

☐ Toggle menu
Blue Gold Program Wiki

Navigation

- [Main page](#)
- [Recent changes](#)
- [Random page](#)
- [Help about MediaWiki](#)

Tools

- [What links here](#)
- [Related changes](#)
- [Special pages](#)
- [Permanent link](#)
- [Page information](#)

Personal tools

- [Log in](#)

personal-extra

☐ Toggle search

Search

Random page

Views

- [View](#)
- [View source](#)
- [History](#)
- [PDF Export](#)

Actions

Section H innovation fund lessons learnt

From Blue Gold Program Wiki

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This article is part of the articles on Section H - Innovation fund, for an overview see [Section H - Innovation Fund](#).

This is the section H of Blue Gold Program
report

Blue Gold Innovation Fund (BGIF)

Section H contains:

[Summary](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Project overview](#)

» Lessons learnt «

[Appendices](#)

This article seeks to capture some of the main lessons learnt during the 4 years of running the Innovation Fund. They have sorted under some headings to structure them, however, most lessons learnt could fall within multiple categories.

- Organising a solicited call for one specific topic with a larger contract amount is an effective way of receiving a large variety of concept notes from both Bangladeshi and international organisations;
- The best projects under BGIF were led by consortia (e.g. Practical Action or MetaMeta with local NGOs), where an international NGO or Dutch company took the lead, and the local organisation did most of the work in the field.

"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

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Contents

- [1 Fund management & procurement](#)
 - [1.1 Preparation of Requests for Proposals \(RfPs\) - Specific calls for proposals](#)
 - [1.2 Announcing RfPs - Type of implementing organisations:](#)
 - [1.3 Announcing RfPs - Communications and generating awareness of BGIF:](#)
 - [1.4 Selection - Too good to be true:](#)
 - [1.5 Selection - Reflections on the innovation funnel approach:](#)
 - [1.6 Selection - Small but realistic](#)
 - [1.7 Selection - Focus on pure innovation versus pure results](#)
 - [1.8 Selecting/Monitoring - added-value of appointing BGP technical leads](#)
 - [1.9 Monitoring - Adaptive management](#)
- [2 Interphases BGIF with BGP and local stakeholders](#)
 - [2.1 Complementing Blue Gold & Horizontal Learning](#)
 - [2.2 Failure is part of innovation](#)

Fund management & procurement[\[edit | edit source\]](#)

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

- Organising a solicited call for one specific topic with a larger contract amount is an effective way of receiving a large variety of concept notes from both Bangladeshi and international organisations;
- Promoting the fund among Dutch organisations with confidence to work in remote underdeveloped areas and preferably prior experience in Bangladesh is more effective.
- Though the solicited call “Improved Information Services for Agriculture process” was successful to achieve it wished for outcomes, it did consume a lot of time in preparation, processing and management time and expenses. It is also only effective for topics where many organisations could potentially deliver services for and competitive bids can be expected.
 - The whole evaluation of the call was intensive but was handled well by the fund managers. ‘Losers’ with potential were coached intensively on where and how to improve their proposals, and after revision/improvements some proposals were approved still.
- Retrospectively, we were late in defining our context and problem area(s), we could have asked for more focused proposals if we had put our mind to identifying the ‘problems in the field, by the communities’ asking for innovative solutions. At the same time, the team had solid knowledge about local problems after a few years of implementation. The demand driven approach was more suitable then, however at that stage, not much budget was left.

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

- It was observed that large organisations were able to produce good proposals, but their solutions were decontextualized and showed little promise of realistic implementation. Academic organisations were observed to be very enthusiastic and tried to pilot abstract concepts into development implementation. Small organisations were observed to be effective implementers with strong local networks but were not very good at proposal writing.
- The best projects under BGIF were led by consortia (e.g. Practical Action or MetaMeta with local NGOs), where an international NGO or Dutch company took the lead, and the local organisation did most of the work in the field. The role we performed continuously i.e. clarifying needs, concepts, approaches etc, where implementers learnt just as much from us, as we from them.

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

- The BGIF management pursued a multipronged approach to communicating BGIF opportunities for interested organisation, realising that only having a website is not enough. In addition, a number of platforms and methods were used.
 - Regular attendance & announcements on events in the sector
 - Circulation in newsletters to 150 relevant organisations & networks
 - Video productions (The idea was always 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 example 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 communication 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 closer links to practitioners from local research institutes should have been established. They could have been involved early 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. Still, quite some efforts have been made to connect to local researches institutes. Several visits were paid to Patuakhali and Khulna university as well other agricultural institutes throughout the country. Only Khulna university came up with a really viable proposal on water hyacinth. I had to reject several concert notes from Patuakhali university since they had no added innovative value.

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

- Some applicants sought to spend the EUR 50,000 in whatever way.
- We have seen indications of, what could be, an intentional overly ambitious and innovative approach to win the project funds, to later find out, through stakeholder consultation, that there is no willingness/capacity to adopt the innovative approach, preferring simpler and less innovative approaches, which also happen to be less expensive to develop. We have attempted to remediate this through strong negotiation and making sure that the original budget assigned to those innovative activities are still properly utilised. Later, we also included payment milestones in contracts where we addressed these 'soft spots' in the proposal to make sure project implementers achieve 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 realise their innovative ideas.
- As mentioned in the [BGIF projects overview](#), five projects traversed two stages, and two projects moved through all three stages from feasibility study to pilot to scale up. 25% of projects going from FS to pilot can be considered quite high and successful.
- Still, most feasibility studies were unable to convince the BGIF team that a pilot phase 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.
- The realities of the Blue Gold Program area are difficult to understand by both Bangladesh and Netherlands based applicants, and do not offer the smoothest implementation landscape
- BGIF management performed Due Diligence and much time was spent on negotiations on projects budget and realistic fee levels of experts proposed. Finally, satisfactory proposals were sent to EKN to present findings and recommendations of committee. This consumed quite a bit of time of the BGIF management, but in the end also reduced costs and gave more security, as more reliable organizations were selected.
- In general, not glamorous but realistic projects were chosen, where benefits for farmers and their families took centre stage. Pig farming, for example, is not an attractive project as such, especially in Bangladesh, it was also a small project just to show that the innovative solution proposed could work. And it did. For the community of low-income Hindu families that were part of the project, they reaped significant benefits in terms of increased knowledge and skills, but also gained respect from their Muslim neighbours and increased incomes due to improved

breeding practises. At the same time, other potential beneficiaries in the same community were upset that they were not selected for the project and created some tension.

Selection - Focus on pure innovation versus pure results[\[edit\]](#) | [edit source](#)

- Panel members did have a good focus on real innovativeness, strategic view of what Bangladesh needs. Sack-farming less innovative, but effective. What is required is a balance between high innovativeness and effective approach that has been proven elsewhere.
- Involving zonal office staff in the in early stage project proposal evaluation has been challenge. This resulted in selected projects coming top-down from Dhaka, hence it was natural that local BGP teams wanted adaptation during project implementation. However, involving zonal staff in evaluation has not been straight forward and also presented a risk: for some it was hard to draw the line between innovation and general impact activities. In the final round of project proposals (Sack farming, Khulna university) the zonal teams were included in the evaluation panel, which ensured local buy-in to the new projects.
- CIMMYT project might have not seen light of day if local vote was weighted stronger. The selection committee for the solicited call was highly external.

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

- Assigning a technical lead from the Blue Gold Program for each BGIF project in the implementation phase, was a large success factor. We have received positive feedback that this arrangement is helpful for implementing organisations, as BGP has a strong network and can facilitate community participation and key stakeholder engagement at the local and regional levels. At the same time, the technical leads make sure that the projects remain relevant for BGP communities. For example, showing a video on making banana flour (powder) to local WMGs by the horizontal learning project was discouraged by BGP team as this practise would only be relevant for a handful of people in the polder area, instead the implementers were encouraged to show videos on good practise in poultry farming, seedbed preparation for rice, etc.
- The technical lead also had a financial monitor function. They checked whether the organizations really stuck their budgeted for activities and material distribution. Field monitoring by BGP staff to added real value by checking promised activities in the proposals were executed in the field.
- Occasionally, local field staff and contractor implementer staff sometimes reacted/liased with one another not in a supportive way but overly critical and dismissive, possibly due to a lack of considering the innovativeness, the need to try (and rather fail than not to try at all). Fund managers would step in where needed to remediate the situation. This occasional competition restricted opportunities for horizontal learning to the wider Blue Gold Program as resentment clouded judgement in some of these instances.

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

- With innovation projects its almost natural that not all project activities will be implemented according to those designed in the project proposal. It requires adaptive management capacities both from project implementers and from fund managers. There are extremes on either side with allowing for too little change (ridged and unable to act towards opportunities and threats) and too much change (loose of focus and missing out on objectives). With contract addenda we have tried to find a middle way, where we accommodate wishes of the project teams to alter their activities, but we capture this in a formal document to make sure 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

- Milestones 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. Also, reports can be beautiful, but cannot fully proof if all activities have been undertaken with satisfaction of stakeholders. In the end, field monitoring is essential!

Interphases BGIF with BGP and local stakeholders[\[edit\]](#) | [edit source](#)]

Complementing Blue Gold & Horizontal Learning[\[edit\]](#) | [edit source](#)]

- WBC was a project that would complement BGP activities, a concept we had not considered which could fit our activities (WBC taking the role of FT/RF/IP), or vice versa a project that offers an opportunity to link too, WBC and other projects were sometimes seen by our field staff as ‘competition’, maybe priming them to see this differently, a change to achieve more, a multiplier (and also seeking such projects more), might be considered. Horizontal learning with wider Blue Gold Program to encourage implementation of innovative approaches in other polders and communities. More horizontal learning on the innovation projects could have been helpful. The fairs organised by DoF and DAE mentioned above also added to horizontal learning.
- SWIFT is an example of horizontal learning as it consolidated BGP small-scale infrastructure approach in Blue Gold Program. At the same time, The SWIFT was one of the less innovative in its actual implementation and became more impact focused than intended. The young team of UP was somehow directed by the senior BGP teams in Patuakhali to copy CAWM works and HL activities. Rather increasing the impact of those instead of being completely innovative.

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

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Blue Gold Innovation Fund

Non-Governmental Organisation

Women’s Business Centre

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.

Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the contractual representative of the Minister of Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation of the Netherlands and signatory to the agreement for the Blue Gold Program with the External Resources Division of the Ministry of Finance as the signatory for the Government of Bangladesh

International Maize and Wheat Improvement Centre

A process through which stakeholders influence and share control over development initiatives and the decisions and resources which affect them.

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.

An area of low-lying land surrounded by an earthen embankment to prevent flooding by river or seawater, with associated structures which are provided to either drain excess rainwater within the polder or to admit freshwater to be stored in a khal for subsequent use for irrigation.

Learning from peers; and in the context of Blue Gold, farmer-to-farmer learning in which a host WMG invites representatives from visiting WMGs to witness an event - such as the harvesting of a new variety of rice - to pass on the knowledge and lessons gained from their experience

Farmer Trainer - Well-performing and capable farmers, previously trained in Farmer Field Schools, who became FFS facilitator themselves after ToT training

Resource Farmers (RF) are members of Farmer Field Schools (FFSs). They are selected from the FFS groups to lead other members in organizing different useful collective actions and to maintain networks on behalf of the members. These RFs are given additional capacity building training to enhance their knowledge on simple record keeping and business skills.

Input Providers

Department of Fisheries, a government department under the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock responsible for regulating the fisheries industry in Bangladesh

Department of Agricultural Extension, a department of the Ministry of Agriculture responsible for disseminating scientific research and new knowledge on agricultural practices through communication and learning activities for farmers in agriculture, agricultural marketing, nutrition and business studies.

Union Parishad - Union Council chaired by an elected Union Chairman

Community-led Agricultural Water Management - with DAE, Blue Gold established a network of schemes for demonstration purposes where locally-applicable annual cropping patterns are introduced along with water level control facilitated by small-scale water infrastructure, and the development of value chain skills in farmers

Learning from peers; and in the context of Blue Gold, farmer-to-farmer learning in which a host WMG invites representatives from visiting WMGs to witness an event - such as the harvesting of a new variety of rice - to pass on the knowledge and lessons gained from their experience

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Namespaces

- [Page](#)
- [Discussion](#)

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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