

A Brief History of Meena in Bangladesh and the South Asian Region

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Background

The Meena Communication Initiative (MCI) was launched in December 1992, and is still running today, almost 30 years after it began. It was part of UNICEF's response to the declaration by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) of 1990 as the "Year of the Girl Child," which was later expanded into the whole decade, 1991-2000. The MCI's overall goal remains today to promote the Rights of the Child and support their implementation and realization, with special focus on female children in South Asia, in order to improve their status and develop their potential by influencing and supporting the forces of social and behavioural change in the region.



The creators of Meena recognized that in addressing the needs of female children, the rights of their brothers must also be recognized and addressed in the stories, so that parents, communities, and decision makers take action together for child rights. The MCI's audiences include:

- 1) Primary audience: all children both in and out of school.
- 2) Secondary audience: parents, family and community members.
- 3) Tertiary audience: teachers, service providers, policy and decision makers.

From the beginning, the MCI was aimed at changing perceptions and behaviour that inhibit the survival, development, protection, and participation of South Asian girls. It became a new story-based way to effectively communicate directly to Bangladeshis and other South Asian populations through various media. Meena was developed as a cartoon character who would have appeal throughout the region, with its different cultures and religions. Formative research was carried out on a number of possible names for the girl, and "Meena" rose as the top choice the majority could agree on throughout the region. The creators of Meena decided to add a comic animal friend of Meena to add entertainment value, attracting people to the stories. After testing with audiences across South Asia, a parrot named "Mithu" was chosen to be Meena's "alter-ego"—her secondary or alternative personality who could get away with some things which many people might say would be improper for girls to do, and therefore distract from acceptance of the main messages.

In the stories, Meena is a nine-year-old girl who is very perceptive and raises questions whenever she senses something is amiss, which ultimately challenges local norms. In the pilot episode, her efforts to go to school are the primary focus. Later, episodes were produced on retention in school and quality of education, as well as other themes. Using the power of storytelling, Meena's character is portrayed as a champion of girls' and women's rights, which

also includes equal nutrition, health care, and protection from other forms of discrimination and abuse. Crafted with the results of field research, Meena comes out as believable and inoffensive. People have no problem accepting her stand against harmful traditional practices.

However, in doing all this she acts as a problem solver rather than a “super girl.” She is an empowered girl figure who empowers others to act, as well. Through her critical thinking and creative actions, Meena brings boys, men, women, parents, grandparents, and community leaders into the discussion, thereby helping to influence social norms. Meena was created by listening to the voices of communities—the thousands of respondents who participated in the formative research. Her words and actions were designed to engage the hearts and minds of people of all ages within the various cultural contexts of South Asia.

Meena's Core Regional Stories in Video and Comic Book Formats

The regional entertainment-education stories created by the MCI are many and varied. Meena was developed in three phases: **Phase 1 (1990-1992)** for proposal development, fundraising, regional consultations, and formative research on the character and background designs, the first story, and then development and testing of the pilot episode and a package of support materials. **Phase 2 (1993-1997)** involved the production of 11 animated video episodes (12.5 to 18 minutes in length) and a one-minute spot advertising the Meena series, as well as related support materials: comic books, posters, flip charts, and facilitators’ guides. In addition, a 16-minute compilation video of various episodes, *I Am Meena*, was produced and released. Also, a radio series was produced in Bangla in collaboration with BBC World Service and broadcast on BBC Bangla service in 1994. **In Phase 3 (1998-2004)**, a further nine animated videos (12.5 to 17.5 minutes in length) were produced, plus four 3- to 6-minute videos, and 10 TV spots, as well as comic books and other support materials.

Meena was never meant to be a stand-alone project. The great range of subjects included most of UNICEF’s priorities through the 1990s and early 2000s:

- Girls’ rights to education: enrolment, retention, quality teaching, and recreation;
- Girls’ and women’s rights to equal nutrition and health care, breastfeeding and early childhood care, childhood immunization, prevention of night blindness, and worm infestation;
- Oral rehydration; access to clean water supplies, sanitation, and good hygiene practices;
- Rights of children with disabilities and their proper care, through the example of Iodine Deficiency Disorders and the importance of Salt Iodization;
- Preventing early marriage and dowry;
- Preventing bullying, child domestic labour, sexual exploitation and trafficking of girls, and countering stigma and discrimination on HIV/AIDS while providing accurate information on its transmission and prevention;
- Preventing childhood accidents;
- Providing psycho-social care to children in communal conflict and natural disaster situations;

Note: Most of the **English versions of regional animated videos and comic books** have been collected and centralized and can be easily **viewed and downloaded on this link**. These are also summarized in **Appendix 1**.

Main Actors and Actions in the Birth and Creation of Meena

Although the MCI was designed as a regional initiative, Bangladesh was the centre of Meena's creation and Bangladeshis provided much of the energy and driving force for her success. It is very difficult to separate Meena's story in Bangladesh from the rest of the region as it was Meena's birth place and served as the key driving force for the MCI's regional and national activities. Without the actions and continued commitment of UNICEF, Bangladesh Country Office (BCO) and many Bangladeshis, Meena would not have been created, flourished, and still be alive today.

In March 1990, Neill McKee, then the new Chief of Programme Communication and Information Section (PCIS) of UNICEF-BCO, came up with the idea of a South Asian cartoon girl character at a UNICEF-supported conference in Prague (capital of former Czechoslovakia), on the use of animated film for development communication and education. At the conference, James P. Grant, then Executive Director of UNICEF, introduced McKee to William Hanna of Hanna-Barbera Cartoons, Hollywood, California, and challenged McKee to come up with an idea for a cooperative project with Hanna Barbera. McKee responded by the next day and began discussing his idea of an animated South Asian girl figure with Mr. Hanna and a few colleagues from New York and South Asia, such as Renu Gosh from India.

When McKee returned to Dhaka, he began advocating and writing to UNICEF-New York and other South Asian UNICEF offices about the idea and developed a funding proposal. He recognized that animated films were expensive to produce. (At the time, thousands of images had to be hand-drawn and coloured. It wasn't until the late 1990s that computer-based animation became good enough to use for Meena productions.) So, McKee knew the characters and stories would only be cost-effective if they were suitable for use throughout much of the South Asian region. It was difficult to sell this idea to some countries because UNICEF was then, and remains today, a largely country-based organization, programmatically, and usually does not operate regional projects.

It took most of the remainder of 1990 to raise the initial funds for the MCI through UNICEF's fundraising office in New York. Cecilia Lotse, senior fundraiser, was very helpful for she brought on board the Government of Norway, and Norway continued to support the MCI for over a decade. In 1991, Morten Giersing joined UNICEF's Regional Office for South Asia (ROSA) in Kathmandu, Nepal, as the Regional Information/Communication Officer, and he gave strong support to the creation of Meena.

Because McKee was busy with the Expanded Programme on Immunization and many other communication priorities, Cole Dodge, then UNICEF Representative, suggested he bring in the newly-arrived Rachel Carnegie as a consultant, and she soon became the main creative force and coordinator, co-managing with McKee. Carnegie was the key author of the first eight Meena episodes. With her background in Child to Child, U.K., she wove fantasy with facts and crafted stories that remain appealing even today to intergenerational audiences. Based on findings from the field research, Carnegie breathed life into the Meena characters and stories, making Meena almost "culturally immortal."

Carnegie consulted with many UNICEF national officers, including Shamsuddin Ahmed and Afsan Chowdhury, and various groups and creative personalities. She received initial design ideas from South Asian artists, including Bangladeshis Rafiqun Nabi (known as "Ronobi"), Mustafa Monwar, and Shishir Bhattacharjee. The most suitable of these were tested throughout the region. Carnegie located the talented artist, Ram Mohan, an animated film expert in Mumbai, India and brought him into the Meena team.

McKee introduced Carnegie to Dr. Mira Aghi of New Delhi who became the director of creative research in 1991, and national researchers were identified and trained by her to carry out the qualitative research needed. Both Mohan and Dr. Aghi worked with Carnegie to test the initial character designs and names, background designs, eliminating those that were clearly identified with a particular region or religion (e.g., no mosques, temples, or churches). Using storyboards, they carried out in-depth interviews on the first story on Meena's enrolment in school. Dr. Aghi brought with her the fame and wisdom of working with Children's Television Network (CTW)—“Sesame Street.” Her involvement with CTW in her early career taught her the dos and don'ts of field research with an emphasis on not just how to ask questions but also to watch for non-verbal expressions. Dr. Aghi was involved in story creation and checked dialogues, sometimes coming up with alternative expressions that came from field research notes.

For the first few episodes, formative research was conducted in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan (Note: In Phase 3, extensive research was also conducted in Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Vietnam on selected new regional storylines.) The original formative research process involved approximately 200 focus groups and 50 in-depth interviews for the first few episodes with girls, boys, parents, grandparents, and community members. Although scaled-down, this process continued for later episodes in order to ensure that the stories, and new characters added, would have the intended social and behaviour change effect.

By 2001, over 10,000 children and equal numbers of adults are estimated to have been consulted in the process. It is interesting that the majority of respondents saw Meena as a real girl like their sister, daughter, granddaughter, or like girls in their communities, not a cartoon figure. They said that most films shown in cinemas, such as those produced by Bollywood, were fictional and did not address their own realities.

Mohan understood the importance of research and listened well to the discussions in the creative team. He could interpret the true emotions of voices from the field, translating them into the interesting, relatable, character-designs he created for the entire Meena series—making them so acceptable that audiences throughout rural South Asia thought they were people from their own village or the next village. Mohan first worked with Hanna Barbera's FIL Cartoons in Manila, Philippines, which offered a reduced rate to UNICEF. He travelled to or liaised with Manila to produce seven episodes during 1991-1995. Beginning in 1993, Mohan also began to produce episodes on his own Mumbai studio, and then he and his team took over the work on all later episodes and TV spots, with the exception of only one episode. (*Strangers in the Village* was produced by Toonz Animation, Trivandrum, India.) Mohan came to be known as the “father of animated film” in South Asia for he guided and trained many younger artists and supported their professional development.



Besides Bangladesh, original country focal points included Renu Ghosh in India, Raana Syed and Ramzan Azhar in Pakistan, as well as Sharad Ranjit in Nepal. Through the years, they actively contributed to MCI in idea creation and dissemination of the completed episodes. (Note that, in the credits of the comic books and videos, other researchers, artists, and UNICEF staff members from Bangladesh and South Asian offices are also mentioned.) The focal points also contracted researchers and coordinated the development of national language versions of Meena videos and comic books.

In 1992, Nuzhat Shahzadi joined PCIS, Dhaka, and in addition to other programme communication duties, became engaged with Carnegie in Meena story creation, traveling to regional meetings as the focal point from Bangladesh. At the end of 1993, McKee left Bangladesh to become the Regional Programme Communication Officer in UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Office (ESARO), but the team he had set up carried on with their great work. After Carnegie left Bangladesh in mid-1994, Shahzadi took over her role of coordinating regional production activities and continued Meena dissemination efforts in Bangladesh, while Carnegie continued to consult from the U.K.

In January 1995, the Meena team (Shahzadi as lead, with Yasmin Lashker Rashid, and Shanaz Monir), moved to BRAC in a contract negotiated by UNICEF-BCO. Meena materials reached thousands of children in rural Bangladesh through BRAC schools and Shahzadi continued to liaise with national media. The arrangement with BRAC lasted until mid-1996, when BRAC requested that the MCI be returned to UNICEF due to differences in management philosophies with UNICEF-BCO. Shortly thereafter, Shahzadi was selected as coordinator of the [Sara Communication Initiative](#) for the African adolescent girl in ESARO, Nairobi, which McKee had started, and Mira Mitra formally took over as Meena's national focal point in UNICEF-BCO in 1997.

Move to UNICEF-ROSA

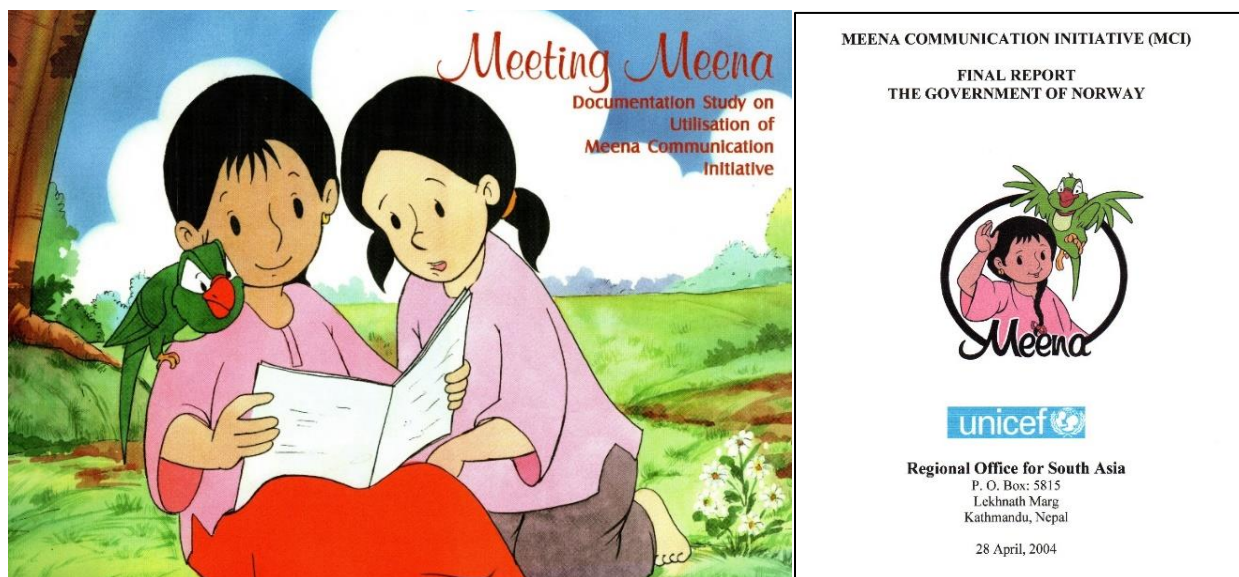
With the help of the Regional Director and Morten Giersing, as well as the Regional Management Team (RMT), a Meena Regional Coordinator's post was created to take over management of the production of regional episodes. Christian Clark became the first regional coordinator during 1994-99 and he led the creation of the four remaining episodes in Phase 2, using research generated by Dr. Aghi and the national researchers/focal points. Clark also brought in a Canadian animator Derek Lamb to work with Ram Mohan. Deepa Balsavar from Mumbai provided creative assistance on these productions and continued to support the project thereafter.

Shahzadi took over from Clark at ROSA in 2001, after completing her role as coordinator of Sara in Africa, 1996 to 2000. During Shahzadi's time at ROSA (2001-2004), she engaged Ram Mohan and team (plus Toonz Animation for one episode) and led the development of new regional productions: nine full videos (12.5 to 18 minutes), four short videos (3 to 6 minutes) and 10 TV spots (1 minute). Almost all videos were accompanied by comic books, posters, and draft facilitators' guides for country offices to adapt to their needs. She transferred regional funding to country offices for translation and national language dubbing of regional episodes in addition to other on-going activities, including a considerable amount to Bangladesh, as reported in the final report to Norway (see page 11 of report below). Shahzadi continued to involve Rachel Carnegie and Dr. Mira Aghi, as well as the country focal points and researchers in the process. Harsha Mehta was also brought in at this time to facilitate the coordination processes of the productions in Mumbai.

In collaboration with ROSA and with additional funding from the Government of Japan, Shahzadi led the creation of the final Meena regional episode on psycho-social support to children in natural disasters, based on experience in Sri Lanka after the Tsunami. It was a co-production with Johns Hopkins University's Center for Communication Programs (JHU/CCP). At the time, Shahzadi had temporarily left UNICEF from May 2004 to September 2005, to work at JHU/CCP, based in Baltimore, USA. **[Click here to read a journal article on the development of Meena and this episode, *Life Has Changed*](#)**, which was written by Shahzadi and McKee, who, by that time, had left UNICEF for JHU/CCP and was based in Moscow, Russia.

Summary of the MCI's Achievements in South Asia and Worldwide

In 2001, Shahzadi and Carnegie, compiled a detailed document on the first decade of the MCI. **By clicking on the cover of *Meeting Meena*, below, you will be able to view and/or download a pictorially-illustrated overview of Meena's formative research and development process led by UNICEF-BCO and dissemination and evaluation achievements from 1991 to 2001.** The use of multi-media and engagement of many partners in all countries, as recorded in *Meeting Meena*, is based on field reports from country focal points, including **Bangladesh, which is covered in considerable detail on pages 11 to 28.** The report includes evaluation summaries. Note that the achievements in India, Nepal, and Pakistan are covered on pages 29-81 and Meena activities in Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos are mentioned on pages 82-83. (Maldives participated slightly later—from August 2001). In addition, when Shahzadi re-joined UNICEF in Sri Lanka (Dec. 2005-June 2007) and Afghanistan (June 2007-April 2011), she used Meena materials as part of her toolkit while working with children and women in conflict situations. Finally, she introduced Meena to the South Pacific when she became Head of Field Office & UN Joint Presence, in Kiribati, UNICEF-Pacific (July 2011-March 2015).



Also, view or download the final donor report on funding from the Government of Norway by clicking on the cover above. It was completed by Shahzadi before she left ROSA in 2004. It documents Norway's great support to Meena during 2001 to 2004. (Note: In addition to the Government of Norway, Meena regional efforts also received funding from the US, UK, Netherland, Finland National Committees for UNICEF, and the Government of Japan.) The

above two documents give the best comprehensive overview of all that was achieved by the MCI in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the region, as well as some of the efforts to disseminate Meena in other parts of Asia.

Eventually, various Meena episodes were dubbed in 17 South Asian languages, as well as French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Arabic and Greek. Meena became a popular tool for UNICEF's world-wide advocacy, fundraising, and education initiatives. In December 1995, Meena was identified by Newsweek magazine as "one of the actors to emerge on the world's stage in 1996." Meena was appointed as the official "ambassador" of the 1998 International Children's Day of Broadcasting—an event reaching more than 2,000 broadcasters, globally. They were offered the series in return for dubbing it into local languages. By 2001, the pilot episode had been dubbed into and broadcast in 30 diverse languages. In addition, Meena was used for development education by UNICEF National Committees. Also in the late 90s, a video documentary on Meena and the Girl Child was produced and narrated by British actor, Peter Ustinov. (See above documentation Study, page 9 and 84.)

Further Details on Dissemination Activities in Bangladesh

During the early days of Meena, Nuzhat Shahzadi oversaw the translation and dubbing of episodes 2 to 8 of the regional episodes into Bangla in Mumbai, as well as revision of the Meena theme song in Bangla. Thereafter, eight regional episodes and TV spots were produced in Bangla, but most of those produced in Phase 3 were not, and are not available in Bangla language. [Click here to view and/or play all those that are available in Bangla.](#)

UNICEF-BCO's main objective was to integrate Meena materials into national communication and educational systems, weaving her stories and values on the importance of girls' rights into the social fabric of the nation. From the very beginning, strong partnerships were built with the Government, NGOs, and community-based organizations. State owned mechanisms were encouraged to participate.

Since 1993, Bangladesh Television has been a champion for popularizing Meena by regularly repeating broadcasts of the films, including during prime time. Meena episodes continue to be broadcast on television. A Meena Day was first held in Dhaka on September 24, 1993. Although the day was not celebrated consistently during 1994-1997, on September 24, 1998 UNICEF and SAARC launched a joint celebration and at least Bangladesh continues with the celebration each year. In Bangladesh, Meena Day has been observed at school, upazila, district and national level. It is now adopted as a government programme and also observed through different TV channels, such as ATN, ETV, and Ekattor. In 2005, UNICEF Bangladesh initiated a Meena Media Award programme, which has been observed every year since then. Children and adults are invited to take part in the competition by producing materials on the rights of children and other issues important to children. In 1993, UNICEF's Education Section printed and distributed one million copies of the first Meena episode, including guidelines for teachers, to all primary schools to boost alliance building with educational entities. The MCI eventually became part of the government's efforts to enact the Primary Education (Compulsory) Act, 1990.

Bangladesh Airlines included the Meena films in their in-flight entertainment during 1993-1994. In 1993, the Department of Mass Communication screened Meena films to over three million people through their mobile film unit. In 1993, the first Meena episode was produced on 35mm and circulated by cinema distributors on an experimental basis, to be shown as a support to the main feature. However, this was discontinued as young male cinema audiences were the main viewers and they were not MCI's primary target audience.

In 1998, a second BBC radio series was produced and broadcast in Bangla and three other South Asian languages. This approach further popularized Meena among hard-to-reach, under-privileged, and rural communities. (Carnegie raised funds for this series though she was not under any paid contract with UNICEF for this activity.)

Integration of Meena through BRAC's grass roots channels was a major achievement from 1993 to mid-1996. BRAC's non-formal education programmes included Meena in their curriculum and developed additional learning materials using the concept and characters. BRAC's Rural Development Programme (RDP) popularized girls' right to education through their micro-credit initiatives and Meena was included in the 18th pledge of the women borrowers/participants. Millions of children and adults were eventually reached through BRAC's work. Influenced by the successful negotiation of a private sector partnership between UNICEF and Maskew Miller Longman, Cape Town, for Africa's Sara Communication Initiative, UNICEF-BCO contracted BRAC to print, publish, market and distribute Meena materials for a period of 2.5 years (August 2000 to February 2003).

Grameen Bank, GSS, NGO Forum, as well as community-focused groups, used Meena in their approaches. Autonomous bodies such as Shishu Academies in urban centres hosted Meena events encouraging children's participation (1993-2001). With support from UNICEF's Health and Nutrition Section, Scouts and Guides developed a manual starring Meena and her family to create awareness on diarrhoea management and ORT. Folk theatres, puppet shows, billboards, creative competitions and celebrations were organized over the years to keep Meena alive. Between July 2001 and April 2005, the Department of Mass Communication undertook Meena activities in 64 districts. The National Institute of Mass Communication continues to include sessions on Meena in its training programme organized for professionals—print journalists, radio, TV, and others.

In 1997, when Mira Mitra became the Meena focal point, she advocated for funding and the inclusion of Meena activities in UNICEF-supported activities, liaising with UNICEF programme sections, managing national dissemination, attending regional Meena meetings and later coordinating the production of national episodes in Bangla. She moved to the Education Section's Intensive District Approach to Education for All (IDEAL) Project. (With further reorganization, from January 2001 to May 2006, Mitra and Meena moved to the Programme Communication and Education (CDE) Section. Mitra moved once more from May 15, 2006 to the end of 2010 as a Senior Programme Specialist in the Health and Nutrition Section, taking Meena with her.)

Meena was integrated into the IDEAL project, an initiative aimed at improving the quality of education in primary schools. This led to the production of new materials. These materials have been used to introduce gender issues into schools and to promote a more child/girl-friendly learning environment. In 2003, with the funds from the Governments of Japan, Australia (AusAID), the IDEAL Project reprinted Meena books. The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) approved 10 Meena regional comic books (translated into Bangla) for distribution to all primary schools in selected IDEAL districts. Also in 2003, the IDEAL project featured the organization of interactive forum theatre at community level, focusing on physical growth and development of children (0 - 5 years) and improvement of girls' education. Meena stories were included in English text books for Grades 9 and 10. Also, over the years, more than four questions were included related to the Meena episodes in the Government's Secondary School Education final examinations. The Education Section hired Farhana Borg, a Bangladeshi consultant to support Meena activities. Subsequently, UNICEF-BCO engaged Barbara Kolucki, an international

consultant who supported production of interactive episodes of selected Meena films in which children participated. Those interactive episodes were broadcasted on TV.

Meena muppet shows are still very popular and still being used for dissemination of social messages. In September 2021, Vorer Alo, a social organisation in Chottogram, started to use Meena muppets to disseminate messages on mask management, handwashing at school level for Covid-19 prevention. Bangladesh office has taken Meena to different levels by initiating many creative activities like Meena games based on the episodes, interactive radio programme with children. Meena's achievements also include *Ami Meena Bolchi* (I am Meena Talking) developed, produced and broadcast in Bangladesh Betar (Bangladesh Radio). This has been going for more than seven years.

Rehana Akhter, a Bangladeshi consultant, was hired to support the coordination of national Meena episodes that were produced during this period. For this, funding was received from the governments of the Netherlands and Japan, as well as Alive and Thrive, a global nutrition programme operated by FHI360. UNICEF-BCO contracted Light Box in Mumbai, headed by Ram Mohan to train Bangladeshi artists so they could accurately portray Meena characters and backgrounds in the production of these national episodes. Before he passed away in 2019, Mohan made several visits to Bangladesh to work with studios and facilitated several training workshops, along with Deepa Balsavar. These events involved animation artists, writers, government officials, and NGO professionals. AVCom, a Dhaka firm, became involved in Bangla versioning when the systems became digital. Also, Pulak Raha was contracted for involvement in the production of Meena episodes since 2006. His organization, Team Associates, is still working on production of Meena materials. He is a dedicated and committed communication professional and advocate for Meena.

Meena responsibilities remained with Mitra as a Communication for Development (C4D) Specialist in the Health and Nutrition Section from January 2011 until she retired in January 2015, when Tania Sultana took over MCI duties from her. **Most of the national episodes on UNICEF-BCO's priorities** such as floods, viruses, pneumonia, handwashing, corporal punishment, birth registration, etc., which were produced under the supervision of Mitra during 2006-2013, [may be viewed and played by clicking on this link](#). After retiring, Mitra remained involved in Meena, recently opening a FaceBook page, "We Love Meena," which many people have joined and where they continue to express interest in Meena.

Evaluation Summary, Bangladesh

Since launching the MCI in Dhaka in December 1992, Meena has remained a popular character in Bangladesh. A number of interim national assessments were undertaken to understand how the audiences perceived Meena. Bangladesh's 1998 National Media Survey included questions on Meena and revealed that 44% of urban adult television viewers and 17% of rural adult television viewers could remember seeing Meena on television. 97% of the adult respondents who saw Meena stated that they liked her "very much." Of Dhaka residents who watch TV, more than 50% knew the Meena character and identified the series as being about "girls' rights."

In 1999, Research & Computing Services (RCS) Pvt. Ltd., headed by Dr. Nadia Binte Amin, won a bid to evaluate what the MCI had achieved in Bangladesh, to date. It served as a baseline for the IDEAL project implementation and the Basic Education for Hard-to-Reach urban Children. Respondents in the study included 905 school-going children, 829 parents, 828 teachers and 24 managers of learning centres and implementing agencies. The key findings were:

- **Awareness of Meena:** of school-going children, 85% of girls and 87% of boys are were aware of Meena; of non school-going children, 40% of girls and 38% of boys knew about Meena.

Among children who were aware of Meena, the following was reported:

- **Popularity:** Meena was highly popular among children in and out of school, almost all of whom said that they liked Meena.
- **Perception of character:** Approximately 66% of school-going children perceived Meena as a village girl. Only 13% of girls and 18% of boys of school-going children, and 22% of girls and 14% of boys of non school-going children saw Meena as a cartoon character.
- **Main Message:** Most children in and out of school felt that Meena’s primary messages are on health and sanitation (which reflects the heavy utilization of those episodes). However, 32% of girls and 28% of boys in school reported that Meena talks about educational issues.
- **Characteristics:** Children, in general, stated that what they like about Meena is her eagerness to learn new things.
- **Identification with character:** Identification with Meena’s character was quite strong among children interviewed: 88% of girls and 86% of boys who go to school feel that they practice what Meena does. The most prevalent were activities related to sanitation and hygiene—especially washing hands before eating.
- **Parents’ gender awareness:** The larger portion of parents (85% of females and 80% of males) understand that girls face problems in Bangladesh. 26% of female and 28% of male parents mentioned this and that Meena could help bring about increasing gender awareness by highlighting specific problems, such as education and dowry.

In Bangladesh, Meena remains popular across generations, with the content and messages being relevant to this day, although much progress has been made in the education of girls. In fact, due to UNICEF’s education programmes, and many other undertakings such as those of BRAC and other NGOs, as well as the World Bank’s scholarship project to support girls’ completion of secondary school, Bangladeshi girls’ enrollment and completion of secondary education has caught up to, and sometimes exceeded that of boys. Bangladesh has made tremendous progress on almost all social development indicators since the 1980s, outpacing some neighboring South Asian countries in many areas. Probably its wide use of Meena in the mix with these many other interventions has been one of the contributing factors, although more research would be required to prove this.

The Sustainability and Future of Meena

In 2003 while still in ROSA, Shahzadi initiated a regional evaluation process of the MCI and Paul Chesterton of Australia Catholic University won the contract bid. He did not undertake original research, rather he reviewed the above-mentioned *Meeting Meena* documentation study and other original sources from country reports and evaluation efforts to analyze and compile results. He also interviewed some key stakeholders in UNICEF, and governments. (Note that the completion of the evaluation was much delayed by ROSA procedures and not completed while Shahzadi was still in Kathmandu.)

One of the key recommendations of this evaluation was that, for sustainability and strengthening of the MCI, there needs to be more internal advocacy for her integration into UNICEF programmes in the region, and that UNICEF should seriously consider institutionalization of Meena in national entities in Bangladesh and India. From the very beginning,

the original Meena team was concerned with sustainability and experimented with developing Meena consumer products for sale. However, this was outside of the scope of UNICEF's private sector fundraising efforts under the purview of UNICEF New York's Greeting Card Operation, and they did not express interest.

As special donor funding was coming to an end in early 2004, Meena's sustainability issues remained a major concern for UNICEF, especially in Bangladesh. In 2002, Morten Giersing, the then Representative of UNICEF-BCO, invited Shahzadi to explore the matter further. BCO was eager to work together to create an independent institution with a strong board of governors for Meena's sustainability, in collaboration with the Government and development sectors. Shahzadi and Giersing met with key NGO leaders, including Dr. Md. Yunus of Grameen Bank and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed of BRAC, to secure their support. Also, Harsha Mehta was hired to organize a series of meetings for Shahzadi with key officials of Tata, Birla, Ambani, Archies, Hallmark, and Cartoon Network in Mumbai, India, to discuss the idea of creation of a "Meena Centre" for the initiative's future sustainability. The meetings generated strong enthusiasm from these organizations.

In the same year, under the leadership of Giersing, a brainstorming workshop was facilitated by Shahzadi in Dhaka with representatives of all the above-mentioned corporate partners from India, as well as some key Bangladeshi NGOs and government agencies. Consensus was reached to establish a "Meena Centre" that would have the capacity to produce regional and country-specific Meena materials/packages, raise funds, and support utilization of the packages to ensure girls' rights. It was agreed that the development of the structural and operational modalities of this entity would be the next step. At this time, Zafreen Chowdhury, Communication Officer from UNICEF-BCO, was brought in to work with Shahzadi. Giersing and Shahzadi presented the idea of the "Meena Centre" at the UNICEF RMT for South Asia, held in Bangkok. However, participating Representatives did not buy into this novel vision, stating that it could become a never-ending liability for UNICEF.

Giersing did not give up. In May 2005, he contracted Rachel Carnegie to develop a strategic concept paper on Meena's institutional future in Bangladesh, elaborating the pros and cons of various options. In September 2005, after Shahzadi completed her contractual assignment with JHU/CCP, Giersing contracted her to develop a detailed strategic partnership document for the creation of a "Meena Centre," as agreed upon in principle at the corporate partners' workshop, building on Carnegie's concept paper. But no such centre was realized during Giersing's tenure in Bangladesh, or thereafter.

Today, the only UNICEF South Asian Office that has a Meena focal point, to our knowledge, is BCO, where new national episodes are still being produced using Bangladeshi artists and contractors. In 2019, UNICEF-BCO organized a consultancy by Deloitte Consulting on the future of Meena in Bangladesh with stakeholders: themes, audiences/target groups, dissemination channels to reach children in the contemporary era, a detailed guideline (including broad sustainability aspects) relating to basic M&E for social and behavioural change communication. A total of 36 focus group discussions and 156 in-depth interviews were held with children, parents, teachers, head teachers; officials from national, divisional, and district government bodies; UNICEF, media companies, Primary Teachers Training Institutes, and the Shishu Academy. A total of 60 boys and 97 girls below the age of 15 participated. The Ministry of Information organized a dissemination workshop and shared the key findings. Here is a summary of key findings:

- **Meena is being watched and followed to this day by children and guardians:** Children continue to learn about many issues from Meena: child marriage, child labour, gender equity, importance of education, and health and sanitation. The most popular episodes mentioned are *Too Young to Marry*, *Meena's Three Wishes* (water, sanitation, and hygiene), *Health in Your Hands* (handwashing and hygiene), *Dividing the Mango* (equal food and nutrition for girls), *Will Meena Leave School?* and *Protection During Flood*.
- **Need to revitalize Meena:** As of 2019, no new episodes produced, no fixed schedule for broadcasts, irregular community screenings, Meena only limited to children in school, teachers not trained on Meena programme.
- **Suggestions for new, contemporary themes:** More episodes are needed on gender equity/respecting girls, sexual harassment, menstrual hygiene, violence against children, climate change/preventing river erosion, environmental pollution, protection of animals, losing touch with cultural values, drug abuse, excessive use of mobile phones, corruption, unemployment, fighting superstitions.
- **Most popular channels:** Television remains the most popular—70% of children watch Meena on TV but episodes should be broadcast on a regular schedule; radio has a limited reach but possibly useful for “dark” media reach areas; children are accessing Meena on cell phones and a dedicated social media channel should be set up, and/or on platforms such as FaceBook; there is limited Meena activity in schools and community screenings are needed; Meena books have limited distribution through schools and libraries, and are not available in the market.
- **Redesign Meena?:** Although the majority of respondents said that Meena should remain a rural girl, there were suggestions for an older Meena and Raju, especially by urban adolescent girls. But most boys wanted Meena to remain a child. (Note: Considering the amount and cost of research put into developing Meena in the first place, and the fact that she remains a popular brand as she is, this is not a feasible suggestion in our opinion.)
- **Meena requires a defined governance structure to ensure ownership and accountability.**

The above consultancy was completed and presented to UNICEF and key stakeholders in December 2019, just before the Covid-19 pandemic upset most organizations’ plans for the immediate future. It remains to be seen if UNICEF-BCO will act on the key recommendations and continue to make Bangladesh the preeminent South Asian country for utilization of this cartoon series which has changed the lives of so many for the better. In 2013, a Sri Lankan journalist wrote an on-line article titled “[Long Before Malala, there was Meena,](#)” referring Malala Yousafzai, the popular Pakistani advocate for girls’ rights. Meena remains popular in the press throughout South Asia, as demonstrated by [this article which claims she helped to shape modern South Asian societies](#).

The question remains—is it too late? Did UNICEF miss an opportunity for fostering a permanent and sustainable home for Meena, so that future generations in South Asia can be entertained and educated by her stories? Or does the answer to this question still lie in Bangladesh, where she was born?

APPENDIX 1: REGIONAL MEENA MATERIALS (ENGLISH VERSIONS)		
(Note: Most videos and comic books can be viewed and downloaded on this link)		
Episodes available in animated film, comic book, poster with facilitation guidelines:		
<i>(Prototype flip charts were produced by UNICEF ROSA for episodes 1-11; comic books produced for all episodes; generic users' guides were available for country level adaptation.)</i>		
Title	Length in mins./seconds	Subject
1. Count Your Chickens	(13:40)	Girls' (and boys') right to education – access to school
2. Dividing the Mango	(13:10)	Equal right to food & girls' workload
3. Will Meena Leave School?	(13:00)	Girls' (and boys') right to education - retention in school
4. Who's Afraid of the Bully?	(12:30)	Preventing teasing of girls
5. Saving a Life	(13:30)	Management of diarrhoea/Oral rehydration
6. Meena's Three Wishes	(18:20)	Water, sanitation and hygiene
7. Say No to Dowry	(13:00)	Rejecting dowry practice
8. Too Young to Marry	(13:30)	Raising awareness on prevention of early marriage
9. Take Care of Girls	(12:30)	Girls' (and boys') right to health care
10. I Love School	(14:30)	Quality of education
11. It's Got to be a Boy	(13:30)	Challenging son preference
12. A Girl's Story	(15:00)	HIV/AIDS – transmission & care and support
13. I am Meena	(16:00)	Girls'/children's rights—compilation of Meena clips
14. Meena in the City	(18:10)	Domestic child labour/non-formal education
15. Learning to Love	(14:50)	Early Childhood Development and Care
16. Strangers in the Village	(17:00)	Peace in conflict situations & dealing with diversity
17. Reaching Out	(15:00)	HIV/AIDS social inclusion/stigma & transmission reduction
18. Meena and her Friend	(12:55)	Disabilities -Iodine Deficiency Disorders/Salt Iodization
19. It Could Happen to Anyone	(14:30)	Accident/injury prevention
20. The Girls Came Back	(15:45)	Child sex trafficking
21. Fair Play for Girls	(12:30)	Girls' right to recreation
22. Life has changed	(17:30)	Psycho-social support in natural disasters & trauma
23. When Meena was Born	(6:15)	Pre-natal and new born care
24. When Meena was a Little Girl	(5:00)	Breastfeeding and complimentary feeding
25. Health in your Hands	(3:00)	Hand washing
26. Safe from Worms	(3:00)	Intestinal worms
TV spots (1 minute +), plus comic books with users' guides		
27. Seeing in the Dark	(1:20)	Vitamin A
28. Baby Rani's Four Visits	(1:15)	Immunization
29. Say Yes for Children	(1:00)	Advocacy for children's rights
30. We Love Books	(1:15)	Quality in education – making books
31. Learning can be Fun!	(1:15)	Quality in education – child centred learning
32. Learning with Meena	(missing)	Benefits of education
33. Teacher Helps to Learn	(missing)	Quality in education – positive discipline
34. Let's Go to School Together	(1:08)	Safety for girls going to school
35. School First, Marriage Later	(1:13)	Completing schooling; delaying marriage
36. Aunt Finally Understands	(1:20)	Completing schooling
Radio: 2 x 13-part radio drama serials in collaboration with BBC World Service		Girls'/children's rights. First series was adapted from film stories. The second included new stories.