.

2.8 Mobilising youth as ‘change agents’ to provide peer-to-peer PVE training was a success in creating a multiplier effect for PVE activities. As part of this programme, 250 young men and women became PVE ambassadors. They gained the necessary skills and knowledge to train more than 2,700 youth on the issue of VE, early warning signs of radicalisation, and how they can effectively prevent it.

2.9 The programme supported debate clubs, and now 220 youth from 25 educational institutions have become professional debaters. They participate in national-level debates – to voice their concerns, advocate for their rights and needs, and better articulate their views to different stakeholders, including local authorities, government officials, law enforcement agencies, as well as their parents, elders, and community and religious leaders.

2.10 One of the participants of the debate competition highlighted: *‘Previously we used to judge-act-behave in a unilineal way, which might not always be the correct path and I was unable to accept other views which were different from mine but yet correct. I am now able to have a multi-dimensional outlook on other people and their views. This has made me feel a more complete and balanced human being with holistic views.’* Due to the positive impact of this activity, 15 educational institutions decided to continue operationalising these debating clubs after the end of the programme, which ensures the sustainable impact of this activity.

2.11 Through the programme, seven art camps were established in seven different educational institutions. 180 youth had the opportunity to voice their views and emotions through painting under the slogan *‘Harmony no Extremism!’* To showcase the work of students, 91 acrylic and charcoal paintings, focused on peace, tolerance, and social cohesion, were exhibited in the art gallery Jainul Gallery of Dhaka. Youth reported that this initiative provided them with confidence in themselves, a way to show their talents and views, which they were hesitant to give voice to, and a feeling of appreciation from their close family and friends. Some of the paintings were displayed by GCERF, in collaboration with the European Union, in an art exhibition at the margins of the 74<sup>th</sup> United Nations General Assembly (UNGA).

### **3. Lessons Learned and Insights**

#### **Lesson 1: The AFM model of very small yet tailored grants can engage organisations that are normally not reached by PVE funding**

3.1 The AFM model used in Bangladesh was a useful mechanism to provide grants for PVE to small organisations that would not otherwise have access to this funding, such as private sector organisations, small youth-led organisations, and debate clubs.

3.2 Even for the local host organisation, the AFM model was a unique and rewarding experience of working with organisations that are not often on the radar of their projects. This provided a strong opportunity to mobilise different skill sets and outreach capacities, and also to expand the range of organisations in the Greater Dhaka region that engage and implement PVE programmes.

3.3 However, such a model comes with challenges as some of these organisations lack the operational or financial capacity or are not used to this particular manner of designing and implementing projects. Thus, it required a high level of support from GCERF and especially MJF, who provided numerous trainings to these organisations in various domains to build their capacity.

#### **Lesson 2: A good programme is tailored to the context and is built on evidence**

3.4 All P/CVE programmes should be informed and guided by a thorough analysis of the context and ongoing research. For example, when working with university students, the context-specificity of this analysis should be narrowed down to the population group and different types of educational institutions, as well geographical locations. The perception study funded by GCERF for the AFM in Bangladesh challenged existing assumptions and identified some of the most recurring drivers and enabling factors to violent extremism among university students, such as:

- ➔ Limited knowledge of violent extremism and the role of youth in prevention;
- ➔ Lack of economic opportunities after graduation and positive avenues for youth to achieve their aspirations, leading students to feel frustrated and unable to meet the high expectations of their parents;
- ➔ Lack of interaction among students from mainstream education and madrasa schools, leading to a perceived isolation of madrasa students;

- Youth without religious knowledge are more vulnerable to VE indoctrination. The perception study revealed that students from religious institutions were most likely to endorse the statement that “killing another person is against my moral beliefs.”;
- Youth lack critical thinking skills and a sense of purpose, especially those from Manikganj and Narayanganj areas. A high number of students reported that sometimes they think that there is no point in life. Most of them believe that life is about being rewarded after death (i.e., their life on this earth is only transitional; this life is about suffering for a reward after death); and
- University students from private institutions showed a lower resilience against violent extremism in comparison with their counterparts in madrasas and public universities. Moreover, religion was identified as a source of resilience – not fragility – for the students.

3.5 Another important lesson during this study was that using standard measures as the BRAVE-14 can be useful tools for a standardised assessment of the risks and protective factors regarding youth resilience to VE. However, the experience has shown that due to cultural differences, any application of such tools requires extensive work in adapting it to the local context, and often requires coupling with qualitative methods of gathering data.

### **Lesson 3: The right sequencing of activities on PVE interventions is often as important as the nature of activities implemented**

3.6 The activities were deliberately designed and implemented in a sequential order to ensure that they complement one another and achieve impact at different levels. For example, the initial activities implemented focused on providing intensive PVE training to 250 young men and women.

3.7 Following the training, sub-grantees supported these students to establish 41 campus-based youth clubs to engage other peers outside of their universities in extracurricular activities that matched their preferences, such as theatre plays, movie-making, music and dancing performances, debate competitions, painting classes, etc. Trained youth acted as agents of change in PVE. They disseminated their knowledge to other peers and mainstreamed PVE in all youth-led activities to channel awareness on this subject to the broader community.

#### **Lesson 4: Youth should be the protagonist of PVE interventions**

3.8 One of the lessons learned during the implementation of this programme was that activities which were designed to let youth interact, lead, produce, and speak were more successful than when grantees facilitated large groups of PVE training, workshops, and other awareness-raising activities, where young people were unable to engage in discussions. Youth reported attention difficulties after these non-interactive activities and were not motivated to participate in follow-up activities.

3.9 On the other hand, projects such as the debating clubs, peer-to-peer training, and media production were considered successful in engaging youth, placing them at the centre of activity implementation itself. A good example of youth-led activity was the production of the short movie “Film4Peace”, through the GCERF funded programmes. The movie was showcased in universities beyond greater Dhaka and facilitated discussions among youth on the importance of inter-group tolerance and harmony in sustaining peace and stability in society. The Executive Director of the CSO was also invited to an international peace conference in Thailand to share lessons and good practices from Bangladesh of youth-led activities in PVE.

#### **Lesson 5: Engaging Madrasa students can be challenging, but branding of activities as social change can be effective in engaging more reluctant organisations**

3.10 Involving Madrasa students in PVE interventions is very important to enhance their confidence in interacting with peers from other backgrounds and address their perceived feelings of isolation, as identified during the perception survey. One of the key achievements of the programme was the capacity of some activities (e.g. debates) to bring together students from madrasa schools and private and public universities, fostering cohesion among them while stimulating students to reflect critically and share with confidence their views on issues such as peace, tolerance, and PVE.

3.11 However, one of the challenges in this regard was securing access and gaining cooperation from madrasas. A lesson learned through the first round is that although long-term advocacy is required in this regard, branding of activities as social change can be an alternative way of engaging previously reluctant institutions. It is interesting to note that a similar challenge occurs in engaging private institutions and in this case, branding activities as professional and personal development gave good results.



**Lesson 6: Engaging “celebrities” or influential people can be a powerful addition to the PVE cause**

3.12 The programme revealed that celebrity figures may serve as a strong positive influence on young people. Engaging renowned celebrities such as high government officials, writers, philosophers, academics, artists, motivational speakers, and religious scholars in PVE interventions led to higher participation of youth and a more prolonged, lasting impact. It also ensures the buy-in from educational institutions for activities focused on sensitive topics such as PVE.

**Lesson 7: Engage different PVE stakeholders, especially local and national authorities was key to the success of the programme**

3.13 Engaging local administration can help to break down fears about PVE and minimise adverse political influence. The cooperation of local authorities facilitated the practical implementation of events on the ground, particularly in the case of AFM activities, which entails intensive implementation in a short timescale.

3.14 At the same time, the AFM programme was a success in actively engaging government representatives from different ministries and departments in PVE interventions. The programme involved different government institutions like ministries, the Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit, law enforcement agencies, and local administration, as well as other relevant actors, including the Madrasa Board, school principals, and the Islamic Foundation.

3.15 The AFM experience was valuable for building trust and support with central authorities and producing valuable lessons emanating from intensive PVE programming. These two elements can place the AFM team in an important position to advocate together with other GCERF grantees and PVE actors for a National Plan of Action to ensure the collaboration of different ministries and departments.

**Lesson 8: Future AFMs using this model might need to pay more attention to how to monitor and evaluate outcomes**

3.16 This AFM model of GCERF partnering with a national host organisation, which then provided micro and small grants to small projects focused on a theme, proved successful in reaching many beneficiaries in a short-time scale. Its results also seem positive, given the qualitative data gathered by GCERF, MJF, and by the independent end-of-grant evaluation.

3.17 However, the focus on outputs during the design of the project made it more difficult to establish fine-tuned distinctions of the outcomes of some activities, as well as to quantify the outcomes of the programme. It is important to highlight that due to the nature of project, it is very unlikely that the standard M&E framework of CFM grants would be possible in this case.

3.18 One potential option would be to use the data generated by the perception survey to identify four to five key areas of intervention, then develop related outcome indicators that are tailored enough to match these areas of intervention, but general enough to fit different project designs. Another option is to conduct a panel survey with selected students across the whole project.

## **ANNEX IA: MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE INDEPENDENT END-OF-GRANT EVALUATION**

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The GCERF Secretariat uses independent end-of-grant evaluation exercises to assess the extent to which the actions of the grantees have contributed to strengthening community resilience to violent extremism. Evaluators are asked to identify the achievements, challenges, lessons learned and effective practices of the projects.

The GCERF Secretariat contracted an independent organisation to conduct an end-of-grant independent evaluation of the Bangladesh AFM. The evaluation occurred in September 2019 and below are its findings and recommendations, addressing OECD-DAC evaluation criteria.

**Relevance:** All projects selected by MJF for support were explicitly tailored to align with GCERF's objectives. In the preliminary phases of grant-awarding and programme development, MJF made sure to advise the grantees accordingly and to support any alterations in planning needed to comply with requirements. All grantees received the findings of the SAMPREETI Perception Study, shared by MJF. The evaluation, therefore, concluded that all grants funded through the project were highly relevant.

**Effectiveness:** Most of the reviewed grants (sample of 13 of the total 39 grants) were successful in implementing their planned activities. Only one grant reviewed failed substantially to reach its objective.

All grants primarily worked on the premise that positive social change depends on mobilising enough people by means of positive messaging and in combination with constructive action. All projects worked towards this end, eliciting (sometimes impressive) momentum.

It would be a fair assessment to say that all of them contributed towards a more peaceful Bangladeshi society. However, small short-term grants have – by definition – a limited effect on the achievement of expected medium- and long-term outcomes. As to the effects of the projects, participants reported improved understanding of others (from diverse backgrounds, regions, minorities), increased self-confidence, a better appreciation of friends and family, a heightened awareness of the risks of extremism (e.g., in internet use), and a recognition of the importance of reflection/critical thinking.

**Efficiency:** The project management and M&E capabilities of all grantees were strengthened by MJF, which provided reliable support throughout the programme. MJF was instrumental in steering grant implementation, facilitating access to authorities, and creating synergies where possible. Local authorities and university administrations were involved in most of the activities. However, gaining access in some locations proved difficult for several programmes, as was engaging a number of madrasas. Coordination and reporting between MJF and the Secretariat was adequate and timely.

**Sustainability:** Naturally, sustainability is a challenge for small, short-term grants. One organisation of the sample of 13 was able to secure additional funding to replicate and scale up successful activities. We expect that only a small minority of the total of 39 organisations will be able to achieve this. Also, some activities will continue if the momentum is kept alive by motivated and engaged students. GCERF could consider building a sustainability incentive into the AFM as part of a Country Strategy, e.g. pre-qualifying successful AFM grantees for potential CFM grants.

## ANNEX 1B: TESTIMONIES FROM BENEFICIARIES

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### THE STORY OF A YOUNG ARTIST

Sahan Islam, a 25-years-old master's student at Dhaka University of Fine Art, and participant in the art camp organised by SAMPRETI programme came first in the art competition. A closed-door discussion revealed the young man's pains and pleasures: a journey of a lifetime all alone against the wind.

Sahan recalled, while he was only at his age of six, he was molested by his cousin and friends. *"I was so cute that everyone stared at me and thought that I am a girl. At a young age, I started to understand that I am not a typical person-I am*



*The painting of Sahan Islam*

*Different"*. He explained that: *"It was quite normal and okay till I was a toddler, but soon after I reached the age of adolescence, my appearance became an issue for the family and society. My mother always poked me as to why I don't behave like a normal person because the neighbours and relatives were continuously complaining about me. I was tired of listening such heinous comments, and I tried to hide myself from the common crowd. Then I found people who are like me. I found an art camp arranged by this programme that worked on different sexual orientations"*.

It was the first time that Sahan found a platform to disclose his identity. He explained that the theme of his picture, which is of a person with a double face- a man and woman- shows his intersexuality. The cuckoo bird in the person's throat resembles his thin voice, like one of the females, because of which he suffered and was humiliated for a long time. While the peacock with open tail and hundreds of eyes resembles his surroundings, including his friends, neighbours, and relatives who have adverse attitudes towards him. He provided special thanks to the programme for giving him the platform that helped him transform his suffocating setting into a much congenial and tolerant surrounding. He added: *"This programme recognized me for who I am not for how I look. It provided me with the confidence to stand first, which changed my status in front of my friends' circle. Earlier, I was always undermined, laughed at and ridiculed by my friends, and was not valued as a classmate"*.

### DEBATING COMPETITION A GREAT TOOL TO PVE

Saiful Islam, a young 21-year-old student from one of the six madrasa schools, participated in the PVE debate competition, together with students from 16 other educational institutions. Graduate-level students who participated in the competition were trained by public speaking experts from Bangladesh debate society. Saiful emphasised that for Madrasa students, this is the first-ever debate competition that they attended, which provided them with the opportunity to debate at the National level, as well as to be broadcasted on TV platforms.



**National Debate Competition**

Saiful explained: *“Our grooming with the experts enhanced our capacity to become a debater and gain knowledge and skills to compete with those who have long debating experience...”* He added: *“We knew about violent extremism from the different sources. However, now we have gained new insights, self-realization, and ability to think differently”.* We now feel that we also belong to the mainstream society and we, as citizens, have the responsibility to support and care for the people and the country. He believes that: *‘Previously we used to judge-act-behave in a unilined way, which might not always be the correct path and there could be different views which were also correct. Such a multi-dimensional outlook will now enrich us to become complete and balanced human beings with holistic views.’* He further emphasises: *“I can thus be the ambassador and a frontline warrior to prevent violent extremism which is a motto of my Islam.”*

### CHALLENGING GENDER STEREOTYPES THROUGH PVE

Farhana Islam is a 29-year-old passionate filmmaker, who left her secure job as a journalist to become a film director. SAMPRETI programme provided her the opportunity to create a short film called **“The End.”** Farhana believes that this opportunity has not only enabled her to follow her dream career, but also served as a tool to change perceived gender stereotypes in the community. She explains that: *‘Society is not yet ready for a woman film director...they rather appreciate women in the acting, scriptwriting, or costume designer, but the direction by a woman is not yet accepted in the regime of manhood. However, through programmes such as SAMPRETI, these societal perceptions are changing, and women are encouraged to have a more powerful role in the community’.*