

Sir Fazle's Contribution to Education

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's immense contribution to education is through the pioneering work of BRAC, a development organisation he founded and continues to lead. When Abed established BRAC in early 1972 as a relief and rehabilitation project in a remote village in Bangladesh, immediately following the country's war of liberation, the literacy rate was below 20%. Despite the population more than doubling since then, the country has made remarkable progress in providing access to education. Almost all children now enroll in the first year of primary school. Uniquely among poor countries, the gender gap in enrollment in primary and secondary education has also been eliminated. Alongside government and private sector efforts, BRAC's groundbreaking education programme, a brainchild of Abed, is a key factor in these achievements.

From the beginning of his foray into development work, Abed viewed education as a crucial catalyst for change. In his youth, he was influenced by the teachings of his maternal grandfather, an education minister in the government of Bengal. Later he was inspired by the ideas of the likes of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Soon after starting BRAC's relief and rehabilitation activities, Abed realized the need for sustainable development efforts. When BRAC shifted its focus to long term community development activities in 1972, education naturally became a key area of work. Abed's very first development plan for BRAC aimed to make literate the entire adult population of the village in which it was then working and get all primary school dropouts back into school.

But Abed understood that education was about more than just schools and books. He ensured that functional education was an underlying fundamental in BRAC's organizing principles. Initially, this encompassed awareness building and literacy and numeracy skills for adults. Abed had BRAC develop its own learning materials in the form of posters, flip charts etc. By the end of the 1970's, BRAC had developed a comprehensive educational system, including a community development and literacy and numeracy curricula, training, research and publishing. But functional education for adults would not ensure sustainable progress for such a large population. For that, Abed believed there was a need to ensure primary level literacy for all children. In 1974, BRAC started engaging with the primary education sector through a monthly magazine for children which was sent to all 45,000 public schools in the country. But poverty, distance, corruption and poor quality of education were keeping a large majority of children from the public school system.

So, in 1985, Abed initiated a pilot non-formal primary education programme. He wanted to demonstrate that education could be made relevant, cost-effective and of a high quality and that retention rates could be improved and gender imbalance could be rectified. In conducting this experiment, Abed sought help from expert educators at local universities. What emerged was a revolutionary model in primary education – a one-room school where a teacher who is a member of the local community takes a class of 33 children through the entire 5-year primary curriculum in

BRAC's Evolution

1972	Fazle Hasan Abed establishes BRAC
1973	Activities transform from relief and rehabilitation to long term community development, including adult literacy interventions
1985	BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education Programme (NFPE) is started
1993	Adolescent Reading Centres are opened
1994	The Non-Formal Primary Education programme is replicated in Africa
1995	The Continuing Education programme is started
1997	BRAC Pre-Primary Schools commence operation
1999	The Adolescent Peer Organised Network (APON) course is created
2001	BRAC University is established. The Post-Primary Basic Education (PBE) programme is set up
2002	BRAC commences development work in Afghanistan
2003	The Continuing Education and Post Primary Basic Education programmes are integrated into a single programme called the Post Primary Basic and Continuing Education (PACE) programme
2004	BRAC University establishes the James P. Grant School of Public Health and the Institute of Educational Development
2006	BRAC's development programmes in Africa commence
2008	BRAC's education programme initiates capacity building of government and registered non-government primary schools

four years. The school's customized curriculum and books were designed using state-of-the-art teaching-learning methods and strong involvement of both parents.

Abed had always believed that women, though worst affected by poverty, could play a crucial role as agents

of change. He understood that educating girls would not only empower them and help improve their status in their families and community, but also ensure their future family's wellbeing. Educated women would make better decisions regarding family planning etc. and subsequently their children's health and education. So, as with all BRAC initiatives, gender became an essential ingredient for BRAC's education programme from the very beginning. To offset the existing gender imbalance in Bangladesh's education system, Abed set a target of 70% for the enrolment of girls and encouraged the recruitment of mostly female teachers.

His extensive reading helped Abed keep up with the latest thinking on development issues. He reached out to educators in the Netherlands, New Zealand and England to help develop interactive learning material for BRAC schools.

Abed is a big believer in scale. "Small is beautiful," he is known to say, "but big is necessary". So when the pilot schools, whose terms ended in 1987, proved to be a success, Abed had his team scale up and in just five short years, BRAC recovered almost 20,000 children who had been fallen out of the formal system. By the mid 90's, BRAC had 19,000 schools and graduated over 500,000 children in Bangladesh and its school model was being replicated in Africa.

A large majority of BRAC graduates in Bangladesh were going into the public system for higher education. But some, mostly girls, were not continuing their education due to social pressures such as marriage. For these adolescents, Abed set up a 'continuing education' programme, which encompassed community libraries and adolescent reading centres where these students could stay in touch with books and learning materials. Eventually, these centres became a platform for further functional education and empowerment of adolescent girls.

Abed understood the need for harnessing the power of the youth – not only those from disadvantaged families, but also the elite. Under his guidance, BRAC set up a university with the mission to build capacity on a national level by creating "functional elites". In addition to providing a comprehensive liberal education, BRAC University has established several institutes for post-graduate research and training to strengthen human capacity in several key areas critical to national development.

It was always Abed's intention that BRAC schools would be a temporary solution to the issue of access to education. He aimed for a deeper engagement with the formal education system. Towards this, one initiative he undertook was the development in 1997 of a network of pre-primary schools to give young children from illiterate households a head start before they entered into the formal primary system. Before this, pre-primary education was a concept reserved for the elite in Bangladesh. It is now being adopted into the national education system.

The government has since actively involved BRAC in providing educational development services. In 1997, BRAC partnered with the government to develop the teaching and management capacities of public secondary school teachers and administrators. In 1999, BRAC took over dysfunctional community primary schools to make them operational.

In 2002, intent on spreading the learning of BRAC's post-war rehabilitation experience in Bangladesh, Abed established BRAC's first international operations in Afghanistan. Education was a key sector there as well, especially for girls. Of the over 70,000 students currently attending BRAC schools in Afghanistan, 85% are girls.

Abed has institutionalized cross-cutting concepts of inclusiveness and innovation at BRAC. In the education sector, the development of bi-lingual schools and materials for ethnic minority groups, inclusion of special needs children in BRAC schools, training of teachers and communities on special needs issues and equipping schools and students with assistive devices are testaments to this. Constant innovation is a cornerstone of BRAC's education programme, which has introduced concepts such as computer-aided learning, Multi Strategy Language Teaching, mentoring etc. into both its own operations as well as partner systems.

No other organisation can match the range, quality, scale and effectiveness of BRAC's education programme. Present in half of the 10 countries across Asia, Africa and the Caribbean in which BRAC currently operates, it is the largest secular, non-formal education system in the world. More than 35,000 BRAC schools worldwide are providing primary education to more than 1 million students (over 65% girls). Nearly 5 million children (over 65% girls) have already graduated from BRAC's primary schools and over 95% of them have gone on to formal schooling at the secondary level. It is also one of the most effective - in Bangladesh's state-conducted primary completion examination in 2010, 99 percent of the BRAC students passed, a rate at least 15% higher than the national average. But what really differentiates BRAC's education programme from all others is its cost-effectiveness. In Bangladesh, the per-child cost for BRAC's four-year primary education is under USD 30! And BRAC's interventions are not limited to just primary schooling – between early childhood to young-adulthood, almost 10 million people have to date directly benefited from a variety of education interventions run by BRAC.

It is the foresight and guidance of Sir Fazle Hasan Abed which has made these achievements possible. He has been the visionary behind most of BRAC's groundbreaking interventions in education, quietly guiding his team of dedicated development practitioners towards constant reinvention. Of all his successes in ensuring education for all, Abed can be most proud that in the hearts of millions of disadvantaged children around the world he has inculcated a love of learning which they will carry with them for the rest of their lives.