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“What Are Governments Doing to Promote Social Justice?: BRAC’s Three Decades in Bangladesh”

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What was the problem?

Bangladesh is an economically underdeveloped country with one of the densest populations in the world —145 million Bangladeshis live in 145,000 square kilometers. All major development indicators demonstrate the country has a long way to go to bring people out of poverty: 40% of Bangladesh’s citizens live below the poverty line; the national literacy rate is about 45%; and infant and maternal mortality rates are among the highest in the world. The rich are getting richer, the poor poorer, corruption remains a challenge, and democracy is struggling. Yet, progress is certainly being made.

What was the innovation?

BRAC, which is one of the most successful private development organizations in Bangladesh, is also the largest national NGO in the world. It began as a small relief and rehabilitation initiative in 1972 with a staff of 50 to assist poor refugees returning to Bangladesh following its foundation as an independent nation. Over the last three decades, it has developed into a large, multi-faceted development organization working directly with the poor, with a particular focus women and children. Programs and interventions in microfinance, health, education, social development and training have evolved and consolidated. BRAC’s two major goals are to alleviate poverty and to empower the poor, especially women.

Currently, BRAC has over 6 million micro-finance clients, 1.7 million students, and an annual budget of 330 million U.S. dollars. It employs a full-time staff of 47,000 and a part-time staff of 55,000, with branches in Afghanistan, Africa, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, London, and New York. BRAC’s activities include legal services to support human rights, essential health care programs, and social development initiatives such as building village theaters. In 2001, BRAC established its own university to train future country leaders through undergraduate and graduate studies.

What obstacles did you face?

The disparity between rich and poor in Bangladesh continues to widen, and government corruption is a major challenge. In order to prevent corruption within BRAC, the organization’s leaders have instituted a number of mechanisms for oversight. Each BRAC staff member must undergo rigorous training to create a value-driven institutional culture. The Training Division also plans regular activities to ensure that BRAC leadership capacities continue to grow, both in Bangladesh and abroad. An ombudsperson ensures that complaints within the organization can be arbitrated

impartially without regard to staff hierarchies. To improve accountability, the organization maintains its own strong Accounts and Audits Division.

What were the planned versus actual results?

The success factors for BRAC include substantial investment in research and evaluation, which supports continuous innovation in programming. The organization's leadership has also proven its commitment to the goals of poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor. BRAC's reliance on professionalism has generated strong Training and Accounts and Audits Divisions, which work to improve the organization's capacity, transparency, and accountability. Finally, BRAC's evolving government relationship and network of partners has enabled it to implement programs easily and efficiently.

Salehuddin Ahmed is Pro-Vice Chancellor of BRAC University and a member of the BRAC University Governing Board. He is also the Chair of the BUILD-BRAC University Initiative on Learning and Development, a strategic think-tank of the University. Dr. Ahmed has published widely on development and poverty alleviation and currently teaches a range of topics including management, leadership, work motivation, and stress management. He also initiated, and is in the process of implementing, a three-year faculty capacity building agreement with George Washington University with funding from the United States State Department. Before becoming Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University, Dr. Ahmed served as Deputy Executive Director of BRAC, in which capacity he administered programs in Human Resource Development, Training and Capacity Building, Health and Population, Rural Development, Monitoring and Auditing, Finance, Logistics, and Construction. Dr. Ahmed has been a Visiting Professor at the School for International Training (SIT) and Marlboro College, Vermont. He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship in August 2004. Dr. Ahmed holds a Ph.D. in Economics from Kharkov National University and a Master's in Management from the Asian Institute of Management in Manila, and has participated in several training programs at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.