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**Mobility, Mobilization or Negotiation:  
NGO Discourses in Poverty Reduction**

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# Mobility, Mobilization or Negotiation: NGO Discourses in Poverty Reduction<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*Perspectives on the role of NGOs in development and poverty reduction have been changing along with the shifting architecture of global aid and development since the last decade or so. In the post Washington consensus era, official sources have seen NGOs as service-deliverers that could stop-gap state failures especially in the field of education and health care. On the other hand there is a counter view that NGOs should be located in a critical space engaging governments on behalf of their constituencies. Furthermore in the post 9/11 scenario, aid has been securitized so that poverty reduction is now often linked to the war against terrorism. In this backdrop how do NGOs perceive their programs on poverty reduction? I intend to review some of the ways in which European NGOs respond to the various discourses on poverty at the global, national and local level with a specific focus on some of these strategic issues and discursive practices.*

## **Revisiting Poverty Reduction: The Rationale**

Since the mid-1990s the thinking about development has undergone substantial change. During the eighties and the early nineties, the dominant paradigm in development theory and policy was usually referred to as neo-liberalism or the ‘Washington Consensus’ as characterized by John Williamson. This policy emphasised the importance of markets. Joseph Stiglitz contributed to the revision of neo-liberal principles by talking of the redesigning of the market economy’s regulatory framework (Stiglitz, 1998:15-80). He maintained that Governments should serve as a complement to markets, undertaking actions that make markets work better and correcting market failure.

The change in thinking about development policies from the market-oriented Washington Consensus to the institution-based post-Washington Consensus was supported academically by the advent of the new institutional economics which focused on the importance of social, political and economic institutions for development (North, 1990:12).

In addition to the above shift in academic thinking, a notable change is also evident where the focus has shifted again towards poverty reduction. This has been a result of the following reasons:

- a. A response to the intense lobbying by humanitarian pressure groups against the human consequences of structural adjustment:

Structural Adjustment Lending (SAL) was a reform programme of World Bank, which gained prominence in the 1980s. It sprang from the realization that in the post 1979 economic environment, so-called Less Developed Countries (LDCs) were likely to require extensive programmes of domestic policy reforms in order to respond to changed international relations, prices, terms of trades deterioration and declining national inflow of foreign finance. All these

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required long-term and profound structural change but might create political and transitional difficulties. So the SAL programmes were to provide the additional resources to enable governments to implement the necessary reforms or “structural adjustments”. But as time went by this policy came to be critically reviewed by humanitarian pressure groups and movements who foregrounded the costs of such adjustments especially on the poorer sections of the population of the least developed country.

b. Failure of the market to play a significant role in poverty reduction in the least developing countries as promised by the Washington Consensus (Hout, 2007:2-3)

The focus on market-oriented economic transformation was gradually being questioned during the 1990s for its one-sidedness. The East Asian financial crisis of 1997-8 challenged the assumptions of economic reform held by many policymakers and turned out to be a major factor in the reorientation of neo-liberalism and the introduction of the post-Washington Consensus (Jayasuriya and Rosser, 2001). In the words of World Bank President James Wolfensohn, “...while focusing on macroeconomic numbers or on major reforms like privatisation, we have ignored the basic institutional infrastructure, without which a market economy simply cannot function.” (World Bank, 1998: 11-12).

c. Growing tendency to securitize aid in official circles (Rugumamu in Gould and Siitonen, 2007:47-49)

The incident of September, 11, 2001 among other things, generated the thinking among Western analysts that economic growth, security and peace in developing countries were organically intertwined and dynamic aspects of social development. Poverty, alienation and violent conflict in developing countries were increasingly viewed as “threats” to the security of the West. On the other hand development assistance was also seen as of the instruments of pre-emptive defense against these threats. This was the beginning of the re-securitization of foreign aid. As the Bush administration’s 2002 National Security Strategy observed, “poverty does not make poor people terrorists and murderers. Yet poverty, weak states and corruption can make weak states vulnerable to terrorist networks and drug cartels within their borders.” The Strategy further claims that extreme poverty tends to be breeding grounds for despair and violence, which in turn undermines global peace and security. In responding to the “war on terror” most European states generally supported the US interpretation of new threats to global security. In its refocused joint policy, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC 2003:9) asserted that foreign aid was to be guided by security concerns. With the initiation of the new Obama administration amidst the gloom of global recession, it remains to be seen whether this stance will be retracted. Though Obama has declared a phasing out policy in Iraq, he has announced in the same breath that the American gaze to be focussed on Afghanistan and Pakistan. In fact a de-emphasis of militarization may very well enhance the scope of addressing the problem in non-military and developmental terms.

### **Location of NGOs in the Changing Architecture in Global Poverty Reduction Discourses**

Ever since the 1980s, there has been a steady rise in the number of NGOs. According to OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) estimates there were 2,500 NGOs in the developed world by 1988, while for developing countries it was 50,000. This rise was partly due to NGOs being better able to reach to grassroots than official programmes and partly due

to donor pressure on recipient Governments to reduce their direct investment in development programmes in the neo-liberalist phase. In the post Washington Consensus era, poverty reduction was seen through the welfare approach where NGOs were considered to be service providers to stop gap state failures. A more critical outlook was to look at the NGO scene through the rights approach where NGOs would engage with their governments on behalf of poverty groups in their search for justice.

In this backdrop of the global architecture of aid, I will ask how NGOs perceive their programs on poverty reduction. Do they look at their tasks primarily as complementing state services so as to increase income mobility? Do they consider their task to be primarily of mobilization of their respective constituencies so as to empower them in their search for justice? Or are they primarily trying to negotiate with and lobby the government on specific and general issues which concerns poverty groups? I intend to review some of the ways in which European NGOs respond to the various discourses on poverty at the global, national and local level with a specific focus on some of these strategic issues and discursive practices.

## **Methodology**

During March – April 2008, I interviewed <sup>2</sup> five selected NGOs based in Europe who along with individual scholars and Bangladeshi expatriates form a lobby group for Bangladesh in Germany called the Bangladesh-Forum<sup>3</sup> and who have programs in poverty reduction with local partner-NGOs in Bangladesh. I also interviewed relevant representatives of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and their implementing bodies (GTZ and KfW) and reviewed relevant policy documents and literature.

Some of the general characteristics of the NGOs I interviewed were the following:

- Two were church based, others were not
- Most got 25 to 50% of their budgetary support from their Government
- For some these provided administrative support (e.g. staff salary) for others they are simply programmatic support
- All worked in conjunction with local partner NGOs in Bangladesh, numbers varying from 6 to 10 partners each
- The local partner-NGOs varied in size and capacity, but were usually reputed national level NGOs, with a few that are local-based.

## **General Approaches Adopted for Poverty Reduction**

The state of poverty encompasses notion of limitation and deprivation of resources. Poverty is frequently measured quantitatively in terms of per capita income and consumption level or calorie intake as methods used by World Bank and United Nations. Other quarters conceptualize poverty in terms of an income of one-dollar-a-day. (Rahman, 2003).

The money matrix in currency today, uses the following criteria for poverty.

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<sup>2</sup> The NGOs interviewed were: Bread for the World, Church Development Service ( EED) e.V, NETZ Partnership for Development and Justice, Partnership Shanti Bangladesh e.V, Mati e.V. Self Defined Rural Development in Bangladesh. Misereor was also on the list, but could not be available for interview.

<sup>3</sup> [www.bangladesh-forum.de](http://www.bangladesh-forum.de).

a) **Direct Calorie Intake (DCI)** : Household is poor if its per capita calorie intake is less than 2,122 kcal per day ( this does not include non-food item).

b) **Food Energy Intake (FEI)**: Food poverty line is the monetary value of the food expenditure that allows households to just meet the stipulated calorie requirement. (the FEI is normally derived through regression of the relationship between calorie intake and expenditure).

c) **Cost of Basic Need (CBN)**: A basic food basket is identified from the data, consistent with consumption patterns. The quantity of the basket is scaled accordingly to correspond to the nutritional requirement. Then the cost of acquiring the basket is calculated.

This money matrix conceptualizes poverty partially. It does not include other expenses beyond the food item. The existing literature however shows that poverty is not only confined within the money matrix, but that a few other indicators have also been adapted by researchers and various organizations. Nasrin Sultana (2002) summarized the information from various organizations in the following matrix, which provide different definitions of the extreme poor in Bangladesh. These include some divergences like, female headed households, lack of access to health care, institutional and non-institutional loans, displacement, disability etc.

Nowadays poverty is widely conceived as a multidimensional and dynamic process and not just an experience of economic deprivation. It includes considerations of knowledge and skills, human resources and capacities, vulnerabilities and coping, gender inequalities and human security and finally social exclusion and people's initiatives.

Most of the NGOs who were interviewed professed to follow the multidimensional concept of poverty. However they varied in the way they strategized poverty reduction. Some of the NGOs tended to take a more service-delivery approach, focusing on income generation and income mobility, while others adopted a rights-based approach focussing on empowerment of the disenfranchised, but most preferred a combination of both.

Each differed in their definition of the "extreme poor", but most adopt a multidimensional perspective of poverty. All of them adopted a specific definition of 'beneficiaries' sometimes inclusive of women and minorities (ethnic and religious) as special categories.

Almost all NGOs took up campaign and advocacy issues both individually and jointly at the local level as well as at the national and international level as part of the lobby group called the Bangladesh Forum.

### **NGO Strategies: Mobility - The Language of Service Delivery**

Mobility in terms of socio-economic mobility, is variedly seen as income mobility in terms of income generation or livelihood projects or moving out of hunger in terms of food security. Such service delivery mechanisms are usually considered to be essential in cases of groups in extreme poverty. The service maybe in the form of credit, health, education etc. though many NGOs reject credit and opt for interest free loans, since it is well recognized in the Bangladesh experience that micro-credit, the dominant development paradigm, cannot reach the poorest of the poor (Kholiquzzaman, 2007).

Staff training and community-ownership are essential for the successful implementation of these programmes. It is felt by all NGOs that in order for such service delivery mechanisms to

be successful, one needs to have a committed staff and rules of operation which would match the service delivered (be it credit, health or education) to the needs of the community.

These programmes are more or less compatible with mainstream developmental thinking, since their primary aim is to provide safety net provisions for the extreme poor and other constituencies which the state fails to reach out to. Hence they are, generally speaking, not perceived as a threat by the establishment. For this reason they are quite popular in the development thinking of both development partners as well as their local partner-NGOs. But very often such programmes are targeted by the Islamic fundamentalists (right-wing orthodox parties), because by providing essential services to the extreme poverty groups, they contest and interrogate the orthodoxy inherent in many local power structures. It is common therefore for these programmes to face challenges from the local power structure and politico-legal regimes.

### **NGO Strategies: Mobilization – The Language of Empowerment**

Many church-based NGOs perceive their empowerment programmes as part of their work for social justice. Others see empowerment programmes as a logical second phase of their livelihood and income generation programmes. A few opt solely for empowerment approach rejecting all kinds of service delivery. For conflict-ridden areas with minority population e.g. the Chittagong Hill Tracts, empowerment programmes takes the form of confidence-building measures and capacity-building. With the advent of the rights-based approach (Guhathakurta and Hasan, 2005), it has become more popular to enshrine components of empowerment strategies to ones programmes, but both development and local partners are often reluctant to take on such programmes because it often brings them into head on collision with both the local elites and national Government, since powerful vested interests are located at these levels and they resist anyform of empowerment of the people. For this reason even when such programmes are undertaken, it is often couched in the safety of a training programme, or a somewhat contained consciousness raising exercise. It has led many critics to wonder whether rights instead of leading to empowerment strategies have itself become a way of service delivery (Guhathakurta and Hasan, 2005).

### **NGO Strategies: Negotiation – The Language of Advocacy**

Some NGOs focus on particular themes to campaign for e.g. environment, women's rights, conflict-prevention, which are in line with their international image and priority.

Mostly common themes are articulated from broader concerns of the civil society in Bangladesh e.g. violence against women, freedom of the press, need for free and fair elections, protection for minorities and the extreme poor. Some demands arise from the plight faced by their local partners, e.g. harassment of NGO leaders by state and non-state actors, restrictions on release of funds and registration. Participation in international campaigns like those preceding G8 summit, or "Make Poverty History" campaigns are important activities which NGOs take on to help create international public opinion and advocate on behalf of their constituencies.

## **Perceptions of NGOs regarding Global Poverty Reduction Discourses**

When asked as to what extent the varied nature of their programmes responded to the changing nature of global aid policies, most NGOs who took primarily the service delivery approach responded that this has been a time tested and accepted approach preceding the post-Washington consensus era. Thus it is not as part of the recent ideology that they adopt this method. Besides they found this approach essential in order to address the needs of the extreme poor. For example when the question was put to a member of a marginalized community as to what kind of development orientation he would prefer his answer was, “I don’t have time to talk about rights. If you want to give me something, go ahead. Otherwise I have work to do.”

Furthermore the interviews revealed that the official (donor) discourse is based on the assumption that Bangladeshi NGOs seems to have combined service-delivery with a rights based approach very effectively, so both should be encouraged. However in some of the implementing bodies a concern was expressed that service delivery should be more important for NGOs since empowerment strategies often landed them in trouble.

On the other hand many European NGOs claimed that they have been able to negotiate spaces for themselves supported by public opinion and civil society and have thus been able to proceed with empowering strategies. One challenge has been the accountability of their local partners and the constraints created by the Bangladesh state, as apparent in the arrest by the past regimes of many NGO leaders for ‘overstepping their boundaries’ as in the cases of Proshika and ADAB.<sup>4</sup> In the field of practice in Bangladesh, the introduction of the rights based approach in what had been mostly a service delivery world was often not accepted. For example in a field work undertaken in Bangladesh by the author in 2005, one field level NGO worker was recorded as saying: “Rights are a nuisance actually. They are for NGOs that get a lot of foreign funding. We can’t afford rights.” But on the other hand a villager responded “Sure I know what rights are. Rights are something they can’t take away from me and are not for sale, like my integrity,” thus implying that there is a potential field for a rights based approach in the country, which is home grown and which do not necessarily tally with any external intervention.

No NGOs supported the idea of linking poverty reduction to war on terror. However, there was a general concern about fundamentalism in Bangladesh especially since many of their local partners have been targets of fundamentalist violence. Here they felt strongly that they should be supporting the cause of their local partners to combat fundamentalism at the grassroots and helping to advocate for a strong democratic polity.

From the perspective of an official discourse too, no linear link was thought possible between poverty reduction and war on terror. However this they thought would be more applicable for fragile states than Bangladesh. But though Bangladesh was not considered to be a fragile state it was advocated that aid be continued to Bangladesh so that it does not lapse into one. The following excerpt from the country programme evaluation of the BMZ (October, 2006) seems to support this argument:

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<sup>4</sup> Kazi Faruq, the chief executive of Proshika, one of the larger NGOs in Bangladesh and also leader of the NGO network organization called ADAB in brief, was harassed by repeatedly by both BNP regime as well as the caretaker government on charges of graft. But in actuality the arrests were politically motivated as Kazi faruq was seen as supporting the Awam I League, the then opposition to the BNP regime, and also represented an NGO which represented grass roots mobilization.



“Bangladesh’s importance for global structural tasks therefore derives not only from the duty of the international community to combat extreme poverty, which can spill over into neighbouring countries through migration or in the form of extremism. It is in the international community’s own interests that Bangladesh’s democratic structures should be strengthened, thus preserving the tolerant form of Islam and that poverty and the attendant crisis potential should be sustainably reduced through rapid, poverty-oriented economic development.”

This may be a sign that the official discourse is being affected by the global discourses on poverty reduction or it may be a way in which the global discourse is being used to bring in more funds for poverty reduction at the country level.

### **Negotiating Space**

Most NGOs are recipients of official funds and as such some NGO representatives think that those whose administration are directly funded by official funds would tend to be less independent than others. Church-based NGOs tended to argue that they are more independent than others especially in a country like Germany where the Church is a powerful actor which can often provide an alternative support base to the state. NGOs varied in their opinion as to how much involvement they wanted from their official development partners. Some thought that they would like more official involvement with NGOs, while others were quite happy to enjoy the freedom of space, which the non-interference of official circles offered them. It was also learnt from reviewing the official literature, that poverty reduction strategies often formed a very small part of their overarching goals of development assistance, and that even when articulated, the definition they adopted was very broad based with a tendency to treat target groups as homogenous socio-economic groups e.g. rural poor, women. Such definitions left the NGOs with space to manoeuvre. Implementing bodies like GTZ and KFW tended to assume that more money should be available for direct poverty reduction programmes.

### **Lessons Learnt**

From the above analysis, the following lessons could be culled with respect to how European NGOs could manoeuvre and negotiate more space for themselves in the context of the global discourses on poverty and in the context of the changing architecture of aid.

NGOs in their policy making and programmes, needed to be more aware about the global discourses of poverty reduction and discuss and strategize among themselves. They also needed to engage their local partners in this discourse. It is not unusual to find that local partners in resource poor societies tended to be more donor-oriented and dependent. Hence they would often subscribe to any policy if it brought them extra funds. This would be more likely to happen in times of recession than others. NGOs in Europe who has more room to manoeuvre can help their partners in this respect.

NGOs should uphold and showcase their individual perspectives on poverty reduction as distinct from global ones and highlight such perspectives in their lobbying campaigns. They should also link up with the broader concerns of the civil society in the recipient country like human rights violation and the strengthening of democratic structures and lobby national and international regimes on their behalf either individually or collectively as part of a platform. This can be done in the form of conducting continuous dialogues with their own governments,

official implementing bodies and institutions like the EU on thematic aspects of poverty reduction and conducting campaigns and networking on poverty reduction at an international level.

## Conclusion

The question remains as to whether NGOs in the North would want to incorporate such learning as depicted above into their development agendas and practices. Previous work has demonstrated the opposite (Ebrahim, 2003; Lister 2000). Northern NGOs had often efficiently modified the agendas of their southern partners and partnership had become a mere buzzword to cover the real power relationship at stake. In the real world that we exist today an inability to learn from both the new geo political and economic realities and past experiences would surely sound the death knell to the potential that is inherent in such cooperation.

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