Non-Governmental Organizations and Popular Education Programs: Can they Mobilize Culturally Appropriate Grassroots Organizations in Rural Bangladesh?

Bijoy P. Barua
Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, OISE/UT

Abstract: This paper will address the issues of popular education programs and the mobilization of grassroots organizations by NGOs from the context of culture and sustainable development in rural Bangladesh.

Introduction

In developing countries, the terms ‘partnership’, ‘people’s participation’ and ‘popular education’ have been widely used for the socio-economic and political development of disadvantaged people. In light of these key terms, development researchers, policy planners and program organizers often discuss poverty alleviation, people’s empowerment, mobilization, people’s organization, grassroots organization and people-centered development within the context of the international development agenda in developing countries. Over the years, Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs] have gained popularity in these countries through the promotion of grassroots organizations and development.

In this paper, I will argue that the NGOs have ignored social, cultural and spiritual aspects of the rural people since they have been occupied with the massive expansion of programs for their own growth and development in the name of ‘empowerment’. More importantly, the NGOs have been working to create dependency while building grassroots organizations in the villages with the assistance of Western donors. These grassroots organizations will not be sustained in the villages of Bangladesh if the external funding is not available. The critique of this paper is based on my own field research in the Southwestern part of Bangladesh from 1997-1999. I will begin with a brief review of literature on NGOs, popular education and grassroots development in developing countries. This will be followed by a description of NGOs, grassroots organizations and their expansion into the rural culture of Bangladesh. Finally, I will draw a conclusion from my discussion on these key points. Throughout this paper, I will use the terms ‘grassroots organization’ and ‘people’s organizations’ interchangeably.

Non-Governmental Organizations and Popular Education Programs

The empowerment concept of NGOs is mainly focused on consciousness raising, leadership training and the formation of grassroots organizations in villages through imparting popular education. Popular education is considered to be a process of collective learning where educators and educatees learn together through group action in order to make social change. In addition, popular education is politically radical and attempts to mobilize the disadvantaged groups for empowerment through grassroots organizations. It promotes a ‘bottom up’ approach instead of a ‘trickle down’ approach. “Popular education begins from people’s physical, emotional and intellectual locations” (Clover et al.1998: 10). An important element of popular education programs is to liberate the villagers from colonial oppression and to assist them in valuing their...
own culture in order to strengthen their grassroots organizations through educational activities (Dawson, 1992).

**Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Grassroots Development**

The Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs] are viewed as non-profit civil society organizations that are involved in grassroots promotion for the empowerment of the disadvantaged segments of the population (Clark, 1999). These NGOs have been engaged in empowering the rural disadvantaged people through the building of grassroots organizations in the villages. The NGOs have expanded their activities enormously over the last four decades in Asia, Africa and Latin America. There is a growing belief among the Western donors that participatory development can only be attained through the active involvement of NGOs in development. Despite these factors, international organizations, including the World Bank, tend to involve NGOs in development activities in order to put political pressure on governments in the developing countries. Although NGOs in recent times have been considered as efficient agencies by the international development agencies, there are strong critiques of their roles, policies and operations in grassroots development. In the view of Fowler (1988); “NGOs have their own goals and vested interests which may not concur with those of their intended beneficiaries. NGOs’ organization structures just seem to have emerged from their [funding] history rather than being appropriately designed for the purpose of micro-development” (p.13). In recent times, NGOs have become more project oriented than people oriented because of foreign funding. In most cases, they are occupied in the massive expansion of programs in the rural areas, regardless of any participation from the rural people. “NGOs have suffered from a limited vision of their roles” (Korten, 1990:91). Although they have been successful as advocates of people’s participation and empowerment, their conceptual clarity with regard to participation in the process of grassroots development remains vague (Galjart, 1995). Their work is mostly limited to welfare activities in order to relieve the immediate suffering of the people. Much of their programs have been confined to the basic needs approach rather than political empowerment for social change. In most cases, the role of the NGOs in the rural societies tends to maintain a patron-client relationship in the name of empowerment (Barua, 1999).

**Context of NGOs and Grassroots Development in Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has a total of 56,977 sq. miles or 147570 sq. km. with a population of 111.4 million as of March 11, 1992. Ninety percent of the people live in rural areas and over sixty percent live by agriculture alone (BBS, 1996). Although Bangladesh was rich economically during the pre-colonial period, at the present time seventy percent of the rural population is landless [owning less than 0.5 of an acre each]. Over 50 million people are living in absolute poverty and of these, more than 25 million are living in extremely harsh circumstances. Rural people are more than twice as likely to be poor compared to those living in the cities (Saddi, 1998). The people of Bangladesh have experienced colonial oppression for more than two hundred years. More significantly, they have faced military rule for nearly 30 years from 1947 to 1992. The participation of people in the political process was not a regular event (Barua, 1999). Over the years, the people of Bangladesh have struggled for their liberation based on their language and cultural identities (Jahan, 1996). In spite of their long struggle, Bangladesh only emerged as an
independent nation state through a war of liberation in 1971. The liberation struggle sensitized the young freedom fighters to work for the empowerment of the rural people. Eventually, these freedom fighters came forward with a commitment to establish Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs] in the post-liberation era in order to help these rural people. The NGOs have now extended their programs to 24 million rural people in 78% of the villages in the 490 thanas [sub-districts] with the financial support of international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral donors (Karim, M., 1993).

NGOs have implemented a variety of activities in the villages of Bangladesh without consistent effort. “It is obvious that they have not gone through an evaluation of their own development process” (ADAB/PRIP/IDR1, 1992:2). In fact, the monetary and materialistic environment within the development organizations has largely demobilized the creativity of the rural people in Bangladesh. Although, NGOs adopted the Freirian concept of ‘conscientization’ in the late 1970s to enhance the awareness of the rural people in Bangladesh, they have now mainly engaged in the promotion of development through capital building and monetary transactions in order to attract these people. NGOs have been primarily confined to building their own power base and authority rather than to collective education in the villages.

Grassroots Organizations and the Rural Culture

The popular education programs of NGOs emphasized the building of grassroots organizations through the target group approach. This approach organizes the disadvantaged men and women based on economic homogeneity in order to change their economic and political status in the society. Popular education programs of NGOs tend to replace the existing indigenous social organizations. They usually present the view that the existing indigenous social organizations are ‘oppressive’ and do not allow any social and physical mobility within the society. This notion has eventually allowed NGOs to mobilize samities [grassroots organizations] in the villages with the intention of creating an exploitation free society through social movement. In fact, the formation of grassroots organizations was adopted by the NGOs in the 1970s. Since the rural people participate in the samity, they are able to receive monetary benefit from the NGOs. This new form of organization maintains bureaucratic social norms, regulations, administrative responsibilities and record keeping which are new to the samity members. In most cases, these are practiced by the Extension Workers in order to maintain reporting procedures since the members of the samity are unable to do this (Barua, 1999). Generally, the village people tend to maintain their social responsibilities through an oral record keeping procedure. “Writing does not bear any meaning here” (Freire, 1985:13). Since the formation of samities takes place within the organizational framework of NGOs, the members of the samities are not able to liberate their thoughts through critical consciousness. Rather, the relationship between the NGOs and the villagers is often developed toward a didactic rather than the participative.

Interestingly, I observed that the cohesiveness and solidarity of members in the samity is mainly based on their gosthi [lineage/clan], sanskrity [cultural/religious identity], and para [neighborhood] identities within the rural society of Bangladesh. These three key elements have

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also been essential in mobilizing samities in the villages, whatever the form of educational activity. Generally, most of the members of a particular samity are closely connected through a network of para where they live and interact continuously with each other everyday. Since the gosthi and sanskrity networks are deeply rooted within the socio-cultural environment of the Bangladeshi village, it is probably impossible to ignore these social networks within the para of the villages. In addition, one cannot deny the role of the existing gosthi and sanskrity networks in mobilizing the disadvantaged groups of people and making grassroots organizations. Such gosthi, sanskrity and para networks act virtually as an informal educational forum in sharing the information and messages within the villages. This type of educative sharing takes place spontaneously in the villages through everyday social and emotional relationships and interactions rather than through institutionalized and bureaucratic structures (Barua, 1999). Despite this, NGOs ignore the cultural identity of people while mobilizing peoples’ organizations. It may also be of some benefit to refer to an example from the Latin American context. In Peruvian society traditional community organizational structures were considered to be effective instruments/tools for social transformation and group solidarity without the external imposition of new ones. Rural peasant communities were mobilized into grassroots organizations through popular education (Gianotten and Wit, 1990).

In Bangladesh, there are 200,000 masjids [mosques], 100,000 mukhtabs [Islamic schools] (Shahidullah, 1997) and 5,766 madrashas [Islamic schools] (Rashiduzzaman, 1994) deeply rooted in the villages which are involved in the mobilization of the people through their educational programs. The religious institutions and the indigenous organizations (kinship ties/networks) have a strong say in determining socio-political behavior in the rural socio-cultural life. The social and political bonds among the rural people, whether poor or rich, are based on their kinship ties and religious affinities. During my involvement in the field, the members of the various samities expressed their deep respect for their religion, social and cultural identities and said that they would want to maintain these identities. The extension workers of NGOs also confirmed that they are more accepted in the villages if they go to the mosques and temples. Despite this fact, the NGOs repeatedly expressed the view that they would like to ensure the economic growth and democratic rights of disadvantaged groups through the mobilization of grassroots organizations. However, I believe the NGOs can only promote such efforts with the assistance of their Western donors who tend to impose conditions and terms on the basis of their own ideology.

NGOs are critical of social and religious institutions within the villages and they often label these groups as being ‘hegemonic groups’. Consequently, thousands of NGOs education centers were vandalized by religious groups in 1990 and 1991 as part of a cultural challenge in Bangladesh. Because of this, even liberal and socio-political parties could not avoid the appeal of using socio-religious and cultural identities in order to win the national election of 1996. The introduction of the democratic process has virtually allowed every group to bargain for their social, cultural and political identities. If NGOs become involved in the religious right versus liberal conflict, they will lose their power base due to the strong hold of religious institutions and indigenous organizations in the program villages (Rashiduzzaman, 1994). Incidentally, while implementing education for disadvantaged groups in Latin American society, Paulo Freire also could not ignore religious institutions. Rather, he was involved in these institutions in order to promote education for the benefit of disadvantaged groups. Freire emphasized that; “My
‘meetings’ with Marx never suggested to me to stop ‘meeting Christ’ (Quoted in Lange, 1998). Considering this, NGOs, Islamic schools, trusts and social service groups would arguably be more productive if they could work together collectively rather than with hostility in promoting popular education for the villagers in Bangladesh.

The formation of grassroots organizations within the target group [based on economic criteria] has easily helped the people become alienated from their community or encouraged them to depend on the implementing agencies. Furthermore, given the rural disadvantaged group’s continued dependence on these catalytic forces, it is very difficult for them to develop their own grassroots organizations as well as the independent leadership skills necessary to develop democratic rights in the rural society. Such grassroots organizations are usually maintained only as long as NGOs remain in the villages. In other words, the members of the grassroots organization would only assemble in the weekly meetings in order to receive their monetary benefits from the NGOs through a micro-credit scheme. As a result, the NGOs are able to channel credit to the rural people with an interest rate of 15%-22% (Economist, 1998) in the name of empowerment and development. Attention has been focused on money and material items rather than the social, cultural and spiritual aspects of the rural people.

Conclusion

After considerable examination of the formation of grassroots organizations in Bangladesh, I have found that the indigenous social organizations, socio-cultural and religious networks play a significant role in mobilizing the rural people despite NGOs insistence on people’s organization based on economic homogeneity. In other words, the cohesiveness and solidarity of members is mainly dependent upon their gosthi, sanskrity, and para identities. Considering this, I believe that self-sustained grassroots organizations can only be mobilized on the basis of a thorough understanding of the local culture. The imposition of new forms of grassroots organizations has created dependency in the name of development. The formation of grassroots organizations based on a Western urban notion of development may not create any base or space for rural people to develop their own organizations in Bangladesh. The rural people of Bangladesh maintain their own social, cultural, spiritual and psychological values in order to live in harmony with nature and their society. If the NGOs truly intend to empower the rural people, they will need to conceptualize the issue of building grassroots organizations based on the reality experienced by the villagers within their unique social environment.

References


