



NEEDS ARE
ALWAYS
EVOLVING AND
BRAC WILL
ALWAYS HAVE
WORK TO DO

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed
Founder, BRAC

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Hold on to the sense of mission. Prioritise listening to the field

As BRAC crosses the 50 year landmark, the foundational 'resource' to drive the future journeys remains the same - the sense of mission that was both the initial spark forged in the cyclone-devastated wasteland of Bhola in 1970, and a recurring thread animating BRAC's subsequent

programme and institutional journeys. The technocratic discourse of development often misses the fundamental significance of this ingredient of commitment and sense of mission. It is the ingredient which continually reminds us why we are in the 'development' work in the first

place. Even in the closing months of his life, Abed Bhai's focus was for sure on BRAC the institution, but more so on reinforcing this sense of mission that gave meaning to the institution.

In the last 50 years, BRAC has stamped its footprints in multiple programmatic areas. But these were not random choices. Abed Bhai always gave great importance to listening to the field. The logic was simple but fundamental. If your conversations are not with those whose lives you are trying to improve, how will you know where and how best to focus your attention and energy? Anti-diarrhoeal innovation and expanded immunisation in the 1980s were for sure goals in their

own right, but these upended the reasoning heard from women in rural communities, that they went for six to seven children in the expectation that at least a few would survive. The decline in child-bearing burden for women set the stage for their opportunities to engage in new social and economic roles, boosting the potential for women's empowerment. In the 1990s, when the state pushed for compulsory primary education, village-level discussions revealed a problem of children who were 'left-out', who, due to poverty, were failing to access the formal education system. This is where BRAC under Abed Bhai's guidance triggered a new frontier of non-formal education.

Abed Bhai was an attentive listener, not only to field voices, but also to new, useful research that had potential for BRAC's programmatic initiatives. He looked both inside BRAC and outside for research insights and findings that resonated with BRAC's mission. On multiple occasions, Abed Bhai told me how he picked up useful insights from the poverty research I was leading in the 1990s, to open new programme fronts on people living in extreme poverty, who were being bypassed by the microcredit interventions, as well as people who already graduated out of poverty, but found no entry into institutional finances. Under Abed Bhai's guidance, and the dedicated efforts of BRAC teams, BRAC

Ultra-Poor Graduation programme and BRAC Bank have gone on to become signature achievements of the organisation, addressing these two critical groups. BRAC's foray into social enterprises too emerged out of the intense interactions with another group living in vulnerability – rural artisans – who had skills but little access to remunerative markets.

As we cross the 50-year milestone, the urgency to remain relevant to the needs and priorities of people living in vulnerability in today's circumstances is as compelling as ever. Four new strategic programme challenges loom. Urbanisation. Climate change. Youth. Agriculture. Before his passing, Abed Bhai pointed towards a whole new challenge emerging and reinforced by the pandemic – mental health. How perceptive Abed Bhai was.

If commitment and relevance have been two of BRAC's foundational 'resources', the third in my view is the concern for worthy results. The sense of mission that Abed Bhai ignited is not merely about declarative intentions. BRAC's focus has consistently been on generating beneficial, measurable and sustainable outcomes for the millions of women, men and

children that it works for and with.

Hold on to the sense of mission. Prioritise listening to the field. Be concerned about impact and results. Embrace the emerging challenges.



DR HOSSAIN ZILLUR RAHMAN

Chairperson
BRAC





We have never faced bigger challenges, but we have never been more ready

Welcome to BRAC's 50th annual report, marking half a century of working with people and communities to build a world free from all forms of exploitation and discrimination where everyone has the opportunity to realise their potential.

Throughout this year we have been reflecting on the last 50 years, and all the people involved in this journey, particularly the people and communities who have worked so hard over the decades to change their lives and the lives of the

people around them.

We have also been looking forward to what the next 50 years may bring. Societal, environmental, and technological disruption will be the new normal in the coming decades, and our work will need to continue to rapidly evolve as needs change.

In 2022, as the pandemic abated, we began to get a clear picture of the socioeconomic damage caused by COVID-19. Not only did it roll back years of hard-won gains in ending poverty and gender

equality, but it also laid bare other vulnerabilities.

At the start of the pandemic, many people in low and middle-income households fell into poverty in a matter of a few months. Many had savings, but these were quickly depleted, and, as they were not living under the poverty line by definition, they did not have access to any of the government's social safety net programmes. As the pandemic progressed, this happened to more and more people, shedding light on the fact that even though Bangladesh has made significant progress in ending poverty, many people are living just above the poverty line and at high risk of falling back into poverty.

As our planet warms, we can expect an upsurge of new and old diseases that will deliver

significant shocks. For example, we already see a rise in dengue and chikungunya cases. An increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather conditions will put particular strain on communities living in vulnerable situations, and the increasing unpredictability of weather is already threatening livelihoods on a mass scale. Beyond simply looking at poverty, we need to address vulnerability, particularly in communities such as transgender communities, communities in hard-to-reach areas, and older people, and incorporate their needs in new development plans.

Bangladesh has made great strides in social development, but if we are to maintain that trajectory, we need to design interventions that focus on resilience and reducing vulnerability and exploitation, so people and communities can bounce back after shocks. We need to improve and expand access to social protection and strengthen coping mechanisms. Increasing access to appropriate insurance products, for example, can be an important tool to increase the resilience of urban, middle-class communities.

Women are disproportionately vulnerable to poverty, inequality and systemic shocks. As an example, there are services designed to support seasonal migrants, who are mostly men. But it is women who are left behind at home, often with little income and no support. BRAC has always put women at the heart of all we do, and we will continue to do so, and deepen that investment. If we want to see equality, we need to address the barriers to the full participation of women. We need to provide services, but also look

at entire ecosystems, and invest in initiatives such as safeguarding, to ensure women can safely access those services.

All the challenges we face will be exponentially exacerbated by the climate crisis, which poses an existential threat to our planet, particularly in countries like Bangladesh. This is not a new issue, but the quantity and intensity of both slow-onset and rapid-onset crises is rapidly increasing. Bangladesh is already at the forefront of thought leadership on climate change, and the government has made great strides in shifting the narrative from climate-vulnerability to climate-prosperity by launching the Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan in 2021.

We must now use our extensive experience in social development to promote locally-led climate adaptation at scale. This can be achieved through close collaboration between the government, civil society and the private sector, a data-driven focus on outcomes, and creating a nexus between disaster response and long-term development. We must engage young people and take insight from the lived experience of communities at the forefront of the crisis.

Recognising that climate adaptation and mitigation are two sides of the same coin, we must also play our part in climate mitigation by protecting ecosystems such as the Sundarbans mangrove forest, encouraging sustainable transport and moving to renewable energy.

In the coming decades, our resilience and capacity for innovation will be tested like never before. BRAC will continue to stand by the people and communities who need it the most, and I look forward to your continued support and partnership as we head into this next chapter.



ASIF SALEH

Executive Director
BRAC



LETTER FROM THE **MANAGING DIRECTOR**



BRAC's social enterprises will continue to stand with people and communities

2022 was a year of two distinct halves in Bangladesh. The first half was marked by an outpouring of relief as COVID-19 finally receded. With lockdowns and social distancing behind us, we set our sights on post-pandemic recovery. The relief was soon tempered however, by other emerging challenges.

In the second half of 2022, global supply chain challenges and the ripple effects of the war in Ukraine drove up the cost of fuel and commodities, triggering nearly double-digit inflation and depleting foreign currency reserves. The impacts were felt across the supply chain. The currency crunch prompted many banks to stop opening letters of credit, hampering the import of raw materials and equipment. It was a challenging six months, but our social enterprises managed to finish the year strongly.

This year also saw the increasingly disruptive impacts of the climate crisis. Our farmers grappled with unpredictable rainfall patterns, unseasonal flooding, higher average temperatures and increasingly violent storms. We are continuing our work to develop climate-resilient seeds - saline-tolerant, drought-resistant and extreme weather resistant varieties - suited for changing weather conditions. This work will evolve as the impacts

of the climate crisis are felt in different ways across the country.

As a new generation of more formally educated farmers enter the agricultural sector, we are also looking into setting up agricultural institutes. These would not only work with farmers growing crops, but also fish, livestock, and eventually poultry. With the climate crisis increasingly threatening food security in many countries, we need to ensure that agriculture stays viable as a livelihood in Bangladesh among young farmers.

We are actively looking for ways to shrink our carbon footprint across the value chains of all our enterprises. We are increasing the use of biodegradable packaging and incorporating more recycled fabric into our products. We are also stepping up our work promoting sustainable agricultural practices, such as encouraging farmers to use bio-pesticides and bio-fertilisers.

2022 was a year of disruption, was BRAC's 50th year, and, in many ways, an insight into what the next 50 years might look like in terms of increasing unpredictability. Whatever lies ahead, BRAC's social enterprises will continue to stand with people and communities, evolve to meet their needs and continue to ensure they have access to opportunities to realise their potential.

Tamara Abed

TAMARA HASAN ABED

Managing Director
Enterprises, BRAC

