

Accomplishment beyond expectation

In forty years since independence this undersized country has achieved oversized feats, but how?

Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has affirmed before parliament that her government is "for the people, by the people and of the people." She further echoed this sentiment when she visited David Cameron at Number 10 on January 27, 2011, saying: "My agenda is very clear, I want to build up my country as a poverty-free, illiteracy-free country, and I want to make sure that our people get healthcare, health service and education."

In the past, Bangladesh has been unfairly satirised as "Bang-the-dish" and it has come a long way since Henry Kissinger dubbed it an international "basket case" 40 years ago. In fact, last year the *Wall Street Journal* suggested that Pakistan could learn about economic growth and confronting terrorism from its former eastern province in an article headed "Bangladesh, 'Basket Case' No More".

The UN has also lauded Bangladesh in its progress toward achieving its Millennium Development Goals, Bangladesh was one of six countries in Asia and Africa feted for its progress toward achieving those goals. It has a rapidly expanding economy and is one of the world's major exporters of ready-made garments.

The world's third most populous Muslim-majority country has also taken a strong stance against global terrorism and confronts any radical ideology that may fan its flames. During a recent three-day visit, German President Christian Wulff called Bangladesh a "stabilising force" in South Asia and commented: "Bangladesh is a key partner for Germany when it comes to tackling global challenges, including the question of how we can together contribute to improved understanding across cultural and religious boundaries."

Bangladesh was previously the breadbasket of the region, earning it the name



Bangladesh has been lauded for its poverty-reduction efforts and hailed a "stabilising force" in South Asia

"Golden Bengal" in pre-industrial days. Its infrastructure was destroyed during the war of independence of 1971. In addition, natural disasters hit developing countries hardest and Bangladesh was recently identified by the Global Climate Risk Index as the country most affected by extreme weather events between 1991 and 2010. Unsurprisingly, the government is tackling global climate change, food security and poverty confidently.

In 2005, the poverty rate in Bangladesh was around 40 per cent; by the end of last year it had fallen to 31.5 per cent, putting the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy on a good footing to hit its goal of lifting 12 million people out of poverty by 2015.

So what is behind the poverty rate falling by almost a quarter in just five years? In a recent interview with *The Washington Post*, the Prime Minister attributed it to a combination of factors, saying: "We have been trying to find the root causes of poverty and how we could reduce it. We wanted to ensure food security so we put all our force into producing more food and also the distribution system so that food should first reach the poorest of the poor. Then we tried to create job opportunities for them in the rural areas. Now our farmers can open bank accounts with 10 taka [8 pence], a very small amount, and the subsidy we give goes directly to the farmer. So they use this money for cultivation and also it creates job opportunity."

"We also established one bank to create job opportunities for the younger generation. Without any collateral, they can take out a loan from the bank to start a business. I believe that educating our people will also help to reduce the poverty level. So our education is free up to primary level for everyone, and for girls it is free up to high school level."

"Digital Bangladesh is becoming a reality"

As part of her election manifesto, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina promised to make Bangladesh a middle-income country, particularly influential in the ICT sector, by 2021

Vision 2021: Digital Bangladesh is the result of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her government's pledge to make Bangladesh a middle-income country, particularly influential in the information, communication and technology (ICT) sector, by 2021.

The roadmap for this technological advancement focuses on four elements: human resource development,

people involvement, civil services and use of information technology in business. The initiative is already taking shape and gaining global attention.

The inauguration of the first Bangladesh-assembled laptop, called Doel, in October by the Prime Minister heralded a major step forward in widening access to ICT across the country.

At the launch, the Prime Minister highlighted the various steps the government has taken for the advancement of Bangladesh through launching web portals, setting up e-centres at district levels and withdrawing tax on computers.

Publicly owned Telephone Shilpa Sangstha (TSS) has been assigned to manufacture the cut-price computers and has so far made 6,000 laptops and netbooks for sale. The product range comprises one laptop and three netbook models. The netbooks are cheaper and have lower specifications than their laptop counterpart and prices for the Doel computers range between Tk 10,000 and Tk 26,000 (£85-£220), depending on their configuration.

A month later, at the opening of the One-Stop Service Centre in Dhaka on November 14, 2011, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon remarked: "Digital

Bangladesh is becoming a reality [...] And that is what people across Bangladesh can see with their own eyes.

"Vital services are being provided quickly and affordably. Modern electronic systems have replaced century-old, heavily bureaucratic manual administrative practices.

"Women have new venues for empowerment. Cutting out middlemen reduces corruption. And instead of travelling long distances for such services, people in all 64 districts now have, as the slogan so aptly puts it, service at their doorsteps."

Presenting Bangladesh to the rest of the world

Highly educated, independent and q

At home, Bangladesh's newfound stability under the Awami League government is allowing the country to flourish with the introduction of a more efficient bureaucratic system and regulatory reforms. Overseas, it is increasingly taking a more significant stance on the world stage on a range of issues, including climate change, women's empowerment and poverty reduction. Furthermore, while many countries around the world search for ways to break out of serious financial difficulties, Bangladesh has never defaulted on its payments or gone bankrupt.

"Bangladesh is probably one of the best-kept secrets," says Dr Dipu Moni, Bangladesh's Minister of Foreign Affairs. "The perception around the globe in many areas is due to the international media. Whenever they talk about Bangladesh they talk about the challenges, the floods, the cyclones and boats capsizing, as well as overpopulation and climate change. But they do not talk about the other realities."

Bangladesh is the seventh most populous country in the world. Its population exceeds 158 million people – roughly half that of the United States – in an area only twice the size of Ireland. Yet despite such population density, and a reduced availability of agricultural land, it now meets almost 100 per cent of its domestic food requirement. By comparison, in the 1970s its population was half it is today and only about 60 per cent of its food crop was produced. "This is a great achievement," says Dr Dipu.

The Minister attributes the resilience and adaptability of the people as the country's greatest asset that should be acknowledged internationally. Climate change, overpopulation, poverty, the struggle for rights, and the sacrifice of lives for an independent, democratic country are all cases where Bangladeshis have had a chance to show their true colours.

"In any part of the world you have natural or man-made disasters or riots, looting and all sorts of things. But here, even during the worst disaster, people come together and help each other. They are hard working and honest, and the best thing is that they have never accepted anything less than democracy," says Dr Dipu. "This is a country where, despite all these challenges, we are achieving our Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)."

People-to-people links are at the core of the close relationships that exist between the UK and Bangladesh. Today, almost half a million British nationals are of Bangladeshi origin – a community whose contributions to UK society have not just impacted on the nation's palate, but are also visible in government, politics, business, law, education, innovation and technology.

The UK has provided a great deal of support for Bangladesh since its liberation in 1971. The Department for International Development (DFID) in the UK has the largest bilateral grant aid programme in Bangladesh. It has pledged to spend an average of £250 million per year on development initiatives there until 2015. According to the British High Commission in Dhaka, the UK is also looking to support the Bangladeshi leadership in key international



Our people are our greatest asset."

DR DIPU MONI,
Minister of Foreign Affairs

institutions, for example in the latter's role as a major provider of UN peacekeeping forces and in multilateral bodies responsible for climate change negotiations.

Prime Minister David Cameron welcomed Bangladesh's Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on her visit to London in January, commenting: "We have a good and strong relationship between Britain and Bangladesh. We have a great shared interest in tackling issues like climate change."

In addition, both Britain and Bangladesh have been targets of indiscriminate terrorist violence. During the January visit, both leaders reaffirmed their commitment to continue working together to counter the threat by building up the capacity to pursue terrorists and protect against attack, and also through addressing the root causes of extremism.

"We have now become an example to the world in terms of disaster management where we have involved the whole community in a disaster management programme. We have also become an example in terms of counter terrorism and counter extremism," says Dr Dipu. "In our society there is no room for extremism or terrorism because people do not like it. Even though at some point in our

history some regimes did support these groups, the population rejected it completely."

This determination to draw the line at extremism has allowed Bangladesh to become a pluralist society where ethnic and religious harmony is present, not because of any imposed force, but rather from something that has come from within. Dr Dipu says, "The influence of Buddhism is where men are carriers of knowledge, but women are carriers of wisdom. The Hindu influence is also there. In Islam the first person to become a martyr was a woman, and in our Prophet's life there was a great influence of women around him. There is violence against women in this society, like anywhere, but in our culture there is a special place for women."

Dr Dipu is a firm advocate of women's participation in politics. She is one of two master trainers who have trained women political activists under a programme she helped design and implement in close relationship with the National Democratic Institute (NDI) of the US. "This is a great country for women and everyone, because if women move forward, then the whole country moves forward," she says. Dr Dipu has also played an important role in many other sectors, including health and human rights, both locally and globally.

The Foreign Minister stresses the importance of good international relations. "Our main motto with regard to our foreign policy is to be friends with everyone," she says. The US is Bangladesh's biggest trade partner and largest source of foreign direct investment, followed by the UK. It also has growing business, trade and investment relationships with China. Dr Dipu adds: "If you look at our infrastructure, a sizeable proportion of it has some kind of Chinese influence. We are definitely looking forward to cooperating in the energy, power and infrastructure sectors, as well as other areas including science and technology, agriculture, research and innovation."



CLIMATE CHANGE

Tackling the issues

Bangladesh has to meet the challenges presented by extreme weather

Bangladesh is one of the most unfortunate countries in the world with regard to climate change. Despite the fact that it does not contribute to these negative changes, Bangladesh is paying the price for other countries' industrialisation.

Although various states have made promises to Bangladesh to help combat the issues it faces, few are following through with actions. "The UK is probably one of the very few countries which has kept its promise in terms of helping with mitigating climate change. They have come up with some funds, whereas many others, although they pledged to do so, did not come up with any funding," says Dr Dipu Moni, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Both the northern and the southern parts of Bangladesh are affected, in differing but harmful ways. Previously, Bangladesh's summer lasted for two to three months. Now, however, as the heat increases, so does the duration of summer, which now lasts from five to six months. Gradually, rivers will dry up and the northern half of Bangladesh could turn to desert. An extreme drought would destroy the fertile land that allows Bangladesh to grow its own food, maintain its self sufficiency, and contribute to the country's main source of GDP: agriculture.

Tropical cyclones have also taken an unexpected turn for the worse, with their numbers and strength increasing. These stronger and more frequent cyclones increase the size and speed of high tide waves, causing more flooding. Many places are gradually sinking in the amount of water that pours over the land. Thousands of people and animals die, and the water's salt content destroys any standing crops.

It is universally recognised that Bangladesh is vulnerable to these climate changes because it is low lying, located on the Bay of Bengal in a delta, and densely populated. As a result of these problematic changes, the government is putting special emphasis on the conservation of the environment and its development. The government has undertaken integrated policies and plans to protect the country from the impact of global warming by building pollution-free environments and protecting water resources: 134 programs have already been launched to aid in these changes, as promised by the government in its election manifesto.

Bangladesh hosted the CVF (climate vulnerable forum) in November in Dhaka, which gave Bangladesh new visibility in its fight against climate change.

DEMONSTRATING DEMOCRACY FACILITATING GROWTH

Dr M. Sayeedur Rahman Khan, High Commissioner for the People's Republic of Bangladesh is determined to raise the image of Bangladesh in the UK and other countries

The battle for democracy has not been easy for Bangladesh, and despite interruptions that have stalled the democratic process, the people remain optimistic.

"The people of Bangladesh love democracy. They are liberal and progressive – not extremists or militants. They keep demonstrating to restore democracy and democratic processes," he says. With this attitude, Bangladesh continues to move forward, hoping to sustain itself as a self-reliant nation. "This is the priority of the government – we want to depend less and less on foreign donations," Dr Khan adds.

According to financial analysts and watchdogs, Bangladesh is expected to be one of the 11 emerging economies in the world in the next decade due to the country's investment potential in such sectors as garments and textiles, tourism, power and energy, leather and leather goods, food, information technology and business services. One non-traditional sector Bangladesh is currently exploring is pharmaceuticals, with pharmaceutical firms currently supplying products to 75 countries, including Britain.

Bangladesh's business environment is investment friendly when compared with other Asian countries, and the country also boasts



DR M. SAYEEDUR RAHMAN KHAN,
High Commissioner for the People's
Republic of Bangladesh

a prime strategic location between two economic giants – India and China. Easy access by sea, air and roads allows for a huge market. It is also cost effective to invest in Bangladesh compared with other countries because of export processing zones and government incentives such as tax holidays.

Currently the UK is the third largest export destination for Bangladeshi products. Total exports to the UK from Bangladesh in the last fiscal year 2010-2011 were \$2.23 billion – a 35 per cent rise from the previous year. Some export items from Bangladesh to the UK include shrimps, home textiles and woven garments, but the country has many more products to offer besides traditional items, ranging from computer software to ceramics – and even shipbuilding.

Bangladesh and the UK have historic, traditional and friendly ties that predate 1971 and the two nations have worked closely in various international forums on a range of issues, including climate change, human rights and UN peacekeeping. "Bangladesh considers the UK to be a very dependable friend and development partner," Dr Khan says. "In fact, the relations between our two countries are defined by a shared aspiration for democracy, development and human rights, and a vibrant trade and economic partnership, and the presence of a large British-Bangladeshi diaspora."

Currently there are about 500,000 British Bangladeshis living in the UK, and 35,000 students from Bangladesh studying in the UK.

THE UK-BANGLADESH BOND HAS NEVER BEEN STRONGER

The relationship between the two countries is a long-standing friendship with a big future

"We have a strong working relationship with Bangladesh and shared interests globally and domestically," explains British High Commissioner to Bangladesh based in Dhaka, Mr Robert Gibson.

Britain is a close partner, not least on the commercial front. "The UK is the largest investor in Bangladesh with a cumulative total of approximately £2 billion at the moment. There are over 50 British companies operating throughout the country," says Mr Gibson.

Encouraging private investments benefits economic and social development and increases employment. "The benefit for a company operating here is the large workforce. Bangladesh is a huge exporter of labour around the world. Inside Bangladesh there is a large workforce available for companies," adds the High Commissioner.

The UK has the largest bilateral grant aid programme in Bangladesh, aimed at helping over 15 million people living in poverty. The aim is to assist the poor with improved education, better family planning and the development of technical skills among employment seekers. "Through its education programme, the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) hopes to ensure there is virtually 100 per cent primary education across the country and that the majority of children stay in education and that this is of good quality," adds Mr Gibson. "We enjoy a shared vision in global affairs, and one of the areas where we cooperate is climate change."

Undoubtedly, the strongest bond that exists between Bangladesh and the UK is the people-to-people connection. Personal and family ties stretch across and beyond borders in such a way that a fusion of cultures could be said to have taken place. The UK is home to an estimated half million nationals of Bangladeshi descent, and is the firm choice of destination for studying abroad, while Bangladeshi culinary tastes now form part of the British palate. There is even the mutual passion for cricket! So, for a multitude of reasons, the strong bond between Bangladesh and the UK promises to be a long-term relationship.



// We enjoy a shared vision in global affairs."

ROBERT GIBSON,
British High Commissioner
to Bangladesh

"Forty years after independence, Bangladesh is rapidly emerging on the global stage. This is a country with enormous potential and opportunities. The biggest treasure is undoubtedly the people – they are dynamic, resourceful and full of aspiration," concludes Mr Gibson.

BRAC pioneers innovative approach to poverty alleviation

Once one of the world's poorest nation's, Bangladesh has made some remarkable achievements in the fight against poverty and improving social and economic prospects for its people

"Out of adversity comes opportunity," Benjamin Franklin once famously declared, and a year after a devastating civil war brought independence to East Pakistan, as Bangladesh was formerly known, Sir Fazle Hasan Abed left his executive accountancy position at Shell Oil and devoted himself to helping fellow Bangladeshis help themselves. He believed that to change poverty, you had to change society, especially in rural communities.

Founded in 1972 and dedicated to empowering the poor to bring about change in their own lives, his multiple award-winning BRAC project – which started as an acronym (Bangladesh Rehabilitation Assistance Committee) and became a motto, "building resources across communities" – has pioneered a business-like approach to tackling the realities of poverty and has arguably become the most successful non-governmental organisation (NGO) on the planet.

The unleashing of human potential through self-reliance is at the core of BRAC's operations. After initially being involved with relief work, BRAC has developed support services in the areas of human rights and social empowerment; education and health; economic empowerment

and enterprise development; livelihood training; environmental sustainability; and disaster preparedness.

According to Subinay Nandy, country director, China, at the United Nations Development Programme: "BRAC is the world's largest development organisation and is doing tremendous work impacting the lives of millions. BRAC is making a significant contribution to Bangladesh, making huge leaps forward in meeting the Millennium Development Goals." In his book *Freedom from Want*, Ian Smillie refers to BRAC as "undoubtedly the largest and most



variegated social experiment in the developing world. The spread of its work dwarfs any other private, government or non-profit enterprise in its impact on development."

BRAC launched its microfinance programme in 1974 to provide the poor with the economic tools to fight their own way out of poverty, which now distributes around \$1 billion (£640,000) a year in microloans. In partnership with the IFC and ShoreCap International, it is also behind one of the leading private banks in Bangladesh – BRAC Bank – that is renowned for its support of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

BRAC:
"Undoubtedly the largest and most variegated social experiment in the developing world"

BRAC now reaches over eight million borrowers, with the number steadily rising due in part to this year's launch of bKash Limited, a mobile financial service provider in Bangladesh and a subsidiary of BRAC Bank.

Gender equality, respect for the environment and inclusivity cut through all of its activities. BRAC is also an internet service provider, has a university, and its primary schools educate 11 per cent of Bangladesh's children. BRAC also runs feed mills, chicken farms, tea plantations and packaging factories.

Although BRAC is now active in 10 countries and spans three continents, the majority of its work remains in Bangladesh. Its low-cost, effective and adaptable solutions to the day-to-day problems facing poor families can be scaled up quickly to a national level and now reach every village in the country, which covers an area roughly twice the size of Ireland and has a population of more than 158 million people.

BRAC has built a massive global network of micro-franchised entrepreneurs providing services in agriculture, poultry, livestock and health. Sir Fazle calls it a "holistic, sustainable, market-oriented approach" to poverty alleviation that uses microloans, training and branding, while offering borrowers low-cost access to inventory, efficient distribution systems and continuous support. He recently presented his approach to more than 2,000 delegates at the Global Microcredit Summit 2011 in Valladolid, Spain.