



# The schools that BRAC built

There are many successful grass-roots programmes in education, but few more talked about than BRAC's (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee). Founded in 1972 as a refugee relief organization, following the war of liberation, BRAC soon recognized the need for permanent solutions and developed programmes in credit, health and multisectoral development. In 1985 this NGO began its educational programme with 22 experimental schools. Today it runs 6,000 non-formal primary schools with a staff of 4,000,

schools. In 1992 we have 6,300. By 1998 we will have 100,000.

## How does BRAC get its ideas for programmes?

We respond to a need and one thing builds on another. We had a terrible cyclone in May in the southern belt where there is a very high illiteracy rate. We sent relief and, when things settled down, somebody said, "Let's do a reforestation programme that will protect the soil from erosion and flooding." And that led to income-generating projects like planting and building roads. Then

see why she hasn't come to school. We do a lot of motivational training of our staff, and once on the job they become like family, and an extension of the community.

## Is local ownership part of your success?

It's essential. Involved parents feel that when the school is running well, it's because of their participation. It's really an art to convince them, especially parents of girl drop-outs. Previously they would say, "She has to be married; there's no need for school." Once they see their child

## An interview with BRAC programme officer, Sayeeda Anis.

providing basic education for 180,000 rural children, 70 per cent of them girls.

The average cost is US\$15 per child per year compared to US\$17 in the formal school system. Receiving its primary support from Government and international agencies, BRAC earns 32 per cent of its income from investments in commercial projects and several in-house enterprises that include a printing press and a fish freezing plant. "What makes BRAC so effective?" and "How can it be replicated?" are questions repeatedly asked by NGOs and international agencies.

## How do you explain BRAC's spectacular success?

Everything we do is unconventional and unorthodox. We have direct access to top management which understands community needs. We have no obstacles to making decisions, no layers of bureaucracy to go through. If we have a good idea, we do it.

For every programme we do, we evaluate, revise, rethink and revise again. If it isn't working after a time, we modify or drop it. We're not scared to take risks. We go into anything that might have an impact and push a little further. In 1985 we had 22

somebody said, "The people need more permanent protection from the cyclone." So we built concrete shelters and then got the idea to use the shelters as schools. Now we have 80 schools on Kutubdia Island.

## Do you provide material incentives to bring girls to school?

Just books.

## How do you keep girls in school?

Classes are fun. Even during the rainy season, kids have swam to school. In fact, each day has 40 minutes of fun time—singing, dancing, drawing. There is no punishment, but there is praise, clapping and dancing for the child by the other children, it's very human programme and our staff are highly motivated. When we asked parents if their children enjoyed school and what they like best, they said, "Our children like the teacher. She's so good to them. She doesn't beat them. She talks to them as a friend."

## How do you sustain a programme once it starts?

With careful monitoring and constant follow-up. Every day our staff has contact with parents and teachers. If a child is sick or attendance drops, the programme organizer rushes to her house to

is happy, they jump in.

## Have you been able to replicate BRAC?

Other NGOs took our materials, were trained by us and started schools, but they failed. Then we modified the programme, picked out NGOs we wanted, invited them to a two-day workshop and told them that if they were interested, they would have to follow our guidelines. That included monitoring, materials and a surprise visit. Then we would support them.

## What do you think went wrong?

They failed because they don't think supervision is important enough. They think that one visit in 10 days is fine. But you have to do it every day and just a visit isn't even enough. You have to talk to the parents and build up personal relations with them.

## What improvements would BRAC like to see now in its own programmes?

More education of fathers about why it's good to send their daughters to school. The school buildings could also be improved. There is no electricity, no light or heat. All the warmth comes from the teachers and programme organizers.

—Unicef