



**BRAC Social
Innovation Lab**

“At its core, BRAC is a problem-solving organisation. We’re not necessarily looking for brand new, sexy ideas; little nudges and tweaks are sometimes what it takes to maximise impact.

The point of innovation is to find the simplest solution possible and then scale it up in an effective way.”

Asif Saleh, Senior Director, BRAC

Innovation can accelerate the end of poverty

The world is changing faster than ever. In emerging economies like Bangladesh, there is a palpable energy in the air.

However, positive national trends don’t always reach all households equally. The economic and social shifts often create new vulnerabilities and undermine existing support structures. Development programmes that were once highly effective, may begin to fail to reach the poorest or deliver the necessary tools and services.

To counter this, organisations must be prepared to evolve and keep pace as contexts change. The process of translating new knowledge and approaches into

programmes that are effective, efficient and scalable, can be deceptively difficult. Many good ideas never get traction.

In 2011, BRAC created an in-house team—the social innovation lab. This was to bring together diverse stakeholders and catalyse action, ultimately ensuring that BRAC remains a pioneer in taking new poverty-alleviation solutions to scale.

This booklet describes both the importance of social innovation in eliminating global poverty and how the social innovation lab contributes to BRAC’s overall impact.



BRAC finds solutions to seemingly impossible problems

Since 1972, the Bangladeshi organisation, BRAC, has challenged conventional wisdom in its pursuit of poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor. BRAC's success is based on its ability to transform simple ideas into effective, large-scale programmes.

Today, our work spans human rights and social empowerment, education and health, economic empowerment and enterprise development, livelihood training, and disaster preparedness. We work directly in 11 countries within Asia and Africa; our innovations have been replicated in countless others.

Many of BRAC's most successful innovations haven't involved revolutionary end products. In these cases, the critical difference was a new delivery mechanism, support system, or behavioural change that drove adoption.

Balancing innovation and scale

We see first-hand how fast-changing environments affect people living in poverty. Meeting their needs requires us to constantly look to what the future holds and introduce timely innovations.

Often the need for change is urgent, so we learn on the fly. Planning, study, and programme design can only go so far in addressing complex social problems. Sometimes the solutions come only from learning by doing. Experimenting with existing tools and learning from the

results can help you to design your own mechanism.

Identifying new innovations is just the starting point. Ultimately, BRAC is obsessed with scale. There's a saying at BRAC: "Small is beautiful, but big is necessary." When something works, we want to ensure it reaches as many people as possible.

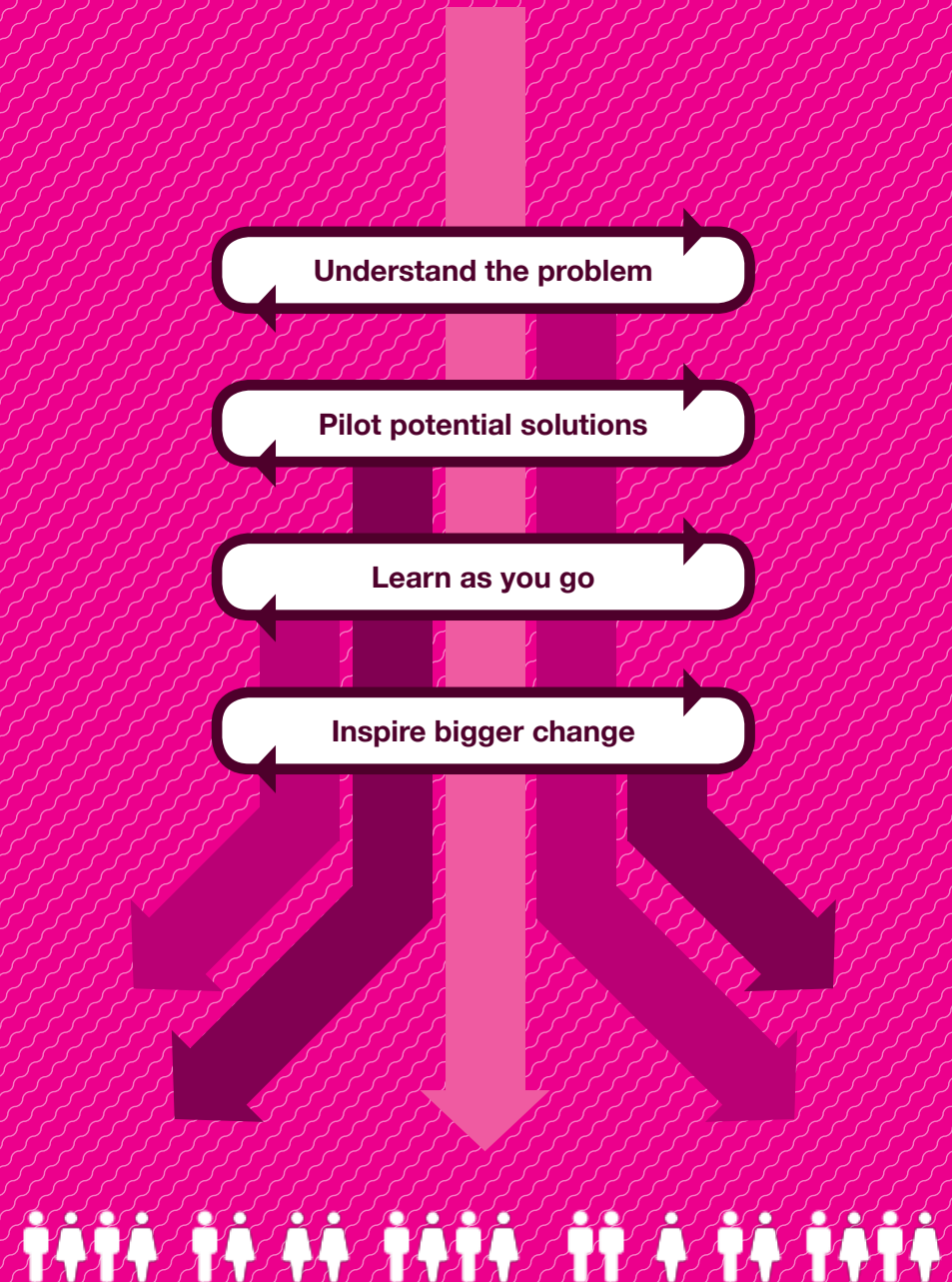
What is social innovation?

Innovation comes in many shapes and sizes—from incremental to radical, from products to systems. Social innovations are those with the primary aim of generating improvements to the lives of individuals, or society at large. For example, common objectives of social innovation include enabling the poor to increase their earnings, reducing gender inequality, or improving access to health services. Often the most transformative innovations are frugal, drawing on common items and resources that are readily available. The magic comes from seeing ways to pull everything together in a novel way, or add a few additional ingredients that provide a spark.

Within BRAC, we define innovation as a change that enables us to improve the quality of our services, increase efficiency, save time, or scale impact.

It usually results from combining new ideas or ways of thinking with operational experience and client insights.

Innovation at BRAC: From idea to innovation at scale



BRAC Social Innovation Lab

For many years, BRAC operated like a start-up, and innovation happened naturally. Now, with global operations and over 100,000 employees, BRAC needs a team focused solely on identifying opportunities for improvement and, as we say, solutions for tomorrow's challenges.

This is the social innovation lab. We're a nimble, dynamic team that aims to champion strategic innovations, create space for all BRAC staff to solve problems, and keep the culture of innovation alive and strong across the organisation.

Since our inception in 2011, we have experimented with a number of strategies to accelerate and support innovation at BRAC. We've learned from both our successes and failures, constantly evolving our own strategy and activities to find ways to optimise our impact.

Preparing BRAC for tomorrow's challenges

Since the organisation's needs can shift without notice, we've learned to be very flexible and adapt constantly. While we are an independent team, we spend a lot of time with our colleagues working on the front lines and managing operations, learning about their daily frustrations and desired changes. Maintaining a comprehensive understanding of BRAC's problem landscape enables us to identify the right partnerships, technologies and best

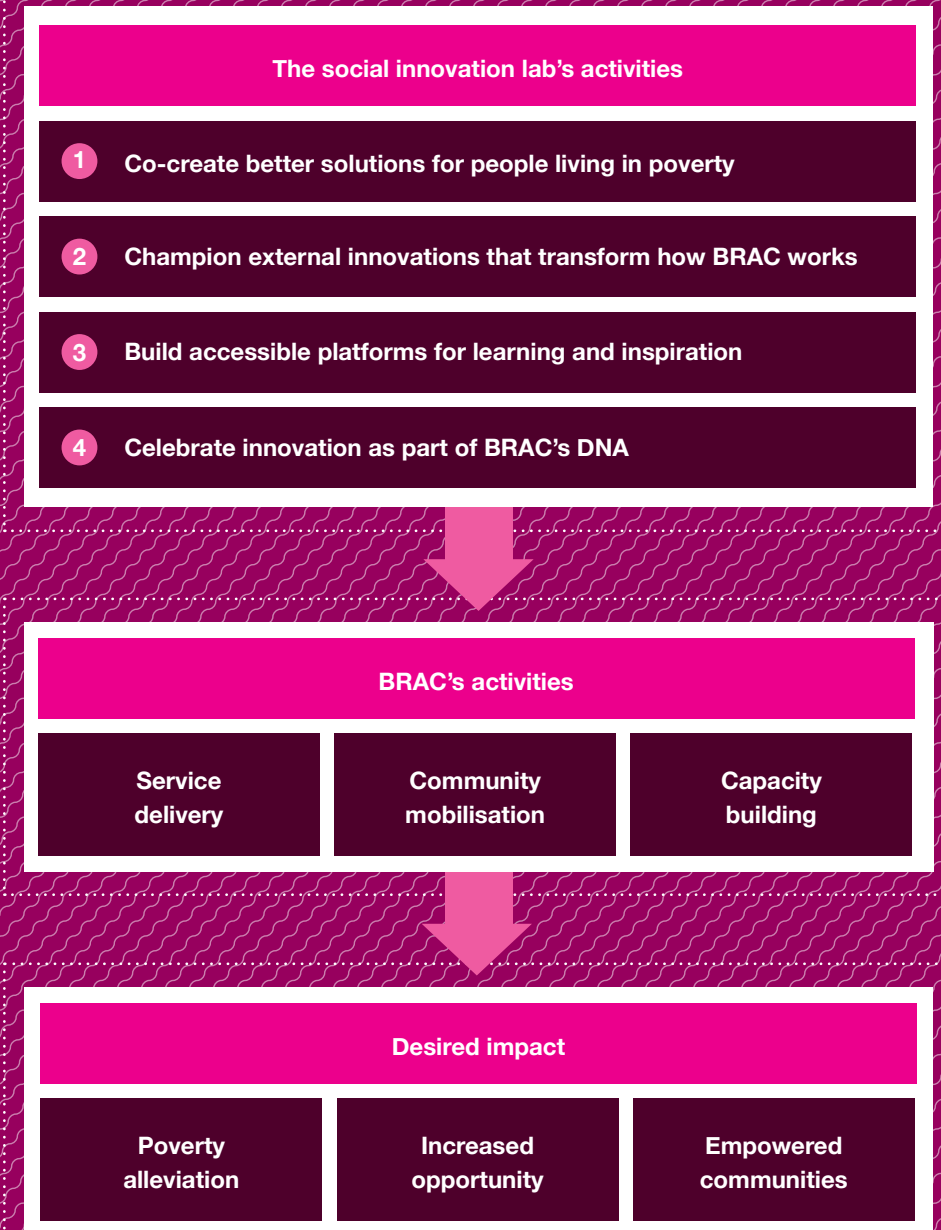
practices to introduce into the organisation. It helps us focus on what matters most, rather than what's trending.

Often the best innovations are not ones that we ourselves build, but ones that we nurture. They may originate from entrepreneurs or other organisations, but need a helping hand to gain traction within BRAC's programmes. Even home-grown initiatives can suffer neglect, or benefit from some additional thought and tweaking that we can provide. The social innovation lab is largely agnostic about where things come from or who gets credit; what we're really after are things that work!

Building something bigger than us

At the end of the day, if we can't influence BRAC's ecosystem and create opportunities for more experimentation and creativity across our enormous network of staff and communities, our impact is minimal. We are committed to building better systems for innovation, identifying and supporting innovators, and visibly celebrating the value of innovation.

How we contribute to BRAC's impact





How we work 1 2 3 4

Co-create better solutions for people living in poverty

BRAC's grassroots presence is unparalleled in Bangladesh. We've developed deep, trusting relationships with communities across the country. This means that we're constantly identifying unmet social and economic needs, opportunities for improving delivery models, and organic solutions built by communities themselves. The Social Innovation Lab combines these insights with intelligence about cutting-edge strategies emerging elsewhere to find what works best.

This can be as simple as introducing an SMS-based polling tool to get a quick pulse on community priorities, rapidly mapping a slum and various social services using open-source software, or customising services to fit the unique needs of artisans.



How we work 1 2 3 4

Champion external innovations that transform how BRAC works

Bangladesh is quickly becoming one of the world's top markets for mobile financial services. Technology like mobile money can significantly accelerate financial inclusion and provision of new financial services for the poor, if the tools are accessible to people living in poverty.

The social innovation lab has supported BRAC in piloting a number of experiments using mobile money, providing crucial financial education and technical support to enable people living in remote areas and with low levels of literacy to master the technology. It's also leading internal efforts to ensure that the transition to digital financial services results in greater operational efficiency and quality of services.



How we work 1 2 3 4

Build accessible platforms for learning and inspiration

Innovation is hardly a solitary activity. Often learning about how others are experimenting and succeeding, provides new ideas and motivation to try something new. The social innovation lab aims to bring new ideas and innovators into BRAC, ensuring that the organisation is constantly exposed to exciting advancements.

At least once a month, we bring the BRAC staff together to discuss their ideas and hear about emerging innovations from Bangladesh and beyond. Many of these events are casual and interactive; the goal is to enable people to connect and learn from each other. The frugal innovation forum is our flagship event. It invites practitioners from across South Asia to join us in discussions about effective new ways of tackling critical issues like climate change, urban poverty and increasing economic inequality.

How we work 1 2 3 4

Celebrate innovation as part of BRAC's DNA

Great ideas often come from the grassroots; from community members and BRAC's field staff who work closely with them to implement interventions. We want to make sure that we're available to listen to them, and visibly appreciate as many as possible who contribute great insights and ideas. We believe that BRAC is great because of the people it employs, and we want to let them know that innovation is something that we can all contribute to.

One way that the social innovation lab accomplishes this goal is through crowdsourcing ideas. We run open challenges, inviting staff at all levels to contribute ideas through websites, SMS, and even written letters. Winners receive a gift and a certificate from BRAC's founder and chairperson in an official ceremony.



Our seven rules for innovation

Innovation is both an art and a science. These principles help us ensure that our work remains true to BRAC's organisational values and builds on what we've learned works best.

- ① **Keep it simple.** Complicated ideas can look great on paper, but rarely hold up in practice. Be relentless about keeping things simple, and always look for ways to reduce complexity where possible.
- ② **Shamelessly steal ideas and practices that work.** The point is to provide effective solutions, not necessarily develop everything by yourself. Otherwise, you risk re-inventing the wheel (and maybe not even a good one).
- ③ **Be scrappy and opportunistic.** Innovation is about a mind-set. It requires you to stay hungry, curious, and perpetually dissatisfied with the status quo. Great opportunities often come in disguise, and rarely arrive with budgets, clear instructions, and other “nice-to-haves”. You have to learn to take what you get and hustle effectively, translating an inch of space into a mile of experimentation.
- ④ **Don't get tunnel vision.** There are thousands of people around the world working on solving issues related to poverty, and we should be paying close attention to learn from their efforts. If you don't look around at what's happening around you, you'll get left behind.
- ⑤ **Learning can be time-consuming, but repeating mistakes is expensive.** It's nice to be active, and often easy to justify delaying reflection, documentation, and other “luxuries” when there are plenty of urgent projects to complete. But over time, failing to accumulate a body of knowledge that can be shared and translated into tools can limit a team's impact. Be disciplined about learning.
- ⑥ **Excite the organisation by recruiting innovative insiders.** If you sit in a “lab” and build things by yourself, chances are they won't perfectly match the context and solve the problem. Instead, find people across the organisation with deep knowledge of the realities and invite them to guide you. These champions also can convince their colleagues to give new solutions a chance, when you can't.
- ⑦ **Without trust, nothing is possible.** Innovation requires risk; by definition, it's about convincing people to try things that they've never done. Trust starts a dialogue—it means people will talk to you about their problems, and take a chance with you. But trust requires you to be open, candid, available, accountable and humble. This can be hard, especially when things don't go as planned—but that's when it matters the most.

What's next

Innovation never ends. There are always new opportunities to improve. We value partnerships, ideas and spaces to collaborate with others addressing poverty globally. We hope to have the chance to learn and work with you.

innovation.brac.net

Keep up to date with BRAC's latest mobile money developments, and learn what else the social innovation lab is doing.

blog.brac.net

Engage in dialogue with BRAC development experts.

brac.net

Learn more about BRAC's innovative work in alleviating poverty and empowering the poor.



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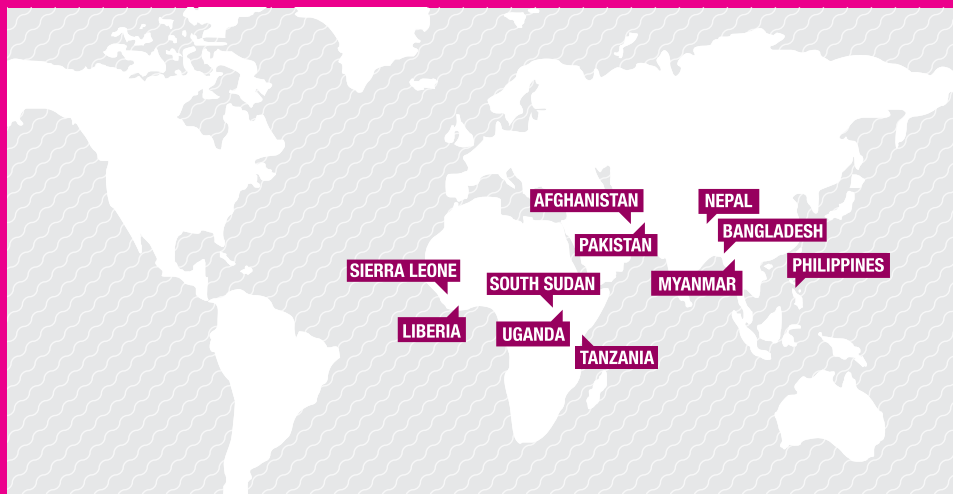
110,000+

Total employees

138 Million

People reached

1 Largest NGO in the world



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