

Beyond Assets: Why Aspiration is Foundational to the Pathway out of Poverty

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Radhika, a Malayali tribal woman, is a participant in the Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana programme, India's government-led national inclusive livelihood programme. When BRAC visited her community during a field visit, team members asked her about her aspirations for the future. She answered, "I want to buy soap." For Radhika, wishing to buy soap indicated aspirations for a life marginally better than her current circumstances. It illustrates how the poverty cycle can constrain an individual's capacity to even consider long-term goals or a different future.

Expanding aspirations for those living in extreme poverty is critical when addressing the poverty eradication programme; Productive assets, sustainable livelihoods, financial services, and coaching create opportunities, but aspiration gives those opportunities meaning and direction. It is aspiration that enables individuals to imagine a different future.

Radhika's response prompted us at BRAC India to reflect on a fundamental question: How do we build hope and ambition within a Graduation programme like Samaveshi Aajeevika Yojana (SAY)? Increasingly, [evidence](#) suggests that hope is a function of aspirations, agency, and pathways. Psychological factors that shape economic decision-making can have profound effects on welfare outcomes and the persistence of poverty. Without the ability to envision a better future, individuals are less likely to invest in opportunities. It reinforced that, for households experiencing extreme vulnerability and multidimensional poverty, the first barrier is often not the absence of resources but the absence

of hope and the capacity to imagine a different future. Consequently, we have come to recognise aspiration building as a foundational pillar of both the coaching component and the Graduation approach.

Aspiration as foundational support

A growing body of research argues that poverty is not simply a condition of material deprivation; it also constrains people's capacity to aspire. [Appadurai \(2004\)](#) argues that aspirations are socially embedded rather than individually determined. People's aspirations are shaped by the ideas, experiences, and opportunities they observe within their social environment, which together define what they perceive as possible. Consequently, aspirations are not merely personal preferences; they are influenced by the social and economic realities in which people live. This insight has important implications for SAY. Sustainable poverty reduction requires more than creating economic opportunities; it also requires that households believe those opportunities are attainable. Simply providing productive assets, financial services, skills training, or market linkages is often insufficient if households lack the confidence or motivation to utilise them. Sustainable Graduation depends on two complementary conditions: the availability of opportunities to escape poverty and the confidence of households to pursue those opportunities. Where aspirations remain systematically low, even well-designed interventions may fail to generate lasting change because households are less likely to invest, innovate, or take calculated risks.

Field observations from the SAY Programme illustrate this phenomenon clearly. Many households experiencing chronic poverty gradually begin to perceive their circumstances as permanent. Years of deprivation, repeated setbacks, lack of individualised support and limited exposure to successful role models reduce expectations about what can realistically be achieved. As a result, daily survival dominates decision-making, and even modest ambitions can appear beyond reach. Recognising this challenge, the SAY Programme places aspiration mapping at the centre of the programme process. Rather than beginning with a discussion of household deficits, the [Aspiration Tool](#) initiates a structured conversation about the future. The Aspiration Tool is a structured aspiration-mapping process used in the SAY Programme. Introduced by programme coaches, it combines facilitated

conversations with a household-owned Aspiration Booklet in which participants record, reflect on, and periodically update their aspirations in their own words. Rather than serving as a one-time assessment or planning template, the booklet functions as a living document that accompanies households throughout the Graduation journey, enabling aspirations to evolve alongside their progress. It encourages households to reflect on their strengths, articulate what they hope to achieve, and identify realistic pathways towards those goals. In doing so, the programme seeks not only to identify aspirations but also to restore hope, confidence, and a sense of possibility.



Households own their aspirations

The aspiration tool provides participants with a booklet to narrate, in their own words, their wants and aspirations. The document is not filed away; it is revisited and revised by the participating households. This is done in their own language and on their own time. This resource, while facilitated by the programme, belongs to the household. When people write down even a modest expectation - a better roof, a child staying in school, a savings goal—it serves as the first step to owning their aspirations rather than answering a programmatic checklist.

Coaches facilitate aspiration-building by helping households identify achievable goals that can be supported through the programme and available convergence opportunities. By aligning aspirations with feasible pathways, coaches foster trust, strengthen agency, and create a solid foundation.

Aspiration's power lies in being dynamic and self-reinforcing. Appadurai (2004) argues that the capacity to aspire is a navigational capacity that develops through experience. As individuals achieve meaningful milestones and gain exposure to new possibilities, they expand what they believe is attainable. Each achievement broadens the household's horizon of possibilities and strengthens its capacity to imagine and pursue the next goal. What once looked like an unreachable ceiling becomes the new floor: food security gives way to ambitions for stable livelihoods, which in turn fuel goals like enterprise growth, children's education, or better housing. This is the cycle at the heart of the Graduation approach - success builds confidence, confidence expands aspiration, and expanded aspiration drives further investment and resilience.

Shifting from needs-based programming to strengths-based development

The use of the Aspiration Tool has the potential to shift SAY from a needs-based approach to a strengths-based approach. Conventional poverty programmes typically begin by identifying what households lack, i.e., income, food security, productive assets, housing, or access to essential services. While these assessments are necessary for targeting support, they also frame households primarily through their deficits, positioning them as recipients of assistance rather than active participants in their own development. The

Aspiration Tool deliberately changes this starting point. Instead of asking, "what do you need?", it asks, "what kind of future do you want to build?" Rather than focusing on poverty alone, it begins by recognising people's aspirations, capabilities, experiences, and potential. Households are less defined by what they lack and more defined by what they hope to achieve.

This shift fundamentally changed the relationship between the programme and the participant. Instead of prescribing solutions, the programme works with households to identify pathways towards goals that they themselves have chosen. By placing household aspirations at the centre of programme design, the Aspiration Tool strengthens ownership, agency, and motivation - laying the foundation for lasting economic and social transformation.

Aspiration as the foundation of coaching

The Aspiration Tool is implemented through facilitated conversations between coaches and households - not a one-time form to be filled out, but an entry point into an ongoing dialogue. Through these conversations, coaches help households to reflect on their aspirations, recognise their own strengths, name the barriers in their way, and sketch out realistic paths toward their goals. When considering how the aspiration tool and aspiration building may fit into the [coaching design](#), we should consider frequency of in-person contact with participants, type of contact, coaching support tools, and coaching tasks.

Coaching modules may feel abstract or disconnected to participants. These modules are typically designed top-down - built by programme architects around what participants should learn, rather than what participants themselves want. For marginalised households, many of whom have had little say in decisions made about their own lives, a curriculum handed to them in this way can feel abstract and imposed. By utilising households' aspirations as a guide, modules have the potential to be more participant-driven. Aspiration work aims to address the disconnect between programme implementation and participant experience by centering households' aspirations as a guidebook. They can inform the coaching programme design and approach.

Beyond the practical value, aspiration does something psychological. Poverty tends to erode confidence and can leave people feeling invisible within their own communities. Simply being asked what future they want sends a quiet but powerful message: their future matters, and so does their opinion. Coaching can be more effective when it is grounded in household-defined aspirations. The Aspiration Booklet creates the space for households to articulate their own goals, and coaching then becomes a process of supporting those aspirations rather than delivering a predefined curriculum.

Aspiration as an engine for continuous growth

The defining strength of the Aspiration Tool is that it treats aspirations as dynamic rather than static. It is not intended to capture a household's aspirations at a single point in time; rather, it supports a continuous process of growth. Every achievement, whether securing regular meals or establishing a livelihood, creates the confidence and capability to pursue the next goal. This has a clear implication for programme implementation. The Aspiration Tool should not be viewed as a one-time enrolment exercise but as a living coaching tool. Aspirations can be reviewed and updated regularly, enabling coaches and households to celebrate progress, respond to changing circumstances, and set new goals.

Implications for the SAY Programme

Recognising aspiration as a driver of sustained change has important implications for the design and implementation of the SAY Programme.

- First, aspiration should not be treated as a one-time assessment conducted during household enrolment. Instead, it should form the foundation of the coaching process, with aspirations reviewed and refined throughout the programme as households achieve milestones and identify new goals.

- Second, livelihood planning should be guided by the aspirations, strengths, and circumstances of individual households rather than predetermined programme options. Coaching should therefore focus on helping households translate their aspirations into realistic and achievable livelihood pathways.
- Third, programme success should extend beyond measuring outputs such as asset transfers or the number of households meeting graduation criteria. A more meaningful measure of success is whether households demonstrate increasing confidence, stronger agency, greater decision-making capacity, and continue to set progressively higher aspirations beyond the programme period.

The aspiration tool supports the SAY programme participants to keep dreaming and investing in themselves beyond the typical programme success indicators.

