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BRAC: Embodying the spirit of Liberation War

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Bangladesh and Brac are just about the same age. The Liberation War in Bangladesh was fought in 1971 to free Bangladesh from discrimination, deprivation and disparity. Brac, imbued with the ideals and spirit of Independence, pursued its efforts to rehabilitate returnee refugees and the households that were affected during the war. And, in the course of its subsequent dramatic evolution, the organisation established itself as a pioneer in identifying and addressing the multidimensional realities of poverty. Brac's initiatives in alleviating poverty and empowering the poor have scaled unforeseen heights in the recent history of global development.

Employing a holistic approach to serve its target population, Brac's development interventions have reached 110 million people in Bangladesh. Over eight million poor, landless people -- most of whom are women -- receive financial services from Brac's Microfinance Programme.

Brac also recognises that there are households that cannot access microloans, and has thus introduced the Asset Transfer Programme to serve that ultra-poor. Over 65,000 rural poor women have been provided with access to national and global market through Aarong -- a Brac enterprise.

One of Brac's key contributions is in creating employment opportunities in rural Bangladesh. The organisation has created jobs for over 6.5 million people -- this number has increased on a regular basis in the recent years. This indicates that Brac is providing livelihood for a significant portion of the one million people that enter the rural labour force every year in Bangladesh. Brac is also the country's single largest institutional employer with over 120,000 employees, and thousands of health volunteers and educators.

Brac's innovative and effective initiatives that meet the essential healthcare needs of the poor people are now being studied worldwide. In the 1980s, Brac revolutionised prevention of diarrhoea by introducing the practice of oral saline intake. The organisation also played a leading role in the expansion of vaccination programmes nationwide to ensure that all children get vaccinated in their first year after birth. Through these health-related interventions Brac has significantly contributed in reducing maternal and child mortality rate.

The organisation's education programme has also gained much esteem as a leading provider of quality informal education for the underprivileged children. Approximately two million students are studying in Brac's pre-primary and primary schools and 60% of the graduates have entered the mainstream secondary schools. Brac University, on the other hand, has been established with an aim to bring in world-class quality in tertiary education in the country.

The small and medium entrepreneurs in the country are being provided with access to finance through Brac Bank, while new and improved varieties of seeds, technology and techniques are being introduced by the organisation to boost agricultural productivity and farmer's earnings.

Brac is playing a pivotal role in addressing the commodity market failures and the deficiencies in accelerating the nation's economic welfare. Today, the organisation is almost 80% self-sufficient in financial terms, thanks to the returns received from its enterprises and investments. A tax payment amounting to 400 million BDT in 2009 is an example that speaks of Brac's significant contribution to the national exchequer.

Brac's experiences of working in a least developed country like Bangladesh are now being replicated and adapted in some of the world's most risk-prone areas, such as, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Haiti. Thus, Brac is fittingly an envoy of Bangladesh's remarkable contribution in alleviating world-poverty and South-South cooperation.

The major protagonist of this story of an organisation's spectacular development endeavours is Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, a humanist thought-leader who not only founded an organisation that embodies the spirit of the Liberation War in its nation-wide development interventions, but also portrayed the post-war promising Bangladesh to the rest of the world. Like me, many find Sir Fazle's philosophy of life and his conduct as a source of great inspiration.

We trust that Brac will continue to blaze the trail in the enormous undertaking of eliminating poverty and inequality in Bangladesh, as the nation forges forward to graduate to a middle-income country in the not-so-distant future.

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