

## SCALING UP: THE BRAC EXPERIENCE

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### ABSTRACT

BRAC, a development NGO based in Bangladesh, has demonstrated an extraordinary aptitude for program expansion, or 'scaling up'. Only thirty-four years old, the organization is today the largest NGO in the world, with programs serving an estimated 110 million people. This paper identifies the seven key principles of scaling up responsible for BRAC's success: Listening to the People, Vision, Piloting, Training, Down-to-Earth Management, Evaluation and Adaptation, and Advocacy. The expansion of BRAC's widely imitated Non-Formal Primary Education furnishes concrete examples of these principles in practice. It is our hope that these lessons, accumulated from BRAC's long experience, will prove useful to other organizations as they endeavor to expand.

**Key Words:** Scaling up, expansion, BRAC, NGO.

### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

BRAC began as a small relief operation in northern Bangladesh in 1972, just after the country achieved its independence. Today, BRAC is the largest NGO in the world with programs in microfinance, education, health, and social development that serve an estimated 110 million people.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to its innovative program support enterprises, its annual budget of US \$300 million is 76% self-financed, and its network of 3,000 area offices covers the entire country. The pace of BRAC's growth has been staggering. In 1980, it employed 471 full-time staff; ten years later, this figure was nearly nine times as large, at 4,222. By 2005, full-time staff numbered over 37,000, making BRAC the second-largest employer in Bangladesh after the government (Quelch and Laidler-Kylander 2006, 87).

BRAC has accumulated extensive expertise in the process of program expansion, or "scaling up". As each new BRAC program has gone from concept to pilot to full-scale implementation, BRAC has gained insights into the necessary components of a successful project launch. These insights may be distilled into seven key principles of scaling up: Listening to the People; Vision; Piloting; Training; Down-to-Earth Management; Evaluation and Adaptation; and Advocacy. This paper aims to elucidate these principles, highlighting the history of BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education program (NFPE) as a concrete example of their implementation.

### BACKGROUND

With a population of nearly 150 million living in an area the size of the U.S. state of Wisconsin (145,000 square kilometers), Bangladesh ranks as one of the most densely populated countries in the world (World Bank 2006). Located in a river delta, with flat fertile land, the country is prone to flooding and other natural disasters. Agriculture accounts for 20% of the GDP and employs 52% of the labor force, although these figures are steadily declining (Asian Development Bank 2006). The

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1. This paper is based on a lecture by Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed at the Wilton Park, London Conference on June 14, 2006.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all statistics and figures relating to BRAC operations are taken from *BRAC Annual Report 2005*.

country is predominantly Muslim, with a Hindu minority, and linguistically homogeneous.

Bangladesh has made great strides in development, but there is still much work to be done. Population growth is under control at 1.4%, and the infant mortality rate has decreased dramatically (ADB 2006). But with 50% of the population living below the poverty line, malnutrition is pervasive, and 48% of children under five are underweight (WB 2006). Primary school enrollment has reached gender parity, although the overall literacy rate among women still languishes at 31% (ADB 2006). Fortunately, in the face of these challenges, the NGO (non-governmental organization) community is vibrant, with hundreds of active organizations. Sector leaders include BRAC and Grameen Bank, both pioneers of microfinance.

BRAC's twin objectives are the alleviation of poverty and the empowerment of the poor, especially women, and its programs address a wide range of economic and social development issues. Its well-known microfinance program spurs poverty alleviation through the provision of savings and credit services for poor rural women. Over four million village women are currently receiving loans from BRAC, and loan disbursements since the inception of the program total US \$6 billion. To complement these loans, BRAC also runs support programs to facilitate micro-enterprise development in poultry, livestock, aquaculture, sericulture, agricultural extension, and agro-forestry. Services include training, improved breeds, technical assistance, monitoring, and marketing.

Social programs address issues like education health, and legal awareness. BRAC's Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) program operates schools for 1.42 million children not reached by the regular system. Its paraprofessional community health workers deliver basic healthcare services to 31 million villagers, dealing with issues of nutrition, sanitation, family planning, and immunization. The tuberculosis control program casts an even wider net, reaching 83 million. Finally, social, legal, and human rights awareness is propagated through legal literacy courses, legal aide clinics, theatrical performances, and other programs.

BRAC's horizons continue to expand. In 2002, BRAC launched Challenging the Frontiers of

Poverty Reduction – Targeting the Ultra Poor (CFPR-TUP), a program specifically designed to reach the extreme poor so often bypassed by most microcredit and poverty alleviation programs. In 2001, it opened the doors of BRAC University, an institution dedicated to the education of the next generation of Bangladesh's innovative, pro-poor leaders. Other new projects include BRAC Bank, BRACNet, and international expansion through projects in Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Sudan, and Malawi.

### **SCALING UP: BRAC'S NON-FORMAL PRIMARY EDUCATION PROGRAM**

All BRAC programs undergo a similar process of scaling up, but one of the best examples is its Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) program. Since the program was founded with a small pilot in 1985, its growth has been remarkable. Today, over 31,000 primary schools and 16,000 pre-primary schools operate throughout Bangladesh. The quality of the education is just as impressive. BRAC primary schools complete the national five-year primary education in four years, using mostly BRAC's own textbooks, and most students continue their education in the formal system after graduation. The five core subjects are Bengali, English, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Special efforts are made to include hard-to-reach populations, including children with disabilities and ethnic minorities, and sixty-five percent of students are girls. The evolution of this program from its first inspiration to its current national success (and continuing growth) illustrates concretely the seven elements of BRAC's strategy for scaling up.

#### **1. Listening to the People**

The first principle of scaling up—indeed, of any development project—is listening to the people. Villagers are often the source of the best program ideas, and their input ensures the relevance of program goals and methods. Technical or theoretical expertise can only be useful to the extent that it is attuned to the needs of the people it is meant to serve; an NGO that does not seek or heed the guidance of its clients runs the risk of investing in programs that turn out to be inappropriate or even counterproductive.

BRAC has taken great care not to fall into this trap; to the contrary, it prides itself on being a learning

organization, constantly soliciting and acting on feedback, criticism, and suggestions from its members. Some even suggest that BRAC's members should really receive at least half the credit for the success of the NGO, since they generate so many of the ideas for new programs, and their commitment and enthusiasm have been so integral to program implementation.

The creation of BRAC's non-formal primary schools, like many other programs, was prompted by requests from village women. By the early 1980s, BRAC had earned a reputation among villagers as an effective organization and had built trust with its village organization members. Women who were concerned about high dropout rates among their school-age children turned to BRAC for a solution. "Can you do something for our children's education? Our children do not survive the public system," they entreated. In response, BRAC undertook a study to gather information from the villagers in a formal and systematic way. Why did so many children drop out of—or never attend—government schools? In addition to big classes, long school days, and discouragement among girls, it was found that emphasis on homework had a disproportionately discouraging effect on the poor, who lacked literate parents or expensive tutors to help students outside of class.

This experience highlights two additional, subtler elements of a successful dialog with the people. First, a relationship of trust is necessary to encourage open, honest communication. BRAC built such trust by establishing itself as a village institution running effective and helpful programs and reinforced this trust through responsiveness to comments. Second, listening to the people entails more than simple attention to individual conversations and anecdotes. Such personal communication is certainly necessary and often provides the first inspiration for new projects or reforms, but it must be complemented by thorough, systematized information-gathering. Formal studies go beyond the opinions of the most vocal informants, reaching out to a broader cross-section of a community or target population and corroborating expressed opinions with hard data.

## 2. Vision

Listening to the people is absolutely essential for providing inspiration, calling attention to problems

requiring attention, and often suggesting potential solutions—but an ambitious vision is what challenges an organization to take these ideas to the next level. Vision puts the work of the organization in a larger, longer-term context, providing a sense of purpose and potential to fuel the drive to scale up. BRAC's vision is particularly well-developed; never content with isolated local progress, BRAC consistently takes a national, long-term approach to development and the empowerment of the poor.

The transition from local relief to national-scale development was first realized in BRAC's campaign against diarrhea in the early 1980s. At that time, diarrhea claimed nearly one in eight children in Bangladesh before their fifth birthday. Diarrhea can be effectively treated with a simple homemade oral rehydration solution (ORS), but most rural mothers did not know how to make ORS and instead put their trust in unreliable and ineffective store-bought remedies or quack doctors. BRAC, at first independently and later in collaboration with the Bangladeshi government, decided that the best way to address the problem was a grassroots education campaign. Like subsequent programs, this campaign was developed slowly, beginning with a year of research in 1979, followed by piloting, planning, training, and capacity building, and supportive but strict supervision, and finally the expansion to cover the country. Between 1980 and 1990, BRAC staff personally visited 13 million village households, accounting for 80% of the households in Bangladesh, and taught at least one family member how to make ORS (Lovell 1992, 61).

This achievement proved that BRAC was capable of implementing effective programs on a national scale, and prompted BRAC to think differently about its role. When confronted with the educational needs of its members' children, BRAC did not set up isolated, small-scale, superficial, or patchwork efforts. All over Bangladesh, public school classrooms were overcrowded, and millions of children had fallen through the cracks. BRAC saw that the education of the nation's poor children demanded serious commitment, and the organization was in a position to conceive a bold vision for a national educational program.

## 3. Piloting

The piloting process enables an organization to develop newly generated program ideas into

effective, actualized programs on a small scale in preparation for expansion. Beginning a new project with a pilot minimizes risk, since a small mistake is less costly than a large one, and therefore allows greater freedom to experiment and innovate. The pilot also establishes a solid foundation on which to build a larger program, and its results provide potential donors with concrete evidence of the growing program's efficacy.

The piloting process has two main objectives: effectiveness and efficiency. Effectiveness, the essential purpose of any program, must be the first goal. At a small scale, it is possible to experiment, to take risks, and to make some mistakes, in order to determine which strategies produce the best results. Once effectiveness is achieved, the focus shifts to efficiency, a quality whose importance will become increasingly conspicuous as a program scales up. Unnecessary tasks and program elements should be eliminated, while those necessary to program effectiveness should be standardized and routinized as much as possible in preparation for replication. Standardization not only facilitates consistency but will also enable the program to take advantage of economies of scale as it grows.

Meanwhile, support systems should be developed with a view to the requirements of expansion, including training, logistics, and auditing capabilities. All in all, it typically takes three to four years to prepare a new BRAC program to go to scale (Abed *Thinking* 2006).

The NFPE pilot of twenty-two one-room schools was launched in 1985. For another NGO, twenty-two schools might sound like a successful, mature program—for an organization of BRAC's vision, they were just a laboratory. These pilot schools were opened mostly in areas where BRAC had already established a presence, and they taught a three-year primary education. Because BRAC hoped to provide a model for the reform of government schools, the budget was limited to the government's budget at that time, US \$15 per child per year (Abed *Innovator* 2006). Armed with the empirical data it had collected about the factors discouraging poor children from attending government schools, a small group of educators, assisted by a consultant from Dhaka University School of Education, experimented for two years with materials and methods of teacher selection and training (Lovell 1992, 50). The relatively large pilot group size enhanced the effectiveness of these

experiments, providing room to explore a greater number of techniques when needed, and more reliable data about their results.

#### 4. Training

Quality training is absolutely essential for successful expansion. The piloting process is meant to develop an effective and efficient program design, but the efforts devoted to piloting are wasted if the lessons learned there are not consistently applied. Training helps to transmit procedural and technical expertise and organizational values to new hires, ensuring that these critical (if intangible) assets are not diluted as the organization expands. Existing personnel, meanwhile, need training to support continuing professional development as a growing organization presents them with new challenges.

BRAC takes training very seriously for all its employees. The first BRAC Training and Resource Center (TARC) was established at Savar in 1978, and BRAC now operates 16 such facilities across Bangladesh. The development of a new program is always supported by the preparation of relevant trainings for new and existing personnel. Capacity development in this field is key; training programs and facilities must always be built up ahead of program requirements, particularly during periods of potentially destabilizing growth.

Quality training is particularly vital to the success of the NFPE program, since its teachers are paraprofessionals, not certified teachers. The turnover rate among such paraprofessionals, native to the village in which they work, is much lower than among outside professionals. With a minimum of nine years formal schooling, new teachers are trained in BRAC's curriculum and teaching methods in an initial fifteen-day residential session, followed by one daylong refresher training each month. Refresher trainings provide continuing reinforcement for the essential skills taught at the initial training and a forum for addressing additional issues as they arise in the classroom. The persistence of training support over time, combined with the design of BRAC's curriculum materials, ensures that paraprofessional teachers are qualified to provide an excellent education to their students.

#### 5. Down-to-Earth Management

A down-to-earth management structure helps to ensure that quality training translates to quality

practice and keeps the organization in touch with developments on the field level. Nucleus field management units, which BRAC calls area offices, are ideally suited to preserve the close managerial relationships of a small-scale project in a program that is scaling up; new units should be opened with a mix of new and experienced personnel to promote continuity and stability. Managers focus their energy on support supervision, not policing, and they should make the effort to stay in touch with the everyday developments in their area. In the NFPE program, each supervisor is responsible for fifteen schools, visiting each school twice a week. The program organizer's visits are opportunities for the teacher to ask questions and seek advice, as well as for the supervisor to offer suggestions and observations. In combination with the monthly refresher trainings, the intensity of this managerial relationship ensures that paraprofessional teachers have all the support that they may need.

The ethos of supportive supervision should apply throughout the organization's hierarchy. At all levels, the emphasis is on frequent field visits, personal meetings, and supportive relationships. Most BRAC executives actually began their careers as program organizers working with village organizations; even if they now work out of the head office in the city, they still spend most of their time talking to people in the field, not in front of a computer screen. Area meetings are held once a week, regional meetings once a month, and head office meetings periodically. These meetings require an investment of energy, time, and resources, but the result is a more interactive and responsive organization. As the organization grows, management personnel who are attentive to field operations will become aware of problems more quickly and will be better equipped to respond to them as they arise. Decentralization of decision-making power also facilitates responsiveness and keeps a growing organization nimble.

Finally, regular auditing ensures that offices are held accountable for their use of resources. Strict financial control is exercised through internal, external, and international audits, and each area office is audited every six months. This rigorous accounting is necessary both for organizational efficiency and integrity and for the benefit of donors, whose support is especially crucial during the process of scaling up.

## 6. Evaluation and Adaptation

A newly scaled-up program is not sustainable without follow-through. Evaluation and adaptation must continue long after the intensive experimentation of the piloting process; the long-term effectiveness of a program relies on its continuing responsiveness to changing field conditions. Monitoring should be conducted within the program, as a natural component of program management, and it should also be conducted by impartial outsiders. In BRAC's case, the Research and Evaluation Division (RED) was established back in 1975 to fill precisely this need for independent evaluation. Today, RED employs forty full-time researchers and handles both program evaluation and basic research on issues relevant to BRAC's development goals. Its work fosters continuous innovation and adjustments in programs and management.

Such evaluation has guided great changes in the structure of the NFPE program over the course of its history. The first schools ran a three-year basic curriculum, since BRAC assumed that various economic and social pressures would prevent children from continuing their education in government schools. But BRAC was happy to discover that its assumptions were mistaken: in 1990, 90% of older children and 99% of younger children enrolled in government primary schools after completion of their three years with BRAC (Lovell 1992, 55). BRAC's first response was a supplemental bridge program for those students who wanted to continue, but it then decided that it could do better. Through increased contact hours, NFPE schools began to provide all their students the government's full five-year primary curriculum, including English, in only four years.

## 7. Advocacy

Ultimately, no project or program can completely solve the problem it aims to address. In order to achieve maximum impact, program activities on the ground should be complemented by advocacy work nationally and even internationally. A successfully operationalized program lends an organization a great deal of credibility, which may be leveraged to the great advantage of its cause.

BRAC's advocacy work has led to an excellent working relationship with government education programs and a number of increasingly

collaborative projects. Its Government Partnership Program obtained approval to open pre-primary schools, whose students enter government primary schools after completing a one-year curriculum. The benefits of the NFPE method are also spreading beyond the walls of dedicated NFPE schools. BRAC's Post-Primary Basic Education program works with rural non-government secondary schools, providing administrators with education management training and teachers with subject training in mathematics, English, and science. The Partnership with Primary Schools extends similar support to mainstream primary school teachers, together with programs designed to increase community participation.

The NFPE model has also received a great deal of international attention, and Bangladesh's 31,000 schools are in effect now serving as the pilot for an international expansion. Organizations in South Asia, Africa, and Central America have developed primary education systems based on the BRAC model (Quelch and Laidler-Kylander 2006, 99). BRAC itself runs NFPE schools as part of its programs in Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, and it recently received a US\$250 million commitment from the Clinton Global Initiative for an expansion into Africa, where it will be opening schools in Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, and Southern Sudan.

### CONCLUSION

The process of scaling up can be one of the biggest challenges in the management of an NGO, but it is also one of the most vital. In a world where billions of people live on less than a dollar a day, the endeavor to scale up is rooted in the inescapable magnitude and urgency of need among the poor. All too often, organizations set their sights too low, underestimating their own potential for full-scale impact. Let BRAC's experience serve as an inspiration to abandon such self-limiting timidity. The need of the poor is too great, and the will to scale up is acutely needed.

Together, these seven key principles, based on BRAC's long history of successful growth, provide an excellent model for any organization ready to meet this challenge and begin (or continue) the process of scaling up. Attention to the expressed needs of the people, particularly the prospective program's clientele, should be complemented by broad, long-term organizational vision. Energy

must be dedicated to piloting in order to ensure effective and efficient program design, and emphasis on training ensures that the practices established are transmitted to all personnel. Down-to-earth management and support supervision foster innovation and a culture of learning, and continuing evaluation promotes responsiveness to changing circumstances. Meanwhile, advocacy maximizes the impact of the program in the wider world and leverages its success towards institutional and policy reform.

BRAC firmly believes (in contrast to the title of E. F. Schumacher's popular book) "Small is beautiful, but big is necessary." The organization has had exceptional success translating this conviction into real-world results, and its programs touch the lives of millions every year. But BRAC's programs are not enough, and NGOs around the world must also begin to scale up more aggressively if viable, widespread development is to be possible.

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