

**Visit to BRAC Bangladesh (March 16-21, 2016)**

Khaleel Tetlay, Acting Chief Executive Officer/Chief Operating Officer RSPN, was invited by BRAC to participate in the Frugal Innovation Forum: Scaling Sustainability at Dhaka March 23-24, 2015. Over 150 participants from Bangladesh, India, Great Britain, United States, Myanmar, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania took part in the Forum. Participants came from government organisations, civil society organisations, social enterprises, corporate organisations, social equity fund management organisations, and academic institutions. The focus on the two-day Forum was about learning about social innovations and how these can be scaled up sustainably for impact. Professor Jaideep Prabhu, University of Cambridge and author of *Jugaad Innovation: A Frugal and Flexible Approach to Innovation in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, set the stage for the Forum by talking about the need for innovation and for scaling up for impact. Scaling up is important as billions of people are still suffering from poverty. Various discussants shared examples about innovations from the community mobilisation, health, education, sanitation, rights based approaches, enterprise and income generation sectors. The importance of the process of inquiry was highlighted and that it has to be imbedded within organisational culture.

Representatives from social investment funds and corporate sector also spoke about innovations for social impact. Large global corporations, e.g. GSK, Unilever, etc., are also undertaking innovations to scale up, to reach the 'bottom of the pyramid' category of consumers. Unilever and BRAC have entered into a partnership for raising awareness about hand washing and hygiene. Unilever wants to increase sales of soap and BRAC wants improved hygiene. This convergence of interest forms the basis of this partnership. Mobile technology and the use of smart phones are providing opportunities for financial and banking institutions to innovate to go up the scale.

The highlight of the Forum was the address given by Sir Fazal-e Abed, Founder and Chairman BRAC, wherein he spoke about the context of the post-Independence Bangladesh that led to the setting up of BRAC. Although the initial focus on BRAC was on providing relief services but very early on BRAC re-strategized and began to focus on livelihoods enhancement and social sector interventions. In the 1980s, BRAC initiated microfinance activities, and in the 1990s began to set up social enterprises. Today, BRAC is the largest NGO in the world, with a staff of over 100,000. BRAC has set up a university, a bank, a mobile money transfer organisation, and 13 social enterprises (including Aarong shops, poultry, printing and publishing, internet service, agricultural seeds, artificial insemination, dairy, nursery, etc.). Sir Fazal-e Abed said that BRAC believes that the poor are not homogeneous; there are various categories of poor and each category needs different forms of support to improve their poverty status. The extreme poor needs 24-36 months of integrated support. While the extreme poor may be provided with grants and free services, others may have to bear some portion of the costs of services. Sir Fazal-e Abed concluded his comments by saying that while much has been achieved in Bangladesh, there is still much more to be done. And now with the availability of new technologies, there are more and more opportunities for innovations across whole array of fields that can be sustainably scaled up not only in

Bangladesh but also in other countries and said “That while we may not be around forever, the network of BRAC institutions will be around to continuously work in partnership with the government organisations, private sector, donors and other NGOs to support the people to realise their own potentials, to access economic, financial and social services, and to improve their own lives and of their children”.

On March 25, 2015, ACEO/COO participated in a meeting of 60 key stakeholders at the Prime Minister’s Office in a session on Scaling up Rural Community Mobilisation Models. The session was chaired by Professor Syed Hashemi (BRAC University). ACEO/COO spoke about the Rural Support Programmes in Pakistan and how they have built upon work of Dr Akhter Hameed Khan and the key principles drawn from the Comilla Project by Mr Shoaib Sultan Khan (first General Manager of AKRSP, and now Chairman RSPN). The work and scale up of RSPs in Pakistan is driven by the socio-economic context of the country, with a very heavy incidence of poverty, and also on the opportunity to support the rural people through the proven social mobilisation approach. After the success of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, followed quite innovative approaches to social mobilisation, scaling up of RSPs began with the support of the government and donors. Today there are 11 RSPs working in 125 districts of the country, and they have supported fostering of 354,000 Community Organisations and 1,180 Local Support Organisations. RSPs have mobilised nearly 6 million rural households. However, this is only one-third of the rural households. RSPs have innovated to reduce their costing for scaling up of social mobilisation. Initially, the process was staff led, and now it is led by trained Community Resource Persons. RSP staff focuses on quality assurance. RSPN/RSPs are in negotiation with a major donor for further full scale up in 8 districts of the Sindh Province. Some of the learning from this Forum will be incorporated to achieve better impact.

ACEO/COO added that the RSP approach has been also adopted and adapted in other regional countries. Mr Shoaib Sultan Khan, under the UNDP SAPAP, supported social mobilisation scale up in Andhra Pradesh. Seeing the impact of the social mobilisation approach, the India Government has launched the National Rural Livelihoods Mission that aims to mobilise 350 poor people in 13 Indian States. The Aga Khan Foundation has adapted the social mobilisation approach in its work in Tajikistan, Afghanistan and East Africa. Professor Hashemi then brief spoke about Dr Akhter Hameed Khan and his innovative work in Comilla and how that work even today continues to inform the rural development approaches not only in Bangladesh but also in other South Asian countries.

The Government of Bangladesh with support from USAID and UNDP has been implemented the Access to Information Programme (a2i) across all the Union Councils of the country. At each Union Council, two local educated and computer literate entrepreneurs (one male and one female) are provided office space with a computer, printer and internet access to set up the Union Digital Centre. These entrepreneurs then access government data and provide them to local population on fee basis, e.g. copies of birth certificate, examination results, land records, domicile, passport forms, driving forms, etc. This programme has linked up all Union Councils with the information highway. People now do not need to travel to district headquarters for most of the documentation and to seek information. Other opportunities are being explored on how to link these UGC with other information networks for the benefit of the rural population.

The visit to Bangladesh provided a unique opportunity to interact with key stakeholders not only from BRAC and other local organisations, but also with organisations from other regional countries as well as from America, Britain and East Africa. So much is happening in the development domain and the pace is increasing. Innovations are being continuously introduced and scale up. Cross learning is important and as agreed at the Forum, needs to be encouraged both within individual countries and as well as across the countries.

(This was ACEO/COO's first visit to Bangladesh after a gap of 20 years. During this period the scope and depth of BRAC's work has increased tremendously, both within the country as well as in direct replication in 15 Asian and African countries. One of Mr Abed's senior colleagues migrated to India and began replication there hence there is no BRAC India. Two decades ago, the BRAC Centre for Development Management (located at Savar about 40 km from Dhaka) was a single story complex; today it is more like a 5-star hotel complex. It is a separate service company, offering excellent accommodation and logistical support through 7-story residential complex and multiple conference rooms. At the time of the Forum, other INGOs and corporate organisations were using the CDM facilities to hold their own meetings.

The pace of development is accelerating. Current growth rate is estimated by ADB to be above 6% (for Pakistan it is less than 4%). Residential construction within Dhaka as well as on the outskirts is booming. New factories are being built, primarily for Ready Made Garments. Social indicators have improved significantly, e.g. MMR is down from 800/100,000 to 175/100,000; IMR is down from 240/1000 to 40/1000.

If the Two Ladies can reach some reconciliation and political stability is reached, the pace of development in Bangladesh can be further accelerated. Strategically, down the time line, the country will need more resources to cope with effects of climate change. Now is the time to economically prepare for that).



BRAC Centre for Development Management



BRAC Aarong Super Store (one of 13 in Dhaka)



Block printing at a production centre for Aarong Stores



AI Entrepreneurs linked to BRAC AI Social Enterprise



BRAC Social Enterprise – Nursery



BRAC Social Enterprise – Sanitary napkin production unit



Traffic on the Dhaka – Savar Road



Participants at the Forum



ACEO/COO with Sir Fazal-e Abed and Prof Prabhu



ACEO/COO with Prof Hashemi at PMO