AGENTS OF COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT? THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN BANGLADESH

M. Rezaul ISLAM[1],
W. John MORGAN[2]

Abstract: *This article considers the role of non-government organizations (NGOs) in term of their capacity as agents of community empowerment in Bangladesh. The article investigates the application of community empowerment using the domains provided by Laverack (2006). The article is based on qualitative research focusing on two NGOs in Bangladesh: Proshika and Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) and their work in two communities, one urban and the other rural. The data are obtained from two indigenous occupants: blacksmiths and goldsmiths. The article argues that NGOs in Bangladesh are potential agents of community empowerment, but there are obstacles which limit this.*

Key words: *Non-government organizations (NGO), NGOs' capacity, community empowerment, Bangladesh*

1. Introduction

This article is developed from and adds to a previous article published by the authors (Islam and Morgan, 2011). That article focused on non-governmental organizations

[1] M. Rezaul Islam, PhD is Visiting Senior Lecturer, Department of Social Administration and Justice, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Building, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, E-mail: rezaul@um.edu.my

[2] W John Morgan, PhD is Chairman of the United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO and Chair of Political Economy and Education, Distinguished Professor, International Institute of Adult and Lifelong Education, School of Education, University of Nottingham, NG81BB, E-mail: john.morgan@nottingham.ac.uk

in Bangladesh and their contribution to both social capital development and to community empowerment. Such development capacities, it was argued, provide a suitable framework within which to consider the elements and effectiveness of the community empowerment approaches suggested by Laverack (2006). It was observed that NGOs' interventions in developing countries such as Bangladesh are now focused on community empowerment. The research reported in that article selected two programmes from leading NGOs in Bangladesh: the Markets and Livelihoods Programme (MLP) of Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) and the Small Economic Enterprise Development (SEED) programme of *Proshika*. The research also focused on two groups, blacksmiths (MLP) and goldsmiths (SEED), from communities served by the NGOs. However, the article focused chiefly on social capital development, while the role of the NGOs for community empowerment was explained only relatively briefly. This article is intended to report that aspect of the research in more detail, examining further the potential and the limitations of NGOs in Bangladesh as agents of community empowerment.

2. Community development, community empowerment and NGOs: Theories and approaches

Now a day, the concepts 'community development' and 'community empowerment' have become important aspects to the NGOs' activities. The term 'community development' (CD) has been used to a great extent in the social sciences. In general, it is used as a process/method for social development. Recently, the term is being used as a new, powerful tool in the war on poverty in the developing countries. The concept of CD had its origin during the post World War II period. It came to international attention in 1948, when the Cambridge Conference on African Administration, organised by the British Colonial Office, used the term 'community development' for 'mass education' (Abedin, 2000:1). In the late 1940s and the 1950s, the British Colonial Office, US International Cooperation Administration, and the United Nations Organisation (UNO) encouraged the underdeveloped countries to take an interest in the CD approach. As a result, it gradually appeared as a universal phenomenon in the developing countries. The UNO defined CD as 'the process by which the efforts of the people themselves' were combined with 'those of the governmental authorities' in order to 'improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities', to integrate 'these communities into the life of the nation' and to 'enable them to contribute fully to national progress' (Abedin, 2000:1). It is especially effective in combating the powerlessness of disenfranchised people.

A common definition of 'community development' (CD) is not simple to attain, nor is it universally agreed upon (Wise, 1998, p.1) because of its wideness and complexity (Kelly & Caputo, 2005, p. 234). It means different things to different people in different places, and has expanded considerably in the past few years. The field of

CD grew, in large part, out of the industrialisation model of the mid-1900s. Reviewing the contemporary literature, some paramount substitutes for the word 'development', in this context are: *advancement; betterment; capacity building; empowerment; enhancement;* and *nurturing*. Brennan (2004) argues that there is an inconsistency in the definition, usage, and general understanding of what CD represents. To some extent, it is synonymous with economic development and is characterised by efforts to recruit industry and services. For example, business development, infrastructure improvements, and city planning all often fall under the description of CD.

Holdcroft (1978, p. 48) and Malki (2006, pp. 51-52) consider CD from a wider perspective. They define it as a process, method, programme, institution, and/or movement. As a long-term process, it enables people to take collective action to achieve their common goals; as a participatory method it leads to improved resource allocation and sustainable outcomes, to increase the negotiation power of poor people, and mobilises greater local resources to be reinvested locally; as a programme it gives communities a sense of responsibility, authority and control over the development decision-making process, the set-up of the development agenda and thus in the process of resource allocation; as institution it represents the interest of the community members and is devoted to the improvement of the material well-being of rural peoples.

CD is the planned evolution of all aspects of community well-being (economic, social, environmental, and cultural). It is a process whereby community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems. It is considered as a 'grassroots' process by which communities: become more responsible; organise and plan together; develop healthy options; empower themselves; reduce ignorance, poverty and suffering; create employment and economic opportunities; and achieve social, economic, cultural and environmental goals. Frank & Smith (1999, p. 6) argue that effective CD should be: a long-term endeavour, well planned, inclusive and equitable, holistic and integrated into the bigger picture, initiated and supported by community members, of benefit to the community, and grounded in experience that leads to best practice. CD is a set of principles which attempt to achieve felt-needs, extensive citizen involvement, consensus and local decision making. The key purpose is to bring about social change and justice collectively by working with communities. The most important outcome of CD is to improve the quality of life. Effective CD helps to improve mutual benefit and reciprocal responsibility among community members. It improves connections between social, cultural, environmental and economic matters; the diversity of interests within a community; and its relationship to building capacity (Frank & Smith, 1999, p. 6).

On the other hand, the concept of 'empowerment' is a buzzword. Empowerment is a process whereby individuals struggle to reduce personal powerlessness and dependency by having increased control over their lives (Lord & Hutchison 1997; Rappaport, 1987). It is highly advocated by prominent development actors and mainly

NGOs (Bodja, 2006, p. vi). Labonte (1996) states it as an important outcome of community development. As a broad concept, it represents more than a simple increase in income level or access to material resources (Islam & Mia, 2007, p.15). Empowerment enables people to organise and influence change on the basis of their access to knowledge, to political processes and to financial, social and natural resources (Bodja, 2006. p. 11-12). The concept has been defined in the literature in two ways: individual empowerment and community empowerment (Arai, 1995), but there is no universally accepted definition. It means different things to different people, and it varies across countries and cultures. It provides rebalancing of the structure of power within a community by addressing: control of resources, control of decisions, control of information, and physical domination (INTRAC 2005). It helps to expand the assets and capabilities of the poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable the institutions that affect their lives. The basic elements of empowerment are rights, resources and support to information, inclusion/ participation, accountability, and local organisational capacity (Narayan, 2002).

The concept of 'empowerment' is one of growing interest in development discourse. It is a process through which individuals struggle to reduce personal powerlessness and dependency and increase control over the circumstances in which they live their lives (Lord & Hutchison, 1997). It is advocated by prominent agents in economic and social development and especially by NGOs (Bodja, 2006: vi). As a broad concept, it represents more than a simple increase in income level or access to material resources (Islam & Mia, 2007. p. 15). Empowerment enables people to organize and influence change on the basis of their access to knowledge, to political processes and to financial, social and natural resources (Bodja, 2006, p. 11-12). The basic elements of empowerment are: rights, resource, information, inclusion, participation, accountability, and local organizational capacity (Narayan, 2002).

As we noted in 2011 it is argued that the discourse of 'community empowerment' has become the: '…common denominator of action for development agencies in a global world' (Tembo, 2004. p. 1025; Islam and Morgan, 2011, p.5). The concept was introduced in the 1990s to replace community participation (Rifkin, 2003, p.169), using the acronym CHOICE (C=capacity-building, H=human rights, O=organisational sustainability, I=institutional accountability, C=contribution, and E=enabling environment) theory, provided by Amartya Sen (1999). Rifkin shows, for example, how health equity can be achieved through community empowerment. The emergence of empowerment as a developmental concept is associated also with the shift to alternative development strategies as distinct from policies that derived from mainstream development theories. Empowerment is an 'alternative development approach' which recognizes the social aspects of development and the need for local communities to enhance their participation in the process through using local resources. Laverack (2006) reviews a number of approaches to such community

empowerment and develops nine components such as: improving participation; developing local leadership; increasing problem assessment capacities; critical awareness of people's needs; building of organizational structures; improving resource mobilisation; strengthening links to other organizations and people; creating an equitable relationship with outside agents; and increasing control over programme management. These enable individuals and groups to become better organized and to mobilise for community change in the direction that they have decided for themselves. Laverack states that there is considerable similarity between the approaches considered. He adds, however, that there is no consensus on which particular combination is the most effective for community empowerment. Instead, they provide a guide to community development practitioners in the planning, application and evaluation of community empowerment in a programme context.

Laverack says that, although such approaches have been used by practitioners for many years, their purposeful integration in a programme context is a more recent idea. The role of the practitioner in using an empowerment approach has been conventionally concerned with facilitating the movement of people along a continuum. These approaches give a more precise way of developing strategies for progression along an empowerment continuum. Laverack argues that this approach is very flexible and can lead to individuals and groups developing empowerment strategies which identify problems and their solution through collective action successfully.

NGOs have certain characteristics and advantages which allow the use of the elements of empowerment more successfully than state agencies. For example, Wuyts *et al.*, (1992, p.134), Cerenea (1988, p.18), and Islam and Morgan (2011) argue that such empowerment approaches can work successfully with the NGOs' advantages, such as acceptance and relation with marginalised groups, organizing participation, quick and flexible response, and cost-effectiveness. However, it is also suggested that NGOs perform differently from the above assumptions. Bodja (2006:20) argues that NGOs are accused of enabling well-established élites to corner development aid. Such élites are also seen as forming structures which perpetuate existing systems of neo-patrimonialism in poor communities. NGOs, especially international ones, have expanded their structure such that they have lost efficiency in terms of delivering cheaper and quicker service to the people they are intended to assist. Moreover, such NGOs are often accused of misunderstanding local conditions and of using staff without local knowledge and necessary skills (Wuyts *et al.*, 1992, p.134; Bodja, 2006, p.20), which misses the objective of community empowerment.

3. Research Methods Used

The research methods used were reported fully in our earlier article (Islam and Morgan, 2011). They are summarised again here for the benefit of new readers. A qualitative methodology was used, influenced by ethnography in that it considered different, but related social and cultural factors, such as people's attitudes, norms, values and practices in everyday life. The field work was based in two communities of goldsmiths and of blacksmiths, focussing on the Small Economic Enterprise Development (SEED) Programme of *Prokisha* and on s the Market and Livelihoods programme of Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) at the Mirpur) market in Dhaka and the Mostafapur Union Bazar for PAB respectively NGO staff members and community leaders were other stakeholders consulted. Qualitative data collection methods such as participatory rural appraisal (PRA), social mapping, participant observation, in-depth study, focus group discussion (FGD) and documentation survey were employed, including research questionnaires collected from community people, local leaders and NGO staff members The data collected was also triangulated and analyzed *thematically* and ethical issues taken into account, which required detailed preparation.

4. The NGOs as potential agents of community empowerment

As we reported in 2011, the research found several capacities within the NGOs as agents for community empowerment. These are presented in the Table-1. The data gathered from the two NGOs are analysed on the basis of nine domains of community empowerment provided by Laverack (2006).

Table 1

NGOs as potential agents of community empowerment

NGOs	Potential capacities for community empowerment
Both (common areas)	Community awareness, counselling & advocacy, training, participatory plan, meeting and consultation, information sharing, market chain, market map, seminars and workshops, involve with association, network with GOs-NGOs, monitoring & supervision, follow-up, research works, knowledge documentation, use of modern communication, donor friendly
MLP (PAB)	Exposure visit, partnership, formation of market opportunity groups, use of scientific tools (i.e. need assessment, market actors' behaviour assessment, learning log sheet and relationship matrix, etc.)
SEED (*Proshika*)	Federation, social scheme, credit, internal programme coordination, computer software, use of unused local resources, raising self-fund

Source: Adapted from Islam & Morgan (2011)

a) Community participation versus community empowerment

Community participation in all its forms has become an increasingly important aspect of urban and rural policy globally (Lyons *et al.,* 2001, p.1233). Participation has a significant effect on empowerment for sustainable development, which Friedmann (1996) calls 'socially sustainable conditions'. Community workers should focus on assessing community feelings through encouraging active local participation and then transform these into constructive community action plans (Malki, 2006, p.52). The participatory plan of the NGOs was most useful where the local producers, such as blacksmiths and goldsmiths, improved their confidence, drew on their traditional knowledge, experience and skills. It was helpful to justify and verify their thinking within institutional arrangements. Both NGOs believed that more participation in such kinds of institutional arrangement decreased individual fears, apprehensions, and limitations, on the one hand, and increased the possibility of social empowerment, on the other.

The staff members of both NGOs said that they began this participation through their community survey, where they investigated all social networks and encouraged the active participation of local people. They also said that this kind of participation came about through a 'market chain', where all types of social networks were established through 'collective actions' to achieve greater community empowerment. It was perceived as 'genuine' or 'real participation', achieved when the populace had an active voice in defining or diagnosing its own problems. As a consequence, development activity had an authentic chance of meeting the real needs of the population (Goulet, 1989, p.175).

The MSL arranged the exposure visit, where a blacksmith had a chance to talk directly with other blacksmiths, brokers, wholesalers, and businessmen (both urban and rural), designers, and suppliers. Many blacksmiths said that their exposure visits and participation in different blacksmith enterprises in Dhaka improved their confidence and working attitude. This gave them more freedom and confidence in the assertion of their democratic rights, as the process was formed by the people and for the people. But the staff members of PAB agreed that they were unsuccessful in some cases, as the local producers could not free from the exploitation of local élites, such as wholesalers. But the research found that such participation was helpful in minimising the exercise of such élite power.

b) Using scientific tools to increase problem assessment capacities

In 'bottom-up' participatory development, the improvement of problem assessment capacities among poor people is now an important aspect of community empowerment. It is very important in developing countries such as Bangladesh,

where a significant part of the population is illiterate and not fully aware of their rights and potential to deal with problems. The tools used by the NGOs were effective in assessing local people's attitudes, culture, norms and values, and political situation. Both NGOs used a number of scientific tools, such as community surveys, participatory market chain, market assessments, participatory plan approach, rapid market surveys, participatory rural appraisal (PRA), training, technology fairs, and also monitoring and evaluation as their assessment methods. The NGOs developed these through a 'trial and error' process. They were useful to new local entrepreneurs in improving their own assessment capacity. For instance, the 'rapid market survey' (RMS) was used to assess the current market situation. The local producers found this an easy and useful method, through which they could gather and record necessary information.

PAB offered other tools to the local producers, such as learning log sheets, relationship matrixes, needs assessment and market actors' behaviour assessment tools. In this way, the PAB could assess the most useful resources through identifying specific actions, which contributed to team success, and to improved future action. The Table-2 shows an example of the 'Cold Milk-Hot Profits' project's learning log sheet of the MLP in Dinajpur District. This identified suitable trainees and the collection of fees as a project topic.

Table 2
Learning Log sheet of PAB: Assignment Paravet training fee collection

Specific actions for well assignment	Actions contributed team success	Actions for better next time	Most useful resources and reasons
Identify professional demand Training demand creation Understand business interest Compare training cost & schedules with other organisations Registered form filled-up & training fee received	Minimised the expenditure of training Identified actual professional participant Maximised of training outputs	Open circulation of training Organising meeting	Human resources were most useful PNGOs & staffs of PAB motivated the paravets to pay fee
Learning: 1. The participants who had need the training only he/she would agree to pay the training fee. 2. Fee collection was a way to identify the effective participant.			

Source: PAB, 2006a, 2007a

The relation matrix shown in Table-3 was useful to assess the possible outcomes in favour of producer groups, where all possible related parameters/indicators were identified. This matrix was able to locate the current and future baselines on the basis of possible parameters. It shows how the milk producers and milkman relationship was developed in terms of information sharing, quality control, price settlement and improvement of trust. It was also helpful in improving social networks and social trust among the different groups of the community.

Table 3
Relation Matrix of PAB: Baseline, current & future picture on relationship between milk producer & milkman (milking and transport)

Parameter	Baseline	Future
Information sharing & communication	Regular communication occurred on milk purchasing purpose. No significant information, however, emerged on market prices and processor demands	The milkmen will disseminate the necessary information and will work with the producers in a group jointly
Quality control issues	-Lack of knowledge on quality milk production & hygiene of producers and milkmen The milkmen could not ensure the quality due to the small amount of collection as a long time	Quality of milk will be produced and it will be evident if tested and producers will get better prices.
Price fixation & payment	Generally the milkmen fix the milk prices for lack of alternative market and in some cases the milkmen provide money in advance to the producer and as a result producers are bound to sell milk to the milkmen at a lower price	Producer groups will enable price fixing through bargaining
Faithfulness & dependability	They have no faithfulness & dependability on one another in case of payment and extra weight	Producers will get regular payment and they will not be deprived about the weight.

Source: PAB, 2006a, 2007b

Proshika developed a number of techniques and measurements for proper performance assessment of the local producers, staff members and trainers. These included methodologies to develop good trainers, strategies for speaking, indicators of good trainers, questionnaires of producers' personal characteristics, producers' evaluation form and indicators of training demands, principles of communication,

learning strategies, techniques of memorising capacities, experienced-based learning-circle, visual aids of training, and principles of group learning. The staff members followed the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) strategies and PRA (Jones & Laverack, 2003, p.7), which they used to provide statements about the 'needs' and 'problems' on the running projects (SEED, 2007).

c) Group work practice to increase leadership capacity

Leadership is an important determinant for organisational performance. The key elements of leadership are vision, innovation, decisiveness, and a strong people orientation (VanSant, 2003. p.9). Both NGOs observed that most of the communities in Bangladesh suffer from problems related to a lack of effective leadership. The NGO staff members developed leadership capacity for two reasons: First, they were working with group-based enterprises, where leaders had a vital role to maintain and sustain these group activities; and secondly, the NGO workers wanted to share their organizational values and norms with the leaders, who would be able to disseminate and share these values and practices with their group members. As we have pointed out elsewhere, this kind of leadership can be compared with Gramsci's[1] concept of 'organic' intellectuals, who are developed through their own social processes. Gramsci argues that 'organic' intellectuals are rooted in their class and communities, are conscious of and committed to a constant struggle to achieve both domination and hegemony (Morgan, 1987, pp.303-304). The research found that such community leaders were being developed through associations and clubs, and through links with overlapping social networks.

The PAB developed local leadership through making partnerships and building forums, such as producer groups, private service providers and business development service providers. As a lead NGO, the PAB provided financial, managerial, and technological support to the partner NGOs. For instance, the PAB worked with the blacksmiths group at *Mostafapur Bazar* under this partnership. The PAB staff members claimed that, at the local level, these sorts of forums played significant roles in exchanging information and knowledge. PAB had twenty three types of producer groups with 455 members (Faridpur had five, including the '*Bhai Bhai Kamar Association*', eight in Barisal, and ten in Dinajpur) with association of partner NGOs (PAB, 2007c, pp. 1-3). On the other hand, by December 2007, *Proshika* had established 220 area development centres (ADCs), 149,776 peoples' organizations, and 18,417 group federations (*Proshika*, 2008), which were maintained with proper organizational rules, regulations, principles, and values. These were helpful for developing leadership and leadership qualities among the

---

[1] Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was probably the most important Marxist theorist produced by Western Europe since Marx and Engels.

local producers. *Proshika* also formed business associations. These associations had a number of activities regarding local leadership. The staff members and the local community leaders confirmed that a good number of their leaders participated in the elections to the local public administrations, and many were elected as Union Parishad (UP) Chairmen, Ward Members and Ward Commissioners.

d) More social networks to improve resource mobilisation

One of the major functions of the NGOs is to improve resource mobilisation. Network structure(s) can create enabling conditions for the mobilisation of social capital within communities and for people to feel empowered (Dale & Sparkes, 2008:143). Social networks helped many of the local producers by providing work opportunities, financial support, justice and social security (Purvez, 2005, p. 94). Both NGOs shared knowledge through a number of activities, such as exposure visits, training, and supervision and monitoring. It was seen that both NGOs used many local resources, such as local trainers (i.e. cascade training) and local raw materials.

The PAB file documents showed that the MSL worked with a number of organizations as a part of this partnership scheme between April 2006 and March 2007. These organisations were: the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU), Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), Wheat Research Centre (WRC), Rural Development Academy (RDA), Vocational Training Institute, *Palli Karma Shahyak Foundation* (PKSP), CARITAS Bangladesh, *Parbatya Boudha Mission Bangladesh*, and Art Institute of the University of Dhaka (PAB, 2006b). They also participated in the 'local market development forum', and shared experience with ICT based organizations. The SEED staff members claimed that they had good relations with many market and business level government organizations (GOs) and NGOs.

The MLP programme emphasised capacity building, partnership development and collaboration between GOs-NGOs. This programme provided a significant number of credits, inputs and technical assistance, which were mobilised and channelled to the project beneficiaries. For example, a number of partner NGOs started an enterprise development loan programme with MLP, where Tk. 21,787,500.00 (£213,602) credited to 1011 small enterprises. Mondal (2000:34) found that under the saving scheme of *Proshika*, the development workers encouraged their target people to save a small amount of money from their everyday income to face their crises and further investment for more income. It was observed that about half of their income or profit was used on human development or placed in savings. According to a SEED (2007) office data sheet, their total investment was Tk. 177,756,941 (£174, 2710), net profit Tk. 66, 71,440 (£65,406) and self-sufficiency was 162 from July 2006 to June 2007.

e) *Social enterprise and the NGOs' holistic approach*

The concept of 'social enterprise' is a recent feature of NGOs' activities. The term social enterprise was first developed by Freer Spreckley in 1981. The social enterprises are businesses with social objectives (Cheung, 2006), whose surpluses are primarily reinvested to achieve social objectives or used in the community, rather than being driven to maximise profit for shareholders and owners (Taskin *et al.,* 2006, pp.362-363). The first Bangladeshi Nobel Laureate (in Peace) Professor Mohammad Yunus introduced this concept with his NGO-*Grameen Bank*, which has now become a new dimension of social development in the NGO sector.

Social enterprise can be effective to achieve broader development, as it attempts to secure interactions with many social networks, on the one hand, and its impact is more holistic and comprehensive, on the other. This strategy empowers local people to generate their own capital in a sustainable manner. This approach can work significantly, where many local NGOs are facing a funding crisis and where NGO-state relationships are often fraught with tension. This approach can be used as an alternative mode for empowering citizens. Cheung (2006) finds this an innovative approach for NGOs in meeting new needs, which creates job facilities, enhances integration into labour markets, encourages self-reliance, and increases the density of community network and cross-sector partnerships.

The positive side of NGOs' activities as social enterprises is that it works through an effective partnership. It is a kind of joint venture, where the NGO is a partner that works with the government and other business sectors. One of the merits of this partnership is to share social responsibility and accountability among multiple agents, as it does not work singly. The value of this approach is that it shares all earning benefits with the local producers who own the enterprise; it improves members' dedication, sacrifice, care, and attention to the enterprise. SEED established a partnership with the business sectors, social enterprise agencies, and government. The goal of SEED was to promote sustainable income growth amongst the micro and small entrepreneurs, and create employment opportunities for the poor. Until June 2006, the SEED disbursed Tk. 725.86 millions (£6.60 million) among 5,640 entrepreneurs. Up to December 2006, a total of 13,441 entrepreneurs (40% female) were organized at 76 *Proshika* Area Development Centres (ADCs), and Tk. 742 million (£6.74 million) loans were disbursed among them. A total of 43,095 new jobs (54% full-time and 46% casual) were created (*Proshika,* 2008). This social scheme provided a number of facilities, such as scholarships, further loans, medical and job facilities for SEED members. This was more comprehensive, holistic, and accountable for a sustainable community. One SEED staff member compared its social accountability with the bank sector in Bangladesh:

"Banks never go to the community; banks do not provide business plan, training, motivational and counselling supports to the community; they don't have social schemes; rather SEED goes to the community and it builds up social networks with different sectors."

As a socially responsible organization, *Proshika* widened its experience and skills base by carrying out relief and rehabilitation activities during the many floods, cyclones and tornadoes between 1984 and 2006; and the *monga*[1] of 2005. The floods of 1988 and 1998 and the cyclone of 1991 were colossal and caused unprecedented damage. During the 1988 flood *Proshika* carried out an extensive relief and rehabilitation programme at a cost of Tk. 71.90 million (£0.65 million). The relief and rehabilitation programme carried out during the 1998 flood was even more extensive, involving a cost of Tk. 192.30 million (£1.75 million) (*Proshika*, 2008).

f) Communication and knowledge sharing

The NGOs used four types of communications channels for improvement of critical awareness about the community needs. These were aid channel and knowledge transfer, partnerships and links with like minded GOs-NGOs, participatory plan, and media, including website connection.

NGO staff members explained that, due to the shortage of financial capital and lack of government help, they had to depend on external agents, such as on donors as an 'aid channel'. But they confirmed that this 'aid channel' was helpful to build-up their capacity, particularly the management skills, new technology and innovation, and development policy between the North and South. The NGO staff members said that the donors had diverse experience working with different countries and with different communities. These networks were frequently international with the purpose of fostering social change (Bebbington, 2004, pp. 729-30) and were 'transactional networks' (Radcliff, 2001) in which both NGOs were embedded.

It is necessary for NGOs to have a precise knowledge and understanding of local people and their problems. This approach challenges the conventional development approach in which strategies are imposed from above. Laverack (2006, p.4) argues that, rather than using a formal education approach, the practitioners should help people by working with them in small groups, analysing why some people live in poor conditions and others not, and what local, state and national actions might

---

[1] *Monga* is seasonal food insecurity in ecologically vulnerable and economically weak parts of north-western Bangladesh, primarily caused by an employment and income deficit before *aman (a kind of paddy rice)* is harvested. It mainly affects rural poor, who have an undiversified income based on agriculture (Zug, 2006:2).

remedy particular circumstances. This helped both NGOs and local people increase their level of critical awareness. (Jones & Laverack, 2003, p.7). One SEED staff member spoke about activities for the local producer:

"SEED uses some local languages and techniques to understand the local producers- Who are their debtors? Who are their creditors? How will the creditors get their investments back? Why they are giving them the loan, and what sorts of financial and social benefits will they get and how? How will they pay their loan and how will they improve their savings? SEED is giving a real picture of their calculation how they will sustain their business."

Again, the PAB has partnership programmes: '…through shared responsibility to effect change, mobilise resources and exchange experiences with local NGOs. The MSL programme worked with seventy rural NGOs and 200 private 'like minded' service providers together to ensure 12,646 rural producers' (i.e. smallholder farmers, non-farm enterprises and rural potters) access to skills, credit, information and technology, and market linkage until 2006. More than twenty government offices in project areas supported producers either by improving their own training curriculum or providing training, credit and other material support (Chaudhury, 2006, p.5). The NGO staff members claimed that their collaboration with other NGOs, GOs, and producers was established successfully.

NGO staff members claimed that they followed the participatory planning approach through PRA, FGD, dialogue, campaign, and rally, and they shared knowledge with local community people. The NGOs also knew how they would develop their work according to the needs of the producers. This plan included drawing upon local culture and practice, peoples' choice, needs and demands, and norms and values. It was a 'learning process', through which an organization observed, listened, learned and identified the appropriate interventions. Both NGOs took the initiative to find out the real 'mentors' or 'organic' intellectuals in the local community from whom the local producers learned about their products. The NGOs also had continuous interaction with producers through monitoring and evaluation via mobile telephone. In such an evaluation of the MSL project, it was found that the programme had been able to change the real life story of many rural producers by facilitating technology innovation (PAB, 2006b, p.3).

g) Decentralised and autonomous management

At present: '…empowering organizational structures' in terms of management sufficiency, control over management, and 'ensured mutual support groups' (Laverack, 2006, p.6) are important elements of NGOs' work. Many authors state that, in an increasingly globalised world, whether a local NGO is using financial

resources from its own funds is an indication of its move towards 'self-reliance' and relief from donor dependency. However, it was found that both NGOs still were dependent on donors for funds.

Both NGOs had independent advisory and management boards which were adequate to control activities through autonomous and decentralised management. The MLP of PAB was managed by the head office located at Dhaka, linked with the main office in the UK. The head office of SEED of *Proshika* was located in Dhaka. According to area office staff members, there was full autonomy to work, and the central office did not impose unwelcome administrative decisions on them. However, the allocation of funds was through the head office which took all strategic decisions according to the assumed needs and demands of the local communities. Both NGOs had more organic relationships at community level; they seemed the most appropriate service delivery partners and were invited more and more by multilateral organizations to implement programmes. But their organizational structures did not fit the new large scale requirements; their accountability systems did not match either and there was the potential for problems with both government and the populations they serve (Scheper, 2000, p.3).

The sub-sector of PAB, for example, was the 'cold milk for hot profits' project[1] (PAB, 2007a, pp.1-3). From February to April in 2007, this sub-sector arranged sixteen group meetings with two partner NGOs in *Dinajpur* District, where the importance of vaccination for profitable cow rearing, the necessary care for pregnant and milking cows, and quality milk production experiences with group milk marketing issues, were shared among group members. This meeting was important for improving group functioning, but the question was about the quality and effectiveness of decision making. The group did not have the autonomy to decide what sort of help was needed, but received the interventions as the MLP decided and provided and it was found that the 'patron-client' relationship still existed. On the other hand, SEED also had links with other mutual peer institutions, such as the Bangladesh Women Enterprise, ASA, and BRAC, and their attempts for community empowerment were comparatively successful. As Fatmi & Islam (2001, pp.253) argue, *Proshika*'s model for social development and poverty alleviation emphasises total empowerment. *Proshika* therefore followed an approach of 'walking on two legs'.

---

[1] This project was run between April 2006 and March 2008. The aims were to increase the income and diversify the livelihood options of small milk producers through improvements in the quality and quantity of milk production. It helped to improve the livelihoods by creating a sustainable community-based integrated marketing system. The beneficiaries were 304 small dairy farmers, plus the local *paravets and goyalas* (milk collectors and milk processors) in the *Dinajpur* district of Bangladesh. This project has also been successful in encouraging others outside the area to adopt the scheme (PAB, 2008).

5. The limitations of NGOs as agents of community empowerment

A growing number of critical assessments suggest that the operational impact of NGOs in community empowerment is less than claimed. The NGOs' capacities, derived from the theory of community empowerment, have significant implications for Bangladeshi communities. However, the NGOs often follow a 'service delivery' paradigm, where the provision of services is strictly separated from engagement in the broader polity. In reference to this connection, NGOs become providers of goods to poor 'consumers', rather than 'facilitators' of collective action and empowerment (Rahman, 2006, p.452). The growing predominance of service delivery programmes among NGOs is problematic for the goals of empowerment and poverty alleviation (Rahman, 2006, p.455). Importantly, the NGO staff members had little theoretical knowledge about community empowerment though they still practised it. Moreover, the measurement of community empowerment within the role of NGOs is not easy. This is because the definitions of the concept are vague, qualitative and open to subjective interpretation. In addition, such an approach has limitations in terms of its broad applications within the Bangladeshi community. In some cases, the NGOs did take initiatives, but because of local problems, could not embed them as community practice. Moreover, NGOs' social contributions could not be visualised entirely.

The findings from both NGOs are summarised in Table- 4. This shows that there were some limitations in common to the community empowerment approach. The NGOs individually found a number of distinct limitations. It was also observed that some limitations were aggravated because of NGOs' weaknesses (i.e. a monolithic approach and the exclusion of ordinary people, unhealthy empowerment and malpractices of power, and management problem). Some limitations were related to the country's poor socio-economic and cultural conditions (i.e. lack of social trust, local power structures, and the negative role of religious leaders), and to those created by the government and by donor agencies (i.e. continuing debates between indigenous and global knowledge paradigms, donor dependency, inaccessible market and lack of government initiative, and challenges of knowledge transfer).

Table 4
The limitations of NGOs as agents of community empowerment

NGOs	Barriers for community empowerment
Both (common barriers)	Lack of social education, social ignorance, traditional habits, peoples' financial crisis, lack of unity and mental limitation, reluctance to use GK bases, lack of knowledge ownership, role of brokers & other exploiting groups, non-cooperation of local leaders and GOs-NGOs. Others included lack of government plan initiatives, inaccessible local markets, shortage of

NGOs	Barriers for community empowerment
	financial and other capitals, lack of social trust, class conflicts, power-relations, chadabaji, lack of decentralised management, external interventions & donor dependency, lack of knowledge update, unavailability of local resources, shortages of training resources, market competition
MLP (PAB)	Demoralisation, lack of communication, problem of knowledge transfer, project discontinuation
SEED (Proshika)	Lack of staff members' dedication, bad relations with the Government, inadequate educational background of staff members, low staff salary and staff turn-over, malfunctioning of associations, negative role of religious leaders

Source: Adapted from Islam and Morgan (2011)

The research also confirmed that the NGOs' initiatives toward development created more problems than solutions for powerless people (Kusumahadi, 2002, p.12), such as local blacksmiths and goldsmiths. The prescription of community empowerment approach provided by Laverack (2006) was found to be ambiguous. Laverack listed nine components as 'domains', which the stakeholders felt were too many and some were duplicated. They found them complex, long, gloomy, loose, and incomplete and even obscure. For example, the stakeholders could not find a real difference between '…increase problem assessment capacities' and '…critical awareness about people's needs'. Again, '…strengthening links to other organisations and people', and '…create equitable relationships with outside agents' are also similar. The 'empowerment approach' should be conceptualised in such a way, that the local people, community leaders and NGO staff members can understand and apply it effectively.

Secondly and paradoxically, Laverack's empowerment approach may also appear incomplete For example, the research showed that community participation was not secured simply by increasing people's assessment capacities and critical awareness, as they needed to fulfil some felt needs immediately, and then to address what may be discovered as their longer-term real needs. This is a 'social welfare' approach which is included in the study of Kusumahadi (2002, pp.5-6). The elements used there to 'increase access' and 'social control' should be added to Laverack's empowerment approach. To increase access is important to build community capacity, and to achieve access to the resources needed. The final element is that to: '…increase control over programme management' is phrased badly. It should be re-stated as: '…to increase self-management'. The concept of 'self-management' is more decentralised, understandable and pursuable. Such an approach would be considered as more convenient and acceptable for the NGOs, as a function of their direct links with local organizations and communities to gain a better insight into what kind of programmes are needed and desired by the poor themselves.

6. Concluding Remarks

To sum up, although the NGOs showed potential as agents for community empowerment in Bangladesh, their actual contribution in developing local leadership, creating empowering organizational structures and increasing people's control over management was weak. It was seen that both NGOs followed the so-called participatory plan (PP) and tried to consider the community feelings through their active participation, and then integrated these in community planning. But, practically, they faced contradiction as they could not include many marginal and ultra poor within their PP. The PP could not achieve 'real' or 'genuine' participation, as a substantial number of bureaucratic and top down methods existed. The NGOs used a number of scientific tools, such as the community survey, participatory market chain analysis, market assessment, rapid market survey, PRA, training, technology fair and monitoring and supervision as part of their assessment. But many of the local producers and NGO staff members claimed that they could not persist with such interventions, as they could not own them effectively. It was found that a good number of staff members believed that in many cases they failed to fit with the local context and with local producers' needs and feelings.

The paper argued that the reputational leaders/the 'organic intellectuals', who informally serve the community, had a better chance of building community capacity. It was found that both NGOs believed that leadership is not a process which could be developed by training; rather it should be developed through usual group activities, such as a participatory plan, market channel and business plan, involving people with different existing associations, and linking with different social networks. But this initiative was blocked by some of the local socio-economical and political processes, such as cultural lag, irrational attitudes, political influence, lack of GOs' help, and non-cooperation of the local power structure. On the other hand, NGOs' communication and knowledge sharing practices strengthened linking capacity with outside agents, and improved critical awareness among the local producers about their needs. It was found that both NGOs used aid channel, knowledge transfer, partnership with like minded GOs-NGOs, participatory plan, and media, including website connection under these interventions. The paper showed that decentralisation and autonomous management systems were significant aspects of community empowerment. It found some contradictions, such as self-dependency versus donor dependency and centralised versus decentralised management systems. It argued that without decentralised and autonomous management systems, the NGOs could not take any kind of decision independently, which would be in support of community empowerment.

NGOs' social enterprise concept was proved an effective intervention for community empowerment. It was considered to be a holistic approach, which could open many

windows to coordinate and accommodate many social networks through partnerships. The research illustrated that NGOs recent trend toward social enterprise was convincing, but the NGOs faced some contradictions, which included the socio-cultural barriers (i.e. self-interest attitude, cultural lag, and rigidity of traditional practice, financial insecurity) to such new social technology. The paper argues that neither of the NGOs could establish itself as a social enterprise, though some of their interventions were working toward achieving this goal.

The paper discussed number of limitations that the NGOs experienced, where their capacities were restricted. It was observed that globalisation made these limitations so complex that the NGOs faced tremendous challenges to overcome those limitations. One of the principal limitations was the poor socio-economic and cultural conditions of the community. The NGOs could not offer many of their interventions, such as loans, training, new information and knowledge, and technology to the local producers as the local producers were not able to utilise them. The NGOs' conventional roles (i.e. micro-credit business, target based approach, monolithic development approach, exclusion of the 'ultra' poor, work with existing employment rather creation new employment sectors, and downward accountability) were caught in this complex situation. However, the NGOs could not fulfil the demands of the marginal communities, such as blacksmiths and goldsmiths because of their lack of services and lack of dedication to social capital and community empowerment.

The research showed that the overall satisfaction among local producers was comparatively low with long-term social development interventions. The most disturbing finding of the research was NGOs' political empowerment. Such empowerment was used to perform their conventional role robustly. This attitude created many conflicts among different development agents. Eventually, the NGOs lost people's trust and confidence. Moreover, NGOs' exploitation, through money laundering, corruption, and misuse of donation, gave a negative impression to the community people, including community leaders and civil society. As a result, the NGOs could not find network-based broader supports at the community level. In addition, most NGOs in Bangladesh were dependent on foreign donation. Because of donors' terms and conditions, the local NGOs lost their autonomous management power. However, the NGOs lost their 'ownership'.

To consider the overall limitations, this paper purposes that an authentic participation policy can overcome many limitations, such as questions of accountability, NGOs' political empowerment, lack of social trust, non-cooperation of civil society and GOs, domination of local power structures, and so on. The research found that the participation between NGOs and other associated groups, such as local producers, community leaders, civil society, GOs and local institutions was not authentic. The thesis proposes that participation should be 'real', where the power should be held by the local people. This participation would be based on the indigenous structures,

where the local people would be able to determine which project they prefer and how the resources would be mobilised and utilised for community development. The research found that the poor and marginalised individuals and communities, such as blacksmiths and goldsmiths, were not able to achieve the full potential of their capability because of constraints imposed by the social/institutional structures of customs, control, and power. The paper proposes a more 'dynamic vision' that incorporated social networks and recognised dispersed and contingent power relations. This kind of participation could secure the development ownership for the local community, civil society, and institutions (NGOs and donor agencies). NGOs' role as a 'social mobilisation' paradigm of development would be more helpful for empowerment, collective action, and engagement with the broader political system.

References

Abedin N. (2000). Community development versus socio-cultural and administrative values in rural Bangladesh: 1950s and 1960s, in *Journal of Third World Studies*, Fall.

Bebbington A. (2004). NGOs and uneven development: geographies of development intervention, in Progress in Human Geography, vol. 28, No. 6, pp. 725–747.

Bodja S. (2006). A critical perspective on community empowerment: the selected NGOs in Ethiopia, unpublished Masters' degree dissertation, Cape Town: University of Western Cape.

Brennan M. A. (2004). *IFAS Community Development: Toward a Consistent Definition of Community Development,* Florida, University of Florida.

Cerenea M. M. (1988). *Non-governmental Organization and Local Development*, Washington D. C., World Bank.

Cheung S. Y. L. (2006). Social enterprises and entrepreneurs, Conference on Social Enterprise, Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, City University of Hong Kong, 6 April.

Chaudhury I. A. (2006) *Sustainable Livelihoods through Capacity Building and Enterprise Development, Documenting the Evidence and Lesson Learned,* Dhaka, Practical Action Bangladesh.

Dale A, & Sparkes J. (2008). Protecting ecosystems: network structure and social capital formation, in Community Development Journal, vol. 43, No. 2, pp. 143-156.

Fatmi M. N. E & Islam M. (2001). Towards a sustainable poverty forming model the Proshika approach. IN Sharif I. & Wood G. (Eds.). Challenges for Second Generation Microfinance, Regulations, Supervision and Resource Mobilization, Dhaka, University Press Ltd.

Frank F. & Smith A. (1999). *The Community Development Handbook: A Tool to Build Capacity,* Canada, Minister of Public Works and Government Services.

Friedmann J. (1996). Rethinking poverty: empowerment and citizens rights, in International Social Science Journal, No. 148, pp. 161-172.

Goulet D. (1989). Participation in development: new avenues, in World Development, vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 165-178.

Holdcroft D. (1978). *Words and Deeds Problems in the Theory of Speech Acts,* Oxford, Clarendon Press.

International NGOs Training and Research Centre (INTRACT) (1999). *The participatory approaches learning study,* London, Department for International Development (DFID).

Islam, M. R. & Mia, A. (2007). The innovative elements in non-formal education of Bangladesh: perspective of income generating programmes for poverty alleviation' International Journal of Education and Development using Information and Communication Technology (IJEDICT), vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 89-104.

Islam M. R. & Morgan, W. J. (2011). NGOs in Bangladesh: Their contribution to social capital development and community empowerment, in Community Development Journal, advance access- doi: 10.1093/cdj/bsr024

Jones A. & Laverack G. (2003). Building capable communities within a sustainable livelihoods approach: experiences from central Asia. Online at http://www.livelihoods.org/lessons/docs/kyrgyz_SLLPC.doc, accessed 2 June 2007.

Kelly K. & Caputo T. (2005). Case study of grassroots community development: sustainable, flexible and cost-effective responses to local needs, in *Community Development Journal*, vol. 41, No. 2, pp. 234-245.

Kusumahadi M. (2002). Practical challenges to the community empowerment programme experiences of Satunama Foundation of Yogyakarta Indonesia. Online at http://www.satunama.org/upl/article/en_Meth.Kusumahadi%5C's%20PRESENTATION.pdf, accessed 19 October 2006.

Laverack G. (2006). Using a 'domains' approach to build community Empowerment, in Community Development Journal, vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 4-12.

Labonte R. (1996). Community empowerment and leisure, in Journal of Leisurability, vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 4-20.

Lord J. & Hutchison P. (1997) Empowerment, disability and the community context, in Rehabilitation Digest, vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 13-15.

Lyons M., Smuts C., Stephens A. (2001). Participation, empowerment and sustainability: (how) do the links work? in Urban Studies, No. 8, pp.1233-1251.

Malki M. (2006). Community development approaches: a concept note. In Hamyaran (Ed.). *Community Empowerment for Sustainable Development in Iran,* pp. 50-59, Fifth Mena Development Forum. Beirut, Lebanon, Iran NGO Resource Centre.

Mondal M. S. H. (2000). Study of Impact of Proshika Micro-credit Programmes on Employment and Income Generation, Dhaka, Proshika.

Morgan W. J. (1987). Considering Antonio Gramsci, in Teaching Politics, vol. 16, No. 3, pp. 301-307.

Narayan D. (2002). Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Source Book, Washington, D. C., World Bank.

Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) (2006a). Rapid Market Survey on Milk Marketing (for milk processors), PMCA, Tool-3, Dinajpur city, Dhaka, PAB.

Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) (2006b). Markets and Livelihoods Programmes, Dhaka, PAB.

Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) (2006c). Annual Project Review Report, 2006, Dhaka, PAB.

Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) (2007a). Monthly Progress Report on 'Cold Milk for Hot Profits' Project, Dhaka, PAB.

Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) (2007b). Relationship Matrix on 'Cold milk for Hot Profits' Project, Dhaka, PAB.

Practical Action Bangladesh (PAB) (2007c). Producer Group Status of Faridpur, Dhaka, PAB.

Proshika (2008). Activity Report 2008, Dhaka, Proshika.

Purvez M. S. A. (2005). Building support for a living: the importance of social networks for the livelihoods of the poor. IN Khan I. A. & Seeley J. (Eds) *Making a Living: The Livelihoods of the Rural Poor in Bangladesh,* pp. 93-107, Dhaka, University Press Ltd.

Radcliff, B. (2001) Politics, markets, and life satisfaction: the political economy of human happiness, in American Political Science Review, vol. 95, No. 4, pp. 939-952.

Rahman S. (2006). Development, democracy and the NGO sector theory and evidence from Bangladesh, in Journal of Developing Societies, vol. 22, No. 4, 451–473.

Rappaport J. (1987). Terms of empowerment/exemplars of prevention: toward a theory for community psychology, in American Journal of Community Psychology, No. 15, pp. 121-47.

Rifkin S. A. (2003). A framework linking community empowerment and health equity: It is a matter of CHOICE, in Journal of Health Population Nutrition, vol. 21, No. 3, pp.168-180.

Scheper E. E. (2000). The challenges for local NGOs in the globalising civil society, key note speech at the Rise of Civil Society in East Asia conference, a joint Sophia University/UNDP initiative, Tokyo, April.

Sen A. (1999) *Development as freedom,* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Tembo F. (2004). NGDOs' role in building poor people's capacity to benefit from Globalization, in Journal of International Development, vol. 16, No. 1023–1037.

VanSant J. (2003). Challenges of local NGO sustainability, keynote remarks prepared for the USAID/PVC-ASHA Annual PVO Conference, 14 October.

Wise G. (1998). Definitions: community development, community based-education about the environment. Online at http://www.uwex.edu/erc/pdf/AppA_ CommunityEdDefinitions.pdf, accessed 12 August 2005.

Wuyts M., Mackintosh M., Hewitt T. (1992). *Development Policy and Public Action*, Oxford, Oxford University Press/the Open University.

EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES
ON THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Victor NICOLĂESCU[1],
Daniela NICOLĂESCU[2]

Abstract: *In Europe, social economy consists of a lot of actors and it manages to produce social usefulness and to cover needs that the public sector or the business environment fail to meet. The organisational forms, the social objectives and the areas of activity of the social enterprises can vary from one country to another because they may be involved in activities helping local development or promoting the environmental activities; they may provide services, manage finances, or they may apply commercial rules in order to encourage the international development. This paper approaches the social economy at European level considering the typology of the welfare systems and the peculiarities of each individual state. The portability and transferability of this organisational form may become a hindrance when the attention focuses only on the formal aspect regarding the mechanical transfer of some patterns from the European level to the regional level.*

Keywords: *social economy, welfare, development, social enterprise, non-profit*

1. Introduction

The definition of social economy is not an easy thing because this expression is used to define a complex world and a system of relations that govern the third sector and the non-profit enterprises: creation of flexible jobs, active citizenship, services for the people, decentralised social assistance, human rights safety, consolidated policies for local development and social cooperation. It is thus considered to be an economy with the most different actors, spanning from cooperatives to mutual aid associations,

---

[1] PhD, Associate Professor, Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work and Sociology, Petre Andrei University, Iaşi, Romania. E-mail: vic72ro@gmail.com.

[2] PhD, Expert on child rights and social policies, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: nicoldana@ yahoo.com