

Future Plans Cover Wider Grounds and Bigger Challenges

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 came from the Comilla Model from Akhtar Hamid Khan of 'community development,' village-based cooperatives and thana sector cooperative associations and all that. So, we started organizing villages into cooperatives and village groups. The model was 'community development.' It was a multi-sectoral programme in the sense that we had health and family planning programmes, cooperatives and rural institutions. It was employment and income generation, training of youth to get into income generating activities and functional education for adults.

DS: How many villages were covered under the programme?
 FHA: The programme started with 200 villages in our project area. The Sulla project continued in its second phase. I did not have any problem in getting funds as the first phase had been so well done. Oxfam told me that out of the 700 projects it funds all over the world, it was one of the best managed ones.

I needed \$ 480,000 for the second phase of the programme. It said it was not only going to give money to us but would also get all other Oxfams — Oxfam Canada, Oxfam USA — to contribute. Oxfam's partners in Australia were asked to contribute and they more or less became an Oxfam consortium to fund the second phase of the programme. So, money was never a problem after 1972. In the second phase, we did many things and learned many things. One was that communities in rural Bangladesh are not homogeneous; and the landed and the landless are always in conflict.

DS: Do you mean 'homogeneity' in the economic sense?
 FHA: Economic homogeneity is not there. The villages are riddled with factions and kinship, loyalty ties, and economically different groups of people.

DS: We have covered the history more or less. Now we have gone into what kind of agenda you were developing up to that point of time. And let us have some of the lessons learnt.
 FHA: During the first three years the lesson we learnt was that village people were not homogeneous and a community did not exist in villages. Factions, kinship, and differences in economic status were always creating conflicts within the community. The landless were asking for higher wages, while the landed would like to pay the lowest possible wage. So, everything that we tried to do — growing food or improving the yield of the land, growing more crops — benefited only the landowners. If we dug a canal to irrigate some land, who was getting the benefit? Whose land was this and who was benefiting? This kind of questions cropped up.

DS: Which period are you talking about?
 FHA: From 1973 to 1975. It was the first phase of the BRAC development programme.
 In Sulla, we started with an assumption that the village is a community. We found that the concept did not exist in reality. Secondly, all the programmes that we took were benefiting the comparatively better off people. Agricultural programmes were benefiting the landed people rather than the landless.

Health and family planning programmes were also taken up. We started with health insurance. The process was to insure everybody who would give five seers of paddy to the paramedics at the time of harvest and in return they would be provided with curative care and medicine. By early 1973, the first batch of 20 paramedics were trained for a year from within the community.

DS: But you found that the model was not working well?
 FHA: No, it was not. Because the poor people, poorest of the poor, were unable to pay five seers of paddy for each family. But the rich and the better off took advantage of it. I found that about two-thirds of the people were insured but the one-third left out were the poorest whom we wanted to serve.

I decided to raise the insurance premium a little and get this 30 per cent covered by the insurance so that the rich would pay for the poor. But I couldn't get the rich to accept that idea. My conception proved wrong. Moreover, we realised that as soon as BRAC left the project area these fellows would become quacks, charging high rates for their services. Another thing that I learned is that I cannot train villagers and hope that they will live in the villages forever serving according to my vision of things.

DS: How do you see the issue of human rights?
 FHA: In my view there are four levels in the process of human rights implementation. One, making people aware of their rights. The second is building within the community a mechanism by which conflicts can be resolved. Thirdly, when the conflict cannot be resolved within the community, it goes to either the police or the courts. So get the legal system to operate effectively so that the courts provide justice. The fourth level is the parliament — the law-

makers and the law itself. The law could be unjust. Who changes the law? The law changes because the lawmakers, who are pressed by the people, change the law. In our society it will happen only when people become responsive and put pressure on the system to change. Only then unjust laws can be changed. I think all the four levels must gradually start working properly.

DS: Some people get the feeling that we might be going backwards while you look at the scenario with optimism and reach out to the fourth level. The divisiveness of the nation, the inability of our people today to raise consciousness and the sliding back from any kind of consensus — all these worries a lot of people. Don't they worry you?
 FHA: They do worry me too. To some extent I think the problem has to do with the function of the religion-cultural milieu or the situation that we now have in this country. You know Lewis Trowse, a French anthropologist, who wrote this wonderful book called 'Tropic of the Tropics.' It was written some 15 years ago. There are some very interesting pieces of ideas. He said he went to Delhi and told his driver to show him the city. The driver goes from Kutub Mihar to Lodi Gardens, to Humayun's tomb and goes on and on till he travels 26 miles of the city of Delhi. He thinks no city in the world in the middle ages was as large as Delhi. Rome was one square kilometer, London was two kilometers, Paris was three square kilometers — why was Delhi so large? He then started looking at history. He said that this fellow Kutubuddin Ibeq who built the Kutub Minar, stayed here, his son Bolbon went there. So each fellow built his own thing. Each of them wanted to build something himself. So there is no continuity.

DS: That is debatable.
 FHA: No. Look at Bangladesh. What happened here? As soon as Bangladesh is liberated Jinnah Avenue becomes Bangabandhu Avenue. We are denying history as though he never existed. Jinnah did exist, but we want to deny him. He may never have been good for us, but how can we deny him? One regime starts something, the next regime thinks that it should all be wiped out completely. So we start again. Award League district governorship goes and Ziaur Rahman comes with Gram Sarkar. As soon as Ershad comes in, Gram Sarkar goes. He starts with Upazila. As soon as Ershad goes, Upazila becomes thana. Upazila was such a good name, lovely name. Thana is a bad name, it means police station. Where is the sense of history, of continuity?
 DS: When you say something about the continuity part...
 FHA: It is of historical continuity. If you make a building well it will survive 500 years. That doesn't mean the system survives. There was a research on all the 15th century institutions which were flourishing. Only 31 survived out of 500. Those are Oxford, Cambridge, Bologna... Twenty-nine are universities in two or three churches. The companies didn't survive because they have not met the needs of various times. The universities survived because they probably had met that need, they had to change. When I think of BRAC, I think of an institution. I am always thinking in terms of how BRAC should survive. Is BRAC going to be accountable, be responsible to the needs of the differing times as Bangladesh will progress?

DS: We see excellent examples of success. Why can't different NGOs like Grameen Bank, BRAC, Gohoshasthya together develop a national vision?
 FHA: In the work of NGOs, the bureaucracy feels slighted. We have come through a process by which all development, all changes are supposed to be done by the government. Our bureaucrats think that they are supposed to do things for the country, not for the people. So they want to keep us out. Other societies are changing. Even Russia which thought that the communist party could do things and nobody else, has changed. And I am sure these changes will come here also so that the government is not the only purveyor of bureaucratic, political, and all kinds of power. I wouldn't just single out the bureaucrats, it's the whole psycho-social ethos.

Faruk A. Chowdhury (FAC): There's a complete lack of openness of the minds of the people. I will just give one example. The deputy prime minister of an African country wishes to come here to see BRAC's education programme. Naturally it requires some protocol. So the government comes in. Our ambassador to their country writes to the government. The government writes to the relevant ministry. The education ministry cannot believe that a deputy prime minister of a country will come only to see a BRAC programme. How can it be possible? As he is not interested to

go to various places like the universities so our government is not sure how to deal with it.

DS: What about the political parties? Do they come to you to learn from the experience of BRAC? Given your success record, one would expect that they would try and build their party's development programme, by learning from your experience.
 FAC: They look upon BRAC as an employment agency. If you go to Mr Abed he will give you a job. That's how they think.

DS: But my question is, why? FHA: Why? Because they don't want to know.
 FAC: Why have we become trapped within the system that is going on in our country? Look at the immediate past — the last ten years. Who has been governing? They are just ruling the country. You see, people have no participation. From 1972, the government has had no continuity.

DS: There has not been any kind of political education of the people who have been in the country from 1972...
 FHA: Sometimes ago I met a leading political figure of the opposition, and we were talking about fertilizer subsidy. He said that the farmers don't like the withdrawal of the fertilizer subsidy. I asked him: 'Which farmer gets the fertilizer subsidy? Why does he get it? How much he benefits? Which group of people in the village benefits? And things like that. If you make an analysis, you'll see that the poor people don't benefit from it. So why are you calling yourselves semi-socialist and fighting about this? Is it because you don't know the facts? No one wants to get down to the reality of politics and base one's views on facts.'

DS: What is your view on the growth of population in our country?
 FHA: Bangladesh is the most thickly populated country in the world. But the signs are that in Bangladesh a fertility decline is taking place. Not fast enough but it is gathering momentum. And I'll tell you why it will take further momentum. We will provide a major effort into the population programme. We will do that and by the turn of the century if we can get 60 per cent of the eligible couples practising family planning, which is possible, I think the fertility decline will be rapid. This is one thing I am hopeful about.

Secondly, if you can get particularly girls' education going very well in the next decade, you will have again the family-size norm from the present four, declining to two. This also can be very rapid. So from population angle, I see that it is possible to bring about fertility decline very quickly.
 DS: What, in your opinion, goes wrong with the develop-



Fazle Hasan Abed.

ment in agriculture? Does it have anything to do with the farmers themselves?
 FHA: Every time I go to a village and ask the farmer how is the crop this year, he replies: 'If God wills, I'll have a good crop.' I went to Japan in 1977 where I met a man named Hiroshi and asked him the same question. He told me: 'In this plot of land, I should have had 13 retoons per plant. But I have got 11. Do you know why? Because 31 days after planting this crop I went to my sister's wedding in Tokyo and my mother said I should stay over for a whole week. So this plot did not get irrigation and the right dose of fertilizer. And that is why instead of 13 retoons I have got 11.' He can quantify, monitor, assess and evaluate. These are the cognitive skills that the Japanese society has given to its farmer, and they produce five times as much food per hectare than the Bangladeshis do. We know how much fertilizer to give. But we don't have a man with the mind of Hiroshi. So our task is to create that man — to create the farmer who has that kind of cognitive skills.

DS: What do we need to produce Hiroshi in Bangladesh?
 FHA: It's the kind of mental skills, mental ability and also the ability to draw a cause-effect relationship which is called rationality. Total rationality. Not depending on nature. The fatalistic attitude has to go. It should be a scientific attitude.
 DS: Will the boys, who are now in your BRAC school attain-

ing the age of farmers in the next 10 to 20 years, have it?
 FHA: I hope they will. That's the cognitive skill I want them to develop. I don't want all the boys to become graduates of Dhaka University. Many of them will stay there as farmers, fishermen and whatever. These boys are going to become Hiroshis — that's the idea. I would not go into education if I can't change the human mind.

DS: Do we have the capacity to feed the bottom 50 million people?
 FHA: Certainly. If we all work together, government, NGOs and citizen groups, then we should be able to stabilize our population at around 220 million. And if we can do that then we should be able to feed and clothe ourselves. Then the whole system, specially if we go for higher technology, will not be very difficult. In teaching children every new kind of technology, method and media is being used. All these things are possible provided we want it. I need US 180 million dollar for the next ten years to get the high school system operating. I will start, I don't know whether I will get the money or not.

(See box: BRAC in Education.)
 DS: Let's go back to the population thing. Our population is going to stabilize in the year 2056. And at that point of time the population would be 250 million or so. Now you take it against your total land area. Your take it against the purchasing power of your people. So when you talk of self-sufficiency in food...
 FHA: No. I mean in terms of

export. Not only rice, many other things too. We don't have to produce all the rice. You see as soon as the farmer's mental ability becomes like that of Hiroshi's, he is not going to produce rice only.

DS: Have you thought of any other measures?
 FHA: Bangladesh produces 40 tons of silk whereas Thailand produces about 1100 tons and India produces about 12,000 tons. But supposing by the year 2000, we want to produce 1100 tons, what do we have to do? I started working on it from 1990 and planted 1.6 million mulberry trees, which are food for the silkworm. In 1991 1.8 million and in 1992 3.3 million trees were planted. This year we will be planting 5 million trees. The idea is to have 25 million trees planted by 1997. This will provide for half a million jobs in the silk sector. By the turn of the century we will produce 1500 tons of silk that will be US 200 million dollar worth of export. I don't know what the government is doing but BRAC programme alone will accomplish this.

DS: Where do we get a market for 1500 tons of silk?
 FHA: Bangladesh's present need is about 200 tons. You see Korea and Thailand are producing silk now. But their per capita income is going up very fast. They will get out of silk because it is a low — paid work. So as they go out, we will be able to get into silk. The slack created by their lack of production will be taken up by Bangladeshis.

DS: You are really becoming multi-sectoral!
 FHA: Regarding designs, I am now getting New York designers to come up here to look at the weaving designers and the fashion designers. So a design institute has to be opened up for that. When we talk about 1200 tons of silk produced in a country we need a whole new range of silks. Where are we going to get that? I am going to import that initially from America, India, France, Italy and I have to set up institutes — design institutes. Otherwise I cannot do it.

DS: Are you thinking of opening sales centres like Aarong abroad?
 FHA: Yes I am. I have just concluded an agreement with a group of people in England. They want to set up Aarong Europe. There will be two shops in London, one in Amsterdam, one in Paris and one in Bonn. They are just starting.

DS: Do you have regional coordinating centres, or are all centres coordinated directly in Dhaka?
 FHA: No, we have regional offices.
 DS: How do you manage? What is your management style?
 FHA: You see, the management style of a business organization is easy as you can check

somebody's efficiency by profitability of the enterprise that he runs. The bottom line is easy to quantify. But in BRAC there is no bottom line. We cannot quantify things. The top management's job in BRAC is value transmitting — transmitting a value to your staff. If you have done a good job as a value transmitter then other things fall in places in the sense that you then give them a framework within which to operate and they work well. We give them a lot of responsibilities and authority: commensurate authorities. They don't have to come to Abed Bhai for every little thing. BRAC does not give them much salary but they enjoy a lot of authority and responsibility.

DS: Talk about your failures, some major obstacles, frustrations.
 FHA: We have done many wrong things in working with the community.
 DS: I noted that you did focus a lot on problems and difficulties that you faced.
 FHA: I realised that almost 70 per cent of the gonokendras were taken over by the village elite. There are lot of things we are now experimenting with we are now in 10 thanas, 1600 villages, working on health, particularly reproductive health, family planning (reproductive health is a part of family planning) and another two or three experiments on cutting down maternal mortality which is very high in Bangladesh, and on the existing programme on tuberculosis control.

DS: Can you give me some idea about the tuberculosis control programme?
 FHA: Tuberculosis in Bangladesh is almost 1 per cent. Now we immunize the children. But there are the adults who are already susceptible to tuberculosis. Somebody told me at Harvard some weeks back: 'You are doing one of the largest village based tuberculosis control programmes in the world at the lowest cost.' I said, BRAC could, for \$ 80 million, control the tuberculosis programme to cover the entire country.

Is it worthwhile to spend US 80 million dollar to do that or should I spend the same amount in family planning programme by getting the government system revitalized? I wanted the experts to prioritize. They know what's going on in the world. I went to Harvard to do that. A strategy paper has now come from Harvard to me: 'These are the strategies — now you have to choose for yourself.'

DS: How do you operate your rural development programme?
 FHA: Under the Rural Development Programme (RDP) we have 175 branch offices. Each of them covers about 60 villages. That comes to about 10,000 villages which fall under our intensive rural development programme. RDP emphasizes on the organization building of the poor people, credit, employment and income generation. We have a credit programme similar to that of Grameen Bank. Similar, but not exactly the same. Grameen Bank has got about 1.4 million borrowers and we have about 800,000 borrowers. We started as a development organisation, they started as a bank. So our standpoint from the beginning was different. But perhaps we are coming closer now as we progress.

DS: What is the basic difference?
 FHA: The difference is like, say, if a woman comes to BRAC for a loan for setting up a poultry farm, I tell her that loan for poultry would not work because there is too high a mortality rate in rural Bangladesh for poultry.
 So I am not interested only in lending her money and recovering it; I want her to make money as well. So what BRAC does is that it organizes people who are interested in poultry and train some of them as poultry vaccinators. We also make sure that the Livestock department provides them with enough vaccines so that they get a regular supply. This poultry programme has been taken up in 1700 villages and we have 1700 women who have become vaccinators. All the villages are covered by proper vaccines and poultry mortality has declined to almost nil. Just mortality decline itself would improve the population of poultry by doubling it within two years.

BRAC now needs 500,000 chicks a month, each one-day old. But the government supplies only 155,000 chicks a month. Now I am pushing the Ministry of Livestock to upgrade their whole system so that they could supply enough.
 DS: Do you not get sometimes the feeling that you might be in a danger of spreading yourself too thin?
 FHA: No, not at all. I'll tell you why. I have lot of people working in my organisation. We plan much ahead. We are also developing management. Our personnel are very sensitively controlled. Those who are good get promotions and those who are not are terminated. It's an on going process. We have a total of 8,600 staff excluding teachers and other para pro-

essionals.
 DS: Let's go to two areas that we don't want to miss out. As someone who's been involved so much, so closely, in the major affairs in the development scenario, how do you look at the future of Bangladesh, and the future of the development process, as you see it today?
 FHA: I feel very optimistic. A development worker's first trait should be that he is an optimist by inclination. I'm optimistic in the sense that I look forward to a better future for Bangladesh.
 DS: What makes you so optimistic?
 FHA: I am hopeful for many reasons. One is that I have got tremendous faith in the people of Bangladesh, particularly in the women, and their ability. A woman in Bangladesh, in fact, a rural woman, signifies best what a good manager ought to be. She manages poverty — the poverty in the household. She manages poverty at the household level.

DS: A very nice phrase...
 FHA: And she is the woman who at the age of six looks after a two-year-old sibling, while her seven year old brother is playing somewhere else. She works hard as a child. She does not get education, but she gets a lot of wisdom. The average age of marriage in Bangladesh is around 16. So she will be married off to a landless man at the age of 16. Her husband will get 206 days of work in a year out of 365 days if he is lucky. And all through these days she will have to feed her children. She is the one who keeps the family together — the family relationship. Despite all the deprivation she creates a bond. This is a wonderful sort of resource that Bangladesh has got. This wonderful woman does all that and then manages poverty. If she is given a little bit more in terms of either resources or opportunities she is going to be the key to salvation of Bangladesh. And that's why we have 70 per cent girls in BRAC schools.

DS: But at some point, one has to start thinking of the political system, the economic system and the socio-economic system that make the best out of what you said the asset of the country. And that is what development process is all about. How do we relate ourselves to establish the linkage between what we see as an asset with the system that operates in the country?
 FHA: My theoretical construct is that you organize the poor people in the village. They pressurize the system which includes the bureaucrats, union councils and district councils. They pressurize the system and the system must respond. In case of a negative response people get frustrated or revolt. The system can also respond effectively if it has the ability. And the third way of response could be that the system shoots. You ghrao a thana or an office and you have got the force to shoot you. So repression can also occur if you organize at the bottom without doing anything at the top.

We are organizing the poor in the villages. It will have some impact on pressurizing the system to be accountable. But again if you don't have a political system which is also at the same time growing with democratization process, then you have got a problem. Autocrats will come to power.
 DS: Even under democracy a participatory system may not work?
 FHA: Right. Democracy also does not work. So we want participatory democracy. You are building the block of democracy at the grassroots level by organizing people in a participatory manner and gradually go up. So, this is the first theoretical construct. The second one is your system. The system's ability to respond. When I say that I will train a teacher it is my wish to increase the system's ability to respond to the needs of our people. When we are training thana education or health officers what we're doing is augmenting the system's capacity to respond.

DS: So you are not politicizing them?
 FHA: No, not yet. I'm right now at the level of the theoretical construct. The third level is the political. The people don't talk to politicians very much. They talk to bureaucrats all the time or even the local government functionaries. They go to the union council. The super structure of politics which is the parliament has not reached the people yet. This is not democracy to me where nobody is accountable. Even if the government performs badly it wouldn't be accountable. So I don't think much of this democracy. But a process has started and we are going to help deepen this process.

DS: It's a long process.
 FHA: Right. It is a long process. The democratic process has never been a short one.
 DS: But our problem is that problems are mounting, the population is increasing, the resources are diminishing and so we are racing against time.
 However, we'll leave that for another occasion when we can again sit and talk. Thank you very much for your time.

BRAC in Education

'We have to change the secondary education in Bangladesh. I hope BRAC's primary education system will have some influence on the primary education system of the country. They (government) cannot ignore us since we are so big,' says Abed.

BRAC hopes to set up 100,000 schools by 1998 to impart education to about 3.3 million children between the age of six and 10 at an annual cost of 65 million dollars. The students will make up 18-20 per cent of the child population. Presently it has 13,000 schools across the country and hopes to have 20,000 at the end of the current year, 35,000 next year and 50,000 by the end of 1995.

In BRAC schools, the cost per child is around 19 dollars every year, one of the lowest in the world. A study by an independent organisation, however, shows that the BRAC school cost is about the same as in government schools.
 But, BRAC says, it offers one-third the price of the government as its cost per student includes the teaching material expenditures. Besides, the dropout rate in BRAC schools is much lower than in government schools. BRAC claims this system to be more cost-effective.

Education for BRAC began with the adults as early as 1973. The primary education efforts came much later, in the early 80's.

It began with the health workers in Sulla while BRAC was still a rehabilitation-oriented organisation. In January 1973, it opened 200 schools and night education centres in different villages of Sulla.

The schools followed the adult education methods provided by the Comilla Board. At first BRAC ventured to secure community participation by imposing 50 per cent of the cost on the community members. But it did not work.
 Another problem was that the dropout rate was very high. The students found the materials and method to be boring without having much relevance to their lives. Once learning to sign their names, they lost all interest in the schools.

Within three months it became apparent that the programme was not working. BRAC then tried the philosophy of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Abed thought that this master and his method could provide an answer to his problems.
 BRAC hired one of Freire's disciples as a consultant to help it design a non-formal education for adults in Bangladesh. With his help, BRAC developed an effective set of material. Then it was BRAC's own people who fully developed the methodology into material and methods suitable to the needs of the country.

In 1980, BRAC felt that to educate the people, adult education was not enough. Says

Abed, 'One day in 1980, I went to an adult education centre and saw a boy of about 16 to 18 years of age, trying to learn Ba. Bari. When I first went to Sulla he was seven years old, and he was not going to school. The boy should have gone to school then.'

The 80's began with the slogans of poverty alleviation. BRAC was also caught in that stream, neglecting the aspect of education. But soon it realised that education was one of the principal conditions for poverty alleviation. That is, human resource development could not be achieved without educating the population.

In 1981, BRAC began its primary education programme on an ad-hoc basis, setting up two schools in Savar. Three years later it developed a new methodology for primary education and non-formal primary education in rural Bangladesh.
 It wanted to encompass those majority children who either never get enrolled in schools or are dropouts, thus remaining outside the existing system. There were several important things to consider. First, since the children are mostly working for their livelihoods, the school hours had to be a limited three hours a day.

Secondly, the existing teaching material and method were not at all interesting. The primary schools had to be more accommodating, more enjoyable and more rewarding in order to

hold the working class children. BRAC left the timing of its school to the children and their parents so that the community would also feel involved and responsible.

Another point that BRAC stressed upon was that the learning should take place within the school. Homework, other than simple handwriting, would simply perplex and discourage the student since he or she could expect no help from the illiterate parents.
 It also emphasised the need for the teacher to transmit to the student a sense of self worth. Says Abed, 'And these things, the finer things have gone into our teaching making BRAC's programme as it is today.'

The estimated expenses for BRAC's primary education plans, will have to be funded by either the donors or the government. 'I would preferably want the government to allocate from its recurring budget for this programme, because I'm doing the work that the state should do,' says Abed.
 BRAC feels that to achieve the goal of education for all by the state, it could help the government in a whole lot of areas. 'I would ideally like the government,' Abed says, 'to feel that BRAC has something to give, if want to take it. When that kind of mentality is there then we can help and work together to change the whole system.'



Photo: Shehzad Noorani