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Interviews  
with  
**Badrul  
Khan**



## **Interview with Fazle Hasan Abed**

**B. H. Khan:** *BRAC (originally the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee) has the reputation of being the largest non-governmental development organization in the world. BRAC has pioneered many successful programs, which have made a difference in the lives of poor people in Bangladesh and other countries, such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Uganda. One of the most widely acclaimed programs has been non-formal primary education. As the founder of BRAC, how do you see the role of education in helping people improve their lives?*

**F. H. Abed:** Education is the core of BRAC. We started adult learning in 1973. We started with night schools for adults. Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" was an inspiration. His idea was to develop identity and solidarity among groups through an educational process. This educational process helped us to develop our group methodology. If you look at our microfinance program, you will see that it is an economic program using the educational process. We have 5.2 million women clients in this program. They work collaboratively, come together, and decide what they will do and how much they will borrow. We give them legal education on land law, citizen rights, human rights, etc. After providing this legal education, we give them small credits. This is all functional education.

**BHK:** *Now we are living in the Information Age. The application of low-cost educational technologies can improve education in developing countries, including Bangladesh. What is your vision of education in Bangladesh and other developing countries?*

**FHA:** A large number of children of Bangladesh and other developing countries are deprived of basic education. We want every child to have an opportunity for basic education. That is our primary goal. We started schools where schools did not exist. We have tried to get all children into school. Our vision is that every child must get basic education. Not only that, if they are bright, they should get higher education. We want to remove the impediments such as poverty to providing education for all children. Under BRAC auspices, we are providing educational opportunities to over 1.5 million children who otherwise would be deprived of education. I believe low-cost educational technologies will help us achieve our goal in the information society.

**BHK:** *How do you judge the effectiveness of your educational activities?*

**FHA:** The success of educational activities is obviously judged by how effectively we have been able to alleviate poverty, get rid of illiteracy, get children into school, reduce the infant mortality rate, and remove gender discrimination. Education with innovative teaching strategies has played a key role in achieving positive outcomes, which in turn provided a great return on our investment.



**Fazle Hasan Abed** is the Founder and Chairperson of RAC ([www.brac.net](http://www.brac.net)). BRAC started as an almost entirely donor-funded, small-scale relief and rehabilitation project. Today, BRAC has emerged as an independent, virtually self-financed paradigm in sustainable human development. It is the largest in the world, employing some 97,000 people, with the twin objectives of poverty, alleviation and empowerment of the poor. It has an annual budget of US \$330 million, 72% self-financing. In recognition

of his services to society, Mr. Abed has received numerous awards both nationally and internationally. The international awards include The Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership (1980), UNESCO Noma Prize for Literacy (1985), Alan Shawn Feinstein World Hunger Award (1990), UNICEF's Maurice Pate Award (1992), Doctorate of Laws from Queen's University, Canada (1994), the Olof Palme Award (2001), Social Entrepreneurship Award by the Schwab Foundation (2002), Gleitsman Foundation Award (2003), Honorary Doctorate of Education, University of Manchester, UK (2003), the Gates Award for Global Health (2004), and the UNDP Mahbub ul Haq Award for Outstanding Contribution in Human Development (2004).

**BHK:** *Developing countries like Bangladesh will lag behind in education, if they do not incorporate information and communication technology (ICT) into their educational systems. What is BRAC doing about it?*

**FHA:** Obviously, low-cost educational technologies can help us expand the opportunities for basic education in a very effective way. In our non-formal education programs, we are looking for ways to utilize locally appropriate and low-cost technologies. I would like to see the people in the field of Educational Technology come forward with innovative ways to help poor and developing nations to meet their educational needs, now that through this interview, they have become more aware of our needs.

In spite of the huge development of technology during the last 20 years, we have not been able to take advantage of it yet. I hope Bangladesh will soon have broadband connection more widely. BRAC is collaborating in a joint venture with corporations in the USA and Japan. The Institute of Educational Development at BRAC University (BU-IED) is exploring the use of ICT for educational purposes. We want every school to be connected and have their own informational and instructional Websites. We want BU-IED to develop learning content and materials by following international technical and instructional standards and to be prepared to be a part of technology-based educational revolution.

**BHK:** *Recently, Bill Gates came to Bangladesh and pledged support for teacher training through technology. I understand that you met Bill Gates earlier in the USA and again in Bangladesh. It is evident that BRAC has been the leader in an innovative teacher training*

*approach in its non-formal primary education program. Do you see a role for BRAC in technology-based teacher training?*



Bill and Melinda Gates visit BRAC.

**FHA:** It was a great pleasure to share BRAC's vision of development programs, including our education and microfinance program, with Bill Gates. We appreciate what he is doing and we at BRAC would like to participate in creative use of technology in meeting the educational needs of Bangladesh and other developing countries.

Our children are badly served by most of their teachers, who expect children to simply memorize lessons. If students write in their own words, they get lower grades! I think that the teachers need to be re-oriented. Their mindset should be more receptive to another kind of teaching-learning methodology. Half a million primary and secondary teachers need to be re-oriented. Universities face the same problems. Teachers spend so much time copying from the textbook on the blackboard, which is a waste of everybody's time! Can you do something to re-orient the teachers? Technology will not succeed without this effort. Some teachers are exceptional, they will accept new ideas, but others will not be happy to do so. To bring in technology, we will have to prepare materials for teachers and materials for students which teachers and students can access easily. Teachers should also be able to develop some materials in different domains of learning. We should help teachers develop the skills to be able to prepare such materials.

**BHK:** *Would you like to see that happen through BU-IED?*

**FHA:** I would like to see the institute introduce better teaching and learning methodology. It should begin with primary and secondary levels and then it may move on to higher education. I hope that an advanced training program, such as the M.A. in education will not only develop some professional skills, but also that it will help the trainees to go to the heart of problems to change the teaching/learning techniques.

**BHK:** *I feel that virtual education can happen in Bangladesh as effectively as in the USA. In fact, I proposed the establishment of the Asian Virtual University (AsianVU) in Bangladesh, which can serve as a hub for excellence in developing cost-effective and efficient blended e-learning by following international instructional and technical standards. What are the prospects of a virtual university? Can BRAC University, especially the Institute of Educational Development, be the nucleus of a virtual university?*

**FHA:** It will be a very important enterprise for the education system in Bangladesh. A start can be made with mathematics, for which the content is universal and much is already available on the Internet. Ethics courses may be enriched with technology. Language teaching would be another area. Language development and communication skills are a problem in our education system. All students should be able to express themselves well. Afterward, you can work on history. An educated person should know the history of human civilization.

Start small, test it, if it works, go on to the next stage. We started with 22 nonformal primary schools in 1983. Then it went to 700, then to 20,000 and 30,000 in a gradual process of development. BRAC University Institute of Educational development (BU-IED) can be the base for this initiative. I would like to see that all children, whether in the university or in primary and secondary schools, achieve better learning outcomes. □

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**Badrul H. Khan** is an international speaker, author, educator, and consultant in the field of e-learning and educational technology. Dr. Khan's books in the field of online learning include: **Web-Based Training** (2001), **E-Learning QUICK Checklist** (2005), **Managing E-Learning** (2005),

and *Flexible Learning in an Information Society* (2006). He is founder of [www.BooksToRead.com](http://www.BooksToRead.com), a recommended readings site on the Internet. He is currently exploring the possibility of establishing the Asian Virtual University ([www.BadrulKhan.com/AsianVU](http://www.BadrulKhan.com/AsianVU)) as a hub for excellence in online education. His Website is: <http://www.BadrulKhan.com/khan> . He acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Manzoor Ahmed, Director of Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University with this interview. This is the fifth in an ongoing series.