

**Fighting Poverty:**  
Government and NGO perceptions and interventions in Bangladesh

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Paper presented at the  
Development Studies Network Conference on Poverty, Prosperity and Progress  
Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington  
17-19th November 2000

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The issues related with poverty are multidimensional. The perception of poverty, its measurement and alleviation thus require familiarisation with the parameters and the varying implications. Strategies on poverty alleviation without an understanding of these parameters cannot produce sustainable results. In Bangladesh, the poverty-reduction efforts taken by agencies of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have produced different results in recent years. Selected NGOs have been relatively more successful in tackling poverty because they approached poverty from a perspective, different from that of the government. They appreciated different parameters and their socio-economic impact on people. This paper examines the linkage between conceptualisation of poverty parameters and formulation of anti-poverty strategies and programmes in a poverty-stricken Bangladesh. It discusses the perceptions and responses of the state and NGOs in combating poverty. Perceiving poverty from a 'down-to-earth' approach, the paper makes an effort to identify new parameters (e.g. related to environment and access structure), and examines the implications of the parameters in Bangladesh. The paper also measures the degree of success and failure of the anti-poverty schemes of GoB and NGOs.*

### **Conceptualising and measuring poverty**

From a broader perspective, poverty means the forms of economic, social, and psychological deprivation occurring among people lacking sufficient ownership, control or access to resources to maintain or provide individual or collective minimum levels of living (Hye, 1996). This is an appropriate viewpoint in the context of Bangladesh, where the dimensions of poverty are daunting, and poverty-alleviation remains a challenge for not only the state but also the NGOs, who have been playing a critical role in empowering the poor since the country's independence in 1971. This perspective also leads to a complex-multidimensional approach to the understanding of poverty, as opposed to unidimensional approach which narrowly views poverty as a matter of income deprivation or nutritional deprivation.

#### ***The unidimensional approach: Income, Food intake and Basic needs***

Poverty is measured by the amount of income necessary to purchase food to attain required nutritional level. This income level is used as the cut-off point to differentiate between poor and non-poor (Ravallion 1990). According to the calorie intake concept, the daily consumption of 2200 calorie provides the basis for poverty line. Those who are taking less than that may be called poor. The broad-based basic needs approach looks at health, education, water, shelter and food in a composite manner. The UNDP's 'Human Poverty Index' uses this method of measurement of poverty.

#### ***The multidimensional approach: Social, Environmental and Institutional needs***

This approach recognises wide-ranging parameters of poverty. It seeks to identify indigence in not only physiological level but also economic, social, environmental and institutional arenas. This broader perspective emphasises on people's capabilities to buy food and non-food items (e.g. housing, clothing, medicine) on the one hand, and their social, environmental and institutional empowerment on the other. Social and institutional mapping, conducted in the developing countries, suggest that apart from economic growth (e.g. agricultural and industrial production), which influences people's food-intake and income level, poverty is also related with power structure, governance process, access situation, community interaction, environment, institutional capacities, ownership pattern, and so on.

In fact, poor and non-poor dichotomy rests on this multidimensional nature of poverty. Any strategy to alleviate poverty must therefore need to consider a range of quality of life variables such as, nutrition, health and sanitation, housing, personal security, access to state distribution system, participation and institutional capacity, and crisis coping capacity. It is therefore imperative to use this broader approach to measure the magnitude and diversity of poverty. In poverty-stricken Bangladesh, where both government and NGOs have been giving highest priority on poverty-alleviation in their development plans and programmes, it is important to use this broader perspective to measure the magnitude and diversity of poverty.

### **Conditions of the Bangladeshi poor**

Estimates of the proportion of population below poverty line at different points in time are based on Household Income and Expenditure Surveys carried out periodically by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. These studies, however, show that from 1973/74 poverty has increased continuously and reached its peak in 1981/82. Poverty has declined through the eighties. In 1988-89, 48 percent of rural population lived below the poverty line compared to 65 percent in 1973-74. Another study, which examined changes in poverty condition during 1990-92 relative to 1989-90 bench mark in 62 villages revealed unmistakable signs of improvement. According to the study, proportion of households suffering food deficit and without access to minimum clothing has declined and employment per household and school enrolment has increased. In fact, some development indicators suggest that there has been improvement in the living standard of the people of Bangladesh over the last two and a half decades [e.g. per capita income increased from US \$ 124 in 1974 to US \$ 295 in 1995 (World Bank, 1998); life expectancy from 45 in 1974 to 58 in 1996; immunisation coverage from 1% in 1981 to 77% in 1996; access to safe water from 56% in 1975 to 96% in 1996) (GoB, 1998).

### **Poverty still daunting**

But some studies observe that the poverty dimension in Bangladesh is manifold and it is still widespread in the country. (Sobhan, 1998, Hossain, 1997). The World Food Programme (WFP), in its country report on Bangladesh, perceived poverty as "extreme want of necessities" (WFP, 1997). With a per capita GDP of US dollars 295 (World Bank and BCAS, 1998), Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries of the World (one of the 47 countries categorised as least developed countries (LDC) in per capita income, literacy rate, and contribution of manufacturing to GNP). According to Human Development Index (HDI) prepared by United Nations Development Program (UNDP), based on life expectancy, educational attainment, and income indicators, the country ranks 146<sup>th</sup> in the list of 173 countries (Hye, 1996). The overall living conditions of the Bangladeshi poor can be measured by the following economic, social and environmental parameters.

### **Economic factors**

#### ***Inequality***

Bangladesh is a country of gross inequalities where the rural-urban divide is often extreme. Eighty three per cent of the population live in the countryside, produce 80 per cent of the country's total wealth yet receive only 20 per cent of total state services (e.g. health, education). In rural areas, 50 percent households are landless, and the bottom 40 per cent own 2.8 per cent of cultivable land compared with top five per cent owning 30 percent (Sobhan, 1998).

#### ***Growth***

Poverty situation has slightly improved in Bangladesh during the eighties and nineties with economic growth taking place. Growth rate for the economy as a whole was 5 percent during the seventies, which has risen to 6.5 percent in 1995 (World Bank and BCAS, 1998). Although a direct linkage between alleviation of poverty and growth is yet to be established, the linkages between increased agricultural production and poverty reduction can be hypothesised. Recent study shows that HYV technology has benefited the bottom 40 percent

of the population side by side with the top 20 percent. The bottom 40 percent of the rural population, consisting mainly of landless workers and marginal farmers, have benefited because HYV technology needs 50 to 80 percent more labour than the traditional technologies (Khan, et al, 1999). Both GoB and NGOs can deserve credibility for their effort to popularise HYV technology.

**Employment**

Data from various micro and macro studies show that unemployment remained more or less stable at 31 to 40 percent during the sixties and the seventies. A later study estimates unemployment at 21 to 31 percent for the period between 1979 and 1984. Women have a higher rate of unemployment-three times as high as men (Khan, et al 1999). However, the NGO sector has made a positive contribution by its credit support programmes in generating employment for the rural poor. The government has also helped creating seasonal employment for rural women through its food support programmes such as Food for Works Programme.

**Demographic and food factors**

**Population**

As one of World's most densely populated countries (with an estimated 122 million people [GOB, 1998] in an area of 146,635 square kilometres, having a density of 832 per sq. km), Bangladesh faces an extremely difficult socio-economic and demographic situation. With an estimated 40 percent of the country's 122 million people living below poverty line (i.e. consuming less than 2122 calories a day) (GoB, 1998), Bangladesh is in much worse situation than most of the developing countries facing poverty. The rapid population growth at 1.82 per cent a year (GoB, 1998) has taxed the natural resource base to a point of breakdown.

**Food intake**

In Bangladesh, poverty is quantified on the basis of a per capita minimum diet of 2122 calories. The term "absolute poor" is used in Bangladesh for those who live below this poverty line [nearly 49 million (40 per cent) of the country's population]. "Hard-core poor" describes one who does not have a sufficient income to meet even an energy intake of 1,805 calories (WFP, 1997). Survey results show more than 25 million (20.5 per cent) are living in hard-core poverty (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1996). A new terminology, the WFP is currently attaching to identify the poorest of the poor, is "hungry poor". According to WFP, they are those poor in Bangladesh who live below the poverty line of 1600 calories- the most distressed segment of the population. It is estimated that 10-15 per cent of the country's population can be seen under this most malnourished group.

**Absolute poor**

Daily food intake between 1806-2122 calories

40% population

**Hard-core poor**

Daily food intake between 1601-1805 calories

20.5% population (within 'absolute poor' group)

**"Hungry Poor"**

Daily maximum intake 1600 calories

10-15% population (within 'absolute poor' group)

**Social factors**

**Governance/Social structure and the Problem of "Access"**

The social structure of the country is dominated by traditional kinship pattern. More and more state intervention in the rural life is alleged to have developed dependency relationship between the central state, the local power elite and the rural poor, the local notables being the clients of the state and the rural poor as their dependent. In the situation, benefits of whatever administrative or local government reform the country initiated have not reached the poor. Both the rural and urban poor lack access to health, education, and other services provided by the central and local government. The problem of access into service delivery system lies in the very mechanism of patronage distribution. Resources and services are used by the central

government as instruments of control, which keep the poor dependent on the rich. This configuration helps central government to serve political interests. Even today, nearly a decade after the return of parliamentary democracy in 1991, a somewhat fragile and undeveloped democracy contributes to continuing instability and deteriorating rule of law. Reforms in democracy and governance sectors in Bangladesh continue to fail to address these structural issues.

### ***Gender-specificity***

Poverty has a specific gender dimension in Bangladesh. Though women constitute little more than half of the total population, they are economically dependent and vulnerable, educationally backward and politically and socially disadvantaged. Women head a large proportion of poor households in Bangladesh, and female members of poor households are often worse off than male members because of gender-based differences in the distribution of food and other entitlement within the family (UNDP, 1993). Women are not only socially discriminated, but are subject to threat, exploitation and harassment of all sorts. Though some NGOs have been working toward the goal of women's empowerment, a desirable gender-friendly social condition remains a far cry.

### **Other dimensions of poverty**

#### ***Urban poor***

Migration from rural areas is a major factor behind urban poverty. Various studies suggest that the rural-urban migration process reflects both “pull” and “push” factors with some positive impact on the living standards of the migrants. Thus, urban poverty is largely a spill over of the pervasive rural poverty. The living conditions of urban slum-dwellers and homeless people are often more appalling than that of rural poor.

#### ***Environmental refugees***

It has been observed that there is a close link between poverty and the environment. Thousands of people are clustered in ecologically fragile areas of Bangladesh, with low agricultural potential and high degree of environmental catastrophe. These areas include flood-prone and river-eroded areas, drought-hit northern Bangladesh, and *char* lands (sand bar) in the riverbank lines of *Jamuna, Padma and Meghna*. Flood, river erosion and drought are no less destructive and disastrous than other natural calamities like cyclone. These cause untold misery and leave far-reaching adverse effects on both human life and environment. The people, who lose homesteads and lands due to flood and river erosion, usually take decades to make up the damage if they do at all. In most of the cases, they fail to rehabilitate themselves and end up as 'environmental refugees'. It has been estimated that there are about 3.5 million river erosion affected people in Bangladesh and an additional 0.25 million people are joining them annually (Kafi, 1993). The 1998 flood, for example, claimed 400 lives, caused damage to 80 percent of school buildings and two-third of the country's arable land. It brought misery to 30 million people (*Janakantha*, 8 September, 1998)

#### ***Ethnic groups***

Various ethnic groups (tribes) living in the northern region and in the hill districts of the south-eastern part of the country face poverty, which is mainly caused by the state policy of exclusion. The *santals* in the north and the *chakmas, murongs* and other tribes in the hill districts have been systematically harassed, exploited and neglected by the military rulers in the past. Man-made disasters like forced eviction from land and construction of dam brought severe ecological disasters for the tribal communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area. The policies of the state to provide autonomy to this region have been nothing more than rhetoric. In reality, these minority people complain about lack of economic and social support in their communities. A recent study shows poor educational and health services and credit support programmes in both regions of the country. GoB-managed schools and health centres are inadequate in terms of quality as well as quantity (Khan et al. 1999).

#### ***Disabled***

Physical disability is also seen as a very special cause of poverty. The disabled lack access to state resources. Even not many NGOs include the disabled into their programme structure. The perception of poverty's linkage with disability is generally missing even among the big NGOs.

### **What these factors explain in terms of policy implications?**

A careful examination of the magnitude and diversity in poverty situation, as manifested in the above-mentioned factors, would reveal a number of issues:

- (a) These factors influencing poverty suggest that poverty in Bangladesh has various dimensions manifested by economic status, social position, human resource status, crisis-coping ability, institutional capacity and so on.
- (b) Only a few factors (e.g. economic growth, employment) perhaps contribute to income and thereby poverty reduction. Other dimensions/factors such as social structure, environmental conditions, gender position, and rural-urban migration influence poverty in a negative manner. This would suggest that poverty is still daunting and different people face different dimensions of poverty - related to the conditions they live in.
- (c) Poverty under the above dimensions (e.g. economic, demographic, social, environmental) differ markedly between the extreme poor and moderately poor households.

Such differential brings out a number of implications for policy. From the economic category, extreme poor or the "hungry poor" households have been more or less excluded from all types of interventions from the government agencies as well as from big NGOs (because of their group formation criteria). These "excluded poor" also include people affected by other dimensions of poverty such as destitute women, urban poor, environmental refugees and tribal communities. These poorest of the poor lack access to government and NGO resources and support systems. Not enough policies have been formulated at the state or NGO level to include these "excluded" people into the programme coverage. Against this backdrop, government and NGOs are not likely to make total success with their poverty alleviation efforts if they fail to provide institutional support to the most vulnerable groups of the poor.

### **Anti-poverty plans and programmes of GoB**

The GoB, in almost all of its long-term plans (Five year plans), put considerable emphasis on poverty alleviation as a key area of concern. In the Fifth Five Year Plan (1997-2002), the government promised to ensure people's participation for self-reliance, poverty-reduction and sustainable development (GoB, 1998). These documents, particularly the last two Five Year Plans (1990-1995; 1997-2002) and also the abandoned 20-year Perspective Plan (PP) (1990-2010), aimed to reduce poverty by ensuring better access for the rural poor to the means of production through their organisations for productive activities, development of agriculture and infrastructures. The Fifth Five Year Plan proposed to launch programmes under rural development sector encompassing development of physical infrastructure, irrigation, drainage, flood control and employment-generating programmes for the rural poor.

### **The BRDB approach**

At the operational level, Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB), is the largest public organisation implementing poverty-alleviation programmes of the government. The BRDB promoted three types of cooperatives at the village level: *Bittahin Samabaya Samittees* (BSS) (Assetless Cooperative Societies), *Mahila Bittahin Samabaya Samittees* (MBSS) (Assetless Women's Cooperative Societies), *Krishak Samabaya Samittees* (KSS) (Farmer's Cooperative Societies). The Board also helped creating *Thana* Central Cooperative Association (TCCA) at the *thana* (sub-district) level as an elected apex body to co-ordinate the activities of village-based cooperatives. The Board mobilises people to become members of different cooperatives to receive skill development training and credit support.

### **Other Programme Components**

There are four other major components of anti-poverty programmes of government. These include: (a) Vulnerable Group Development Programme (VGDP), (b) Rural Maintenance Programme (RMP), (c) Rural Development Programme (RDP), and (d) Credit programme of the *Palli Karma Sahayak* Foundation (PKSF) (Rural Works Support Foundation).

#### ***Vulnerable Group Development Programme (VGDP)***

Since inception in the mid-seventies, the VGDP has been extended nation-wide. It is largely a relief-oriented programme with limited provision for long-term economic development of vulnerable sections of the population. Under the programme, destitute women are identified and provided with VGD card to get food support from the union *parishad* (council) - the lowest tier of local government. The overall objective of the VGDP is to improve the socio-economic conditions of the poorest, distressed and most disadvantaged women to keep them above the hard-core poverty level.

#### ***Rural Maintenance Programme (RMP)***

Under the RMP, poor women are given employment with cash wage. Women work on the maintenance of rural earthen roads. Such work has been undertaken on nearly 76 percent of such roads in the country. An average of 60,000 destitute women per year have been supported by the programme (Sobhan, 1998). RMP has made significant contributions to the lives of rural destitute women. They have also been given an opportunity, through the establishment of Rural Maintenance Associations (RMAs), to negotiate and self-manage maintenance activities issued from union *parishads*. In 1992, RMP began to graduate its destitute women from the Programme after providing them with appropriate support and training. RMP began a phased approach which allowed women to stay in RMP for four years and graduate out into self-supporting income-generating activities (Sobhan, 1998).

#### ***Rural Development Programme (RDP)***

The RDP began as the Food for Work Programme in 1975. It supports the water sector through repair and rehabilitation of embankments and irrigation and drainage canals; road sector through the construction, repair and rehabilitation of rural roads, specifically the GCCR (Growth Centre Connecting Roads); the forestry sector through tree plantation and the fisheries sector through the excavation of riverine lakes and freshwater ponds for fish production for poor people. The RDP in fact provides targeted support to the rural poor for income generation through employment and also helped strengthening the rural physical infrastructure.

#### ***Credit programme of the Palli Karma Sahayak Foundation (PKSF)***

The government set up the foundation in 1990 with an objective to create employment opportunities for the rural landless and assetless people by providing them collateral free loan through various NGOs. The PKSF is channelling funds through NGOs and semi-government organisations to the rural poor, and also providing organisational support and training to such institutions.

### **Some observations on the GoB approach**

BRDB's approach to poverty alleviation deserves appreciation. The Board supports not only the farmers (who are lower middle class groups), but also the assetless men and women (i.e. MSS and MBSS groups who have so far been excluded from state support). The other strength of the programme is that it has given the vulnerable people their own institution. This is the only viable programme of the government that has followed the NGO model of group mobilisation for building grassroots institutions for the poor.

But the general criticism of the government-sponsored anti-poverty programmes is based on the issue of "coverage". It is often argued that the government has failed to reach the hard core poor and hungry poor groups of population (amounting to nearly 30-35% of population). Apart from BRDB's support to BSS and

MBSS groups and the VGD, most other interventions benefit the poor and not the poorest. Other critical observations are as follows:

- (a) The GoB initiative is seen as more a failure to create sustainable living provisions for the poor. It is observed that through VGD and RMP programmes, the government follows a 'relief approach' rather than a 'development approach' to help the poor. The GoB programme components lack social awareness, human resource development and skill development training.
- (b) It seems that the government does not make enough effort to improve the service delivery mechanisms and to increase access to state services and support systems for the "excluded" poor. The vulnerable segments of population such as river-eroded and flood-affected people, ethnic groups, and the urban poor do not receive required support from the government.
- (c) Bangladesh still remain a centralised state. Successive governments have deliberately neglected the Constitutional pledge to strengthen local government institutions. Community-based organisations (CBOs) were not also exploited to mobilise local communities and enhance people's participation. The reform initiatives to strengthen local government have been observed as 'window-dressing' approach. No government has put any serious effort to institutionalise democracy at the grassroots level, to enhance the capacities of local government or to legally-empower them to exercise substantial authority to plan and implement poverty-alleviation and local development projects.
- (d) From management point of view, the effectiveness of the GoB investment in reaching the poor remains questionable: (a) the establishment cost of the GoB programmes/projects are high; (b) they are biased to the relatively richer section of the community, and (c) the delivery system is weak and inefficient (Ali, 1999).

### **The NGO perceptions of poverty**

NGO activities in Bangladesh have virtually grown into a movement through the three decades of sovereign existence of Bangladesh. From at least the late seventies NGOs have been acquiring an increasingly prominent role in the nation's development process. Their activities have been especially significant in such vital sectors as poverty alleviation, social development (health, sanitation, primary education), child development, human resources development, rural development including improvement of rural infrastructure, women's empowerment and grassroots institution building. NGOs constitute a huge community in Bangladesh (as many as 1200 are registered with either the NGO Affairs Bureau or the Department of Social Welfare). The perceptions and programme priority on poverty alleviation, as in other sectors, in such an enlarged NGO world obviously vary.

#### ***Not a homogenous community***

As far as poverty-alleviation approach is concerned one can identify three broad types of NGOs operating in Bangladesh:

##### ***Category A: NGOs providing more Credit with limited social support***

These are the large and medium-size NGOs which have country-wide or regional network and are continuing their support for the targeted population (mainly poor but not the vulnerable poor) with increased credit support and a somewhat minimum level of social education, awareness training and so on [such as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (BRAC)]. The number of NGOs in this category is the maximum.

##### ***Category B: NGOs known as MCIs***

These NGOs primarily focus on credit programmes. These are more popularly known as micro credit institutions (MCIs) [e.g. Grameen Bank and Association for Social Advancement (ASA)].

***Category C: NGOs concerned with social dimension of poverty***

Under this category, there are hundreds of small and/or local NGOs which have a high priority for social empowerment rather than economic empowerment of the poor. These NGOs perceive poverty as a challenge caused by social exploitation, environmental degradation, physical disability and so on. *Nijera Kori, Uttaran, Banchte Shekha, Samata*, International Voluntary Society (IVS), Impact Foundation Bangladesh are the prominent ones.

***Limited support to the "Hungry Poor"***

This categorisation of NGOs would suggest that not all these organisations implement programmes on poverty alleviation, particularly in income generation and food security sectors. And those who undertake anti-poverty schemes, not many of them provide services to the "hungry poor". Those concentrating on economic dimension of poverty, more or less work through 'group formation-followed by skill development training and credit support' method. The group formation criteria for most of the NGOs would require the households to have minimum assets or at least wage labour status. Although there are some NGOs like TMSS, which work with the most vulnerable groups of population (e.g. beggars, assetless people, destitute women), the general practice is to ensure that groups have at least some wealth that can be used as collateral against credit.

***Social dimension in the back sit***

In recent years there has been a trend amongst some NGOs such as ASA to concentrate on credit programmes only. This shows that social development interventions such as awareness raising, women's empowerment, environmental concerns and policy advocacy have taken a back sit in the strategic priority order. It is however observed that every NGO, whether big or small, make a symbolic effort to alleviate poverty caused by social, environmental and ethnic factors. Some NGOs however continue to make serious effort to work with the urban poor, environmental refugees and backward tribal communities.

**NGO Interventions**

It needs appreciation that a large number of NGOs are making efforts for the alleviation of poverty and overall socio-economic development of the rural poor. Here poverty alleviation programmes of selected NGOs from the three categories are presented:

***Category A:***

***Bangladesh Rural Advance Committee (BRAC)***

BRAC, the largest NGO in Bangladesh, pursues an integrated approach and provides training, credit and logistic support to its beneficiaries. BRAC organises the rural poor in small groups of about twenty five persons (men and women separately) and provides them with functional education and skill development training. Under the fold of Rural Development Programme (RDP) operation till December 1998, there were 2449 villages covering 1,036,454 members – (85%) female and 15% male.

***Rangpur-Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS)***

RDRS encourages formation of primary groups in the villages of the 38 Thanas in Rangpur and Dinajpur districts of the north-western region of the country. The total number of groups formed is about 6000 federated into union level organisations. Total number of group members is about 65,000. The male : female ratio among members was 55:45. RDRS's integrated rural development program is conducted through a number of interrelated projects, each with their own staff and fund. The credit component has recently got somewhat higher priority from RDRS's policy makers.

**Category B:**

***Grameen Bank (GB)***

GB is the pioneering institution in Bangladesh to promote micro-credit programme. It is now about two decades that GB has been operating. As a specialised bank, it targets poverty alleviation as its primary mandate. While it enjoys certain financial facilities from the central bank like other scheduled banks it also enjoys, as a quasi-NGO, certain amount of autonomy in its operational functioning.

***Association for Social advancement (ASA)***

ASA aims to empower the powerless by ensuring people's participation in the process of development. In line with this goal, ASA initiated a credit-based support package for the rural poor.

**Category C:**

***Nijera Kori***

Nijera Kori does not give any material assistance to its target group (i.e landless labourers), but it helps them to organise themselves and develop cooperation among the members based on mutual trust and confidence. The overriding objective is to make the groups free from patron-client relation, both of the traditional and the contemporary types where patrons change from local to outsiders. Since its inception, Nijera Kori has organised 4553 groups of which 2533 belong to women and 2030 to men. The total membership in 1995 stood at 100556 of which 502260 were women (Hye, 1996).

***Impact Foundation Bangladesh***

This NGO works for the people with disability, particularly blindness. It has recently made a commendable success by launching of its *Jiban Tori* (life boat) - a floating hospital of its first kind in the country. The initiator of the project, a blind himself, has made tremendous success in mobilising funds for construction of the boat hospital, which is equipped with doctors, nurses and other surgical instruments. The boat floats from village to village, from community to community to provide medical aid to blind people and other people with disability. Impact Foundation has also initiated a pilot project in the south-western part of the country for skill development training and income generation for the disabled.

**Collaboration with local government: a new approach to combat social dimension of poverty**

As the government and donors' concern with mounting poverty and ever-widening human misery increased, development plans and strategies began to be redesigned from mid-eighties to encourage partnership between central government, NGOs and local government. This gradual but clearly discernible shift in the development approach gradually helped all partners to recognise each other's contribution in poverty-alleviation and socio-economic development programmes. The Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) and Expanded Immunisation Programme (EIP) are among the other interventions which were designed to involve NGOs to serve the people better. NGO services and participation in these nation-wide programmes (in which government and local government are involved in the process of facilitation) have proved very effective in reaching the poor and the needy. There are cases where NGOs work closely with local government.

**VON**

VON, a Manikganj-based local NGO sets a good example of collaboration with Manikganj municipality with respect to water supply and sanitation in the municipal area. Together the two organisations have distributed sanitary latrine and safe water (hand tube wells). In addition, VON-Manikganj Pourashava jointly developed and implemented a health education programme for the poor.

**MJSS**

The Manikganj *Janasankhya Simitokoron Samittee* (MJSS) (Manikganj Association for Population Control) collaborated with Manikganj municipality the Extended Immunisation Programme (EIP) through launching

an immunisation campaign for the local children. Like VON, MJSS is also supporting the municipal authority in its health and sanitation development programmes.

### ***Federation as the Third Party in Collaboration***

RDRS succeeded in developing people's own organisation called 'Federation' for strengthening the process of grassroots democratisation and enhancing people's participation. The formation of Federation with the phased-out groups is significant in a way that it was after this institutional development, opportunities for collaboration between local government, NGOs and people have increased in social forestry and disaster management areas in the north-western region of the country.

### **Some critical observations on the NGO approach**

Despite the success stories, the poverty alleviation programmes of NGOs raised some questions, in academic circles and among development practitioners.

- (a) The most important concern is related to the issue of 'clientelism'. It is often questioned whether a new patron-client relationship between NGOs and their beneficiaries has replaced the traditional one, and whether NGO development strategy is accelerating this change?
- (b) The overwhelming credit-based NGO support for poverty alleviation generates concern that they have been taking the risk of being MCIs only, which have increasing showing less interest to the NGO practice of group formation and social development training. Some studies show the negative impact of credit approach on the poor. One of these studies reveal that poverty is increasing because of over-use of credit (Morshed, 2000). Some times the poor takes credit from two or even three NGOs, and get in to the trap from which poverty alleviation becomes difficult. It is also argued that the NGOs have in effect replaced *mahajans* (traditional money lenders) in the rural communities and have become a more powerful institution of *mahajan*.
- (c) The third observation is on the issue of coverage. Although the NGO community in Bangladesh as a whole has gained world renown for its micro finance and poverty alleviation programmes, but many of them are not reaching the hungry poor and other vulnerable groups of population (MacLean, 1998). A large number of NGOs are included in this list.

### **Conclusion**

Poverty, with its magnitude and different dimensions, is still alarming in Bangladesh. Since independence the major policy focus of the government was on alleviation of poverty. All plan documents endeavoured to address this particular issue and anti-poverty programmes were implemented by successive governments during the last three decades. To supplement government efforts, NGOs have also launched different programmes and projects to address the situation.

NGOs in Bangladesh have made a better impact than what the government has done. NGOs' success has been possible due to their appreciation for different magnitude and dimensions of poverty. This perception aided them to take appropriate and innovative strategies to fight poverty. It is now widely recognised that NGOs are not only supplementing government efforts in poverty alleviation, but more importantly, have emerged as an independent sector making visible and sustainable contribution in the social and economic development of the poor. In spite of these efforts and their successes widespread poverty still persists in the country, particularly among the poorest of the poor who remained outside the state and NGO interventions.

Present realities of these "excluded" population call for more concerted efforts both by the government and NGOs. Greater collaboration among government, local government and NGOs can become instrumental. Such collaboration should be based on cooperation and goodwill for promoting participation of

people in poverty alleviation programmes. A congenial social set-up, democratic political environment and good governance are also needed for the cause of poverty alleviation in the country.

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