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Thursday 2 July 2015

Brac's Sir Fazle Hasan Abed wins 2015 World Food prize for reducing poverty



Fazle Hasan Abed: 'Everything we did in Bangladesh we did with one focus: getting poor people out of poverty because we feel that poverty is dehumanising.' Photograph: Courtesy Asian University

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of [Brac](#), the largest non-governmental organisation on the planet, has been awarded [the 2015 World Food prize](#) for his “unparalleled” work on reducing poverty in [Bangladesh](#) and 10 other countries.

Abed established Brac – formerly known as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee – in 1972 as a relief operation to help the country recover from its war of independence with Pakistan and the destruction wrought by a tropical cyclone.

The organisation's focus soon switched to finding new ways to tackle poverty and empower women socially and economically, and it is estimated to have brought nearly 150 million people out of poverty since its foundation.

Today, it has a staff of 110,000 and works in 11 countries: Bangladesh, [Afghanistan](#), [Pakistan](#), the [Philippines](#), [Sri Lanka](#), [Liberia](#), [Sierra Leone](#), [South Sudan](#), [Tanzania](#), [Uganda](#) and [Haiti](#).

Dr MS Swaminathan, chair of the World Food prize selection committee and the first World Food prize laureate in 1987, described Abed as a “strategic thinker, and a man with a future vision”. He also praised the NGO for its constant innovation and bold use of funding.

“While funding was important, Abed realised that the organisation needed some internal financial resources in order to steer its course, rather than become diverted by donor agendas,” he said.

“He therefore set up a considerable number of commercial enterprises as part of the Brac ‘brand’. These include printing presses, manufacturing industries, a hotel, conference facilities, retail outlets and the private Brac University, among others. Surpluses from these enterprises go into supporting Brac’s development programmes.”

Abed, who was knighted by the Queen in 2010, described the award as a “tremendous honour”, adding: “I’m sure this will be a great joy for our staff and energise them even more. It’s a great satisfaction for us to receive recognition of the work we’ve done for the last 43 years.”

He said he was particularly proud of Brac’s work on tackling child mortality in Bangladesh in the 1980s, which saw the number of deaths halved over a decade.

“We went to every household in Bangladesh teaching mothers how to make oral rehydration fluid at home to combat diarrhoeal deaths,” he said. “That also made it possible for Brac to become a very large organisation very quickly and to expand our programmes throughout the country.”

Equally productive, he said, had been Brac’s push to raise the rates of child immunisation in the last few years of the same decade. Between 1986 and 1990, [the proportion of immunised Bangladeshi children rose from 2% to 70%](#). In the areas where Brac works, he added, the immunisation rate is now at 95%.

Abed said that although Brac’s approach is multifaceted, it was founded on a simple principle.

“We have worked on many different aspects of poverty: mortality reduction; maternal mortality and health; family planning; financial services for women; women’s empowerment; agriculture, and all kinds of livelihoods for poor people so that they could come out of extreme poverty and malnutrition,” he said.

“Everything we did in Bangladesh we did with one focus: getting poor people out of poverty because we feel that poverty is dehumanising.”

With the world preparing to adopt the [sustainable development goals](#) – which will replace the [millennium development goals](#) and set the global development agenda for the next 15 years – Abed called for a renewed focus on eliminating extreme poverty.

He said that [Brac's work with the poorest 8% of Bangladeshis had shown that even the ultra-poor](#) could be reached if sufficient resources and commitment were available. Brac's two-year programme, designed to help those who are too poor for microfinance loans, involves using grants, monthly stipends and health services to support families while they learn about making money and household budgeting.

The programme has since [been rolled out in several countries](#) – Ghana, Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Honduras and Peru –where it has also proved successful.

“Taking people out of extreme poverty can be done but you need the commitment to do it in every country throughout the world,” said Abed.

“That's the problem – do we have the commitment in every country to take the extreme poor out of their misery? Do we have good governance in every country? There are many factors that affect development and hopefully these will also be part of the sustainable development goals: good governance and the eradication of corruption from societies.”