BRAC INTERNATIONAL
STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK
FOR RESPONDING TO THE COVID–19 OUTBREAK
Responding to large-scale challenges and leading recovery efforts is in BRAC’s DNA. It is during times of crises when we are at our best. In the face of the unprecedented catastrophe created by COVID–19, BRAC International is determined to stand beside the world’s most vulnerable people. Through in–depth, on–the–ground assessments, we have seen the devastating physical and economic impact on the already overburdened and underserved communities where we work, particularly women and children. We are rapidly adapting to the unprecedented nature of this crisis, turning to innovation and technology and linking it to our community presence, all while evolving our traditional ways of working. We stand shoulder–to–shoulder with peers, partners, and governments knowing that we will only create meaningful impact through collaboration. Now more than ever, we must rise together, investing in hope, empathy, and compassion to meet this extraordinary challenge.

Join us,

Dr. Muhammad Musa
Executive Director
BRAC International
INTRODUCTION

Globally, BRAC is seeking $50 million USD in support of its COVID-19 response. The organization is prioritizing its efforts in a four-pronged strategy that will raise community awareness and prevent infections; optimize partnerships to maximize impact in outbreak situations; support economic revitalization for communities and individuals; and ensure the safety and security of all staff. We are taking collective action to slow the spread of the virus through partnerships with donors, local organizations, governments, and communities.

ABOUT BRAC INTERNATIONAL

Founded in Bangladesh in 1972, BRAC is a global leader in developing and implementing cost-effective, evidence-based programs to empower the most marginalized people in extremely poor, conflict-prone, and post-disaster settings. BRAC International now operates in Afghanistan, Liberia, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda, taking a holistic approach to alleviating poverty, running programs in education, healthcare, microfinance, women’s and girls’ empowerment, agriculture, humanitarian and disaster preparedness, and more. In 2020, BRAC was ranked the top NGO in the world by NGO Advisor for the fifth consecutive time for its work across the globe.

BRAC AND COVID-19

The rapidly expanding COVID-19 pandemic poses an unprecedented challenge. In addition to causing fatalities on a massive scale, the virus is severely overwhelming health care systems, significantly disrupting daily life, negatively affecting livelihoods, and causing enormous damage to economies. All these factors have a disproportionately negative impact on the lives and livelihoods of those living in situations of poverty, inequality, and exploitation. BRAC is an organization built on the principle of standing with the most vulnerable, particularly in times of crisis, and is committed to supporting local communities and helping them respond to the outbreak, initially with humanitarian interventions, but transitioning quickly to socio-economic rehabilitation and development programs in the coming weeks, months, and beyond.

COVID-19 has affected all BRAC countries of operation. Notably, the Philippines and Afghanistan have seen the largest number of new cases, while the rest of the countries are in the very early stages of the epidemic. In most, if not all of the countries in which we work, health care facilities are weak. As a result, a number of countries may not acknowledge or be able to identify the outbreak until it is quite advanced. This means, asymptomatic and even symptomatic cases are likely to remain undiagnosed and pose a serious threat of a large number of cases at an already advanced stage of the epidemic.

The immediate effect of the outbreak is a widespread shutdown of social and economic centers to promote social distancing as a tool to curb the spread of the virus. However, this causes an immediate
loss of income among a large number of families, especially those working in the informal economy, most negatively affecting those with limited financial reserves and associated coping capabilities. This causes massive psychological distress and uncertainty in families and communities where such incidences occur. These dual challenges need to be addressed simultaneously, especially for those who live in poverty and suffer from social marginalization, including the elderly and other socio-economic and gender-based vulnerable groups.

Given that the epidemic grows at different times in different countries, coordinating an overarching response proves challenging. Different contexts require different actions, almost simultaneously. This document serves as a framework and provides guidelines for BRAC’s strategic approach in responding to the outbreak in all countries in which it operates.

BRAC’S HISTORY AND CAPACITY TO RESPOND TO HUMANITARIAN CRISES

In all 10 countries in which it works, BRAC International is well positioned to coordinate effective responses to the outbreak, having deep experience in humanitarian response, both to natural and man-made disasters, as well as long-term socio-economic development programming, proven to improve the lives of the world’s most vulnerable. BRAC works alongside governments, non-governmental organizations, and communities to build disaster resilience and respond holistically to the effects of both natural and human-made disasters and epidemics.

Since its founding in 1972, the organization has been building community-level disaster preparedness, resilience building, and related institutional capacity building. BRAC is the largest civil society responder in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh, where the world’s most populous refugee camp is located. BRAC was also on the front lines of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014. Though Ebola is a different disease, there are many practices to stop its spread which are similar to COVID-19, like frequent handwashing and practicing social distancing. We are learning from case studies published by the Global Delivery Initiative on BRAC’s microfinance response to the Ebola outbreak, and findings from the World Bank on how our youth empowerment clubs helped adolescent girls be resilient in the wake of Ebola.

BRAC has immediate avenues for outreach through our network of community health workers, microfinance loan groups, youth empowerment clubs, schools, and other community programming. Though these programs are limited during the outbreak, we are leveraging our existing relationships with beneficiaries, local leaders, partner organizations, and governments to ensure a coordinated response. BRAC has proven in multiple diverse contexts that it is prepared to respond to crises when they arise and is committed to working with affected communities long after the immediate crises have passed.
OUR RESPONSE

Building on our existing in-country programs, we are working alongside local and national government bodies and response mechanisms, as well as the private sector, while leveraging our deep organizational knowledge of crisis-response with our established networks in each country. Building on our established capacity, operational knowledge, and existing relationships and networks, we are using a four-pronged strategy to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. During all four prongs, BRAC International is making sure we are vigilant of and compliant with BRAC’s safeguarding policies. We will act swiftly in response to any type of reported abuses.

Please visit our dedicated COVID-19 website to learn more about BRAC’s response here.

FOUR-PRONGED STRATEGY

In its COVID-19 response, BRAC is implementing the below four-pronged strategy to reach at least 20 million people:

- Orientation, Safety and Safeguarding of All Staff
- Community Awareness Raising and IPC Activity Promotion
- Partnership in Managing Context-Specific Outbreak
- Food Security, Social and Economic Recovery
PRONG ONE - Ensure the Safety and Security of our Staff

At the field, branch, and national levels, BRAC must continuously ensure that our staff are safe and healthy so they can deliver services to the people for whom we exist, while still caring for themselves and their own families. To do that we are adhering to the following principles:

1. For office-based staff, those who can work from home are doing so. Those whose work requires them to be physically present are adhering to social distancing guidelines.
2. To prevent object to person infection, we are ensuring the cleanliness of all common areas and all staff have been trained on safety measures.
3. A COVID-19 Training Module is being developed in all local languages for BRAC staff along with master trainers.
4. Personal hygiene products are being distributed to staff along with protective products such as masks, gloves, and aprons.
5. Due to the principle of social distancing, all field-work has been suspended, including training, classes, and participatory development processes which require working in groups.
6. Front-line workers, whose work has been suspended, are being assigned to activities related to the outbreak such as raising awareness and supplying soap and sanitizers to communities in need.
7. Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is being acquired as quickly as possible, in order to ensure the safety of our staff and communities.
8. Physical and emotional training and support is being provided to field staff and health workers to ensure they feel safe and secure in the field. Additional support will be available to all staff as needed.
PRONG TWO - Community Based Awareness and Infection Prevention and Control

All of our actions are in alignment with the Infection Prevention Control Guidelines from the WHO. Staff are reaching out to the communities in which they work on a daily one-on-one basis, including our microfinance staff, teachers, and play leaders, to maintain and strengthen relationships with community members. As the risks of exposure grow, we are using technology, including texts and videos, and distance counseling to share crucial information. All content is regionalized so it is appropriate for the varying cultural contexts in which BRAC operates.

Country-level leadership is actively participating in national COVID-19 task forces. This allows BRAC to coordinate our activities with the government and other actors. Participation in these task forces allows us to focus our efforts where they are most needed and where we can best utilize our existing presence.

We are promoting hand washing training and social distancing, as well as teaching people how to promote these practices. Our field staff have been working with communities to identify how to best meet their health and nutrition needs. We are coordinating directly with community, religious, and other leaders to use their platforms to promote practices to limit the spread of the virus.

Events such as these can have large psychosocial impacts. The stress of income loss, isolation, and inaccessibility of social support systems can especially affect women and children. By building on our long history and learnings from post-conflict and post-crisis response settings, BRAC is providing counseling and other needed services to those who require or seek psychosocial support. If we are unable to meet their needs, we are directing them to qualified partners. We are also working with communities to provide resources and advice on how to manage working from home, engaging out of school children, including engaging young children though our play-based ECD model, and other challenges that are arising through the course of this crisis.

It is highly possible that we will have to conduct new trainings to prepare our staff to utilize digital technologies for advocacy purposes. We may also need to find partners to help us coordinate our digital outreach, like SMS messaging for awareness raising. Using other organizations’ technology may allow us to reach communities more effectively and we are proactively pursuing these partnerships, in addition to those outlined in the following section.
**PRONG THREE - Partnering for Response During the Outbreak**

Partnerships are a key tool in our response capability. We have strong existing relationships with governments, community leaders, other local and international NGOs, and are working closely with these groups to coordinate our response. While ensuring that collective action is taken to best mitigate the spread of the disease, we are also working closely with established authorities and other actors to strategize where our combined resources can make the most impact to respond to its aftermath.

In most of the countries in which we operate the outbreak is in its early stages, with the exception of the Philippines and Afghanistan. However, accurate case detection in all countries is a significant challenge. As the outbreak increases, we plan to complement the work of governments and the private sector on the clinical side with engagement and assistance on the community side to help track and manage the outbreak. Our staff are reaching out to communities to conduct contact tracing, refer cases, provide information for how to treat confirmed cases at the home level, recommend case isolation, and ensure instruction from the clinical side is promoted.

Through this effort we are exploring partnerships with the World Food Programme (WFP) and others for food distribution to ensure affected households’ basic needs are being met and to enable them to follow necessary precautions. Most poor households are unable to stockpile food as they often live hand to mouth. Ensuring adequate food supplies and other basic needs for vulnerable households is especially important during this outbreak. At the village level, BRAC is well positioned to help deliver needed services and supplies to alleviate economic hardships incurred by this outbreak.

Wherever possible, we are continuing to run our existing development programs. We are exploring partnerships to continue our play-based learning initiatives and education programs through technology-enabled platforms, including launching “Digital Play Labs”. This could also include safely distributing play materials, books, and other learning materials.

We are also working to understand how we can adjust our usual health care activities and provide remote services for non-COVID-19-related cases, which still take place during the outbreak. Through this process we are adapting our programs to changing contexts and new methods of delivery.

To support healthcare systems in all our countries, we are supporting clinical workers through our extensive networks of nurses and medical staff and are prepared to transfer staff from lower to greater affected areas should the need arise. We may work with communities to create community field hospitals using experience from our work in Haiti during the cholera outbreak of 2010. We would only do this as appropriate and in partnership with other organizations. We are also in the process of developing a partnership with UNHCR to manage home quarantine, isolation, and treatment centers of COVID-19 cases in Cox’s Bazar. In Bangladesh, we have established a nationwide tele-counselling platform in partnership with local mental health organizations to help reduce distress related to COVID-19 for doctors, healthcare workers, BRAC staff, and the general population.
PRONG FOUR - Economic and Social Revitalization

BRAC International is committed to working with affected communities to rebuild and emerge stronger than before. It is clear that the COVID-19 outbreak has immediate consequences on food and income security for already vulnerable communities. BRAC International has commissioned and begun undertaking an ongoing assessment of economic hardships including income loss, food insecurity, and other challenges to livelihoods that communities and beneficiaries may face immediately and in the longer term. These rapid assessments provide insight into how the outbreak and its economic consequences are affecting vulnerable households across the Global South. So far we have completed two assessments, whose findings are being utilized to design our context specific economic rehabilitation and social reconstruction programs.

We have always focused our economic empowerment efforts on people living in poverty, especially those living in ultra-poverty. We will continue to coordinate our revitalization work through our microfinance and ultra-poor graduation programs to target these especially vulnerable populations. Through our Skills Development and Youth Empowerment programs, we will work with young people on their social and economic development. Following the guidance of local governments and the WHO, we will restart schools, early childhood Play Labs, and youth empowerment clubs and work with households to rebuild their income and their businesses.

MONITORING INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND MEDIA MANAGEMENT

Data driven decision making is at the center of our response efforts. We are working to continuously collect and manage data on the outbreak and what is happening in the lives of the families with whom we work. We are also collecting field stories, which are shared through situation reports to understand all dimensions of the crisis.

ADVOCACY

As this outbreak unfolds, we will discover new issues which may need to be shared at a higher level. These issues may have large policy implications, and we see our position as a voice for communities to drive needed change. We can already see that as borders close and the movement of goods and people shrinks, local structures are more important than ever to respond to this crisis. BRAC’s unique position as a southern-based NGO with global reach, positions us to provide valuable insight and perspective to both local and global policy discussions.
Using data and learned knowledge, we are developing an advocacy approach to shape international and local policy decisions. This includes ensuring resource allocation to people in need. Our office in the Netherlands and our affiliate offices in the United States and United Kingdom are helping to push our collective work for policy change.

We are taking special care to ensure that policies follow the tenets of gender equality and diversity. We are paying special attention to women and girls in data collection, while also recognizing the diverse needs of men and boys. We want to make sure that all people have equal rights and that all diverse needs are met.

**CONCLUSION**

Building on our deep experience in post-crisis rehabilitation we are actively communicating with the communities in which we work to ensure we are meeting their needs by providing services that empower and protect the most vulnerable and engender economic inclusion. As this is a constantly evolving situation, we will adjust this strategy as needed and apply its components in each operational country as appropriate.

We invite you to contribute to BRAC’s COVID-19 efforts to reach the world’s most vulnerable people in Asia and Africa. Detailed concept papers for each of BRAC International’s operational countries are available upon request. Together, we will work to pursue a world where everyone has the opportunity to realize their potential.