
BRAC: Building Resources Across Communities

The Coproduction of Governance: Civil Society, the Government, and the Private Sector

Fazle Hasan Abed
fatema.ak@brac.net

Mr. Abed will reflect on his own experiences and his own learning over the past 36 years with regard to setting up and running BRAC. His main thesis will be that in a country like Bangladesh, it is possible to make a significant positive change in the lives of the poor and other marginalized people, including women. In fact, “it is possible to bring hope back!” He will recollect how he decided to move to the uncharted territory of “development” and to leave his secure career in a multinational oil company.

BRAC started as a small relief and rehabilitation effort in a remote rural district of Bangladesh after the liberation of the country. Early on, it became clear that relief was not the way to make a sustainable improvement in poor people’s lives, and BRAC started experimenting with “development.” Different projects on health, education, and economic development were piloted. Some were successful while others were not.

Mr. Abed will explore a major question that BRAC faced with regard to successful programs and agencies: how should they be dealt with? The traditional wisdom was that the government would replicate them, but given the situation prevailing at that time, it was not going to happen.

Mr. Abed will discuss the example of an early successful program. The year 1979 was named the “International Year of the Child,” and BRAC knew from its work that high infant mortality and fertility were major problems facing the country. BRAC also knew that people would not lower the number of children born to their families until they were sure that their children would survive to complete a desired family size. Diarrhea was one of the most prevalent causes of childhood death. BRAC decided to make the importance of oral rehydration known to the mothers. With a successful pilot, BRAC started teaching mothers about this in every household throughout the country. This was the first time that BRAC took one of its programs nationwide. This gave BRAC the experience of how to organize and plan for upscaling programs. After this, BRAC undertook nationwide programs in many areas, including health, education, and microfinance.

Mr. Abed will demonstrate that BRAC’s strategy is to first test the effectiveness of an idea through pilots, then to examine their efficiency before scaling up. BRAC is now the

largest NGO in the South, but it has not remained restricted to working within Bangladesh alone. Its programs are now found in diverse settings such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Tanzania, and Southern Sudan.

One of BRAC's distinguishing features is its belief, and consequent investment in capacity development. To this end, BRAC has set up a university. It has graduate schools in public health, development studies, and governance studies. BRAC University works with many universities in the North, including Harvard, to improve its curriculum in terms of both the science and art. BRAC also works very closely with national governments to improve governance of the public sector. In fact, BRAC works with the government in implementing many of its programs. These include a focused effort on immunization, and the two serious problems of tuberculosis and malaria. BRAC believes in synergy, and thus works in partnership with other stakeholders, including the government, the private sector, and donors. BRAC trains government bureaucrats and doctors through short certificate courses and long-term master's programs. Dr. Gowher Rizvi helped BRAC design a master's degree program for the government civil servants. Finally, Mr. Abed will conclude by highlighting another of BRAC's key distinguishing features—the fact that it finances its development programs. Of the (USD)\$430 million annual budget in 2007, BRAC generated 70% of it from its own enterprises within the country.

Fazle Hasan Abed was born in Bangladesh in 1936. Abed was educated in Dhaka and Glasgow Universities and qualified as a Chartered Accountant in London. The 1971 Liberation War of Bangladesh had a profound effect on Abed, then in his thirties and holding a senior Corporate Executive position at Shell Oil. The war dramatically changed the direction of his life: he left his job and went to London to devote himself to Bangladesh's War of Independence. There, Abed helped initiate the "Help Bangladesh" campaign, organizing funds to raise awareness about Bangladesh. After the war, Abed returned to the newly independent Bangladesh to find the economy of his country in ruins. Millions of refugees, who had sought shelter in India during the war, started trekking back into the country. The tremendous need for humanitarian relief called for urgent efforts. Abed decided to take action by setting up BRAC (formerly, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), dedicated to the rehabilitation of returning refugees in a remote area in northeastern Bangladesh. This work led him and BRAC to deal with the long-term task of improving living conditions of the rural poor. He focused his organization's efforts on helping the poor develop their capacity to manage and control their own destiny. Thus, BRAC's primary objectives emerged as alleviation of poverty and empowerment of the poor. In the span of only three decades, BRAC grew to become the largest non-governmental development organization in the world, in terms of its scale and the diversity of its interventions. Abed has been recognized with a number of awards, including the Ramon

Magsaysay Prize, the UNICEF Maurice Pate Award, the Olof Palme Prize, Schwab Foundation's Social Entrepreneurship Award, UNDP's Mahbub-ul-Haq Award, the Henry R. Kravis Prize in Leadership, and the first Clinton Global Citizenship Award. He is also a founding member of Ashoka's Global Academy for Social Entrepreneurship, and has received several honorary degrees, including Doctor of Humane Letters from Yale University.