



File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1992-0038
See also: E/ICEF/1992/CRP.0023

Message from Mr. James P. Grant
Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)
on the occasion of
The Presentation of the 1992 UNICEF Maurice Pate Award

New York
15 June 1992

	UNICEF Alternate Inventory Label
	 Rcf0006YIR
Item #	CF/RAD/USAA/DB01/2002-01064
ExR/Code:	CF/EXD/SP/1992-0038
Maurice Pate Award 1992 - BRAC. Remarks by Mr. James P. G.	
<i>Date Label Printed</i> 20-Aug-2002	

cover + 3pp + 8b



United Nations Children's Fund Fonds des Nations Unies pour l'enfance Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia
Детский Фонд Организации Объединенных Наций 联合国儿童基金会 منظمة الأمم المتحدة للطفولة

File Sub: CF/EXD/SP/1992-0038
See also: E/ICEF/1992/CRP.0023

E/ICEF/1992/CRP.23
15 June 1992
ENGLISH ONLY

FOR INFORMATION

UNITED NATIONS CHILDREN'S FUND
Executive Board
1992 session

Remarks by Mr. James P. Grant

Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

on the occasion of

The Presentation of the 1992 UNICEF Maurice Pate Award

New York - 15 June 1992

Madam Chairman:

It is with much appreciation and pleasure that we present UNICEF's Maurice Pate Award for 1992 to a non-governmental organization which has not only met with great success in implementing innovative programmes in the fields of poverty alleviation, basic education and primary health care, among others, but which, in the process, has also generated hope and enthusiasm in a country which some say has little cause for hope and enthusiasm. It is to the great credit of Fazle Hasan Abed, Executive Director and founder of the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), that he has been able to enhance his country's global image. The award not only recognizes his organization's accomplishments; it also pays tribute to the values, dedication and inspirational leadership of Mr. Abed and his dedicated colleagues.

It is true that hope is often a rare commodity in Bangladesh, burdened as it is with a population density of 750 people per square kilometer, with intense competition for scarce resources and over half of the rural population landless. Unemployment and underemployment is high. Poverty is all pervasive.

The situation in education and health care is also far from encouraging. Bangladesh has one of the lowest literacy levels in the world, with the over-15 literacy rate of only 31 per cent in 1991. Due to traditional gender bias and limited access to the educational system, fully eighty-five per cent of rural women are illiterate and non-numerate, and girls lag behind boys in all human development indicators. Life expectancy is 52 years; under-five mortality is 188 deaths per 1000 live births; six per cent of the world's under-5 deaths occur in Bangladesh (870,000 per year or almost two per minute); less than half of the population has access to health services. It is against this background that efforts to alleviate the worst consequences of poverty, and improve basic health and education services must be measured.

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BRAC's institutional history mirrors the great changes that have taken place in the global concept of development. BRAC began in a cluster of villages called Sulla in northeastern Bangladesh, in 1971, as an organization involved in post-independence rehabilitation. The organizers quickly recognized that the traditional "handouts" approach seldom improved the lives of the poor. Development would not occur unless the poor were organized to help themselves. It was this simple but profound realization which began BRAC's movement towards a new vision for ensuring a better future for many thousands of the world's poorest children.

BRAC's strength lies in its belief that, if provided with basic resources and organization, the landless and illiterate are capable of making remarkable strides in self-sufficiency and dignity. BRAC's philosophy is that the poor of today are tomorrow's resources. In BRAC own words: "Economic and political democratization are the fundamental keys to unlocking the potential of the rural poor". It is a philosophy which UNICEF fully shares.

The growth of BRAC from a small group of well-meaning people to a national organization of over 4,000 professionals and over 5,000 para-professionals, is one quantitative indication of the organization's success. But statistics alone do not adequately reflect the contours of the dream which has empowered BRAC to try and improve the lot of such a large part of South Asia's population and, by extension, the lives of poor people everywhere.

BRAC's accomplishments are far-ranging and are chronicled in an excellent book published just last month, Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: the BRAC Strategy, by Catherine Lovell. It has significantly improved the situation of children, contributing to a significant increase in immunization coverage in northern Bangladesh, where the UCI goal of reaching 80 per cent of one-year olds with vaccines has now been achieved two years in a row. It has also been instrumental in spreading the use of ORT all over the country. Its workers have enhanced the quality of the primary health care delivery system. Its social forestry programmes have effectively taken root. Through BRAC, rural credit has become a ladder by which many have escaped the claws of punishing poverty. Its special focus on the role and status of women is evident in all its programmes.

Unquestionably, however, BRAC's most striking success in recent years has been its Non-formal Primary Education Programme, which is now being recognized as a global model. Running contrary to conventional wisdom, BRAC has shown that grinding rural poverty need not be a barrier to educational advancement. Children of the poor, even if they have to work at home for part of the day, benefit by the flexible, community-regulated schedule and skills-oriented curriculum of BRAC schools. This approach has been particularly successful with girls and growing numbers of highly-motivated BRAC-educated youngsters go on to enter the formal education system. BRAC schools are, simultaneously, powerful promoters of human and economic development, and of human rights and democratic participation.

When I last visited Bangladesh -- in April -- I was delighted to observe a strengthening of the partnership between government and NGOs, particularly in the fields of basic education and primary health care. BRAC has been in the forefront of this winning combination of complementary efforts.

Today, while managing scores of donor-funded programmes in diverse fields, BRAC's new focus is on reducing dependency -- not only the organization's dependency on outside donors, but the dependency of beneficiaries on BRAC itself. BRAC has established commercially-successful and expanding retail outlets for Bangladeshi products, many produced by women's cooperatives. BRAC ambitious Rural Credit Programme has every chance of being as successful as the well-known Grameen Bank, a sister-agency whose lending model is now being replicated from Indonesia to Arkansas, USA.

We have come to expect BRAC to innovate and lead the way. BRAC is helping to redefine the concept of national development agency by increasingly funding its activities from its own resources, allowing beneficiaries to become partners. By association, donors also become part of a network striving for liberation from poverty and ignorance, and not merely a provider of funds and technology.

For the past 20 years, BRAC has journeyed through a process of discovery and learning which has enriched all of us. It has reached a point where those working in international development look to BRAC for leadership and inspiration. That is why the 1992 Maurice Pate award belongs to the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee.