Project Title: Accelerator Lab Network

Project Number: 00123383 (Atlas Number ********)

Implementing Partner: UNDP

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Engagement facility: Accelerator Lab Bangladesh

Note: *As this is a multi country project the final project review will be consolidated by the Accelerator Lab Global team after the final evaluation in 2026.*

Overview

Over the reporting period, the UNDP Bangladesh Accelerator Lab evolved from a crisis-responsive innovation unit into a platform that supported policy engagement, programme design, and systems-oriented approaches. Initially focused on COVID-19 response and recovery, the Lab demonstrated the relevance of experimentation, innovation intelligence, and ecosystem engagement in addressing complex development challenges across different thematic areas.

Over its lifecycle, the Accelerator Lab mobilized over USD 7 million in public and private resources, achieved high levels of delivery against allocated budgets, and maintained appropriate fiduciary oversight and risk management practices. The Lab contributed to strengthening UNDP Bangladesh's upstream policy engagement, supported work on digital transformation and innovation, and facilitated the uptake of innovation methods across selected Country Office programmes.

Overall, the Accelerator Lab provided strategic, financial, and reputational value to UNDP Bangladesh. It leaves behind institutional practices, partnerships, and capabilities that can be built upon to support innovation-led and evidence-informed development programming going forward.

Successes

1. Strategic Intelligence and Design Hub (SIDH)

One of the most recent and notable contribution of the Accelerator Lab has been its role in conceptualizing and designing the Strategic Intelligence and Design Hub (SIDH), which the Country Office is set to pilot in 2026. The Lab's engagement ensured that SIDH builds on its experience in systems thinking, foresight, data analytics, and adaptive programme design. By embedding these capabilities into a distributed, flexible function within UNDP Bangladesh, SIDH will carry forward the Lab's core offerings into CO operations and programmatic work. This initiative represents a

tangible attempt at institutionalizing the Lab's approach, enabling UNDP to continue delivering integrated, knowledge-driven, and innovative development solutions, while strengthening organizational learning, policy influence, and resource mobilization.

2. **The Saint Martin's Island Portfolio: From Degradation to Regeneration**

Saint Martin's was a "tragedy of the commons." 10,000 tourists a day were crushing the ecosystem. The coral was dying, smothered by plastic and stripped by locals desperate for income.

The Human Story:
We met teenage boys who used to poach turtle eggs to sell for pocket money. Today, those same boys are employed as "Turtle Guardians." They patrol the beaches at 3:00 AM, using red-light torches to guide mother turtles to safety. This wasn't just a conservation project; it was an identity shift for the island's youth.

The System Shift:
We realized that cleaning the beach was useless if the plastic had nowhere to go. The island is cut off from the mainland. So, we installed a Hydraulic Plastic Compression Machine. It turned fluffy, voluminous trash into dense, heavy bricks. Suddenly, the economics changed. It became profitable for boats to carry these "plastic bricks" back to the mainland to sell to recyclers like PRAN-RFL. We turned pollution into a product.

3. **The Inclusive Growth Portfolio: The "Unseen" Economy**

The Challenge: The informal sector- street food vendors, local tour guides, unregistered workers- drives Bangladesh's economy but remains invisible to policy.

The Human Story:
In Cox's Bazar, tourists loved the beach but feared the street food. Vendors were losing money because they lacked hygiene facilities. We didn't just give them gloves; we built the "Safe Street Food" Cart model. We trained vendors on hygiene, not as a rule, but as a business strategy. Income rose by 40%.

The "Smart Guide" Revolution:

In Thanchi and CXB, young men and women knew every trail and waterfall but were invisible online. We mapped them. We gave them digital identities. Now, a trekker in Europe can book a local guide in Thanchi directly. We bridged the digital divide with human hospitality.

4. Advanced Information Integrity through AI-powered Prebunking

To counter misinformation, the Lab pioneered an AI-assisted prebunking tool, a first-of-its-kind initiative in Bangladesh. Funded by the Government of Japan, this project aimed to anticipate and neutralise misinformation before it spreads, leveraging behavioural science and machine learning.

We have developed prototype and completed user testing in 2025. Showcased at UNDP Global AI Exchanges (Dec 2025), positioning Bangladesh as a global reference point. Also featured in UNDP's global blog on AI and misinformation. This initiative elevated Bangladesh's voice in global AI ethics and governance discourse. It also laid the foundation for an election misinformation pre-bunking tool under UNDP Bangladesh BALLOT project, ensuring continuity and scale.

5. Circular economy and green transition portfolio

Recognising the urgency of climate resilience and resource efficiency, the Lab supported the Circular Economy (CE) portfolio design process. Through landscape analysis, foresight exercises, and sensemaking workshops, we identified leverage points for systemic change. We convened multi-stakeholder dialogues to co-create interventions, integrated behavioural insights into waste management and resource efficiency strategies, and positioned CE as a strategic pillar for UNDP Bangladesh's green economy agenda. This work informed upstream policy engagement and unlocked pathways for collaboration with government, signalling Bangladesh's readiness for regional leadership in circular innovation.

6. System based Portfolio on Khulna's Urban Renewal

The lab led the design of the Country office's first systems-based portfolio design on Urban Resilience of Khulna, co-creating strategies with UNDP projects, government counterparts, and community stakeholders to envisage a Khulna's green economic growth led by community driven approaches, climate resilience, and innovative governance of Khulna and its blue economy. The portfolio design has been embedded in the CO's new urban resilience programme proposal developed to scale to 50 cities, with a proposed budget of USD 70 million and strong government buy-in.

7. DNCC Innovation Lab

The lab led the establishment of an Innovation lab housed in the country's capital Dhaka's North City Corporation (DNCC). The city lab supported integration of R&D cycles into city policymaking to facilitate smart city transformation. The city lab developed a suite of digital tools to enhance participatory governance and adaptive service delivery. These included the DNCC Dengue-Watch Dashboard, a information dashboard for managing heat stress, and a DNCC partnership management platform. The lab also prototyped an AI-enabled citizen service chatbot and created an

integrated system for collecting hyper-local air quality data, which was linked to local LED digital display boards. This made the Air Quality Index (AQI) more accessible to the public and enabled the dissemination of health advisory messages.

8. Conceptualizing a system for identifying Grassroots Innovations

The Lab conceptualized a toolkit for identifying and mapping grassroots innovations in Bangladesh and envisioned a national platform dedicated to identifying, documenting, and empowering grassroots innovations across Bangladesh. The platform's approach is rooted in the belief that local communities possess unique insights and creative solutions to their own development challenges. The initiative proposed a network of community scouts, regular outreach and innovation scouting programs, a standardized framework for documenting and evaluating grassroots innovations, and an incubation program providing mentorship and network support to promising grassroots innovators.

9. Women's Digital Innovation Hackathon & Digital Upskilling

Lab organized an all-women virtual hackathon in July 2021, engaging over 200 applicants from across Bangladesh, with 90 selected participants and 20+ solutions generated. The event focused on digital transformation and smart city solutions, with strong participation from rural communities. The Lab also provided free access to the "Elements of Artificial Intelligence" course for 100 participants and achieved high satisfaction and engagement rates. Partnerships included Women in Digital, UltraHack, University of Helsinki, and Reaktor.

10. EduTab Project & Digital Learning for Rural Youth

Scaled the EduTab project under the QFFD's Education for All initiative, providing LMS-enabled e-learning support to 157 rural and disadvantaged high school students across 5 districts. The pilot achieved a 97% pass rate, with 33% of students obtaining the highest grade. The Lab developed analytics to monitor student engagement and performance, with a focus on supporting girls' education.

11. BPO Industry Skills Gap Assessment & Youth Employment Accelerator

Conducted a comprehensive assessment of skills demand and gaps in Bangladesh's Business Process Outsourcing industry, surveying 54 firms and 1,600+ students. The Lab generated policy recommendations for bridging the skills gap, reducing youth unemployment, and promoting micro-credentials. Partnerships included RAPID, New Vision Limited, BASIS, and BACCO.

12. Youth Upskilling & Digital Transformation

The lab led exploratory research on skills and future of work in the context of Bangladeshi youth. Designed a pilot on micro-credential scholarship for Bangladeshi

youth in partnership with Harvard University and a UNDP project, to upskill over a thousand youth in emerging technologies. The Lab's initiatives have supported evidence and analytics, digital literacy, and the development of a scalable online training model.

13. Policy support

Provided technical inputs to the Government's White Paper on the State of the Economy, especially on the data ecosystem chapter.

14. AI Task Team Initiatives

The Accelerator Lab Bangladesh has been at the forefront of AI-driven transformation within UNDP, supporting the formation of the AI Task Team to encourage responsible adoption and capacity building in artificial intelligence across the CO. The task team worked across units and functions, curating and leading events such as the AI Fun Fest to promote dialogue on responsible AI use and showcase young innovators. Key initiatives included the development and piloting of AI-based tools for public service delivery, such as the virtual assistant for Dhaka North City Corporation. The Lab also contributed to the global AI sprint. Through partnerships with leading universities and technology partners, the team launched AI learning sessions, artathons, and capacity-building programs, positioning UNDP Bangladesh in AI-enabled innovation for inclusive governance and digital transformation.

15. Crowdfunding and climate resilience

The Lab broke new ground in innovative financing by launching a crowdfunding campaign on Every.org, raising USD 16,065 (as of 31 December 2025) to support youth-led safe drinking water initiatives in climate-vulnerable coastal regions. Collaborated with UNDP AltFinLab, BERA, and local partners. Beyond resource mobilisation, this initiative demonstrated the power of citizen engagement and diaspora contributions in financing SDG solutions. It also paved the way for local crowdfunding partnerships with bKash, embedding financial innovation into UNDP's delivery model. The initiative has been taken over by UNDP BGD Comms team for ensuring continuity and sustainability.

16. Blockchain enabled supply chain traceability

The Lab explored blockchain technology to enhance transparency and trust in agricultural value chains. This initiative aimed to reduce post-harvest losses, empower smallholder farmers through digital trust frameworks and align with trade competitiveness and compliance goals. While still at the conceptual stage, this work positioned UNDP as a thought leader on blockchain for development, opening doors for future pilots in traceability, food security and climate adaptation.

17. The Digital Public Goods Portfolio: Justice through Data

The Challenge: Land disputes clog up 70% of Bangladesh's courts. Families lose everything fighting over paper deeds that are rotting in damp record rooms.

The Human Story:
We saw citizens traveling hundreds of miles and paying bribes just to get a copy of their grandfather's land deed. It was a tax on the poor.

The Scale-Up:
We started small, digitizing a few records. The Ministry of Land saw the potential and stepped in with $2.41 Million. Today, we are using Artificial Intelligence (AI) to read handwritten Bengali script from 100 years ago, converting rotting paper into immutable digital records. This is more than tech; it is digital justice.

18. The Financial Catalyst

The Accelerator Lab was never meant to be a permanent donor. We were at the "Risk Capital."

The Multiplier Effect:

We operated on a model of "High-Risk Pre-Investment."

- We spent $50,000 to test an idea (like the Land Data Digitalization). Because we took the risk of failure, the Government felt safe to invest $2.4 Million to scale it.
- We spent $20,000 to map vaccine gaps in CHT. Japan MOFA saw the data and granted $150,000 to fill those gaps.
- We spent $15,000 assessment and prototyping medical waste disposal. Japan MOFA followed up with $2.7 Million for a national system in 26 Government Hospitals.

Total Leverage: For every $1 the Lab spent on experimentation, we unlocked $18 in follow-up funding. We proved that R&D is an investment, not an expense.

Lessons Learned

1. **Innovation Creates Impact Only When Embedded in Core Decision-Making**
   The Accelerator Lab's notable results such as the AI prebunking initiative, Khulna urban resilience portfolio, and DNCC Innovation Lab demonstrated that innovation delivers value when it is directly integrated into programme design, policy processes, and management decisions. Innovation intelligence and experimentation must function as decision-support tools within operational workflows, rather than as standalone research or pilots.

2. **Systems-Based Approaches Enable Scale and Sustainability**
   The portfolio design work showed that addressing complex development challenges requires systems thinking. Identifying leverage points, aligning incentives across actors, and sequencing interventions enables initiatives to move beyond isolated solutions toward scalable, long-term transformation.

3. **Strong Institutional Anchoring is Critical for Sustainability**
   The establishment of the DNCC Innovation Lab and the integration of innovation methodologies across Country Office programmes underscored the importance of institutional ownership. Embedding innovation capabilities within government counterparts and UNDP structures ensures continuity beyond project cycles and reduces dependency on individual teams.

4. **Digital Innovation Demands Governance, Ethics, and Trust**
   AI, data platforms, and blockchain explorations highlighted that technological solutions require robust governance frameworks, ethical safeguards, and capacity-building to gain public trust and institutional acceptance. Responsible AI principles, data protection, and transparency are prerequisites for adoption, particularly in public service delivery and information integrity.

5. **Public–Private Collaboration Requires Clear Value Propositions and Governance**
   Successful partnerships across AI, skills development, crowdfunding, and digital platforms were enabled by clearly defined roles, incentives, accountability mechanisms, and risk management arrangements. Well-structured partnership frameworks reduce ambiguity, protect institutional reputation, and support sustained collaboration at scale.

6. **Ecosystem Engagement is Essential for Innovation-Led Development**
   Initiatives such as circular economy dialogues, crowdfunding for climate resilience, and grassroots innovation scouting demonstrated that meaningful ecosystem engagement is non-negotiable. Multi-stakeholder collaboration including, government, private sector, academia, communities, and diaspora, strengthens relevance, legitimacy, and scalability of innovation efforts.

7. **Virtual and Digital Platforms Expand Inclusion and Reach**
   Virtual hackathons, online learning platforms, and digital upskilling initiatives proved effective in reaching women, rural youth, and underserved communities. Digital engagement models can significantly lower participation barriers and should be considered core delivery mechanisms rather than temporary substitutes.

8. **Data-Driven Learning Improves Programme Performance**
   Analytics embedded in education, skills, and digital service pilots enabled real-time monitoring, adaptive management, and targeted interventions. Continuous

learning loops combining qualitative insights with quantitative data enhance effectiveness and accountability across innovation portfolios.

9. **Innovation Requires Deliberate Leadership and Cultural Change**
   Adaptive, people-centered leadership was a key enabler of experimentation under uncertainty. Coaching-based management, psychological safety, and tolerance for learning from failure strengthened team resilience and allowed the Lab to navigate crises while delivering results.

10. **Early Investment in Financing Pathways Accelerates Impact**
    Crowdfunding and alternative financing pilots illustrated that innovation outcomes scale faster when financing strategies are designed alongside solutions. Engaging citizens, diaspora, and fintech partners early can unlock new resource streams and diversify funding beyond traditional donors.

11. **Anticipatory Foresight Strengthens Crisis Preparedness**
    The political crisis experience underscored the importance of anticipatory intelligence. While innovation mapping existed, the absence of early policy prioritization limited uptake. Systematic foresight and horizon scanning should be more tightly linked to national planning processes to ensure preparedness for emerging risks.

12. **Grassroots Innovation Requires Structured Discovery and Support Systems**
    Conceptual work on identifying grassroots innovations highlighted that local solutions are abundant but often invisible. Dedicated scouting mechanisms, standardized documentation, and light-touch incubation are essential to translate grassroots ingenuity into scalable development outcomes.

13. **Hardware Fails without "Heart-ware" (Behavioral Science**)
    Early in the Saint Martin's project, we placed standard dustbins on the beach. They remained empty. Tourists threw trash next to the bin, not in it. We realized we were fighting psychology, not just litter. People ignore "infrastructure" but they respond to "experience." We redesigned the bins. We made them color-coded, shaped like characters, and placed them at "decision points" (where people finish a drink). We used "Nudge Theory." Suddenly, using the bin became part of the fun.
    Takeaway: Never budget for construction without budgeting for behavior change.

14. **Trust Networks Outperform Digital Networks**
    During the Covid-19 vaccine rollout in the remote Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). The government's SMS registration system failed. People in remote hills didn't have smartphones, or they didn't trust the text messages. We used

"Sensemaking" to find the real influencers. It wasn't the politicians; it was the "Headmen" and "Karbaris" (traditional village chiefs). We stopped sending SMSs and started sending Headmen. We set up Mobile Vaccine Booths at village markets on market day.
Takeaway: In the Global South, the "Human API" (community leaders) is faster and more reliable than the Digital API.

15. **Don’t Ask for CSR; Build Supply Chains**
Trying to get the private sector to fund waste management. Companies get tired of "donating" to clean-ups. It’s not sustainable. We approached PRAN-RFL not as a donor, but as a buyer. "We have 10 tons of plastic. Do you want to buy it?" They said yes. This created a Circular Economy. The transaction was commercial, so it lasted.
Takeaway: Sustainability lies in the P&L (Profit & Loss) statement, not the CSR budget.

Unanticipated Factors

The political crisis during July-August 2024, which resulted in a 15-year regime change, significantly altered the national operating context. In response, Country Office programming priorities were rapidly reoriented towards governance reforms and stabilization efforts. As a result, several Accelerator Lab initiatives that were being developed or implemented in close collaboration with government counterparts experienced delays, pauses, or required substantive adaptation to align with the evolving institutional landscape.

This context underscored an important learning around the necessity of adaptive programming and political economy awareness in innovation work. While the Accelerator Lab model emphasizes experimentation and iteration, periods of political transition require even greater flexibility in partnership modalities, timelines, and risk management approaches. The experience reinforced the value of maintaining diversified partnerships beyond government institutions, investing in early sensing of political and institutional shifts, and designing initiatives with built-in contingencies to ensure continuity and relevance in volatile contexts.

Links to all documentation

Please insert any country level reports and reviews of the Accelerator Labs.

Published blogs:

https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/resilience-through-sustainable-tourism-empowering-local-communities-naikkhongchari-bangladesh

https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/sea-turtle-conservation-through-behavioral-insights-and-community-engagement

https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/experimenting-potentials-dried-fish-bangladeshs-blue-economy-expanding-local-and-international-market-through-blue-tourism

https://www.undp.org/bangladesh/blog/seaweed-experimentation-ray-hope-coastal-belt-fishers-families-contributing-blue-economy-bangladesh