



Remembering Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, Founder & Chairperson, BRAC

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“Young men and women growing up today face unique challenges. We all have an equal responsibility to invest time and energy in shaping their thinking and building their capacities to prepare them for the future.”

- *Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, Founder and Chairperson,
Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee (BRAC)*

Amidst the news coverage of nationwide protests and agitation against CAA and NRC, most of us missed bidding farewell to Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, Founder and Chairperson of BRAC, arguably the world’s largest NGO.

It is rare that we come across a life that is lived entirely in the service of others. In these complex times, with the privileged seeking refuge behind their wealth and resources, the story of Sir Fazle Abed is a lesson in how personal strength, backed by strong intent and effort, can be used to elevate millions of lives.

Born in Baniachong, Abed studied in the UK and acquired British citizenship in 1962. He returned to (then) East Pakistan to join the oil company Shell. The 1970 cyclone and 1971 Liberation War in Bangladesh dramatically changed the direction of his life. The turmoil in the country forced him to leave his job and move to London. While in London, he helped initiate ‘Action Bangladesh’ and ‘HELP Bangladesh’ in support of the Liberation War. He returned to an independent Bangladesh that had suffered huge economic losses in 1972. Ten million refugees, who had sought shelter in India during the war, returned to Bangladesh and needed urgent relief and rehabilitation. Sir Abed was guided by a desire to help these refugees develop their own capacity to better manage their lives. Using his expertise and influence, he negotiated for financial support from organisations across London and political support from neighbouring India to help in the redevelopment of Bangladesh, and in that, BRAC was born.



Sir Fazle Hasan Abed spending time with Children | Image Courtesy: The Daily Star

BRAC's multi-dimensional approach towards poverty alleviation, involved using microfinance to address issues around sanitation, agriculture, education, hygiene, and family planning, among others. It is now one of the world's most compelling examples of how a non-profit establishment can create transformative impact when rooted in strong business practices.

The story of BRAC and Sir Fazle Abed's unparalleled role in it is a tall one, and not just because of its mission to achieve long-term poverty alleviation and empowerment of the underprivileged, especially women. It is a story of complete alignment between an audacious vision of a selfless man, a concrete mission, a well-defined and need based strategy, and an efficient execution plan engaging diverse stakeholders.

The success of BRAC over the years serves as a great learning for organisations within the sector. BRAC has consistently **tested, measured, and modified its solutions** in order to maximize its effectiveness in tackling poverty-related challenges and issues. Their approach entails **working directly with the community** to develop solutions together, not as an outside force.

BRAC has recognized the limits that government, religious and social norms had on women, and thus, placed **women’s empowerment as the key to sustainable development**. Within those constraints, BRAC identified industries where women would be permitted to work, helped them set up microenterprises and provided them with market linkages. Combining traditional microfinance loans with other programs like health care, education, human rights, legal services, and social enterprise, they recognised that **sustainable development is complex and highly inter-linked**. Lastly, most of BRAC’s programmes were based on the **concept of “massification”**– that could be expanded exponentially to serve large populations. This allowed BRAC to be highly effective when expanding to other regions with dense populations of people living in extreme poverty.

Sir Fazle also reiterated that much of what he was able to do with BRAC was because of his experiences in the corporate or business world. He achieved goals by setting targets that not only cover the width of the poverty-stricken populations, but also the depth of the several challenges that they face. In several of his interviews in the past, he credited the role that diverse stakeholders (including Funders and the Government) played in the success of his programmes.

Today, as I reflect on his legacy, I am struck by his resilience in building self-sufficient lives and communities in his country. A man, a leader, much ahead of his time, he has left us with so much to learn from by the rare combination of deep commitment to the cause and strategic effort to solving problems of such immense magnitude. Simply put, he did whatever it took. As he has very rightly said, “Small is beautiful, but big is necessary.”

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