

Poverty, inequality, and health

An International Perspective

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16 Do poverty alleviation programmes reduce inequities in health? The Bangladesh experience

A. Mushtaque R. Chowdhury and Abbas Bhuiya

Over the previous two decades many poverty alleviation programmes have been implemented in developing countries. Evaluation of such programmes has traditionally concentrated more on their success in increasing the income levels of participants than on the broader goals of human well-being. This chapter looks at the poverty alleviation programme of BRAC, a large non-governmental organization in Bangladesh, and, based on a scientifically-designed study, presents its impact on selected components of 'human well-being'.

The study found evidence for better child survival and nutritional status in households served by the programme. Similar evidence was also found for the programme's impact on other areas such as expenditure patterns, family planning practice, children's education, and domestic violence against women. The likely influence of 'selection bias' on the above results is also discussed.

This chapter examines a women-focused development intervention in terms of its impact on human well-being and health equity. In a country like Bangladesh, the major goal of any development intervention is the alleviation of poverty. This is not surprising as a majority of the population live in abject poverty without equitable access and entitlement to basic minimum needs. Evaluations of such programmes have traditionally looked at their success in increasing the income levels of participants. Less attention has been paid to how far these successes are translated into improvements in various aspects of human well-being.

Bangladesh

Bangladesh broke away from Pakistan in 1971 to become an independent nation. The economy was wrecked and the infrastructure normally associated with nationhood did not exist. However, over the past several years, there have

been many positive changes. Between 1975 and 1992 food production almost doubled (Government of Bangladesh, 1996); life expectancy increased by 30% between 1970 and 1996; and the under-five mortality rate decreased by 55% between 1960 and 1996 (UNICEF, 1998). Bangladesh has also achieved impressive results in many other fields. Immunization coverage reached over 70% in the early 1990s from a low of 2% in 1985, although recently it has started to decline (Chowdhury *et al.*, in press). The contraceptive prevalence rate has risen to nearly 50% from under 10% in the mid-1970s, and total fertility rate has declined from over 6 in the 1970s to 3.2 in the late 1990s (UNICEF, 1998). Net enrolment in primary schools has increased to 77% and the gender gap has all but disappeared (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1999). In terms of poverty alleviation, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have made significant progress: micro-credit programmes now serve nearly seven million families, more than half of the country's 12 million poor households (Abed, 1999). Based on the direct calorie intake method the percentage of poor households has declined from 63% in 1983 to 47% in 1995 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1997).

Despite these impressive strides, Bangladesh remains one of the world's poorest nations. In the World Bank's new system of measuring the wealth of nations, Bangladesh ranks eighteenth from the bottom among 123 countries (World Bank, 1998). Per capita income has grown but at the very slow rate of only 2% a year, and is currently only US\$280. This and other socio-demographic information about Bangladesh are provided in Table 16.1.

Table 16.1 Bangladesh in statistics

Population (1996)	126 million
Density (population per sq. km)	850
Human Development Index rank (1998)	147
Population growth rate (%) (1980-96)	1.9
Life expectancy (years) (1995)	
Female	57.0
Male	56.9
Infant mortality (1996)	83
Adult literacy (%) (1995)	
Female	26.1
Male	49.4
Primary school net enrolment rate (1998)	77
GNP per capita (1998)	US\$280
Under-weight children under age 5 (1990-1997)	56

Source: UNDP, 1998; UNICEF, 1998; Chowdhury *et al.*, 1999

BRAC: from relief work to development and poverty alleviation

In Bangladesh the constitutional responsibility for development of the country rests with the government. However, it has not always performed this role to its full potential. This is particularly true in the area of poverty alleviation. The history of poverty alleviation efforts in Bangladesh dates back to the early days of Pakistan in the 1950s, when programmes such as the 'green revolution' and the establishment of the Bangladesh (then Pakistan) Academy of Rural Development in Comilla were initiated. However, such efforts did not make any significant dent in poverty.

The War of Liberation in 1971 raised new expectations and provided fresh impetus to create a just and poverty-free Bangladesh. The non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which were born in the aftermath of the War for relief and rehabilitation operations, started involving themselves in this task and the relatively unknown field of development. BRAC was one such organization.

BRAC was set up in 1972 as a response to humanitarian need following Independence. Its objectives at the time were reflected in its initial name: Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee. However, it became clear early on to the leaders in BRAC that relief work was a short-term measure, given the multiple problems that the people faced. There was a shift in the objectives of the organization from addressing the 'acute crisis' of the aftermath of the War to dealing with the 'persistent crisis' of development. In keeping with this change, the organization was renamed the 'Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee', which since 1996 has been simply known as 'BRAC'.

Over the years BRAC has grown exponentially in developmental innovation and scale. Considerable experience has been gained; some experiments were successful but others failed. Perhaps the most important lesson learned by BRAC has been that there is no fix-all strategy or blueprint for development and that only through constant learning and adaptation could it effectively serve the poor. Further details about BRAC's early experiences are available elsewhere (Chowdhury and Chowdhury, 1978; Chen, 1983; Lovell, 1992; Chowdhury and Cash, 1996; Abed and Chowdhury, 1997).

BRAC programmes today

BRAC is now the world's largest NGO in terms of the scale and diversity of its interventions. Table 16.2 presents the scale of current BRAC programmes. One of the initial activities which earned national coverage and international attention was its oral rehydration therapy (ORT) programme for diarrhoea. During the 1980s hundreds of female BRAC workers visited households in 95% of the country's villages to instruct mothers how to prepare ORT with home ingredients. ORT has now become a part of the Bangladeshi culture (Chowdhury and

Table 16.2 Some basic facts about BRAC (May 1999)

Full-time staff	23,978
Part-time staff	33,746
Participants in poverty alleviation programme	2.9 million households
Amount of loan disbursed to the poor	US\$ 700 million
Percentage of loans repaid	98%
Amount saved by Village Organization members	US\$ 65 million
Total primary schools run by BRAC	34,517
Total school students enrolled	1.1 million (70% girls)
Mothers taught oral rehydration for diarrhoea	13 million
Total budget (annual)	US\$ 131 million
Villages with BRAC poverty alleviation programme	50,000
Number of field offices	800
Number of districts with BRAC programme	64 (out of 64)

Cash, 1993). The current health programme provides essential health services to villagers with emphasis on women's health and specific diseases such as tuberculosis, through village-based voluntary health workers (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1997; Chowdhury, 1999).

The education programme runs over 34,000 primary schools outside the formal state system for 1.1 million pupils. Seventy per cent of the BRAC school attendees are girls and come from the poorest sections of the community, to whom the formal public sector schools are least accessible. The effectiveness of the BRAC schools in terms of dropout, attendance, achievement, and costs is very high (Chabot *et al.*, 1993; Chowdhury *et al.*, 1999).

The other BRAC programme, which is the main focus of the present chapter, is the Rural Development Programme (RDP). RDP is the primary poverty alleviation effort of BRAC. It is active in over 50,000 of Bangladesh's 84,000 villages and involves nearly three million poor women, representing as many families. The twin goals of BRAC, poverty alleviation and empowerment of women, are reflected in the activities and strategies of the RDP. Poverty is looked at from a holistic viewpoint; it is characterized not only in terms of insufficient income or an absence of employment opportunities but as a complex syndrome which manifests itself in many different forms. In the words of Amartya Sen (1995), 'The point is not the irrelevance of economic variables such as personal incomes, but their severe inadequacy in capturing many of the causal influences on the quality of life and the survival chances of people.'

Along with income and employment generation, BRAC helps in forming organizations of the poor, conscientization and awareness raising, gender equity, and human resource development training. The logic of these programmes is the creation of an 'enabling environment' in which the poor can participate in their own development and in improving the quality of their lives (see Fig. 16.1).

The RDP works through a process of social mobilization, delivery of inputs,

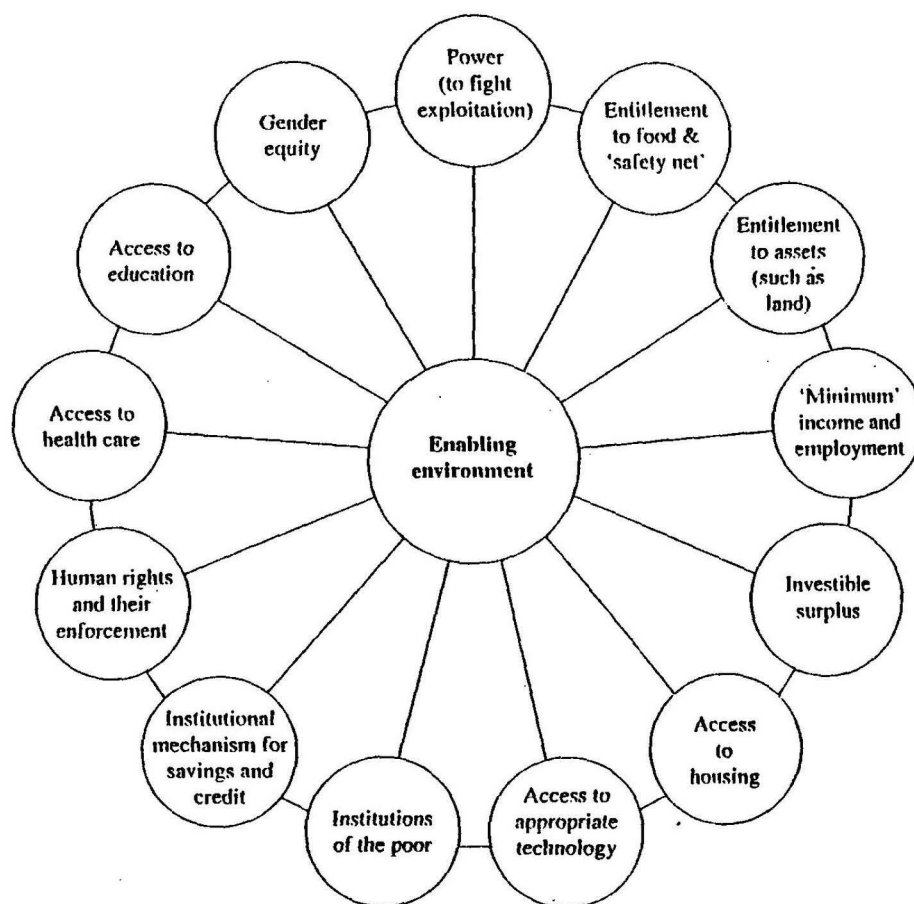


Fig. 16.1 Deficiencies leading to poverty
Source: Chowdhury and Alam, 1998

and creation of an environment of choice for the poor. Like most other poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh (Schuler and Hashemi, 1994; Pitt and Khandker, 1996), BRAC defines the rural poor as those having half an acre of land or less. The process of social mobilization in a village starts with the identification of those who fulfil this definition of the poor. As soon as an adequate number of eligible individuals show definite interest, an institution of the poor, called a village organization (VO), is formed. In Bangladesh about half of the households would fall into the BRAC eligibility criteria and about 30 to 40% of those eligible in the villages where BRAC has a presence have so far joined the VOs. The emphasis on gender has changed over time in BRAC: in the 1990s most VOs formed were composed of women only. A VO has 40 to 50 members, but it can start functioning with as few as 20 members.

Once a VO is established, two activities start simultaneously: a programme to raise consciousness and awareness and one for compulsory savings. Through the consciousness-raising programme, the women are made aware of the society around them; they analyse the reasons for the existing exploitative socio-economic and political system and what they could do to change it in their favour. A formal course on human rights and legal education (HRLE) is provided for members, covering constitutional and citizens' rights, and family, inheritance, and land law (Rafi *et al.*, in press). Members also participate in a compulsory savings scheme which has a minimum level of 5 Taka (10 US cents) per week. Savings are considered (by BRAC and group members) as a form of old age security.

The educational process occurs in a variety of situations: weekly and monthly meetings of the VO, training programmes at different centres outside the community, and the continuous interactions that take place between the VO members and BRAC staff, from organizing meetings to disbursement and collection of loans. In each VO, members are trained by BRAC in different trades. Thus one member may be trained as a village health worker, and another as a poultry vaccinator. These cadres cater to the need of VO members and also sell their services to other villagers for a small fee.

Within a month of formation, VO members are allowed to apply for BRAC loans on an individual basis. Three types of credit are disbursed. The members may request credit for:

- any traditional activity such as rural trading, transport (boat and rickshaw), and rice processing;
- a non-traditional activity such as grocery shop and rural restaurant management, or technology-based activity such as raising poultry, sericulture, or mechanized irrigation; or
- housing loans.

Interest on a housing loan is 10%, while for other activities it is 15%. The impressively high proportion of loans that are repaid (98%) is the result of a combination of members' consciousness, peer group pressure, and BRAC staff supervision.

An important feature of poverty alleviation activities is that an attempt is made to create a 'backward and forward linkage' for most of the technology-based activities. For example, in the case of poultry programmes, BRAC starts by providing training to women on how to rear high yielding varieties of chickens. Loans are given for operating a low-cost hatchery to supply day-old chicks to other village women. The women then rear these chicks until they start laying eggs. The eggs are then sold to the hatchery as well as to consumers. One of the major problems of poultry rearing in Bangladesh is the high mortality of the birds. The government livestock department keeps stock of vaccines but these are very much under-used. A VO member is trained to vaccinate poultry, and she is then linked to the local livestock department of the government which

supplies vaccines. After receiving the vaccine, the VO member inoculates village chickens for a small fee. The woman increases her own income and ensures survival of her neighbours' chickens. Similar backward and forward linkages have been established for other programmes such as sericulture, where BRAC has established a highly successful marketing outlet for the producers through a shop-chain called *Aarong*.

Who joins BRAC?

From the beginning BRAC has recognized and taken account of the existing socio-economic stratification in the rural society and as a consequence has taken an approach that targeted only the poor and the women (Chen, 1983; Lovell, 1992). The definition of the poor (i.e. owning half an acre of land or less) was a functional one, but other characteristics, such as whether family members sold their manual labour for survival (a very low status occupation in Bangladesh), were also considered in choosing VO members. It became evident that among the 'poor' (as defined through the BRAC criteria), there were further stratifications; there were the extreme poor who belonged to households headed by a woman (where there was no male member or the male member(s) were invalids), households having neither land nor homestead, and the marginal or moderate poor who are better off than the extreme poor.

Several studies have examined the composition of the VO members in terms of their economic status, and have confirmed that the majority of the members belonged to the target group defined by BRAC. Members coming from outside the target group varied from 11% in a large population-based survey (Evans *et al.*, 1999) to 20% in a 'national' study (Mustafa *et al.*, 1996), to 29% found in a sub-district (Zaman, 1996). While Evans and colleagues used rapid rural appraisals (RRA) with 'wealth ranking', the other two studies utilized questionnaire survey methods.

There has been particular concern about the composition of the groups involved in the BRAC micro-credit based poverty alleviation programmes, specifically whether or not the poorest VO members were included. Hulme and Mosely (1996) estimated that the poorest 20% of the population were excluded from micro-credit programmes. Montgomery *et al.* (1996), in their study of the BRAC programme, estimated that 20% of the BRAC membership came from the very poor and vulnerable group, and 15% from outside the target group. Evans *et al.* (1999) developed a conceptual framework that examined the barriers to participation in micro-credit programmes. These included programme-related barriers (such as insufficient supply of micro-credit, membership requirements, peer group expectations, and institutional incentives) and client-related barriers (such as insufficient resources, ill-health or vulnerability to crisis, female head of household, lack of education, and individual and household preferences). This framework was used to analyse the BRAC programme using a large population-based survey of 24,234 households using RRA. Their conclusions were based

on the data reproduced in Table 16.3. From these results they concluded that poorer households were more likely to be BRAC members compared to non-poor or less poor. They found that although the VO membership did include some people outside of the target groups, the overwhelming majority were poor as defined by BRAC and the share of the poorest of the poor in VOs was greater than their proportion of the population. As all the village poor are not included in the VO (a VO consists of 40–50 members whereas a typical village would consist of about 100 poor households), the Evans *et al.* study hypothesized a 'natural selection' mechanism through which households with more credit-worthiness ended-up being differentially enrolled as members. Rutherford (1993) in his study of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh stressed the problem of 'self exclusion', and suggested that the ritual of membership such as rigid attendance in meetings and forced savings enhanced the 'fears and timidities' of the extreme poor, including widows and women household heads.

Impact of BRAC programmes on health and equity

The remaining parts of this chapter concentrate on the evidence of BRAC's programmes actually having an impact on welfare and health. Although BRAC works all over Bangladesh, the data for the present analysis came mostly from one sub-district called Matlab, the field station of the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B), located 50 kilometres south of Dhaka city in a riverine area of Chandpur district. The ICDDR,B has maintained this surveillance area since 1963 and the many studies conducted there on demographics and action research attest to its world-wide reputation (D'Souza, 1984; van Ginneken *et al.*, 1998).

In 1992, BRAC started its Rural Development Programme in Matlab. The inputs introduced in the villages included: VO formation and organization of the poor, micro-credit, training of VO members on human and legal rights, and skills, and non-formal primary education for children. In 75 villages a total of 164 VOs were formed with 6,736 members (all women), covering over half of the

Table 16.3 BRAC VO membership status by wealth group

	Wealth group			n
	1	2	3	
VO membership (%)	11	28	61	5,535
Population (%)	24	27	49	24,234

Note: Group 1: Food secure; own >0.5 acre of land (well-off).

Group 2: Periodic food insecurity; own <0.5 acre of land (moderate poor).

Group 3: Chronically food insecure; own <0.5 acre of land (poorest of the poor).

Source: Evans *et al.*, 1999

villages' poor households. Since 1993 BRAC village organization members have saved over US\$300,000 and the sum of US\$2.8 million has been disbursed to them as loans with a 99.7% recovery rate. In addition BRAC opened 81 non-formal schools which enrolled 2,658 students. In the period up to 1998 4,098 students had completed the three-year cycle of education (70% girls) and 94% gained entry to the formal government primary schools.

Evaluation design

Given the availability of reliable individual level data, BRAC and ICDDR,B initiated a research project to examine the impact of the development-related activities on the health and well-being of the population, which became known as the BRAC-ICDDR,B Joint Research Project.

A four-cell research design was followed with villages being divided into those that had:

- only BRAC inputs;
- only ICDDR,B inputs;
- both BRAC and ICDDR,B inputs; or
- no interventions (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1995).

Except for the minimal government development programmes, which are thinly spread, no other significant development programme operated in the area (Khan *et al.*, 1997).

The data used in the present analysis came from the following sources:

- *Baseline survey.* Prior to BRAC's interventions in 1992, a survey of over 12,000 households (pop. over 60,000) in villages belonging to the above four cells collected quantitative information on assets, expenditures, education, nutritional status, health seeking behaviour, women's empowerment, family planning, and involvement with development activities.
- *Seasonal surveys.* Three rounds of seasonal surveys were carried out in a sub-sample of the baseline population in 1995-6. These collected the same information as at baseline (see above).
- *Ethnographic surveys.* Several ethnographic and other qualitative investigations were carried out using in-depth interview, focus group discussion, and observations focusing on women's status and intra-household food distribution.
- *Demographic surveillance data.* The Demographic Surveillance System (DSS) of ICDDR,B provided mortality information on all households in the villages under study. ICDDR,B routinely collects the following information on a monthly basis: births, deaths, in- and out-migration, and marriage.
- *Management information.* BRAC maintains a Management Information System (MIS) for its projects. Information pertaining to the inputs received from BRAC, such as date of joining, amount of loan received, etc., for households joining the BRAC programme was linked with the DSS information.

The concept of human well-being

A major objective of the research was to study the impact of BRAC on human well-being, which was defined as a concept with seven dimensions as shown in Fig. 16.2. Hypothetical pathways linking the BRAC programme inputs with each of the dimensions were delineated and were addressed through the research. Table 16.4 shows the conceptual framework linking the inputs with the expected impact.

In this chapter we examine the programme impact on nutritional status and mortality and relate the findings to some of the hypothetical pathways (process). The analyses compared the following three groups:

- women who joined BRAC (BRAC members);
- poor eligible women who didn't join BRAC (poor non-members); and
- non-poor women not eligible to join BRAC (non-poor non-members).

Household and individual level data have been compared between the above groups and between 1992 and 1995. Further analyses based on the four cells of the research design are currently in progress.

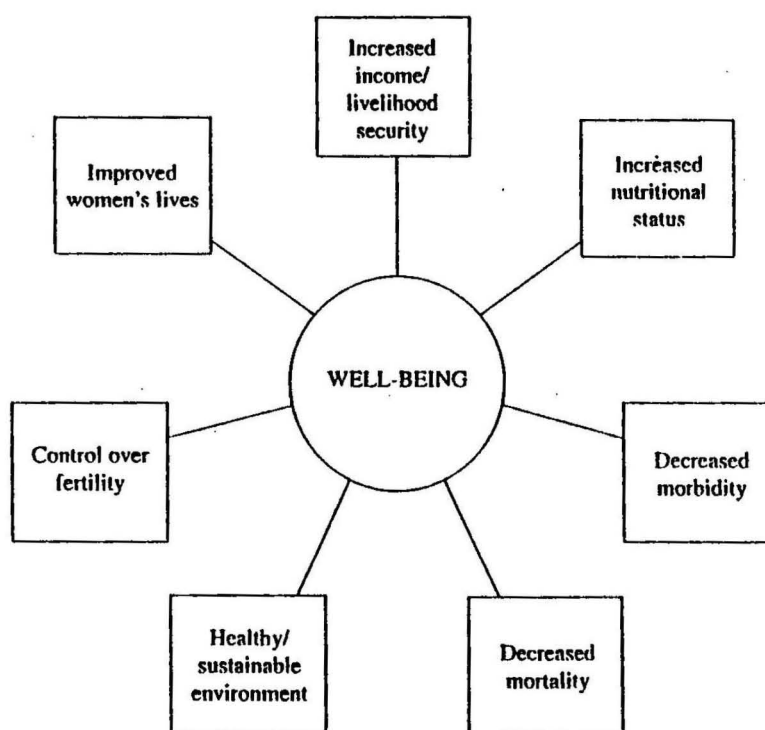


Fig. 16.2 Seven dimensions of human well-being
Source: Chowdhury *et al.*, 1995

Table 16.4 The conceptual frame linking expected impacts with inputs of BRAC in Matlab, Bangladesh

Input	Process	Health Impact
Institution building	Feeling of self-worth	Nutritional status
Children's education	Literate self and children	Intra-family food allocation
Adult's education on human and legal rights	Better skills	Fertility (level, age at marriage, birth spacing)
Training (skill & human development)	More income employment savings & assets	Morbidity (type, transmission complications, resistance to infection)
Savings and credit	Control over income assets	Mortality (level, cause)
Health services: • BRAC • ICDDR,B –Surveillance –MCH-FP	Less hunger Access to and utilization of 'modern' health care	

Source: Chowdhury *et al.*, 1995

Impact on nutritional status of children

The BRAC-ICDDR,B project collected mid-upper-arm circumference (MUAC) information at two points of time: in 1992 when the BRAC intervention was about to start and in 1995 when the intervention was about three years old. Table 16.5 compares the severe protein-energy malnutrition (PEM) (represented as MUAC < 125 mm) of children 6 months to 72 months of age according to their mothers' participation in BRAC. The prevalence of severe PEM has significantly declined among the children of BRAC member households, but there was no such change among the children of non-members.

The same information when analysed by gender showed a significantly higher prevalence of severe PEM in females among both BRAC members and poor non-members, but not among non-poor non-members.

Impact on child survival

Survival rates of children belonging to BRAC member households in comparison to poor non-member and non-poor non-member households are seen in Fig. 16.3. It shows that survival of children belonging to BRAC households is better than that for children from poor non-member households, and is in fact rather similar to survival of children from non-poor households. The pronounced survival advantage of children of poor members compared to poor

Table 16.5 Prevalence of severe PEM of children by BRAC membership status during pre (1992) and post (1995) intervention period

Malnutrition	1992 baseline poor individuals (n=827)	1995 BRAC Member (n=273)	1995 Poor non member (n=707)	1995 Non-poor non-members (n=538)	1 v. 2	1 v. 3
Severe PEM (MUAC<125 mm)	23.2	12.1	21.2	11.5	<i>p</i> <0.01	NS

Source: Khatun *et al.*, 1998*b*

non-members is seen for girls as well as boys (Fig. 16.4). It is striking that the survival advantage associated with BRAC membership among the poor was largely the result of mortality differences in the first few months of life, particularly in the neonatal period.

Food and family expenditure

The patterns in intra-family food distribution were explored through observations of a small sample of 25 households containing both girls and boys. It showed that among BRAC member households girls more commonly received equal treatment; boys were more favoured in terms of being given culturally preferred/superior parts of the fish, chicken, meat, etc. (Roy *et al.*, 1998).

In a separate assessment conducted in a larger geographic area, BRAC member households spent more overall and spent significantly more on consumption of food items than poor non-members (Table 16.6). Proportion of non-food expenditures, indicating the capacity of households to spend money

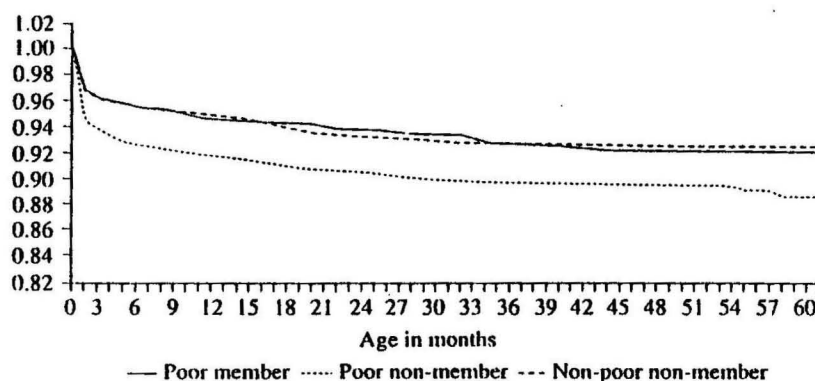


Fig. 16.3 Life table probability of survival of children belonging to households of BRAC members, poor non-members, and non-poor non-members
Source: Bhuiya *et al.*, in press

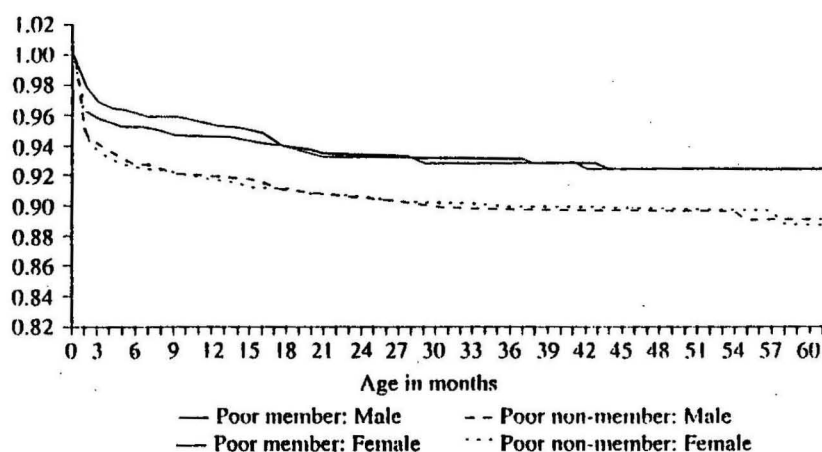


Fig. 16.4 Life table probability of survival of male and female children belonging to BRAC member, poor non-member, and non-poor non-member households

Table 16.6 Expenditure pattern of BRAC and non-BRAC sample households

Expenditure pattern	BRAC Length of membership (in months)				Comparison (n=223)	BRAC v. comp. (t value)
	1-11 (n=360)	12-47 (n=417)	48+ (n=295)	Total (n=1,072)		
Per capita monthly expenditure (Taka).	686	686	689	687	540	3.43***
% cereal to total food expenditure.	45.9	45.0	46.4	45.7	46.1	-0.26
% non-food to total expenditure.	37.9	35.4	34.2	35.9	32.4	3.57***
Per capita calorie.	2,279	2,304	2,342	2,306	2,182	3.37***

Note: *** $p < 0.001$

Source: Husain, 1998

beyond food, was also greater among BRAC member households. Finally, the per capita calorie intake was also significantly higher in BRAC households.

Family planning

Table 16.7 shows that the current use of family planning methods was greater among the currently married BRAC members than among poor non-members ($p < 0.05$). BRAC members also had higher rates of use of family planning than the non-poor non-members.

Table 16.7 Current use of family planning by BRAC membership

BRAC membership	No. of respondents	Current FP use %
Member	500	57.0
Poor non-member	1,194	49.6
Non-poor non-member	1,088	51.3

Table 16.8 Distribution of children (11–15 years) achieving 'basic education' by membership status in 1992 and 1995

Sex	1992 Baseline poor individuals	1995 BRAC members	1995 Poor non- members	1995 Non-poor non- members
Girl	9.6 (188)	23.7 (152)	12.6 (340)	33.5 (337)
Boy	14.9 (215)	30.7 (163)	15.5 (330)	41.2 (381)
All	12.4 (403)	27.3 (315)	14.0 (670)	37.6 (718)

Figures within parentheses indicate the number of children.

Education

Table 16.8 shows the level of education achieved by children of 11–15 years old, at baseline in 1992 and then in 1995. Educational achievement was determined using a curriculum-independent competency test administered to children aged 11–15. A child satisfying a minimum level of competency in reading, writing, arithmetic, and life skills was considered to have 'basic education' (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1994). Educational performance improved for both member and non-member groups but the gain was much greater in the case of BRAC member households than poor non-member households and more in girls than boys.

Violence against women

The prevalence of self-reported violence against women has been studied. A total of 2,038 currently married women aged 15–55 years were interviewed with a structured questionnaire. Women were asked about occurrence of five types of violence in the previous four months:

- physical abuse;
- money taken against will;
- prevented from going to natal home;
- prevented from working outside; or
- jewellery taken against will.

In the present analysis we report only the incidence of physical violence. Table 16.9 compares the incidence of reported physical violence against women

Table 16.9 Occurrence of physical violence during last four months by BRAC membership, membership length, and membership depth, Matlab 1995

	Physical violence %
BRAC membership	
BRAC member (n=438)	8.9
Poor non-member (n=1550)	5.8
<i>X² Significance</i>	<i>p<.05</i>
Length of BRAC membership	
≤ 2 year (n=185)	10.8
2 + year (n=260)	7.3
<i>X² Significance</i>	<i>NS</i>
Depth of BRAC membership	
Poor non-member (n=1595)	5.6
Only savings (n=56)	5.4
Savings+credit (n=268)	11.2
Savings+credit+training (n=119)	3.4
<i>X² Significance</i>	<i>p<.01</i>

Source: Khan *et al.*, 1998

between BRAC member and non-member households. It shows a higher incidence of violence among BRAC members than among non-member households. When the incidence figures were analysed according to length and 'depth' of membership (Chen and Mahmud, 1995), however, the prevalence tended to decrease with increasing membership length. The peak in violence is reached when credit is introduced, but tapers off when other inputs, such as 'training' are offered.

Discussion

The stated objectives of BRAC are the alleviation of poverty and empowerment of the poor, particularly women, so as to reduce inequities between the rich and the poor, and between men and women. Whether existing development programmes, including those of BRAC, achieve this is a crucial question that donors, academics, and development specialists have all asked.

A large body of literature has emerged that attempts to examine the effect and impact of development interventions (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1991; Mustafa *et al.*, 1996; Pitt and Khandker, 1996; Husain, 1998). These studies usually examine how a programme delivers services, manages production, or trains participants. What is less well documented is their impact on human well-being as defined in the present study. The BRAC-ICDDR,B Joint Research Project in Matlab, Bangladesh, was designed specifically to examine such an impact.

Of the seven dimensions of human well-being identified by BRAC (Fig. 16.2),

preliminary analyses relating to nutritional status and child survival have been presented. These data suggest that:

- there was a measurable improvement in terms of nutrition for the BRAC household members in comparison to a 'comparable' non-member group;
- child survival is better in BRAC households in comparison to that in poor households that did not belong to BRAC; and
- these differences in nutritional status and child survival were equally discernible for male and female members of BRAC households.

Two important questions arise. First, how can we explain these differences according to BRAC membership? Are they the result of the BRAC programmes or could they be artefacts due to selection bias in the recruitment process, whereby the 'poor' who become BRAC members are better off in a number of important ways at entry? Second, if the differences are due to BRAC programmes, what was the mechanism or pathway through which the interventions led to these improvements?

BRAC recruits poor women with a landholding of half an acre or less. Studies have documented that a certain proportion of BRAC and other NGO participants (between 11% and 29% in case of BRAC) come from a less poor group. There are several reasons why people from outside the target group are recruited. Participants may lie to field staff about their actual landholding at the time of joining or they may have improved their situation since joining. A recent study found that women who had joined BRAC for four years or more had each added ten decimals (1 acre = 100 decimals) to their landholding (Husain, 1998). The 'comparison' group selected for the present study conformed to the definition of BRAC membership. Zaman (1998) examined the background of the two groups in Matlab sub-district and found that 29% non-poor women were also VO members. When compared with members who actually conformed to the BRAC eligibility criteria (i.e. landholding of 0.5 acre or less), the comparison group had more land, assets, and number of earners in the family. Information presented in the text from other studies indicated that the majority of BRAC membership conformed to the eligibility criteria of BRAC and the share of the poorest of the poor in the village organizations was more than their proportion in the population. Nevertheless, researchers have speculated that there may still be a 'natural selection' mechanism that favours the more credit-worthy among the poor, thus allowing room for self selection (Evans *et al.*, 1999).

Further studies to detect the possible presence of selection bias and its impact on the present results are being carried out. One analysis traced the mortality history of children belonging to BRAC and non-BRAC poor prior to 1992 when the intervention started, using the data available through the Demographic Surveillance System of ICDDR,B. Although both groups were similar prior to 1992 in mortality levels, the BRAC group children experienced a greater fall in mortality over the past seven years. Early results from an analysis of nutritional status data collected in 1992 and 1995 showed similar results. Evans *et al.*

(1999) noted that the women members who did not meet BRAC eligibility criteria but were inducted into VOs were the better-off poor but were not members of village élites. The mortality data presented in the text showed that the BRAC members were actually very close to the élites; even when the non-poor members were excluded from the analysis, the better performance of BRAC members persisted.

Most of the impact on mortality occurred during the neonatal period, yet most of the child survival technologies have their impact later in childhood. Something is happening to the women during pregnancy and/or during the birth process that is affecting neonates. One of the determinants could be psychological well-being. The initial analyses of a study showed that BRAC members' psychological well-being was marginally higher (Khatun *et al.*, 1998a). Research is under way to understand this phenomenon better.

Figure 16.2 suggested the various factors that could affect well-being. One of these was improved nutritional status. In BRAC participant households, the intra-family allocation of food is more equitable, although there is still the tendency to favour boys. The average calorie consumption is higher among BRAC participants. The per capita monthly expenditure is greater, as is the proportion of the expenditure spent on food. BRAC women were greater users of family planning methods, which may have given them a longer time between pregnancies and opportunity to participate in micro-credit financed income-generating activities. The increased violence against women that occurs in the earlier phases of the BRAC was reduced over time when credit was accompanied by other inputs such as human development and skill training. When a woman receives a loan, a new transaction and relationship emerges in her own and her extended family. A small amount of money works as a miracle in a cash-hungry society, and significantly raises the woman's power in the family (Zaman, 1998; Schuler *et al.*, 1996). Not all men are ready to accept this new power relationship and some may resort to violence to express their anger. The changes in women's economic role within the family may initially be met with resistance or resentment, and in extreme cases with violence (Khan *et al.*, 1998). Other studies have also documented reduced incidence of violence in households that are served by micro-credit programmes (Hadi, 1997). However, we also need to be somewhat cautious in accepting and interpreting this information. It may be that BRAC members, because of their increased awareness, report more details of their marital life.

Improvement in the level of basic education of children is dramatic, and more so in girls than boys. This might be expected, as BRAC schools discriminate positively in favour of girls. In recent years, there have been improvements in performance of basic education at the national level as well (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1999) and this is reflected in Matlab.

These observations provide evidence to support the following conclusions:

- poverty alleviation programmes focused on women as implemented by

BRAC are effective in improving well-being, particularly in the areas of childhood nutrition and mortality;

- these impacts could be partially explained by other effects that take place as a result of BRAC's intervention; and
- there are indications that the BRAC programme has been successful in reducing inequity in health between the non-poor and poor.

BRAC is now one of the largest NGOs in the world. It is also one of the oldest development organizations in the developing world. BRAC's philosophy of 'learning from doing' has bestowed it with many successes. Several of its programmes have been replicated all over the country by itself and by others. For example, BRAC's non-formal primary education (NFPE) programme is being implemented by over 250 local NGOs in Bangladesh, in addition to BRAC itself. Many of the approaches and methods developed by BRAC are also now used by the government. Based on BRAC's pilot programme on nutritional supplementation in Muktagacha sub-district (Chowdhury *et al.*, 1998), the government is implementing this in 60 other sub-districts of the country with World Bank assistance. Some BRAC approaches have been adapted for use in several countries of Asia and Africa. BRAC's NFPE strategy has now been implemented, with local amendments, in Ethiopia, Uganda, Pakistan, and India (Kaur, 1997).

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