

## **THE ROLE OF NGOs IN THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH**

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Key words: Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), sustainable development, development programmes, poverty alleviation, employment generation

Abstract. Non-governmental organizations are claimed to have impacts on the sustainable development in rural areas of the developing countries and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is identified as an example. This study has considered BRAC as the case and has been aimed to critically outline the roles of this selected non-governmental organization (BRAC) in sustainable development process. With this particular aim, this study has also explored the trends of current poverty situations in Bangladesh. In addition, impacts of the BRAC sustainable development initiatives have also been analyzed, to some extent. This study has selected two villages of the Chandpur district of Bangladesh, where BRAC has been operating intense programmes. This study has used both the qualitative and quantitative methods of research. Results suggest that programmes undertaken by NGOs are capable of having positive contributions in the sustainable development process to a certain level. The fact is that the programme implementation, where efficiency of the NGO employees is an indicator of success factor. The research is empirical and is expectedly fill the gap of literature.

### **Introduction**

In recent times, roles of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government organizations are becoming debatable issues. These are also becoming subject matters for wider discussions and reviews in the developing country perspectives. Bangladesh is a member of the world's least developed countries, having increased population density, unemployment, illiteracy, child mortality, socio-communal unrest and many more. The country has also been facing massive

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challenges of feeding the rapidly increasing population or even to support their livelihood in a sustainable manner. In addition, the continuing pressure of urbanization with reduced cultivable land areas are creating pressures on the government and the entire economic set up. Because, the traditional agricultural sector has failed to fully support the national economy. In general, agriculture has so far appeared as the main source of livelihood for more than half of the entire population of the country. But this sector has arguably failed to create ground, sustainable development. Other than this, the sector has been constantly facing pressures due to its typical vulnerability to natural hazards. Increasing numbers of landless populations caused by river erosions is also adding pressure to the national economy. Visibly, the overall situation shows the limited capacity of the government for improving the existing situation and for creating more opportunities. However, the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been playing supportive roles with the government. In some cases, they are considered as more effective to get attached with the grass-root-level developmental initiatives. The roles and initiatives played by the NGOs in Bangladesh have been considered as having positive impacts on poverty alleviation among the rural poor population. In areas where the poverty situation remains intense, activities of the NGOs typically get more important. The target groups for these initiatives are mostly hard core poor who have very little access and opportunities for improving their living status and standards. Most of the rural peoples rarely own resources and capacities to fight against the poverty and to get employment. The very basic and important activities of the NGOs are to organize these peoples, to help to create awareness among them, inspiring them and through all of these efforts transforming them to become conversant with development. Most of such organizations tend to work with an aim of meeting demand of these poor peoples. Because, these peoples traditionally are kept out of the mainstream development initiative. Through all of these comprehensive efforts, these NGOs work in accordance with the national-level-developmental planning process. In addition, as a developing country, Bangladesh has remained far behind in comparison with other developing nations regarding the up gradation of sustainable poverty alleviation. The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) is the world's largest non- governmental organization (NGO). It started working 1972 with Sir Fazle Hasan Abed as the entrepreneur. Considering this organization as the case, this study has been designed to critically outline the roles of a selected non-governmental organization (BRAC) in sustainable development. With this particular aim, this paper has outlined the trends of current poverty situations in Bangladesh and the impact analysis that BRAC is having through its sustainable development initiatives.

## 1. Literature Review

*1.1 Rural Poverty- Background:* Poverty is often referred as the unavailability of resources for meeting the basic living standard (Nilsson, 2012). Rural poverty can be measured on the basis of rural households' dependency on resources like land or labour, market accessibility and the protection by society (Douarin, et. al., 2011). The existence of poverty across the world has been evidenced at least for centuries and the underpinning of poverty situation at the rural level has been remaining as the key feature from the later part of the nineteenth century (Smith and Lusted, 2010). From the individual viewpoint, poverty is often considered as attached with the income capacity of the population (Chambers, et. al., 2011). However the trends and features of poverty are not the same in all over the world and in all geographical locations. For example, the poverty in Africa is often considered as the outcome of drought or famine, where in Asia mainly due to political or bureaucratic corruption and in Europe or America due to the economic slowdown or losses of jobs (Olsen, 2010). Major poverty alleviation initiatives started to direct towards the well-being of the poor people through the involvement of the government (Ruben, et. al., 2007). Rural poverty cannot be a persistent issue and governments all over have been playing the pivotal role is initiating and implementing the development programmes those have been designed for the well-being of poor rural populations (Glauben, et. al., 2012). However, the major lack of a developed communication system, weaker administrative set up and the distribution of information have been acting as main obstacles for full pledged poverty alleviation programmes that can be beneficial for the overall development of the country's rural poverty status (Dorward, et. al., 2004).

*1.2 Sustainable Development and Poverty:* In general, sustainable development refers to development that meets the current needs and ensures meeting demands of the future generation. Two very basic concepts of sustainable development are: needs of the global poor populations and the socio-technological limitations that narrow peoples' abilities for meeting the current and future demand (Baker, 2006). In terms of sustainable development, few poverty alleviation and developmental programmes are not adequate for including all of the marginal and underprivileged populations with the main track of developmental process. Predominantly, financial limitation has also been a major issue to be considered. The industrial revolution of the early twentieth century accompanied by rapid urbanization expanded the gap between the urban and rural part of Bangladesh to an alarming level (Freeman, 2009; Webster and Engberg-Pedersen, 2002). At this time the typical roles of government have been found either inadequate or insufficient for the well-being of the rural poor population. Rural employment generation, the economic activity expansion with injecting cash flow to the rural economy have either been absent, negligible or even largely inadequate

(Rutherford, 2003). The aftermath of the World War II has experienced more limited interventions of the government with the employment generation, poverty alleviation and rural developmental activities. The reduced governmental initiatives have been considered as the outcome of lower economic and political set up. The decade of the sixties has initiated debate on the theoretical policy framework for rural poverty alleviation with the emphasis on rural developmental approaches (Deaton and Kozel, 2005). This particular period has introduced the conceptual ground for rural development programmes. The overall poverty situation has been broadly classified into the developed and developing country context that has in turn extended the gap between the urban with rural areas (Kakwani and Son, 2008). Structural developments of the rural areas have been largely ignored with few amounts of financial investments from the governmental level. This has again worsened the employment and poverty situation of the rural areas. The poverty situation in most of the countries of the world is divided into two broad areas and is confined within the urban and rural areas. The basic characteristics, necessity, demand, features with priority like issues differ from region to region or even on the basis of country based circumstances (Rupasingha and Goetz, 2007). Traditionally, the rural sector is larger than the urban in most of the developing countries and is directly attached with the national level planning or developmental agendas. As a combined approach, the rural poverty alleviation strategies have become an integral component of the national development strategies (Kneebone and Berube, 2008).

*1.3 Poverty Situation: Bangladesh Perspective:* Bangladesh is a part of South Asia and strategically plays major roles in the region's economic framework. The economic condition of Bangladesh cannot be claimed as rapidly increasing even with the 6.2% growth in the GDP in 2011 with expected 6.4% in 2012 and the country has been battling against famine and poverty from time immemorial as observed with food prices rising by 13.9% in 2011 (The World Bank, 2012). The hard-core poverty victims in Bangladesh can be identified as the rickshaw puller, labourer, weavers, small businessman, fisherman, landless peoples, smiths and marginal farmers of the rural society (Mair and Marti, 2009). The poverty rate in Bangladesh is traditionally persistent with an alarmingly and gradually increasing rate. However, in recent decade, with the intervention of both Government and non government organization, the poverty rate started declining. In 1991, 51% of the total population was below the poverty level and in 2011 was 31.5% (Bangladesh Economy, 2012). This indicates a slightly advanced status of the poverty level and overall economic empowerment. Even though for the last few decades, the country has managed to make progress in poverty alleviation and mainly in the decade of the nineties. The country has experienced rapid growth in economy that has resulted in reduced rate of poverty (McLeod, 2007). Important

progresses of poverty alleviation initiatives have been supported by the increase in social sector in the national budget and significant contributions from the non-governmental organizations (Lewis, 2011). The poverty alleviation and employment generation in Bangladesh has constantly remained a major challenge. Also, the rural poverty situation remains the prime concern for the developmental initiatives of countries like Bangladesh at least for the last few decades (Deininger, 2003). Still, numerous efforts have been made to improve the poverty situation through the five-year plan. Main goal of the first of its kind between 1973 and 1978 was to alleviate poverty (Khandker, 2005). Since then, this programme has been in operation. Nonetheless, the successes are not mentionable from the government's side alone. As soon as the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been attached with the poverty alleviation scenario with empowering the poor, the development of institutions and capacity buildings through the equal distribution of assets, the poverty situation and employment generation conditions have gradually improved (Ullah and Routray, 2007).

*1.4 The Bangladesh Rural Advanced Committee (BRAC):* This organization started to get involved with the development activities very soon after Bangladesh got independence (Hossain and Sengupta, 2009). The newly born country was desperately in need of rebuilding and redevelopment after it engaged in nearly a year-long independence war. However, this organization managed to contribute in these processes, where, the country was reshaped and restructured. BRAC as the world's fourth biggest non-governmental organization (NGO) is involved in development activities in twelve countries of the world with its' more than 12,000 active workforce (Bangladesh Rural Advanced Committee, 2012). This organization mainly started with micro finance and later on expanded to activities in education, sericulture, forestry, to CGI education and even agriculture (Halder, 2003). Development initiatives of BRAC have encircled around poverty alleviation through sustainability programmes, women empowerment or even the poverty alleviation programmes (Abed and Matin, 2007). In addition, the activities have also expanded to employment generation and decreasing poor peoples' vulnerability. BRAC's significant success has found its way through the effective uses of micro credit schemes within controllable frameworks and this has also been evident that the development initiatives in both rural and urban areas are involved with the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Eastwood and Lipton, 2000; Huda, 2010). Almost all of the BRAC programmes are aimed towards the well being of both marginal and rural populations of Bangladesh. Few names can be mentioned for the purposes are: the Tenant Farmers Development Project, Adolescent Empowerment, the Micro Finance and empowering the rural economy through targeting the Extreme poverty (Halder and Mosley, 2004). The Social Enterprise programmes, the Gender Justice and Diversity with the Community

Empowerment Programmes are parallel to the national policy agendas and are particularly focused towards employment generation and poverty alleviation (Abed and Matin, 2007;).

**2. Research Methods:** Following the typologies of research methodologies, this is often believed that the qualitative method is considered as traditional and this has been considered as having validity (Hair, et. al., 2011). Often regarded that the qualitative method is relatively well fit for studies that are based on human ideas with their activities and those tend to understand the existing psycho-sociological issues (Bryman and Bell, 2011). This study has aims to attach the effects of some selected development project of a non-governmental organization with special concentration on poverty alleviation and employment generation. This represents the relevancy of qualitative research method for this study as the most suitable. In order to understand the in-depth human viewpoints, the case study method has been found effective. This is often argued that the information and data that are usually extracted from the practical field often need to employ case study method. This can be considered as the most efficient way to perform such activities than general survey or experimental method (Gerring, 2004). From the perspective of typology of case studies, this study has been designed as an explanatory and single case study. Because, the case study method very often is claimed to transform local knowledge into the case study (Yin, 2009). In the explanatory case study, the research questions are capable of meeting the elementary research aspects (Ghauri and Grønhaug, 2010). The research that progresses through interviews tends to have more in-depth information than the other types (Blumberg, 2008). Thus this study has been based on qualitative research with the explanatory type of case study and followed by in-depth qualitative interviews. The attached numerical data represents part of the qualitative method.

Some key criteria for case study villages' selection were considered: the BRAC programmes intervened villages, the accessibility of the researchers and the programme integrity with the beneficiaries. This study used both the qualitative and quantitative method of research. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and between the timeframe of the middle of March to the middle of April, 2012. In total 18 interviews were conducted in three different categories. Out of these interviews, 16 were conducted with the direct and indirect beneficiaries in the case study villages. These interviewees were divided into two broad areas of poverty alleviation and employment generation and their number were 8 each. The rest 2 were conducted with officials of BRAC. The beneficiaries were asked about the programmes undertaken by BRAC and the extent of benefits they were getting. They were also asked about the direct and indirect benefits from these programmes, while, the Key Informants were asked about the official viewpoints

and future plans of BRAC. All of these interviews were taken in person, recorded on a tape recorder and then self transcribed. The three types of interviews have been described through using A, B and C.

The research has been designed with considering two villages of the Chandpur district of Bangladesh where the BRAC has presences with its programmes. The basic reasons for selecting these two.

**3. Findings and Analysis:**

*3.1 Rural Poverty Situation:* As stated by the respondent A1, ‘The poverty situation in rural Bangladesh has been deteriorating at least for the last decade. There has not been any visible sign of improvement in any area or sector. In a few cases, the rural poverty situation in Bangladesh can be identified as simply as dreadful as any other similar area of the world’. As argued by A2, ‘What is poverty?’

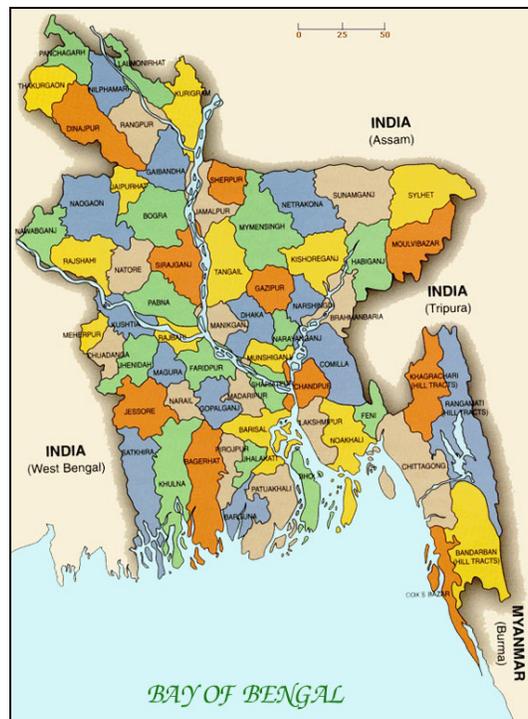


Fig. 1: Case study sites in the Chandpur district of Bangladesh (in star mark) (source: modified from the Bangladesh BCC working group, 2012).

We are so involved in constant poverty that it is difficult to differentiate the stages of poverty. I believe that these villages are the world's most poverty stricken. If you cannot believe me...see on your own eyes'. However, the respondent A3 was a bit more pessimistic in a sense by stating that, 'Poverty situation in these villages can simply be considered as passing through the danger period; because the general living standard has been deteriorating very fast by the negative influences in almost every areas of rural livelihood'. The respondent A4 argued more clearly through the statement, 'The poverty situation in these villages has been remaining very bad at least for the last few decades. However, the situation has slightly developed with the presence of the BRAC and few other non-governmental organizations' presence. Their multi fold and diversified activities have been effectively helping to overcome the existing situation.' A5 stated that, 'The villages have been constantly suffering from poverty and visibly there been no signs of development.' A6 and A7 argued that, 'Poverty situation in these villages have been remaining similar for years after years.' A8 was bit more clearly in his statement, 'These two villages have been remaining very poor from the time immemorial'.

**3.2 Affordability for Food:** Regarding the food intake per day, the respondents were diversified in their answer. Out of 8 of the respondents, only 1 has been found as able to take meal and feed his family 3 times a day. 3 and 2 respondents were found to take meal and capable of feeding the family for 1 time and 2 times respectively. The rest 2 pass their time mostly in starvation. The table below shows the capacity for food intake per day of the respondents.

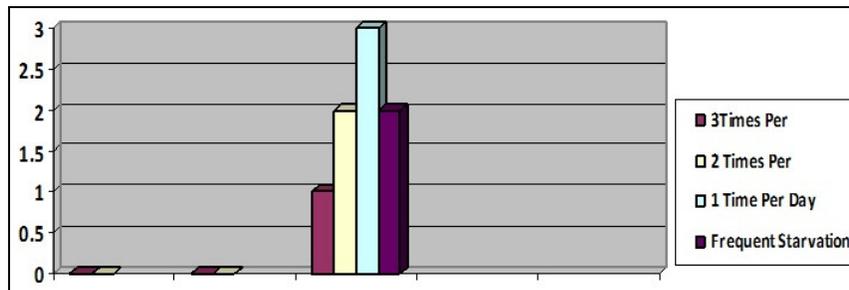


Fig. 2: Affordability for food intake.

The above figure represents that poverty persists in the case study sites, where only one respondent has been capable of taking food three times a day. Here, 1 times per day shows the maximum number of 3. This clearly represents that that the poverty level in the case study villages persisted but not as severe.

*3.3 Family Support:* Most of the respondents were unable to answer the questions regarding the family supporting in case of their inability to earn. Respondent A1 argued that, 'Only Allah (God) knows'. However, the answer of respondent A8 was bit more expressive, 'Allah gave us the children and only Allah knows how they will be fed'. Respondents like A3, A4, A5 and A6 were more on God, in case they were unable to work and support their family. Respondent A7 and A8 argued that, in times of need even God does not always help.

*3.4 Expectation from BRAC:* Regarding expectations from the BRAC's poverty alleviation programmes, the answers covered wider areas like ensuring the basic elements of livelihood. A3 stated that, 'The activities and programmes of BRAC has not been mentionable in terms of poverty alleviation'. A4 argued that, 'the available programmes of BRAC have not been effective in reaching the very poor population of the villages and thus to help them to fight against hunger and poverty'.

*3.5 Impacts and Benefits from BRAC programmes:* Respondent A5 and A6 have argued that the agriculture and food security programme, the micro finance programme and the tenant farmers development programme have been found as having more affectivity. A5 stated that, 'Before BRAC started its operation we had to go to the *Mahajans* (Landlord) for borrowing money. The interest rate was so high that in case of any natural disaster or drought, the farmers were unable to repay the loan instalments. This forced them to sell their land property to cover the instalments'. The other respondent A7 argued clearly that 'The villages where we are living have been traditionally poverty stricken; the activities of BRAC can be simply identified as blessings for us. This organization has allowed us to keep away from the so called *Mahajans* (Landlord) and borrowers who usually tend to exploit peoples in every possible ways'.

*3.6 Experiences from BRAC Programmes:* A8 was very much straightforward regarding the experiences from the BRAC's poverty alleviation programmes, 'The poverty alleviation programmes of BRAC are nothing more than a business. I bet whether, you find a single person who will answer positive'. A1, A2, A3, A4 and A5 expressed the similar viewpoints and experiences. However, respondent A6 and A7 argued that the poverty alleviation programmes by BRAC have been gradually helping the rural populations.

*3.7 Current Trend of Rural Poverty Situation:* Rural poverty in Bangladesh has been remaining as one of the major issues towards the general development and for well being of the rural populations. Majority of the respondents answered that rural poverty predominantly had its existence and has been affecting the livelihood of the rural population. Main outcome of the current study has been set to focus on issues like the existing patterns of rural poverty and related concerns in the selected case study sites of Bangladesh. Bangladesh posses the basic

requirements to become one of the popular case study sites for rural poverty related studies in the whole world. In few cases, the rural poverty situation in Bangladesh can be claimed to have explored the unknown and unexplored issues. From the discussions previously made in the literature review part shows that poverty can be characterized as the lack of resources (Nilsson, 2012). In that sense, poverty has its presence in the case study villages. Rural poverty is characterized by dependency on the household on their access and utilization of resources as labour, land and social protection. Then poverty has been remaining as a basic characteristic for these case study villages. However, the degree of severity of poverty in the case study sites has always been a key factor. Few of the respondents have found that the diversified programmes of non-governmental organizations are effective in the process of poverty alleviation.

**Discussions:** Impacts of the BRAC programmes are partly responsible for sustainable development and preventing unemployment situation in Bangladesh. The features of rural poverty can be identified through the access of the rural populations' dependency on the land, labour, market and the basic elements of livelihoods. Rural poverty has been existing in almost every part of the case study villages. However, the degree and severity was not same in ever where. The villages have been socially and economically stratified on the basis on income, expenditure and other variables like education, land ownership or even the capacity of food intake. But the case study villages have been mainly dominated by the poverty stricken and low earning population. In certain period of time of the year like in the Monsoon when flood breaks out all over, the poverty situation moves below the normal status. Due to the loss of crops, lack of work and even for the communication. Interestingly, in the case study villages' involvement of the governmental agencies with poverty alleviation programmes have been found negligible. Certain non-governmental organizations like the International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR, B) has been mentionable, in general. The poverty alleviation programmes by BRAC has been found diversified and multi-fold. These have allowed the villagers to be more benefitted and thus to get involved with the poverty alleviation programmes more closely. Activities and initiatives of BRAC have been focused on poverty alleviation through creating sources of earning and support. Few of the programmes have been found as more beneficial than the traditional ways of poverty alleviation. Money flow in the rural economy has been found absent by the governmental organizations. But, the activities of NGOs like BRAC has been found more effective in a way of ensuring money flow in the rural economy in a more convenient manner. Lack of financial investments along with the institutionalized framework of governmental investments in the rural economy and mainly in the case study sites have been

found largely ignored. Not even the rural poverty alleviation has been found as a prioritized issue on the national policy strategies.

### **Conclusions**

The poverty and the unemployment situation has prevailed in rural Bangladesh for decades. There has not been any major improvement of the degree and overall situation of this problem leading towards sustainable development. However, the involvement of NGOs like the BRAC has made initiatives to improve the general situation at least to some extent. The rural Bangladesh scenario in terms of poverty and unemployment has been visibly influenced with the involvement of NGOs like BRAC. One of the important findings of this study is the current trend of poverty and unemployment situation in rural Bangladesh. The actual poverty situation and unemployment dynamics in rural Bangladesh have never been understood in the academic similar pattern in the case study villages. Different types and views have influenced the poverty and unemployment situation. The labor power has been mainly thought to be employed in the agricultural sector, while, the service sector comes to the second position. However, the recent trend showed that the majority of labours in the case study sites have been gradually attracting to day labour. Other finding is the peoples' attitude towards the development and employment generating activities by the non-governmental organizations like BRAC. The natural calamities along with other types of disasters have increased the poverty and unemployment rate and status to some extent. But, such development activities have less acceptability among the rural populations, because, the attitude and experiences have not been pleasant with the BRAC employees. This study has been designed with the basic objective for exploring the contributions those the non-governmental organizations have had in the rural settings of Bangladesh. In addition this study has attempted to understand the degree and volume of ongoing poverty situation along with the unemployment status in Bangladesh. This study has also tried to outline the effects of activities and initiatives undertaken by the non-governmental organizations. Findings have been able to explore the present status of poverty and unemployment situation in rural Bangladesh through the case studies. This has again helped to offer the understanding of the programmes that are carried out and considered as successful in rural Bangladesh. The activities and initiatives carried out by the non-governmental organizations have been found as both positive and negative in regard to building a better and sustainably developed Bangladesh. This study has faced two basic limitations. First, the limited time allotment that has restricted the researcher from carrying out more interviews that could possibly represent more types of populations. The second limitation has been the rural populations' unwillingness to share their views and ideas about BRAC and its activities having a

fear that this can have negative impacts on their relationship with BRAC. However, the researcher has attempted to overcome these limitations and to enrich the study through personal observation. The dynamics and extent of rural poverty traditionally cover vast areas and there is a clear opportunity to conduct further studies on diversified aspects in the future.

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