

# Reaching Primary Education at the Doorstep of the Poor: The BRAC Experience

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BRAC Research Report



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## ABSTRACT

It is a review paper on BRAC education programme. Starting with a description of the country context of the initial days of the programme it describes how the programme was developed and implemented, and expanded throughout the country using the gathered experiences. Impact of the programme, challenges faced and lesson learned were discussed afterwards.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Bangladesh is a small and densely populated South Asian country with rich culture and traditions. The country's area is 147,570 sq. km and the population is over 130 million. The population growth rate is about 1.8% and three quarters of the population live in rural areas. The Muslims account for about 88% of the total population. A number of ethnic minorities live in the country, some of which have their own languages. However, Bangla, the national language, is spoken by over 98% of the people.

The economic condition of the people of Bangladesh is, in general, very poor. It is a developing country with average annual income of US\$ 360. The proportion of population living below the poverty line improved from 71% in 1971 to 43% recently. Poverty, a rural economy, high level of under employment and un employment, rapid population growth, frequent natural disasters, high illiteracy especially among woman, a high degree of rural urban disparity, and low status of girls and women are some of the characteristics of the nation. In terms of human development index (HDI), Bangladesh ranks 138th among 177 countries, and in terms of human poverty index (HPI) it ranks 72nd among 95 countries.

BRAC, a private development organisation, started in 1972 as a relief organisation to help rehabilitate refugees returning from India after the war of independence. The activities were concentrated only in the remote rural areas. During the work, the organisers observed the process of relief activities and socio-economic dynamics of the communities. It was observed that poverty drove recipients of relief to sell materials at low prices to the local elites, who saw it as an opportunity to exploit them. The distribution of food and other livelihood materials could not continue because the environment did not permit it. It was also learned that free distribution did not ensure proper use. Through the process it was also discovered that women were the most vulnerable section in Bangladeshi society; household getting relief materials did not mean its women could partake of them. These experiences gave BRAC a broader perspective of human development, which helped in its interaction with people and made it effective.

Over the period BRAC realised that poverty is a complex phenomenon that must be tackled through a holistic approach. As the women are the most vulnerable in the family and society, they should be at the centre of any development intervention. Today, BRAC's twin objectives are poverty alleviation and empowering the poor. It promotes income generation for the poor – mostly the landless rural women – through micro-finance and programmes on health, education and human resources development.

Although Bangladesh appeared as an independent state in 1971, it did not progress much in any of the social sectors for the next two decades. Education is one of those. The school enrolment rate of the children and literacy rate of the population could explain the situation more clearly. The national census data show that a fifth of the children aged 5-9 years and a third of those aged 10-14 years attended school in 1974, which increased to 30% and 43% respectively at mid 1980s. Improvement in adult literacy rate was only five to six percentage points during the same period. Only a quarter of the adult population was literate in 1974, which improved to about 31% in 1985. Quite high gender gap also existed. The girls and the females were lagging behind their respective counterparts. Nearly 80% of the adult females were unable to read or write at the functional level. Only a half of the school enrolled children could complete the five-year cycle of primary education. Although no data on quality of education is available for that particular time, but the present situation can only regress that it was just very poor. Although over 80% of the population lived in the rural areas, 70% of the educational investment went to urban areas, most to higher education. Only 2.2% of its GNP spent for education.

BRAC's initiatives for educational development could not be separated from its other development activities. BRAC believes that education is a key to any sustainable human development process. Thus, interlink between everyday life of the learners and education provision is a must. The educational activities of BRAC started with functional literacy programme in mid 1970s when BRAC observed that without having minimum literacy skills people were not being able to take the advantages of income generating activities, health and other social services. So, a number of literacy centres were started in different areas of the country, especially where its development programmes were carried out. The basis of the curriculum for the programme and the contents of the textbooks were set in the light of the day-to-day needs of the people for whom the programme was designed. However, previous experiences of the country and the neighbouring countries were also considered. A number of national and international experts in literacy also worked to develop the programme. While working with the rural poor people BRAC learned two lessons:

- Firstly, education can be provided if it is made accessible at the doorsteps of the un-accessible.
- Secondly, people do learn more and better if it is matched with the needs of everyday life.
- It can be remembered that the adult literacy rate was only 24% at that time and the females were much behind the males.

## IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERVENTION

### DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRACTICE

A major shift occurred in the education programme when rural mothers, who were also participants of BRAC development programmes and were attending in the functional literacy classes, questioned that “..... but what about our children, will they have to wait till they are 18 to join your schools?” By this time BRAC is 10 years experienced in adult literacy programme and five years experienced in teaching oral rehydration therapy to the women of more than six million of households. In 1984, BRAC started to think about school programme for the young children. Through a closer look at the then primary schooling system BRAC observed that:

- Schools were situated far from the poorer communities. It was difficult for the young children to cross such distance everyday. As such they did not enrol there, especially the girls.
- Teaching learning system was set in such a way that it needed extra help and guidance at home. As the poor and illiterate parents could not do so and did not have financial ability to keep private tutor, they got a feeling that these schools were not for their children.
- Classrooms were crowded and the teaching learning atmosphere was not child-centred, so the learners lost their interest to continue in schools within a short period. The dropout rate was high.
- Due to the need for child labour in households it was not possible for the parents to allow their children to attend classes at a fixed time during all the seasons. This caused discontinuation of the learners from the schools.
- Girls did not enrol in schools as much as the boys did.

With the above learning, in 1985, BRAC started 22 single room one-teacher experimental schools called Non-formal Primary Education (NFPE) in 22 rural villages. The aim was to learn and develop a school model for the poorer children to equip them in basic reading, writing and numeracy along with life skills and social studies. A three-year curriculum (including textbooks and other supplementary materials) for grades I to III was developed under the supervision of local experts. A series of field trials and consultation meetings were held in different parts of the country. The targeted learners were those children who never enrolled or dropped out from the existing system due to poverty or gender barrier. In each school there were 30 students aged 8-10 years. Considering the lower rate of girl enrolment in the existing schools, it was decided to take more girls in BRAC schools. Seventy percent of the pupils in the experimental schools were girls. Seating arrangement was also non-traditional. Pupils sat in a U-shape pattern on a mat; no chair or bench was used. The teachers were all married women with at least nine years of schooling taken from the same village. It was thought that the teachers would be paraprofessional and a short orientation course (12 days) was also developed for them. National level experts in teacher training helped in this regard. Schools were divided into clusters and each programme organiser (PO) was responsible to supervise 5/6 schools. The first challenge, at that time, was to ensure regular attendance of the learners in the schools. The concept of community participation through regular parent-teacher meeting was developed. A very effective mechanism came out from this which became a part of the model. The learning is as follows:

- School timing should be flexible according to the seasonal needs of the families.
- Regular (once a month) parent-teacher meetings helped the parents to understand what was going on in the schools and what role they needed to play for the sake of the children. It also helped the teachers to understand parents' views about the schools and what they intend to have from school.
- Such meetings made the teacher and the POs accountable to the community to whom they were serving.
- Along with the above, visits of the teachers and the POs to the unattended learners' houses helped a lot in ensuring regular attendance and protecting dropout.

The second challenge was to keep up the teachers' quality who had only nine years of schooling and no formal education on teaching. Introduction of monthly experience-based training and yearly refresher training for the teachers were another innovation with respect to quality assurance. This helped the teachers to prepare themselves better and make plans on a monthly basis and share experiences among themselves. In addition to this, the programme organiser's regular visit to the schools ensured proper supervision and management of the system.

The third challenge was to ensure completion of the course and take the students to the formal schools for further education. Home visit of the non-attending students by the teachers and the programme organisers primarily ensured attendance and ultimately ensured completion of the course.

The 22 schools with the above understanding ran for next three years. It was observed that only 2% of the enrolled students dropped out over the cycle of three years. Major reason for this was because of families must move away. The first evaluation study on this by the World Bank (1988) showed that although the learners of the BRAC schools came from the lower socio-economic group and those of the government primary schools from the middle class, both did equally well in reading and writing tests. However, the BRAC school learners did lower in mathematics and social studies. The reason behind this was that the test was constructed on the basis of government curriculum. Such texts in BRAC schools were different. In BRAC, more attention was given on practical use of mathematics and placing a different emphasis in social studies. Ninety-five percent of those who completed the course passed admission tests to enter into the fourth grade of the formal system. It should also be noted here that these children came from different economically endowed groups.

This experiment started with financial assistance from a Canadian donor which continued up to 1988. A Norwegian donor joined during the second year. The above experiment also helped BRAC to design another course for the never enrolled children aged 11-14 years. This was a two-year course started in 1988 with financial assistance from an UN agency. This curriculum was more functional, particularly at the second year, because many of the learners were too old to transfer to the formal schools. This initiative was known as Basic Education for Older Children (BEOC).

## **THE PRACTICE AT WORK**

On successful completion of three-year course for the children aged 8-10 years BRAC sought reaction from the parents and the community people. People of the neighbouring villages were also consulted. A demand for more schools was created from the mothers and the villagers. Simultaneously, the donors were also interested to continue their support. BRAC started to establish schools in various parts of the country where the other programmes were already there. By the end of 1990, total number of schools of both the models reached at 3,479.

After the Jomtien conference in 1990, new programmes have been initiated round the world in order to achieve Education for All (EFA). BRAC models have created an interest among the international community, including the donors. Donors started offering money to BRAC to expand the programme. For instance, two international donors offered to open 13,000 schools of both the types by 1993. The number of schools jumped to 4,500 by 1991 and kept increasing afterwards. It reached to 34,000 schools all over the country by 2001. The programme was extended in urban areas in 1991 in response to the growing demand for education in urban slums. Although these schools followed the NFPE curriculum but certain modifications had to be made, especially in social studies, to make it sensible to urban environment. For instance, issues related to road traffic symbols, water and sanitation in slums, cleanliness etc. had to be introduced or revised to make it friendly to urban life. Earlier less attendance and higher dropout due to heavy under aged employment in urban slums affected the programme. The problem was partly resolved through motivating the parents and in some cases the employers.

In 1998, BRAC management has decided to extend the duration of the course from three to four years. The idea was to provide the full cycle of primary education (Grades I to V) within a time span of four years. One thousand school of 1996 cohort was the first batch who completed the full cycle of primary education in 1999. This is the present situation of the model. The time duration is  $(9+9+10+10+10) = 48$  months. Formal school textbooks are used in grades IV and V with BRAC prepared supplementary workbooks.

Management and supervision of schools are two vital issues. Although the overall responsibility lies with the Chairperson and the Executive Director, a Deputy Executive Director and the Head of the education programme along with his team directly manage the programme. The department is divided into three major units; these are education development unit, field operations unit and monitoring unit. A senior manager heads each unit. Each unit has a number of head office based staff and many field staff.

The education development unit has three main tasks aiming at quality assurance of the programme; these are development of curriculum, textbooks and supplementary materials, teacher training, and assessment of the students. A group of trained and experienced persons, stationed at head office, are responsible to develop curriculum and other materials through field test. This group has collaboration with the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) under the Ministry of Education of the government. The field based quality managers, master trainers, and batch trainers are three layers of quality assurance cadres. They provide academic supervision at the school level and training support to the teachers and the programme organisers. The quality managers participate in the weekly meeting of the programme organisers. The master trainers and the batch trainers facilitate the monthly refreshers training of the teachers.

The field operation unit is responsible for implementing the programme at the grassroots level – starting from school opening to the graduation of the pupils. They work through region and area level offices. A manager heads each office. A number of programme organisers (five to six) are posted in each area office. These programme organisers are the first line supervisors of the schools and the teachers. On average, 500 schools are established in each region, and 70-80 schools in each area. One programme organiser supervises 12-14 schools. At present there are 43 regional offices and 450 area offices throughout the country. The major responsibilities of the regional offices are to supervise the area offices. They evaluate the performance of the staff and take initiative to improve them, approve annual budget and provide logistic support to the area offices, inspect schools, and supervise the activities of the quality managers. All regional managers meet once a month with the senior manager heading the field operations unit at head office. Thus, all administrative directions are passed through the regional managers to the field offices. The area offices are mainly responsible for smooth running of the schools. The programme organisers work under the leadership of the area managers. The monthly



refresher training courses are arranged in the area office premises. The recruitment of the teachers is done at the area level and the others at the head office level.

The monitoring unit collects two types of data. Data on day-to-day activities are compiled under this unit. Moreover, a team of 40 monitoring officers are engaged in monitoring of various issues related to the programme. The issues are selected by the head office management or sometimes in the monthly regional managers' meeting. The monitoring unit prepares separate report on each of the themes under monitoring system. These reports are very much helpful in understanding current status of the programme. The operational decisions are taken based on these reports. Sometimes the research division of BRAC gets research issues from the monitoring reports. Basic data on the schools are used as sampling frame of the studies conducted by the research division.

Other departments within BRAC such as training, research, audit and accounts, human resources and a large printing press assist in the activities of BRAC education programme. It would not have been possible to run such a big programme without the support from them. These departments simultaneously support other programmes as well.

The parents and the donors are two important parts of the programme. Because of their lower level of education, the parents are not being able to supervise the teachers but their presence in the school premises play a very important role. The parents, especially the mothers sat together once a month to discuss various issues related to the school. There is also a parent-teacher committee for each school. The members of this committee regularly visit the schools to see whether the schools start and end timely and the teachers perform their duties. The students or the parents do not do contribute financially or in-kind. Education in BRAC schools is totally free – no fee is charged to the students. Textbooks and other learning materials and stationeries are provided to each of the students free of cost.

Two principles have been considered in relation to the costs of the programme. Firstly, costs per child should be minimum as much as practicable, and secondly, largest share of the costs should be used for assuring quality education. During the initial stage, annual cost per child was US\$ 15. Books and supplies for the students, supervision of schools and teacher training received two thirds of total costs. Although costs per child increased to US\$18 recently, but the proportions for different heads did not change. As the teachers are paraprofessional they are paid a small amount as stipend, not salary. It can be mentioned here that, largest share (over 90%) of the total costs is used for teacher salary in the state owned primary schools. It would not have been possible for BRAC to run such a large public service enterprise without external funds. As the service is dedicated to the children of poor families it has no income of its own. It is a fully subsidised enterprise. Since the learners and their parents are motivated to education and so give their time for this. In this way they obviously sacrifice some amount of income earnings.

## **TARGET GROUP OF BENEFICIARIES**

The programme is targeted to the never enrolled and dropped out children of the poorer section of the community from its very inception. As already mentioned, the programme was started to value the interest of the women participated in other programmes of BRAC. Children of illiterate parents are given priority. Both boys and the girls are benefited from this programme; however, the share of the girls is 65% at present. Before opening a school, areas are selected based on the government statistics on out of school children. Areas with high density of out of school children are given priority. BRAC programme organisers do household survey in the selected areas in order to identify the targeted children. Findings of a number of studies can be cited to see the background socio-economic status of BRAC school students.

A series of studies conducted by BRAC research division shows that the mothers of over 70% of the students and the fathers of over a half of the students had never been to school.

Over a half of the students in BRAC schools were first generation learners during 1995-97, which was found 43-45% during 1999-2001. About 60% of the students came from those households having less than 50 decimals of land for cultivation and a half of the families live basically on selling manual labour. Generally the women of poorer families are the beneficiaries of the NGO run micro-finance programmes. Over a half of the students mothers were the participants of such programmes. *Education Watch* study showed that 42% of the formal school students were first generation learners, whereas it was 48.4% in case of BRAC schools.

## IMPACT OF THE INTERVENTION

### ACHIEVEMENT DUE TO THE INTERVENTION

Impact of any education programme can be seen in two ways, internal and external. In case of internal impact one generally looks at what happens inside the classroom and for later case impact on socio-economic life is explored. Due to the educational intervention of BRAC 2.4 million children completed primary curriculum during the last two decades, over two-thirds of which were girls. Two national sample surveys showed that 6.5% of the total students at primary level were enrolled in BRAC schools (Chowdhury *et al* 1999, 2002). When BRAC intervention started, a wide gender gap in access to primary education existed. Today, gender parity has been achieved at the national level. BRAC's emphasis towards girls education has at least some contribution in this regard.

A comparative study on assessment of basic competencies showed that the students of BRAC schools did significantly better than their counterparts in the government primary schools (Nath *et al* 1999). One recent study based on NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) determined terminal competencies observed that the students of BRAC schools did significantly better than those in regular and formal primary schools (Nath and Chowdhury 2001). Such a positive impact was possible because of its small class size, frequent in-service teacher training, care driven teaching learning system, parental participation, and accountable management in BRAC schools. It can be mentioned here that all these are lacking in the formal education system.

Earlier the BRAC school students were not allowed to participate in the primary scholarship examinations organised by the Directorate of Primary Education of the government. This is now open for the last three years. Due to lack of experience with such examination system the pupils of BRAC schools could not do much well during the first two years. However, they did much better results in the last year's examination.

Learners of BRAC schools do not only complete their primary education, but also enrol in secondary schools for further education. Each year over 90% of the BRAC school graduates enrol in formal secondary schools. BRAC plays a role in this regard. Firstly, the programme organisers initiate this transition. Secondly, BRAC provides free textbooks and stipends to some of the very poor students. However, all girls of the rural secondary schools in Bangladesh receive government stipend. One recent study on socio-economic impact of BRAC non-formal primary education shows, although BRAC school students came from poorer families they performed equally with their counterparts in formal schools in different livelihood indicators (income, employment, asset accumulation, etc.). Moreover, people with BRAC school background had better knowledge on health and other development issues including awareness (child rights, etc.) than those with formal school background.

All Above are direct impacts of BRAC education programme. There were indirect impacts too. Almost all the teachers in BRAC schools are females. Though they are paid a small amount of stipend, it helps improve their livelihood. Teachers are generally honoured in Bangladeshi society. Due to their service in schools pupils and the villagers honour them. This programme created part time income opportunity for thousands of women living in the rural areas and urban slums.

### CHALLENGES AHEAD

Although BRAC has been working in primary education for the last two decades and many children completed their primary education through BRAC schools, but still there are many out

of school children in the country. One recent estimate shows that 20% of the country's primary school-aged children are out of school. These children live mostly in the remote rural areas; some of which are islands in the big rivers, hilly areas, specific areas like tea gardens, and among different occupational groups. BRAC education programme expanded mostly in those areas where other programmes went first. There are many other remote areas to work in. Again, It is not possible for BRAC to open school if adequate number of out of school children is not available in the area. To open a BRAC school at least 30 pupils are required and it is not economically sound if school is opened with less than 25 pupils. Due to these reasons some out of school children remain as they were, even if BRAC programme is there in the areas.

In comparison with the overall quality of primary education provisions in the country, the quality of BRAC schools is better. However, there is scope to improve learning achievement of the pupils. Like as other provisions, majority of the BRAC schools pupils are not able to achieve the entire terminal competencies expected in them at the end of primary schooling.

One of the BRAC's aims is empowerment of women and thus it works targeting the girls and the women. Studies showed that in general, the girls in BRAC schools did not achieve as much as the boys achieved. One study looked at the reasons behind gender difference in mathematics achievement among BRAC school pupils. It found, gender based norms and values inculcate among the family members of the pupils, teachers and the programme organisers as well. Boys are given priority and expected more competence in the classrooms. The whole process of school operation has some elements that promote the boys, not the girls.

This programme is fully donor dependent. As the children of the poorer families are the targets of this programme, there is no way of charging fees for the service. Some years back as the donors could not make their commitment on time, it delayed opening new schools as planned. If the government could share a portion of the costs it might be helpful in smooth running of the programme in the hard-to-reach areas.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Starting from a relief and rehabilitation organisation BRAC is now a multi-sectoral, multi-faceted development organisation. It was possible due to its learning mode of delivery system. In case of education, starting from 22 experimental schools for three years, now there are 34,000 non-formal schools providing full cycle of primary education. It was possible only because BRAC moved with the demands of its clients, here the learners and the parents. Education was provided according to the needs of the community, however culture of the community was not ignored during implementation. Another important issue is that quality of education has never been sacrificed at the cost of expansion. This ensured a continued public interest to the service. The international donor community always extended their hands with financial assistance. Regular monitoring, supportive supervision and continued research on the services are part of managing an overall delivery mechanism. A holistic approach of development is crucial for the uplift of the poor.

Following lessons have been learned over the period in providing education through the non-formal primary school programme of BRAC.

- Primary education can be provided to all if it is made accessible at the doorsteps of the un-accessible. Children can learn more and better if it is matched with the needs of everyday life and the teachers take care of the challenges the pupils face.
- Young children especially the girls do face some special problems in order to avail existing schooling facilities (e.g., formal). Distance between school and home, and some other social insecurity issues need to be taken care of.

- Listening to the people and learning from them is important. That is, learning mode of service providing organisations is necessary. In case of education, demands of the children and their parents (especially the mothers) should carefully be looked at.
- Each and every new step should be piloted before implementation. Scaling up of the service should be done according to the demands of the participants and needs of the society.
- Development approach is better than the relief approach in order to provide public services. A holistic approach to development is a necessity for meaningful and sustainable development.
- To make an educational programme successful it is necessary to ensure other support services beyond education e.g., monitoring, training, research, audit and public support in general.
- Culture of the community where the service is being provided needs to be honoured and incorporated in the service management system. Small is beautiful but big is necessary if one really wants to respond to public's demand for education.

### **SCOPE FOR THE REPLICATION AND UP SCALING OF THE INTERVENTION**

Scaling up of BRAC's intervention in primary education has been shown in Bangladesh. Starting from 22 experimental schools in a district, it now operates 34,000 schools covering all the districts of the country. How was it possible has been described in the previous sections of this document.

There are examples of replication of this model in the other parts of the world. With support from UNICEF, BRAC model of non-formal primary schools have been launched in Sierra Leone in 1993, Zambia in 1994 and later in Sudan. The Save the Children USA adopted BRAC model in Mali in 1996. Egypt has also opened community schools adopting BRAC approach. BRAC has started working in Afghanistan some years ago and in Sri Lanka recently. Thousands of BRAC model schools have already been started in Afghanistan and few in Sri Lanka. In all the cases, the senior managers of BRAC guided the local organisers in replicating/adopting the model.

In replicating/adopting the model, the first challenge was to make the people understand that these are schools. According to many, a school is supposed to be with buildings and play grounds, etc. It took some time to make people understand the benefits of these small schools. Secondly, good relationship among the programme organiser, parents and the teacher is a must for smooth running of the school. If the teachers are not made sensitive to the children and their parental demands it is nearly impossible to make a better teaching-learning environment. Thirdly, the government may not accept this model as an alternative way of providing basic education even for the time being.

Ensuring primary education to the people should be the prime responsibility of the national governments. A sustainable primary education provision can only be found through strengthening the national system. However, the governments in the developing and underdeveloped world are not ready to do so. Main problem lies with inadequate resources, management capacity and lack of commitment. In such a situation, BRAC model can only supplement with the mainstream. This model is very much helpful in building a culture of schooling for every child whether rich or poor. It is helpful to create access to education in the remote rural areas where the existing system is unable to reach. Good practices of this model can then be adopted in the formal mainstream system.