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## REACHING THE UNREACHED

A BRAC Experience on Non-formal Primary Education for the rural poor children

Paper for : UCEP Workshop on Teaching the Disadvantaged Children

Presenter : Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed  
Director Programme BRAC

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60 Mahatma J.A. Chowk (212) Tel: 834180-3, Fax: 880-3-881343 Te: 832337 BRAC/BF

## **BRAC**

When BRAC started its work in 1972 providing basic relief to a war ravaged population, it soon became clear that poverty was the biggest problem facing the newly independent nation; that mere relief was not enough. Soon a strategy to group the rural landless was developed for their self-sustaining personal development through training, credit, income generation activities and through education for children. Institution building underpins all activities.

Major BRAC activities are the Rural Development Programme, the Rural Credit Project, the Women's Health and Development Programme and the Non-Formal Primary Education Programme. Because of the low status of women in Bangladesh particular attention is paid to women in every BRAC activity. By 1992 more than 7 million people were reached across 12 thousand villages.

From only a few when BRAC first began, today there are over 5000 full-time staff .

### **NON-FORMAL PRIMARY EDUCATION PROGRAMME**

The impact of Bangladesh's massive poverty and illiteracy on current and future generations of the country is enormous. The weakness of the existing primary education system cripples the country's entire human resource base and seriously threatens all prospects for a better life.

Acting upon the needs of the rural poor and with a view to making a contribution to eradicate illiteracy, BRAC started a non-formal primary education programme (NFPE) in 1985 for unschooled and left-out children of the villages especially girls.

**Programme goals:**

The main goal of the programme has been to reach the children of the poorest landless families with a basic relevant education.

The programme aims to :

- reduce illiteracy and contribute to the basic education of a significant proportion of the country's children, especially those from the poorest families.
- ensure enhanced participation of the community in education, especially women.
- promote education of girls ( at least 70% of the students)
- develop a para professional cadre of teachers
- contribute towards the government's universal primary education programme

## **PROGRAMME DESIGN**

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BRAC implements two school models : a) a three year course for 8-10 year old children who have never attended school or have dropped out before achieving any literary or numeracy skill. This model is called NFPE. b) The Primary Education for Older Children or PEOC model is a 2 year programme for the 11-16 age group. From 1992 PEOC will also run for three years. Both types of school follow the same curriculum.

### **School curriculum**

The school curriculum is designed to be relevant to the needs and lives of rural children. Children are taught to read , write and do simple arithmetic like counting and measurement. The necessary books and supplies are charge free. There is practically no homework assigned and all task is done during the two and half hour of class each day. Formal examinations are not given. Child progress is measured continually through regular assessment. The curriculum is designed to cover the essential content of primary education.

A good portion of each day is set aside for co-curricular activities such as singing, dancing, drawing etc. This contributes to the physical and mental stimulation of the children and assures high attendance.

### **Individual attention**

The class size is small with only 30 students in a class. This allows the teacher to pay individual attention to the pupils. Moreover, as the schools

are located near the child's home, the teacher is able to visit the child at home whenever necessary.

### School teacher and teacher training

The school teacher is the essential person. Mostly, women, they have a minimum of nine years of schooling and are residents of the village where school is to start. Their training is a continuing process. It begins with a 15 day intensive training on child psychology and pedagogy prior to school opening. Thereafter, every teacher must attend the mandatory 1 day refresher course every month. At the end of the first year of school every teacher receives a 4 day training to prepare her for the second year of school.

A list of potential teachers is always kept ready in case a replacement is necessary.

### Supervision and management

Regular and strict supervision is most essential. The Programme Organiser in the field is responsible for 15 to 20 schools and visits each school twice a week.

### Community participation

Parents and the community have an active role in running the schools. Parents- teacher meeting every month is the main forum where child progress, problems or any school related issue is discussed. In addition, a



four member school management committee is formed for every school comprising of parents, local leader and the teacher. This committee meets whenever required and is responsible for such tasks as making necessary repairs to the school building and any other school related activity it desires to look into. The Programme Organiser facilitates these forums.

In the BRAC schools, daily class attendance averages 99%. Almost 98% of the children complete the school term of whom a majority (95%) move on to the government primary schools in classes IV and V.

Currently, 8600 schools are operating, reaching more than 250,000 rural children.

## **LEARNINGS FROM THE PROGRAMME**

NFPE has taught BRAC many simple lessons. BRAC has learnt that poor parents do want their children to be educated irrespective of gender. When school schedule suits familial needs, when teachers teach and when that learning can be applied to every day life, children stay in school. The key element to a successful learning process is ofcourse parental participation and efficient supervision, this too BRAC has applied and learnt first hand.

An important lesson learnt is that good basic education can be imparted by teachers without a lengthy pedagogical background.

Based on these learnings the BRAC non-formal school programme plans to rapidly scale up its activities during the 90s, giving non-starters and drop-outs a second chance for a better, more informed life.