

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to the Laidlaw Scholars Foundation, Mr. Asheesh Advani (CEO), Mr. Adnan Bokhari (CFO) and Ms. Jennifer Motamedi (HR Generalist) from JA Worldwide, and the Tufts University Laidlaw Scholars Program for their invaluable support of this research and the opportunity to undertake such a transformative experience abroad. Their commitment to fostering leadership and global understanding made this endeavor possible.

The opportunity to be part of a JA Worldwide and JA Asia Pacific delegation to Dhaka, Bangladesh, was not merely a professional assignment but a profound journey into a vibrant nation brimming with potential and a compelling vision for its future. Our mission was ambitious yet clear: to build partnerships and attract supporters for launching Junior Achievement (JA) in Bangladesh, with the ultimate goal of empowering its youth through entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and work readiness. This experience offered invaluable insights into the intricacies of global development, the power of collaborative vision, and the practical application of cultural competencies in an international context.

The overarching theme of our visit was powerfully articulated by Nobel Laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus's vision for a "world of three zeroes—zero poverty, zero unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions". This call to action resonated deeply with everyone we encountered, from seasoned entrepreneurs and dedicated educators to astute corporate executives. There was a palpable, shared desire to equip young people with the essential tools to drive growth and sustainable innovation, immediately underscoring that JA's proven programs were not just a good fit, but an indispensable one, for this bold national aspiration. This guiding philosophy provided a unifying framework for all our engagements and became a central takeaway, emphasizing the importance of aligning global initiatives with locally resonant aspirations.

Key Takeaways from the Bangladesh Expedition

Our visit provided a multi-faceted learning experience, offering critical insights into the Bangladeshi landscape and the practicalities of launching a non-governmental organization (NGO) in a new country.

1. The Pervasive Skills-Gap and Youth Unemployment Challenge

One of the most significant and consistent themes that emerged from our discussions was the stark reality of a pervasive skills-gap within Bangladesh's educational system and its direct impact on youth unemployment. Universities like IUB highlighted a fixation on credentials often coming at the expense of practical skills training, leading to a situation where youth are frequently "coddled," creating a jarring transition to university life and a profound disconnect with workforce expectations. The expectation from the workforce, as noted by IUB, is for graduates to "hit the ground running," a stark contrast to the prevalent on-the-job training model. Fahim Mashroor, CEO of BDJOBS, further illuminated this challenge, revealing that while official aggregated unemployment figures aren't remarkably high, youth unemployment is a

significant concern. He pointed to an oversupply of university graduates who are often unfit for the local workforce and a large number of unskilled workers seeking employment overseas. Critically, only about one-third of university graduates secure jobs, highlighting a severe mismatch between graduate skills and industry needs. This reality powerfully reinforced the urgent need for JA's programs in entrepreneurship, financial literacy, and work readiness, which directly address these gaps by focusing on practical, applied skills. The cultural aspiration for a university degree, often fueled by foreign laborers sending money home, exacerbates this dynamic, as it doesn't always translate into local employment opportunities.

2. The Imperative of Strategic Partnerships and Local Alignment

The sheer diversity and enthusiasm of the stakeholders we met underscored the criticality of forging strategic partnerships for any impactful launch in Bangladesh. Our delegation engaged with a broad spectrum of leaders, each offering unique perspectives and potential avenues for collaboration:

- **Academic Institutions as Catalysts for Change:** Discussions with BRAC University explored creating a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) focused on project-based work, including micro-credentials and teacher training, with strong interest in co-branding and developing soft skills programs. Daffodil International University showcased its extensive ecosystem as a potential means to reach diverse groups, offering opportunities for co-branded centers/micro-credential programs and hosting innovation camps. Even secondary schools like Sunbeams School and Sir John Wilson School expressed keen interest in JA's Company Program, realistic entrepreneurship workshops, and financial literacy, particularly for older students, along with a strong desire for teacher training. These engagements highlighted the academic sector's recognition of the skills gap and their receptiveness to external programs that can bridge it.

- **Corporate and Financial Sector Engagement:** Meetings with Standard Chartered Bank Bangladesh (SCB) and Brac Bank revealed a strong commitment to corporate social responsibility, particularly in areas of financial literacy, inclusion, and work-readiness. SCB's existing "Future Makers" program, emphasizing "Learn, Earn, Grow" and job placement, aligns seamlessly with JA's mission, and they were identified as a potential funder for initial projects, with a preference for NGO partners. Brac Bank's focus on supporting SMEs and empowering women through programs like "Uddokta 101" also presented clear opportunities for collaboration, viewing micro-credentialing as a valuable angle. This illustrated the financial sector's role not just as funders, but as strategic partners deeply invested in economic development and youth empowerment.

- **NGO and Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Partners:** Organizations like YY Ventures, focused on building investment fund structures and expanding into Asia Pacific, expressed interest in global collaboration and the "Impact Hub" model, potentially serving as an implementation partner. BYLC (Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center), with its extensive experience serving 10,000 youth and managing foreign funding, was also identified as a valuable implementation partner. Phulki, an organization dedicated to women's empowerment, demonstrated its ability to receive

foreign funds and its potential as a program or NGO partner. These interactions showcased a vibrant local NGO and entrepreneurial ecosystem eager for collaborative impact.

• **Legal and Governance Expertise:** Crucial insights into the legal frameworks for establishing an NGO were provided by Anita Ghazi Rahman and Pushpo Rahman of Legal Circle. They outlined various entity options (Public Limited Company, Trust, Society under a local NGO) and the complexities of foreign funding and compliance requirements, underscoring the necessity of sound legal guidance in navigating a new operating environment. Their interest in inspiring the next generation, especially girls, also marked them as potential board members.

This extensive network of potential partners emphasized that success in Bangladesh hinges on a multi-stakeholder approach, building bridges across different sectors to create a holistic ecosystem of support for youth development.

3. Navigating the Complexities of NGO Establishment

A significant takeaway was the nuanced understanding of the dynamics of launching and operating an NGO in Bangladesh. The discussions with Legal Circle were particularly enlightening, shedding light on the various legal entity options and their respective implications for governance, foreign funding, and operational flexibility. The suggestion to consider forming a Society under a local NGO, requiring a background check for board members and intelligence meetings, highlighted the importance of selecting neutral, qualified individuals for governance. The complexities surrounding foreign fund acceptance, requiring an NGO bureau license and project application with associated service charges, also became clear.

This learning process emphasized that a successful launch requires not only programmatic alignment but also meticulous attention to legal and administrative compliance, often best achieved through collaboration with existing local entities or by building a strong local board. The strategic priority of either finding a local NGO partner to license the JA brand or forming our own entity, while developing relationships with potential board members, became paramount.

4. Gender Disparities and Women's Empowerment as a Cross-Cutting Priority

The visit also brought into sharp focus the significant gender disparities in workforce participation, despite girls being statistically well-educated. A "huge drop-off" in employment for women, attributed to a "variety of cultural and other reasons," was consistently noted. Organizations like Phulki, focused on women's empowerment and advocating for daycare law changes to enable women to work, underscored this challenge and offered potential solutions. Legal Circle also expressed a keen interest in investing in female children's education and inspiring the next generation of youth, especially girls.

This reinforced that any youth empowerment initiative in Bangladesh must intentionally address gender-specific barriers and integrate women's economic participation as a core objective. This became a cross-cutting priority, aligning with the broader vision of zero unemployment.

Cultural Competencies Developed in a Global Context

Engaging in this delegation to Bangladesh presented a unique opportunity to develop and refine several critical cultural competencies essential for effective global leadership and impact.

1. Nuance in Communication and Relationship Building

Operating in a new cultural context necessitated a heightened awareness of nuance in communication and a deliberate approach to relationship building. The inherent "warmth of the people" created a welcoming environment, but successful engagement required sensitivity to local customs and professional courtesies. The meticulous planning of the itinerary, including thank-you drafts and follow-up actions, demonstrated an understanding of the importance of polite and professional interaction. Beyond formal meetings, the repeated emphasis on building "new friends" and "future partners" highlighted that trust and rapport are foundational to establishing sustainable collaborations. This was particularly evident in identifying individuals like Pushpo Rahman and Fahim Mashroor not just for their professional expertise, but also as potential board members who could bridge local and international perspectives.

2. Deep Contextual Understanding and Adapting Solutions

Rather than imposing pre-conceived notions, a crucial competency developed was the ability to immerse ourselves in a deep contextual understanding of Bangladesh's unique challenges and opportunities. The delegation actively sought to understand the root causes of youth unemployment and the skills gap, moving beyond surface-level observations to grasp the cultural, educational, and economic factors at play. For instance, recognizing the cultural aspiration for university degrees despite limited job prospects allowed for a more informed discussion on how JA's programs could complement, rather than contradict, existing societal values.

This understanding directly informed the strategy of proposing tailored solutions, such as co-branded credentials with universities or project-based work that could adapt to the specific needs of institutions like BRAC University. It also guided the exploration of legal entity options, accepting that a one-size-fits-all approach to NGO establishment would not be effective. This adaptability, driven by a genuine effort to understand the local environment, is paramount for sustainable global impact.

3. Strategic Flexibility and Problem-Solving

The complexities of launching in a new country demanded strategic flexibility and agile problem-solving. Encountering the challenge of establishing a legal entity capable of receiving foreign funds, for example, prompted discussions around multiple options—from a Public Limited Company to a Trust or a Society under a local NGO—and the practicalities of each. The idea of starting with project-based collaborations rather than immediately forming a fully independent entity was a pragmatic response to the initial complexities, allowing for a phased approach to market entry and brand licensing.

This demonstrated a competency in navigating ambiguous situations, generating multiple potential pathways forward, and prioritizing practical steps (like securing initial project funding from SCB) while concurrently building foundational structures (like local board recruitment).

The focus on finding suitable local NGO partners, such as Daffodil or YY Ventures, to potentially license the JA brand also reflected this strategic flexibility.

4. Intercultural Collaboration and Leveraging Local Expertise

The success of the visit was heavily reliant on effective intercultural collaboration and a willingness to leverage local expertise. From proactive organization of the trip to relying on legal professionals like Anita Ghazi Rahman and seasoned entrepreneurs like Fahim Mashroor for governance advice, the delegation actively sought and valued local perspectives. The detailed meeting notes, capturing the nuances of each discussion and identifying potential areas of synergy, reflect a collaborative mindset that prioritized listening and learning from local leaders. The identification of various "Connection Types" for potential partners, distinguishing between direct contacts, those reachable through an intro, and others, also showcased a sophisticated approach to networking within a new cultural landscape, understanding that personal connections often pave the way for professional collaborations. This demonstrated a deep appreciation for the social capital and knowledge embedded within the Bangladeshi community.

Conclusion

The journey to Dhaka was an incredibly enriching experience, validating the immense potential for Junior Achievement to empower Bangladeshi youth and contribute to Dr. Yunus's vision of a "world of three zeroes". The insights gained into the nation's skills-gap, youth unemployment challenges, and the vibrant, yet complex, ecosystem for NGO operations were profound. Equally significant was the opportunity to develop and apply critical cultural competencies: navigating complex legal and social landscapes, building trust through nuanced communication, fostering strategic partnerships, and adapting global models to local realities.

As Dr. Muhammad Yunus wisely stated, "Each young person is a born entrepreneur. All we have to do is give them the opportunity to unleash their potential". Our visit affirmed this belief, revealing a nation eager to provide those opportunities. We are profoundly grateful to our new friends and partners in Dhaka for their generous welcome and professional engagement. The journey to bring JA to Bangladesh has indeed begun, and we are excited to see its impact expand, empowering youth to lead with innovation, purpose, and sustainability, and truly championing human rights, youth power, and purpose-driven education for a better and more sustainable world. This experience abroad has not only deepened my understanding of global development challenges but has also fortified my conviction in the transformative power of collaborative, culturally sensitive leadership.