Non-Formal Education for Youth-Led Change Youth Development Programming in Bangladesh

Research Report
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For the purposes of anonymity for our participants, we have used stock images in this document

List of Acronyms

AHRC - Arts and Humanities Research Council
CCD - Centre for Communication and Development
CTS – Changing the Story
FGD – Focus Group Discussion
IDEA - Institute of Development Affairs
LEAD - Leadership for Advancing Development in Bangladesh
NFE – Non-Formal Education
NGO – Non-Government Organization
SAP – Social Action Project
SDG – Sustainable Development Goal
UK – United Kingdom
UN – United Nations
YPSA - Foundation and Young Power in Social Action

Executive Summary

This research report has been developed for the as part of 'Non-Formal Education (NFE) for Youth-Led Change', a collaborative research project between the University of Leeds and the British Council. It analyses the British Council's Leadership for Advancing Development in Bangladesh (LEAD Bangladesh). The qualitative study aims to understand how LEAD Bangladesh empowered youth, promoted social justice, and facilitated youth-led change. The central research question guiding this study is: *How can non-formal education (NFE) contribute to youth-led social change?*

Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with various cohorts of participants closely associated with the LEAD Bangladesh Program. These participants included young people, program facilitators, program partners, British Council representatives, and community members.

Thematic analysis of the data reveals that LEAD Bangladesh, as a flexible and inclusive mode of NFE, significantly contributes to youth-led social change. The program's needs-based design, contextualized training modules, and content related to active citizenship, gender equity, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8, 13, and 16, along with its participatory and engaging activities, played a crucial role in the program's success.

Social Action Projects (SAPs) implemented by the youth in local communities were instrumental in translating theoretical knowledge, awareness, and attitudes into practical actions. The implementation of SAPs provided the youth with opportunities to interact and engage with local community members, policymakers, local governments, and diaspora, thereby creating a substantial impact. Through SAPs, the youth developed abilities, confidence, self-esteem,

leadership skills, communication skills, and practical skills. Concurrently, these projects raised community awareness about rights, responsibilities, social issues, citizenship, and employment, aligning with various SDGs.

Despite the successes, the study identified several challenges, including youth engagement and motivation, natural calamities (such as the COVID-19 pandemic and floods), difficulties in maintaining communication with policymakers and local governments, skepticism among community members, limited program resources (such as budget constraints for SAPs), and management issues (such as staffing limitations). The sustainability of impact was an additional challenge.

To address these challenges, participants suggested extending the program duration, increasing SAP budgets, increasing program frequency, improving follow-up and monitoring, integrating additional SDGs, incorporating more interactive and engaging methods, enhancing logistical and financial support, more effectively engaging female participants, increasing stakeholder engagement, and fostering continuous lifelong learning.

Additionally, the research team provided several recommendations for sustaining the impact of the LEAD Bangladesh program, including engaging young people in the program design, developing sustainable youth networks, embedding the program in the local community, and changing funding structures. These recommendations aim to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of youth-led non-formal education programs, fostering a more inclusive and empowered generation capable of driving social change.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This research report has been developed as part of 'Non-Formal Education (NFE) for Youth-Led Change'. A research project developed in collaboration between the University of Leeds and the British Council to examine how NFE can empower young people, promote social justice, and facilitate youth-led change. The project so far has comprised a knowledge exchange workshop and feasibility studies in Ethiopia and Bangladesh. This report presents the findings of the study in Bangladesh, which engaged with the British Council's Leadership for Advancing Development in Bangladesh project (LEAD Bangladesh).

Education is a fundamental aspect of individual and societal development, recognized as a lifelong journey that encompasses various forms of learning. Both formal and non-formal education (NFE) play crucial roles in this process (Shohel & Howes, 2011). Broadly understood, formal education typically occurs in structured institutions like schools and universities, following a standardized curriculum (Latcham, 2016). In contrast, NFE includes organized educational activities outside the formal system, such as training programs and workshops designed to address specific learning needs and contexts for a targeted audience (Brennan, 1997). NFE programs can be tailored to the unique needs and interests of learners, offering flexibility and relevance that formal education may not always provide (Grajcevci & Shala, 2016; Tudor, 2013). NFE can be provided by a wide range of entities, including governments, UN agencies, trade unions, sports clubs, and national institutions. However, the leading providers of NFE are youth organizations, particularly volunteer-led youth non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Simac, Marcus, & Harper, 2021).

NFE is understood as offering a flexibility and adaptability that is often absent in formal education settings, underscoring its significance. NFE programs, for example, may include participatory and learner-centered approaches, which encourage active engagement, critical thinking, and practical application of knowledge. Such programs are designed to be adaptable, allowing for experiential learning and the development of skills that are directly applicable to real-world contexts.

The Research Project

This qualitative research aimed to understand how LEAD Bangladesh, run by the British Council in collaboration with its partners, has contributed to empowering youth, promoting social justice, and facilitating youth-led change. By examining the experiences and perspectives of various cohorts of participants, the study sought to uncover the ways in which NFE can serve as a catalyst for positive social transformation. The study also explored the challenges encountered by various stakeholders in this youth-led social change or transformation.

The primary research question guiding this study was: How can non-formal education contribute to youth-led social change? To address this question, the study investigated the following sub-questions: a) How can NFE empower young people as social actors? b) How can NFE contribute to youth-led peacebuilding? c) How does NFE enable young people to contribute to social justice? d) What impact do different methodologies within NFE programs have on youth empowerment, peacebuilding, and social change? e) What are the main challenges or shortcomings in NFE promoting youth-led social change?

To answer these research questions, data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with various cohorts of participants closely associated with the LEAD Bangladesh Program. These participants included young people (n=21), program facilitators (n=4), program staff (n=6), and community members (n=2).

Findings and Analysis

The thematic analysis of the data revealed that LEAD Bangladesh, as a flexible and inclusive mode of non-formal education, contributed to empowering young people, and to youth-led social change. The program's needs-based design, contextualized training modules, and content related to active citizenship, gender equity, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8, 13, and 16, along with participatory and engaging activities and a flexible learning mode (both online and offline) with necessary safeguarding strategies, played a crucial role in the program's success.

The findings of the study also showed that social action projects (SAPs) implemented by the youths in local communities further enhanced the value of this NFE program. These projects enabled the youth to transform theoretical knowledge, awareness, and attitudes into practical actions. The implementation of SAPs provided the youth with opportunities to interact and engage with local community members, policymakers, and local governments, thereby impacting both the youth and the community. Through SAPs, youth developed abilities, confidence, self-esteem, leadership skills, communication skills, and practical skills. Concurrently, these projects raised community awareness about rights, responsibilities, social issues, citizenship, and employment, aligning with various SDGs. Additionally, youth had opportunities to share their SAPs with the diaspora community in the UK for mentoring, which facilitated reflection on SAP implementation and enhanced motivation and intercultural communication skills.

Challenges and Recommendations:

Despite the successes, the study identified several challenges, including youth engagement and motivation, natural calamities (such as the COVID-19 pandemic and floods), difficulties in maintaining communication with policymakers and local governments, skepticism among community members, limited program resources (such as budget constraints for SAPs), and management issues (such as staffing limitations).

To tackle these challenges, participants recommended several measures, such as extending the program's duration, boosting SAP budgets, increasing the frequency of programs, enhancing follow-up and monitoring efforts, integrating more Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), utilizing more interactive and engaging approaches, improving logistical and financial assistance, better engaging female participants, increasing stakeholder involvement, and promoting continuous lifelong learning. Furthermore, the research team offered various suggestions for maintaining the impact of the LEAD Bangladesh program, including initiating similar non-formal education programs for youth, emphasizing employability skills, establishing alumni networks, and using these networks to develop new programs.

Chapter Summary:

The following chapters provide a comprehensive overview and detailed analysis of the study:

- Chapter Two describes the overview of non-formal education for youth-led change.

- Chapter Three presents the methodology of the study.

- Chapter Four describes the overview of LEAD Bangladesh.

- Chapter Five presents the findings of the study, followed by a summary of the key successes and challenges, and recommendations.

Chapter Two: Non-formal Education for Youth-led Change

Non-Formal Education for Youth-Led Change is a research project developed by the University of Leeds (UK) and the British Council. This 12-month project aims to harness the potential of NFE to empower youth, promote social justice, and facilitate youth-led change. The primary objective of the NFE for Youth-Led Change Project is to develop pathways that better utilize NFE for youth empowerment. The project seeks to enhance understanding of the various forms of learning that contribute to youth empowerment; create effective spaces for the expression of youth voice; and facilitate youth-led social change.

Non-Formal Education for Youth-Led Change is funded by the UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under their 'follow-on-funding for impact and engagement scheme'. It follows on from, and therefore aims to incorporate insights and knowledge gained from, a previous AHRC project, 'Changing the Story' (CTS). CTS, which ran 30 projects in 12 conflict-affected contexts, provided a rich foundation of data demonstrating the role of NFE in promoting transrational and affective learning. This form of learning considers emotional, embodied, and affective dimensions, which are crucial for politically empowering young people and enabling them to contribute to societal change and peacebuilding.

The NFE for Youth-Led Change Project works closely with the British Council's Youth Connect, a global youth leadership program, which supports young people to develop the skills, inspiration and connections to tackle major challenges, such as climate change, employability and inequality. Through this engagement, NFE for Youth-Led Change seeks to facilitate knowledge exchange around NFE, enhance NFE programming, and establish an evidence base regarding the role of NFE in contributing to youth-led social change. Ultimately, NFE for Youth-Led Change aims to understand how the different pedagogies in NFE might promote youth-led change and where there are challenges here, to enable organizations (like BC) to incorporate this learning into their project design. This youth-led transformation is essential for addressing complex societal challenges and achieving sustainable development goals.

Chapter Three: LEAD Bangladesh

3.1 Background

The British Council launched the Leadership for Advancing Development in Bangladesh (LEAD Bangladesh) project on October 1, 2020, for a duration of 2 years, with a total budget of EUR 719,123.00, EUR 359.60.00 of which was funded by the British Council. This initiative, inspired by the Active Citizenship program, is a global effort aimed at fostering social leadership among youth. The project involved young people engaging in training followed by running social action projects in which local communities, local governments, and other stakeholders cultivate leadership skills. LEAD Bangladesh focused on increasing youth engagement, voice, agency, and participation in policy development in Bangladesh, with the goal of developing future change-makers with a global perspective. It aimed to empower young people in Bangladesh to become leaders in their communities, identifying innovative and sustainable solutions to local and global challenges, particularly in the areas of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions).

The project worked with: a) Bangladeshi youth (ages 18-25) across various communities, b) Bangladeshi diaspora leaders in the UK (ages 30-50), and c) A total of 3,000 young people collaborating with 40 leaders from the UK.

The intended outcomes of the LEAD Bangladesh Program were:

1. Enhanced leadership skills for youth in Bangladesh to address key developmental challenges.

2. Better insights developed by the UK diaspora community about development challenges in Bangladesh through training, direct connections with grassroots networks/youth working on the ground, and mentoring future leaders.

3. Empowered youth, through leadership and thematic trainings, motivated to engage in communities through SAPs on social entrepreneurship, climate impact, and democratic inclusion in local governance.

4. Increased dialogue between youth, local government, and sectoral experts, providing meaningful opportunities for Bangladeshi youth to participate in policy discussions, debates, and shaping the future of Bangladesh.

5. A sustained network of changemakers in Bangladesh, the UK, and across the Commonwealth, facilitating the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and initiatives on challenges affecting both Bangladesh and the world.

3.2 Program Activities

LEAD Bangladesh incorporated several activities, including a five-day training program followed by social action projects and engagement with the diaspora community. Selected youth received training centered on issues around youth development and community engagement, delivered both online and offline to ensure accessibility and flexibility. Key training topics included active citizenship, leadership and advocacy, communication skills, project management, ethical considerations, gender equity, safeguarding, social issues, social mapping techniques, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 8, 13, and 16, as well as community engagement and networking. Examples of module content included:

- Active citizenship: Identity, cultures, intercultural dialogues, local and global community, and social action planning and delivery.

- SDG 13: Self-identity, culture, climate, causes and effects of climate change, climate change stakeholders, climate change threats, tools and strategies for analyzing climate change threats, climate change adaptation, and social action planning maps.

- SDG 16: Rights and responsibilities, accountability, participation, inclusion, social integration, and more.

- SDG 8: Business ideas, entrepreneurship, needs analysis, business selection, feasibility study, business planning and management, accounting, etc.

After the five-day training, youth engaged in social action projects related to the particular SDG that they had received training in. Within these projects, young people engaged with community members, leaders, and local governments or policymakers as needed. As direct beneficiaries of the SAPs, Bangladeshi community members at SAP locations, including local government, were involved in the implementation of the SAPs.

Experienced professionals and leaders from the Bangladeshi diaspora community in the UK volunteer their time on the project to mentor young Bangladeshi leaders as they developed their SAPs. This mentorship provided both an on-the-ground understanding of key challenges across Bangladesh and valuable cross-cultural mentoring experience.

Participants from Bangladesh also had access to 'Commonwealth 100,' an online platform offering self-access training on leadership, opportunities for global collaboration, and networking with young people across the Commonwealth. This platform is open-source and focuses on leadership development.

The project celebrated the achievements of young participants through a Leadership Symposium, showcasing the impact of selected social projects.

3.3 Location and Implementation Partners

The project was implemented in various regions of Bangladesh, including Dhaka, Chattogram, Chuadanga, Khulna, Rajshahi, and Sylhet. The implementation partners included the Centre for Communication and Development (CCD) Bangladesh, Institute of Development Affairs (IDEA), Shushilan, The Hunger Project, WAVE Foundation, and Young Power in Social Action (YPSA). Common Purpose is the UK-based partner responsible for implementing the diaspora leadership component.

3.4 Stakeholders and their Recruitment Process

The British Council's LEAD Bangladesh project engaged a diverse array of stakeholders, including:

Youth Participants: These are the young individuals who directly participated in the programme. They were engaged through personal networks, prior involvement with partner organizations, social media platforms, and on-campus outreach efforts.

Partner Organizations: These are the entities responsible for implementing the project. They were selected by the British Council through a competitive process and were integral to the programme's execution.

Facilitators: Served as trainers, facilitators were engaged by partner organizations to deliver the programme's content.

Community Members: As beneficiaries, community members were involved in the programme through the Social Action Projects (SAPs) implemented by the youth participants. Their engagement was facilitated by the support of partner organizations.

Local Government Representatives: These elected officials represented the government at the local level and collaborated with the project to ensure its alignment with local governance structures and needs.

Diaspora Community: This group consisted of individuals who have migrated and now reside permanently in a foreign country. The UK-based partner engaged the diaspora community, fostering international connections and support.

The engagement of these stakeholders was a multifaceted process. Youth participants were mobilized through various outreach methods (e.g., community engagement), while facilitators were brought on board by partner organizations selected for their capability and expertise. Community members and policymakers became involved through the youth-led SAPs, with partner organizations and aided in communication and coordination. The diaspora community's involvement was orchestrated by the UK-based partner, enhancing the project's global reach and impact.

3.5 LEAD Bangladesh Achievements

According to the British Council, the LEAD Bangladesh program has supported 4,500 young people across Bangladesh in developing leadership skills to identify innovative, sustainable solutions to local and global challenges, in collaboration with leaders from the Bangladeshi diaspora community in the UK. The young participants initiated 240 Social Action Projects (SAPs) in three critical areas of Bangladesh's development linked to SDGs: entrepreneurship, climate change, and civic engagement, benefiting over 80,000 community members.

Chapter Four: Methodology of the Study

This research employed a qualitative approach to investigate how non-formal education contributes to youth-led social change through LEAD Bangladesh. The study aimed to understand the experiences and perspectives of various stakeholders involved in the project. This methodology chapter details the research methods, tools, participants, analytical approach, and ethical considerations utilized in the study.

4.1 Data Collection

Data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). These methods were selected to provide comprehensive insights from participants (Bryman, 2016; Caggiano and Weber, 2023). Most interviews and FGDs were conducted face-to-face to facilitate direct interaction and deeper engagement. However, some sessions were held online using platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams to accommodate participants' availability and preferences. A range of instruments and tools were utilized for data collection, including structured interview schedules and FGD guides. These tools were developed by the research team to address the study's objectives and elicit comprehensive responses from participants. They were tailored to different participant groups to ensure relevance and clarity.

The study included a diverse range of participants: young people, programme facilitators, members of partner organizations, community members, and the British Council team. Purposeful sampling techniques were used to select individuals who could offer valuable insights into LEAD Bangladesh. The British Council oversaw the selection process. Table 1 provides an overview of the sample size and participant distribution.

A total of 21 young people participated in the study, comprising 10 males and 11 females, aged between 22 and 27. Among these, 10 were students and the remainder were university graduates. Additionally, 6 participants were employed. Young people were selected from various regions, including Dhaka (n=8), Sylhet (n=10), Chuadanga (n=2), and Chattogram (n=1). In addition, 13 young people participated in the FGDs. Among them, six were students at different levels, and the rest were graduates engaged in various social activities and professions such as teaching, journalism, and office work.

The study also interviewed four facilitators of LEAD Bangladesh. Of these facilitators, three were male and one was female. Three were employed by partner organizations as facilitators, while the fourth was a student also serving as a facilitator. These facilitators were drawn from two partner organizations.

Table 1. Overview of the sample size and participant distribution

Methods	Number of Participants engaged
In-depth interviews with young people	21
FGD with young people	13
In-depth interviews with facilitators	4
In-depth interviews with partners	4
FGD with partners	6
In-depth interviews with British Council staff	2
Interviews with community	2

Furthermore, the study included members from partner organizations through one online FGD and two face-to-face interviews. The FGD involved six participants representing six different organizations, while the two interviews included four participants, equally divided by gender. Additionally, two British Council personnel, both male, were invited to participate. In this report, participants from the British Council are collectively referred to as the programme team.

To assess the community impact, the study conducted an interview with two community members who closely observed the activities of the young people. Both participants were male and had been involved in local community activities for an extended period.

Participants were accessed with the support of the British Council and partner organizations based in Dhaka and Sylhet. These organizations facilitated introductions and arranged meetings, enabling the researchers to reach the necessary sample of stakeholders involved in LEAD Bangladesh. Prior to conducting interviews, the research team adhered to established ethical procedures, as detailed in the ethics section.

The interviews and FGDs were conducted by the core research team to ensure consistency and depth in data collection. Interviews and FGDs were audio recorded with the informed consent of participants. Data collection was carried out in both English and Bangla to accommodate participants' language preferences and comfort levels. This bilingual approach facilitated accurate and comfortable expression of participants' thoughts and experiences, thereby enhancing the quality of the data collected.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. Audio recordings were deleted, and all identifiable data was removed from transcriptions, which were allocated a unique identifying code and stored in an encrypted folder.

4.2 Data Analysis

The transcribed data were meticulously reviewed and coded by the researchers. Coding involved identifying significant statements and categorizing them into meaningful units, which were then organized into subthemes and further refined into major themes. This systematic approach to data analysis enabled the researchers to uncover patterns and insights pertinent to the study's objectives.

The findings from the data analysis are presented thematically, reflecting the key themes that emerged from participants' responses. This thematic presentation provides a coherent and structured overview of the study's outcomes, highlighting the critical aspects of LEAD Bangladesh's impact on youth empowerment, social justice, and youth-led change.

4.3 Research Ethics

This research adhered to established ethical guidelines throughout its course, and ethical approval was obtained from the University of Leeds, UK. Prior to taking part in the research, participants were given a participation information sheet and a privacy notice (written in both English and Bangla), which explained the purpose of the research, their rights as participants, and what would happen to the collected data. At the start of each interview and FGD, participants were reminded of this information, and verbal consent was obtained and recorded. Participants' anonymity has been maintained through the removal of all identifiable information from transcripts and the use of unique identifying codes. Following the project, the data from the interviews and focus groups will be stored in the University of Leeds Research Data Repository (Research Data Leeds) as a single dataset in order to ensure the data can be shared, reused, and cited beyond the end of the project, including, importantly, by partners and collaborators on the project. Data stored in the repository will be anonymized, and no personal or confidential data will be stored. Research Data Leeds is fully supported by the University of Leeds to ensure all data are reserved properly and held securely.

Chapter Five: Findings of the Study

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the study's findings across several key themes. Initially, it details the program design, followed by the program methodology. It then explores the social action projects and their impacts, and subsequently, the effects of the program on youth, youth engagement, and program sustainability.

5.2 Program Design

The LEAD Bangladesh program, based on the Active Citizens methodology, aligns with key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) relevant to Bangladesh, namely SDG 8 (decent work and employment), SDG 13 (climate action), and SDG 16 (transparency, accountability, and institutional governance).

5.2.1 Identifying the Needs of Young People

The British Council used the Youth Survey and Next Generation Research to determine young people's priorities, which informed the program's design. A program team member explained, "We ask young people about their priorities at regular intervals... these are kind of the concerning elements to young people" (NFE0102B). The 2015 survey, highlighting climate change, employment, and governance as major concerns, significantly influenced the program's themes: "At that time, climate, employment was quite prominent... these things helped us shape the design of LEAD Bangladesh" (NFE0102B).

The program was also tailored to various contexts, with content adapted to address specific regional needs and issues. Emphasizing localized considerations, particularly regarding conflict dynamics and inclusion, was crucial: "Have we reached out across different divides? ...there are minority groups, how have we affected them in our work? And have we been able to ensure inclusion and representation?" (NFE0101B). The program adapted methodologies from previous initiatives, utilizing existing training materials and customizing them with the assistance of local consultants. Another participant noted, "We had training materials from Prodigy and could slightly tweak it to make it fit for LEAD Bangladesh" (NFE0102B).

The program team also stressed the importance of understanding the historical and cultural significance of youth involvement in Bangladesh to identify their needs. This perspective highlights the intrinsic motivation and potential of young people to drive social change, which the program aimed to harness and develop further.

Additionally, recognizing the demographic significance of the youth population in Bangladesh was essential. One participant from the program team noted, "About one-third of the population now are young people, so they

are our future" (NFE0105B). This demographic insight underscores the strategic importance of investing in youth development to secure the nation's future. The program's alignment with global agendas, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), further emphasizes the importance of youth involvement in broader development initiatives. This comprehensive approach not only empowered the youth but also ensured their involvement contributed to wider social and economic development goals.

This study examined whether young participants were involved in the planning and design of the LEAD Bangladesh program and how this influenced their engagement in the training. Interview data indicates that young people were not involved in the program design, as it was developed by the British Council prior to their participation. One participant noted, "I was not involved in the planning phase of the project; I joined the program after that stage had already been completed" (NFE0209B). Another participant shared a similar experience: "No, I was not engaged in designing or planning the program" (NFE0208B). This lack of engagement in program design is not unusual for funded programs, which are often constrained in their ability to engage in participatory processes through time constraints.

Many young people reported that their non-involvement in the design phase did not negatively impact their engagement and learning during the training. However, some participants suggested that their experience could have been improved with greater initial engagement and better resource allocation. They provided insights into potential improvements, noting,

"If they [the British Council] had taken our opinions in designing the program, it might have been more enjoyable for us. Everyone might have joined the program more willingly" (NFE02018B). Another participant mentioned,

"It affected me in the sense that, sometimes I thought the program could have been improved if certain aspects were different. This was my personal thinking. Overall, the program was very effective and good in every aspect. However, there were times when I felt that some changes could have made it better, like if it had been a bit different." (NFE02011B)

Additionally, budget constraints were a concern: "If I have to mention a specific point, I would mention the budgeting issue. We were given 5000 BDT! So, within 5000 BDT, doing two seminars and meeting with our team members was tough… I think there were some shortcomings in the budget" (NFE02019B). These findings suggest that collecting feedback from participants could help program designers reconsider and adjust certain aspects of the program design where necessary.

Nonetheless, this research examined the relevance of the LEAD Bangladesh training program to the needs and experiences of young people in Bangladesh. The findings here indicate that the program is highly relevant, inspiring, and beneficial, helping participants become aware of social issues and fostering leadership, communication skills, and a sense of social responsibility.

In interviews, young people emphasized the program's relevance using descriptors such as "absolutely," "definitely," "of course," "obviously," and "hundred percent." One participant noted, "Obviously! Obviously! I found them very relevant" (NFE0221B). Another mentioned, "Obviously! It's very relevant and useful for the youth" (NFE0220B). Another participant stated, "Definitely, these programs are very relevant for the people of Bangladesh" (NFE0205B).

Participants highlighted that the training raised their awareness of various personal and social issues, including self-awareness, community, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender equality, and the inclusion of marginalized groups, which they had been previously unaware of. One participant remarked,

> **"Before the training, I was unaware of these issues. After the training, I knew that we young people have to work on it for the betterment of ourselves, our society, and our country" (NFE0202B).**

Another participant noted, "Yes, I think this is relevant for the youth of Bangladesh currently, because Bangladesh has various issues, from climate change to social problems. So, to solve these problems through youth engagement, programs like LEAD Bangladesh and works like this are necessary. From this kind of project, the youth of Bangladesh can develop themselves and also work to solve the problems of society" (NFE0208B).

The findings suggest that both young people and the program team consider the LEAD Bangladesh program highly relevant for youth self-development and the development of society and the community.

5.3 Training Methodology

This section outlines the methodological and pedagogical aspects of the training elements of LEAD Bangladesh (with section 5.4 examining the social action projects specifically). It details how young people were engaged in the pedagogical activities, the modes of education (non-formal) and learning (online, face-to-face, or blended), and how these modes impacted their engagement and motivation compared to traditional formal education and face-to-face learning.

5.3.1 Participatory Approaches

The program curriculum was designed to empower young people by equipping them with essential skills related to leadership, civic engagement, and sustainable development, particularly in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The pedagogical approach taken prioritized learner-centered approaches, and emphasized participation, experiential learning, and practical applications. This delivery model promoted critical thinking and problem-solving, and enabled youth to apply what they had learned to real-world scenarios. Participants, facilitators, and the program team unanimously considered the program methodology of LEAD Bangladesh to be participatory and engaging. The program team emphasized that the training methodologies were designed to be highly participatory, involving young people in interactive activities. Facilitators used various activities to energize and engage participants, and ensured a dynamic and inclusive learning experience. This participatory approach is critical for maintaining participant interest and facilitating deep learning, contrasting with traditional didactic methods. For instance, activities like the "power walk" and community mapping exercises enabled participants to actively engage with the content, fostering a The program team also highlighted the

significance of social action projects, as discussed below which provided participants with hands-on experience in community engagement. These projects, often driven by passion and need, allowed young people to apply their learning in real-world contexts, reinforcing their skills and knowledge and making the learning experience more meaningful and engaging.

Young people echoed these sentiments, emphasizing that the activities conducted during the training were participatory and aligned with the program's goals. Activities such as role-playing sessions, community campaigns, and advocacy workshops were particularly noted for their relevance in preparing participants to tackle real-world issues effectively. One participant working on entrepreneurship awareness stated, "We had to do a lot of campaigns and workshops and arrange Google Meet sessions with community people to make them aware that besides studies, we can do these kinds of things to earn money" (NFE0203B). Another participant described the "POWER WALK" session, involving role-playing scenarios depicting societal inequalities, as eye-opening:

"It really helped us initially to think about what we were actually going to do, what could be done for society and to help the community, to fulfill the SDG goals as well" (NFE0202B).

 This was supported by another participant who noted that community visits and engagement were crucial for understanding local challenges and opportunities for social change. They argued that such relevant, participatory, and engaging activities were not found in other formal education modes.

A variety of skill-building activities, such as communication skills development, public speaking, and interpersonal skills workshops, further helped participants build confidence and competence. These sessions encouraged participants to engage in discussions, debates, and presentations, thus enhancing their ability to articulate their ideas effectively. For example, the participants engaged in a 'Joint Visioning Workshop'. The workshop gave youth participants the opportunity to observe UK-based social projects and replicate relevant aspects of these projects. This enabled the participants to interact directly with the diaspora leaders. One young participant reflected on their experience:

"When we went there to the UK for the Joint Visioning Workshop, we met the diaspora community in person and shared our journey. We worked together and had several group discussion sessions. They suggested ways we could overcome the challenges we are facing here and shared how they work with their communities in the UK. They also shared their experiences with us, and it was a great experience. They were really cordial" (NFE0206B).

The structured progression of the program was also appreciated by participants, who valued the balance between introductory and more in-depth sessions. One participant commented, "The program was designed so beautifully that they opened up about easy things in the program during the first two days. Then in the next three days serious things were introduced" (NFE0204B). This approach was seen as critical for laying a solid foundation

of knowledge and skills before tackling more complex topics. Participants also reported that the program included energizer sessions, cultural events, breaks, icebreakers, and interactive group activities. These components not only broke the monotony of traditional training methods but also fostered a supportive and dynamic learning environment conducive to personal and collective growth.

Facilitators echoed these views, emphasizing the program's design to avoid the monotony of traditional lectures through activity-based learning. This approach ensured high levels of engagement and practical application of knowledge. One facilitator stated, "We designed very activity-based learning sessions, including many videos and pictures... we created experiences related to the content, and participants related these experiences in the classroom" (NFE0302B). Role-playing was a significant method used to help participants understand complex social issues and engage actively with the training content, making them reflect on social inequalities and the roles of marginalized groups in society. Some young participants, however, advocated for more interactive and engaging methods, such as games, to enhance learning and participation. One participant shared their positive experience with gamified learning: "If we could add more games as I showed you, if we can increase more and more games, they will be really excited. So, I believe that for long-day training, besides lectures, we can incorporate gaming sessions" (NFE0205B).

However, participants who had engaged in training online described some of the difficulties faced with the online training as network and connection issues, which resulted in disrupted engagement: "There were some technical issues in online mode, like if we were on the phone, there were a lot of distractions and noise" (NFE0202BF). Another participant described their experience as:

The condition of online training was very bad because I joined the training from my hometown, and the network was poor. There were 40 participants in the training, so it was difficult for the facilitator to answer every question. It took a lot of time. Sometimes, the facilitator was unable to complete the mandatory session within a day and missed one or two sessions that were scheduled. There was also a gap in getting answers to every question. In face-to-face sessions, we can learn things clearly, but online, due to technological and other issues, we sometimes missed parts" (NFE0203BM).

This online experience will be examined in more detail in section 5.3.3 . Overall, the curriculum development and delivery model, combined with these diverse activities, created a robust framework for empowering the youth participants. The findings indicate that the pedagogical approaches and methodology used in the LEAD Bangladesh program were activity-based and engaging, fostering joyful learning experiences. By focusing on experiential learning and aligning with SGDs, the project not only enhanced the youth participant's individual skills but also promoted engagement in community issues, empowering young people to drive social change.

5.3.2 Mode of Education: Formal vs. Non-Formal

The non-formal education provided by the LEAD Bangladesh program offers unique learning experiences distinct from participants' experiences of formal education. This section explores how participants experienced these differences, focusing on the methodologies, flexibility, and skill development facilitated by the LEAD program.

Learning Different Subjects

Young participants highlighted substantial differences in content and subject matter between their formal education and the non-formal education of the LEAD Bangladesh program. They argued that formal education tends to focus heavily on academic and theoretical knowledge, often neglecting contemporary issues and personal development topics emphasized in the non-formal education of the LEAD Bangladesh program. One participant stated, "The [academic] institution I attended was fully academic-based... they never taught us about things like SDGs or how to identify our personal strengths and weaknesses" (NFE0201B). Another participant echoed this sentiment, saying, "In school, college, or university, they do not teach us about current issues like gender equality and climate change. I did not have any idea about this before doing training in the LEAD Bangladesh program" (NFE0202B).

Facilitators and the program team emphasized that the non-formal education of the LEAD Bangladesh program plays a crucial role in developing soft skills, life skills, citizenship awareness, and understanding social and governmental issues—areas often inadequately covered in formal education. The program team argued that a significant advantage of non-formal education in the LEAD Bangladesh program is its emphasis on developing critical 21st-century skills such as problem-solving,

communication, and critical thinking. These skills are often neglected in formal education systems that prioritize rote learning and standardized testing. One program team member stated, "How do young people understand the labor market?... that requires problem-solving, critical thinking" (NFE0101B). Participants engaged in entrepreneurship training, where they learned about business planning and development. This training incorporated practical exercises, enabling participants to design business projects that address community needs while building their entrepreneurial skills. The non-formal education program of LEAD Bangladesh therefore equips young people with the skills necessary to navigate and succeed in an increasingly complex and dynamic labor market, highlighting the necessity of non-formal education to fill the gaps left by formal systems.

The program also included workshops focused on civic responsibility and community engagement. Participants discussed national history, citizenship, and their roles as active citizens. By understanding the socio-political landscape, the youth participants became better equipped to advocate for change and engage with local government structures.

Different Pedagogical Approaches

Participants also noted key differences in teaching methods and learning environments. Young participants argued that their formal education is often characterized by passive learning, where students primarily receive information from teachers. In contrast, learning in LEAD Bangladesh is more interactive and participatory, as discussed above. One young participant described the difference: "The education system of our school is one-way. Our teachers are delivering lectures, and as students, we are absorbing the knowledge. But in the LEAD Project, it was participatory because the facilitators or instructors asked us various

questions and drew answers out of us" (NFE0208B). Another participant emphasized the collaborative nature of non-formal education, stating, "In this training session, no one was a teacher, no one a student. Everyone was a learner. Even the facilitators were learners. They learned from us, we learned many things from them" (NFE0207B). The program team also highlighted the learner-centered and participatory, active and engaging nature of teaching in non-formal education. One member mentioned, "A program like this... starts with participation, learner-centered methodologies" (NFE0101B). By focusing on the needs and participation of learners, the non-formal program of LEAD Bangladesh fostered a more interactive and engaging educational experience.

Non-formal education was often described as more motivating and engaging compared to formal education. Participants highlighted the interactive nature and the freedom to explore and express ideas as key factors enhancing their learning experience. One participant shared, "Often in class, we feel bored and may feel like sleeping; we often lose attention. But in terms of training, often a participant who undergoes the training once wants to do it again" (NFE0208B). Another participant noted,

> **"Normally, in school and college, I found the classes very boring. However, during the LEAD Bangladesh program training, the sessions were not boring. There were a lot of activities and group work"** **(NFE02018B).**

Participants and facilitators frequently mentioned that non-formal education excels in the practical application of knowledge and skill development. They found the non-formal education of the LEAD Bangladesh program more effective in teaching practical skills directly applicable in real-life situations. One member

from partner organization mentioned, "It [non-formal education of LEAD Bangladesh program] helps them [young people] to get life skills, leadership skills. In our current situation, youth are not that interested in politics. But politics is everywhere so we have to learn politics to change our society" (NFE0104B). This suggests that non-formal education provides a platform for young people to gain essential skills for personal and professional development, including leadership and political literacy. Emphasizing the practical application of knowledge, one young participant noted,

> **"When someone is teaching us something practically, I think that is more effective. When we learn and simultaneously apply as well, I think that makes it more effective to learn something"** **(NFE02010B).**

Another participant shared, "We knew about the theories and how our system works, or how administration works, but we could not apply them. So when we had that project [LEAD Bangladesh project], we could implement our knowledge" (NFE02013B). Highlighting the practical application of knowledge, one facilitator commented, "Through non-formal education, they are realizing and becoming optimistic... They feel like 'I can do it'" (NFE0304B). These findings indicate that the non-formal mode of LEAD Bangladesh helps young people to be optimistic and confident in bridging theoretical knowledge and its application in social contexts, which is necessary for youth-led societal change.

Emphasis on Diversity and Inclusion

Non-formal education programs were praised for their diversity and inclusiveness, bringing together participants from various backgrounds and communities, enriching the learning experience. One participant reflected on this diversity: "In LEAD Bangladesh, when

training in SDG 8, participants were from different backgrounds, ages, and communities… Non-formal education involves much diversity and differentiation, offering knowledge from various perspectives and sources" (NFE0203B). Facilitators echoed this sentiment. One facilitator noted,

> **"Formal education is fruitful for its respective participants, but non-formal education is fruitful for everyone as a whole" (NFE0303B).**

Highlighting flexibility and community engagement, the program team argued that non-formal education is need-based, inclusive, and flexible rather than rigid. One program team member noted, "We bring these programs to the community. We don't ask them to come to an institution… Flexibility in content and materials… is need-based" (NFE0102B). This illustrates the inclusive nature of non-formal education in the LEAD Bangladesh program, making it accessible and beneficial to a broader audience regardless of their backgrounds. Additionally, there are possibilities for learning from people from different disciplines, communities, and ages, providing lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Some facilitators distinguished between formal education and the non-formal education of the LEAD Bangladesh program by identifying gaps in formal education, particularly in community engagement. As one facilitator noted, "In formal education, we are only creating people for the job market… In non-formal education, alongside formal education, we try to involve the youth in community activities… The training includes learning about oneself. In non-formal education, there is hope to contribute to the community, which is missing in formal education" (NFE0301B). This underscored the program's ability to fill gaps in

formal education by encouraging students to engage with their communities and discover their personal and civic identities.

Summary

The above findings indicate that non-formal education programs, such as LEAD Bangladesh, offer significant advantages over traditional formal schooling by providing flexible, need-based, and practical learning experiences. These programs play a crucial role in developing critical skills, fostering community engagement, and promoting global citizenship. As formal education systems continue to evolve, integrating and supporting non-formal education will be essential in addressing educational gaps and ensuring long-term sustainability and impact. Several cohorts of participants discussed the potential for integrating non-formal education techniques from LEAD Bangladesh into formal education settings. One member from a partner organization argued, "In universities, besides formal education, there should be non-formal educational projects as well. And these projects should be frequent, not just occasional ones" (NFE0106B). The integration of participatory and learner-centered techniques can enhance student engagement and learning outcomes in formal education settings. Likewise, young participants expressed a clear preference for a blend of both educational approaches, recognizing that each has its strengths and weaknesses. Formal education provides essential theoretical knowledge and a structured learning path, while non-formal education offers practical application, skill development, and a more engaging learning environment. Insights from participants underscore the need for a holistic approach to education that combines the strengths of both formal and non-formal systems, creating a more comprehensive and inclusive learning environment for all.

5.3.3 Mode of Learning: Online vs. Face-to-Face

This study explored the engagement and experiences of participants in LEAD Bangladesh with both online and offline nonformal training modes. Young participants provided detailed insights into their experiences, highlighting the unique strengths and challenges that influenced their engagement and learning outcomes in distinct ways.

Online Training: Advantages and Challenges

Online training in the LEAD Bangladesh program was praised for its flexibility, enjoyment, and accessibility, allowing participants to join sessions from various locations, which was particularly beneficial during the pandemic. This convenience enabled participants to engage in training activities from the comfort of their homes. One young participant remarked, "The flexibility of online training allowed me to participate from home, which was especially helpful during the pandemic" (NFE0201B). Additionally, the use of interactive tools significantly enhanced engagement. Participants enjoyed these tools, which facilitated collaborative and dynamic sessions, making the learning experience more engaging. Another young participant noted, "I really enjoyed using the interactive tools like jam boards and breakout rooms during online training sessions" (NFE0204B). Another young female participant claimed that she enjoyed online training during the pandemic, noting that she did not feel bored because the facilitators engaged the participants effectively by assigning small tasks to keep them engaged. She observed:

"Actually, the online experience was very good. The online training was conducted during the Covid pandemic, and we didn't realize how we could spend the whole day in front of the computer. However, the facilitators engaged us very effectively, and we didn't get bored sitting in front of the computer from 9 am to 6 pm, with a lunch break in between. We didn't feel like turning it off and taking a nap. The whole day was amazing because we had some small tasks to keep us engaged. Since it was an online version, we had to communicate via chat, which made it very interactive" (NFE0209B).

However, not all participants enjoyed the online training. Some found it boring rather than entertaining due to the long duration, approximately 5-7 hours per day. Many did not interact with others in the session, opting instead to remain in mute mode. Participants also shared other challenges of online training. Technical issues, including network problems and device malfunctions, were common and often disrupted the training flow. For instance, some young people in peripheral areas faced significant network issues that impeded their ability to fully participate. One young participant shared, "Network issues during online sessions made it difficult to stay engaged and disrupted my learning process" (NFE0203B). Furthermore, the virtual format made it challenging to build personal connections with trainers and peers, leading to a less immersive experience. One young participant expressed, "I felt less connected to the trainers and other participants during online training compared to face-to-face sessions" (NFE0206B). Additionally, facilitators found it difficult to respond to all participants' queries and complete the sessions addressing all necessary tasks and content.

One young participant noted, "There were 40 participants in the training, so it was difficult for the facilitator to answer every question. It took a lot of time. Sometimes, the facilitator was unable to complete the mandatory session within a day and missed one or two sessions that were scheduled. There was also a gap in getting answers to every question" (NFE0203B).

The above findings indicate that participants had varied experiences—some felt less engaged, while others found the methods engaging. To address the challenges of online training in the LEAD Bangladesh program, facilitators implemented various engagement strategies, such as small tasks and interactive discussions. These efforts were appreciated by participants, who found these strategies effective in maintaining their interest and engagement throughout the sessions. One young participant commented, "The engagement strategies used by facilitators, like small tasks and interactive discussions, were very effective in keeping me engaged" (NFE0209B).

In-Person Training: Advantages and Challenges
In-person training in LEAD Bangladesh was praised for its enhanced interaction and practical learning opportunities. Face-to-face sessions facilitated better communication and teamwork, and created a more engaging environment. Participants particularly valued the direct interaction, which significantly improved their learning experience. One young participant stated, "The face-to-face interaction in offline training greatly improved my learning experience through better communication and teamwork" (NFE0201B). Moreover, offline training included practical exercises such as mapping and project planning, which were highly beneficial. Participants found these hands-on activities crucial for understanding and applying theoretical concepts. One young

participant observed, "The practical exercises in offline training, like mapping and project planning, were essential for grasping and applying theoretical concepts" (NFE0210B). In terms of developing knowledge, in-person training was often perceived as more effective. The interactive and practical nature of these sessions helped participants retain and apply new knowledge more effectively. Participants reported that in-person training was more effective for learning due to the direct interaction with trainers and the practical exercises involved. One young participant reflected, "Offline training was more effective for my learning because of the direct interaction with trainers and the practical exercises" (NFE0203B).

Despite its benefits, in-person training also faced challenges, particularly in terms of accessibility for participants regardless of gender who came from long distances from the training venue. The requirement for physical presence posed logistical constraints, making it difficult for some participants in district areas to attend. Participants highlighted this issue, noting that the need to be physically present was a significant barrier. One young participant pointed out, "The requirement for physical attendance in offline training was a major barrier for me and others" (NFE0211B).

In summary, both online and offline training modes offer distinct advantages and challenges. Therefore, participants suggested a blended approach that combines the strengths of both online and offline training could provide a comprehensive and adaptable training experience, maximizing effectiveness and participant satisfaction.

5.4 Social Action Projects

Social Action Projects (SAPs) were integral to the post-training phase of LEAD Bangladesh, enabling participants to apply their learnings in real-world contexts. Aligned with specific SDGs, these projects aimed to address a range of social issues within communities. This section explores the engagement of young participants in SAPs, their experiences with various stakeholders, the multifaceted challenges they faced during implementation, and the tangible impacts of their projects.

SAPs required participants to plan and execute projects in their communities, thereby applying their training in practical scenarios. One facilitator remarked, "Participants had to undertake a social action program to plan a realistic project. This method effectively applied their training" (NFE0302B). Following a five-day training, participants engaged in SAPs within their local communities. Facilitators assumed mentorship roles, guiding the participants in executing their projects and liaising with community and government institutions. Projects were designed to align with specific SDGs, reflecting the program's commitment to sustainable development. These projects addressed a range of issues, including maternal nutrition (SDG 2: Zero Hunger), decent work and economic growth (SDG 8), peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16), and climate action (SDG 13). For instance, one group of young people focused on creating a citizen charter to improve local government service access, while another promoted recycling and sustainable practices within their community.

5.4.1 Societal Impacts of Social Action Projects

The SAPs had tangible impacts on communities. Examples of projects that young people carried out, include[1]:

- A project focused on maternal nutrition involved monthly sessions with healthcare providers, implementing food charts and educating mothers about nutrition.

- The establishment of a citizen charter at the local councilor's office, enhancing transparency and accessibility: "When we made them understand that they could connect with any government or organization office for any work, they started going to the bank, counselor's office, and primary or higher-level schools for various needs and information"

- Contributions to reducing child abuse and early marriage, including a project addressing child harassment at Jahangirnagar University, which resulted in lasting changes and continued vigilance by the student body.

- Behavioral changes in waste management within the community: "Whenever we visit, they tell us that they are correctly and effectively segregating waste after learning from us" (NFE0206B).

- Addressing infrastructure problems such as drainage and road conditions,

These initiatives highlight the program's capacity to facilitate meaningful social change at the grassroots level. Several participants, including young people, community members, and the program team, identified the ability of SAPs to address pressing social issues and needs as a significant impact. These projects primarily raised awareness and, in some cases, initiated behavioral changes. However, the complex nature of societal issues means that these changes are often incremental and require broader intervention from governmental and other bodies to be fully realized.

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1 *References have been removed from this section to protect participants anonymity*

Nonetheless, the projects demonstrated the participants' capacity to engage constructively with their communities. One team member noted, "All the social action projects that they did made some impact in terms of mostly probably raising awareness" (NFE0102B). Another commented,

"Some of the social action projects were quite good... they were able to start their own organization from the kind of local, small-scale initiative" (NFE0102B).

Thus demonstrating the youth-led change enabled through these programmes.

5.4.2 Engaging with the Local Community

Engaging with the local community was an essential element of the SAPs. Young participants involved in community engagement initiatives shared diverse experiences, highlighting both successes and challenges. Several participants noted the reciprocal benefits of engaging with community members. One young participant reflected on interactions with mothers in the community, stating, "When I started talking with them, I felt like they also needed somebody to talk to... So, I felt like there are people who need us" (NFE0201B). This interaction exemplifies how community engagement meets mutual needs, fostering a sense of connection and support. Community members provided guidance and support to young people, enhancing the effectiveness of the SAPs. One community member noted, "We have also supported them by suggesting improvements that would help us" (NFE0401B). Another added, "They have considered the suggestions of people like me and him, and to make their efforts successful, they have sought our support" (NFE0402B). This collaborative effort underscores the role of community input in enhancing the quality and impact of youth-led initiatives. Additionally, community members expressed gratitude and encouragement, fostering a supportive environment for ongoing projects. As one community member stated,

"We must support them for their courageous initiatives, and they have been successful in this project. Thanks to them. We hope that they will take more initiatives in the future" (NFE0402B).

This positive feedback encouraged continued engagement and initiative among the youth. A positive example of community engagement that contributed to building trust was the way in which youth participants overcame challenges with communication. Some young people experienced difficulties in engaging with community members due to lack of trust, yet youth participants understood the importance of overcoming this and persevered to create a more comfortable environment for engagement:

"Initially, it was difficult to engage with the mothers because they were uncomfortable discussing their problems with us. It took us a long time to break through this barrier. As we continued with the project and the mothers became familiar with us and our work, they became more interested and willing to talk. Building trust was crucial. To overcome the initial lack of trust, we visited regularly and sought introductions from the administration. Gradually, trust began to develop, and we were able to have meaningful discussions with them" (NFE0201B).

Indeed, engaging with the local community posed several challenges for participants. One young participant highlighted scheduling conflicts as a significant issue: "One of the significant challenges that participants encounter with the community people is matching time with them as community people were busy in their work for their livelihood" (NFE0201B). This logistical challenge can impede effective communication and collaboration. Despite these difficulties, community members gradually recognized the youth's dedication and began to support their efforts, providing meeting spaces and engaging with their initiatives, which indicates a shift towards acceptance and collaboration.

5.4.3 Engaging with Policymakers and Local Government

Engagement with policymakers and local government officials was a crucial aspect of the youth-led social action projects, contributing significantly to community development. Participants frequently reported positive experiences in their interactions with these stakeholders, often receiving support and recognition for their initiatives. This section discusses the engagement experiences, challenges faced, and the impacts of these interactions on the effectiveness of youth-led projects.

Positive Engagement with Policymakers and Local Government

Participants generally experienced favorable interactions with policymakers and local government officials, who often welcomed youth-led initiatives and recognized their potential for addressing community issues effectively. One young participant shared, "When they saw that young students were coming to them, they were very welcoming to us" (NFE0204B). Another added, "The local government was really supportive once they understood our goals" (NFE0202B). This positive reception was frequently linked to the provision of necessary permissions, endorsements, and practical support. For instance, a participant from Chuadanga noted the significant boost from the local mayor's endorsement: "The mayor's endorsement significantly boosted community participation" (NFE0203B). Similarly, another young participant highlighted, "Working with local council members gave us the platform we needed to address community issues directly" (NFE0206B). These observations were corroborated by the partner organization, who remarked, "They [young people] were engaged with the community to disseminate knowledge and also worked on advocacy issues with representatives of local government service providers" (NFE0103&4B). The support from policymakers

and local government not only legitimized the projects but also empowered youth-led community involvement and change. This empowerment fostered a sense of ongoing commitment to social change among participants. One young participant emphasized,

"Getting the endorsement from the district council helped us a lot in gaining the community's trust" (NFE0205B).

Community members also recognized the potential impact of youth-led initiatives, provided they received adequate support. As one community member stated, "If you establish communication with the participants and they receive support from society and local government, they can contribute significantly to the development of our society."

Challenges in Engagement

Despite these positive experiences, young people faced challenges in securing consistent access and communication with local government officials due to their busy schedules. A community member noted, "The lack of fulfillment of roles by local governments and social organizations has led to communication gaps and challenges" (NFE0401B). Initial skepticism or lack of proactive support from some officials also hindered engagement. Additionally, navigating bureaucratic processes presented a significant barrier. Participants encountered delays and complexities in government offices, which sometimes impeded progress despite initial positive interactions. One young participant described these difficulties: "Navigating the bureaucracy of government offices was challenging and often hindered our progress" (NFE0209B). Another added, "We faced a lot of red tape, which slowed down our project implementation" (NFE0210B). Variability in support from local government officials further impacted project

implementation, with support levels varying significantly between individuals. As one young participant observed, "The level of support we received depended a lot on the individual official we were dealing with" (NFE0211B). SAP activities thus required participants to understand and navigate these individual dynamics effectively.

In these circumstances, building trust and rapport with policymakers and local government officials was essential for gaining support. Participants emphasized the importance of regular communication, showcasing project outcomes, and aligning initiatives with local government priorities. One young participant noted, "We leveraged local media and community support to positively influence policymakers" (NFE0207B). Another young shared, "Regular updates and showing tangible results helped build trust with the officials" (NFE0212B). This process of trust-building was critical for youth empowerment and securing necessary support. A young participant remarked, "It took time, but once they saw the positive impact of our work, their support grew" (NFE0213B).

Impacts of Engagement

Engaging with policymakers and local government officials empowered young people to drive meaningful change in their communities. The program facilitated strategic collaborations between youth and local leaders or organizations, leading to policy changes, increased community participation, and improved services. For instance, one young participant highlighted, "Engaging with Union Parishad members led to lasting recognition and support for our community training programs" (NFE2015B). Another young participant shared, "Our advocacy efforts resulted in new policies that improved local healthcare services" (NFE0214B). These engagements contributed to the sustainability of community initiatives through SAPs.

Additionally, the program helped reduce exploitation by intermediaries who charged fees for services meant to be freely available. One young participant noted, "A person can easily apply for a form to get their facilities, but they asked someone to help them get the allowance... I think this type of exploitation decreased a lot because of the Information Center" (NFE02FGD). They further added, "Previously, obtaining a birth certificate required a third party... We assured the general public that without paying too much money, they could communicate with the counselor" (NFE02FGD). This was particularly relevant as demand for vaccination registration and birth certificates increased after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Young people also reported that engaging with policymakers and local government officials contributed to their personal growth and enhanced leadership skills. Navigating bureaucratic processes and advocating for community needs effectively empowered them and sustained their projects. As one young participant explained, "Dealing with local government officials and advocating for our projects really improved my leadership skills" (NFE0215B).

Overall, engaging with policymakers and local government officials is crucial for the success of youth-led community development initiatives. Despite challenges such as limited access, bureaucratic hurdles, and inconsistent support, the persistence and strategic approaches of young participants led to significant positive outcomes. Their experiences underscore the importance of building trust, maintaining regular communication, and demonstrating the impact of their projects. Enhancing capacity-building and fostering partnerships will further empower youth to drive meaningful and sustainable community development.

5.4.4 Engaging with the Diaspora Community

LEAD Bangladesh created opportunities to interact with Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK through online coaching session and in person in the UK and participate in Joint Visioning Workshops. According to the British Council, over nine online group coaching sessions, Bangladeshi Diaspora members connected with Young Leaders to tackle local and global challenges. Each Young Leader had 30 minutes to discuss a specific issue with a member of the diaspora community, aiming to empower them to find their own solutions for implementing their SAPs. In total, 243 Young Leaders participated in these sessions. This initiative emphasized the involvement of the Bangladeshi diaspora in the UK, whose members not only mentored young leaders from Bangladesh but also served as cultural and professional bridges, enhancing cross-border knowledge exchange and mutual support.

Diaspora leaders were paired with young participants to support their SAPs. Selected through an open call across England, Scotland, and Wales, the 40 diaspora leaders came from diverse academic and professional backgrounds, allowing for a variety of perspectives and expertise. Their profiles reflect a range of skills, experiences, and insights into the challenges facing Bangladesh, equipping them to act as effective mentors. Diaspora leaders received three days of intensive leadership and mentoring training in London, hosted by the UK-based partner, Common Purpose, equipping them with a deeper understanding of Bangladesh's development landscape and the specific challenges confronting young leaders.

Findings from the LEAD Bangladesh program underscored the varied experiences and perceptions of participants in their interactions with diaspora communities. These experiences highlight both the positive impacts and challenges associated with such engagements.

Positive Interactions and Support

Participants reported largely positive experiences with diaspora communities, noting the supportive nature and constructive insights provided by diaspora members. These interactions significantly enhanced project outcomes. One young participant observed, "They [diaspora community] provided valuable insights on how to improve the project, which really helped me see how it could be more efficient" (NFE0201B). Another young participant added, "The diaspora community shares these positive ideas with us" (NFE0203B). Young people also valued the opportunity to learn from the diverse experiences and expertise of diaspora members, which enriched their understanding of various Social Action Projects (SAPs). For example, a participant from Chuadanga remarked, "We learned how to make our work greener and more sustainable without harming the climate" (NFE0203B). Another shared, "They [diaspora community] suggested ways we could overcome the challenges we are facing here and shared how they engage with their communities in the UK" (NFE0206B). These insights empowered participants to refine their SAPs and enhance their contributions to youth-led social change.

The participants from partner organizations highlighted how engagement with the diaspora community facilitated direct interactions and immediate feedback on youth-led activities. As a member of the team reflected: "During the diaspora meeting, they offered mentorship and guidance on our social action projects. Our leaders raised concerns, and the diaspora community shared their experiences, which was instrumental in addressing our concerns and providing us with the necessary knowledge" (NFE0105B).

Engagement with the diaspora community had notable impacts on personal motivation and intercultural communication skills development. Participants often found motivation and inspiration through these interactions. A young participant from Sylhet expressed gratitude, stating, "Even though he is not physically in Bangladesh, he is contributing to our country. That motivates me" (NFE0204B). Another young participant from Dhaka remarked, "Engaging with the diaspora community gave me a sense of recognition and support from my family" (NFE0209B). Additionally, these interactions contributed to the development of intercultural communication skills. The partner organizations highlighted the role of the program in fostering communication with diverse communities and broadening participants' horizons. One of them noted, "Young people can communicate with other communities and learn about different cultures. This program helped us overcome language barriers and broaden our horizons" (NFE01FGDB).

Challenges in Engagement

Despite the benefits, participants encountered several challenges in engaging with diaspora communities, including language barriers, guidance discrepancies, and limited interaction time. Language barriers were particularly problematic for participants from Chuadanga and Sylhet. One young participant explained, "The main challenge I faced was the language barrier since English is not my native language" (NFE0203B). Additionally, participants faced challenges related to limited interaction time with diaspora members. They expressed concerns about the brevity of interactions, noting, "The timeframe was short. We only had one day to discuss with them" (NFE0204B). Another young participant added, "During those two sessions, we only had about 5 to 10 minutes to interact with them" (NFE02011B). These challenges were echoed by the project team, one of whom explained:

"The feedback I received from my youths who had the online meeting with diasporas, I felt the success that we had envisioned for this activity was not achieved because our youths weren't able to understand half of the things from the meeting. There was an obvious language barrier. And they were in need of translation. So, I'm a bit doubtful about how fruitful the online meeting with the diasporas was for our youths" (NFE0106B).

This feedback suggests that whilst engagement with the diaspora community bought many benefits to the program, further work could have been done to better integrate the connections and ensure to ensure participants benefitted from enough time and meaningful collaboration with the diaspora community. In conclusion, engagement with the diaspora community through the LEAD Bangladesh program provided participants with valuable insights, support, and challenges. These interactions not only enhanced their social action projects but also fostered personal growth and a broader perspective on youth-led social and community development. To optimize future engagements, it is recommended to establish continuous communication platforms to facilitate effective youth-led change. Such efforts will ensure ongoing learning and collaboration between young people and diaspora communities, maximizing the impact of youth-led community development initiatives.

5.5 Understanding the Program Modules and Youth-led Social Change

This section highlights the participants' understanding of program modules including active citizenship, gender equity, and SDGs, and how this understanding has contributed to youth-led social and community change.

5.5.1 Understanding Active Citizenship and its Impacts

The findings reveal varying levels of awareness and involvement in active citizenship, highlighting both achievements and areas for improvement in program implementation. Young participants recognized the LEAD Bangladesh training sessions as crucial in shaping their understanding of active citizenship and influencing their community-oriented actions. One young participant stated, "If I'm actively involved in serving my community, I am an active citizen" (NFE0206B). The training fostered a profound sense of responsibility towards the community and broader society among participants. Initially, many young people did not perceive community engagement as a personal duty. However, involvement in the active citizenship module of LEAD Bangladesh catalyzed a significant shift in this perception. One young participant remarked, "If I don't act on my responsibilities, then the community or society will worsen. Each person in this community, society, or country, if they are aware of their responsibilities and do their part, then society will be in peace and harmony" (NFE0201B). This statement reflects an enhanced understanding that active citizenship involves personal accountability and commitment to societal well-being.

Similarly, another young participant emphasized the transformative nature of active citizenship, stating, "If I do any good work, it will benefit 3 or 4 people... From 10 people, it will spread in

the society and from the society to all-around country and to the global" (NFE0204B). This example of responsibly disposing of waste demonstrates the ripple effect young people saw of active citizenship, illustrating how individual actions can contribute to broader societal benefits. Another participant highlighted the importance of proactive engagement in community problem-solving: "As citizens, we have to be active and identify as well as solve societal problems" (NFE0208B). This perspective underscores how such a mindset fosters positive changes in individual behavior and community outcomes.

The program team also noted that the LEAD Bangladesh program aimed to cultivate informed and responsible citizens by educating youth about their rights, responsibilities, and the balance between them. A program participant from a partner organization commented, "Active citizens are informed citizens. In the training, we educated our youth about their roles, responsibilities, and duties" (NFE0104B).

Despite these positive outcomes, some participants discussed experiencing limited exposure to active citizenship concepts, suggesting room for curriculum enhancement. One participant observed, "I learned about active citizenship from other participants who had prior engagement with the program. Their discussions provided some insights. However, it was not thoroughly covered in our program curriculum" (NFE0210B). This underscores the potential of peer learning whilst also emphasizing the importance of structured educational content on active citizenship.

5.5.2 Understanding the Gender Equity and its Impacts

Participants' reflections on gender equity within the LEAD Bangladesh program revealed multifaceted insights into changes in perceptions, behaviors, and actions towards gender issues within their communities. Some young participants experienced significant shifts in their understanding of gender roles through their involvement in LEAD Bangladesh. Male participants, for example, reported receiving new gender role orientations. One participant reflected on the historical context of gender disparities in Bangladesh and noted the program's impact in changing misconceptions and promoting gender equity. He argued that gender equity principles, including the importance of safety for everyone regardless of gender, were emphasized, allowing both males and females to assume leadership roles. He noted:

"Before the training, I didn't know how to do this effectively. Regarding gender equity, there was a tradition at my university where class representatives were always male. After the training, I advocated for equal opportunities, and in the next semester, one of my female friends became a class representative. This was a real-life application of what I learned. I believe these principles can be applied in every sector." (NFE0214B)

This participant's advocacy for equal opportunities at his university, contributing to the election of a female class representative, exemplifies the real-world application of the program's teachings in fostering inclusive and equitable communities.

Facilitators similarly observed that the LEAD Bangladesh program significantly contributed to breaking down previous notions of gender roles. Role-playing activities vividly illustrated gender inequality, enabling participants to recognize and address these issues in their lives. After dedicated sessions on sex and gender, initial discomfort between male and female participants improved significantly, enhancing comfort and collaboration in promoting gender equality, which had an impact on the beliefs and behavior of some participants.

However, the research points to some disparities in gender inclusivity. For example, facilitators acknowledged challenges in achieving gender balance, noting that female participants often outnumbered males. This imbalance sometimes affected participation dynamics, particularly in sessions addressing sensitive topics. One facilitator commented, "Most of the participants were female. The male participants were very few in number... Whenever the ratio for any gender is higher, the rest of the people think that if we talk, our opinion won't be granted" (NFE0303B).

Whilst some young women described the role the program played in the 'reinforcement and contextualization of these principles [of gender equality and inclusivity]' (NFE0209B), others noted that gendered dynamics persisted in group activities, with their male counterparts 'often feel[ing] more privileged to take the lead' (NFE0212B).

Furthermore, whilst purporting to have learnt about gender as a social construct, a couple of male participants continued to express beliefs about the particular jobs that men and women are most suited for, noting, for example, that 'Although women lag behind in physically demanding jobs, they are more proficient in marketing tasks' and 'activities like handcrafts are often better suited to women's skills'. Despite teaching on issues of gender then, some participants still left with preconceptions about gendered roles in society.

These insights underscore the importance of participatory approaches in NFE in promoting gender inclusivity, whilst also highlighting that the pervasiveness of existing gender norms in society can have a significant impact on both what participants learn, and how they engage, in NFE initiatives.

5.5.3 Understanding SDGs and their Impacts

The LEAD Bangladesh program emphasizes Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 8, SDG 13, and SDG 16. However, not all participants received training on each of these SDGs; some focused on SDG 8, some on SDG 13, and some on SDG 16. This section explores how participants' understanding of these individual SDGs impacted their thinking and actions.

SDG 13: Climate Change

Sustainable Development Goal 13 (SDG 13) calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. The LEAD Bangladesh training program, focusing on SDG 13, aimed to educate and empower participants to understand the complexities of climate issues and engage in proactive solutions. Participants who received training on SDG 13 reported significant improvements in their awareness of climate change issues. Many highlighted how the sessions deepened their understanding of global warming, sea level rise, and environmental degradation. One young participant noted, "Yes, it changed the way I think about climate change. Right after the training, whenever I went to any gatherings or discussions, I tried to talk about climate change and make people aware of this. Before the training, I was not concerned about climate issues and did things that could harm the climate. After the training, I became aware of how our little steps can affect or change the climate" (NFE0202B). Furthermore, this young participant explained: "I did not have any idea about this. I didn't even know what SDG was. From the training, I

learned more and more about current issues. Even when I talked with my friends, they were very amazed and asked me, "How do you know all these things? We don't know anything" (NFE0202B). Another young participant highlighted the initial lack of awareness in her community when implementing social action projects: "Definitely climate is associated with our day-to-day life. If I mention my community people, before the program, I noticed that my community people were not aware. They don't know about climate change. At that time, I asked them, 'What is the climate?' They didn't know. They didn't know what climate change is. If they don't know, how can they solve it?" (NFE0205B). Both the training and the SAPs therefore played an important role in raising awareness about this pressing issue.

Beyond this increased awareness, the training also led to practical actions and behavioral changes through the SAPs One participant shared a personal anecdote about how the program influenced her behavior towards plastic use: "Yes, it gave me so much knowledge, and I became very aware of climate change from the conference. Right now, I do not use any plastic items and have stopped using plastic water bottles. If anyone throws waste here and there, I tell them not to. 'Why are you throwing it here?'" (NFE02019B). Another participant discussed the shift from theoretical knowledge to practical engagement: "I had theoretical knowledge of climate change. But when I tried to convey this theoretical knowledge to the community, they were not accepting it. However, after this training, I realized the importance of being interactive. In the training, there was a section on how to engage with community members who are unaware of the effects of climate change. I started to understand the necessity of being interactive, and my team also learned to engage with the community effectively" (NFE0206B).

These findings suggest that the LEAD Bangladesh program contributed to developing youths' understanding and awareness of climate change, prompting them to take climate action. Participants emphasized the importance of spreading knowledge about climate change and adapting their behaviors to contribute to climate action efforts.

SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) focuses on promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all. Participants in the LEAD Bangladesh program who received training related to SDG 8 demonstrated a heightened understanding of economic issues and developed practical strategies to address them. The training improved participants' awareness of the importance of economic growth and employment opportunities. One young participant noted,

> **"After this training, I became aware of the importance of creating decent jobs and ensuring fair work conditions. We discussed various strategies to enhance economic growth in our community, such as promoting entrepreneurship and skills development" (NFE0209B).**

Participants reported that the training helped them recognize the importance of supporting local businesses and fostering economic opportunities within their communities. For instance, one participant mentioned, "Before the program, I had little understanding of how economic growth could impact our community. Now, I see the value in supporting local enterprises and creating job opportunities. We started a small initiative to encourage entrepreneurship among young people in our area" (NFE0210B).

Despite these positive changes, there were challenges in implementing some strategies due to limited resources and support. One young participant expressed, "We had great ideas for promoting economic growth and decent work, but the lack of resources and support from local authorities made it difficult to put our plans into action. We need more support to make a real impact" (NFE0211B). This reflects the wider issue of entrepreneurship, which can leave young people without the resources they need to succeed and without fallback positions in case anything goes awry (see, for example, Hodgkinson 2022).

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

Sustainable Development Goal 16 (SDG 16) aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable institutions. Participants who received training on SDG 16 reported increased awareness of the importance of justice, peace, and institutional integrity. One participant stated,

> **"The training on SDG 16 was eye-opening. I learned about the significance of building strong institutions and ensuring justice and peace in our community. We started working on initiatives to promote transparency and accountability in local governance" (NFE0213B).**

Participants highlighted the program's role in fostering a sense of responsibility towards maintaining peace and justice. One participant remarked,

"Before the program, I was not very aware of how to address issues of injustice or corruption. The training helped me understand the importance of standing up for what is right and working towards building stronger institutions. I became more involved in community efforts to promote transparency and resolve conflicts peacefully" (NFE0214B).

However, some participants encountered challenges in translating their understanding into action due to resistance from certain community members and limited resources. One participant noted, "Implementing initiatives related to SDG 16 was challenging because not everyone in the community was supportive. We faced resistance when trying to promote transparency and address issues of injustice. It highlighted the need for more widespread awareness and support for these values" (NFE0215B).

In conclusion, LEAD Bangladesh has demonstrated substantial impact on young people's understanding of active citizenship, gender roles, and SDGs. Participants reported increased awareness and engagement in various areas, including climate action, economic growth, and peacebuilding. The program effectively shifted participants' perceptions and behaviors, fostering a sense of responsibility towards community and societal issues. Despite these positive outcomes, challenges such as limited resources, resistance to change, and gender imbalances highlighted areas for continued improvement. The findings underscore the importance of ongoing support, comprehensive educational content, and inclusive practices in fostering meaningful youth engagement and social impact.

5.6 Impact of the Program on Youth Empowerment

This section assesses the program's impact on youth empowerment, emphasizing changes in participants' self-perception, self-confidence, self-esteem, and various skills, including leadership and communication, are highlighted.

5.6.1 Developing Self-Confidence and Self-Esteem

Young participants reported significant shifts in their self-perception following their involvement in the program. Initially, many were uncertain about their ability to effect meaningful change within their communities. One young participant reflected,

> **"I never thought I could make a meaningful contribution to my community" (NFE0201B).**

Many young people reflected this sentiment, describing themselves as shy and introverted before taking part in the program. However, exposure to training sessions and project leadership roles significantly improved their leadership skills and fostered newfound confidence and a belief in their capacity to drive change. Participants described gaining "leadership, advocacy, and communication skills" (NFE0202B). and proclaimed their transformed understanding of themselves, stating, for example, "Now, I can see myself as a good youth leader" (NFE0207B) and "I felt like, I am a youth, I can do it" (NFE0204B).

The program team supported these observations, noting a visible increase in confidence and self-esteem among participants. They remarked, "They now have confidence and capability. This type of confidence actually boosts them further" (NFE0105B), underscoring the enhanced self-assurance. Recognition and positive feedback from the program reinforced participants' self-esteem and encouraged active

engagement in personal and social issues. One team member observed, "Before the training, they used to feel shy. They were not part of any youth-related projects. After the training, their interest is increasing; they are becoming part of the process" (NFE0103B), illustrating a significant shift towards active involvement.

The team argued that leadership training facilitated an understanding of personal identity and values, enhancing participants' ability to engage in effective dialogues and actions. For instance, one participant described how a previously shy young woman gained the confidence to interact with others through the program: "She was quite confident speaking to different people, which she was not able to do before" (NFE0102B). Engagement in public presentations and community initiatives post-training further demonstrated the participants' enhanced confidence and leadership capabilities. Facilitators and program team members similarly emphasized the program's focus on empowering participants to develop leadership qualities and create actionable community plans aligned with SDGs. They noted that the training helped participants clarify their visions and missions. One facilitator observed,

> **"After the training, they were able to find their vision and identify their strengths and weaknesses" (NFE0304B).**

This newfound clarity inspired many participants to establish organizations and take on leadership roles, demonstrating the lasting influence of the LEAD Bangladesh program. Similarly, one from a partner organization noted, "They [young people] developed leadership skills through this project and independently implemented social action projects" (NFE0104), reflecting autonomy and leadership growth.

5.6.2 Awareness of Civic Responsibilities and Social Commitments

Alongside this development of self-confidence and sense of leadership, participants also learnt about pressing social issues through the program. They therefore highlighted how the program broadened their perspectives and instilled a sense of responsibility toward societal issues. One young participant noted, for example, that, "participating in the program has fundamentally altered how I view social issues. It has broadened my perspective and deepened my commitment to addressing community challenges" (NFE02011B). Another young participant conveyed a renewed dedication to local impact, stating,

> **"I now see staying in Bangladesh as an opportunity to work directly for the betterment of society. My perspective has shifted towards making a tangible difference in my own community" (NFE0207B).**

Young participants gained a sense of responsibility for collectively – as young people – addressing these social issues, as participants noted, for example, "I became more aware of my responsibility… If we want, we can do group work and meetings to mitigate these problems" (NFE02019B) and 'Previously, my focus was primarily on personal goals, but now I understand the potential I have to contribute to my community. The program has shown me that my actions can make a real difference" (NFE0201B). These responses reflect a deepened understanding of both local and global issues and a proactive readiness to address them.

Facilitators also observed significant changes in how young people understood their place in society. One facilitator noted, "After the training, the participants became really emotional because throughout the training, they were able to understand their identity, the challenges of their community, and what their responsibility and social commitment are" (NFE0304B). Facilitators argued that, as well as a focus on developing leadership capabilities, a significant increase in participants' awareness of civic responsibilities and rights due to the training also played a role here. One facilitator noted, for example, that "'Before the training, the young people didn't know what kind of facilities they could access from the local government office… After the training, they knew. They understood their role as citizens, their rights, and their duties to their nation and community" (NFE0302B). This newfound awareness empowered participants to advocate for their rights and the rights of their communities, and engage more actively in contributing to social change.

5.6.3 Practical Application of Learning

Young participants consistently discussed integrating their training into their daily routines. Program team members observed that LEAD Bangladesh allowed young participants to broaden their horizons and develop communication skills through engagement with various stakeholders, including networking "with local people, local government, NGOs, and CEOs" (NFE0102B). Several young participants indicated that the LEAD Bangladesh program significantly developed their communication skills, which had gone on to impact their day-to-day life. As one participant noted, "My communication skills have increased, and I have to use my communication skills in my day-to-day life. Currently, I am working with different youth organizations…my communication skills are really helping me" (NFE0208B).

Other participants discussed specific skills they had gone onto use since the program. For instance, one young participant applied their understanding of sustainability in their work noting 'They often ask why they should change

their long-standing practices...we have responsibilities, and we should work towards achieving SDGs" (NFE0201B). Similarly, another young participant highlighted the utilization of report-writing skills in their current role: "The skill of writing is really useful in my day-to-day life because in my current organization, I can implement the skill of report writing" (NFE0208B). These examples illustrate how participants have translated the learning from LEAD Bangladesh into practical skills, benefiting their professional responsibilities and contributing to broader organizational goals.

Participants expressed overwhelmingly positive feelings regarding their involvement in the LEAD Bangladesh program. One young participant recounted their initial skepticism and subsequent positive experience, stating, "Initially, I wasn't very serious, but one thing was certain: whatever I do, I do it attentively. As I engaged in the training, I started to think more about my future. They introduced me to leadership, and I began to work from my position with dedication. It was a truly amazing feeling" (NFE0208B).

The feeling that I did something for the people of my community, connected with the community people, created a linkage, and met many people through the project. The whole journey was joyful and knowledgeable" (NFE02020B).

Overall, participants' reflections revealed a deeply positive and transformative experience, highlighting the program's value in fostering community engagement and personal development. These findings underscore the program's effectiveness in empowering youth to become active agents of change within their communities, fostering personal development in ability, confidence, self-esteem, civic engagement, leadership, communication skills, and positive attitudes.

5.7 Sustainability of Youth-Led Change

The sustainability of a program is a critical factor in determining its success. Participants from various cohorts discussed the sustainability of the LEAD Bangladesh program's impacts and offered guidelines for ensuring long-term sustainability. The participants presented mixed feedback on whether it was possible for young people to continue to affect change, based on their engagement in the program.

Young participants expressed a strong desire to see the effects of their SAP continue. Some young people highlighted the continued impact that their programs had on the communities in which they worked. They provided examples of SAPs initiated two years ago that continue to produce results. For instance one participant observed that a SAP designed to combat women's harassment on a University campus by raising awareness and preventing incidents. Another participant mentioned starting a waste management project, which, although less robust than before, continues to operate. In the focus group discussions, young participants highlighted an SAP designed to bridge gaps between local government and the community. They implemented several measures, including raising public awareness and enhancing local government accountability. As a result of their efforts, community members now directly communicate with the local government without intermediaries. However, participants noted that the impact of their SAPs has diminished due to a lack of monitoring and support from the program team. They suggested either continuing the current project or initiating a similar one to sustain the effects of the LEAD Bangladesh program.

Similarly, members of the program team expressed concerns about the sustainability of youth-led changes. They noted that despite significant individual transformations, maintaining these changes at the community level remains challenging. They argued that the program's relatively short duration and Bangladesh's socially conservative environment limited the potential for long-term cultural and social norm shifts. The team emphasized the need for ongoing engagement and support to ensure lasting impact and benefits for future generations. One remarked, "We have to be in it for the long term… because the barriers to inclusion are quite strong" (NFE0101B).

This perspective was echoed by a young participant who reflected:

"A lot of people here in [community] are conservative. From this point of view, when a woman gets harassed, she does not get much support. They are like, "Just leave this issue." Or some people think that since the girl is studying at the university level, maybe the girl has some problem that caused the incident. Or they think because the girl is open-minded, she raised her voice over a small matter. That was one of the issues. Though the CNG driver helped us, they were not very aware of whether the passenger in the back seat was going through harassment or not; they took the issue very lightly. Additionally, those who were victims did not want to raise their voices much. They thought it would create hassle and question their reputation. So these things were problematic for me as a leader" (NFE0219B).

Participants also expressed concerns over the potential for the changes experienced by young people, as discussed above, to be maintained beyond the duration of the program. Largely, this was understood to be due to a lack of continued and wider support that would enable young people to contribute to youth-led change. As a member of the program team explained:

"There are various obstacles they [young people] have to face when working for a cause and it's not like they can handle everything on their own. Coming from that, the spark I had seen in them, still see in them, they will do very well. They have the will to do well, but their spark and goodwill need our support. Without any support, they will do something good and their spark stops. There are some extraordinary ones who somehow make it work but without continued support, they lose their sustainability as well […] After closely observing them I noticed that the values definitely affected them. However, now that there's a gap [as the training has finished]. Because of this gap I feel that they have gone back to square one. There are hardly a few who are still carrying all the values this program gave them" (NFE0106B).

Participants from the program team emphasized the importance of establishing networks to ensure the program's lasting impact, and discussed ongoing work in this area. They stated, "We have networks across all countries and communities in different universities. This provides us a platform for future activities of this kind" (NFE01FGDB). The existence of robust networks facilitates ongoing involvement and supports the sustainability of initiatives

started during the program. They added, "With a national-level youth platform and a significant number of active youths engaging in various community activities, we didn't treat this as just a project but as an opportunity to foster a youth movement" (NFE01FGDB). This approach would enable the program activities to be embedded within a broader movement, extending the impact beyond the project's timeframe.

Some facilitators did see how the program continued to have a positive impact on young people and their communities. One facilitator noted, "The program is finished but learning will always remain in their memory and they will practice it" (NFE0304B). This belief underscores the idea that the knowledge imparted during the program will continue to influence participants' actions and decisions in the long run, even after the formal end of the program. Additionally, they highlighted the transformation from youth leaders to recognized community leaders, particularly women leaders, as evidence of a lasting impact that extends beyond individual growth to societal change. Facilitators provided examples of

ongoing projects and continued community involvement as further evidence of the program's sustainable impact. One shared a personal experience: "This project ended two years ago, but its work is ongoing… Teachers and students took the initiative to repair the affected dustbins or replace them on their own… Maybe current students are not actively running the social action project, but I believe our work remains sustainable" (NFE0303B). This response indicates that some of the initiatives started under the program have a lasting presence and continue to inspire ongoing maintenance and activities.

To summarize, opinions on the sustainability of the programs were mixed; with some participants highlighting that both the impact of the SAPs, and the impact on young people themselves can extend beyond the duration of the program. On the other hand, others were concerned about the lack of enabling environments and wider support mechanisms that would enable young people to continue to embed and build upon their, often new, understanding of themselves as social leaders and change makers.

5.8 Key Strengths and Successes of the Program

This research further explored the primary strengths and successes of the program as identified by different cohorts of participants. The analysis highlights the program's key strengths, including its focus on youth engagement, opportunities for peer learning and creativity, effectiveness in fostering community involvement, and the personal and professional development it promotes among participants.

5.8.1 Youth-Focused

The youth-focused approach of the program, that gives young people space to develop and run their own community based programs, contributed to a sense of collectivity amongst young people that fosters shared learning and collaboration. Moreover, the program provided a platform for youth to exchange ideas, learn from each other, and showcase their creativity. One facilitator noted:

> **"Youths are always creative. They show their skills and share information, not only during the training session but also in the evenings or outside. They learn a lot from each other" (NFE0301B).**

This peer learning environment was crucial for personal growth and helped participants develop critical thinking, teamwork, and planning skills.

5.8.2 Community Engagement

The program effectively connected youth with their communities, fostering a sense of responsibility and active citizenship. Young people successfully engaged local government and community members, creating tangible impacts. A facilitator shared a success story: "We engaged the local councilor in a courtyard meeting with the community... As a result, the local government office hung a citizen charter in front of their organization... led by the youth leaders. They acted as bridges to ensure that authorities work for the local people" (NFE0302B). This demonstrates the program's ability to empower youth to address community issues and facilitate dialogue between citizens and local authorities. An example shared by one of the project team was related to one of the SAPs done by the youth, related to sanitation problems in the community, where they initiated contact with the council to address the issue: "They arranged for a meeting with the ... union council chairman to talk and make him aware of the sanitation problem the community was facing. After talking with our students the chairman was so convinced that he gave 39 slabs to our students and all the materials needed for building sanitation latrines. It's a very remarkable achievement for us!" (NFE0106B). Furthermore, the recognition received following the SAPs done in the communities gave the young people confidence in their skills and achievements:

> **"One group collaborated with a medical hospital, and their work was featured in newspapers. We also promoted their achievements on our social media platforms. This recognition empowered them, honoured their efforts, and encouraged them to engage in various personal and social issues" (NFE0103&04B).**

5.8.3 Young People's Personal and Professional Development

The program significantly contributed to the personal and professional development of its young people, helping them find their identity and future direction. A facilitator observed: "The main strength of the program, I think, is that they were able to showcase their strengths and programs. They found their identity and

realized what they want to do in the future" (NFE0304B). This allowed the young people to build connections with others from different backgrounds and to understand other perspectives. Young people gained confidence and a sense of accomplishment as they articulated their achievements and understood their impact on the community. A LEAD Bangladesh participant was identified as having undergone a transformative increase in confidence, through the program. The participant was described as initially being shy and reluctant to engage in activities, but after participation in the project was described as being "a spokesperson and a motivational speaker" (NFE0105B) and as having encouraged young girls specifically to engage in extracurricular activities, such as volunteering, and to pursue further opportunities.

5.8.4 Facilitating Supportive Environments

LEAD Bangladesh provided a supportive environment where participants received mentorship and guidance, which is crucial for their development. The facilitators and teams from partner organizations play a vital role in this regard. The various capacity-building activities that the young people engaged in were particularly effective for training. They were able to travel within the country, gaining insights from other leaders, they engaged in regular meetings with the diaspora community and received insights from youth leaders' previous work (motivations, and challenges). As a result:

"this experience not only enriched their learning, but also boosted their self-esteem" (NFE0103&04B).

This support structure and mentorship helped sustain participant motivation and engagement over time.

5.9 Key Challenges of the Program

The program, involving multiple stakeholders, encountered various challenges during its implementation. This section presents the challenges reported by different stakeholders, with some challenges being common across all stakeholders while others were specific to individual cohorts of participants.

Emergency Induced Challenges

COVID-19 was a common challenge for all stakeholders, affecting the execution of the program. The pandemic posed logistical and engagement challenges for partner organizations and facilitators, while young participants faced difficulties staying connected. One facilitator noted, "Engaging young people became very challenging... We faced some challenges when we cascaded this training virtually, mainly due to network struggles and device issues among participants" (NFE0302B). Additionally, the reopening of schools and colleges post-lockdown made it difficult to maintain sustained engagement: "When the educational institutions reopened, it was difficult to keep them engaged in this process" (NFE0105B). Similar to COVID-19, floods also impacted the program's implementation, particularly in areas like Sylhet, where participants faced difficulties executing Social Action Projects (SAPs) during flooding.

Engaging and Retaining Young Participants

Attracting, engaging, and retaining young participants in the program was a common challenge reported by stakeholders. Facilitators struggled to manage and engage youths at the community level due to their independence and lack of direct control. The partner team also faced difficulties maintaining young people's engagement and motivation during and after the program. One team member from a partner organization noted, "After the program concludes, some participants disengage, and many youth leaders feel that their involvement has come to an end"

(NFE0106B). COVID was a contributing factor to decreased engagement. During the lockdown periods when educational institutions were closed, young people had more time to invest in their projects, however their capacity reduced post COVID, "When the educational institutions reopened, it was difficult to keep them engaged in this process. These were big challenges for us" (NFE01FGDB).

The program team highlighted challenges in attracting and retaining vulnerable and marginalized participants. In the more rural areas, one of the factors leading to increased dropout rates, was marriage. Women are more likely to get married once they reach the age 18, and for a variety of reasons, were more likely to drop out of the program.

Young participants noted that not all peers were equally serious about SAPs, leading to frequent absences and a lack of commitment. Limited opportunities, with only a small number of people being selected for trips abroad, also led to feelings of exclusion and demotivation among non-selected participants, impacting group cohesion and morale.

Connections with Policymakers and Local Government
Several stakeholders reported difficulties in connecting and maintaining effective communication with policymakers and local government. One partner team noted, "It was challenging to connect the young people with the government officials" (NFE0105). Resistance from government officials and bureaucratic hurdles hindered the establishment of fruitful collaborations between youth participants and local government bodies.

Community Skepticism
Several cohorts, particularly young participants and partner organizations, reported facing skepticism and resistance from community members. Youth participants encountered skeptical attitudes and resistance from community members, who were more receptive to older, more experienced individuals. Demonstrating immediate community impact was often difficult, leading to frustrations among participants and stakeholders. One program team member noted, "Sometimes the way the programs are designed, there isn't always an appetite to see the impact at the community level" (NFE0102B).

Limited Resources
Limited financial and human resources were recurring challenges, impacting the program's scale and effectiveness. Young participants and partner organizations reported that the budget of 5000 Taka was insufficient, limiting the scope and impact of their social action projects. Likewise, the limited number of staff available to manage and support a large number of participants and projects was a significant challenge, affecting the quality of follow-up and support provided.

Chapter Six: Recommendations

6.1 Suggestions from the Participants

To overcome challenges and enhance the effectiveness of the program, participants from various cohorts offered the following suggestions:

Reconsidering the Project Design:
Facilitators and young participants highlighted the importance of a more integrated approach to project design. They recommended involving participants in the design phase to ensure the program is more need-based and inclusive. Young participants also specifically suggested increasing the frequency of the training programs, emphasizing the broad benefits to small communities and society at large. One young participant stated, "I think programs like the LEAD Bangladesh program should run more frequently. This way, people from small communities like ours will benefit, as well as society" (NFE0203B). Members of the program team further recommended revising the structure and scheduling of training sessions to improve participant engagement, suggesting a split schedule of "2-2-1 days training" to make the sessions more manageable and effective (NFE0105B).

Expanding Symposiums and Local Initiatives:
Members of project team proposed increasing the number of symposiums to provide more opportunities for participants to showcase their work and engage with a broader audience. One member remarked, "Last time only two symposiums were conducted in two different parts of Bangladesh. I think they can increase the number of places if the budget allows"

(NFE0105B). They also suggested incorporating innovative activities, such as a climate change hackathon, to foster creativity and community engagement.

Extending Program Duration for Sustainability: Many participants advocated for extending the program's duration to ensure a sustainable impact and continuous community engagement. One facilitator noted, "The program should run for a long time... to establish a sustainable platform, we need a long-term program" (NFE0304B). Another suggested,

"Every project lasts for one or two years. If you can engage participants for 3 to 4 years, they can ensure long-term impact because sustained support is crucial" (NFE0302B).

The program team also recommended a minimum duration of five years to allow for better reflection and results (NFE0105B).

Further Education Initiatives: Participants emphasized the need to initiate similar programs for younger age groups to instill values and skills early. One facilitator suggested, "The British Council should also consider starting this kind of program for children, as children are future senior citizens. Learning and carrying

values from an early stage of life is crucial" (NFE0301B). Young participants echoed this sentiment, highlighting the demand for continuous engagement in non-formal education.

Ongoing Mentoring, Coaching, and Follow-Up: The need for continuous mentoring, coaching, and follow-up support was a recurring theme. One facilitator mentioned, "They [young people] needed mentoring support. They needed coaching support... They understood something, but when they went back to the community, they needed more suggestions and advice from experts" (NFE0301B). Participants also emphasized the importance of follow-up to sustain the impact, with one noting, "If there were more follow-up or monitoring systems from the organization for the entire period, it would be helpful for everyone" (NFE0202B).

Enhanced Financial and Logistical Support: Participants frequently mentioned the need for increased financial and logistical support to facilitate their projects. One young participant expressed, "We are not getting proper funding, and that is the biggest problem. We have ideas, but if we get the funds, if we get the programs, if we get the training, we will be able to do many things and we will be able to change the community" (NFE0205B). Another suggested that increased budgets would enable more impactful social action projects (NFE02013B).

Increased Stakeholder Engagement: Engaging a broader range of stakeholders, including government and non-governmental organizations, was deemed crucial for the program's success. Participants stressed the need for formal recognition and collaboration, with one noting, "If there was any direct

engagement with the stakeholders through the British Council or any other organization, and if they recognized this program from the government, then it would be beneficial" (NFE0209B). Another suggested,

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"If I contact the local government alone they will show no interest. But if I go to them and say that I have come from the British Council or an organization [...], they will be more interested to hear from me" (NFE02017B).

Provision of Expert Guidance: Participants underscored the value of specialized training and guidance from experts relevant to their projects. One young participant suggested, "When we are working on a specific social action project, they should provide us with special training from experts. These experts can give us advice and answer our questions" (NFE0208B). Another recommended organizing sessions with experts for youth involved in entrepreneurship (NFE02021B).

Program Management: The team from the partner organization emphasized the need for more staffing, noting, "Only two staff were there. So if they could allocate more staff then it would be better" (NFE0105B). Adequate staffing is crucial for the successful implementation of the project.

By considering these comprehensive suggestions, the program can enhance its design, implementation, and long-term sustainability, ultimately leading to more significant and lasting impacts on the communities it serves.

6.2 Recommendations

The research team has provided several recommendations to ensure the sustainability of the LEAD Bangladesh program's impact and to guide future non-formal education initiatives for youth-led change.

Needs-Based Program Design: In designing the new program, it is essential to identify the current and future needs of both youth and society – and to actively and consistently engage young people in this process. This should be based on comprehensive research, gathering data and insights from a range of stakeholders including youths, experts, facilitators, local governments, social workers, and partner organizations. The program design should be flexible and adjustable to accommodate changing local contexts and should build in opportunities for young people to directly contribute to the program's design. Training sessions should be conducted face-to-face in accessible locations, with multiple venues if necessary.

Increased Monitoring: Increased monitoring should be built into programs, to ensure they are consistently meeting the needs of young people, that young people want to be actively engaged, and to avoid wider issues such as gender-based norms being reinforced through programming.

Inclusive Recruitment and Gender Balance: The program should recruit youths from various educational backgrounds, not only University students and graduates. Additionally, the program should create opportunities for marginalized groups such as the third gender and ethnic minorities, promoting inclusivity and peace among the youth. As above, active monitoring is required to ensure all groups feel included and can participate equally in the program.

Alumni Networks: To enhance the sustainability of program outcomes, the British Council should establish a forum for LEAD Bangladesh Graduates and alumni, facilitating connection through social media, WhatsApp or other networks based on consultation with young people. Young people can use such a network to support each other in continuing youth-led change and promoting collectivity by sharing knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, the program teams should organize an annual national alumni gathering, inviting all alumni and associated stakeholders. This event would recognize alumni and stakeholders, provide opportunities for connection and networking, and stimulate young people's motivation for future endeavors.

Support from Local Governments: Before starting the Social Action Projects (SAPs) in the community, a letter should be sent to local policymakers and government officials, requesting necessary support for the youths implementing their SAPs. This letter could come from the British Council or partner organizations, with a similar letter issued from the Ministry of Local Government. Developing a partnership with the Ministry of Local Government would prepare local governments to avoid cultural shocks and motivate youths by reducing challenges in implementing SAPs. Additionally, partner organizations should enhance monitoring, mentoring, and follow-up.

Enhanced Communication with the Diaspora Community: The program's interaction with the diaspora community is a significant feature. Therefore, the time and frequency of these communications should be extended. To ensure a fair selection process for youths meeting and interacting with the diaspora community, recommendations from facilitators and partner organizations should be considered. The meetings with diaspora

communities should be led by young people, and therefore driven by their needs. This would ensure these interactions make tangible change to young people and the work they do in communities.

Funding Changes: To enable sustainable youth-led change, young people need to be driving the programs that are created for them, and need continued follow up and support. Funding organizations and donors need to recognize the importance of this, and create space in grants that allow for youth-led design and continued follow-up. Such a change could drastically enhance the empowerment of young people.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

This qualitative study focused on the LEAD Bangladesh Program of the British Council to understand how non-formal education (NFE) contributes to youth-led change and empowers young people as social actors. The findings illustrate the role that LEAD Bangladesh plays in enabling young people to understand themselves as social actors who can make positive changes to their communities.

The program's design – whilst not directly including young people - was need-based, supported by comprehensive research, and included a variety of module-based training sessions covering topics such as active citizenship, gender equity, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The activities were both participatory and engaging, offering a blend of online and offline learning modalities tailored to situational needs.

A significant component of the program was the implementation of Social Action Projects (SAPs), which enabled young participants to apply their learning practically. Through these projects, they connected with the community, policymakers, local government, and the diaspora community, facilitating real-world applications of the program's modules. The program demonstrated multiple positive impacts for young people, who experienced an increase in self-esteem, and understood themselves as leaders who can, and should, work to address key social issues. Through the programs young people ran, tangible differences were also made to the communities in which they worked.

While the study identified several challenges, it also provided recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of youth-led non-formal education programs. Although the qualitative nature of the study limits the generalizability of its findings, the insights gained offer valuable implications for the design of future non-formal education programs aimed at enabling youth-led social change.

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