

Conversation

Fazle Hasan Abed Outlines the Battle against Poverty

If one should draw up a list of the world's most successful non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee — better known as BRAC — would be very much near the top, perhaps as some would say, right at the top. The distinction earned by this 22-year old organisation, better known internationally than nationally, rests not so much on many awards it has won over the years, including the prestigious Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 1980 and the Maurice Pate Award of UNICEF in 1992, as on the long hard sustained battle it has fought against all that afflicts the impoverished millions in Bangladesh, from malnutrition to illiteracy, from rising unemployment to population explosion. Herein lies that real success of BRAC, the success that endures and serves as a model for other developing countries. Right from the time, it got off the ground during the war of liberation, BRAC identified the linkages among the problems facing the country and looked for their solutions, sometimes separately and sometimes in a package. If the start was a modest one, involving only a handful of people, it was also innovative with a much stronger grass-root appeal than many other NGOs. Not surprisingly, during the past two decades, it grew into a massive organisation, in manpower and activities, drawing moral and financial support from all parts of the world.

One cannot talk about BRAC without speaking about Fazle Hasan Abed, the 57-year old, a former oil executive-turned-social reformer who serves BRAC as its Founder and Executive Director. But many would say, Abed is BRAC, a plaudit that he denies firmly, with a self-effacing smile. There is little doubt that Abed has served as the motivating spirit, the heart and soul, of this unique organisation.

To know more about BRAC and indeed about its future plans — this is perhaps the most exciting part of it — The Daily Star joined Abed in a four-hour-long conversation at the modest but tastefully furnished BRAC office at Dhaka's Mahakhali Commercial Area. The conversation was conducted by The Daily Star Editor S. M. ALI who was assisted by the paper's Executive Editor MAHFUZ ANAM Chief Reporter ANWARUL HUQ and Staff Photographer ENAM. Abed was assisted by Faruq Ahmad Choudhury, a former diplomat and now an Adviser to BRAC, and by the organisation's Director of Programmes, Dr Salehuddin Ahmed.

Akbar Kabir (who later became adviser to President Ziaur Rahman) as the coordinator of the project. He had just retired. Then I brought Kaiser Zaman from Shell. A board of directors was formed and that is how HELP was set up.

DS: When did you start BRAC?
FHA: During the liberation war, I went to London and started an organization called Action Bangladesh together with some of my friends to build public opinion for Bangladesh. It became a large organization with a lot of supporters. In May or June, 1971 we gave a front page advertisement in the Times saying that 'a genocide is going on in Bangladesh' and so on.

In September, my friend Vikar Chowdhury and I arrived in Calcutta with a number of things to do. One was to set up food godowns around Bangladesh border — the liberated areas. Vikar stayed back and set up an office in Calcutta. I sent out as much money as I could raise. After the liberation of Bangladesh, there was some money, about two lakh rupees, left from our various operations in the Calcutta account. With that and my own money I decided to set up an organization. The total amount came to three lakh.

DS: So one could say BRAC was launched with a modest capital of three lakh rupees? How did you get BRAC started?
FHA: No. BRAC came later. Vikar and I met with some one you all know, Suranjit Sengupta. Vikar went with him to the Sullia area of Sunamganj which was a Hindu majority area. Pakistan army with local forces had burnt down everything there. It was a scene of complete destruction — no houses, no cattle etc. Vikar came back and suggested we might be able to do some relief work there.

DS: You were no longer with Shell?
FHA: No. When I left for London, I left Shell.
DS: Could one say that BRAC started with relief and rehabilitation work in the post-liberation period?
FHA: Yes, that's how BRAC started. I thought I would give two years of my life to this. I set up the organization and hired young people for the rehabilitation in Sullia. It is a remote area. It takes two days to go there. I decided to work there because, I thought, nobody would take the trouble of going there.

DS: Let me have the time-frame.
FHA: February, 1972.
DS: Could one say BRAC was established in February, 1972?
FHA: Yes.
DS: Tell me about something that has puzzled me for the last few months. What is it that made you think of BRAC? BRAC

DS: How many people were working with you at that time in the organisation?
FHA: About 30, all volunteers. Father Timm who was then the Principal of Notre Dame College also came with 12 of his boys to help. Later when he got the Magsaysay award five years ago, he said, "Abed brought me into development work."

What happened after the initial months of relief work was that the Germans committed 3 million Deutsche Mark for the HELP-Monpura project and the project was approved by the government. We wanted to hire people for the project when the money was available. The whole organization needed to be set up. So we looked for someone who could run the organization — the first NGO. We hired



At the roundtable conversation, from left to right, Anwarul Huq, Mahfuz Anam, Dr Salehuddin Ahmed, Faruq Ahmad Choudhury, S M Ali and Fazle Hasan Abed.

rector of Oxfam came to my Motijheel office (I was using Vikar's law chamber as the BRAC office) and said 'I hear you have a project in mind. That was in the first quarter of 1972. He saw the project proposal and within 15 days of his going back to London, Oxfam made a commitment of 189,000 pounds. That was the first grant provided by Oxfam UK.

DS: How did you feel?
FHA: It was exciting in the sense that we had so much to do. As part of the project 10,000 houses were to be built. Boats and fishing nets were to be provided to the fishermen. Even masons did not have their tools; carpenters didn't have anything to work with. It was primarily a housing programme though.

DS: Did you take up any work other than building houses?
FHA: We also took up relief work. We collected milk from UNICEF, opened feeding centres and gave milk to the children. We hired doctors to provide medical assistance.

DS: Did you take up any cultivation programme as part of your project?
FHA: As we were progressing with our rehabilitation work it was already February. In Sullia area, we have only one crop — Boro — no Aman. I thought, unless we planted something in March there would be no crop for that year

and everybody would be starving. There were no cows for ploughing. In those days it was hard to get a power tiller. My maternal uncle took his two power tillers along with his men and tilled about 300 acres of land. I did not bother about whose land was being tilled and who was getting benefited. At that point tilling was more important. So we did it.

During that period I went to Assam and met the Chief Minister there. I asked for his permission to take 21 lakh bamboos which float through the Kushiara river. The permission was given and bamboos came floating to our territory.

DS: More or less you had the operational headquarters in Sullia?
FHA: All the work was going on in Sullia. I was staying in Dhaka. I had a logistic office in Dhaka. I had to keep liaison with the government officials and donor agencies. I also had to look over the banking. I needed a big logistic department but I had only three or four people to do this.

DS: What did you do with the volunteers?
FHA: They were not really volunteers in the true sense. They were paid salaries: 300 taka for an MA, 200 taka for a BA — and if below the grade of BA, 150 taka per month.

DS: Did you have any programme during the famine of 1974?
FHA: There was a famine in North Bengal in 1974. People were dying like flies. Cole Dodge, who was in Oxfam Bangladesh at that time, said Oxfam will provide the fund and BRAC will implement the programme of feeding in Rangpur.

When I arrived in the area in January 1975, there were hardly any men around. They had all fled. This is what happens during famines in our society. Men go away once they have sold their cows, goats and utensils. They leave for towns and cities in search of work and money. But they seldom send their remittance to their families, because they can hardly survive themselves. What they leave behind are women and children who face sure death.

DS: How long did you continue the rehabilitation work?
FHA: The programme went on well and it was a 10-month programme. By the end of the year the relief and rehabilitation stage was over. We understood that poverty in Bangladesh could not be alleviated by the rehabilitation programme alone. Poverty is a much more endemic thing. It needs a long-term commitment and understanding of how poverty can be removed by getting the poor involved in their own development.

DS: When did you start the rural development programme?
FHA: I decided to go into the field of development and asked my friends if we should do it in Sullia. It is so remote, so difficult to reach, but all our staff agreed to do it there. They rather forced me to stay on in Sullia, and start the second phase of the programme, which we called the multisectoral rural development programme. The concept was to set up a programme for Bangladesh's poverty alleviation or a rural development programme.

DS: So your first grant of 189,000 pounds came from Oxfam and you moved it on to projects like rehabilitation. Now to continue with the growth of BRAC would have involved two things: one was an agenda for your future activity and you were looking at the problem of moving away from rehabilitation to poverty alleviation.
FHA: Right. At that time various ideas of rural development

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Dodge. He took an emaciated child full of scabies on his lap like Mother Teresa does. He could do that. Despite all my empathy for the poor and the suppressed I still had the hesitation to do what he did.

DS: How did BRAC start its expansion programme?
FHA: BRAC's first expansion started in Manikgonj and Jamalpur after the famine. These were also experimental projects but we were learning as we were expanding. We learned that we have to be both effective and efficient. There is no point expanding otherwise. You will be wasting a lot of resources. This formulation was in my mind and I have also talked about it with many theoreticians.

David Korten, an organisational theorist, said BRAC is the prototype of a 'learning organization'. According to him, a 'learning organization' is a group of people continually enhancing their capacity to create what they want to create. But another theorist, Peter Senge, described the factors of a 'learning organization' in a different way. He talked of five characteristics:

—Building a shared vision: That means binding people together around a common identity, essence of destiny, the practice of unearthing shared pictures of the future that cost a genuine commitment.

—Personal mastering: The skill of continually clarifying, and deepening the personal vision of an organizational participation.

—Examining mental model: The ability to unearth the internal pictures of the world. To scrutinize them and to make

the students perform. BRAC launched the programme in five big districts between 1980 and 1983. Seven more districts were brought under the programme by 1986. The rest of the country was covered by 1990.

"Covering the entire country meant covering 12 million households" according to Abed. "BRAC is the only NGO in the world which has worked in every village of its own country."

Initially, the problems were numerous. How to define measurements for a standard quantity. Not all households in remote villages possessed a glass. A utensil measuring half a litre had to be marked. But the results were rewarding.

A month after the women were taught, a random survey was carried out to check how accurately they had learnt the lesson. Five per cent of the women were tested to see if they could remember all seven points involved in the preparation of ORS.

The women prepared the solution which was then tested in the laboratory. If the entire test went well, the worker who taught the women got six Taka. If the woman could remember six points, then the worker received three Taka and if she remembered less than five points, only one Taka was paid.

And if laboratory tests showed that the solution was not within the tolerance range, no money was paid at all. So the worker had to make an effort. In order to make the campaign effective, emphasis was laid on quality rather than quantity.

The workers were told to teach less households but to teach effectively. They were not to teach more than 12 households a day. If any worker earned less than 700 taka per month, this meant she was not performing well and her services would be terminated.

BRAC's programme in this field was highly appreciated by Nigerian Health Minister Nelson

WE had been meeting Fazle Hasan Abed socially for some years, watching his activities, rather of BRAC, from a distance, with admiration. Some of our staff members visited his projects and returned with reports which provided with a somewhat partial view of what was going on in what is undoubtedly the largest NGO in the country. In terms of its size, dimension, social commitments and future plans. But we kept putting off a long detailed conversation between Abed and a team from the Star.

When we finally met a few weeks ago, we were fully rewarded for our long wait. As in all our previous conversations with such noted personalities as, Poet Shamsur Rahman, Prof Mohammad Yunus, Prof Rehman Sobhan and Jim Grant, our discussion was totally unstructured, with no written questions to follow. Of course, there were tape recorders and we had to work hard — in putting it to the shape we have given it today in this two-page spread.

The arrangement suited Abed. At social meetings, he was always an easy man to talk to. During the conversation, he was more than just articulate. His in-depth responses to our questions reflected his confidence, modesty, a remarkable attention to details of his projects and a vision for the future, not just of BRAC but of Bangladesh. Maybe, soon after our conversation got off the ground, the barrier that so often separates a section of the national media from people who often treat the press with some unease disappeared and, to put it simply, we stood on the same side, with shared commitments, obligations and challenges.

Now, we are pleased extensive extracts from the conversation between Fazle Hasan Abed and a team of The Daily Star.

Daily Star (DS): How do you trace the history of BRAC. How did it start?

Fazle Hasan Abed (FHA): Well, I think I have to go back to November 11, 1970 when we had a cyclone which killed some three million people. At that time, I worked for the Shell Company in Chittagong. Immediately after the cyclone, I organised a team to visit the islands to assess the situation. The first island the team went to was Sandwip. After Sandwip it went to another island which is even more remote. It found the area ravaged; thousands of corpses were lying about. That is the first time I came in contact with disaster of this magnitude, human suffering, death and destruction. This prompted me to set up an organization called HELP. Within 15-20 days of the disaster various donor agencies started flocking into Dhaka and Chittagong. I offered them prompt assistance. HELP drew up a plan — Rehabilitation and Development programme for Monpura Island.

DS: Were you still with Shell?
FHA: I was still with Shell but then this was outside the work of the company. The Monpura Island had 49,000 people of which only 12,600 people were alive. I decided that HELP would try to rehabilitate them. That's how I became involved in disaster relief work and also started thinking in terms of organising people, housing, reconstruction and things like that.

DS: How many people were working with you at that time in the organisation?
FHA: About 30, all volunteers. Father Timm who was then the Principal of Notre Dame College also came with 12 of his boys to help. Later when he got the Magsaysay award five years ago, he said, "Abed brought me into development work."

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— Photo: Shezad Noorani