Here is one of my favorite pictures from the urban slum location where the project will be... this is a family in their home - I love the smile on the little girl's face which to me represents all of the reasons why we should do our best to unleash the deep potential of poor children by focusing on their health and education.

- Iffath Sharif, Task Team Leader, World Bank

**Bangladesh** has a rich and long history starting with a civilization that began in the region at least 4000 years ago. Currently, a few notable physical, social and economic features distinguish the nation. To begin, because of its small land area coupled with a population of over 162 million, **Bangladesh** is among the most densely populated countries in the world. The country is also extremely vulnerable to natural disasters such as annual monsoon floods and cyclones. In the past two decades, 60 percent of deaths caused by cyclones were in **Bangladesh** and, in the last few years alone, cyclones have devastated parts of the country. In 2007, for example, Tropical Cyclone Sidr touched land with winds of 155 miles per hour killing over 3,500 people and causing at least 3.2 million people to be evacuated along the coastlines from 15 districts. Then, in 2009, another cyclone affected more than 5 million people.

Despite these and other economic predicaments, such as the rising food prices in 2008 and in 2010, **Bangladesh**'s economy has been robust and growing. In the last decade, the average **GDP growth rate** was around 6 percent per year. Stable economic growth has helped to reduce poverty rates from 49 percent in 2000 to 40 percent in 2005. There have also been other significant improvements in social and human development outcomes. Infant and child mortality has declined considerably. From 2000 to 2008 **infant mortality rate** dropped from 66.4 to 52 (per 1000 live births) and **mortality rates for children under-5** dropped from 90.9 to 65 (per 1000)³. The country has also met its **Millennium Development Goals** for gender equality in education and universal primary school enrollment well ahead of time. Now, nearly 98% of girls are enrolled in primary education. In addition, there are now more girls than boys enrolled in secondary education.

Even with these noteworthy achievements, the fact remains that almost 65 million people remain poor, and over 40 million people still live in extreme poverty. In 2009, **Gross National Income (GNI) per capita** of **Bangladesh** was 580 US dollars (in contrast to the United States that was 46,360 US dollars). Even compared to other low-income countries with similar GNI per capita, malnutrition in **Bangladesh** is high. An estimated 135 million people are undernourished and lacking in micronutrients. Children are particularly affected and as recent as 2008, 48 percent of children under five were malnourished.³ Although higher income households have experienced more gains in nutritional status than poor households, a strikingly high proportion (25 to 30 percent) of children in the richest quintile are malnourished. While education outcomes have improved overall, the poorest families are still more likely to send their children, especially boys, to work than to school.
poor, recurring natural disasters and economic volatilities, such as rising food prices, only worsen these circumstances.

To protect families, there are many social safety net programs available, however, only 13 percent of the poor access these programs. Furthermore, the country lacks a coherent and systematic national approach for identifying households in need or in crisis and delivering services. Every social safety net program utilizes different criteria for eligibility and beneficiary identification. Consequently, there is an overlap of beneficiaries, inclusion errors (households are included that are not poor), and exclusion errors (households that should be included are not). Thus, the need to expand the scope and develop a more effective and coherent social safety net system to protect poor and vulnerable families is tremendous.

The World Bank’s Rapid Social Response (RSR) Program is funding a pilot project to first, assist in developing a social safety net that can more effectively identify and deliver services to poor families; and, second, to further the Government of Bangladesh’s goals for human development and poverty reduction. To move forward, there are many unanswered questions including the following:

- How can human development outcomes of poor children be improved?
- Will the same safety net program perform differently in urban and rural areas? If so, how?
- Who are in the best position to identify poor families in need? Who can deliver services more effectively?
- How can technological innovations help to address poverty?

How will the Government of Bangladesh with the help of RSR address these questions? Stay tuned for Part 2.

Written by Andrea L. Robles, May 26, 2011

This article does not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank Group, its Executive Directors or the governments they represent. Rapid Social Response Program (RSR) is part of the World Bank’s response to the Food, Fuel and Financial Crisis. Its mission is to help the World’s poorest countries become better prepared to cope with systemic and unpredictable shocks. RSR has been generously supported by the governments of Russian Federation, Norway and United Kingdom. For further information, please visit http://www.worldbank.org/rsr.

The 2009 cyclone killed almost 200 people, injured over 7,000, and damaged or destroyed more than 500,000 houses, 400,000 acres of agricultural crops, and 8,000 kilometers of roads. See USAID website: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/humanitarian_assistance/disaster_assistance/countries/bangladesh/template/index.html


Poverty Assessment for Bangladesh: Creating Opportunities and bridging the East West Divide, Paper series #26, 2008, p. 140.

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