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# 39 BGIF Lessons Learnt

From Blue Gold Program Wiki

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This chapter aims to capture the main lessons learnt during the period when the Innovation Fund was most active, from 2015 to 2020. Although we have structured these lessons under specific sub-headings, individual BGIF projects would be included in more than one of these headings.



The following materials illustrate concepts, interventions, outcomes and lessons learnt, including through stories from community members.

#### Thematic brochures

- [Blue Gold Innovation Fund: Lessons Learnt](#)

#### Case studies

- [Practical Innovations in the coastal zone: in agriculture and water management](#)

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## Preparation of Requests for Proposals (RfPs) - Specific calls for proposals[\[edit | edit source\]](#)

- Invitations to Dutch organisations should be restricted to those who have the experience, confidence and local contacts to work in the remote underdeveloped areas of south-west Bangladesh, preferably with prior experience in Bangladesh.
- Although the solicited call “Improved Information Services for Agricultural Processes” was considered successful, a great deal of time was required for preparation, processing and management. It was most effective for topics where a healthy number of interested organisations with appropriate credentials submitted bids. The overall evaluation of the call was an intensive process which was well-handled by the fund managers. A number of bidders who offered an excellent conceptual design but which didn’t fulfil the full scope were coached to further develop their proposals to address the evaluation criteria.
- With hindsight, more invitations to bid could have been issued if an earlier analysis had been made with the communities of the context, problem area(s) and identification of the problems in the field - and with possible solutions. In explanation, the team needed to accumulate

knowledge during the implementation process in order to recognise the importance of a demand-driven approach, by which time there was insufficient time and budget.

## **Announcing RfPs - Type of implementing organisations:[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]**

- Large organisations were able to produce good proposals, but their solutions were sometimes decontextualized and showed little promise of realistic implementation. Academic organisations tried enthusiastically to pilot abstract concepts into development implementation. Smaller organisations were shown to be effective implementers with strong local networks but were not good at presenting their arguments in formal proposals.
- During the development of a concept by a bidding organisation, the role performed by the BGIF team helped to clarify needs, concepts, approaches etc - as a result of which, the implementers learnt just as much from us, as we from them.

## **Announcing RfPs - Communications and generating awareness of BGIF:[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]**

- A multi-pronged approach to communicating BGIF opportunities for interested organisations was adopted:
  - Regular announcements via the Blue Gold website and Facebook page
  - Circulation in newsletters to 150 relevant organisations and networks
  - Video productions - to spread video production via social media channels, like BGP Facebook group but also external lines like Water-Channel.
  - BGP was successful getting broadcasting space on national television on special programs for farmers.
  - Project booklet
  - Organisation of special events to target a specific group (including Blue Gold Innovation Challenge for Youth and the SME Campaign “Entrepreneurship in Bangladesh”).
- Once projects reached operational stage, external communications and usage of social media could have been better, in order to promote uptake of innovative methods by other interested organisations. WMKIP social media channel (My Bangla Delta) has quite a strong presence, especially considering its projects are fewer and smaller.
- In terms of agriculture development, earlier and closer links to practitioners should have been established with local research institutes. They could have been involved earlier in ‘innovations’, which could ‘leverage’ BGP activities. At the same time, BGP had some staff doing their own basic research on sugar beets, rather than linking up with others (research institutes) to leverage their findings. Even so, some effort was made to connect to local researches institutes. Several visits were paid to Patuakhali and Khulna universities as well other agricultural institutes throughout the country. However, only Khulna university came up with a really viable proposal on water hyacinth.

## **Procurement Modalities[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]**

Organising a solicited call on a specific topic with the higher contract ceiling that is possible for competitive tenders under European Union rules is an efficient process for attracting a large variety of concept notes from both Bangladeshi and international organisations.

## **Selection - Too good to be true:[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]**

- Some applicants provided ideas of how to spend a EUR 50,000 allocation without sufficient consideration of BGIF expectations.
- A number of proposals used an intentional excessively ambitious and innovative approach in order to win the project funds, only to later find out, through stakeholder consultation, an unwillingness or capacity constraint prevented the adoption of the proposed approach. Preference was therefore given to simpler and less innovative approaches, which also turned out to be less expensive to develop. We have attempted to remedy this through strong negotiation and ensuring that the original budget assigned to those innovative activities was properly utilised. Later, payment milestones were included in contracts to address these 'soft spots' in the proposal and to make sure project implementers achieved ambitious milestones.

## **Selection - Reflections on the innovation funnel approach[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]**

- The innovation funnel has been helpful in discussions with interested applicants, to help them understand how the BGIF could help to realise their innovations.
- Five projects traversed two stages, and two projects moved through all three stages from feasibility study to pilot to scale-up: a record of 25% of projects going from FS to pilot is a reasonable achievement.
- Most feasibility studies were unable to convince the BGIF team during the pilot phase that the project would provide significant benefits to the target population.

## **Selection - Small but realistic[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]**

- The ideas and solutions proposed by applicants did not always match with local needs.
- Proposals from Bangladesh- and Netherlands-based applicants did not always take account of the practical difficulties of implementing projects in the Blue Gold area - where remoteness from Dhaka, difficult communications, and exposure to floods and storms required consideration.
- As part of their due diligence mandate, considerable time of the BGIF management team was required in negotiating budgets and realistic fee levels for experts.
- In general, BGIF projects were not chosen for their high ideals, but rather for their realistic objectives - which were targeted and achievable - and which ensured that benefits for farmers and their families took centre stage. Although hygienic pig farming (Nice Foundation)<sup>[[Notes 11](#)]</sup>, for example, created strong reactions, it was a good example of a small project which showed that improved hygiene in existing pig farms could improve relations in a mixed community. The low-income Hindu families that were part of the project, obtained significant benefits - both in terms of increased knowledge and skills and respect from Muslim neighbours as well as increased incomes due to improved breeding practices. At the same time, other potential beneficiaries in the same community were upset that they were not selected for the project and created tension.

## **Selection - Mix of pure innovation and achieving scale with proven technologies[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]**

- Members of the evaluation committees sought to identify a mix of projects with genuine innovation alongside those which achieved strategic objectives for the region. For example,

whilst the sack-farming project (Practical Action)<sup>[Notes 2]</sup> may not be considered an innovation, it scaled-up and spread a proven concept to a population which otherwise wouldn't have been introduced to the idea.

- In the early stages of BGIF, zonal office staff of the TA team were not involved in the evaluation of BGIF proposals, which resulted in a lack of ownership at zonal level. However, a subsequent decision to involve zonal staff in the evaluation process also had its difficulties since the zonal staff were (not surprisingly) predisposed to select projects which they believed would benefit Blue Gold farmers, rather than to encourage innovation and/or were scaling-up proven technologies that were not available within the Blue Gold area. In the final round of project proposals (sack farming with Practical Action and water hyacinth processing with Khulna University), the zonal teams were included in the evaluation panel, and this ensured local buy-in.
- The CIMMYT project with mung bean may not have been approved if the local vote was given higher weighting. In this case, the selection committee for the solicited call was almost entirely external.

## **Project Management - ownership and complementarity**[\[edit](#) | [edit source\]](#)

In general, the best BGIF projects were led by consortia where the lead organisation implemented the project and took responsibility for delivery, using complementary specialist skills, sometimes from an international NGO or Dutch company.

## **Selecting/Monitoring - added-value of appointing BGP technical leads**[\[edit](#) | [edit source\]](#)

- Assigning technical leadership from within the Blue Gold technical assistance team for the implementation phase of each BGIF project, was an important reason for their success. Implementing organisations benefited from this local level ownership with access to BGP's network of contacts, at community level (through WMGs) as well as at local and regional level. At the same time, the Blue Gold technical leads were obliged to ensure the relevancy of initiatives to BGP communities. For example, promoting banana flour (powder) to local WMGs through the horizontal learning project was discouraged by the Blue Gold team because of its limited relevance to farmers - instead the implementers were encouraged to show videos on best practice in poultry farming, seedbed preparation for rice, etc.
- The technical lead also monitored financial performance - checking that the implementing organizations achieved budgeted activities and material distribution. Field monitoring by BGP staff added ensure that activities defined in the proposal were actually executed in the field.
- Occasionally, poor relations between local Blue Gold staff and staff of the implementing organisation resulted from an unwillingness of the Blue Gold staff to accept alternative approaches, or to accept the need to try (and rather fail than not to try at all).

## **Monitoring - Adaptive management**[\[edit](#) | [edit source\]](#)

- By their nature, innovation projects should and allow for adaptive management both by the project implementers and the fund managers, whilst avoiding extremes: ie allowing too little change (where rigidity prevents opportunities and threats being appropriately addressed) or too much change (which results in a loss of focus and key objectives being missed). Through contract addenda, a middle way is sought in which the adjustments proposed by f the

implementing teams are captured and formalised through a process which ensures that the original objectives are met, that the change is well thought out (with new payment conditions) and will be efficiently implemented. Agreeing upon these payment milestones assures common understanding about outcome of BGIF projects, both from BGP and project implementers.

- Milestone payments based on specific agreed deliverables are easy to administrate but require more budget scrutiny before contract signing. Vouchers, timesheets, etc. do not tell much about the quality of work delivered. Although attractive reports can mask the reality of poor execution, they cannot fully prove that all activities have been undertaken with satisfaction of stakeholders. In the end, field monitoring is essential!

## Failure is part of innovation[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

By their nature as projects for innovation, the type and sequencing of project activities will vary from a project proposal – requiring adaptive management capacities both within the implementing organisation and from the fund managers. There are extremes, allowing for too little change (with rigid management which is unable to respond appropriately to opportunities and threats) or too much change (where there is little top-end supervision and modifications are made to assist field operations with a resulting loss of focus and departure from overall objectives). Through addenda to the original contract agreement, we have aimed to allow a process to emerge in which the wishes of the project teams to modify their activities are formalised whilst at the same time ensuring that the change doesn't depart from the original target, is well thought out (with new payment conditions) and can be efficiently implemented.

*“The feedback from Blue Gold is most valued by United Purpose as it is informing and helping us to develop stronger and robust WBC and shaping of the social enterprise connecting all of them. This is particularly important as we are scaling up with promotion of 160 WBCs in Chittagong hill tracts” - Sriramappa Gonchikara - Country Director United Purpose*

## Rejected Proposals - reasons for not proceeding with unsolicited bids[[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

- In total, 108 project concepts and proposals were rejected, of which 76 were un-solicited, 32 solicited. [\[Notes 3\]](#) Here a distinction should be made between concept notes and proposals. Many concept notes were rejected, but a just limited number of proposals.
- The main reasons for rejection can be summarised as follows:
  - **Outside of project area:** some proposals did not take place in the coastal zone at all (eg Rangpur, Rajshahi, etc), which indicated how little preparation had been made by some applicants to understand the scope and location of Blue Gold.
  - **Decontextualized:**
    - A number of applications were not appropriate to the coastal zone. Perhaps this was understandable as expenditure by these organisations was limited, but it led to otherwise good but ill-founded concepts. our context we might try and clarify more at publication of the call, for all interested.
    - Ideas were not applicable or relevant to the project area (eg potato seed and potato processing in coastal zone will not work), or too academic and unfeasible.
  - **Not innovative solutions** (grow shrimp – already there, pond fisheries – already there, sheep farming, etc.).

- **Cannot be adopted:** In a number of cases, proposals for activities outside the scope of the law were rejected (for example collecting crab from Sundarbans).
- **Too similar to BGP approach:** In these activities the Blue Gold Program follows the same extension method to increase local production. Therefore, the activities mentioned in the proposal do not qualify as 'innovative'.
- **No response** on evaluation outcome of concept note, rejected after six months of waiting – surprisingly common reason for project rejection with no interest received from organisation after they were invited for proposal submission.
- A number of projects were targeted at **large-scale commercial farmer operations**, rather than the small-scale farmers who are typical of the Blue Gold area.
- **Organizational strength:** little or no previous experience and unable to demonstrate capability of achieving ambitious targets set down in proposals
- Doubtful **scaling up** opportunities, none or little market potential.
- Too **expensive** – budget outside permissible BGIF range.

## Notes[\[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

1. [↑](#) See Project 11 in [List of BGIF projects](#)
2. [↑](#) See Project 35 in [List of BGIF projects](#)
3. [↑](#) See [List of rejected project concepts and proposals](#)

## See more[\[edit](#) | [edit source](#)]

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Blue Gold Innovation Fund

A defined set of temporary activities through which facilitators seek to effect change

Blue Gold Program

Water Management Knowledge and Innovation Program - starting in December 2017 and led by Deltares and the Institute of Water Modelling (IWM) with the aim of contributing to the long term development goals for the Southern Coastal Region as well as to objectives of the Blue Gold Program through tested and sustainable water management innovations, knowledge development and participatory action research.

<https://www.deltares.nl/en/news/developing-water-management-innovations-local-communities-bangladesh/>

A feasibility study is an analysis that takes all of a project's relevant factors into account—including economic, technical, legal, and scheduling considerations—to ascertain the likelihood of completing the project successfully.

Feasibility Study / Feasibility Stage, especially of Blue Gold Innovation Fund projects

A feasibility study is an analysis that takes all of a project's relevant factors into account—including economic, technical, legal, and scheduling considerations—to ascertain the likelihood of completing the project successfully.

Technical Assistance

International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre

Non-Governmental Organisation

Water Management Group - The basic organizational unit in Blue Gold representing local stakeholders from a hydrological or social unit (para/village). Through Blue Gold, 511 WMGs have been formed and registered. The average WMG covers an area of around 230 ha has 365 households or a population of just over 1,500.

Women's Business Centre

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## Variants

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## Blue Gold Program Wiki

The wiki version of the Lessons Learnt Report of the Blue Gold program, documents the experiences of a technical assistance (TA) team working in a development project implemented by the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) over an eight+ year period from March 2013 to December 2021. The wiki lessons learnt report (LLR) is intended to complement the BWDB and DAE project completion reports (PCRs), with the aim of recording lessons learnt for use in the design and implementation of future interventions in the coastal zone.

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