

Rural Non-Farm Sector Development and Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The importance rural non-farm sector in the livelihoods of the rural poor in developing countries, particularly in Bangladesh, is increasingly acknowledged. The understanding of the factors and processes that affect the ability of the poor to engage in more sustainable and remunerative activities helps design policies and interventions that increase the pro-poorness of the rural non-farm sector. Moreover, working in more or less decentralised contexts, development organisations, governments and researchers seek to develop rural non-farm sectors find that this generates strong interest among rural poor. Employment in rural non-farm activities has become an essential aspect of the lives of many people in the rural areas of Bangladesh, as in several other developing countries. While this is an economic phenomenon, it has an essential social aspect because those affected are mostly the rural poor. For the growing number of these people who are not absorbed enough in agriculture or urban-based industry and are obliged to leave the land partially or entirely, non-farm activities are a part of their survival strategies.

Keywords: Poverty Reduction, Non-Farm Sector, GOB, Grameen Bank, SAARC

Introduction

Poverty alleviation and social sector development have been the core issues in development planning in Bangladesh since 1971. Among the least developed countries in Asia, Bangladesh is among the most densely populated (866 per square kilometre) countries, with a population of 124.8 million squeezed into 144,000 square kilometres (Rahman, 2002). Urbanisation is low, but the infant mortality rate is high. The share of manufacturing is common, but the manufacturing sector's growth rate is high. Bangladesh is a delta, mostly plains through which the Ganges and the Brahmaputra flow to the Bay of Bengal.

In Bangladesh, development projects of agriculture, rural development, primary and mass education, health and family welfare, women and children affairs, labour and employment include poverty alleviation

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programmes. The social sector comprises all poverty-related programmes minus agriculture, education, youth and sports, mass communication, cultural affairs, and public administration.

As a pre-given idea of the outer world, the Greek philosopher Plato used the term Outer World in the theory of Forms in his classic work Republic. A poor person is considered one without a job, who cannot help or cater to his family, and has no money, farm or business. Children are poor if they have no parents, no education, no good food, clothes and health. A poor person is described as malnourished and ageing fast, one without self-confidence looks dirty and lives in a filthy environment, one who cannot cater to his family, train his children in school and unable to pay medical bills.

The Millennium Development Goals: Bangladesh Progress Report, jointly prepared by the UN and the Government of Bangladesh, notes how Bangladesh is steadily keeping on track in meeting the UN Millennium Development Goals. For Bangladesh, the goals include (i) lowering the poverty rate to 29.4 per cent, (ii) providing 100 per cent universal primary education, (iii) reducing child mortality to 50 per thousand live births, and (iv) improving maternal health to 143 or fewer fatalities in one hundred thousand natal conditions, and ensuring environmental sustainability by 20 per cent, all by the year 2015. The report found the pace of poverty reduction at an average of 9.2 per cent from 1991 to 2000 had picked up since Bangladesh entered the new millennium with a poverty level of 49.8 per cent. In related fields of human development, the report showed that the enrolment rate at primary schools, including those of various denominations, rose to 82.7 per cent in 2003 compared to 73.7 per cent in 1992. The child mortality rate fell to 82 per 1,000 live births compared to 151 in 1990. Maternal mortality per hundred thousand births had decreased from 570 to 320. Environmental sustainability went up by 1.2 per cent as the proportion of forest cover of land mass increased from 9 to 10.2 per cent. Not many countries at Bangladesh's income level can list so many of these achievements (UNDP, 2005).

This paper highlights the meaning and approaches to the poverty alleviation process and the potential of the rural non-farm sector to

overcome rural poverty in Bangladesh. This study carries using historical and analytical methods.

Poverty Discourse in Bangladesh

Although poverty in the South Asian Sub-Continent was a subject of interest during the British Colonial period (Jack, 1916; Siddqui, 1982), there was only one research on this issue during the Pakistan period 1947-71 (Siddiqui, 1982). Poverty began attracting researchers' attention after the famine of 1974, and the decade saw several studies mainly devoted to counting the poor. Only Alamgir (1978) and Griffin (1977) tried to provide macro-level analysis of the poverty process in the country. Alamgir had developed a Marxist analysis of poverty. Griffin sought to understand the problem regarding a high level of inequality and the dominance of the rich in the state machinery. Two ethnographic studies, however, were significant in exploring rural poverty. In Jhagrapur, Arens and Beurden (1977) provided a graphic account of the livelihoods of the poor and the exploitation process in a village of Kushtia, focusing on women from a Marxist perspective. In 1977 Siddiqui (1982) mounted a meticulous study of poverty in a village of Narail again from a Marxist perspective, which tried to link micro-level poverty with macro societal processes. Hartman and Boyce (1979; 1983) undertook an ethnographic study of a Rangpur village and underscored patron-clientelism and parochialism as the vital instrument that kept the poor dependent, fearful and voiceless.

A particularly speculative but influential study on the poverty of the 1980s was undertaken by Maloney (1986), who sought to explore deep behavioural and cultural contours in Bangladesh that led to the perpetuation of poverty in the country. Central to his analysis is that Bangladesh society's 'overall socio-economic texture' was traditional. A particular drawback of this conventional society was (i) the notion of atomistic individualism, (ii) the characteristic of the Gangetic delta that impedes crystallisation and (iii) durable organisations and thus prevents modernisation.

More detailed studies of poverty have become available from the 1990s onward. While there are five key data sources for understanding poverty in the country, the most important is the Household Expenditure Survey (HES), which started in 1973-1974; 13 rounds of these surveys have been conducted

(BBS, 2002). But HES data have generally been reliable since the 1990s (Rahman, 2002). The second primary data source is The Analysis of Poverty Trends (APT), undertaken by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) and later on Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) in 1989. The feature of this study is the use of panel data (Rahman, 2002). A third source is information on the nutritional status of children collected by Helen Keller International in 1990. The fourth source is the dietary data provided irregularly by the Institute of Nutrition and Food Sciences (Rahman, 2002). A fifth source is the survey of 32 villages conducted by IRRI in 1987-1988 and 2000. Apart from these, several specific surveys and qualitative studies were carried out to understand poverty in particular circumstances and in greater depth. One product of this type of study is 19 reports published by PROSHIKA under its 'The Livelihoods of the Extreme Poor Study'.

An attempt at Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh

Since 1973 the successive development plans in Bangladesh have highlighted the issue of poverty alleviation for the country itself. The plans also prepared several strategies to face the challenge. The First Five-Year Plan (1973-1978) laid stress more on a socialistic restructuring of the economy so that the benefits of development could be distributed more equitably among the different groups of people. In a sense, the Plan was preoccupied more with the task of post-independence economic reconstruction and the international economic crisis arising from the oil price hike than with the country's poverty problem. The Two-Year Plan (1978-1980) was expected to give the country a direction for future planning and development. However, it got bogged down in rationalising the portfolio of ongoing projects in the face of acute resource shortages.

Bangladesh's Second Five-Year Plan (1980-1985) focused on poverty reduction through income and employment growth. Growth with equity through employment expansion was expected to raise the purchasing power. For poverty alleviation, planners provided an incentive to agricultural support and agro-process industries as these contribute to the development of the rural economy.

The Third Five-Year Plan (1985-1990) of Bangladesh relegated poverty alleviation, defined as 'satisfaction of basic needs of the people, to the sixth position among eight pronounced objectives. Employment generation

through the dynamic private sector, a fulfillment of minimum essential requirement through increased supply, higher income, and faster economic growth was expected to take care of poverty.

The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990-1995) held poverty alleviation and employment generation through human resource development as one of its primary objectives. The Plan emphasised the resilience of the poor and the disadvantaged groups to survive against most adverse circumstances. When properly organised and supported, these economically backward groups could show resourcefulness regarding savings, investment, technology adaptation, and entrepreneurship. The Fourth Five-Year Plan attempted to integrate sector-based planning with socio-economic group-based planning to ensure more significant poverty alleviation and economic growth. According to the Fourth Five-Year Plan, it would be necessary to formulate special projects for the poor and the disadvantaged group to alleviate poverty after direct integration with sectoral programmes.

The Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) aimed to alleviate poverty through accelerated economic growth on an annual 7 per cent to a noticeable improvement in the living standard of the people by raising their level of income and meeting their basic needs. Other objectives of the Fifth Five-Year Plan were to: (i) alleviate poverty through employment generation and raise at least half the people below the poverty line above that level, and (ii) develop socio-economic infrastructure with particular emphasis on human resources development in a science and technology-based society, (iii) distribute the benefits of economic development equitably with the provision of safety net for the most vulnerable people and accelerated development of backward areas, and (iv) reduce gender disparity (Hye, 1996).

The strategy of rural development in the draft perspective plan drawn up for the sector covering the period 1995-2010 is a continuation of the strategy paper prepared for the rural sector in the Third Five Year Plan in which the targeted production and employment programmes for the rural poor featured prominently. According to this strategy, rural development projects were to be one or more of the development of physical infrastructure, irrigated agriculture and minor drainage, and production and employment for the rural poor. The draft perspective plan for the rural sector envisaged the

continuation and expansion of successful targeted poverty alleviation programmes/projects and the addition of new pro-poor projects based on social mobilisation (Hye, 1996).

The Bangladesh Government has also adopted a long-term vision for the country's development which reflects in the long-term Perspective Plan (2010-2021). To realise the idea, the Bangladesh Government start implementing the Sixth Five Year Plan (FY 2011-2015) in July 2010. The NSAPR-II (revised) remained in force till FY 2011, and its performance is reviewed annually in a regular course. Eventually, the time frame for MTBF (Medium Term Budget Framework) is extended from three to five years, facilitating the continuation of spillover projects or programmes and the inclusion of new ones (GOB, 2011).

In the light of the long-term vision, Bangladesh Government has identified five priority areas for medium-term action, such as (i) maintenance of macroeconomic stability and control over commodity price hikes, (ii) effective action against corruption, (iii) sufficiency in power and energy, (iv) elimination of poverty and inequality, and (v) establishment of good governance.

An overview of these Five-Year Plans of the Bangladesh Government on rural development indicates that poverty alleviation has always been a core concern of the development trajectory. It also depicts a priority attachment to poverty alleviation in terms of objectives and strategies. A follow-up review of these policy statements, however, manifests that, in most cases, no serious attempts have been made to translate such policies into concrete programmes and projects within a coherent institutional framework. As a result, the sectoral programmes, particularly in agriculture, health, social welfare, infrastructure development, water resource development etc., were designed in isolation without focusing on poverty alleviation. Even with the existing institutional framework, there has been a noticeable lack of coordination in the management of the projects on poverty alleviation carried out by different agencies of the GOB as well as NGOs (Aminuzzaman and Nunn, 1993).

Approaches toward Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh

Since its independence, Bangladesh has virtually become a laboratory for designing and experimenting with different rural development models

and approaches. Various agencies of the Government of Bangladesh (GOB), international donors and Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) have experimented with other models and techniques of institution building for rural and local level development (Holtsberg, 1990). The goals, objectives and strategies for implementing these experimental approaches varied depending on the sponsor of the projects. But alleviating poverty has always been one of the core objectives of those practical approaches. Despite all these different institutional and experimental interventions over the years, poverty alleviation remains a significant challenge for Bangladesh (Jahan, 1991). Given the present trends in population and economic growth and the absence of a concerted plan of action for poverty alleviation, experts fear that the poverty scenario in Bangladesh will be even worse in the years to come (GOB, 1991; SAARC, 1992; BIDS, 1993).

In the mid-1960s, the Comilla Model of cooperative received international fame as an alternative approach for rural development in resource-poor countries (Aminuzzaman, 1985). However, the Comilla model virtually became redundant in post-independent Bangladesh with the changed socio-economic and political reality. Since then, given the high poverty level and extreme dependence on foreign aid, Bangladesh has become a veritable laboratory for rural development and poverty alleviation interventions. Without a comprehensive, transparent policy, rural development has become a patchwork of public and private initiatives and interventions (Willmann, 1990; Siddiqui, 1985; Jones, 1982; Holtsberg, 1992). The GOB agencies and NGOs have developed a wide variety of intervention packages. Bilateral or multilateral donor agencies have mainly financed these interventions. All such interventions can broadly classify under three different project approaches (Aminuzzaman, 1997):

- Direct Capability-Raising Projects,
- Growth-Oriented Projects with a Strong Immediate Impact on Poverty, and
- Targeted Special Employment Schemes for the Poor.

The Direct Capability-Raising Projects' indirectly address poverty through enforcing higher investment in social sectors like health and education,

enhancing human capabilities and improving the standard of living indicators. These projects, in effect, do not directly impact employment or income generation.

The Growth-Oriented Projects with a Strong Immediate Impact on Poverty is based on the assumption that poverty addresses through fostering a higher growth process through a complex interplay of macro-economic policy instruments.

Again 'the Targeted Special Employment Schemes for the Poor' was developed in 1984 by the Government of Bangladesh as a new Strategy for Rural Development Projects (SRDP). The strategy emphasised the inclusion of Rural Poor Projects (RPP) as a component of all future rural and area development programmes. In line with the process, several new generations of Area Development Programmes were negotiated and launched with an RPP component. Under these Area Development Programmes, a targeted self-employment scheme with varying input support such as credit, training and extension services is implemented. These schemes have promoted the landless-poor's joint ventures by forming groups and cooperatives. Under these programmes, assets are transferred to the target groups on a collective basis, e.g. common cultivation of land, pisciculture, irrigation, and power tiller schemes run by the landless groups and cooperatives. In almost all cases Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) was assigned to implement the programme. In addition to these approaches, GOB also took some special programmes like Food for Works (FFW), Vulnerable Groups Feeding etc., to address seasonal rural unemployment and the causes of needy women.

Moreover, the approaches and interventions for rural development and poverty alleviation in Bangladesh have been discussed under five different institutional models such as (Aminuzzaman, 1997):

- (a) Bangladesh Rural Development Board Model,
- (b) Donor-Line Agency Collaboration,
- (c) NGO-Government Collaboration Model,
- (d) Poverty Alleviation Projects (PAPs) of Large NGOs, and
- (e) Small and Local NGO projects.

(a) Bangladesh Rural Development Board Model

Bangladesh Rural Development Board (BRDB) was assigned to develop the cooperative system and implement various rural development programmes. BRDB is the most extensive institutional set-up of the GOB, which is directly engaged in organising and managing rural development and poverty alleviation programme in Bangladesh. Eighty-five per cent of the BRDB efforts are carried out in the form of projects in which 91 per cent of the share is contributed by different multilateral and bilateral Donor organisations (Interchain 1990); (BRDB, 1991).

(b) Donor-Line Agency Collaboration

In this approach, the GOB and selected Donor agency have designed poverty alleviation projects, at least on paper. However, in reality, most of these projects have been the products of different mission reports commissioned by the donor. In fact, on the whole, these projects are the manifestations of the Donors' disbelief in the capability of GOB Agencies. Under this model, a specific GOB line agency is formally assigned to run the project while the Donors provide a Project Advisory Team. The Donors usually impose elaborate project-specific institutional arrangements. The project is managed by an international project management firm with highly salaried expatriate resident advisers and consultants (Raquib, 1992).

(c) NGO-Government Collaboration Model

Another emerging model in PAP is the collaboration between the GOB line agencies and the NGOs, which one study notes as a 'Promising Alternative Institutional Approach to Poverty Alleviation (Hossain, A. 1995). This approach combines the extensive experience of NGOs in group formation, awareness raising, human resource development and income generating activities with the large-scale capacity of GOB line agencies to deliver inputs of technical expertise and resources. In other words, NGO staff's local knowledge, human resource development expertise, motivation and enthusiasm are expected to demonstrate by GOB staff interacting with each other.

(d) Poverty Alleviation Projects (PAPs) of Large NGOs

NGOs in Bangladesh radically transformed and became agents of development in the post-independence era. The GOB had neither the capacity nor the appropriate institutional mechanism to address the volume and diversity of immediate crises of the post-independent period to handle alone. Then, several international NGOs and voluntary organisations extended their helping hands to assist Bangladesh in its striving efforts to rebuild the infrastructure and the economy. Thus, the decade of 1970s witnessed the emergence of several local NGOs and the arrival of several International NGOs in Bangladesh. Since the 1970s, NGOs have become a part of Bangladesh's institutional poverty alleviation framework (Sobhan and Bhattacharya, 1990).

(e) Small and Local NGO Projects

This institutional arrangement aims to upgrade small local NGOs' capacity to implement poverty alleviation projects. *Palli Karma Sahayak* Foundation (PKSF), established in 1990 by the GOB, is the leading agency in such an approach. The PKSF's broad goal is to implement income and employment generating programmes to alleviate poverty for the landless and the restless people in the rural areas through various NGOs. The PKSF calls these the Partner Organisations (POs). The Foundation, during the financial year 1992-1993, through its 79 POs, has distributed a sum of Tk.100 million. The total sum of the direct loans and the revolving loan provided by the POs have rendered credit support to over 70,000 landless, asset-less people in rural Bangladesh, of which 83 per cent are women (PKSF, 1992).

Linkages between Rural Non-Farm Sector and Poverty Reduction

Most of the literature on the linkages between rural non-farm sector income and rural poverty indicates a strong relationship. When average income from the rural non-farm sources is higher than that of the farm sector (agriculture), access to rural non-farm sector jobs represents upward mobility improving the welfare of both individuals and households. Secondly, by diversifying their sources of income, rural households can augment their gains and minimise the extent to which they are affected by adverse income shocks from farm activities. Thirdly, as rural non-farm incomes increase the households' cash liquidity, they

can buy farm inputs more quickly, thus increasing their farm productivity. Finally, the rural non-farm sector offers landless families (unable to engage in farm activities because of their lack of land) an essential option for generating income.

Since agricultural growth provides only limited possibilities for labour absorption, the burden of absorbing additions to the rapidly growing labour force is shared by rapid employment expansion in the non-farm (non-agricultural) sector. The process in the classic dual economy growth models with rapid growth in the non-agriculture sector leads to progressive labour force shifts from the low-income agriculture sector into the high-income non-agricultural industry. As the size of the rural non-farm sector increases relative to the farm sector, its growth has a more significant potential impact on poverty through a larger capacity to absorb surplus labour from agriculture (Ahluwalia, 1990).

Rural Non-Farm Sector Impact on Poverty Reduction in Bangladesh

The rural non-farm sector's impact on poverty alleviation in Bangladesh is vast and varied. Some key terms related to the diversification and rural non-farm sector address three issues. Firstly, it reviews the main theories of rural non-farm sector growth and highlights a model for thinking about various stages of diversification in the rural economy. Secondly, it considers the diverse impacts on poverty, inequality and well-being caused by participation in the rural non-farm sector. Finally, it feels policy options, outlining the choices and trade-offs that face rural planners and policymakers.

Five key issues need clarification before discussing the diversification of the rural non-farm sector. Firstly, diversification can refer to an increasing mix or diversity of activities, regardless of the industry, or a shift away from traditional rural sectors such as agriculture to non-traditional, often non-agricultural activities associated with the growth of rural non-farm sector activities.

Secondly, diversification takes place during various issues of economic growth. That's why the diversification of a rural economy (and thus the expansion of the rural non-farm sector) is distinct from the diversification of a household or individual economy (and hence the development of rural

non-farm sector income shares). There are links between these issues, and they are not always direct.

Thirdly, 'non-farm' or 'non-agricultural' are sectoral definitions. In case of consistency between micro and macro levels of discussion, the National Accounting concepts of primary, secondary and tertiary enterprises are a useful benchmark to carry.

Fourthly, and related to this, 'rural' is a spatial definition. It comprises rural towns, growth centres and their industrial units.

Lastly, other proper conceptual dimensions exist beyond the sector and space to consider in thinking about livelihood and economic activities. These include (a) the degree of linkage to agriculture or other sectors, (b) the relations of productions, (c) the level of technology, capitalisation or modernisation, which often has a direct bearing on, and (d) the levels of productivity and associated returns.

An essential measure of the rural non-farm sector's performance is its impact on poverty and income distribution. The resources from the Household Expenditure Survey (HES) prepared by BBS uses to investigate the effects of the rural non-farm sector on incomes, poverty and inequality in the rural economy of Bangladesh:

- The rural non-farm sector per capita income growth has been positive over the 1980s, unlike the per capita agricultural and rural wage income.
- The rural non-farm sector's per capita income improvement occurred mostly in self-employment but not substantially in wage-employment.
- The rural non-farm sector was an important income source for the poor and non-poor alike.
- The incidence of poverty for the rural non-farm sector households is lower than the farm (agricultural) labourer households.
- Increasing participation in the rural non-farm sector is likely to reduce income inequality.

Conclusion

In Bangladesh, alleviating rural poverty under the changing economic conditions is a colossal task for which international cooperation is needed, in

addition to wise domestic policies. In this regard, Bangladesh has strongly projected its views in regional and global forums. Bangladesh took the initiative in formulating the SAARC Dhaka Declaration for Poverty Alleviation, which regards the poor not as liabilities but as assets and emphasises the need to bring the creative dynamics of the poor into the mainstream of development. An institutional mechanism to ensure this has already started. Bangladesh is committed to the Agenda for Action adopted at Copenhagen Social Summit in March 1995, the Platform for Action agreed upon at Beijing World Conference for Women in September 1995, and the decisions taken at World Food Summit in Rome in November 1996. In each of those forums, poverty alleviation was a primary concern. At the World Micro-Credit Summit in Washington, inaugurated by the Prime Minister of Bangladesh in February 1997, micro-lending was endorsed as an essential tool for alleviating rural poverty. Based on its success in Bangladesh, the *Grameen* Bank concept of micro-credit has now been replicated worldwide, including in China. The Summit led to the generation of global awareness that to finance the micro-lending programmes on a large scale, funds needed to be raised through joint efforts at the national and international levels.

The importance rural non-farm sector in the livelihoods of the rural poor in developing countries, particularly in Bangladesh, is increasingly acknowledged. The understanding of the factors and processes that affect the ability of the poor to engage in more sustainable and remunerative activities helps design policies and interventions that increase the pro-poorness of the rural non-farm sector. Employment in rural non-farm activities has become an essential aspect of the lives of many people in the rural areas of Bangladesh, as in several other developing countries. While this is an economic phenomenon, it has an essential social aspect because those affected are mostly the rural poor. For the growing number of these people who are not absorbed enough in agriculture or urban-based industry and are obliged to leave the land partially or entirely, non-farm activities are a part of their survival strategies.

Jahan (1997) found out about the development challenges of the nineties as well as the poverty alleviation strategy of Bangladesh. The approaches are (a) enforcing more significant investments in social sectors, (b) fostering a higher growth process, and (c) promoting targeted employment and income-generating programmes are essential. Again the targeted employment

generation schemes and the issue of sustainability of poverty alleviation programmes in Bangladesh are remarkable. During the 1990s, the issue of poverty alleviation was not only a development constraint but also a socio-political challenge for Bangladesh.

The World Bank (2000b) has laudably blueprinted the vision of the social protection of the poor or vulnerable so that they can manage risks better, mainly through safety nets. The fiscal crisis of the state and the absence of donor support undermine the realism of such a vision. Jeffery Sachs (2001) recently held that IMF and the World Bank were accomplices in 'grossly underfunded and insufficient strategies' (Sachs, 2001: 44) for poverty reduction. But even under the existing constraints, there is scope for new and innovative programmes such as health insurance and disaster insurance for NGO clients, which can fund from the savings of the poor. There can be GO-NGO collaboration in protecting the poorest of the poor.

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