

Asif Aftab Kalam
Abul Kalam

ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH

Abstract

Bangladesh is faced with rampant poverty, high population density, recurring natural disasters and a dwindling natural resource base. All these factors make it imperative for the country to integrate and sustain all development concerns. Known as the land of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the role of NGOs especially those dedicated towards environmental causes are crucial towards the end. The paper considers the origins, typology and operational spheres of the NGOs in Bangladesh, focusing on the functional aspects of those categorized as environmental NGOs. It is observed that the NGOs in Bangladesh owe their origins to the country's legacies of political tumult and environmental hazards and to still larger factors of misgovernance and alienation caused by autocracy and political instability; but they owe their regulatory framework to the intermediary role of the foreign donors. Category-wise,

Mr. Asif Aftab Kalam, currently a graduate student in Economics at the University of Dhaka, is working as a Research Assistant in the project "Role of Government and Civil Society in Sustainable Development: A Comparative Study of Japan and Bangladesh," a study sponsored by the Japan Foundation (Tokyo). He is also a research trainee under the Research Initiative, Bangladesh (RIB), a research body that enjoys funding by the Royal Government of The Netherlands. **Mr. Abul Kalam**, Ph.D. is Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka. Their e-mail contact is: nemishus@yahoo.com

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the NGOs of Bangladesh fit in well with the World Bank's description of them as service-oriented, but their role in overall developmental endeavor is subject to question. However, the role of the NGOs in the environmental category has earned more credibility and commendation as they surely play a role in raising community environmental consciousness, promoting protection and the needs of sustainable development. It is felt that the NGOs can be better utilized at the grassroots level for ensuring sustainable development in a least developing country like Bangladesh, and that a government with democratic credentials, effectiveness and credibility can use them as state's eyes, ears and arms for both the ends.

INTRODUCTION

Born in 1947 as part of Pakistan and re-born in 1971 through an arduous struggle for liberation, it is now famed as a land of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), with one of the largest numbers being in operation in the category of international and national NGOs. Some of them have their track record of participation in the nation's struggle for liberation and have also played a role in the work of relief and rehabilitation during that period. In the aftermath of liberation, the NGOs were drawn into development process and have emerged as a well-known phenomenon in the development concerns of Bangladesh (Siddiqui, 96: 117). The number of the registered NGOs in Bangladesh alone is now well publicized around 20,000. The number of the unregistered ones may well be a few times more, though most of them operate locally and nobody knows exactly how many of them are real and functional, and how many are fakes.

While some of the NGOs owe their birth dating back to the Pakistani period, most of them have emerged in the aftermath of the independence of the country. They have featured most prominently

since the early 1980s when democratic government was overthrown by a military coup and a military-instigated civilization process replaced the military rule. It is known that for most of the last two decades nearly 15-20 per cent of the external annual aid flows to Bangladesh have been channeled through the NGOs (Table 1-Appendix). Currently, the NGOs in Bangladesh are involved in almost all sectors of development ranging from social mobilization, rural development to poverty alleviation, health, family planning and education (Jasimuddin, 89: 28-29). The number of registered NGOs purely devoted purely to environmental concerns seems, however, fewer in number, just around 100. While the number may be relatively small, still they made their mark in their self-assumed assignments of environmental protection and dissemination of knowledge about environmental degradation and the related field of sustainable development.

While rise of the NGOs in Bangladesh is as old as the country itself, the history of the environmental NGOs is more recent. There has been diversity of arguments and analytical dimensions involving the activities of the NGOs in Bangladesh; some compliment them for cooperative partnership for socioeconomic development in Bangladesh, changing the nation's development landscape (Khan, 98: 2-3), while others denigrate them as non-accountable organizations (NAOs) (Farooque, 99: 1). The NGOs of Bangladesh have assumed for themselves multifaceted functions, but their organization framework, their self-sustaining capacities, their external links and their actual behaviour or performance at the operational levels raise suspicions and provoke questions.

Questions pertaining to the NGOs in Bangladesh in general and the environmental NGOs in particular concern their origins, typology, the framework and areas of their operations and their impacts on the nation's efforts towards sustainable development. Origin-wise, it may

be little difficult to isolate the environmental NGOs from the general NGOs, for they seem to have common roots to political and economic misgovernance and, to the legacies of unsustainable nature of the country's developmental efforts. It is often asked how did the NGOs—both general as well as of the environmental type—emerge and get engaged in their pursuits, where did they get their funding from, how is their relationship with the government structures and other stakeholders? Lastly, how may one describe the NGOs of Bangladesh, including those in environmental type, in conceptual terms and what part are they playing in social mobilization or raising consciousness vis-à-vis sustainability of the nation's developmental efforts?

In addressing the foregoing pertinent questions, the paper examines the scope of activities and functional spheres of the NGOs in Bangladesh, placing in perspective the dimensions of economic requirements of sustainable development as well as environmental management. It highlights the positive achievements of the NGOs, with a particular focus on their environmental type, while not being uncritical of their lapses. Finally, it is felt that the NGOs may have a continuing role in social mobilization both at the grassroots as well as policymaking levels towards promoting sustainable development, but a government with an effective and credible record of good governance may well utilize the NGOs as its eyes, ears and arms in the interest of both sustainable development and environmental management.

In this connection it may be relevant to bring to light a study made by the Foundation for Advanced Studies on International Development (FASID) of Japan that offered perspectives on issues, possibilities and limitations confronting the NGOs of South Asia in trying to achieve sustainable development. However, the thrust of that study was to highlight the people involved with the NGOs, the aspect of centralization of NGOs and their participation in the process of development (Ohashi, 99:36). Moreover, the study does not offer any

country focus nor does it address the role perception of the environmental NGOs in sustainable development. Contrarily, the current paper seeks to address the role of the environmental NGOs, beginning with conceptual perspectives, identifying the linkage components of sustainable development, touching on the context of the rise of the NGOs globally and keeping in mind the rationale of their emergence in Bangladesh (section II). While tracing the history of the context of sustainable development in Bangladesh, the paper explains the issues and challenges facing sustainable development in Bangladesh, taking into account the backdrop of the NGO movement in the country and highlights the milieu in which the environmental NGOs had their early grooming (section III). The main focus of the paper is on appraisal of the typology of the movement, examining the surroundings in which the NGO movement grew, with an emphasis placed on the role of the environmental NGOs, and also offers an overall assessment of their role in Bangladesh (section IV). The conclusions sum up the overall findings and offer a few words in reflection.

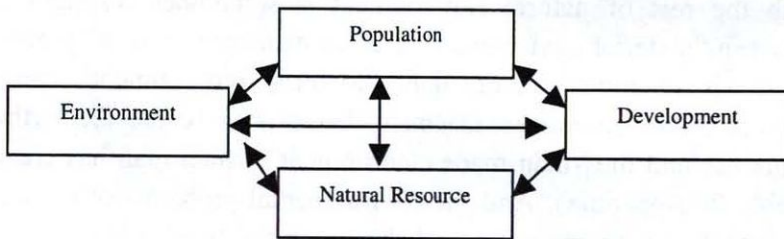
Conceptual Perspectives

In addressing the issue of NGOs role in sustainable development, it is pertinent to begin with a perspective of the interface between environmental and economic/developmental issues that may possibly offer a bridged analysis of these different perspectives. There is indeed an absence of a paradigm integrating the differing approaches in the related fields, namely the institutional aspects of the NGOs, the notional aspect of environment and their interrelationship with sustainable development.

Environment and development involving NGOs encompass complex set of issues, each of which has its own structures and dynamics (Pillet and Murota, 87: Foreword). The issues in their very scope often focus on two dimensions: one is the issue of developmental sustainability or the scope of environmental

consequences of the economic activity in question, and the other is the spatial view or the geographical scope of activities of the actors such as the concerned NGOs. Moreover, the relationships between environment and development are intimately intertwined with the natural as well as human factors (see the schematic model: Figure 1).

Figure 1



Source: Modified and adapted from Rahman and Huq, 94: 28 (Figure, 6).

Economic development, for instance, raises living standards and provides a basis that contributes to improvement in education and health. However, a rapidly growing population uses up the resources that could make economic and social development possible, making development unsustainable. With the combination of environmental degradation, the relationships involving population, development and environment are thus drawn into a full circle. The links between population and the other issues have come into a sharp focus, requiring little elucidation (Kuroda, *General Links*, 91: 680). It is known that unplanned development breaks both ecological and human laws, and hence strains resources, making development unsustainable. Hence it is pertinent to conceptualize environment and development in right perspective, both being inextricably linked, and in that backdrop it is equally important to place the role of the NGOs in appropriate order.

What is environment and how it has become a problem? Environment consists of human beings and the non-human surroundings. And the two elements influence and change each other (Itoh, 91: 713). There are several key elements manifesting the problems of environment. They include pollution, entropy (waste) disposal, noise, depletion of resources etc. Environment deals with the dialectic between nature and culture, the interactions of humans with the rest of nature. Environment is sometimes distinguished between "material environment" and "human environment" which is the basis of human interaction. "Material environment" can be classified into natural environment that existed before the birth of mankind, and the "man-made environment" which man has created (Table 2- Appendix). And the environmental problems of the earth are mainly due to environmental change on this level, which cross all national boundaries as they are related to human life itself.

The concepts of "sustainable development" and "sustainable environment" in this context need little elucidation, as they feature prominently in current development vocabulary, with ramifications for organizations, structures and policies. Sustainable development (SD) is not an independent notion. To make it a reality, a sustainable population growth rate, a sustainable use of resources and a sustainable environment are prerequisites. In this sense, the above three variables are inextricably connected. All three must be "sustainable" in tandem with development. Without development and without some degree of economic growth, it is not possible to raise people's living standards and quality of life. In other words, while development must not harm the environment, development must be in balance with the environment. This is the "sustainable development." Environmentally safe development must be able to satisfy the "needs of future generations" without damaging their abilities, and it must also satisfy the needs of the present generation (Kuroda, 91: 680). The protection of the environment is an essential

prerequisite to development. Without adequate environmental protection, development becomes unsustainable or it is undermined; without development, resources will be inadequate for necessary investments, and environmental protection will fail (World Bank, 92: 2).

The linkage between SD and environment thus seem fairly apparent, though not unquestionable. Conceived through a political process by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, otherwise known as the Brundtland Commission) in its Report *Our Common Future* (1987), SD "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their needs" or development that is "both economically and ecologically sustainable." It further recognizes that "unlimited growth is neither feasible nor desirable, that meeting the basic needs of all people should be the goal of development, and that only a protected and carefully nurtured environment can be able to sustain human aspiration " (WCED Report, cited in Khan, 98: 1-2). There is, however, an element of vagueness and ambiguity in meaning of SD that allowed it to have multiple, rather innumerable, interpretations. Indeed the concept has evolved to encompass *three* major dimensions: *ecological*, *economic* and *social*, with no success as yet of unifying them into a coherent whole. The *ecological* view focuses on preserving the integrity of ecological subsystems viewed as critical for stability of global systems. The units of measurement in this perspective are physical, *not* monetary, and rely on such vocabulary as sustained yield, carrying capacity or assimilative capacity of a country or region. The *economic* approach to sustainability centres around two frameworks: qualitative development and quantitative growth. The qualitative framework argues for a development without quantitative growth, without expanding the macro scale of global production. The *social* dimension, in similar vein, emphasizes that the key actors are human

beings, whose pattern of social organization is crucial. The social dimension involves poverty reduction, requiring considerable growth, as well as development, in developing countries. But ecological constraints are real, and more growth for the poor must be balanced by negative throughput growth for the rich (Jalal. 93:6-7).

Thus, SD simply represents development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations. The causes of unsustainable development lie in several factors. The most important of them is poverty, and amelioration of poverty is a necessary and central condition of any effective programme to deal with environmental concern (Ministerial Brief, 90: 7). It is generally accepted that environmental decline, rapid population growth and stagnant production are closely linked with the fast spread of acute poverty in many countries including Bangladesh. Two hurtful combines: one -poverty-environment- and, the other -development-environment- are the main causes of unsustainable development. (Jalal, 93: 7). The environmental problem is currently seen as a "social disaster" that resulted in serious health disorders and hardships in life. Pollution and destruction of natural and living environment are caused by industries, saving on expenses for environmental protection and safety in pursuit of profits. Further losses are due to generation and accumulation of large quantities of pollutants, which are by-products of urbanization and industrialization, aggravated by a consumer lifestyle, popularized by mass production industries. All these occurred because the government (including self-governing agencies) has been remiss in framing preventive policies against environmental pollution, and because it has not earmarked adequate expenditure for environmental protection." Environmental problem is thus associated with the civilizational changes, or efforts in developmental thrust and in resulting changes in lifestyles, along with the progress of urbanization and industrialization, as both

industries and people in general are damaging nature and the living environment. All this has "led to serious health disorders and hardships in life, confronting the entire society and this is the social calamity which people recognize today" (Shimizu, 91: 733-34).

From the conceptual vantage point, the NGOs have their organizational expression within and/or beyond states committed to uphold or promote peoples interests i.e., more specifically raising consciousness of the citizens about their rights as well as obligations, especially involving environment and developmental concerns. All of this encompasses complex set of issues, each of which has its own structure and dynamics. Thus the rise of NGOs is often attributed to the requirements of sustainable development or a growth process that is sustainable, as the state itself may not be able to serve as the sole determinant of such concerns. This means that others such as conscientious segments of its citizens or 'civil society' has some definitive role to play in both determining what obstacles are confronted in achieving such objectives and offer prescriptions that may be offered as remedies. The new actors emerging at the national and international levels such as the environmental NGOs or NGOs in general must innovate the necessary images in terms of ideas and actions so as to ensure the perceived requirements of both the state and its population. In other words, they should also be able to build their own working relations and self-sustaining capacity in harmony so that the new NGO players in both their organization structures and project framing / program management do not raise new concerns by imposing themselves.

The role of NGOs in sustained developmental efforts and in the maintenance of a sustained environment came to limelight in early 1970s when major donor countries, following the earlier examples set by Norway and Canada, started directly supporting NGOs programmes. The shift of official funding toward the NGOs

accelerated in the 1980s. The principal reason of growing international interest in NGOs is that most donors have broadened their aid objectives, including poverty alleviation concern with sustainable environment as major aid objectives as part of development agenda as well as strengthening of civil societies. The poor performance of governments in the developing world in fulfilling these agendas coupled with NGOs popularity for their works in the field of education, health and poverty alleviation led donors to turn to NGOs to help them achieve a greater poverty focus in their aid programmes.

There thus appears a conceptual link involving the notions such as sustainable environment and sustainable development and the emergence of the NGOs, the latter seems as a follow up of the first. This means that there are concerns such as unsustainable growth, preservation of nature and ecosystem that contributed to a wider awareness among citizens or the 'civil society' about the grinding effects of poverty and deteriorating environment. Such concerns have led to an organizational movement globally committed to pursue a shared environmental and developmental destiny, correspondingly leading to the emergence of organized bodies like the NGOs for management of those concerns at the nation-state level as well.

Since its emergence Bangladesh has been facing several major environmental problems arising from unsustainable nature of its population pressure, surrounding circumstances and as a consequence of development process itself, including human interventions on natural system inside and outside its territory. The problems include land degradation and depletion of natural resources, degradation of soil condition and fertility, natural disasters like floods, droughts, cyclones and storm surges, climatic changes, sea level rise and so on. Hence the role of the NGOs of Bangladesh

in relation to that of the government organizations (GOs) does seem critical for the dual reason of enhancing sustainable environmental management and sustainable development in the country. However, before appraising the role perception of the NGOs in Bangladesh, it seems appropriate to consider in a little more detailed fashion the legacies and emerging concerns in the arena of sustainable development in the country.

Sustainable Development in Bangladesh: Legacies and Emerging Concerns

The civilizational roots of Bangladesh go back several millennia; yet the newly found sustainable development framework hardly seems operational until recently. However, the traditional ways of life in Bangladesh suggest that the ancestors have been largely practicing sustainable development, with a few exceptions and flaws, of course, since ancient times often without knowing the bookish definition of it. The traditional Bangladeshi society has been producing to a level just adequate to contemplate a decent survival. It produced no significant pollution other than excreta, let alone hazardous wastes of industrial and agricultural origin; in the name of progress never intended to destroy local biodiversity, killed only the ferocious and harmful animals; maintained and nurtured a happy society by connecting and networking with neighboring communities, and respecting social norms and values; and best of all, they kept human beings at the centre of everything. Despite being devastated by repeated floods, cyclonic storm surges, and some earthquakes, the society bounced back and maintained a good livelihood. The world's reputed historians found the region one of the most prosperous in the entire globe.

Then came the worst time in its history since the latter part of the colonial days. Not only the country witnessed an unprecedented population growth and the problems associated with it, but also a rat

race of accumulating wealth in the name of industrial development and its elite soon became a party to it. An elitist education system for a selected group of people created wealth gap and an insurmountable disparity, often depriving the poorer class within the society. The traditional social norms were shattered in all counts economic, social, and environmental.

Trying to emerge from a war-wrecked land in the aftermath of the 'internal colonial order' and following the independence in 1971 the foremost important development plan was to rebuild the economy, reinstating the social norms and institutions, and restoring the infrastructure and communication networks. The other important issue was to tackle the population pressure, reducing the growth rate, feeding all the people with locally produced food, providing education and health care for all, devising safety mechanisms to fight against frequent natural disasters, and creating employment for the ever-increasing population. By the time the governments were struggling with all these issues, the concept of sustainable development redefined the path of development along the globe.

Up to the 1970s, the predominant wisdom was that economic growth and environmental quality were in a trade-off relationship. In 1972 two events changed the perception of development. The Club of Rome published 'The Limits to Growth', which warned the global community about collapse of modern civilization within a century if exponential growth trends in population and industrial production were not controlled (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). The report put forward the environmental concerns by forecasting that the uncontrolled growth in population and industrial production would overshoot the availability of food, deplete the planet's one-time endowment of non-renewable reserves of fossil fuels and minerals, and seriously degrade the environment with pollutants. The other historic event was the convening of the United Nations Conference on Human

Environment in Stockholm, which for the first time recognized the interrelationship between human activities with the environment and led to the formation of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Then came the WCED report (1987) that established the interrelationship between various development activities and the environment and offered the first accepted definition of sustainable development, prescribing sustainable development as "a production system that respects the obligation to preserve the ecological base for the development" (WCED, 87).

Currently, even a cursory view of the material environment as well as man-made and human environment of Bangladesh, as typified in Table 2, would project it as one of the most fragile countries in the world. It is more affected than most others by global atmospheric change and ozone layer depletion. Rising sea levels worldwide due to global warming is projected to affect one third of the country in the next half a century. With a population of about 130 million in a territory of 144,000 km, the country is also known as the most densely populated non-city state in the world. It is mostly a low-lying delta, formed by sediments brought from the Himalayan drainage ecosystem and deposited along riverbanks and in the flood plains. The country's major hazards include recurrent flooding (covering large areas, often up to 30 per cent of the country), frequent cyclones and tidal-bores. The funnel shape of the Bay of Bengal focuses many major cyclones and tidal-bores to hit Bangladesh's coast. Cyclones appear to be recurrent and increasing in ferocity. They damage crops, seeds, trees, livestock, housing and infrastructure, cause land degradation and erosion. One-third of the country is also vulnerable to drought, often aggravated by man-made degradation of the environment, both regionally and worldwide (Rahman and Huq, 94: 17-26). The floods that occurred in Bangladesh in 1987 and 1988, and again in 1998 were extremely severe and some of this severity is said to have arisen out of a

reduction of forested land in the watershed, increased drainage congestion and flood plain area reduction upstream and in the delta.

Population growth in a country like Bangladesh is seen as one of the most serious problem inhibiting a sustainable use of resources. The urban population was 13 million in 1981 and now it is over three times that number. Increases in development or productivity are eroded by population growth. There is then a very low land/man ratio that intensifies the competition of the very limited land resources, with soils in a state of impoverishment due to depletion of soil fertility, improper cropping sequences, faulty management practices and increased agro-chemical use, including both fertilizers and pesticides.

Water pollution is also a major source of environmental degradation and source of unabated water-borne diseases. Industrial waste is dumped into rivers causing pollution of both the terrestrial and aquatic environments. Agro-chemical pollution is also feared as residues are expected to enter the food chain. Major water issues are cross-sectoral, with abuses such as uncontrolled withdrawals of ground water, leading to a lowered ground water table, increasing salinity and arsenic contamination in wider areas. Water projects, such as the large embankment schemes, while protecting certain areas from flooding and improving drainage, have led to more rapid siltation of river channels and reduced fish production (Rahman and Huq, 94: 23).

Major environmental issues relating to land are also cross-sectoral, in as much as almost all sectors including, agriculture, water, forests, habitat, industry, horticulture compete for the use of it. Of major importance is the issue or need for a more integrated multi-sectoral planning approach for land utilization and land reclamation. Of particular importance are the coastal land areas that are extremely vulnerable and currently the most underutilized. There is also a lack

of collective management of water and land resources that has inhibited optimum sustainable utilization. While the land is in short supply, it remains the base of production and also to support the burgeoning population. Fish is the major supplier of animal protein, covering nearly 80 per cent people and often the only livelihood open to the landless and unemployed. There is an over-exploitation of the fishery resource that challenges its sustainability. Construction of indiscriminate flood control structures impedes the flow water and consequently flood plain productivity. It is feared that some structures have reduced indigenous flood plain fisheries by over 70 per cent (Rahman and Huq, 94: 25-26). Due to commercial felling of timber for fuel and other uses together with encroachments for agricultural and settlement purposes total Reserve Forest area has been reduced by 50 per cent during the last three decades. There is a continuous loss of valuable mangrove forest in the Sundarbans and Chakoria. While industries contribute to economic growth and increase employment opportunities, there is total lack of enforced industrial and marine pollution regulations to exploit natural resources such as fuels, minerals, timber, fish, shrimp and leather at the expense of the environment. Open water fishery has also been a direct victim of industrial expansion through its untreated pollutants (Rahman and Huq, 94: 26).

In Bangladesh, the issues of sustainable development were first dealt with in formulating its Fourth Five Year Plan 1990-95 (PC, 1991). In its chapter-9 four pages were dedicated to highlight the linkages between environment and SD and a number of relevant activities were included in the plan for implementation during the plan period. Unfortunately, it did not resolve the conflicting issues concerning interests between sector-based development plans and programmes. The ministry in-charge of environment, the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MOEF), instituted in 1989, could not attempt to achieve a lot without having adequate legal mandate and

clearly defined rules of business. Even though the issues of land degradation and encroachment into wetlands were highlighted in the Plan, food production was given the highest priority – a policy which resulted in a gradual degradation of soil quality and quick loss of indigenous germplasm biodiversity, a treasure of tens of thousands of years. During the Plan period the Earth Summit held in Rio (1992) already set the agenda of a common philosophy of "*think globally, act locally*." It also recognized global climate change, loss of biodiversity, and the process of desertification as the most important environmental challenges before humankind and a number of relevant non-binding documents and Conventions were signed. Conventions, mostly adhered to by the Government of Bangladesh (GOB) promptly.

The Fifth Five Year Plan 1997-2002 placed greater emphasis on achieving SD. The MOEF laid out its regulatory framework to reduce environmental pollution from industrialization. However, the task of enhancing sustainable development in Bangladesh has not been easy, given an absence of the basic elements of inter-generational equity – an integral part of the SD framework that ensures long-term regeneration capacity of a resource base by means of implementing conservation practices. The government and the public sector lack vision. Practically no consideration is given to maintaining ecological harmony, arresting pollution from industrial and commercial activities, and conserving the natural resource base. Profit-driven market forces manipulate the corrupt bureaucratic system and thereby destroy almost all norms of a sustainable society. Instead of conservation of natural and/or man-made state managed forests, a large-scale deforestation was observed. Despite undertaking a massive project of relocating all the tannery industries from Dhaka and providing them with a single central effluent treatment plant at government's own finance, the owners of the highly polluting units refused to relocate them outside Dhaka. These

are some of the burning examples of negative roles played by the private sector in the journey to sustainable development. Most of the private sectors pay no interest in upholding the national social and environmental norms. Most of the industries are using energy-inefficient technologies (ADB, 1998). There has been no significant attempt to retrofit the inefficient boilers and other machineries. Dumping wastes and effluents, often containing highly toxic chemicals, into common resources is observed everywhere. Toxic dyes are being used and effluent containing the excess chemicals are let free into water bodies at will. There had been reports of dumping ammonia gas along with hot water in rivers from fertilizer factories, killing all types of aquatic organisms and fish. The various associations of industries and private sector usually remain silent in such incidences, and they have not made any serious attempt to collectively resist such wrong doings.

In the foregoing backdrop one has to consider the role of the NGOs in promoting SD. The origin and evolution of NGOs as development players is not, however, unique to Bangladesh. Globally, the NGOs are perceived as "development alternatives" and their growth has been spurred by the inadequacy and inefficiency of the government or bureaucracy-led development efforts in many countries of the Third World (Drabek, 87; Fisher, 94; Clark, 95). The NGOs currently reach over half a billion of more than four billion people in these countries (Khan, 98: 1). The NGOs in Bangladesh operationally have gone through few transitions since the country's independence. In the 1970s, they were virtually ignored by the government. In the 1980s, they were almost in confrontation with the government. While in the first half of the 1990s as GO-NGO cooperation started to grow there was also an element of friction over the independence of the NGOs beyond GO's control. Since June 1996 the GO-NGOs seemed for a while in virtual alliance or partnership and the NGOs no longer appeared outside the government pale. Frictions, however, resurfaced in 1998, especially

over control of the slums in the capital city of Dhaka when the government sought to evict the slum dwellers blaming them for many of the law and order situations in the country. More recently, since the post-October 2001 political change, the NGOs seem to have been regrouping in terms of interests and alignments, hovering between their developmental ideals and political realities (Staff Correspondent, 2002: 1, 11). However, a more focused perspective of the NGOs is essential before their role in sustainable development can be assessed.

NGOs OF BANGLADESH AND THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS

An effort is now made to appraise the operational spheres of Bangladesh NGOs, with a particular focus placed on their role in sustainable development. The contribution of the NGOs, typified as environmental NGOs, does deserve a special treatment, as they concern themselves with issues bordering on environment and sustainable developments. Both the interrelated issues have emerged as major areas of concern internationally since the beginning of the 1970s. The environmental movement was growing steadily through the 1980s, but had its true momentum since the Rio summit of 1992. In Bangladesh environmental NGOs had their small beginning in the late 1980s, but concurrent with the global environment movement they also grew in numbers and size since the Rio summit.

However, category-wise, there are many NGOs of different order, as the world itself sees it. The NGOs may be classified according to whether they are more relief or development-oriented; whether they are religious or secular; whether they stress service delivery or participation and whether they are more public or private-oriented; whether they have internally-based self-sustaining capacity or whether they are based on external support.

Bangladesh's NGOs may spread over into most of the foregoing groupings, but the critical element of similarity combining most of them is their dependence on external support or on assistance and expertise of the donor community. But the NGOs are not new phenomena in the country, as the international NGOs, both European and American, did operate in the then eastern wing during the Pakistani period, though their numbers have swelled only after the independence of Bangladesh. The NGOs in Bangladesh began to appear as an intermediate institution to safeguard and manage donor's money. The momentum had been built up after the overthrow of the democratically elected government in 1981 and the takeover of governance by the military. In addition to the military dictatorship and the moral prerogative and reluctance to deal with an authoritarian regime, aid-granting governments and agencies also saw an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy that could not properly utilize the international assistance.

Many of the NGOs are nominally registered in the relevant government agency, following the Bureau of NGO Affairs guidelines. Many seem rather passive waiting on the sidelines, perhaps appearing merely as opportunity hunters. The NGOs are perceived as threat because their money power and support bases seem independent of domestic sources. Approximately US\$200 million of foreign aid a year is channeled through the NGOs in Bangladesh. Currently, there are some active 142 foreign NGOs and at least 1100 national NGOs which depend on foreign money for their development programs.

The multilateral donors played a very prominent role through all the foregoing transitions and conflicts involving the NGOs and the Government of Bangladesh. The Bretton Woods Institution, The World Bank (WB), that serves the NGOs as one of the premier donor agencies, defines NGOs as "private organizations that pursue

activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development" (Operational Directive 14.70). In wider usage, the term NGO can be applied to any non-profit organization (NPO) that is independent from government. The WB itself sees the NGOs typically as value-based organizations that depend, in whole or in part, on charitable donations and voluntary service. Although the NGO sector has become increasingly professionalized over the last two decades, principles of altruism and voluntarism remain key defining characteristics. The NGOs are known to vary enormously according to their purpose, philosophy, and sectoral expertise. Their scope of activities is meant to serve different needs. In all its forms, civil society is viewed as probably the largest single factor in development, as the WB President feels, if not in its monetary contribution, then certainly in its human contribution and its experience and its history (WB Internet).

The history of active appearance of the NGOs in Bangladesh perhaps dates back to the post-liberation period of turbulence. Immediately after independence, the GOB naturally decided that the newly emerged state with its various apparatus should serve as the primary mechanism for implementing the nation's socioeconomic development agenda. The GOB, newly installed, however, had limited financial resources to carry out its development agenda having emerged from a devastating Liberation War. Therefore, the country from its very inception was acutely dependent upon foreign development assistance. As a result, the GOB's primary responsibility was reduced to allocating foreign donor money according to the policy dictates and guidance of the international funding agencies. The makeup of the policies and/or guidance given by the foreign donors changed from time to time, depending on the nature of the regimes that came to power since the independence of the country (Farooque, 99: 1).

As the nation approached the mid-1970s, a host of internal conflicts and external manipulations began to have ramifications upon the development process. In particular, a consensus began to emerge at the level of international funding agencies and donor countries that the GOB apparatus was by and large corrupt, inefficient and incapable of making proper resource allocations, let alone manage the process of development. It was then that the international community of aid organizations began looking for an alternative conduit for channeling the development assistance (Farooque, 99: 1). The military takeover in 1981 and later continued autocracy in the guise of a civilianization process for nearly nine years made it almost inevitable that the NGOs would have their way in establishing themselves as 'development alternative' where the government itself was by and large alienated from the people. Therefore, the tumult of the post-liberation period, the regime weaknesses and its alienation from the people may be cited as the main grounds for the rise of the NGOs in Bangladesh.

The NGOs are very often projected as "partners for development," seemingly committed development partnership or promoting participatory development. With this end in view, they have even organized themselves under an umbrella organization, christened "Association of Development Agencies, Bangladesh" (ADAB), which is the 'national apex organization' of the local, national and international NGOs working in Bangladesh. The ostensible idea is to carry forward the nation's development objectives at the grassroots level in fields such as gender empowerment and development, environmental protection and regeneration, sustainable agriculture, disaster preparedness and management, research monitoring and evaluation, human resource programs etc. (ADAB, 2000: vi). The efforts are to cover funding and services, quality-wise, and spatially extend to as many areas of the country as possible. Psychologically, through a constant touch of

'civil' caring and nursing, the consciousness of the concerned people is to be raised to such a height so that they may correct their conduct and voice their moral disgust against social evils.

Straddling all the roles of power which society can offer, NGOs thus have been the unofficial part of the government. With their role in the political agitation of 1995, in the election process of 1996 and subsequent support to the then ruling party, the NGOs became "the most reliable and convenient colleagues of both the Government and foreign donors who also represent the interest of one or more governments"(Chowdhury, 98: 2). However, propelled by their money power, apparent successes and increased patronage from the donors, NGOs continued to flourish during the 1980s and 1990s and took command of a significant portion of the country's socioeconomic development resources.

The environmental NGOs of Bangladesh may be categorized in the following manner, keeping in mind the main focus of their activities: (i) Environmental Research NGOs; (ii) Awareness/Media NGOs; (iii) Activist/Implementation NGOs; (iv) Development NGOs, though the list may not necessarily be seen as either fully representative, compartmentalized or as exhaustive (see Figure 2 and also Table 3- Appendix). Category-wise, the environmental NGOs in Bangladesh have assumed for themselves very many functions and/or management concerns of the state and requiring wider participation of the civil society. These cover the majority of NGOs ranging from the very small to the very large and many of them have similar types of environment related activities such as tree planting, aquaculture, poultry, health and sanitation. Only a few selected NGOs are listed below to provide an illustration of the main types of activities. The list does not include many other NGOs also doing similar work. The areas that may broadly be included into the fields of environment and SD include afforestation and/or social forestry,

conservation and environmental protection, environmental research and analysis of environmental accounting and economics, improvement, enforcement of environmental laws and monitoring of environmental quality. There are then specific areas of concern such as nature and wildlife conservation, management of wetlands, natural resource management, community participation and integration of environment with development so as to ensure what is called sustainable development. For all these functions to be effectively harmonized and enforced, both education and training are essential, while appropriate policy responses are fundamental. This means that all the players in the area, the government, the autonomous bodies, the private sectors as well as the NGOs would have to work in close coordination for the common well being of the nation.

Figure 2 Category of Environmental NGOs of Bangladesh:
Locations and Functions

ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH NGOS

| Name | Location | Functions |
|---|-------------------|---|
| Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS) | Dhaka | Its main program is called Natural Resources, Environment and Development under which it has a number of projects in the fields of agricultural development, surface water systems, social forestry, fisheries, urban health and global climate change |
| International Institute for Environmental Studies. and Disaster Management (IIESDM) | Dhaka | A short-lived NGO (1989-92) that had six scientific research programs in environment and disaster management |
| International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) | International NGO | An international NGO involved in studying, collecting and preserving threatened natural habitats, ecosystems and species around the world, with particular interest in framing World Conservation Strategy and National Conservation Strategies (NCS) for developing countries. |
| Multidisciplinary Action Research Centre (MARC) | Dhaka | Currently undertaking a number of environment related programs, including an awareness creation program and a natural resource information center. |
| National Oceanographic and Maritime Institute (NOAMI) | Dhaka | Primarily involved in oceanographic and maritime activities. |
| Ubining | Dhaka | Conducts studies and action-oriented research on a number of development related issues such as women, health and technology. |
| Winrock International | International NGO | It is involved, primarily in developing agro-forestry program, in cooperation with the government and other NGOs. |

AWARENESS/MEDIA NGOS

| Name | Location | Functions |
|--|-------------------|---|
| Forum of Environmental Journalists (FEJ) | Dhaka | Consists of a group of journalists interested in environmental issues created under the aegis of the UN agency Economic and Social Council for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) |
| Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD) | Dhaka | Led by some media personalities for disseminating environmental ideas and information on such issues |
| Society for Conservation of Nature and Environment (SCONE) | Dhaka | Consists mainly of environmental activists and wildlife lovers whose main activity is to produce a monthly journal on environmental issues |
| Institute for Environment and Development Studies (IEDS) | International NGO | Bangladesh chapter of the Friends of the Earth. |

ACTIVIST NGOs

| Name | Location | Functions |
|--|------------|--|
| Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) | Dhaka | An advocacy group of young lawyers working out techniques and strategies with the legal regime for the protection of environment. |
| Pothikrit | Chittagong | It consists of a group of nature lovers who have been trying to protect the wild game reserve, which is home to a large number of wild animals, threatened by deforestation |
| Barind Protection Society | Rajshahi | Consists of a group of journalists, teachers, academics and environmental activists who are concerned about loss of tree cover, decreasing levels of surface water and the perceived threat of desertification, as well as about degradation of the Barind Tract in the north-western part of the country which is a distinct ecosystem |
| Coastal Area Resources Development and Management Association (CARDMA) | Chittagong | Primarily concerned with development of the coastal areas but also have an interest in environmental and resource management issues. |
| Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon (BAPA)[Bangladesh Environmental Movement] | Dhaka | The International Conference on Bangladesh Environment (ICBEN- 2000) led to the formation of BAPA, a common platform of pro- environmental forces of Bangladesh. Since it's formation, BAPA has directed its efforts towards identification of factors behind environmental degradation, creation of awareness and mobilization of people from different walks of life. BAPA has organized numerous public demonstrations, held negotiation with policy makers and built up a broad based network of cooperation among many pro-environment organizations in the country and abroad. |

DEVELOPMENT NGOS

| Name | Location | Functions |
|--|---|--|
| BRAC | Dhaka (headquarters) | Its environmentally relevant activities include aquaculture, education to health and sanitation and support for tree plantation. |
| Proshika | Dhaka (headquarters) | One of the larger development NGOs that runs successful program on tree planting by their groups on roadsides, embankments and other public lands and provides protection from deforestation. |
| Grameen Bank | Dhaka (headquarters) | Its target groups are the rural poor who are motivated in tasks of environmental protection |
| Ganoshasthyo Kendro (GK) | Savar, Dhaka | Primarily involved in running primary health care programs for the rural as well as urban poor, but it has also diversified into the manufacture of generic medicines. |
| Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB) | Dhaka | It has a number of ongoing programs to facilitate the development of networks working on social forestry issues, including tree planting, agro-forestry, forest protection, environmental protection and regeneration, sustainable agriculture |
| Voluntary Health Services Society (VHSS) | Dhaka | A health sector NGO that has enhanced its activities in the environment sector, organizing workshops and seminars. |
| Hellen Keller (HK) | International NGO | Well-known international NGO that remains active in promoting greater nutritional awareness. |
| Christian Community for Development in Bangladesh (CCDB) | Dhaka (supported by international NGOs) | One of the major development NGOs that targets the rural poor as its target group |

Sources: Rahman and Huq, 89-90, 91(ADAB,2000), ; National Dailies, BELA-Internet Edition.

The foregoing analytical perspectives indicate that the environment NGOs of Bangladesh have been active participants in advancing environmental management and sustainable development. There has been in recent years a mushrooming growth of a number of NGOs like Bangladesh *Paribesh Andolon* (Bangladesh Environment Movement), *Porosh*, *Save Buriganga* in recent months that are playing an activist role in the ongoing salvation of efforts of the country's fragile environment. Link-wise, some NGOs like BRAC, GK, *PROSHIKA* and

peri-NGOs quasi-financial institution like *Grameen* Bank maintained their connections with the government, but they have also developed private sector business interests. Some are oriented toward research and suggest policy options; some are intended to help improve jurisprudence and enforcement of environmental laws. Some are media-based and work towards raising environmental consciousness, while others devote to the conservation of nature and wildlife. Some work in the area of wetlands management and management of natural resources as well as support community participation. Still there are others who have their thrust to development activities in general, but also focus on integration of environment in development, emphasizing sustainable development. There are, however, overwhelming areas of concerns of crisis and disaster-management in low-lying delta country Bangladesh that involves almost NGOs, not least the environmental NGOs. They include relief and rehabilitation in the disaster-prone country that almost routinely affect millions in the country by flash-floods and seasonal floods, tornadoes, cyclones and tidal waves, infectious and waterborne diseases, such as acute diarrhea and arsenic contamination.

In almost all these areas the stakeholders, the relevant government departments, semi-government/autonomous bodies, the NGOs, environmental NGOs, including those based in the media have played complementary roles, especially during crisis and disaster situations in providing relief and succor to the affected people as well as helping rehabilitation. Many were successfully drawn into reforestation/afforestation programmes, while others contributed to nation's effort to combat diseases that cause infant mortality.

Some of the legal-environmental NGOs, in particular the BELA, played very prominent role since 1994 in highlighting and monitoring the situations of environmental improvement. It also brought a number of highly publicized litigation cases against the government departments and bodies for environmental neglect, persistently

knocking at the door of the judiciary that ultimately yielded a number of landmark judgments in enforcing environmental laws in the country (BELA-Internet Edition). More recently it has taken the both the private sectors and public sector bodies for unplanned land filling of the capital city's lakes and natural reservoir of waters.

Research-type environmental NGOs have participated and actively deliberated in international gatherings on issues of environmental and sustainable development since 1992. They also undertook research and analysis of various issues of environmental concern. Some of them have been publishing periodicals and manuals, books and monographs articulating the areas of concerns and suggesting remedial measures. Media-based environmental NGOs kept up their vigilance and made efforts to objectively report the environmental predicaments facing the nation. In many seminars, symposia, workshops etc. organized by the environmental NGOs government's cabinet members, luminaries, professionals, civil society leaders and even those from the Judiciary, including the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh became involved, a positive side of GO-NGO cooperation to enhance the cause of sustainable development.

The relevant government ministry and department, the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MOEF) and the Department of Environment (DOE), have, by and large, established good working relationships with the environmental NGO, primarily through the Coalition of Environmental NGOs (CEN). Through such working relationships both sides contributed successfully to develop the National Environmental Management Plan (NEMAP), a good example of GO-NGO cooperation that for the first time paved the way for a bottom-up approach towards national development in any sector. Sustainable Environmental Management Programme (SEMP) launched in 1997 is a follow-up action program for implementation of the NEMAP, the United Nations Development Programme

(UNDP) having played a major role in developing and providing funds for enhancing environmental activities through both the state and NGOs. The NEMAP consisted of 26 projects (components) being executed by the MOEF and with direct assistance from the research community, media, and NGOs. 21 government/non-government agencies, Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), Civil Society, Private Sector, International Agencies, Academic Institutions, Research Organizations, and other Donors such as Canadian International and Development Agency (CIDA), NORAD, World Bank throughout Bangladesh were also associated in implementation. Focus areas relating to the environment are Policy and Institutions; Participatory Eco-System Management; Community-based Environmental Sanitation; Advocacy and Awareness; and Training and Education. The process of formulating the plan itself was participatory, based on voices being raised at a number of grassroots workshops attended by a large number of local people across the country that include the poor, women and the disadvantaged (MOEF, 1995).

A National Phase-out Plan for Ozone Depleting Substances was formulated and acted upon. In order to attain food self-sufficiency, the GOB also adopted number of social development goals, including poverty reduction, employment generation, spreading primary education, improvement of the primary health care system, and decentralization of administrative systems. Participation of local people in planning processes received due attention, which was reflected in the formulation of a Perspective Development Plan (MOP, 1995). The National Environment Act 1995 was enacted, launched and housed within the MOEF, and the issue environmental conservation receiving high importance. The initiative towards formulating a national conservation strategy, taken by the NGOs and civil society, was formally endorsed by the government and a project was subsequently launched and housed within the MOEF. To attain

high economic growth the concept of free market economy was introduced by encouraging the private sector to operate, by lifting the existing bureaucratic bottlenecks and by inviting foreign direct investments for rapid industrialization. Environmental Impacts Assessment (EIA) was made mandatory for a number of industrial and other development activities, though these are still in the rudimentary stages, with over 1100 polluting industrial units identified that have failed to comply with the EIA guidelines.

The government's Technical Education Board worked in harmony with the environmental NGOs to publish the first major textbook in vernacular for the students as well as general readership. It offers a very lucid explanation of all environmental issues from nature and ecosystem to pollution, waste management and greenhouse effect (Karim *et. al.*, 99). The country's universities did not lag behind in opening academic departments and/or institutes devoted to environmental studies and offering courses on environment-related issues in the existing departments. Many of the professionals in the NGOs, the academia and many of the government departments seem willing to work closely so as to highlight the environmental predicament facing the nation and to confront the challenges ahead. While the number of Bangladeshi NGOs has swelled into thousands, ranging from the very small to the very big in a wide variety of areas, only about a hundred of them have been active in environmental issues in the last decade.

An essential pre-requisite for successful planning is the availability of detailed and reliable information of the socio-economic and ecological environment in the country. Researchers in the NGOs have relentlessly assessed the outcome of "traditional planning" and given recommendations on various development issues. The issues concerning environmental degradation were also

placed with due emphasis, which culminated into the formulation of a National Conservation Strategy (NCS) during 1989-92.

Following the devastating floods of 1987 and 1988, the GOB spent millions of dollars to formulate Flood Action Plan (FAP) for the country. The civil society/polity vehemently opposed the plan and criticized it for being too dependent on expensive structural measures (Dalal-Clayton, 1989). The NGO community, as a part of the polity, came forward with documentation on how the ill-planned development activities along the rivers, often in the name of assisting the local poor, further marginalized the poor driving them out of their ancestral lands. Their collective voice within the national boundary and beyond, forced donors to revisit the ideas, while the national legal system put an injunction on implementation of the projects laid down under the aegis of FAP. In 1992 a National Phase-out Plan for the Ozone Depleting Substances was formulated and acted upon.

Similarly, academics raised awareness on the imminent threats of climate change on Bangladesh, and actively took part in international supreme technical forum to formulate a global action agenda for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enhancing adaptation. A few Bangladeshi scientists have become active members of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and have generated wealth of information on various aspects of vulnerability, assessment methodology, emission reduction, and adaptation. Some of these scientists helped a few developing countries to assess their vulnerability to climate change. At present, the national experts are engaged in producing the National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and also a National Action Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change (BCAS interviews).

It may be mentioned that the donors have been more generous towards channeling money through the NGOs. Such contributions enabled NGOs to run projects on rural development, primary and reproductive health care, informal education, participatory forestry, micro-credit towards facilitating rural livelihood and more. Many of these projects have made significant contribution to the overall development of the country. The highly successful activities include Non-formal Education Programme, Immunization Programme, Family Planning Programme, Polio Eradication Programme and others (ADB, 2002).

International Red Crescent Society played a major role in implementing a very successful disaster preparedness and management programme. Multilateral and Bilateral donors, including the WB, the Asian Development Bank and the CIDA USAID and Winrock International, water resources development programme (particularly by the Netherlands International Development Agency), urban slum development programme (particularly by DFID, Danish International Development Agency etc.), environmental development programme (particularly by the CIDA and skills development programme (particularly by the Swedish International Development Agency)—all continue to implement pro-poor and sustainable development projects in Bangladesh. Each of these organizations, along with many others focuses on the future of Bangladesh as a viable and sustained economy.

However, the role of the NGOs as civil society player in the spheres of both environment and sustainable development remain somewhat contentious, because of the traditionally identifiable contentious nature of GO-NGO relations, the role perception of the NGOs in civil society, and the debate over their legitimacy. It is not unknown that the NGOs owe their very legitimacy in the country largely to the intervention of the foreign donors, established their visibility and supportive regulatory

framework for their effective functioning from external actors and continue to seek to enhance their status by developing collaborative relationships with them. That makes them appear as somewhat alien. Moreover, the NGOs continue to influence the state in their favor and do little to develop greater concord and compatibility with other segments of civil society they are committed to serve.

However, the overall roles of the NGOs of Bangladesh, including those in the environmental category, are not beyond question. In a relatively short span of time some of the country's NGOs have built such a high profile for themselves internationally that many a country seem bent on expanding their role model and experiences to other countries. There is an element of confusion about their ranking in political and social hierarchy, their external links with the donor agencies and governments or their legitimacy in nation's systemic evolution, their internal structure and image issue, their role perception in governance or in social mobilization, their accountability and transparency. Yet the NGOs, by and large, have been playing an important role in Bangladesh in raising consciousness about environmental management and sustainable development. It is true indeed that worked alternately in confrontation or in harmony with the GOB.

The NGOs of Bangladesh certainly did have a great going in the overall area of environmental management and sustainable development. Their impact is also felt in specific areas such as grassroots-level environmental education and poverty alleviation, media campaign and publicity, environmental jurisprudence and legal challenges covering issues of lapses in ensuring sustainable development, raising health and hygiene consciousness, micro-credit arrangements and social forestry. But the dichotomy became visible when some of them ventured to intrude well into the functional mechanisms of the GOs, challenging even the legitimacy of the

government itself. It is too well known that the NGOs led by their apex body ADAB actively joined the campaign during the period 1995-96 against a democratically elected government and helped topple that government. Some of them, like PROSHIKA, have clearly identified themselves with the subsequent regime and remained clearly aligned with the then party in power until it lost the elections in 2001.

The ability to bypass the state apparatus, however convenient for the distribution and implementation of development programmes, had a basic problem. The NGOs, including the environmental ones, do not feature anywhere in the basic structure of a traditional democratic system of governance comprising the state mechanisms, the GOs, market institutions and the civil society. Rather the NGOs carry with them a fundamentally different facet of devolution of state functions, but unlike the GOs they have deficiency in the realm of accountability. As a non-market institution, they are shielded from predatory competition in price. As non-governmental institution, they are shielded from political competition, while the governments remain accountable to the general citizenship. The NGOs are not a product of spontaneous social formation; the stakeholders here include foreign donor decision-makers, while the immediate beneficiaries are those individuals in the NGOs who have ventured into them. Here the fundamental problem of NGOs remains one of accountability: they are not directly accountable to the government, the social forces, market or the civil society they claim to serve or represent.

To be fair, most of the environmental NGOs are less politicized. Yet for obvious reasons of organizational solidarity, the environmental NGOs did not, or perhaps could not, take a separate position and remained supportive of the overly political role of their namesakes. Moreover, in spheres of monetary gain and profit motif, even the environmental NGOs do not prove to be angels, as they stand accused of abusing the donors fund at the expense of hapless rural patients

suffering from diseases such acute arsenic poisoning. Indeed, it is reported that many NGOs funded by donor agencies go to the arsenic contaminated rural areas of Bangladesh, collect samples of blood, hair and nail of patients with promises of medical help but actually never return. Such experiences prompted the affected people to vow to hand over the NGO personnel to the police, should they come again for samples with similar excuses of experiments (The Daily Star, 13 July 2000). Do these NGOs then trade on sufferings of the citizens and in turn invite public wrath? This is symptomatic of serious malaise of the newly found donor-NGO partnership. As the NGOs are armed with donor patronage, there is little possibility of government intervention and even the donors themselves have little control once fund is released to their NGO beneficiaries.

This leads to another aspect of accountability and transparency of the NGOs, so much desired and demanded globally in democratic governance. The NGOs cannot be any exception to this, especially when there is a wide-ranging belief that the top echelons of NGOs themselves take a large chunk of the funds available, while the field level workers, assigned with the donkey's job, are quite poorly paid or have little job security. In the process, the fewer top NGO managers may feel quite secure but that is at the expense of larger numbers of the poorly paid field level workers, who are left highly insecure. The concerned government ministers affirm the role of the NGOs in areas such as afforestation or disaster management, yet candidly express their ignorance about their accountability (see, for instance, The Daily Star, 12 June 2000). The primary problem arises from their foreign dependence, both for financial resources and in many a case for expertise. There is virtually no NGO operating in the country that has a self-sustaining capacity *sans* external donors. Most have little regulatory framework of their own and little strength of internal management, except for stopgap arrangements on a project-to-project basis of external funding. Basically, they get most of their funds from

external sources with guidelines for program management, presumably answerable to the donors alone. Naturally, it may easily be possible for the foreign powers to infiltrate through the NGO mechanism into the already fragile arena of the nation's domestic politics. For they serve as "shopping baskets" of many foreign donors and may hence have little relevance to local or national requirements, as their accountability is merely foreign-oriented.

The NGOs in all use up to 15-20 percent of the country's annual development programs, those in the field of environmental management get a lesser share of the resources, though the exact amount of their funding can hardly be guessed. Internationally there is a significant amount currently available for environmentally vulnerable nations like Bangladesh. It is appropriate that environmental get stronger and remain to fully exploit the international funding available to advance the nation's efforts towards sustainable development. At the level of cooperative relations, GOs and environmental NGOs, issues such as environmental protection and disaster management stood to gain much better rating than those working in other fields. Such a phenomenon may, however, be attributable to the perception of urgency confronting all the stakeholders, the state, the NGOs, the citizens and indeed the international community of donors as a whole. It is true that the NGO-GOB relations have never been very smooth.

Yet it is also true that there is a legacy by now of GO-NGO collaboration, especially in the management of natural disasters like 1998 flooding of the country that was the most severe in living memory and their joint efforts could successfully avert a serious famine in the country. The NGOs have been pleading in favor of pro-environmental legislations, technologies and products that resulted in favorable changes. For instance, to arrest air pollution, the import tax of highly polluting two-stroke engines was increased significantly. A plan is now underway to ban such engines altogether. Special

regulatory framework was devised to encourage creation of woodlots in state owned lands by involving the rural poor. These are some of the examples of state's willingness to facilitate the process of sustainable development, even though due to inherent weaknesses in the process of national governance, compounded by lack of political will, and rampant corruption, implementation of the current regulatory framework has been hindered severely. In the general field of environmental management also the government, the executive and even the judiciary, have been more receptive to listen to the NGO entreaties on both conservation issues and anti-pollution cases than they ever did.

Considering the overall trends in the nation's efforts towards sustainable development in the 1990s, one may discern that the country's population growth rate decreased substantially, coupled with increases in both agricultural and industrial production. A number of national policies have been formulated towards sustainable use and management of natural resources (i.e., water, energy, forestry, fisheries etc.) has been underway. There has been increase in government spending on education and public health; an improved disaster management is in place through improved forecasting and warning, during- and post-disaster rehabilitation etc. An emphasis is now placed on increased people's participation in governance in general. Special attention is now given on afforestation, particularly on homestead and strip afforestation. A steady expansion of electricity coverage throughout the country is also underway, so is a much improved road communication network. All such achievement has been possible due partly to facilitation of democratic governance, and partly to the prominent role assumed by the NGOs in both environmental management and sustainable development.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper offered an appraisal of the role perception of the NGOs working in the area of environment and the extent of their achievement in the field of sustainable development. It seemed rather difficult to compartmentalize the NGOs into an exclusive environmental group, as most NGOs have assumed for themselves and are drawn into multifaceted activities, with special role assumption during disaster situations and for the purpose of poverty alleviation. BCAS, for instance, started as an environmental research group addressing environmental and developmental questions, but it soon moved into people's participation and governance concerns, including poverty alleviation, and emerged as a pioneer in ecosystem management (Rahman, 2001: 3). Thus there seems an entwining conceptual tangle involving poverty-environment-development that has its snowballing effects on the self-assumed functions of the NGOs, and diagnosing the syndrome and healing of the symptoms constitute the main focus of their activities. It is obvious that in all their sphere of activities there is an interconnecting spectrum that brings population, resources, environment and development together into a compact disk, as mentioned in Fig. 1, requiring attention in their totality. A careful study of the library materials coupled with personal visits to, and interviews with some of the researchers in, the NGO offices in Dhaka has enabled the authors to gain an insight into their role in the field of sustainable development. A few more points are now added as summing up and for reflection.

Despite the criticisms made earlier, the NGOs as new actors have come here to stay and are part of a new set of interactions in the changing order of international system. Given the entire history of the NGO evolution in Bangladesh and their operations in the last couple of decades, one can hardly doubt the effectiveness of activity of some of the NGOs in Bangladesh. Many of them have made significant

contributions throwing gigantic ideas of enlightenment and vision of social change, offering a better art of management even in the entrepreneurial system. However, it is pertinent that the NGO players be alert to criticisms. It is high time that they make themselves transparent and accountable. Most important for all of them, is to stay away from the minefield of the country's politics. The NGOs of Bangladesh may be cited as global models, but that cannot be at the expense of a democratic polity, which people of all segments of society deeply cherish to evolve in the country. The NGOs should also strive to avoid the crisis of legitimacy, associated with donor driven motivation and associate the wider segments concerned people in their decision making process (Hossain, 98: 28). In this respect the GOs being the functional mechanisms of the state may serve as replicable role models with the necessary input policy vision and expeditious steps towards policy implementation. To these ends, the government has to make itself transparent and accountable in a functional democratic setting. As already stated, the NGOs are here to stay, globally as well as in Bangladesh. The best bet for the government under the circumstances is to establish its own democratic credentials, accountability, transparency, effectiveness and credibility so that the NGOs cannot lay a stake to its own realm. Rather the effort should be so directed that the NGOs could properly be utilized as the state's eyes, ears and arms for furthering and strengthening good governance.

As a resource scarce and a densely populated country Bangladesh requires, more than others, sustainable development planning so as to ensure the lasting use of resources for the growing population of the future generations (Rahman and Huq, 94: 32). Despite their limitations, the environmental NGOs of the country have over the past decade been able to establish both a working relationship with the GOs and research bodies involved in resource management and policy implementation (Table 3). Hence, there has been a flowering of experiences of eco-

management and other community participation programmes in the natural management sector ranging from wetlands to forest. This has now been accepted by the national policy planners and becoming an integrated part of national policy for the sector. Few centers of excellence and knowledge based on NGOs have emerged in Bangladesh with significant sustainable development policy analysis experience and well connected to international institutes. These can be used to enhance policy analysis and developing integrated resource management plans for sustainable development (Rahman, 2001: 3).

Through there has been growing collaboration between government and NGOs, many of the project operators and some agencies tend to use NGOs for offering contract services. The NGOs strongly believe in the utilization of their social mobilization skills and participatory planning experiences in aid of the poor an ecosystem for sustainable management (Rahman, 2001: 3).

All projects need to be replicated and rigorously monitored independently. There is also a need to harness the emergence of small NGOs initiatives in different ecosystems. The strengthening of resource or area based networks of NGOs will also complement in sustainable development and resource management efforts. The synergy between an emerging local government and other government functionaries, peoples knowledge and dedicated NGOs offer the best hope for sustainable development or resource management in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2001: 3).

Despite a multifaceted role played by NGOs in promoting and advancing sustainable development and a rising environmental awareness, it seems still difficult to visualize an optimistic scenario for the country over the next century. For environmental degradation cut a swathe through Bangladesh during the past three decades. The country's ecology has been damaged, the forests have been depleted, the wetlands destroyed, different species of flora and fauna have

vanished, wildlife has almost disappeared, biodiversity has been greatly reduced and the air quality deteriorated. The increased environmental awareness, however, has led to a number of momentous decisions to arrest environmental deterioration, such as preservation of the capital city's green patches of land, freeing the rivers and lakes from the encroachers and land-grabbers, disciplining the traffic congestion and curb air pollution, banning of polythene shopping bags, the initiatives to ban old vehicles emitting deadly black smoke, regulate cutting of hills and unauthorized brickfields, maintain reserve forests, to promote arsenic mitigation schemes. Proactive role of the NGOs and their active participation led to environmental consciousness as well as to better disaster management through indigenous coping capacities and community resilience to overcome living vulnerability, making Bangladesh as a sort of model in the field (BSS, 2002: 19). However, the country's overall vulnerability remains acute, the environmental laws are still too weak in terms of both letter and spirit of implementation, the environmental courts, though promised are yet to be set up. The country has made some progress towards the critical path of sustainable development, but there remains a long journey ahead in which the NGOs, along with other segments of civil society can make substantial contribution.

Table - 1**Flow of Foreign Grant Fund to the NGOs through NGO Affairs Bureau in Bangladesh**

| Period FY | Approved Projects (Nos) | Active NGOs | | | Amount Approved Tk/US\$ (Cumulative) |
|--------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-----|------|---|
| | | <u>Local/Foreign/Total</u> | | | |
| 1990-91 | 464 | 395 | 99 | 494 | 6,356,572,508.33 \$158,914,312.71 |
| 1991-92 | 549 | 523 | 111 | 634 | 17,840,951,913.00 \$446,023,797.83 |
| 1992-93 | 626 | 600 | 125 | 725 | 33,836,320,029.77 \$845,908,000.74 |
| 1993-94 | 581 | 683 | 124 | 807 | 46,437,280,816.37 \$1,160,932,020.41 |
| 1994-95 | 579 | 790 | 129 | 919 | 64,064,777,095.76 \$1,601,619,427.39 |
| 1995-96 | 702 | 882 | 132 | 1014 | 78,737,174,795.16 \$1,968,429,369.88 |
| 1996-97 | 746 | 997 | 135 | 1132 | 88,996,362,479.96 \$2,138,307,604.04 |
| 1997-98 | 593 | 1083 | 142 | 1225 | 95,739,094,319.96 \$2,115,781,089.94 |

Source: NGO Affairs Bureau, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 1999

Table 2
Classification of Environment and Main Environment Problems

| Classification of Environment | Details | Main Environmental Problems |
|---|---|---|
| I. Material Environment Natural Environment temperature, soil erosion | Atmosphere (Nature) Topography/Soil quality Plants, animals, vegetation | Ozone destruction, rise in earth's desert formation, water Pollution, sea pollution, acid Rain destruction of tropical Rain forests & wildlife Population |
| Man-made Environment growth regions | (Social resource infrastructure) | |
| a. Facilities related to production. Secondary, Tertiary Production related facilities Transportation and Communication Facilities | Industrial land, water facilities Electricity, gas facilities, etc. Agricultural foundation, water facilities, forest, roads, fishing harbor facilities etc. Roads, railways, ports, electrical communication facilities | a. Inadequate provision of facilities. Atmospheric pollution, traffic pollution, noise pollution, water pollution, undergone water/soil pollution, dust/industrial wastes. |
| b. Facilities related Daily living housing related facilities | Housing, land development, underground and above water facilities, parks, cleaning Facilities etc. (roads, railways, Ports, electrical communication facilities etc.) | b. Deterioration of housing/residential conditions |
| Education and Cultural facilities Health and Welfare Facilities | Schools, social education/cultural facilities, etc. health centers, hospitals, social welfare facilities etc. | |
| c. Facilities related to national land conservation | River and forestry conservation facilities, seashore conservation facilities, etc. | Population Reduction Regions c. Maintenance of facilities related to living is difficult |
| II Human Environment d. Relationships of family, relatives e. Neighborhood relationships | Intra-family relationships Local governing organizations of town, ward, neighborhood peace and order | d. Destruction of natural environment reclamation/ Golf links Regions with rapid increase in population Deterioration of mutual assistance Deterioration of public peace associations |
| f. Producer relationships | Producer groups of agricultural cooperatives, industrial & business associations and administrative groups | Regions with decrease in population Deterioration of mutual assistance |

Source: Economic Planning Agency, "Annual report related to Status of Pollution, 1989" (1989) (quoted in Itoh, 91: 723).

Table 3

Environment Conservation Program in Bangladesh: Major Actors and Areas of GO-NGO Participation

| <u>Institution</u> | <u>Type</u> | <u>Major Areas of Interest</u> |
|---|---------------|---|
| Ministry of Environment | Government | Setting Environmental Policy and Integration into Development |
| Department of Conservation Act, Environment | Government | Enforcing the Environment |
| Forest Department | Government | 1995 and subsequent rules 1997 Monitoring environmental quality Protection of Government Forests Afforestation |
| Coalition of Environmental NGOs (CEN) | NGO | Network of over 100 NGOs working on Environmental Issues |
| Bangladesh Center for Advanced Studies (BCAS) Bangladesh University | NGO | Research and Policy Center Studying Environmental Issues |
| Of Engineering and Technology (BUET) | University | Teaching Environmental Engineering Courses |
| North-South University | University | Teaching Environment Courses |
| Independent University Of Bangladesh | University | Teaching Environmental Courses |
| Forum of Environmental Journalists, Bangladesh | Media NGO | Raising Environmental Awareness |
| Bangladesh Environment Journalists' Association (BEJA) | Media NGO | Raising Environmental Awareness |
| IUCN- The World Natural Conservation Union | International | Support National Institutions in |
| Bangladesh Institute Of Development | NGO | Resource Management and Biodiversity Conservation |
| Studies (BIDS) | Institute | Research Research on Environment and Developmental Issues |
| Bangladesh Unnayan Parishad (BUP) | NGO | Research on Environmental and Developmental Issues |
| University of Dhaka | University | Education and Research |
| Jahangirnagar University | University | Education and Research |
| Rajshahi University | University | Education and Research |
| Nature Conservation | NGO | Nature and Wildlife Conservation |

| | | |
|--|-----|--|
| Movement (NACOM) | | |
| Wildlife Society of Bangladesh (WSB) | NGO | Wildlife Conservation |
| Centre of Natural Resource Studies (CNRS) | NGO | Wetlands Management Community Participation |
| Centre for Advanced Research in Natural Resources and Management (CARINAM) | NGO | Natural Resource Management |
| Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) | NGO | Developmental Focus, with a recent emphasis on integration of environment in development |
| Bangladesh Environment Movement (BEM) | NGO | Coalition of NGOs and Individuals to Monitor Environmental Issues |

Sources: Based on Environment and Development Alliance (EDA), 99: 65-66; Bangladesh Dailies.

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