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OVERVIEW

The Inclusive Digital Model (IDMODEL) project aims to research into a new business model that seeks to enable marginalised people in developing countries to generate income and empower themselves by sharing their skills and experiences using a digital platform.

The IDMODEL project is awarded and funded by the Economic and Social Research Council's Global Challenges Research Fund (ESRC-GCRF), and led by the Technology and Management Centre for Development (TMCD) at the Oxford Department of International Development (ODID) – University of Oxford and the Department of Strategy and International Business at the University of Birmingham.

Bangladesh and Haate Haat App partner:

- SBK Foundation

China partner:

- University of International Business and Economics

Supporting organisations

- Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bangladesh
- Kuaishou Technology Co., Ltd (China)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors.

The role of digital technology in improving the lives of marginalised communities during the Covid-19 pandemic

POLICY BRIEF

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The 'Digital technology-based business model for inclusive development' (IDMODEL) project started in 2018. As part of this, a content-based digital platform APP named Haate Haat (Hand2Hand) was developed to help marginalised communities and grassroots entrepreneurs in Bangladesh communicate with each other and establish important links, collaborations, and networks.

Since 2019, we have conducted the APP promotion and usage training program, and compiled two sets of survey data to assess its impact. As part of this, we mobilised Tech Hubs in each of the 64 districts of Bangladesh. The hub coordinators worked on improving digital literacy awareness and promoted the Haate Haat features and benefits. They also delivered a district-wide app download campaign. Marginalised women were particularly encouraged to trial the Haate Haat APP via the Tech Hubs.

RCT design, digital-technology training program, and Haate Haat

This fieldwork was a Randomised Control Trial (RCT), involving 1,104 randomly selected households (4,217 individuals) in Bangladesh. We randomly split them into two groups and ensured that there was no significant difference in social-economic status between the two groups. One (treated) group received the IDMODEL digital-technology training program and was given access to the Haate Haat APP. The other group did not. The first survey was undertaken in late 2019, prior to the training being delivered and before the Covid19 pandemic. The training programme was delivered remotely during 2020, and the second survey was undertaken in May 2021.

The Covid19 pandemic significantly affected the global economic situation, including Bangladesh. As a result, the households surveyed universally reported a decrease in their economic circumstances in the second survey when compared with the first. However, our evidence shows that the "treated group" that had been given access to the Haate Haat APP and received the training programme reported better conditions on multiple dimensions.

According to the end-line survey data, household income decreased by less than 5.6% in "treated" households compared to the other group. There was also

3% less unemployment. The decrease in personal income of “treated” individuals was 28.9% less than that reported by individuals in the other group. The treated group was also 20.2 % more likely to utilise mobile APPS to access market information, and were 13.9% more up to date with government information and instructions about Covid19.

Evidence from the RCT suggests that the digital-technology training programme and the Haate Haat APP has played a significant role in improving the lives of marginalised communities. We consider that this programme and associated APP has been beneficial for marginalised communities during the pandemic. Individuals reported that the APP enabled them to generate some income for their family even during the strict lockdown periods. In addition to the statistics provided above, Haate Haat users informed us that the digital-technology training programme increased their confidence in technology, and made them more willing to embrace digital solutions. The acceleration of digital transformation due to the Covid19 pandemic encouraged Haate Haat users to actively explore more digital means of generating income.

We are particularly encouraged to see that the Haate Haat APP has provided women with new skills and opportunities for networking - the foundation for building any effective infrastructure/platform. The lessons learnt from this project confirm that policymakers need to create the infrastructure required for these programmes to be fully accessible to be utilised to add value for marginalised communities.

Policy Recommendations

Digital technology is key to solving “information poverty”. Access to it can improve people’s resilience and their ability to cope with economic hardship, especially in times of crisis such as the Covid19 pandemic. The IDMODEL Haate Haat App and digital-technology training program have shown evidence of how digital technology can be successfully used to benefit marginalised communities. We therefore recommend that policy makers:

- Develop policies that facilitate access to digital technology by improving internet infrastructure availability, lowering internet access charges, and introducing schemes that help reduce the cost of digital devices. Cost is a critical factor that currently limits access to information by marginalised communities.
- Consider establishing a “content-based digital platform usage training” scheme to raise awareness of the benefits of digital technology and help people living in remote communities identify job opportunities, develop their IT skills, identify and create new income sources, and receive information.
- Design bespoke training programs, and make the training of women and young people a priority, especially for communities in remote regions. The Covid19 pandemic has shown that a lot more can be achieved through digital technology than what was envisioned before the pandemic.

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