What we do - empowering adolescents

BRAC is a development success story. Founded in Bangladesh, we are by most measures the largest non-governmental organisation in the world: an innovator in poverty eradication and an outstanding social enterprise. Best known for our community-based approach and the scale of our programmes, we have created opportunities for 138 million people - mostly women - to set in motion lasting change.

Adolescent girls are one of the most powerful agents for change in the world. BRAC empowers adolescent girls and breaks the cycle of poverty, unlocking their economic potential through education, lifeskills and livelihood opportunities. Empowered adolescent girls are able to fight child marriage, protect themselves from teenage pregnancy and build healthier futures.

Our model

Girls are at tremendous risk across the developing world and the costs of not protecting them are high. Securing the appropriate conditions for girls’ futures is not only the right thing to do but has positive implications for national economies. Our BRAC programme which originated in Bangladesh as an adolescent development programme for boys and girls is now operational in Tanzania, Liberia, Uganda, South Sudan and Sierra Leone working mostly with girls and is called Empowerment and Livelihoods for Adolescents (ELA).

BRAC creates and continues to provide safe spaces for girls aged 13-21 years old, especially those who have dropped out of school and might be at risk of getting pregnant at a young age. Local girls’ clubs in borrowed and rented buildings in marginalised communities offer a space where girls can sing, dance, play games and socialise with their friends within walking distance of their homes and away from the pressures of family life.

Some girls are trained as mentors, and through them the other girls receive training in health and nutrition, life skills, sexual health, financial literacy and livelihood skills. BRAC offer girls the opportunity to receive small scale business training and microloans to start their own enterprises and in doing so they can gain financial independence. Central to this programme is the understanding that social empowerment goes hand in hand with economic empowerment. The importance of safe spaces where girls can be girls is plain to see, they share ideas, learn new skills and develop in to their independence safely.

In the news

Sex and Survival: reducing fertility rates among adolescent girls

“To succeed, family planning programmes must empower girls”.
(The Guardian, August 2013)

The Nike Foundation on Unleashing the ‘Girl Effect’

“BRAC Bangladesh’s innovative economic empowerment programs show girls are as credit-worthy as any other market segment, if not more so: 70 percent of girls (usually older girls) took loans ranging from $7 to $440 with a 98 percent recovery rate.” Rahim Kanani
(The Huffington Post, April 2011)
BRAC is the world’s largest implementer of the Girl Effect, the Nike Foundation-led movement to harness the potential of adolescent girls to end poverty for themselves and the world. We are working with the Girl Effect in Sierra Leone, Uganda and Tanzania.

**Rehma, Tanzania**

Rehma was 14 years old and preparing for secondary school when she discovered she was pregnant. Rehma’s father ran away and her mother threw her out of the house. With nowhere to go, and baby girl to look after, she ended up on the streets.

Luckily, she found her way to a BRAC Girls Club which provides girls like Rehma with a safe space where they are protected from abuse, can express themselves, build friendships and learn key skills like money management, child care and family planning.

Rehma attended job skills training with BRAC and was given a small loan of £50 to start a business that makes and sells Maandazi, an African treat a bit like a doughnut. Rehma’s mother later welcomed her back home and now her business supports the family and provides enough for them to save for the future. At BRAC we believe that microfinance opportunities offered at times of crisis and supported with training are instrumental in supporting people like Rehma to work their own way out of poverty.

When we met Rehma she said to us, “I really like my club because it gave my life direction when I had none. When I joined the club I learnt how to protect myself from bad men and HIV.”

At BRAC clubs girls’ gain knowledge and confidence through peer-to-peer learning. This is an important process that leads to further opportunities as they grow to become respected members and leaders in their communities.

**Impact of ELA programmes: a ‘reproductive revolution’**

- contraceptive use in Bangladesh has risen from 12.7 per cent in 1980 to 61.2 per cent in 2011

According to a series of random control trials conducted by the LSE in Uganda:

- self reported condom usage rose by 12.6 per cent among sexually active participants
- two years after entering the programme, village fertility rates were 28.6 per cent lower than in the control samples
- participants reported having sex unwillingly decreased by 83 per cent from the baseline during a one-year period
- 15 per cent of the 53,000 club members are now taking microloans to help them start their own businesses

* Figures taken from ‘Empowering Adolescent Girls: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Uganda’ 2012 Bandiera et al
Innovation lies at the heart of what we do.

Recently we’ve started a drive to encourage women in Bangladesh to get involved in bKash digital money initiatives. Our pilot programme - with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation - is breaking new ground by introducing digitized school fees and youth savings for adolescents in our clubs.
What’s next?

In September 2014, BRAC committed to a massive scale-up of our education and empowerment programmes, pledging to invest hundreds of millions to reach 2.7 million additional girls and train 75,000 teachers by 2019.

In 2014 we launched a pilot programme to empower adolescent girls in Liberia. We are always working to improve the microfinance products for young people.

“Young people may present a higher financial risk, but the social returns are also higher” said the director of BRAC’s microfinance programme, Shameran Abed. “Young people with opportunities are less likely to get married young and more likely to plan for stable livelihoods in the future”.

Caption: Girls from an ELA club learn hairdressing skills in Dar es Salaam