

# FROM WASTE TO WONDER – YOUTH-LED INNOVATION IN COX'S BAZAR



**CASE STORY**  
**DECEMBER 2024**

Author  
**UDAY SHIKDER, BRAC**  
Co-Author  
**MAHINUR SAIF, BRAC**





# CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Cox's Bazar, often hailed as the crown jewel of Bangladesh, is famed for its golden beaches and serene landscapes. But amidst its natural beauty lies a stark reality, the escalating problem of plastic waste. The sheer volume of discarded plastic not only smudges the pristine environment but also threatens marine ecosystems and the livelihoods dependent on them. Addressing this pressing challenge, the BRAC PLEASE Project implemented by SACEP and supported by UNOPS and World Bank set out on a mission to transform how the community views and manages plastic waste. This is a story of how youth in Cox's Bazar became the torchbearers of innovation and sustainability, turning waste into wonder.

The journey began with the youth a group brimming with potential but needing guidance and tools to channel their energy into impactful action. Recognizing this, the BRAC PLEASE Project partnered with BRAC's Youth Platform (BYP) to create a platform that combined learning, creativity, and entrepreneurship.





# A BOOTCAMP TO IGNITE CHANGE

The first step was a transformative Youth Bootcamp on Plastic Upcycling, held from November 8–11, 2024. Over three days, 70 young participants (27 women and 43 men) gathered in Cox's Bazar Municipality to explore the intersection of climate action and innovation. The bootcamp combined engaging storytelling, hands-on exercises, and discussions to reimagine plastic waste not as a problem, but as an opportunity. For many, the bootcamp was a revelation. One participant shared, “I never thought about plastic or its whereabouts before joining this bootcamp. Now, I feel plastic is as important as my close ones.” Such moments of realization marked the beginning of a mindset shift.

The program didn't stop at awareness. It provided practical tools and mentorship, guiding participants to design innovative upcycled products. This training equipped them not only with skills but with confidence, inspiring some to consider turning upcycling into a business venture. While the bootcamp laid the foundation for change, it also kindled curiosity and determination among the participants. The next phase was designed to put their newfound skills to the test. This led to the creation of the Plastic Upcycling Fair, where the youth had an opportunity to showcase their creations and connect with the larger community, further solidifying the transformative journey from knowledge to action.



# DECEMBER

# 20 24





# A FAIR TO CELEBRATE INNOVATION

On December 17, 2024, the vibrant Sugandha Point in Cox's Bazar became a hub of creativity and sustainability. Under the theme "Waste to Wonder," the Plastic Upcycling Fair brought together the bootcamp participants, who presented their work across 11 thematic booths. Each booth was a testament to innovation:

HOME (হোম): FLOWERPOTS AND JEWELRY, EMPHASIZING ECO-FRIENDLY LIVING.

1

PRITHIBIR BOUNDHU (পৃথিবীর বন্ধু): BIRDHOUSES AND SHOWPIECES, BLENDING BEAUTY AND UTILITY.

8

SUCHONA (সূচনা): TOTE BAGS AND PEN HOLDERS, BLENDING CREATIVITY AND UTILITY.

2

DREAMERS (ড্রিমার্স): TEA CAPS AND FLOWER HOLDERS, COMBINING INGENUITY WITH SUSTAINABILITY.

9

COX'S BAZAR 3R (কক্সবাজার 3R): UNIQUE LAMPS AND BASKETS, HIGHLIGHTING ARTISTIC CRAFTSMANSHIP.

3

HOPE BLOSSOM (হোপ ব্লজম): UPCYCLED PRODUCTS USING INNOVATIVE MATERIALS LIKE USED STRAWS.

10

PORIBESH BOUNDHU (পরিবেশ বন্ধু): PRACTICAL ITEMS LIKE LAMPS AND PEN HOLDERS, PROMOTING SUSTAINABILITY.

4

TEAM OF THE EARTH (টিম অফ দ্যা আর্থ): CLUTCH BAGS AND HOME DÉCOR, REDEFINING WASTE.

11

BONOLOTA (বনলতা): CHAIRS AND KEY RINGS, SHOWCASING CRAFTSMANSHIP FROM WASTE.

5

PROKRITIR BOUNDHU (প্রকৃতির বন্ধু): STYLISH HOME DECORATIONS AND JEWELRY.

6

SHAWPNER CHAYA (স্বপ্নের ছায়া): HOME DÉCOR AND PLASTIC BAGS WITH A CREATIVE TWIST.

7

The fair wasn't just about products—it was about stories, dreams, and the potential of what could be achieved through collective action. A Theatre for Development (TfD) session further engaged attendees, delivering powerful narratives on tackling plastic waste.





# WASTE REIMAGINED: MEASURING THE SUCCESS OF INNOVATION

The Plastic Upcycling Fair not only celebrated the creativity of youth but also provided a platform for bridging ideas with tangible outcomes. As visitors explored the booths and interacted with the participants, it became evident that this initiative was more than just an event, it was a movement driving change. The impact of this initiative has been profound:

## EMPOWERED YOUTH

70 young participants gained skills and confidence to innovate.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The fair attracted significant attention, paving the way for greater awareness and involvement in sustainable waste management.

## MARKET OPPORTUNITIES

Products showcased at the fair received interest from platforms like BRAC Aarong and local e-commerce platforms.

## STAKEHOLDER RECOGNITION

The local government's appreciation of the youth-led solutions underscored the importance of community-driven action.





# TURNING CHALLENGES INTO OPPORTUNITIES: INSIGHTS FROM THE JOURNEY

As the outcomes unfolded, valuable lessons emerged from the process, providing insights into how such initiatives could be scaled and sustained. The journey from training to market highlighted areas of growth and opportunities for future improvements. Key Learnings and Reflections. This journey highlighted several critical lessons:

## CONSISTENCY IS KEY

Maintaining production quality is essential for market success and sustainability.

## PARTNERSHIPS MATTER

Collaborations with entities like BRAC Aarong amplify impact and open new opportunities.

## YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Empowering young individuals fosters innovation and creates ripple effects within communities.

## BROADENING REACH

Expanding initiatives to include school Scout teams could further amplify impact.





# FROM WASTE TO WONDER

This story is a testament to the power of youth in addressing one of the most pressing environmental challenges of our time which is plastic waste. Under the theme "Waste to Wonder," young changemakers in Cox's Bazar have proven that waste is not an end but a beginning. By reimagining discarded plastic as a resource, they have not only contributed to reducing pollution but also inspired a shift in how their community perceives sustainability. These efforts reflect a larger narrative: when equipped with the right tools and platforms, youth can transform problems into possibilities, creating a more sustainable future for all.