

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed

A tribute to an innovator and implementer

REHMAN SOBHAN

I had my first encounter with Sir Fazle Hasan Abed in 1971 in Oxford. Abed called to inform me on the efforts by him and his group in London in support of Bangladesh’s liberation struggle. He sought my advice on how to further enhance the impact of their struggle. He also looked ahead and discussed what might be done to serve the deprived masses in post-liberation Bangladesh. I was then impressed by his dedication and foresightedness. Unlike many who talk of serving the masses but do little in practice, in the immediate aftermath of liberation Abed put his dedication and foresight to work in the service of the deprived of Bangladesh.

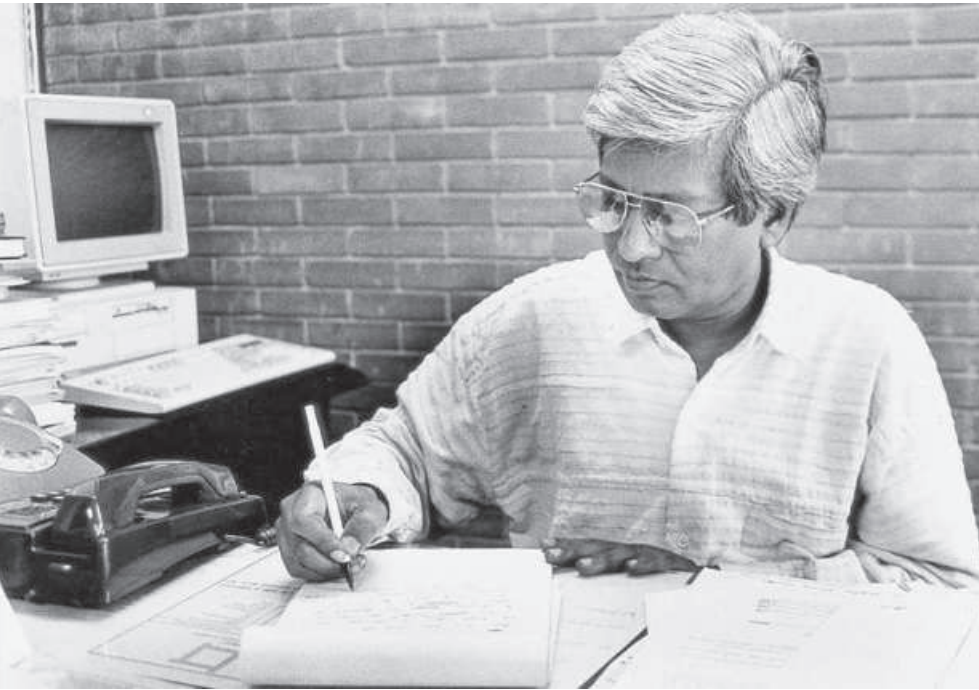
We kept in touch in the post-liberation years but had little interaction. In 1993 when I decided to set up the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) Abed was one of the first persons I approached to join me as one of the founding trustees. He remained an active member of the CPD Board ever since where he not only gave us sage advice on issues of governance of the institution, but encouraged institutional interaction between CPD and Brac in a number of programmes and campaigns. As his end approached, as part of his disengagement from his many engagements around the world, he wrote us a formal letter of resignation from the CPD Board.

Just as it is painful for me and CPD to say farewell to one of our most valued colleagues, it is difficult to imagine a Bangladesh without Sir Fazle Hasan Abed. He leaves a larger than life footprint with its imprint visible not just around the country but across the world. I can think of few people who have done more for the world’s deprived population than Abed. His contribution spans Bangladesh where Brac, the organisation founded by him in 1972, services close to 10 million of the country’s underprivileged households. Through Abed’s commitment to serve the deprived, Brac has now extended its reach across the globe. It has invested its experience

in rehabilitating Sidr victims in Sri Lanka and the war-ravaged population in Afghanistan where two of its officials, working in high risk areas, were once held hostage by the Taliban. Brac has now reached out on a large scale to serve the underprivileged of Africa where they have been actively engaged in Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, South Sudan, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Brac has even extended its reach to Pakistan and across the Atlantic to Haiti.

Abed’s extraordinary engagement with the deprived has transformed Brac into the largest NGO in the world with an annual budget of over a billion dollars and a workforce of around 200,000. Abed’s singular contribution to the world for serving its deprived communities has been his ability to take Brac programmes to scale so that they graduate from micro-welfare projects to the transformation of entire communities. Brac is today more than an NGO. Its scale of operations would suggest that it is now a corporation for the deprived. Abed’s organisational capacity has invested Brac with a market recognition comparable to any of the top international NGOs such as Oxfam and his management contribution has been recognised in case studies in the best business schools.

Abed was a strong believer that Brac should liberate itself from dependence on external donor financing and should become a self-financed facility. To this end, he established a number of programmes which could generate financial surpluses that could be reinvested in other Brac projects. The biggest of such projects was Brac’s flagship micro-finance programme which could recycle its surpluses and expand its clientele of women borrowers to around 8 million so that today it presides over one of the world’s largest microfinance programmes. Abed further drew upon Brac’s brand name and market reach to invest in a variety of other socially oriented income generating investments such as Brac’s stake in Bkash and commercially competitive entities such as Brac Bank which is today one of the best run and most profitable banks in



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Bangladesh. These investments generated revenues which have further enhanced Brac’s internal income generating capacity and enabled it to expand its programmes to reach even larger numbers of the disadvantaged.

The remarkable growth and reach of Brac owes in large measure to the herculean endeavours of Fazle Hasan Abed, its founder. Abed combined extraordinary entrepreneurial and management skills with a genuine passion for public service which began with a commitment to the dispossessed of his own country, but has now been extended to the underprivileged across the world. Abed, who began his professional life as a highly paid executive of a multinational company in Bangladesh, went through the life changing experience of direct involvement, first during the cyclone of November 1970, one of history’s most devastating natural calamities, and

then through his response to the genocide inflicted on the Bengalis in 1971. Abed’s exposure to the human consequences of such acts of violence by man and nature persuaded him to invest the rest of his life in helping not just the victims of devastation but those whose entire life is engaged in coping with the uncertainties of nature and the injustices of society.

In responding to the challenge of deprivation, Abed demonstrated a renaissance vision which equipped him to recognise its holistic nature in Bangladesh. He constructed a multi-faceted agenda for change which incorporated credit, women’s empowerment, legal literacy, healthcare, education and skills development so as to empower the excluded to stand on their own feet. His approach of transforming the excluded from victims into masters of their own fate encouraged him to build an organisation which could graduate from aid

dependence to fiscal self-reliance through building up the market competitiveness of its income generating programmes. Today Brac is no longer dependent on the generosity of donors. Its internally generated revenues underwrite around 80 percent of its total budget. The growth and transformation of Brac has made it a role model for other NGOs not just in Bangladesh but across the world. These achievements have been recognised through a plethora of awards and prizes which have been showered on Abed which gave him direct access to global political leaders, heads of international institutions and CEO’s of the corporate world.

Abed invested 47 years of his life in serving the deprived at home and abroad. His humility and understated projection of his remarkable achievements concealed a quiet determination to let his actions speak louder than his words. He was not inclined to self-promotion but such was the weight of his achievements as a champion of the deprived that he and the organisation he built, came to be recognised across the world by those in need as well as among global and business leaders.

At the end of his days on earth, he left the world he inhabited in a better place with millions of people whose lives were improved through his efforts. Few people may depart with such a sense of satisfaction at their life’s work. He knew his work was unfinished but he laid down a path through which it can be continued by his successors.

His final contribution to posterity was manifested in the meticulous effort he invested in preparing for his final departure. Abed was determined to ensure Brac would outlive him and continue the transformative journey he began 47 years ago in the small village of Sallna, in Sylhet. His goal was to end poverty by empowering the deprived and his soul will not rest in peace until such a day dawns, at least in Bangladesh, with Brac playing a vanguard role in this process.

Rehman Sobhan is Chairman, Centre for Policy Dialogue.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

Make Europe Relevant Again

SIGMAR GABRIEL and CHRISTOPH BORNSCHEIN

IT is increasingly clear that the European Union was not built to be a global actor. The EU is a strictly European idea, designed to bring peace and prosperity to a region ravaged by centuries of incessant war. It was meant to mind its own business, leaving matters of global import to the two permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Britain and France.

Under this arrangement, the EU achieved stability for its neighbourhood. While other countries have pursued global political and economic strategies, we Europeans have relied on our shared history, democratic traditions, and moral compass in the service of fitful regional integration. But these strengths will not ensure Europe’s continued relevance. Economic change and technological advances (online platforms, artificial intelligence, automation, data monopolies, zero-marginal-cost distribution) are reshaping the global economy, upending longstanding power structures, and fuelling political disruption within many countries.

This is where Europe’s true weakness is exposed. The EU and its member states have no effective response to the techno-political trends of our time. On one hand, the growth of supra-national corporations is reshaping standards across the global economy; on the other, China’s pursuit of technological independence (and then supremacy) is creating a schism in the world’s economic superstructure. These trends are somewhat contradictory, yet they have one thing in common: Europe is on the sideline.

Consider a few recent developments. Facebook has launched an initiative to create a unified global currency—Libra—building on its international user base and accumulated data. Google is working



PHOTO: DANIEL MIHAILESCU/AFP

The pride that we Europeans have in our shared history and values has often clouded our vision, leading us to forget that our global relevance is the result of economic power.

to catalogue every bit of the world’s information, all of which will be used to offer more powerful products and services. And Amazon has turned its cloud-computing service into the backbone of the global Internet.

In each case, Europe is playing the role of a common user. Europol is listed as a business “case study” on the Amazon Web Services page. Police forces across Europe have enlisted the US-based data-analytics firm Palantir to help with predictive policing. Volkswagen—an iconic German corporation if there ever was one—has formed a partnership with Amazon to develop its own

“Industrial Cloud.”

It is only natural that the tech giants would seek to diversify by developing new proprietary services and introducing them into unsuspecting markets. Just as Facebook has Libra and Google has Waymo (self-driving cars), Chinese giants like Tencent and Alibaba have become pioneers in digital business solutions and payments, respectively.

The existence of similar digital service providers in both the United States and China is now a standard feature of the global economy. The root cause of this bifurcation is the conflict between China and the US, which is a battle for technological leadership

between two economic models: China’s state capitalism and the US’s private-sector-led economy.

In August 2019, the Chinese firm Huawei introduced its own operating system, Harmony OS, which is said to be faster and more secure than Google’s Android. Though Harmony OS is predominantly geared toward use in the “Internet of Things” (IoT), it will also be easily adapted to Huawei’s smartphone portfolio. The rollout of Harmony OS shows that China is quickly responding to the new world ushered in by US President Donald Trump’s May 2019 executive order, which effectively banned Huawei from US markets. Though many adjustments have since been made over the course of Sino-American negotiations to soften the ban, the basic message was clear: China’s dependence on American business partners can and will be used against it.

Once again, as the trade and technology war has unfolded, Europe has had precious little to do, other than watch. It has been relegated to the role of a consumer, choosing which payment provider or industrial cloud solution to use. To be sure, there are good services available out there, and there is no shame in opting for a readymade industrial IoT, an American logistics platform, or a Chinese 5G developer. For a company in Volkswagen’s position, tapping into Amazon’s web services is a no-brainer.

But assuming the role of a common user comes at a price: namely, a loss of autonomy, security, and global influence. The pride that we Europeans have in our shared history and values has often clouded our vision, leading us to forget that our global relevance is the result of economic power. By not playing a role in technological or political developments, we now stand to lose that power.


We Europeans believe in achieving peace and prosperity through cooperation and mutual respect, rather than through conflict, intimidation, and terror. We also believe in alliances and treaties. In our day and age, the world faces global challenges that can be tackled only through collective action. There can be no unilateral solution to the climate crisis, epidemics, economic disruption, migration, or the looming global recession.

But herein lies Europe’s core dilemma. To be relevant enough to propose and enforce its view of the world, Europe needs to accept reality. Competition, conflict, and nationalism are defining features of today’s world. Europe must start playing a game that it detests.


To put it another way, Europe needs to become a little more American, and the US needs to rediscover its own European ideals. After all, the fundamental similarities between Europe and America have always been stronger than any superficial differences. With Trump, the US has elected not a president but a CEO—a businessman who focuses only on short-term deals, revenue maximisation, and shareholder value. Such a leader is unable to play the long game, which requires accepting short-term losses and handling externalities responsibly and in close cooperation with one’s competitors.

Trump’s blinkered approach may work for stock markets and corporations, but it is no way to run an international order. Europeans and Americans alike need to reimbrace the transatlantic alliance. That may sound like a platitude, but the US-European relationship really will be the key factor in building a secure and prosperous future.

Sigmar Gabriel is a former vice chancellor and foreign minister of Germany. Christoph Bornschein is CEO of TLGG. Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2019. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)



QUOTABLE Quote



ALDOUS HUXLEY (1894–1963)
English novelist and critic gifted with an acute and far-ranging intelligence.
There's only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that's your own self.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 School subject

5 Soaking spot

9 Sore spots

11 Seating pro

13 Set off

14 Intent look

15 Stroller user

16 Turns

18 Board riders

20 Plop down

21 Make fun of

22 Chick tenders

23 Bridal title

2 Contrived

25 Like a beanpole

27 Pub orders

29 Take the title

30 Holds protec-

tively

32 Et cetera

34 Important time

35 Trattoria sauce

36 Beginning

38 Recap

39 Paris river

40 Stock holders

41 Greek vowels

DOWN

1 Ship poles

2 Misbehave

3 "Oh, yeah..."

4 Yonder lady

5 Some statutory

6 Hammett pooch

7 "OK, I've decid-

ed!"

8 Below, in a contract

10 Emphasis

12 Kicks back

17 Mine material

19 Rural spread

22 Poker round

24 Grands, e.g.

25 Trades

26 Police station event

27 NFL player

28 Venus's sister

30 Poultry holders

31 Fills completely

33 Leave speech-less

37 Once called

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEEBLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott