

BOOK REVIEW**Bottom Up NGO Sector in Bangladesh**

Mohiuddin Ahmad, Community Development Library (CDL), 1999

During the past three decades the developing countries have witnessed a changing role of the Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) in terms of a drastic shift from welfare orientation to socio-economic and political dimensions. Some of them have been able to demonstrate their capability to implement development projects on a nation-wide scale and some have been effective at the local level. A good number of NGOs have been successful in designing and implementing innovative programs for the rural masses. A few of them working for the grassroots communities have demonstrated effectiveness in mobilizing social capital and made substantial contributions to empowerment of the rural women. These NGOs are increasingly being co-opted in different public sector projects. However, the ever-expanding multi-dimensional role of the NGOs may prove counter-productive for a developing country as soon as they willingly undermine their assigned role as development agents and start dictating the terms of the state-affairs.

The book "Bottom Up: NGO Sector in Bangladesh" written by Mohiuddin Ahmad outlines the role of the NGOs operating in Bangladesh since independence in the field of social welfare, social mobilization and socio-economic development. It is a survey of the contemporary NGOs depicting their background, changing pattern of role play, relationship with the Government, success and failure of their operations, transparency and

accountability, sustainability, cost of operation, corruption and credibility of NGO operations. In the words of Ahmad, "As the NGO sector in the country is quite large, it is useful to be aware of the interventions and involvement of this sector, as well as to understand relevant issues and problems." The author's statement foreshadows the subject he has covered in the book.

Basically, the book consists of six chapters. The first chapter describes the genesis of the NGO sector in Bangladesh. Immediately after the war of liberation in 1971, there had been a great need for relief and rehabilitation and a host of NGOs responded to this need. Social welfare, social mobilization and rural development became the main thrust of the NGO sector in Bangladesh since mid-seventies with an enormous flow of foreign aid. Ordinances were promulgated and a NGO Affairs Bureau was set up to co-ordinate and regulates their activities. The attitude of the government towards the NGOs has generally been positive having explicit guidelines to the effect that the NGOs should allocate more resources on poverty alleviation programmes; they should operate at a minimum cost and should be more accountable and transparent. The readers will be able to get familiarized with the events and circumstances that engendered a massive growth of the NGO Sector in Bangladesh within a span of short time and the government's policy guidelines to this effect.

The Second Chapter presents an overview of the NGO sector from 1947 to 1999. In 1947 there were only 47 NGOs but in 1999 more than 22 thousands registered NGOs operated in Bangladesh which, the author classified under four broad categories viz., (i) General Voluntary Social Welfare Organizations (total 21419) which are small in size and which

function locally; (ii) National social Welfare Organizations (total 17) having some functions similar to above but operate on a nation-wide scale; (iii) Bangladeshi NGOs operating on foreign donations (total 1223); and (iv) Foreign NGOs (total 147) operating of foreign funds. The main thrust of the NGOs over the past 30 years was social welfare activities (59%); among other, 38% were implementing mainly “development” programs and another 3% had main focus on religion. The donor community channeled more funds through the NGOs. In this chapter the author also highlighted the programs and the operational activities of some major National NGOs like BRAC, Grameen Bank, Proshika, ASA, Caritas, Swanirvar Bangladesh, RDRS and PKSF. The broad categorization and functional dispensation will help readers understand the essential dynamics of the NGO operations in Bangladesh. The readers will be benefited by the statistics and analysis of programs/operations of these NGOs who were the forerunners of this sector.

The Third Chapter deals with government-NGO collaboration. The author clearly spells out the government policy that underscores the need for participation of the NGOs in self sponsored or national development projects provided they are not detrimental to government policy, rules and regulations or national security. The author then elaborately discussed all the relevant areas of collaboration between the Government and the NGOs such as Health and Family Planning, Agriculture, Fisheries, Income Generation, Education, Training etc. The Government-NGO collaboration worked smoothly in some projects and conflict arose in other cases. The readers can form an excellent idea about the nature, scope and limitations of Government-NGO collaboration in various projects.

In Chapter Four, the author attempts to expose the diversity of NGO programmes in a systematic manner. First, the majority of the NGOs adopted a '*target group approach*', the target being men and women belonging to the landless, the women and the other poor strata of the rural population. Second, the NGO activities in Bangladesh are '*programme focused*'- some are exclusively involved in social awareness building activities through functional education, human development training and workshop/exposure programmes; some have major thrust in the delivery of certain services like literacy, preventive and curative health care, family planning, water and sanitation, vocational training, credit and marketing; while some others deliver a combined programme package. Third, the NGOs generally follow a '*group approach*' where village based groups are the cores of their institution building process.

The Fifth Chapter takes into consideration the achievements and effectiveness of the NGO sector vis-a-vis public bodies in terms of efficiency and tangible results covering a wide range of social-economic issues viz., Health and Family Planning, Education, Micro-credit and People's participation in the planning process. In the words of the author, the NGOs "perceived themselves not as mere 'managers of the projects', but more as 'change agents' or catalysis". The author pointed out the donor's perception stating that there has been a lack of people's participation in the development projects undertaken by the public sector whereas the NGOs are found to be more people oriented in their strategies and programs.

The Sixth Chapter takes into cognizance the major issues and concerns involving the NGO sector. The author poses a host of pertinent questions: (i) Do the NGOs address their programmes

to the 'poorest of the poor'? (ii) What are the incidences of high degree overlapping in NGO activities? (iii) The NGOs have proven capability of bringing services to the people, but at what cost? (iv) Most of the credits provided by the NGOs go to women, but how much these have contributed to their empowerment? (v) The NGOs overwhelmingly depend on external resources, but are they sustainable? (vi) The question of credibility: How are the NGOs perceived in the society? Are they doing a good job? (vii) The moral question: In the events of large-scale corruption, vulnerability of resource base, corrupting influence of government officials and existence of a large number of spurious NGOs, how far the NGO activities are justified? The readers will be interested to know the answers. The author resorts to World Bank, UNDP and BBS publication and opinions of the intellectual community.

Language of the book is plain, simple and reader-friendly. It is free from economic jargons and cliché. The readers will get much pleasure in reading the book down the pages.

However, the chapters of the book have not been assimilated in a systematic way. The contents have been arranged in a most casual manner. The author should have clearly demarcated the thematic contents of the book from other minor contents by identifying them as Chapter I, Chapter II, etc. In such a case it would have been much easier for the readers to form a positive impression about the book itself and also understand the interconnectivity among the six chapters.

The readers will feel the inadequacy of performance appraisal of major National NGOs viz., BRAC, Grameen Bank, Proshika, ASA, Caritas, Swanirvar Bangladesh, RDS, TMSS and PKSF. In Chapter II, the author should have provided them with more

quantitative information about the networking and specific sector related activities. A qualitative assessment of their performances could have enriched the content of the book.

In chapter three, the author did not identify or analyze the specific areas where conflicts of principles/interests between the Government and the NGOs acted as detriment to successful implementation of development projects. In the absence of such analysis, the readers have been deprived of the essential ingredients of conflict management.

In chapter five, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of NGO performance. The author did not assess the socio-political and religious impact of NGO activities in the rural areas. Some NGOs have already faces stiff resistance from both religious fundamentalists and political opportunists in carrying out their universal literacy, women empowerment and social awareness programmes in rural areas. The author should have made a critical appraisal of the NGO performance in different dimensions so that readers could have a comprehensive understanding of the operational effectiveness of this sector.

In chapter six, the author has rightly questioned the validity of NGO operations in terms of target population, cost of operation, operational overlapping, women empowerment, NGO sustainability, credibility and other moral issues. However, the author has provided some inconclusive answers to these questions taking into consideration the opinions of the intellectual class refraining from making his own value judgement. Such a shortcoming has undermined the quality of writing. The book is otherwise an excellent piece of well informative readable document.

The book is a bold expression of realities concerning the operations of the NGO sector in Bangladesh. It systematically chronicles the origin, growth and the rise of NGOs within a short span of time. The “bottom up approach” inspired them to work with grassroots groups. The target people shall have more opportunities to express their will. A critical analysis of NGO’s role-play by the author has enriched the content of the book, which set the stage for further intellectual exercises and enlightened debate on this subject. Students of Economics, Public Administration, and others engaged in administrative research or reforms will be substantially benefited from this book.

The title of the book is thematically pertinent and conceptually coherent. It signifies the basic role of the NGOs that will empower the rural poor to express their will and participate in the society’s decision-making process.

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