

BRAC's Experience Building Development Programs in Environments of Conflict and Disaster

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In a discussion hosted by the South Asia program, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, the Founder and Chairperson of BRAC provided insight into the history of his organization and its current work in dealing with issues like political conflicts, natural disaster and illiteracy in developing countries. Founded in Bangladesh in 1972, BRAC has emerged as an independent, virtually self-financed exemplar in sustainable human development that has expanded its programs across countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan and Southern Sudan. Today as the international community is grappling with the effects of the Haiti earthquake and Pakistan floods that have left thousands dead and millions displaced, BRAC is rapidly and effectively assisting the victims and fostering long term sustainable development in these regions. Hence, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed came to CSIS at a time of great significance.

The Emergence of BRAC

Sir Fazle opened his remarks with a brief history of his organization. Soon after Bangladesh's War of Liberation came to an end in 1971, Sir Fazle returned back to Bangladesh from London where he was working as a Shell Oil executive, to help provide immediate assistance to the 10 million refugees flowing back to the newly independent Bangladesh from India. Witnessing the efficiency with which BRAC conducted its operations in its first year, donors soon came forward in support of this nascent organization, confident in Sir Fazle's ability to manage and operate a relief organization as a former executive of a multinational company. Hence, in time, BRAC's mission shifted from immediate disaster relief to long term development.

Evolution of BRAC: From a Relief Operation to an International Development Organization

In Bangladesh during the 1970s, poverty was endemic. While issues like low literacy rate, high child mortality rate were rampant in society, the year 1979 was announced by the United Nations to be the International Year of the Child. This inspired Sir Fazle to first tackle the increasing child mortality rate in his country. Nothing claimed more young lives in Bangladesh than diarrhea, caused by waterborne diseases like cholera. Diarrhea kills through dehydration. The standard treatment of intravenous fluid was not an option in poor communities devoid of proper health facilities. Ironically, researchers in Bangladesh had recently discovered that dehydration could also be treated orally with water, mixed with salt and sugar. Capitalizing on this monumental medical breakthrough, BRAC launched a landmark program from 1980 to 1990, where BRAC volunteers visited to almost 14 million households to teach mothers how to make oral rehydration fluid at home. Mothers could now save their children with the help of simple household supplies. The success of the campaign was significant and child mortality rates in Bangladesh were cut in half. This gave BRAC the confidence to scale up all its projects and introduce a range of programs throughout Bangladesh, ranging from primary education, healthcare, agricultural support, human rights to legal services and microfinance.

Moving Beyond Borders

Sir Fazle underlined the fact that once your organization has been successful in improving the livelihoods of an estimated 110 million people, the "entire world becomes your backyard." Hence, in 2002, BRAC went international by taking its range of development interventions to Afghanistan. Since then, BRAC has expanded to a total of eight countries across Asia and Africa, successfully adapting its unique integrated development model across varying geographic and socioeconomic contexts. In the span of just 8 years since the start of its operations in Afghanistan in 2002, BRAC has grown to become

Afghanistan's largest and most sustainable development organization. BRAC is implementing comprehensive development model in all of the country's 34 provinces. Under the microfinance multiplied approach, BRAC has disbursed more than USD 195 million in microloans provided health, education, and recruited and trained poultry and livestock workers. In a similar fashion, BRAC began operations in Pakistan in 2007 through a microfinance program. Subsequently, BRAC started 20 pre-primary schools in the volatile regions of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. Another significant venture of BRAC was in earthquake hit country of Haiti. Drawing on BRAC's experience of starting up in post-conflict and post-disaster environments, BRAC aims for a multifaceted, bottom-up intervention in Haiti to address immediate needs for relief and long-term needs for rebuilding economic activity and livelihoods. BRAC has made a credible commitment to improve the lives of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged people in Haiti, empowering women and girls, and fostering bottom-up economic development through sustainable financial services.

BRAC Today and Tomorrow

In response to a question enquiring about the major differences between a Northern developed country NGO versus one from the developing world, Sir Fazle stated that an organization like BRAC that was conceived in the aftermath of war in one of the poorest countries has first-hand insight and experience necessary to understand poverty's many faces and develop effective and innovative tools to help overcome them. Additionally, he highlighted the major cost structure difference between a Northern NGO and Southern NGO. For example, the Danger Pay allowance of a Bangladeshi working in Afghanistan is \$3000 per month as compared to an American, who will earn around \$15,000. Sir Fazle touched on several other issues that were not addressed directly in his opening remarks like, the role of women. BRAC was quick to recognize that rural women, while being the worst affected by poverty could in fact play a crucial role as agents of change in their communities. So BRAC started and continues its work with poor rural women, forming village organizations with 35 to 40 members which are at the core of BRAC's microfinance initiatives. Members are encouraged to strive towards self-reliance and are provided with means to generate income and make saving towards a better future. BRAC has also initiated several programs across many countries focused solely on girls' education because, as Sir Fazle put it, boys generally have more opportunities to receive education than girls. In response to a question about BRAC's funding, Sir Fazle repeatedly laid emphasis on the fact that "self-reliance is key" at BRAC, both for those BRAC supports as well as itself. From its inception as a fully donor-funded relief project, BRAC has established itself today as 70% self-financed; not only through built-in measures to ensure efficiency and cost-effectiveness, but also by innovating the concept of social enterprises. Sir Fazle concluded the event by highlighting the future driving force of social progress for BRAC and other organizations - technology. According to Sir Fazle, due to better connectivity of the world through affordable wired and wireless broadband, soon it will be easier to provide education, specifically secondary education, to children in the remotest of regions through e-learning initiatives like online courses, virtual schools, internet-based professional development, and online testing programs. Today BracNet is working relentlessly to that end by producing education software and teacher training programs to inexpensive computing devices and more resourceful websites.