



BIGD

MONOGRAPH

NO. 02 ■ December 2022

INCEPTION, SULLA, AND THE 1970s

BRAC'S TRAJECTORY AND A DECADE OF LEARNING BY DOING

BRAC HISTORY PROJECT

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BIGD Monograph | No. 2 | December 2022
BRAC History Project

BIGD, Brac University and BRAC

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Acknowledgement

This monograph is the result of a collective effort and would not have been possible without the support of many.

Our deepest gratitude to Kaiser Zaman, Sukhendra Kumar Sarkar, KSNM Johurul Islam Khan, Shabbir Ahmed Chowdhury, Ahmed Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury, Salehuddin Ahmed, Jalaluddin Ahmed, Shib Narayan Kairy, Golam Samdani Fakir, Shafiqul Islam, Erum Mariam, Sheepa Hafiza, Rabeya Yasmin, Kaosar Afsana, Sabina Faiz Rashid, Malabika Sarker, Faruque Ahmed, and Tamara Hasan Abed who helped us see so much of BRAC as it was becoming in its early decades. The powerful contribution each of you has had in building this organization is inspiring.

We are indebted to Julian Francis, Khushi Kabir, and Shireen Huq, who took us back to BRAC's very first days, and shared lived experiences that helped expand our imagination as well as validate our ideas. Their memories of wayfaring the landscape of a nascent

country in the 1970s and 1980s, corresponding with its people, and their reflections proved invaluable to our writing.

Heartfelt gratitude to Martha Chen, Lecturer in Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School and International Coordinator of the global research-policy-action network Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), for documenting BRAC's work, with particular emphasis on its women's program in the first decade so rigorously; and for sharing invaluable recollection as well as insight about BRAC that greatly assisted the research.

We depended considerably on Naomi Hossain, Research Professor at the Accountability Research Center at American University, Washington DC, and Tariq Omar Ali, Associate Professor, Georgetown University, Washington, DC and thank them for always engaging in debates and discussions that helped sharpen our arguments.

The team was able to access rare historical documents with the continuous support of Ayesha Abed Library, BRAC University; Women for Women Library, Dhanmondi; Bangladesh National Archive; Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's family; BRAC Manikganj regional and branch office; Uttara BLC; and CARITAS Library, Dhaka and we thank them for their assistance.

We deeply appreciate the efforts from BRAC Communications and BRAC Technology Division in providing technical assistance during interviews

We thank BRAC for making this possible.

as well as the Qual-Pro Unit members at BIGD who offered support whenever it was necessary.

Finally, we thank Asif Saleh, Executive Director, BRAC Bangladesh; Tamara Hasan Abed, Managing Director, BRAC Enterprises; KAM Morshed, Senior Director, Advocacy for Social Change, Partnership Strengthening Unit; and Moutushi Kabir, Senior Director, People, Culture and Communications at BRAC without whose support, this project would not have materialized.

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Sulla: Where BRAC Began

Fifty years after its inception in 1972, BRAC now stands as the world's largest non-governmental organization (NGO) and is a crucial development actor globally. Understanding the organization's ability to thrive and navigate over time, in complex terrains of changing global and national sociopolitics, requires looking back at its history, which is intertwined with the history of Bangladesh.

Two particular historic events played crucial roles in the formation of BRAC: the 1970 Bhola Cyclone and the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. The spectacle of human suffering—deaths and destruction of both lives and livelihoods—brought by the two catastrophic events triggered and solidified a collective humanitarian consciousness that mobilized Bengali people from all areas and professions to support the recovery effort. These heroic efforts took place amid neglect and apathy from the ruling West Pakistan government and the portrayal of the Bengali region as helpless and voiceless by the international media. Consequently, the aftermath was also a period of intensifying political

consciousness. The humanitarian and political consciousness, in the collective response of the people, provided the roots for an extraordinary episode of “vernacular humanitarianism”—the humanitarian response of local actors based on the ecological, sociopolitical, and economic realities of the country—which gave birth to the BRAC philosophy and approach that it maintains till today.

Through directly engaging in the rehabilitation process after the cyclone in Manpura, Bhola, the volunteers engaged in a distinct way of learning that helped them gain a keener awareness of their surroundings. This enabled them to effectively

respond to the needs of the people and to play pioneering roles in rebuilding Bangladesh when it gained independence. One of the volunteers was then 35-year-old Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, who worked as the Head of the Finance Division at Shell Oil, Bangladesh, but would go on to create the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee, now known as BRAC. The efforts that he and his fellow volunteers made in coordinating and facilitating a response to affected populations transformed the trajectory of Southern humanitarianism in Bangladesh, deeply embedded in the historical, political, and cultural landscapes of the region. BRAC emerged with a strong desire and practice to learn affectively from the people and landscape. This grassroots humanitarianism must be recognized as a distinct Southern development discourse and practice that is often overlooked in the field of international humanitarianism.

Although Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and his acquaintances were actively involved in the relief and campaign activities during the liberation war, immediately after independence, they found themselves in a situation that demanded a renewed effort. Many regions of Bangladesh had suffered terribly at the hands

of the Pakistani military and their collaborators during the war.

Mr Viqar Chowdhury, one of Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's closest friends, entered Bangladesh from India through the Tamabil border in Sylhet; he followed a group of refugees from Assam to Sulla (Ahasan & Iqbal, 2022). Chowdhury had a family connection in Sylhet and he consulted with the local leadership about a possible relief operation.

After a discussion, Comrade Barun Roy, a local leader and member of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, suggested Chowdhury start the relief operations in Sulla and Derai upazilas under the Sunamganj district (Ahmad, 2019). Eventually, Chowdhury began a small relief operation and set up a camp in Derai upazila. He wrote letters to Sir Fazle Hasan Abed describing what he witnessed in Sulla upazila. There was a greater presence of the Hindu community in Sulla, and the locality was reduced to ashes with all the villages burnt down and households destroyed (Abed, 2019).

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed came back to Bangladesh on 17 January 1972, and in February, he went to Sylhet to discuss the relief efforts. He soon took over the operation as Viqar Chowdhury had to leave the country for professional

reasons (Ahmad, 2019). In an interview, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed mentioned that one of the reasons why he decided to work in this area was because of its sheer remoteness. He understood that many initiatives would be taken for the urban areas but perhaps not in the remote villages like the ones in Sulla upazila (Abed, n.d., as cited in Mortoza, 2006).

However, after a year of rehabilitation and relief work following independence in Sulla, BRAC realized that its relief efforts would not sustain and development would not follow if people and villages were not made self-reliant. This realization led it to a quick move onto an integrated model of development, investing in human and institutional infrastructure.

In the immediate aftermath of independence, the efforts to build and sustain the governance met with many challenges. One of the challenges was the accessibility issue. Spatially, it was difficult for the government to reach remote areas and ensure various provisions and services. The state machinery was just beginning to roll. BRAC sought to fill some of the gaps in this area, especially those that crucially

affected the poor and marginal people in the community.

This journey was a process of learning by doing. BRAC was confronted quickly by the many structural barriers to poverty reduction, and it was from these earliest moments that its identity as a learning organization was instilled. To understand the nature of these structural constraints, BRAC immersed itself within the communities where the NGO operated, and began to question how it could best promote inclusive development within existing rural power structures and national development plans. By the end of its first decade, BRAC had sharpened its understanding of *poverty* as a deeply relational and complex social phenomenon reflecting power imbalances—an understanding that led it towards the adoption of a new form of women-focused approach to organizing the poor.

This monograph is an outcome of the BRAC History Project, a BIGD-initiated endeavour to historicize and theorize BRAC's navigation and evolution within changing socioeconomic and political realities and local and global histories. Researchers undertook a qualitative inquiry using archival documents

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and oral history collected through interviews. Data sources included institutional libraries, digital libraries, archives, and other relevant, accessible platforms. Oral history interviews were recorded and analyzed thematically. Relevant literature was also reviewed.

By establishing an inclusion criterion, three categories of documents were identified—those related to BRAC, the state, and donor agencies—and appropriate sources of data were located. Data on the state and donor agencies were collected for a context-based analysis of the findings on BRAC. Sources included institutional libraries, digital libraries, archives, and other relevant and accessible platforms. Oral history interviews were recorded and analyzed thematically. Relevant literature was also reviewed.

The outputs of the BRAC History Project will be published in a series of monographs, among other scholarly and public-focused outputs. While the first monograph focused on the history of BRAC's formation, the second emphasizes BRAC's experience in Sulla, explaining the paradigm shift in BRAC's rural development program from community development to a people-centred approach. This monograph

sheds light on why the poor and women, rather than the community, became the focal point in BRAC's approach. In turn, it creates historical vignettes of the trajectory of BRAC during the 1970s as an interplay of knowledge and practice (Hailey & James, 2002; Korten, 1980; Smillie, 2009).

The publication coincides with the inauguration of the yearlong celebration of BRAC's 50th anniversary, rendering a greater significance to the monograph series. We believe the monographs will help us understand the essential BRAC philosophy, the organization's transitions in how it approached development, and its learnings which have been crucial in BRAC's unparalleled success as a global development organization.

1. Introduction

Long known for “patriarchy and poverty” (Greeley, 1983), Bangladesh has made substantial progress in attaining gender equality and reducing poverty since the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (1990–2015). Maternal mortality fell from 569 to 176 deaths per 100,000 live births, and women’s labour force participation rate in the non-farm sector rose from 19% to 32% between 1990 and 2015 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015).

Today, Bangladesh is one of those countries where more girls than boys attend secondary schools, and women live longer than their male counterparts (Banerji, 2017). The country also experienced a modest poverty reduction, as its poor population comprised 58% in 1990 and about 21% in 2019. For the past decade, Bangladesh has been one of the fastest-growing economies. After turning into a lower-middle-income country (LMIC) from a low-income country in 2015, it is now on the road to achieving upper-middle-income country (UMIC) status by 2031 (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2022).

Bangladesh’s developmental success in recent decades starkly contrasts with the nation’s early years. The 1970 Bhola Cyclone caused loss of human lives and civil unrest, and it was followed by the Pakistan army’s genocidal violence, rape, displacement, murder of millions of Bangladeshis, and a full-fledged popular resistance (Hossain, 2018). Within three years of independence, South Asia’s youngest postcolonial nation-state suffered a severe famine which claimed 1.5 million lives, military coups in the following year, and the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the father of the nation and the most iconic leader of Bengali nationalism (Hossain, 2017). Although

the 1970s evokes memories of suffering, scarcity, and hardship rather than human development, the disastrous decade is critical for comprehending Bangladesh's developmental and gender successes, according to political sociologist Hossain (2007, 2017, 2020) and social economist Kabeer (1988).

As a result of global media coverage of the 1970 Bhola Cyclone, also known as "history's deadliest storm" (Carney & Miklian, 2022), the little-known deltaic region came under the western gaze for the first time. Visuals and narratives of the sufferings of cyclone-affected people assisted the Northern audience in imagining it as a land of "bare life," where the state hardly had any power to manage the lives and deaths of the people. Such a discursive construction of the region was critical for its inclusion in international aid discourse as a deserving candidate (Hossain, 2020). In local politics, public resentment against Pakistan's coldhearted response to the natural disaster was immediately manifested in the landslide electoral victory of the Awami League, a political party from then East Pakistan (current day Bangladesh), campaigning for regional autonomy (Hossain, 2018). Hossain (2018) argues that the political ecology transition steered a new social

contract that obligated rulers to save the ruled from life-threatening catastrophes and subsistence crises as a precondition of governance. Subsequent disastrous events, especially the 1974 Famine, and successive political turmoil crystallized into a tripartite agreement between the national elites, the masses, and the donors to avert subsistence crises in one of the world's most populous, impoverished, and disaster-prone countries (Hossain, 2017).

The agreement brought the questions of human security and resilience to the heart of policy discourses. There was a consensus among local and international elites that it would be impossible to eradicate rural poverty if women did not participate in the labour market and control their fertility (Hossain, 2017). It was challenging to carry out women-centric health, education, and economic development initiatives in Bangladeshi society, identified as "classic patriarchy," where women's bodies, labour, sexuality, and mobility were subjected to extreme male control (Greeley, 1983; Kabeer, 1988; Kandiyoti, 1988). Despite deep-rooted patriarchy and shocking violence against women, catastrophe created the condition for politicizing women's issues. Programs to rehabilitate sexually-violated women after the 1971

Liberation War rendered women's issues a pressing national issue (Kabeer, 1988). Disasters further weakened the classic patriarchal contract. The 1974 Famine was one such disaster that shook the long-standing idea of the classic patriarchal contract that men were the protector and providers of women and children (Kabeer, 1988). Starvation and hunger pushed numerous rural women away from home in search of work and survival. Driven by the logic of bare survival, they came out to the public by disobeying the norm of *purdah*, women's seclusion from the public sphere (Hossain, 2017).

Humanitarian disasters during the cyclone, war, and famine were the formative moments of the country's well-known non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The emerging aid economy and the dire reality of the state's lack of administrative capacity to reach out to remote areas and protect people augmented the exceptional growth of Bangladesh's third sector. Cooperation between Northern donors, public institutions, and NGOs around the "subsistence crisis contract" created the fertile ground for experimentation and innovations with development to integrate rural masses, especially women and girls, into development

programs in cost-effective manners (Hossain, 2017).

This monograph locates BRAC, an organization born in the wake of the country's independence and within the historical dynamics between disaster, gender, and human development in Bangladesh. Beginning in Sulla, one of the most remote regions in Sunamganj, Sylhet, BRAC would undergo continuous learning and experimentation, in phases, as it transitioned away from its first phase of rehabilitation. After the 1974 Famine, the organization radically transformed its approach to rural development. Shifting from the so-called "community development" approach, where the entire village was seen as the unit of development and participation was enabled through BRAC staff, the organization adopted a "people-centric" approach to rural development, which was led by the villagers, in particular the poor rural women (Korten, 1980, p. 498). Under an integrated program of rural development, the organization once attempted to integrate people from different sections of society into its development programs. After the acute subsistence crisis in 1974, the poor and women became the main focus of BRAC. In 1978, BRAC established Village Organizations (VOs) or

Shomitis, the grassroots institution of marginalized men and women, which would eventually become the primary institution and *modus operandi* of BRAC's rural development programs for the next decade. Quite naturally, in the subsequent decades, as the organization grew, BRAC modified its approach to suit new challenges and respond to an ever-changing reality (which will be discussed in subsequent monographs). In the early years, however, BRAC heavily emphasized conscientization, organization, and mobilization as powerful means to improve the social, economic, and political status of the most marginalized village actors within local power structures. Very different from the vision of creating self-reliant rural communities BRAC had once hoped for as an outcome of development, the firm commitment to the collective empowerment of the most impoverished and disenfranchised characterized BRAC's post-famine development strategies.

How do we explain the paradigm shift in BRAC's rural development program from the community development approach to a people-centric one? Why did the poor and women, rather than the community, become the focal point in BRAC's approach to rural development

after the famine? The pieces of literature on the relationships between disasters, gender, and development are highly significant. Still, these questions call for considering another strand of literature that views development as a knowledge-based process and organizational change as an interplay of knowledge and practice (Hailey & James, 2002; Korten, 1980; Smillie, 2009). We looked at Sulla, where it all began, for the crucial journey BRAC experienced as it reached its understanding of poverty, development, and people's mobilization.

BRAC's experience in Sulla consisted of mainly three stages: rehabilitation, a community-based integrated model of development, and an approach that focused on the conscientization of the most vulnerable and poorest of the poor—a politically radical people's approach.

2. Rehabilitation: Wayfaring, Attending, and Corresponding

The early years after liberation, once the euphoria of independence had waned, were marred by political upheaval and economic hardship. Bangladesh suffered due to inadequate economic policies, mismanagement, and plunder. Printing the new currency, the taka, in excessive quantities also led to inflation and more hardship that added to the miseries of the masses. When the United Nations Relief Operations Dacca (UNROD) in Bangladesh closed down, the economic shortcomings no longer remained hidden (van Schendel, 2009).

There was considerable resentment that had built up within the population due to the inability of the state to reach quick agreements on national and socialist development policies, and disappointment for what was perceived to be a lack of idealism in the leaders and members of the new government to work selflessly for rebuilding the devastated nation. With Islamic right-wing parties banned for alleged ties with anti-liberation forces, all oppositions, namely the National Socialist Party or Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), the National Awami Party

(NAP), and numerous pro-Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and pro-China communist groups, leaned towards the left (van Schendel, 2009). Extortion, kidnapping, and coercion during elections led to protests and attacks both by JSD and Awami League, and as the situation intensified, a host of leftist groups went underground and set out to wage what they believed would be Bangladesh's unfinished or aborted revolution (ibid).

The times were both turbulent and revolutionary, as reflected in the reading, conversations, and aspirations

of youth, many of whom had joined development work while being involved in politics that advocated for the advancement of the poor and challenged the corrupt and exploitative leadership. The same was reflected in the first generation of BRAC employees who were directly or indirectly involved in the 1971 Liberation War and were more left-oriented as mentioned previously.

It was the rehabilitation issue of nearly 10 million war refugees returning from India that became the most urgent challenge for the war-torn, newly independent Bangladesh (Owen, 1972). Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of BRAC, and Viquar Chowdhury, one of the seven founding members of the organization, together ran a humanitarian operation in the refugee camps in Assam, India, during the 1971 Liberation War (Smillie, 2009). After the independence of Bangladesh, Chowdhury undertook a perilous journey of days, walking with a group of returning refugees towards Sulla, a remote wetland region in northeast Bangladesh. This predominant Hindu area bore the brunt of the Pakistani

military's genocidal campaign. Upon returning, the returnee refugees found the entire area barren with no signs of life: trees burnt, animals slaughtered, and entire crops destroyed (Mortoza, 2006). Stretching around 50 miles in radius, Sulla remained heavily flooded during monsoons, turning into a massive bowl-shaped floodplain like an inland sea (Chen, 1986). Villages within the ecosystem were tiny islands barely connected with the outside world. At that time, reaching this region from Dhaka involved two days of journey through a combination of rail, road, and river transport (Francis, 2019).

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and Viquar Chowdhury felt deep compassion for the war-affected people. The villages had borne the most terrible brunt of the war. Men, women, and children, tired from the long journey from Assam to Sulla, sat quietly under large trees—the only shelters remaining—trying to contemplate how they would rebuild homes and lives (Mortoza, 2006).

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed returned to Bangladesh on 17 January 1972 to join Viquar Chowdhury:



Memories of the first day staying at Sulla will never leave me. We travelled in March but to a place with nowhere to stay. We didn't even know where we would sleep. We found a shop at the local bazaar [market] and slept on a macha [bamboo shaft]. It stormed all night and we were left drenched, sleepless. I was 36 then. We then had to walk to reach the villages. (Abed, n.d., as cited in Mortoza, 2006, p. 41)

They knew a remote place like Sulla would not draw much attention from international aid and relief assistance (Francis, 2019); nor could it be accessed by a transportation system that had been completely ruined during the war. Therefore, in early 1972, they established the Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee to run a rehabilitation program in Sulla (BRAC, 1972). A group of reputed individuals, intimately connected to the country's political and humanitarian histories, came together to form its governing body. Akber Kabir, who was previously with the Heartland Emergency Lifesaving Project (HELP) in Manpura, Bhola, poet and feminist activist Begum Sufia Kamal, Professor Abdur Razzak, retired government official Kazi Fazlur Rahman, and S R Hossain, who was a senior officer at a renowned oil company at that time and had assisted Viquar Chowdhury in Kolkata—all agreed to form the board of directors, along with Chowdhury and Abed. Under the chairpersonship of

Begum Sufia Kamal, the first governing body of BRAC was formed (Mortoza, 2006; Rohde, 2014).

The first-ever institutional fund for BRAC came from Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's contributions that he accumulated by selling off his apartment in the United Kingdom (UK), and Viquar Chowdhury's savings from a bank account in Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) which he opened as part of the "Help Bangladesh" rehabilitation program during the 1971 Liberation War (Ahasan & Iqbal, 2022; Mortoza, 2006). Along with the founders—Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and Viquar Chowdhury—other board members also pooled their money for the initial funds (Ahasan & Iqbal, 2022). However, the voluntary organization needed more money to continue the rehabilitation work in the devastated region. "I knew it would make no sense to go to a donor and ask for money. I would have to do it with a proposal," said Abed (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 11). The team took its

first step of conducting a detailed survey before drafting the proposal. It outlined the exact needs, including emergency food supply, medical interventions, protein-rich foods for children, housing and livelihood recovery, and the amount of money necessary (Smillie, 2009). The process helped the organization assess local needs and also gain its first donor-funded partnership with the British charity organization Oxfam (Oxfam, 1972).

BRAC sought help from diverse venues, not just Northern donors. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and Viquar Chowdhury travelled to India to purchase tools and equipment for weaving, harvesting, fishing, earthworks, and house construction. They met the chief minister of Assam and sought his help to purchase timber and bamboo for house reconstruction at a lower price (Smillie, 2009). Through ongoing conversations with anyone who could help source materials, the team could access iron sheets from Japan and other housing materials from Bangladesh's new government (BRAC, 1972; Mortoza, 2006; Smillie, 2009). Energetic educated youth with dreams of building the nation was mobilized as large amounts of materials were transported. Flowing from the hills of Eastern India, the river

Kushiyara flows 160 kilometres before joining the Surma River in Sylhet and its branch drains into Sulla. Three million bamboo poles were tied together to make a three-mile-long raft and floated down. A dozen volunteers steered the bamboo raft through rains and the sharp turns of the turbulent river en route to Sulla (Harvard Business School, 2014).

The euphoria of freedom and the energy of a newly-formed national identity was palpable everywhere (van Schendel, 2009). BRAC recognized that the spirit of educated youths could meet the challenges of reconstructing the nation. It recruited a group of enthusiastic university graduates keen on repairing the nation (Ahasan & Iqbal, 2022). Their work started at the break of dawn and ended late in the evenings. With no fixed accommodations, they spent nights in temporary camps. They always carried a *gamcha* (thin cotton towel) to dry themselves after crossing the rivers (Chen, 1986). Tin-roofed houses were built slowly, and volunteers, at times, used to rest on the tin sheets under the open sky. They carried mud on their heads, shovelled the land, and created canals for water to reach the farms; they also built a dam at the mouth of the Kushiara. They created farms with the villagers, sowing seeds with bare

hands, each perfectly distanced from the other. Moyazzem Hasan, the first field worker of BRAC, reflected on their zeal at the time: "Our youth drove us to leave footprints of new life" (Hasan, 2021, p. 4).

Viquar Chowdhury had about 25,000 rupees in his account in Calcutta, and roughly 6,000 pounds was at Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's disposal from the sale of his apartment. The money was utilized as the first-ever institutional fund for BRAC. Oxfam was the main funder of the rehabilitation, besides Community Aid Abroad in Australia, and Aide aux volontaires d'Emaus in France also contributed. Funds received from Emergency Relief Fund, Student's World Concern, and Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's network of friends in the United States of America (USA) and Europe who contributed to the initiatives Save East Bengal in London and Famine Relief Committee in Calcutta (BRAC, 1972) played a role. Also acknowledged for continued support were branches of the Government of Bangladesh, namely the Prime Minister's Secretariat

for Coordination of External Relief and the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation; voluntary agencies, including CORR, and agencies of the United Nations which offered support with transportation and other material needs of Sulla Phase I; and finally, BRAC's young voluntary workers, who were the ones responsible for the transportation of supplies from India, patiently making their way in bamboo and timber rafts down the Kushiara River (BRAC, 1972).

For nine months, from February to October 1972, BRAC focused efforts on repairing the land that had been left fallow for so many months. Working with 88,000 people in 187 villages when rehabilitation started, BRAC set up four camps, each having 55 villages under its control. Housing, cooperatives, agriculture, fisheries, tools and implements, medical care, and child feeding programs constituted the very first phase that was undertaken through strenuous conditions, as reflected in the BRAC report:



The delay in completing the program was due mainly to the extremely difficult post-war transportation condition in the country making movement of program materials slow and uncertain. Under the circumstances, we feel that a large physical program, involving movement of thousands of tons of materials for housing and other programs to one of the remoter regions of Bangladesh

completed at a minimum of cost, was no mean achievement. (BRAC, 1972, p. 3)

At the end of the nine-month-long project, BRAC surpassed the initial target of building 6,500 housing units for 30,000 homeless individuals by establishing 3,700 extra housing units accommodating 14,100 families (Oxfam, 1972). The sun's rays reflecting off of corrugated roofing made the newly built houses glisten, detectible from afar as a manifestation of accomplishment. When the project was completed, a total of 16,500 pounds remained unspent, and on an extremely rare occasion, Oxfam was asked if it required the funds to be returned. Oxfam told Sir Fazle Hasan Abed to use the money in the next project to be implemented by BRAC.

Although it was a moment of accomplishment and joy, Sukhen Sarkar, one of the earliest members of BRAC, recounted how they could notice the limitation of their work during an interview with Dr Shahaduz Zaman,

the principal investigator of the BRAC History project.

During the wayfaring through the aquatic world of Sulla by a paddle boat, Sarkar and his colleagues, noticed that the houses on the island, where they had worked extensively, did not look as shiny as before. The issue was raised in the monthly meeting in Sulla. "Perhaps program beneficiaries sold their iron sheets to the better-off neighbors," somebody remarked. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed advised his colleagues that instead of acting based on their assumptions, they should visit the place and ask the villagers about the disappearing building materials and work according to the solutions proposed by them (Sarkar, 2021). Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and others later discovered that the roofs were indeed being sold (elaborated in the next section), and with that knowledge came an understanding that BRAC needed to do more and that more had to be done *differently*. This historical vignette offers crucial insights into BRAC's ways

of knowing, interacting, and listening to the community.

Through this engagement, the founding members of BRAC discovered Sulla. If they had relied only on secondary sources of knowledge, such as newspapers or television, they would have had little chance to know the history of the oppression against the minority Hindu populace in the region, feel the ambience of its ecology, and connect to the sorrow and joy of its people. "Unless visiting, nobody can comprehend how inaccessible the area was," Moyazem Hasan (2021) recounted. The last bit of the journey to Sulla required travelling by boat or walking "depending on the time of year" (Francis, 2019). During the monsoon, there was immense happiness in setting sail and being the sole captain of the boat, says Hasan, who cherished the joy of adapting to an unfamiliar landscape. In the dry season, BRAC's field workers and leaders had to walk 17 miles to reach the base camp. Paddled boats or walking can be painstaking, time-consuming, and less efficient modes of movement than automated transportation. However, Hasan reflected on the unique emotional and cognitive experiences that accompanied his memories of travelling by boat or foot in Sulla: "I now wonder whether the same is felt when

journeys are made in the comfort of cars" (Hasan, 2021).

The theme that emerges from Hasan's writing and Sarkar's recollection, wayfaring as a distinct way of knowing the world. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and others realized the undesirable fate of the tin-roofs BRAC used in building houses for the displaced people. Their realization illustrates a form of knowledge about social reality that gradually grew from the lived experience of "walking on the ground, in the landscapes of real life" instead of looking at the world from a "birds-eye" view (Ingold, 2005). Human beings are terrestrial creatures. Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2005, 2010, 2011) argues that as a fundamental human experience, wayfaring produces a distinct form of knowledge. This kind of knowledge that came from the embodied experience of walking and travelling through the landscape in turn motivated BRAC staff to engage more with the local people in their daily life and struggle.

The above story suggests that the rehabilitation program was not just a one-off intervention for BRAC. It was also a pursuit of learning which called for paying serious and sincere attention to the human condition of program participants, how they used resources

or services, and what they had to say. It is an open-ended process of learning generated through one's attentional relation to the world and capacity to attend to "persons and things, to learn from them," as Ingold (2014, p. 389) calls the education of attention. It is an open-ended, longitudinal, and transformative process of learning. Ingold (2017, p. 22) explicates: "Truths that are inherent in the world are, bit by bit, revealed or disclosed to the novice. What each generation contributes to the next, in this process, is an education of attention."

Although BRAC had plenty of memories of triumph with the rehabilitation program, the BRAC team's attentional relation to human conditions allowed them to identify and acknowledge the limitations of the approach. Living attentively, not intentionally, with others means one needs to respond to the need of another and the evolving situations with "interventions, questions, and responses" (Ingold, 2014, p. 389). In other words, the generation of knowledge through paying attention calls for knowers' collaborative engagements (correspondence) with others. Correspondence is how beings or things relate to one another over time. Then, it is not just interaction but an

evolving dialogue, which is neither given nor achieved but always in the process of making and rests on the logic of care (Ingold, 2017). Sukhen Sarkar (2021) remembered Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's advice on the significance of the practice of correspondence for learning: "Being an academic, you can attain a doctoral degree. However, you cannot change the living conditions of Sulla's people with educational credentials unless you do talk to them, understand their messages, and follow their instructions."

Dr Salehuddin Ahmed, the first generation of BRAC, vividly recounted his conversation with Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, which further illuminates Abed's views on knowledge. In the late 1970s, young Ahmed returned from abroad after completing his PhD program. In an interview at BRAC's Dhaka office, Abed recruited Dr Ahmed to work for BRAC. Ahmed (2021) will never forget the piece of advice Abed gave him: "It is great that you have seen the United States; now it is time for you to discover rural Bengal." Postcolonial and decolonial thinkers accused international development discourses of representing the poor of the Global South in terms of deficiencies, absence, lack, or failure. In stark contrast to the deficit discourse that portrays the poor as uninformed,

unaware, or stupid, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed regarded the poor as the most significant epistemic agent for creating knowledge. He considered them as the teachers who showed the way and led. He kept insisting that his team approach the field as a university against the hegemonic construction of knowledge hierarchy.

The scholarships on BRAC's learning culture (Hailey & James, 2002; Korten,

1980; Smillie, 2009) have not paid sufficient attention to these ecological, ethical, and collaborative learning practices through close engagement and listening attentively to others. It is essential to recognize BRAC's open-ended, contextual, dialogic, and transformative learning process. Secondly, they help locate knowledge within a historical framework as a grounded and evolving phenomenon.

3. The Community Development Approach: Acting and Reflecting

Over the first nine months, Sulla emerged from ashes as the local population received housing and clinics and began to return to farming, animal husbandry, and fishing. But alas, while the roofs shone brightly in the first few months, the sight would be temporary.

“With time we noticed that fewer and fewer houses could be spotted from our boats; realization struck us that the tin roofs were disappearing. Observing the change, Abed Bhai asked us to speak to the villagers about what was happening. Through conversations with the people, we came to know that the tin sheets offered a source of quick temporary income once sold to the better off. They explained that the tin was a luxury for them if they weren't able to eat. Hence, they sold it and asked us to help them eat instead. (Sarkar, 2021)

“What are the usages of tin-roofed houses if we stay starved?” villagers asked BRAC's field workers (Sarkar, 2021). BRAC realized relief and rehabilitation were necessary interventions to meet the pressing needs of people in distress but not enough to bring sustainable change in their lives (Korten, 1980). Recognizing the need for more work to be done and also the

receptiveness of the villagers to “new ideas and new institutions that could help them break their centuries-old subsistence economy,” Sir Fazle Hasan Abed drafted a second funding proposal and in early 1973, after completing Sulla Phase I, BRAC launched an integrated rural development program as Sulla Phase II. Along with the transition from rehabilitation to development, the

Inception, Sulla, and the 1970s

Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee was renamed the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee as it

moved forward to an integrated model of development.



Rural Bangladesh with slight regional variation remains wedded to her primitive ways. But the struggle for liberation has brought about a new climate, a new awareness and desire for change. The corrupt and exploitative rural leadership is constantly being challenged and a new and forward-looking potential leadership awaits in [on] the sidelines to be trained and inducted [in]to their future roles. The people, so long groping in ignorance and mistrust, are now receptive to new ideas and institutions which would help them to break away from centuries old subsistence economy. (BRAC, 1972, p. 7)

BRAC aimed at uplifting the socioeconomic and political conditions of the rural population in an integrated manner through developing self-reliant communities, human and institutional infrastructure, and local leadership. The main strategies to achieve these objectives were forming peasant and fisher cooperative societies and initiating multi-sectorial development projects around agriculture, horticulture, fisheries, adult education, health care, family planning, and vocational training (BRAC, 1974). The team was in search of a “model” of development (Sarkar, 2021) and would adopt many elements from the then widely employed Comilla Cooperative System initiated by the Academy for Rural Development in the 1960s (Chen, 1986).

Akhtar Hameed Khan, renowned chief of the Academy for Rural Development, vigorously advocated for grassroots cooperative participation of villagers to stimulate agricultural development and modernize the peasantry. In Cumilla, East Pakistan, the Academy ran a large-scale program to organize peasants into cooperative credit societies. Khan regarded coops as the essential means to diffuse high-yielding seeds, agricultural and irrigation technologies, extension services, modern agricultural practices, business and managerial skills, and subsidized credits to the peasants (Ali, 2019). In the early 1970s, after gaining liberation from Pakistan, the Bangladeshi state implemented an Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP) by restoring the Academy-

initiated two-tiered cooperative system, consisting of village-based primary cooperatives and a central federation of primary cooperatives at the *thana* (sub-district) level (Momin, 1987). In the continuity of East Pakistan's rural development policy, after the breakaway from Pakistan and independence, Bangladesh's newfangled government relied on the coop to reach out to small and marginal farmers with agricultural inputs, credit, and knowledge. Coops were also expected to contribute to developing "a healthy social consciousness and a desire for harmony and order" in rural areas (Islam, 1985).

BRAC experimented with most elements of the existing structure of rural development at the time, along with its programs that resulted from its learnings from the field. However, some of it would eventually adopt a different approach after realizing that the Comilla Model had several shortcomings. Taking on a multisectoral approach, a total of eight programs were planned,

and it was hoped that the results of the concentrated attention being given to the area would not remain confined within boundaries but would generate a rippling effect, gradually making itself felt all over Bangladesh (BRAC, 1972; Korten, 1980). The large project area consisting of 220 villages was sectioned into 11 parts, each having its field camp, an area manager who would supervise the camp, and four to five multipurpose development workers who would report to the manager. Moreover, the 11 sections were supervised by two zonal program coordinators reporting to one field coordinator (Korten, 1980). The programs included *Gonokendra* (Community Centre), an adult literacy program, cooperatives, agriculture, fisheries, women's program, medical care, and public health and family planning. However, it emphasized making cooperatives functioning and democratic by nurturing coop members' participation, spirit, discipline, and skills. A BRAC (1974, p. 9) report explicated the goal:



The main emphasis of cooperative programs is to ensure direct participation of the membership in the activities of the societies to democratize the cooperative institutions, which traditionally fall prey to powerful interest groups to the detriment of the members at large.

The other vital community development strategy of BRAC was building a Gonokendra (the people's centre) in each village. BRAC envisioned Gonokendra as the hub of the social life of a village, a space for social gatherings, education, training, and raising awareness—in short, the locus of community development. BRAC (1974) encouraged villagers' participation in the construction, usually by labour and land. Its education program vowed to eliminate “the project area's 90 percent illiteracy within three years” (Korten, 1980, p. 488). Besides, BRAC (1974) targeted women for health and family planning services and “destitute women” (widows or deserted women) for vocational training.

During Sulla Phase II, BRAC built community centres, set up medical centres, formed cooperatives, and ran fish and vegetable farms. It also conducted mass immunization and vaccination campaigns and a widescale child feeding and nutrition program. In this process, BRAC workers visited every household under its catchment area, spanning 256 square kilometres and 220 villages (BRAC, 1974). A BRAC

workforce took its shape around 11 base camps. The vegetable gardens that field workers cultivated at the base camps flourished. The sick villagers, treated by the paramedics, began to recover. “Gradually, the people of Sulla came to trust the advice and example of the BRAC staff” (World Education, 1976, p. 3).

In 1973, BRAC adopted the learning approach of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire as captured in his well-known book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In the book, Freire (2005) advocated for a practice of education or praxis that seeks radical social change through the dual work of action and reflection. In effect, education would be delivered to build a “critical consciousness”—a consciousness that would enable people to analyze their oppression and create change in their lives. Freire emphasized that action should not be mere activism but must provoke critical reflection, a process to transform actions into a praxis. He warned against a dichotomous view of action and reflection in thinking of praxis:



Let me emphasize that my defense of the praxis implies no dichotomy by which this praxis could be divided into a prior stage of reflection and a subsequent stage of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously. A critical analysis of reality may, however, reveal that a particular form of action is impossible or inappropriate at the present time. Those who through reflection perceive the infeasibility or inappropriateness of one or another form of action (which should accordingly be postponed or substituted) cannot thereby be accused of inaction. Critical reflection is also action. (Freire, 2005, p. 128)

The didactics would also leave a strong and lasting effect on forming BRAC's tradition that focused on gaining knowledge to raise the consciousness of the poor and thereby empower them. BRAC went on to practice development in multiple ways throughout the 1970s and 1980s, emphasizing education for the poor and the act of reflection as an indispensable component for the staff.

The organization began to nurture the reflective participation of its field workers in the development process, a method that gained prominence in the team meetings—action-reflection-action (Sarkar, 2021). To work better towards the goal of raising consciousness, an everyday practice of doing development accompanied by critical reflection on the experiences of their acts was made compulsory (Sarkar, 2021). Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's method of leadership emphasized continuous

learning through active reflection. As mentioned by Korten (1980, p. 490), "Abed's leadership style encourages open discussion of difficult issues and acceptance of apparent errors, yet provides firm decisions when they are needed." Perhaps, BRAC's Freire-inspired method of action-reflection-action underpinned the organization's attitude towards treating undesirable development outcomes as means of education, as was evident in Sulla Phase II.

Although BRAC's adult education wing began with much promise, the completion rate fell to as low as five per cent by the end of the first year (BRAC, 1974). BRAC undertook a critical evaluation of the program which identified the discrepancy between pedagogic materials with methods and the interests and needs of villagers (Korten, 1980). In 1974,

it experimented with problem-posing learning, a Freirean pedagogical method (World Education, 1976). Freire was a staunch critic of the conventional mode of education based on a paradigm that viewed teachers as knowing subjects and students as passive containers and emphasized knowledge transmission rather than critical thinking. He called for viewing students as persons with prior knowledge and their ownership of knowledge. Following problem-posing learning, the teacher acted as a facilitator. Instead of giving lessons, they encouraged students to participate in posing and solving problems and thinking together (Freire, 2005). BRAC changed pedagogical materials and trained teachers to reorient themselves in the role of facilitator (World Education, 1976). As a result, BRAC's adult education program became more participatory, and the completion rate rose to above 40 (Korten, 1980).

We may draw from an account with Khushi Kabir, who had started as the

secretary in BRAC's Dhaka office but soon joined the material development team that was producing lesson units for the BRAC literacy programs. Within two years of joining, her expertise in the tradition of Freire proved so strong that she was asked to begin a women's program at Anandapur camp. She explained BRAC's rigorous participatory approach and how field workers at Anandapur moved forward in steps, first by overcoming the suspicion held by villagers, going door to door, patiently explaining their intentions, and encouraging women to join them. With the support of the village *mashima* (auntie), an 84-year-old widow, news of the meeting spread in the village. The women then themselves selected the attendees, some eager while others curious to know about what the meeting would be about. The core philosophy, as expressed by BRAC field workers, was that,



“...the women can bring about change. But first, the women must become conscious” of what they already do. They possess many skills. They must see how valuable these skills are. Then the women will decide for themselves what they can do to make life better. (World Education, 1976, p. 4)

Methods to encourage participation and critical thinking included a photo discussion where photographs of women, engaged in various activities such as planting potato plants and other productive work, were shown to the crowd. Field workers would then ask questions like “Are all these women in the pictures from Bangladesh?” “Can you do all the things they are doing?” “Would you like to learn some of these things?” As expressed by the field workers, “It is important for the villagers to draw their own conclusions about the relevance of the pictures to their own lives.” A game of blind man’s buff also ensued at the meetings, where women compared the darkness they were in with the shared feelings of powerlessness, dependence, and helplessness. A sense of collectivity emerged as the women observed how their problems were common to the group. Every comment was significant and attended to. With time, close correspondence, and attending, “Suddenly the villagers are [were] no

longer just watching--they are [were] involved” (World Education, 1976, p. 4).

While the plans for each program had been written and seemed feasible at the time, BRAC would learn of many setbacks, changes required, and the need for a more patient approach to the building of its envisioned human and institutional infrastructure. It would observe rural dynamics more closely and also learn about the complications of disasters, such as the 1974 Famine, on the lives of the poorest of the poor. Gradually, it would come to develop its own distinct ways of learning and realize that the social relationship was the bedrock of poverty. What we mean by this notion of relational is that poverty is a condition that predominantly results from the lack of adequate incorporation or disadvantageously incorporated *relationships* within the society—the terms of incorporation or recognition is skewed against the poor.

4. From Community to the Rural Power Structure: Learnings From 1974

One of the most fundamental problems BRAC faced with its cooperative-centric approach to rural development was that relatively better-off farmers benefited most from the development initiatives at the expense of landless farmers. Why was it the case? The most marginalized villagers explained to BRAC field workers the reasons using the allegory of two different kinds of local fish. *Puti* is a small freshwater fish, whereas *Boal* is a catfish with sharp teeth and aggressive behaviours. The problem was that BRAC invited both of them to swim in a pond called “cooperative societies” or coop (Sarkar, 2021).

Imported by the British Colonial Administration (Iqbal, 2017) and rejuvenated by the Academy in Cumilla during Pakistan's first dictatorship (Ali, 2019), coop continued to inform the strategy of the Rural Development Board in independent Bangladesh (Islam, 1985). During Sulla Phase II, BRAC also envisioned coops as the key institution through which to deliver and organize development in rural Bangladesh. However, BRAC intended to “democratize” the function

of cooperative societies so that the institution would not “fall prey to powerful interest groups” (BRAC, 1974, p. 9).

Still, the model's design required coop members to interact with bureaucrats based in towns to access allocated public resources of the Rural Development Board. The *Puti* fish from remote wetland Sulla did not have much experience swimming away from the pond, but the *Boal* fish regularly

swam across the wildest streams and rivers. The most marginalized of the community neither had the confidence to navigate the strict and formal hierarchy of bureaucracy nor did they possess the necessary cultural skills to communicate with educated folks. Consequently, they could not compete with the bigger fish of the Sulla wetland. The latter was quick to gobble up the public resources channelled into the pond, in other words, the cooperative society.

BRAC's rural development program envisioned the leadership of the Puti in managing cooperative societies. However, ultimately, the elites accessed the lion's share of the subsidized credits, extension services, high-yielding varieties, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and deep tube wells intended for the "green revolution." The marginalized did not know what communications were taking place between officials and elites in the towns. They underwent extreme scarcity and witnessed the big fish returning to the pond empty-handed. From the lived experiences, the small fish realized that sharing the pond, the coop, with the big fish entailed exploitation at their hands. Since the 1950s, cooperatives and community development movements

characterized postcolonial nations' rural development schemes. Development literature widely praised the Comilla Model, especially for increasing agricultural productivity through cooperative credit societies. During the late-Pakistan period, the model gained international attention. Northern development actors promoted it as "the solution to the problems of peasant backwardness" in the Third World (Ali, 2019, p. 435). However, in the 1970s, the cooperative-centric approach to rural development turned into a matter of disappointment to development scholars. Drawing on rural development programs in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, Blair (1978) noted that almost invariably, cooperatives tended to favour rural elites. In the case of Bangladesh, as he found, the more prominent farmers captured the leadership and decision-making process of the government-registered cooperative credit societies. Furthermore, village elites used coops to access, default, and appropriate subsidized loans. Meanwhile, small farmers became the prey of exploitative moneylenders. Blair identified the bureaucratic structure of the cooperative system as the primary factor ensuring the domination of elites and exploitation of the poor.

BRAC became aware of the problems of cooperatives by critically reflecting on its development and collaborative learning practices with villagers, as the story of Boal and Puti fish suggests. The newly gained knowledge challenged fundamental assumptions of the prevailing development paradigm. At the heart of the community-development approach was an understanding of community as “a unified political body founded on consensus and commonality” (Secomb, 2000, p. 133). Over time, BRAC came to discern inequality, socioeconomic disparities, and fractures in the community. BRAC realized the village was not a singular and harmonious unity but consisted “of groups with differing and conflicting interests” (Chen, 1986, p. 13). Because of the realities of fractured communities, BRAC failed to succeed in turning the Gonokendra into a locus of community life (Korten, 1980, p. 489). Through experimenting with cooperatives, BRAC's dream of developing self-reliant rural communities began to fade. Instead, the organization increasingly became concerned with the rural power structure and its implications for rural development which reached a climax during the 1974 Famine.

4.1. Poverty as a Relational Phenomenon

Warnings of famine began as early as March 1974 as rice prices rose sharply, and news of widespread starvation in the North grabbed the headline. Crop failures from severe flooding, USA's refusal to provide food aid, and rampant corruption among government officials proved to be disastrous as prices rocketed. Gruel kitchens, with long lines of the hungry at the mercy of meals provided by state and relief organizations, became a familiar scene as malnutrition equalled rates found in some of the worst Bangladeshi refugee camps of 1971 (Hossain, 2017).

While work continued in Sulla, BRAC undertook an emergency food distribution program in Rawmari upazila under the Kurigram district which was severely impacted by the 1974 Famine. Located in the country's northwest, it was one of the most neglected, remote, and poor regions. With a program design prioritizing the most vulnerable, BRAC targeted to distribute 19,000 meals daily in February, and reached 304,617 meals by May. From 7,908 children fed daily, the number of daily meals went well above 12,000. The program achieved

short-term success as the nutritional rates of children bounced to normalcy. BRAC designed long-term projects around agriculture, family planning, and paramedical services to prevent further famine. However, the BRAC team faced considerable obstruction from village elites who resisted people gaining access to incoming resources. The organization observed the extreme ecological vulnerability of the region, increasing corruption, and elite capture that led to further shortages of food aid. Food supplies were mismanaged and reached those with political affiliations (Mortoza, 2006).

The horror of the subsistence crisis and more painful observations of the capture of relief subsistence by elites through state corruption prompted BRAC to inquire into the nexus of poverty and power systematically. It set up a separate research wing in 1975. In an interview, Abed emphasized the focus of early studies: “who gets what and why, how resource flows through Bangladeshi villages, and how it is captured by groups who are powerful” (Harvard Business School, 2014, p. 16). Several village studies investigated local power structure, social relationships, and the political system. They applied participatory research techniques which

required BRAC staff to perform the role of facilitators rather than interviewers. They organized group discussions with the poorest and most marginalized villagers to gain more profound knowledge on premeditated topics. However, instead of asking questions, facilitators tried to create the condition to enable villagers to enthusiastically participate, reflect, think critically, correspond, argue, and remain open to emerging topics. Korten (1980) observed that researchers, field workers, and villagers worked in tandem setting up the research agenda, gathering data, and even in the intellectual process of interpretation. So collaborative the studies were, as Korten (1980) observed, that the borders between them became blurred.

An influential BRAC monograph, later published as a book titled *The Net: Power Structure in Ten Villages*, revealed the intimate connection between the rural power structure and resource distribution (BRAC, 1980b). It reported that “a small group seemed to have obtained a very disproportionate share of power.” They maintained and extended their power “through a complex net of cooperative connections with other powerful men, including the government officers” (BRAC, 1980b).

Development projects, such as food for work, relief, and education, rarely could produce much development or reach the poor. Instead, they became the object of theft by the network of local and national elites. Landless agricultural labourers were “frequently caught up helpless in the meshes of this invisible network which they only partially understood, had a very small amount of power indeed” (BRAC, 1980b).

The 1974 Famine profoundly impacted BRAC's pursuit of knowledge by deepening its understanding of poverty as relational. The relational approach views poverty not as an accidental condition but as the consequence of unequal social relationships and power distributions (Green, 2006; Mosse, 2003; Wood, 2003). Wood argued that people remain poor not due to individual deficiencies but simply “because of others.” Poor people cannot “control future events because others have more control over them” (Wood, 2003, p. 456). Poverty is not just a matter of income or consumption deficit but “a state of relative powerlessness” (Green, 2006, p. 1111). Against the dominant approach to poverty that focuses exclusively on poor people and characterizes, defines, and measures poverty as lacking, the

relational framework examines social relationships as the driver of inequality, impoverishment, and social exclusion (Green, 2006; Mosse, 2003).

BRAC-initiated studies, in the aftermath of the famine, manifested a relational approach that foregrounded power, social relationships, and the political system in understanding the dynamics of rural poverty. Village studies such as meticulously documented the perils of the “capture” of development resources and the sufferings of ordinary people whose livelihoods were dependent on elites within a patron-client relationship through land ownership, labour, and credit market. Researchers examined how people's incorporation into unequal relationships constrains their capacity to think, act, and engage in social and cognitive processes that confer value, prestige, credibility, authority, and freedom of choice and association (BRAC, 1980b).

4.2. Women Gain Centrality in BRAC's Development Approach

Besides the relational understanding of poverty, there was another significant



We learned a host of things from Rawmari. We noticed how all the males had left at the start of the famine, telling their wives they would go to the city, work and send back money. Whether willingly or unwillingly, the men had left their homes. And the women struggled to stay alive with their children. (Mortoza, 2006, p. 49)

According to the rural patriarchal arrangement in Bangladesh, men are responsible for providing women and children with food, clothing, and shelter and protecting them from starvation, physical harm, and sexual violence. In turn, women perform reproductive duties and rice-processing labour and strictly conform to social norms of seclusion and sexual purity (Chen, 1986; Hossain, 2017; Kabeer, 1988; Kandiyoti, 1988). However, as historians observed, the sexual contract of protection and provision was grossly violated at the height of subsistence crises in Bengal as men frequently abandoned their wives and children. Greenough (1983) identified the entry of a different kind of societal logic in place of men's subsistence responsibilities during times

cognitive outcome of the 1974 Famine. For BRAC, the catastrophe paved the way for comprehending poverty through a solid gender perspective. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed explained:

of severe scarcity. The logic entailed the starvation of dependants to guarantee providers' survival. During the Bengal Famine of 1943, women and children became the objects of a socially agreed, widespread, and silent violence "of abandonment, of ceasing to nourish" (Greenough, 1983, p. 847).

Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's accounts of the gendered dimension of sufferings during the 1974 Famine suggest that the fate of dependent figures did not change. Women and children continued to exist in rural society as dispensed persons. The first-hand observations of the miseries of women and children had immense consequences for BRAC. The 1974 Famine revealed the stark reality that the customary patriarchal

arrangement did not protect but turned its back on women and children in the moment of crisis. It was a watershed moment for Abed. It became clear to him who required BRAC's assistance most urgently. There was a conviction that patriarchal norms and practices of women's seclusion from non-kin males or outsiders should not prevent BRAC from working with women directly (Hossain, 2017).

It would be misleading to characterize Abed's thinking about women and development as "women as victims." It was not just women's abandonment that caught his attention. As thousands of women were abandoned by their male counterparts, Abed observed women's self-sacrificing tendencies. In an interview, he recounted malnourished

mothers visiting BRAC's child-feeding centres in Rawmari upazila. Still, he could not remember seeing any of them "even taking a morsel from the food provided to their babies" (Mortoza, 2006, p. 49). In times of crisis, men could abandon their wives and children, but abandoned women reciprocally did not inflict a similar kind of silent violence on their dependents. Instead, mothers starved or ate less to allocate food for their children. The ethics of women in protecting the weakest members of the family and society was a critical observation of Abed during the famine. He reflected on the lifelong domestic and care work that women and girls perform in Bangladeshi society and their significance for the functioning of society:



A 4/5 year old girl takes care of her siblings but a boy doesn't do the same. Girls are more responsible since their childhoods. Girls help their mothers with cooking and taking care of domestic animals. At 6/7 years they go collect firewood, collect spinach from the fields. In poor families, at 14/15 years girls are married off and in most cases after mothering a child or two, the household expenses are too much for the husband to bear, and the woman is seen either asking for help from neighbors or working to feed the children. I've seen most women in low income and middle income families take on the struggle when there are financial crises. (Abed, n.d., as cited in Mortoza, 2006, p. 49)

The discussion above clearly shows how BRAC came to learn and understand poverty as a relational phenomenon from the concrete experiences of witnessing and working through physical calamities, exacerbated by exploitative and unequal human relations. “The Net” study and other research conducted by BRAC at that time demonstrated that a series of relationships—i.e., a network—often with historical roots, shapes how rural resources including land, trading, and subsistence activities, political power, and government provisions are monopolized by the so-called village elites, more often than not through violent and illegal means. This essentially ensured that people either had to join one or more factions within the village or earn the loyalty of some influential man to eke out a precarious livelihood, especially given the fact that the overwhelming majority of the villagers were landless peasants (BRAC, 1980b).

The 1974 Famine and its aftermath were the testimony of these cruel realities, which also helped shatter the notion of community as an undifferentiated and homogenous whole. The category of destitute women captured the essence of human suffering under the dual

marginalization of poverty and gender in BRAC’s analysis. Significantly, however, BRAC did not only see the vulnerability and victimization of women during the famine but began to discern how to empower and turn the table around them, banking on the capacity to care during stressful times. This knowledge gleaned from the research, and the program interventions were transformative and crucial in the context of emergent forms of targeted approach centred around destitute women. These socioeconomic interventions would be informed by this relational approach to poverty and geared towards the generation of power in subtle and explicit ways among the landless people through the organization, conscientization, training, economic empowerment, and political mobilization at different levels (Chen, 1986).

5. Rethinking Development: The People Approach

From 1975 to 1976, BRAC's rural development program brought a paradigm shift from the cooperative-centric community development approach to the politically radical people-centric approach (Korten, 1980). Earlier, as we have discussed, BRAC hoped to form self-reliant communities and develop villages in an integrated manner and encouraged the participation of people from different sections of rural society in its development program. Through the empirical experiences of practising development in remote Sulla, BRAC realized that the village was not a singular and cohesive community but consisted "of groups with differing and conflicting interests" (Chen, 1986, p. 13). Once envisioned as the most significant institution for rural development,

cooperatives were revealed as a site of siphoning of resources by local elites (BRAC, 1974). Likewise, BRAC came to view persistent poverty not as an accidental condition but as an effect of unequal social relationships and power distributions (BRAC, 1980b).

In the beginning, BRAC started its developmental phase with a cooperative approach to rural development. The goal was integrated development of the whole village. They undertook a variety of activities including Gonokendras, functional literacy classes, formed agricultural and fishing cooperatives as well as health and family planning schemes. Experimentation took place with the intention of the participation of villagers, including better-off farmers, landless, and destitute women.

However, this model of development benefits the better-off members of the village community at the expense of the marginalization of the poorest members (BRAC, 1988; Lovell, 1992).

A host of other shortcomings in the approach also came forth as the team deepened its understanding of the structural constraints to doing development. It realized that there were gaps in the target groups that had been recognized, its understanding of how poverty worked, and its approach to poverty reduction. As mentioned by Martha Chen in her days of working very closely with BRAC and its women's program, "The first lesson the women taught us about poverty is that poverty is not static. The reality is not simply that

some are rich and some poor. The reality is that poverty has a dynamic in which the rich and poor interact" (Smillie, 2009, p. 52).

Such interaction was identified to be rarely beneficial for the poor, rather laden with repeated exploitation, especially for the poorest groups. "An overarching lesson, however, was the realization that community was a relative term with little currency in the lives of the poorest, most especially in the lives of the poorest women" (Chen, 1986, p. 11). As the team uncovered the innate conflicts within the village dynamics that exerted influence over villagers and their access to resources, it reached a few assumptions:



That there was a very fundamental relationship between the rural power structure and the distribution of resources; that programs designed for the whole community deliver most of their benefits to the rich and tend to bypass the poor; that programs designed for the poor must address the rural power structure, which keeps not only power but also resources in the hands of a few; and that in order to address the rural power structure, the capacities of and institutions for the poor (and powerless) must be developed.

(Chen, 1986, p. 11)

Sukhen Sarkar's recollection of BRAC during the 1970s well-captures the logic of the changing development paradigm. He mentioned a monthly meeting in Sulla where Abed and his colleagues decided against using a single pond for both Puti (the small fish) and Boal (the catfish). "If both of them shared the same pond [as was the case for the cooperative credit society], the Boal fish [better-off farmers] would get heftier by eating the Puti fish [landless poor], and the latter would eventually become extinct" (Sarkar, 2021). Hence, under the people-centric approach, BRAC decided to work first and foremost with the Puti fish—"those who have no control over the means of production and distribution," "landless having no asset" and "selling their manual labor for survival"—instead of the village community (BRAC, 1980a, pp. 1–2). Empowering the poor became the prime objective of the people-centric approach to rural development (Korten, 1980). BRAC founder Sir Fazle Hasan Abed's words wonderfully illustrate how the relational approach underpinned both BRAC's analysis of poverty, power, and development strategies in tandem: "People are poor because they are powerless. We must organize people for power. They must organize themselves

so they can change their lives" (Ahasan et al., 2016).

In the rural power structure, as disenfranchised individuals, the poor depended on asymmetric and exploitative patron-client relationships with local elites who maintained control over land, tenancy relationships, and credit provisions. Nevertheless, the poor had a numerical advantage over their counterpart. They needed to be united, organized, and mobilized to realize their potential; this was also reflected in the approach adopted by prominent left-leaning political groups who aimed to bring change structurally.

With the new people-centric approach, BRAC directed its efforts towards organizing the poor. BRAC assumed that once organized into solidarity groups, through mutual help, livelihood activities, and collective actions, the poor and marginalized people could collectively gain power, improve their sociopolitical position in the society, and wane the dependency dynamics of the rural power structure (Ahasan et al., 2016; Ahmed & Rafi, 1999; Rafi, 2003).

5.1. Realizations and Uncovering Village Complexities

BRAC made its shift by drawing not only on its field experiences but also on research-based evidence. Field-based village programs were helping the team sharpen its lens on rural dynamics, while a group of researchers, adopting participatory research methods, studied the perspectives of poor villagers. Findings from the first volume on famine, credit needs, and sanitation titled “Peasant Perceptions” (BRAC, 1984)—which centred around three dominant themes, namely discontinuity, dependency, and disadvantagedness—shed light on the many layers of economic and social relations within village social structures. The analysis assisted the team to look more closely at some important village characteristics and the complexities of attitudes, beliefs, interpersonal relationships, and behaviour that had not been considered when designing earlier programs.

Discontinuity

Researchers identified that several households within a village had factions that played a significant role in the regulation of interhousehold cooperation, and alliance with the

degree of cooperation and interaction was high among households that belonged to the same faction. Each faction also had an internal hierarchy in which dominant positions were enjoyed by those who were the wealthiest, had the greatest influence on local affairs, and also had control over a large portion of resources such as land, credit opportunities, local business, external resources, and employment opportunities.

Factions, they assessed, would have individual wealthier households gather support in return for economic assistance they would promise to offer. It was this wealthier lot that led each faction and also held the highest interest in their continuum. While the poorer households formed the larger group, their affiliation with the faction lasted so long as there was security and protection provided.

Discontinuities were what the research team observed to be the differences in feelings of solidarity or common cause within one faction and then across factions. While there was a presence of solidarity within individual factions, there was a lack thereof between them, thereby generating conflict and restricting village-wide cooperation.

Such conflict was the result of the direct rivalry over resources available locally within the dominant wealthier members who led each faction and continuously tried to exert more influence. The divisions that arose from the conflict acted as a barrier to large-scale cooperation in economic and social affairs.

Dependency

Reflecting on the relationship shared between members of the poorest and the wealthier households within the structure of factionalism, dependency referred to the asymmetric dynamic deeply embedded within village social structures in Bangladesh which left the poor and landless in an exploitative system.

Resources in a village consisting of tangible assets such as land or intangible assets such as political influence or cooperative relations with local government officials were limited and unequally distributed. Such unequal distribution enabled the wealthier households to have considerable influence over the behaviour of the landless or marginal farmers who must depend on the more powerful households for subsistence income, such as wages for labour, credit for petty

trading, or even credit for marriage ceremonies. To ensure that they had such access, the poor households were left plunged in a situation where they had to ensure good relations through the contribution of resources as well as through the provision of political support. And owing to the possibilities of conflict within the village structure of local factionalism, the poor had little promise of social or economic security if they did not participate in this system of patronage.

The study also stressed how such a system of exploitation thrived more in presence of a weak judiciary and a weak and often corrupt government structure (Lovell, 1992). It stressed how the poor were being taken advantage of in almost every sphere of economic exchange such as in the very low wages paid for labour and the excessively high interest rates charged for credit; such exploitation was deeply institutionalized, and so ingrained in the society that the poorest member of the community did even not learn to question the system of inequity.

Disadvantagedness

A third major theme that came forth as a result of the factionalism and its dynamics was disadvantagedness in which poor villagers could not bring

about improvement to their conditions of being entirely dependent on the richer landholders and thereby being unable to accumulate wealth. The theme thus suggested that “rural poverty was not just a random condition but a result of the processes described that confer a built-in disadvantage to a particular set of poor households while conferring a corresponding operational advantage to the wealthier households. The processes included not only the ones that control economic activity but also those social and cognitive processes that ascribe value, prestige, credibility, authority and freedom of choice and association” (Lovell, 1992, p. 31). Thereby the poor were left to deal with their circumstances with not only a very negligible material base that they could depend on but also had to work through constraints and disadvantages that were disproportionately unequal.

With the analysis explained by the researchers, BRAC had evidence of why its community approach was failing to achieve targets and real development remained elusive. With the combined results of field failures and the research findings, the team would reassess their approach, keeping at the forefront the most disadvantaged.

Thus, BRAC’s growing disillusionment with the community as fractured, cooperatives as a means of elite capture, and deepening understanding of relational poverty were fundamental in framing its new approach to rural development.

Up until the decision to undergo a transition in its approach, the team had tried to do something in all sectors for the rural people in selected remote regions. Another issue they now faced was whether BRAC was satisfied doing what it was doing for a certain number of people, or it wished to see as many BRAC-like services as possible in certain regions, and also whether it wished to keep testing innovative approaches for other organizations to take them up eventually (Chen, 1986). It had to come to a decision about how it wished to proceed as an organization—a time of reflection that would lead it to its significant path of experimentation and innovation with poverty eradication.

Through the discussions, the team came to the conclusion that their function was not that of service delivery in the remote or neglected regions but rather to test and experiment what could be done with and for the overlooked sections of the population—the poor (Chen,

1986). They wished to test processes and methods to better reach the poor with inputs and services; organize the poor to ensure their future access and control over the services and inputs; act as an intermediary between the poor and national strategies and programs, private voluntary agencies, and resource institutions; and lastly, act as a buffer between the rural poor and rural power structure (Chen, 1986). With the village structure in focus, BRAC would play its role between the poor and (a) the government by mobilizing services and inputs, demonstrating how to reach the poor, and lobbying for protective legislation; (b) resource institutions by tapping expertise, facilitating interchange, and demonstrating how to reach the poor; and (c) private voluntary organizations by initiating reciprocities such as expertise and training and facilitating interchange.

BRAC also resolved to organize small groups with 20–25 members on average of the poor and gradually bring these small groups together into a federation of the poor. This federation, as it was called then, would with time assume the roles of buffer and intermediary.

With BRAC's reanalysis and reassessment, it thus made an ideological shift that development now meant empowerment of the poor along with a methodological transition that viewed organized groups of the poor as the key instruments for such empowerment (BRAC, 1988; Chen, 1986). The team's assumptions about poverty and development changed fundamentally. They now held:



That the village is made up of groups with differing and conflicting interests; that these groups can be mobilized around issues perceived to be in their self-interest; that the rural poor do not participate adequately in or control their environment because they are socio-politically and economically powerless; and that the poor through the power gained in collective economic and social action can more fully participate in and control their environment. (Chen, 1986, p. 13)

With this shift, the team transitioned from the notion of credit cooperatives for the rural poor to the concept of organized groups of male and female members from poor households who would be the main instrument through which all activities were to be organized and resources and power would be mobilized (Chen, 1986).

With the new strategy, it was hoped that having development efforts directed to the poorest group in the villages would facilitate them to break out of the dependency relationships. Once organized into solidarity groups, it was assumed that, through mutual help among the members and the opportunities that BRAC could provide, the poorest would with time break the hierarchical dependency dynamics of the rural power structure (Lovell, 1992).

In other words, BRAC was working in reorganizing and mobilizing the poor and disadvantaged sector of the population into cooperative groups who would then plan, initiate, manage, and control group activities, both in social and economic fields. All sectoral programs such as agriculture, horticulture, pisciculture, animal husbandry, duck and poultry raising, nutrition, healthcare, family planning

services, and functional education would be thus planned and implemented by the group members. BRAC would support the self-sustained growth of these group activities by providing training, extension, credit, and logistics assistance.

Since 1977, BRAC started forming a distinct institution called Village Organization (VO) or *Shomiti*, a grassroots institution for the most marginalized village actors, consisting of around 25–40 male or female individuals or, in some cases, mixed. Inspired by Freire’s critical pedagogy, BRAC adopted the “conscientization” methodology for group formation and cohesion building among the members. It was precisely a process of involving the dual task of action and reflection, through which people become critically aware of their social realities that interact in a hegemonic way to diminish their human potential. Along with conscientization, BRAC assumed that group-based activities would aid in forming a common purpose among the poor and lead them to undertake collective actions to improve their living conditions and claim their rights and entitlements. BRAC’s Sulla Phase III project was strictly participatory. Therefore, BRAC encouraged VO

members to plan, initiate, manage, and control group activities, both in social and economic fields. BRAC assumed its role as a facilitator of a self-organizing process by providing training, credit, and logistics assistance to the group members.

How such participatory actions evolved in the practice field can also be gleaned from other programs around that time. One of the programs undertaken by BRAC since the mid-1970s onwards was Jamalpur Women's Program (JWP), which initially began as a functional education intervention for destitute women. After the 1974 flood, the UNICEF nutrition unit initiated a Food for Work (FFW) program in the Jamalpur area, which engaged a large number of women, who were previously begging in Jamalpur town, in agriculture (BRAC, 1980a). By June 1975, UNICEF requested BRAC to provide functional education to 840 women who earlier participated in the agricultural FFW scheme. BRAC agreed and trained 15 women from Jamalpur to work as functional education teachers in their local areas (BRAC, 1980a). Although participation at first was not the very best, when the initial phase of the program was about to end, women learners told the teachers that they

were interested in attending more and requested that the classes be continued (BRAC, 1975). According to the annual reports from Jamalpur, these landless women, who were dependent on begging or agricultural wage labouring, were now interested in education rather than just obtaining wheat by participating in the classes.

The planners of the education program initially conceived the functional education classes as merely a supplementary activity of the FFW program when the rural women did not have much to do due to the agricultural lean periods. The intervention did not have any concrete developmental goals beyond imparting some basic literacy and numeracy training. However, as the relationship between the teachers and the learners grew stronger, they started cooperating in other areas. The students, for instance, asked if their teachers could help them obtain contraceptive pills so that they can practice family planning. They were too shy to approach government officials and could simply not go to the clinics due to social stigma.

When the whole program was extended, the teachers came up with more developmental activities. However, the bargaining and dialogue between

the teachers and the learners were central in the planning, extension, and execution of the program (BRAC, 1980a). This build-up of a development program challenges us to rethink our conventional way of thinking of development as a blueprint or a donor-driven idea. This also shows how even before their widespread popularity, later synthesized by prominent scholars such as Chambers (1983), participatory methods were actually brewing in the field through an ongoing practice of interaction and inter-exchange of ideas. Since the classes were based around conscientization and problem-solving methods, this further channelled participatory ethos between students, teachers, and the development apparatus.

Another BRAC program started roughly around the same time which indicates that at the heart of all these activities and interventions was a quest for facilitating power for the powerless and marginalized. The economic activities were implemented within this broader goal. When BRAC launched its ambitious program entitled Rural Credit and Training Project (RCTP) in four different locations of Bangladesh, the stated purpose was “organizing village institutions of poor people for raising

collective demand to establish their social and economic rights” (BRAC, 1979, p. 18). A baseline survey collected information on the socioeconomic condition of the households and targeted those people who were most marginalized, defined as those who had to sell manual labour for subsistence and were struggling to live. These targeted people were organized in VOs and loans were disbursed on a collective basis for the group members. They were encouraged to save, open bank accounts, and create a fund for their economic activities.

Economic empowerment was sought not only as an end itself but also as a means for total upliftment of the poorest class as a whole within the village hierarchy. Therefore, organizing the whole of the poorest classes was emphasized at the local or village levels and also at the regional and national levels. Importantly, a number of motivated individuals from the VOs would go to Savar, Dhaka, and complete a three-day-long intensive training on “Human Development and Social Change.” Again, as a regular group activity, functional education with problem-solving methods was used to catalyze the marginalized villagers—both men and women—to analyze their own

environment and brainstorm collective actions that could bring positive changes in their lives. Economic and developmental activities were part of this collective social bargain within the rural structure. The trained members of the organizations were expected to motivate the powerless rural people to organize, lead various initiatives, and disseminate information around them (BRAC, 1979).

In the economic domain, something quite interesting took place with regard to loan repayment, which would, in a very short time, change the face of development in this country. In Jamalpur, the BRAC program staff maintained a close relationship with the loan grantees to “strictly” oversee that the loans taken, which had high repayment rates, were used in the proper way. The program staff visited the villages every day. Based on the activities of the previous year, BRAC (1980a, p. 6) found that “the landless women are better payers than many others.” These ideas and knowledge germinating from the field would soon prove quite decisive in the development landscape of this region. Later it would be reported that the poorest classes have an astounding rate of repayment overall (Sengupta & Aubuchon, 2008).

Meanwhile, the yearlong emphasis on institution-building brought forth visible changes in Sulla, as reflected in the 1978 annual activity report. BRAC saw success for specific groups in building unity, organization, and cooperation. The organization of the landless, the marginal farmers, and the women were already becoming quite strong; many of the groups were now in a position to ensure survival without BRAC support. The group members designed and implemented sectorial programs, such as agriculture, horticulture, fish farming, animal husbandry, duck and poultry raising, nutrition, healthcare, and credit operation. Streefland et al. (1993) found indivisible group ethos and collective actions by the VO members in Shunamganj in accessing *khas* land and new leadership to emerge from the poor.

The introduction of the VOs revolutionized Bangladeshi developmental trajectory by eliciting the participation of mass rural women. In the feminization of development, women played the role of drivers rather than passive participators. Women's public activities challenged the patriarchal norm of women's seclusion or the *purdah* and changed the social views and valuation of women and girls in Bangladeshi society. For

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BRAC, VOs helped form the nationwide social infrastructure to reach the most marginalized sections of society with microcredit, maternal and child health, immunization, vaccination, education, and social protection services. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed explained how the fresh

insights into the power and ethics of women to sustain and support in critical times such as during the 1974 Famine would help him see the possibilities of investing in females as the primary agents of development:



This helped me realize that if we began working with these women who fought through the harshest of times and always crafted solutions, they would be able to do the same when faced with development activities. The fact that destitute women were a most important part of society wasn't given much thought before but we saw the power in them. (Abed, n.d., as cited in Mortoza, 2006, p. 50)

These insights were being tested and refined in other areas where BRAC operated to prepare the ground for the specific modality of delivering development for the poorest. Knowledge and practice both shaped the way interventions were conceived and executed. Building institutions for the poorest would continue taking priority,

and these ideas for social, economic, and political mobilization of the poor would continue to have a prominent role throughout the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. This would slowly pave the way for large-scale participation of the poor in numerous development interventions within this historical background and reality of Bangladesh.

6. Shades of Poverty: Defining the Poorest of the Poor

With changes in BRAC's assumptions on poverty came shifts in how it defined the socially dynamic condition. In the early years of credit cooperatives, the team targeted three broad and presumable homogenous groups—landless, fishermen, and women—which they termed “disadvantaged.” These three categories, however, soon showed layers of distinctions as BRAC observed how some landless have considerable sources of income, how some fishermen owned boats while others had to hire, and how women from varied socioeconomic classes did not share the same problems (Chen, 1986).

The approach undertaken was thus to narrow down the economic criteria for the group targeted, leading to the definition that included men and women of those households which do not exercise any control over the means of production and/or hire out their labour to third parties. This lens too would prove inadequate as the failure to consider a person's social and political ties brought forth challenges. It was feared that those who might have fallen within the group economically but had

ties with those politically/socially more powerful may be tied into a relationship of dependency; also, the presence of villagers who may have had no such power but were unwilling to perform certain manual labour owing to status perceptions was also another subgroup.

While villagers may have seemed homogenous initially in the functional educational classes, with time, the distinctions in interest, behaviour, and economic aspects came forth.

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Dimensions to accommodate such anomalies were then broadened and a new understanding of the target group thus emerged in 1978:



Men and women of those households who sell their manual labor to others for survival irrespective of occupation; provided, they do not have political patrons among the non-target people; and provided, they cannot still exercise status considerations. (Chen, 1986, p. 15)

The primary elements of BRAC's new methodology consisted of identifying the poor, organizing groups of the poor, and forming a class federation, which were seen as sequential steps. While the team narrowed down its target group to include wider aspects of sociopolitical considerations, it would also bring changes to what it defined as "groups." The shifts in how it perceived groups also offer a reflection of the organization's transitions in ideology (Chen, 1986).

While it started with the village as a unit and provided services with the initiation of activities across village communities, with time, BRAC singled out certain poorer subgroups which were organized for economic support. Starting from 1978, the team began working with

organized groups of the poor which were seen as long-term means to empower the poor (BRAC, 1988; Chen, 1986). Instead of depending on intermediaries, BRAC would work with the groups directly when it came to the delivery of services and inputs through trained members of each group. Objectives included group strength, unity, and concrete productive action which were seen as a result of daily interaction and joint productive activities. BRAC staff who were by then referred to as "organizers" were responsible for developing the individual groups up until they were self-reliant and could manage their own social and economic activities. BRAC's underlying assumptions of its methodology were as follows:



That individual behavior does not occur in a vacuum but in the context of a series of relationships; that to change an individual's behavior in any permanent sense one must change the series of relationships; that if the group is to be the key instrument of change for the poor, the group must prove a viable counter-institution to those earlier relationships; that the group must therefore provide at a minimum what the previous relationships offered individual members (varying degrees of security, resources, employment and power); that a strength of unity among the members will develop to the degree the group is perceived to provide security, resources, employment and power; that the concerted strength of an individual group can provide the degree of power required in, for example, a successful settlement of a domestic dispute but only the concerted strength of many groups can provide the broad base of power required in, for example, the negotiation of favorable wage rates or sharecropping terms; hence the federation. (Chen, 1986, p. 16)

A larger vision during this phase of BRAC's work was building federations of the poor through the organized groups which would eventually replace the forces within the rural power structure that so long controlled the agency and access to resources of the poor. It was to build the collective ability of the most marginalized to negotiate their position within social structures. The team aspired to federate all the poor in its field projects but it strategized to do so through "step by step organization and not hasty mobilization" (Chen, 1986, p. 16).

Beginning with the individual groups at the village level, federation would then take place between villages at the project level and then gradually between projects; the end result was hoped to be a complete replacement of BRAC's function in which the federation would play the role of intermediary between the poor, village power structures, resource institutions, and national strategies (BRAC, 1988).

Once the drastic shifts in ideology, methodology, and plans were set out, implementation took place in the humble petri dish that had been Sulla

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since the start. Phase III of BRAC's work would set stepping stones for project-wide replication.

6.1. Organizing the Poor

With the new set of assumptions on poverty came a shift in not only ideology but the approach was taken methodologically. While Phase II in Sulla comprised of community development, Phase III emphasized on organizing the landless poor into organizations with the objectives of raising their consciousness and awareness. The end goal was to enable them to improve their sociopolitical position in society.

Phase III was initially expected to stretch over a three-year period up to

the end of 1978. There was a total of four areas: capacity building and institutional development; healthcare, preventative medicine, and family planning; economic support for disadvantaged groups; and agriculture, including husbandry. However, although the Sulla project was planned to be focused on disadvantaged and exploited groups, the actual implementation was not in strict consonance with the plan. The focus was shifted thus towards working with the landless and to work with them not on an individual level but as a homogenous group.

A more class-specific group was obtained through an inductive process of reasoning. The homogenous group was defined to include:



Peasants who sold their labour and had no significant assets, fishermen who did not possess fishing equipment, member[s] of other artisan groups who did not possess equipment, or capital to practice their trade and female members of the above groups of people. (BRAC, 1988, p. 4)

Decisions from the review meeting in 1977 were implemented immediately and the year after was dedicated to materializing the policy into action. Much inspiration was taken from the concentrated and targeted approach

of rural development through educational enlightenment or “critical self-awareness of the oppressed” that emerged in Latin America with Paolo Freire’s conscientization model.

BRAC also changed the concept it had adopted so far for its field staff as motivators to professional program organizers (POs) while also letting go of the use of village volunteers except in the particular cases of health and parents' committees (Lovell, 1992). POs, who were young university graduates, now were responsible for organizing and developing the village groups till they could function self-reliantly while also providing technical services and credit as mentioned previously (Lovell, 1992).

The year 1978 was thus devoted to the training and mobilization of the new direction undertaken and a vision in place looked to the development of institutions from this most disadvantaged group—institutions which would instil agency in the targeted rural landless population and eventually have them replace the role of BRAC. The method adopted, as mentioned before, began with functional education (FE) followed by awareness, self-motivation, critical awareness, and finally self-reliant development (BRAC, 1988, p. 4). It was believed that at the stage of critical awareness, responsibility could be transferred to the landless since by that time the assumption was that the villagers would be capable of planning their own activities. With BRAC's

three-step methodology, the poor were identified, groups were formed, and plans were followed to gradually federate.

Group meetings and direct interactions with POs assisted in the identification and creation of 204 landless groups. In 1978, BRAC also organized 269 group workshops that educated the landless while also adding FE courses with new content to stress on the objectives of unity, organization, and cooperation. A total of 207 FE centres were started, with 270 graduating from an initial 3,311 participants. Training courses were arranged for group members on a number of necessary topics.

The year also saw more emphasis on the Economic Support Program (ESP) to reduce the poor's reliance on money lenders, enhance their income, and also boost group position, group sentiment, and group management. A sum of BDT 1,409,575 was disbursed to 3,713 group members in 173 projects that year and to keep alignment with the overarching objective of group strength and unity, the ESP was implemented on a group basis. Credit was first provided to the group and then distributed to the scheme's subgroups. Problems that arose from the program included an

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unhealthy competition within POs to provide loans for the “the more the better” principle; some of these loans, since disbursed a little carelessly, would even need the police’s assistance during release. Another significant observation made during this time was the ineffectiveness of the ESP for being group-based in nature.



The organization of the landless, the marginal farmers and the women are already becoming quite strong...many of the groups are now in a position to ensure survival without BRAC support. BRAC staff strength will gradually be reduced over the next two years. (BRAC, 1988, p. 6)

The progress signalled to the team that the years ahead of 1978 could focus on a slow yet gradual reduction of staff strength to enable the groups’ self-reliance and autonomy.

As per the strategy in place, BRAC focused on responsibility transfer for the years 1979 and 1980. As plans for withdrawal were being drawn, the political strength of the target population was being enhanced in each project village through the creation of groups. With the inclusion of the newly defined target population, a total of 64 groups (31 male and 33 female) were formed and a further 70 core groups (39 male and 41 female) were given the

The yearlong emphasis on institution building brought forth visible change that was reflected in the 1978 annual activity report of Sulla. BRAC saw success for specific groups in its implementation and through the building of unity, organization, and cooperation, it claimed,

responsibility to create more clusters in their respective villages, thereby multiplying the volume and strength of the institutions politically.

While the team advanced with the plans, it continued other programs simultaneously. Training was introduced at the project level to create “advanced” group members who would also be called “cadres,” and a total of 175 such individuals were given the role (143 male and 32 female). Camp workshops were conducted to establish and strengthen ties among groups of different villages within the project areas who shared the same camp. In 1979, 36 such camp workshops were held with

1,256 participants in total. Through the ongoing activities, thoughts were devoted to laying the groundwork for merging or federating the groups of each village into unified VOs in regular group meetings.

Besides these, a total of BDT 103,296 was disbursed under the ESP for implementing 23 programs which included schemes like agriculture, paddy husking, fishing, dried fish processing, small commerce, and other activities. Loans disbursed in 1979 amounted to just seven per cent compared to the previous year. BRAC also established a “common risk” coverage fund with BDT 41,358 from group members. The fund aimed to provide financial support to group members who had to face unusual circumstances or emergencies (e.g., litigation).

By the end of 1979, the team came to observe a growing leadership role within some groups as they moved

closer towards self-reliance. With the circumstances, BRAC took steps towards reducing staff strength and three of its offices (Shashkai, Boushi, and Kagapasha) were permanently closed down while the number of employees was also decreased from 89 to 48 individuals.

While on one end, BRAC was documenting target-based success in its conscientization program, the existing structures of power were increasingly sensing a source of unease owing to the enhancement of bargaining strength being gained by the groups, as was reflected in how many of the VO members would also go on to win local elections. The 1980s would thus see both large-scale expansions along with learnings to navigate unfamiliar tides.

7. Conclusion

There is a widespread academic consensus on the significance of political commitment and development innovations in Bangladesh for reaching out to people who deserve the most, especially women. Scholars credit them for catalyzing the pace of poverty reduction and women's empowerment in a country born with humanitarian disasters, entrenched poverty, and extreme patriarchal domination. This was not an easy or natural process. To explain the reasons for the entrance of marginalized people into Bangladesh's development policies and programs, Hossain (2017) emphasized an elite consensus and political mandate for protecting the rural mass from disasters and starvation that emerged in the wake of the 1970 Bhola Cyclone and became consolidated after the 1974 Famine. Kabeer (1988) showed how catastrophic events inflicted violence and suffering on poor women and created conditions for bringing women's issues to the fore of public discourse, weekend patriarchal norms, and facilitated women's public participation. In this context, BRAC's post-famine activities with marginalized men and women warrant special attention.

The seeds of a quiet revolution that the journalist Edmunds detected in BRAC's programs with women during Phase II transformed into plants in Phase III (Chen, 1986). In the experiment in Jamalpur under the supervision of Martha Chen, women learned together, organized themselves, and mounted collective actions rather than being

the mute objects of development assistance. The era saw the introduction of the Village Organization (VO) which revolutionized the Bangladeshi developmental scene by eliciting the mass participation of poor rural women in the development process. BRAC's people-centric approach led to the feminization of rural development,

which had been an explicitly male-centric domain under the dominant community development approach. Women mobilized themselves around social, political, and economic issues, often against the tide of class and masculine domination, and to defy rural clientelism. Their activities and footprints challenged many norms and practices of male control, societal views, and the valuation of women and girls. For BRAC, VOs constituted a nationwide social infrastructure to reach the most marginalized sections of society with microcredit, maternal and child health, immunization, vaccination, education, and social protection services.

To make sense of how the poor and women attained centrality in BRAC's post-famine development discourses and practices, we need to consider the organization's pursuit and ways of knowing, as we tried to demonstrate here. It was Sulla that taught BRAC about how development had to be done through a rigorous method of observing, attending, and responding; it showed how experimentation would lead the way to sustainability and that failures were each a success if learnt from. From relief and subsequently a community-based model, BRAC would refine and sharpen its lens, recognizing that many layers of poverty had to be understood and responded to if it wished to empower meaningfully and sustainably.

The team would continue to experiment with models of development and what began in remote Sulla in the 1970s would soon become the world's largest development effort in the present day.

BRAC was thus a vernacular experiment, navigating local and global histories. The BRAC team, leadership, and field workers gained knowledge by leading into the world of the poor people through wayfaring the landscape of real life, their attentional relation to the world, their attention to the relational world of poverty as marginalization, critical reflection, and collaborative engagement with the locals. The learning concerned not just programmatic errors but also the social reality of rural Bangladesh through the act of doing. The monograph shows how BRAC learned from every act of doing development and the implication of the 1974 Famine in deepening its understanding of poverty as relational and gendered. BRAC's development paradigm evolved within the country's historical dynamic between disaster, gender, and human development. However, the monograph shows how BRAC's emerging analysis of poverty dynamics through the lens of class and gender shaped its people-centric approach and informed its development strategies of conscientization, organization, and mobilization of the poor, especially women.

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BRAC History Project is a joint initiative of BRAC and BIGD, Brac University. Shahaduz Zaman and Imran Matin respectively are principal and co-principal investigators of this project.

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