From Bangladesh to the world:
Doing development differently

25 southern development approaches from BRAC

Village development organisations

Remote communities face common challenges globally — lack of access to information, opportunities, market linkages.

In 1977, BRAC began catalysing the formation of village development organisations. Governed by the community, they act as a single point for information, training and services. Members save money collectively, creating a platform for members to access collateral–free loans. The organisations are an engine for rural development, uniting people for power and generating employment by increasing the amount of money circulating in the community. The model has been scaled up in six countries.

Adolescent development programme

Every second girl in Bangladesh is married before her 18th birthday.

In the early 1990s, safe spaces for girls were scarce. BRAC turned classrooms into after–school clubs, where girls who dropped out of school could continue learning. 9,000 clubs across Bangladesh provided over 300,000 girls with the space to be themselves, and work on becoming whatever they wanted to be. Clubs were close to girls' homes, and run by women from those communities, trained to teach life skills, sports and the arts. These clubs produced women who went on to compete internationally. The model has been adapted in six countries.

Graduating from extreme poverty

Extreme poverty is more than a lack of finances. Over time, it turns into a lack of belief in one's ability to change their own life.

Graduation is a globally recognised proven approach to equip people to overcome extreme poverty. It is a time–bound pathway comprising income generation, social protection, financial support and social empowerment — with a key focus on supporting people to rebuild hope.

93% of graduates in Bangladesh continue to benefit seven years after graduating and 14 million people have graduated through adapting the approach in 50 countries.

Para-professionals

Professionals are scarce in remote areas globally. People can be brought in from cities, but it is expensive, short–term and requires intensive induction before they understand the community.

BRAC trains thousands of people to work as para–professionals. In roles like para–counsellors, legal aid providers and veterinarians, they take BRAC's work to the last mile in their own communities. They deliver knowledge, offer services and link people with providers. It's an affordable long–term solution with significant added benefits — para–professionals have lived experience of the challenges faced in their communities, and ownership of solutions. The model has been scaled up in 10 countries.

One-room schools

Two out of five children of primary school age in Bangladesh were not in school in the early 1980s. Of those enrolled, half dropped out. Schools were far away, and interfered with chores or harvest seasons. Male teachers made parents with young daughters worry.

BRAC's one–room school model addressed why students dropped out. Schools were brought to students, through renting single rooms in communities. It was free, with no homework and flexible timing. Women from the community were trained to teach the same group of students for all their classes. The model reached 15 million students, was adopted by the Bangladesh government and scaled up in six countries.

Play Labs

90% of brain development occurs during the first five years of life.

BRAC Play Labs build wellbeing, resilience and positivity in children under five. Research shows they achieve the greatest challenge in early childhood development — over two years, children's performance gaps are reduced to the point where the least privileged children enter kindergarten as well–prepared as the most privileged.

Play Labs operate in three countries and have been adapted to create BRAC Humanitarian Play Labs, which operate in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, and the Rhino refugee camp in Uganda.

Community-led healthcare

In the 1970s, one in five children in Bangladesh died before their fifth birthday, women had six children on average and life expectancy was just 46 years.

BRAC's community–driven healthcare network saw women trained as health workers, who travelled door–to–door in their own communities, armed with knowledge, diagnostic tools and referral networks. This was supported by specialists, like midwives, and a range of facilities, like maternity clinics. Today, 97% of children live to the age of five, women have two children on average and life expectancy is 72 years. The model has been scaled up in six countries.

Gender equality at every level

When women have better access to basic services, they make better lives for themselves, and multiply that impact by improving the lives of their families and, eventually, often changing the trajectories of whole communities. The challenge is that their voices — particularly those living in poverty — often go unheard.

BRAC works to expand opportunities available to women, develop approaches to strengthen confidence, skills, and build enabling environments. Women are the backbone of all BRAC's programming, in roles like para–professionals, programme participants, clients, artisans and entrepreneurs. This approach is taken in ten countries.

On-the-job apprenticeships

Two out of five people aged 15–24 in Bangladesh are not in employment, education or formal training.

BRAC connects young people who have dropped out of school with master craftspeople. They work in pairs through an on–the–job apprenticeship model, with both parties receiving a stipend and training. Apprentices learn a trade which is in demand locally, and soft skills to enhance employability. 30,000 apprentices have graduated, among whom early marriage reduced by 62% and household incomes increased six–fold.

Credit plus plus

Microfinance provides financial services to people who cannot access banks, typically because of remoteness or lack of collateral.

Microfinance is only part of a solution, though, and must be combined with other services for people to improve their lives. The first 'plus' is creating markets, so a woman who buys a cow has a way to sell the milk it produces. The second 'plus' is providing services like education and healthcare, to support her to build resilience and drive intergenerational change. The model has been scaled up in seven countries.

Sharecroppers scheme

Sharecroppers, who cultivate crops on other people's land, need capital at the start of the season. Banks won't lend, as the people don't have collateral. There is no profit until harvest, so microfinance isn't an option, because of monthly repayments. Informal lenders charge high interest, demand full repayment and part of the harvest.

With support from the central bank, BRAC's collateral–free loans charge just 10% annual interest. One–third of the loan is repaid initially. The remaining two–thirds are repaid after two harvest seasons. If a harvest fails, there is flexibility to recover.

Community-based safe sanitation

1.6 million people die every year globally because of poor hygiene and sanitation, but open defecation in Bangladesh has reduced from 34% to almost zero over the past two decades.

Key to this success was reducing the gap between hygiene knowledge and practice. BRAC supported the government's efforts through community mobilisation and community–level WASH committees. Market forces were activated — rural sanitation centres sold sanitary construction materials and supported people to become sanitation entrepreneurs. The work became the largest WASH programme anywhere managed by an NGO, supporting 39 million people to access hygienic sanitation.

Evidence-based development

BRAC teams are from the same communities they work with, and always connected to the realities on the ground. Frontline insights from this lived experience are the most important evidence.

Supporting this is rigorous monitoring, evaluation and research. The Research and Evaluation Division was established in 1975. BRAC University was founded in 2001. Work and evidence run parallel — evidence informs BRAC's work, and the work informs the areas in which insights and research are needed. Work takes into account best practices from the globe, as well as increasingly informing the globe of best practices from the south.

Linking development with markets

BRAC sees people in poverty as active contributors to economic growth, and equips people across all its work to emerge as micro–entrepreneurs, artisans and social service providers.

This entrepreneurial programming approach has led to sustainability of impact, as people become self–reliant, and the creation of multiple social enterprises. In Bangladesh, Aarong Dairy, for example, links farmers who often have just three cows each to otherwise inaccessible markets; it now makes up one–third of the nation's locally processed milk.

Food security: Creating value chains to support agricultural production

Bangladesh had a food production deficit of three million metric tonnes in 1972. Hunger was causing chronic malnutrition, leading to child stunting and poor health.

BRAC's approach was multi–pronged — broadening nutrition awareness, expanding microfinance, educating people on leasing land for farming and increasing access to high quality inputs so they could make livelihoods from farming. Work was then done at the macro level — research and development, technology innovation and building value chains — to make markets work for people living in poverty. The model has been adapted in six countries.

Aarong: A livelihood platform for artisans

Bangladesh is a country of rich craft traditions, which produced the finest muslin in the world. By the early 20th century, however, many craft traditions had been lost — and more were disappearing. Artisans sold their crafts through buyers who took most of the profit. Retailers were few, and only paid when products were sold.

Aarong was started to make craft into a viable livelihood. Artisans were paid when products were made. While importing goods rose in popularity, Aarong grew demand for local fashion, home and gift products, fusing tradition with modern designs. Decades later, Bangladesh's crafts are world heritage listed and demanded globally.

Humanitarian-development nexus

Crises are changing globally, with climate change and conflict causing protracted displacement.

Bangladesh welcomed almost one million Rohingya in 2017. BRAC is the biggest civil society responder, merging short–term humanitarian response and long–term development approaches to provide multi–faceted, holistic services to Rohingya and host communities. Urgent humanitarian needs were the initial focus. As the crisis prolonged, focus shifted from mass scale short–term relief to localised, targeted long–term approaches to work towards self–reliance.

Local solutions

In the early 1980s, poultry farmers needed vaccines for their chickens, and those vaccines needed to be kept cold. Refrigeration was rarely available.

Bananas, however, were. Their flesh was just cool enough — and provided an added benefit of cushioning against breakage. Thousands of farmers were saved from catastrophic losses. Our pragmatic solutions come from deeply understanding every community's unique challenges, through the lived experiences of our staff who are from the same communities. 'Banana immunisation' is just one example. BRAC has established a southern approach to development — the work starts in communities, with the belief that the people closest to the challenges are the closest to the solutions.

Community-led housing

Bangladesh is among the most densely populated countries in the world. One in three people in urban areas live in makeshift shelters. Safe homes are crucial to escaping poverty, but people do not have the capital to invest in them.

Through BRAC's community–led housing model, community leaders mobilise a capital fund from member contributions and external grants to provide people loans to build houses, starting with those in most need. Houses are constructed with local labour, to local conditions, with local materials, using climate–resilient designs — so they are affordable, and built to last.
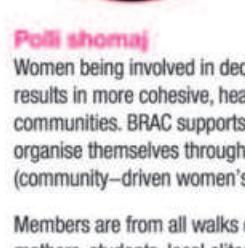
Functional education

Can a tiger build a house?

Illiteracy was a significant challenge among adults in Bangladesh in 1972. This was important in terms of vulnerability — it could result in being tricked into selling an asset at a low price or signing a contract without understanding it.

BRAC's functional education programme began in 1973, with literacy, numeracy and life skills. It also focused on building confidence — facilitators encouraged people to analyse their environment, self–reflect and focus on their abilities. One of the early realisations in a class was that, given access to the tools, all the adults could build a house — giving them an ability even tigers don't have.

Technology adoption

Technology has been a powerful force in BRAC's ability to scale — overcoming distance, reducing administrative time and informing rapid decision making.

The BRAC Computer Centre was established in 1985, and automating key data processing functions significantly improved the efficiency, transparency and reliability of BRAC's early initiatives. With thousands of employees working with millions of people in remote areas, all operations were digitised in 2016. During COVID–19, this enabled data–driven decision–making, informing the creation of telehealth apps, slum mapping and relief distribution apps and real–time, data–informed awareness campaigns.

Community and travelling libraries

Three million people have engaged in reading through BRAC's libraries across Bangladesh.

Community libraries were a bridge to the rest of the world for many remote villages. They burst with books, magazines and films, and were managed by locally–recruited librarians. These self–financed spaces offered training, encouraged cultural activities and explored the arts. They were the reason many women who did not go to school became readers.

Mobile libraries carried a trunk full of abridged versions of Bengali literary classics on a rickshaw or a boat, and would set up in different places for people to sit and read.

Boat schools

Much of Bangladesh's land is wetlands, which are submerged for half of the year, and primary enrolment and literacy rates lag far behind national averages.
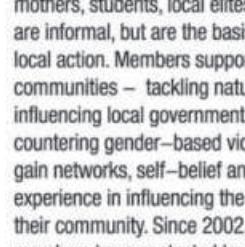
BRAC's boat schools were introduced with a simple philosophy: if children cannot get to schools, schools will go to them. Painted bright pink and equipped with solar panels, the boats function as both classrooms and school buses, collecting children from their homes and returning them after school. Over 14,000 students in Bangladesh's wetlands region have accessed education through boat schools, and the model has been replicated in the Philippines.

Polli shomaj

Women being involved in decision–making results in more cohesive, healthy, peaceful communities. BRAC supports women to organise themselves through polli shomaj (community–driven women's networks).

Members are from all walks of life — mothers, students, local elites. Meetings are informal, but are the basis of powerful local action. Members support their communities — tackling natural disasters, influencing local government decisions, and countering gender–based violence. Women gain networks, self–belief and first–hand experience in influencing the trajectory of their community. Since 2002, over 9,000 members have contested local elections, with almost 3,000 being elected.

Popular theatre

Bengal has always had a love of performing arts. Social, environmental and spiritual messaging was often embedded in performances. BRAC uses theatre to create awareness and generate dialogue in communities, but with a twist — the theatre is led entirely by the community.

Each play explores a theme identified by people from the community. Instead of actors, the people on stage have no prior theatre experience, are from the community they perform in, and have lived experience of what they were performing. All shows are in the local dialect, and performers receive a stipend. 232,000 of BRAC's popular theatre shows have been performed throughout Bangladesh, attended by over 77 million people.