NGOs in Development Policy

I

Introduction

NGOs were born with Bangladesh. The devastation of 1971 took its toll on the country, the economy and the people. In many ways work for the country's development had to be started afresh. And there was much work to be done. As is often the case, a crisis will show the strength of a people and compel some to take action in the interest of others. The pervasive devastation and suffering that came in the aftermath of independence inspired action in an innovative and committed group of people dedicated to helping their countrymen and women. This was the beginning of the NGO movement in Bangladesh.

From its beginning as a rehabilitation committee for returning refugees in Sylhet, BRAC has grown to be the world's largest private development organisation. Our growth is a function of our success in listening to the people, developing programmes to meet their needs, and working to empower them to address the issues that keep them in
poverty. Since our inception we have had the privilege to work with and learn from the people of Bangladesh. It is because of this willingness to learn that we have evolved and grown with the country. From our initial programmes dealing with rehabilitation, we moved into community development as a long-term approach to people's needs. Then as our learning and experience grew we realised that the community approach did not directly benefit the people in most severe need. In 1976, we moved to a target group approach in which our programmes sought to address the poorest of the poor, those people whose lives were absolutely dominated by poverty. BRAC has always sought to address the needs of this country's poor people, and as our capacity has grown new avenues have opened up to us. We have become concerned with the larger macro policy issues of poverty alleviation, both nationally and internationally. We have come to a position where we can influence policy, not by merely talking about what could be done, but by showing what we have done; showing them the capacity of the poor to help themselves if given the right tools, opportunities and motivations.

II

THREE DECADES OF DEVELOPMENT

NGOs in Bangladesh now have three decades of building relationships with people, donor agencies and governments, at home and abroad. Relationships between organisations, as between people, grow, mature and change. This is especially true of the relationship between NGOs and the government of Bangladesh, as it has evolved in the past three decades.
think that this relationship can be characterised as a series of phases.

During the first phase, in the 1970s, we paid little attention to each other. The country was in such a deep state of crisis, that both the government and NGOs were trying to get organised to try to address the suffering of the people. There was so much to do as schools, health facilities, and people's livelihoods lay in ruins. The government was oblivious to the existence of NGOs and, as we were small organisations, we didn't think that the government was interested in our work. So in the first decade when we were facing such enormous tasks, neither party had time to engage with the other.

This was all to change quite radically with the coming of the 1980's. In this decade NGOs experienced some successes and came to feel confident about their role in the development of Bangladesh. These were no longer temporary organisations to deal with emergency relief. BRAC had become a pillar of civil society and after a decade of working with people in poverty its 'learning' approach had paid off with some high profile successes. This was the decade of 'Arrogance, Suspicion, and Jealousy'. Large scale successes like the Oral Rehydration Therapy (ORT) programme, where female workers mobilised and educated rural women about the simple solution to treat diarrhoea, showed that BRAC programmes could make a significant impact in the areas of health, education, and rural development. By 1990, 1,200 BRAC Oral Rehydration workers had introduced 13 million households to this revolutionary treatment.
At this point BRAC had found its place and created a demand for its programmes. The government reacted to BRAC's confidence with suspicion. They were wary of subversion by this newly powerful actor. BRAC's strategy in dealing with this somewhat strained relationship was to avoid confrontation and continue to do the things that it did best. BRAC was out to prove that good things could happen in Bangladesh, to prove that it was not a 'bottomless' basket as it had been callously labelled by some.

The current decade has been one of 'Rapprochement' between NGOs and the government. I think everyone realises that although a great deal has been achieved since independence, there remains a great deal of work to be done to face the challenges encountered by a huge percentage of our population. There is more than a lifetime's work for both the government and NGOs to do. The 1990's saw us embark on many joint-programming initiatives with the government. BRAC joined the government's Expanded Programme on Immunisation (EPI) offering management support for enhanced delivery and assistance in mobilising hard to reach populations. This joint effort succeeded in bringing the immunisation rate from 2% in 1985, to 80% in the 1990s. We have also partnered with the government on our Income Generation for Vulnerable Group Development project (IGVGD), and on many of our Rural Development Programmes in which the government supplies inputs for our poultry and sericulture programmes among others. Thus the '90s has seen greater co-operation between government and NGOs which recognises their respective strengths and
mobilises these strengths to work towards a betterment of the standard of living of the poor and vulnerable.

And now, on the cusp of the 21st century, the question on everyone's lips is what will the future hold? We expect that our relationship with the government will continue to mature and we hope to continue to work with them in the future. But we are wary. Like other NGOs in the North and the South, we are concerned with the possibility that we will become 'co-opted' by the government or international donors. We fear that we will come to be viewed as a 'public service contractor' for implementing their programmes and priorities. The threat here is that we will lose our independence and our flexibility, which are our major strengths.

III

NGOS' ROLE IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Our plan for the future does not involve 'co-option'. We will continue our work and pursue policy changes at the national level with a two pronged approach. First, we seek to influence policy indirectly through the empowerment of the poor themselves. We seek to raise their awareness of their rights and responsibilities and facilitate their organisation so that their voices that have so long been silenced can at last be heard. Our Social Development programme includes a variety of initiatives to raise awareness and enhance the representation of issues important to the poor. The Human Rights and Legal Education Training makes people aware of the law and their rights and the Polli Shomaj, a village level committee, is responsible for working with local government to
safeguard these rights. The Gram Shomaj is another village forum for discussing issues that affect the lives of women and work to resolve local disputes.

The second dimension of our approach is to advocate directly at all levels of government for more attention to the issues and policies necessary for significant poverty alleviation. This policy is not pursued exclusively at the national level in Dhaka but also at local levels. Our Community Leaders Workshop brings together prominent members of the community to discuss social, legal and economic issues in the interest of raising their awareness of the social and economic hardships encountered by the underprivileged.

We seek to open up space for the discussion of the agenda of the poor, both by helping them organise themselves to better assert the rights they are granted under law, but also to mobilise against the discrimination that they encounter daily. At the national and international levels, BRAC seeks to not only to draw attention to the need to seriously address poverty, but we also seek to show that success is possible. In this respect our role is political, but not partisan. Development is a political process. It deals with the empowerment of the underprivileged and the mobilisation of national resources. But these are cross cutting issues that span the bridge between political party affiliation. Our message is very clear to both, the government and opposition parties, attention to basic needs like access to health care, education and the chance to earn a living must be a cornerstone of their policy.
NGOs in Bangladesh have earned the right to be listened to and respected. Even my presence here, at the Bangladesh Institute for International and Strategic Studies is evidence of the importance being placed on issues surrounding poverty and the contributions that NGOs have to make the policy discussion. The agenda of the poor has become important for the nation and the globe. In the past thirty years we have been learning from the village organisation members and providing examples for programmes all over the world. In the next thirty years we will continue to learn while sharing our experience with policy makers so that the achievements at the village level in the reduction of poverty and the promotion of health and education can be sustained and spread throughout the country.