

Tribute on

first death anniversary

Sir Fazle’s final letter

Sir Fazle, or Abed bhai as everyone knew him, wrote this letter after he stepped down from the position of chairperson of BRAC and BRAC International. He sent this letter to the BRAC family on 7 August 2019. Below is an excerpt of the letter.

I am writing to share with you how BRAC became my story. I started BRAC when I was 36. Growing up, starting an NGO and working in the remote villages of Bangladesh were never in my plans. With my privileged upbringing, 14 years in London, first as a student, then as a Chartered Management Accountant, having a comfortable lifestyle as a multinational company’s executive – my life was on an entirely different trajectory.

Then things changed.

The devastating Bhola cyclone of 1970 was a turning point in my life. More than 300,000 people lost their lives. Seeing the death and destruction with my own eyes made me realise how disconnected I was. My house became the headquarter of a small relief operation. Experiencing the fragility of human life, especially the vulnerability of the people living in poverty, shook me to the depth of my being. I decided to try to change this.

The War of Liberation of Bangladesh, which began soon thereafter, completely transformed me. In May of 1971, I moved to London to mobilise resources and support from the European and UK governments to get Bangladesh recognised and to denounce the genocide. Along with a few friends, I set up Action Bangladesh. We collected funds and sent relief materials home and vigorously lobbied to get Bangladesh recognised.

I sold my flat in London for 16,000 pounds and returned home in January 1972. With that money and some funds from a few close friends, I set up a relief and rehabilitation project in the remote area of Sulla. The Sulla project covered three unions in the Sunamganj and Habiganj districts in northeastern Bangladesh. That is how BRAC was born.

There was no turning back from that point. Over the next 47 years, we have grown to be one of the most effective

development organisations in the world. In 2002, BRAC started its first international operation by venturing into Afghanistan. Since then, we have expanded our international operations into 10 countries in Asia and Africa. BRAC is a unique, holistic development ecosystem comprising social enterprises, microfinance, tertiary education, investments and development programmes, all driven by the same mission.

Of course, none of these were done alone by BRAC. We are fortunate to partner with Governments, mission-aligned donors, partners and peer organisations along the way.

BRAC began its journey as the ‘Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee’. Since then, we have grown beyond being an acronym. When people ask me now what BRAC stands for, I like to say that we stand for an idea – an idea of a world where everyone has an equal opportunity to realise their potential. The passion of my lifetime has been to work with people living in poverty and to see them, with the right resources and opportunities, transform into agents of change in their own lives, families and communities.

BRAC has always believed that change is human-made. At the heart of everything we do is the conviction that everyone can be actors in history, and that no one should ever be a passive recipient of charity.

The inequalities that create divisions among rich and poor, powerful and powerless, are made by humans. So change is also possible through human acts of compassion, courage and conviction. Giving people hope, investing in confidence and reminding them of their own self-worth have been a consistent ethos across all of BRAC’s work. I have spent my life watching optimism triumph over despair when the light of self-belief is sparked in people. As a team, I want us to keep lighting these sparks. Our work should always reflect our faith in human spirit and our respect for their inherent power.

Yours, **Abed bhai**

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed: Master builder

by Ian Smillie

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of BRAC in the global effort to end poverty. It is equally difficult to separate its success from the life and work of the man who created and steered it through almost five decades, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed — ‘Abed Bhai’ to his colleagues, ‘Abed’ to his friends.

BRAC’s size and reach are, by any measure, staggering. Its microfinance lending, mostly to poor rural women, exceeds a billion dollars a year. Although BRAC is a leader in the field of microfinance, touted for a few years as the miracle remedy for poverty, Abed never saw it as a cure-all. In his mind, the key to ending poverty was new, productive enterprise. Poor people, especially women and especially in rural areas, had to make things. And to do that, they had to be better linked to resources — seeds, fertilizer, knowledge, finance — and to markets. BRAC’s social enterprises in dairy, poultry, silk, handicrafts, seed multiplication, and a dozen others, have created hundreds of thousands of livelihoods, and in time they generated income that has made BRAC largely self-financing. Microfinance was the fuel in the tank, but the engine was always innovative, productive enterprise.

The BRAC Bank, completely separate from microfinance operations, holds deposits of more than USD 2 billion and has a Moody’s long-term credit rating as good as that of Barclay’s Bank. Facts like these might catch the eye of a banker. But BRAC was and remains, an NGO with its primary focus on social development, ranked for the past four years by the Geneva-based NGO Advisor as number 1 on a list of 500 global non-profits.

BRAC pioneered non-formal primary education, mostly for girls, aiming to give literacy, dignity and hope to the next generation of mothers. Its ground-breaking

oral rehydration training programmes in the 1970s reached nine out of ten rural households in Bangladesh. That, along with innovative health, nutrition and sanitation programmes, contributed to a seven-fold reduction in the country’s child mortality. Fewer child deaths, better education and more economic opportunity, especially for women, led to a three-fold drop in the fertility rate, ending worries about unchecked population growth.

There’s hardly an area of human development that BRAC hasn’t touched in a meaningful way, taking some of its best lessons to Africa and other parts of Asia. Fazle Hasan Abed did not accomplish this all on his own. But he was able to find and motivate others — individuals, government departments, donor agencies and some of the world’s most powerful and influential policy makers. His ambition was boundless, but it rested on a quiet charisma that inspired devotion and made mountains seem scalable. He listened far more than he spoke.

I first met Abed in 1973, when BRAC was just a handful of people working out of a flat in Motijheel. It was an unlikely, almost accidental enterprise, created by a man whose life until then couldn’t possibly have suggested what was to come. He had lived comfortably for several years in London, and then worked as a senior Shell Oil accountant in Chittagong. There, he took time off to spearhead relief efforts following the 1970 cyclone and the 1971 War of Independence. Discovering the deeply entrenched poverty he had failed to notice during his privileged youth, he created what he thought would be a small, time-bound demonstration effort to show what might be accomplished with a few farming cooperatives, adult literacy and health training.

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People trapped in a cycle of destitution often do not realise their lives can be changed for the better through their own activities. Once they understand that, it is like a light gets turned on.

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Sir Fazle Hasan Abed KCMG
Founder, BRAC

A lesser man would have run from the resulting failures, but for Abed, they were lessons to be remembered and applied to the much bigger voyage on which he then embarked.

When I was completing research in 2009 for a book about BRAC, *Freedom from Want*, and trying to think about what had made it so successful, outsiders frequently told me

it was Abed’s experience with the private sector. I always doubted that. Shell perhaps gave him useful perspectives on money and management, but it could not have been the source of his ingenuity, his compassion and sense of injustice, his willingness to take risks and his insistence on learning what works, what does not, and why. He told me that a lot of it was luck, and laughed, quoting Napoleon: “Give me lucky generals.” I investigated the concept of luck and found a good summary: “Being ready for the opportunity.” Abed was always able, better than most, to see and understand opportunity. By that definition, ‘luck’ may well have played a part.

He suggested I talk with an employee who had recently returned from doctoral studies in Britain — she might have a helpful perspective on BRAC’s success. She said she had expected to find a saint or a genius around every corner, but in the end, that wasn’t the case. The answer was “common sense” — everything BRAC has achieved came about, she said, through the application of common sense. I put that in the book, but in truth, Abed did have the versatility of genius, a talent for applying common sense in a world where the concept is largely unknown and an ability to unlock doors long closed to innovation, justice and human development.

Abed never rested on well-deserved laurels;

he always argued that ‘big’ is essential in confronting poverty. Most ambitious people, however, leave a trail of wreckage and animosity behind them. With Abed, it was quite the opposite, and that too must be part of BRAC’s success — his unflappability in the face of tremendous odds and personal tragedy, his ability to build and to bring diverse people and resources together in common cause. Christopher Wren, visiting the construction site for St Paul’s, is said to have asked a stonemason what he was doing. “I’m cutting stone,” the man said.

Farther along, Wren asked another stonemason what he was doing. He said, “I’m building a cathedral.”

Abed was both Christopher Wren and the stonemason, and while BRAC in its many manifestations will continue to thrive, the legacy will always be his: Abed, Master Builder.

Ian Smillie is an Ottawa-based writer, development professional and foreign aid critic. He is the author of several books including: Freedom from Want, Blood on the Stone: Greed, Corruption and War in the Global Diamond Trade, and Diamonds. He is the chairman of Diamond Development Initiative.

Messages poured in from every corner of the world upon Sir Fazle’s passing. Friends, family and those who were directly benefited as a result of his work reflect on a life lived fully.

On my dear friend Abed

Abed was one of the foremost leaders of thought as well as action of our time. Not only did he transform Bangladesh, and indeed a lot of the world, by his radical initiatives, he proceeded to his actions through identifying what our deprived world needed, using remarkably penetrating analysis and social scrutiny. An astonishing combination of clear-headed thinking and sure-footed execution made Abed the great leader that he was. We have had very few like him in the history of the world.

Amartya Sen

Recipient of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences

You will remain our companion forever

Economists and researchers from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal always pose a question to me: ‘How is it that in Bangladesh whatever starts in one location is soon scaled up as a nationwide programme? Why does it not happen in our country?’

I give them a standard answer: ‘Because an Abed is yet to be born in your country.’

Abed has left behind a self-confident Bangladesh. The story of his immense courage, vision and creativity will continue to empower all generations to come. Abed will remain the image of Bangladesh that inspires them.

Abed, it will be easy for the coming generations to take on the responsibility of building the Bangladesh of their dreams, on the foundation that you have built.

Abed, the nation will remain indebted to you forever.

Dr Muhammad Yunus

Recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize 2006

One of the heroes of modern times

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, a Bangladeshi who is one of the heroes of modern times, helped lift Bangladeshis and tens of millions around the globe. Abed founded BRAC, one of the world’s largest aid groups, and targeted the very poor in Asia and Africa. RIP, Abed. I can think of few people who have done so much for humanity as Abed. He was a friend and someone I deeply admired and learned from. While US aid efforts in Afghanistan often flopped, he succeeded. Reflecting his humility, no one called him Sir Fazle. He was simply Abed.

Nicholas Kristof

Journalist and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner

He was a great gift to humanity

Sir Fazle Abed’s life was a great gift to humanity. His nearly 50 years of visionary leadership at BRAC transformed millions of lives in Bangladesh and beyond, and changed the way the world thinks about development. Driven by an unwavering belief in the inherent dignity of all people, he empowered those in extreme poverty to build better futures for themselves and their families. I will always be grateful for the chance to see his life-changing programmes in action in Bangladesh when I was president, for his many years of work with the Clinton Global Initiative, and for the kindness, friendship, and inspiration he gave Hillary and me including the grace and courage of the final months of his life. His legacy will live on in all the people whose lives are better, healthier and more secure because of his remarkable service.

Bill Clinton

42nd President of the United States of America

We will forever draw inspiration from his work

In 1972, after Bangladesh’s war of liberation had left many homeless, Fazle Abed left his job as a London oil executive and returned to his home country with £16,000 in his pocket — and the ambitious goal of building 10,400 houses. He ended up raising enough money to build 16,000 houses for some of the poorest people in Bangladesh and still had enough left over to start his next project. That’s who Sir Fazle was as a humanitarian, and that’s what he helped us learn about development work: How to build a big, efficient organisation, while never forgetting who you were doing it for. We were saddened to hear of his passing and will forever draw inspiration from his work, as will the rest of the world, which he left so much better than he found.

Bill and Melinda Gates

Founders, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation