



Stimulating role of NGOs in Bangladesh

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Summary

Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) act as windows on applied knowledge and provide links to sources of information. NGO activities are active in all nineteen coastal districts in Bangladesh. Among the NGOs that work exclusively in rural areas, the greater numbers are involved in water and sanitation, closely followed by environment and forestry, fisheries and micro-credits, providing small loans.

Many NGOs address typical coastal issues, assist in solving local coastal problems and implement programmes among selected coastal communities. In recent years, the government has initiated several development projects addressing issues of coastal zone management and targeting programmes to enhance livelihoods of the coastal population.

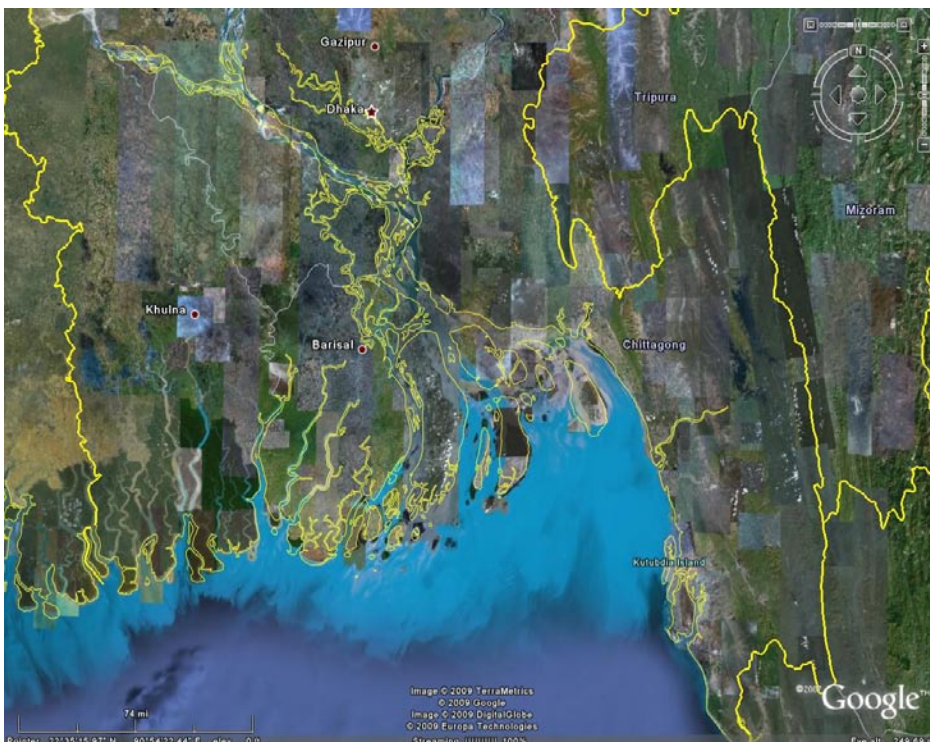


Figure 1: Bangladesh, a low lying deltaic country product of strong and dynamic rivers and the sea. (source: Google Earth: Image @2009 TerraMetrics, @2009 Google Image, @2009 DigitalGlobe, @2009 Europa Technologies)

1. Role of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Most of the NGO activities in the coastal districts of Bangladesh aim to contribute to poverty alleviation and community development. But they tend to limit their activities to some specialised areas. For example, some mainly address women's issues, others are involved in the financial credit programme, and yet others in social mobilisation activities. Quite a number of NGOs address issues in their immediate (coastal) environment and try to undertake activities focusing on those issues. Several hundreds of "coastal NGOs" are engaged in "coastal activities" (Sayed Iftekhar et al., 2003). Typical coastal zone activities range from: disaster preparedness, fisheries, food processing (dry fish), environment, forestry, housing. NGOs also highlight the existence of applied knowledge and provide links to sources of information on sustainable development and how for instance to mitigate and adapt to climate change or how to identify and combat the occurrence of arsenic (As).

2. Coverage

NGO activities are prevalent in all nineteen coastal districts of Bangladesh. Chittagong district has the highest number of NGOs (83), closely followed by Khulna (78), Jessore (71) and Barisal (64), while Shariatpur and Feni are covered by the lowest number of NGOs (14 each) followed by Jhalakati (15), see Figure 2.

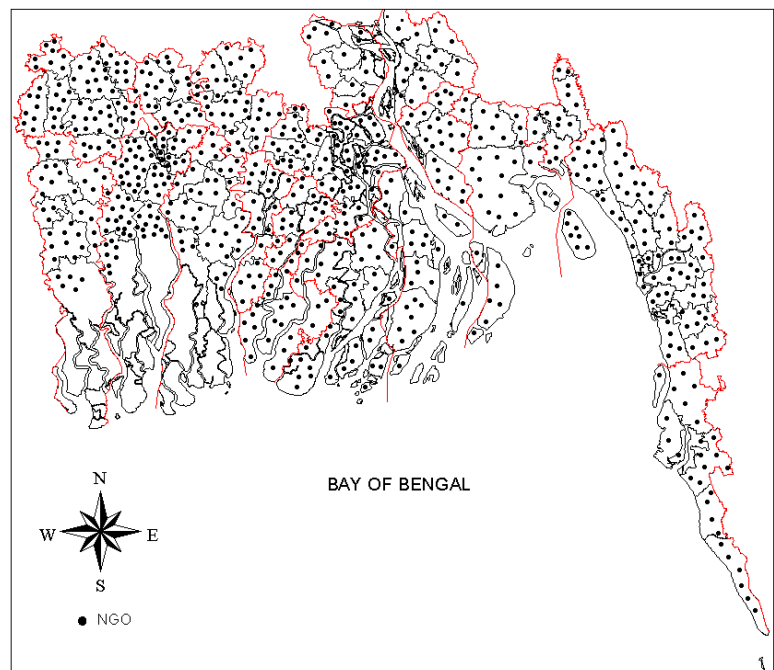


Figure 2: **Distribution of NGOs** in the 19 coastal districts. (source PDO-ICZMP, Working Paper 22, 2003)

3. Activities

Among the NGOs that work exclusively in rural areas, the highest number are involved in water and sanitation (53%) closely followed by environment and forestry, fisheries and micro-credits. Among the urban NGOs, the highest number work in the field of AIDS prevention, followed by programmes on street children, health, nutrition, and programmes concerned with adolescent children. Among the NGOs with activities both in rural and urban areas, the highest number have programmes in the field of training (42%), followed by women's development and provision of credit. For details, see Ahmad, 2003a and ADAB, 2000.

Many NGOs operate in the coastal districts. However, not many NGOs are present in the most exposed coastal zone that are, the 'chars' (newly accreted alluvial land) and the islands. People in those areas have distinctive vulnerabilities as they live with recurrent disasters (cyclones and erosion) and are deprived of basic services (because of isolation). It is difficult to estimate how many households in the coastal zone are covered by the NGOs. Estimates were made (Ahmad, 2003b and Sayed Iftekhar et al., 2003). The number of households covered by 168 micro-credit NGOs in the coastal zone was about 0.7 million (December 2001). This is 10 percent of the coastal households and 31 percent of the total clientele covered by micro-credit NGOs in Bangladesh. Beneficiaries of the micro-credit programme of NGOs are mostly located in the 'interior coast'.

Several NGOs are engaged in specific issues such as water quality and in particular, with toxic arsenic in groundwater. Understanding on the distribution of arsenic is growing. Very high arsenic concentrations of greater than 100 µgram/l occur in Bangladesh and West-Bengal groundwater. Regarding the expected arsenic distribution in wells: the shallow wells have the lowest arsenic concentration (NNC-IAH, 2008). The use of arsenic-selective adsorbents as an adaptive measure is viable in remote rural locations. (Sudipta Sarkar et al., 2008).

4. Coastal perspective

There is no well-articulated overarching NGO “coastal perspective”. However many NGOs address typical coastal issues, assist in mitigating coastal problems and implement programmes among selected coastal communities. In recent years, the government has initiated several development projects addressing issues of coastal zone management and targeting programmes to enhance livelihoods of the coastal population. Some examples of increasing NGO involvement in government projects include:

- Char Development & Settlement Project;
- Sundarbans Bio-Diversity Conservation Project;
- Coastal Embankment rehabilitation Project;
- Empowerment of Coastal Fishing Communities.

There are also many NGOs, which have a major impact on programmes concerning coastal communities, for example:

- Community Development Centre working with marine fishers;
- Association for Land Reforms & Development, addressing issues of land settlement (for the victims of erosion);
- Bangladesh Disaster Preparedness Centre, which is engaged in disaster preparedness;
- COAST Trust, which is involved in the enhancement of livelihoods of the poor;
- Coastal Development Partnership, which is active in networking and information dissemination.

Since the inception of the Programme Development Office (PDO) for the Integrated Coastal Zone Management - ICZM Plan (see CCC II-1-3) in February 2002, the ICZM concept is being introduced to the NGO community. Many NGOs have responded positively, and extended extensive support and cooperation in accomplishing certain activities of this programme.

5. Institutional setting

NGOs have their own clientele. They generally work with the poor. They organise their clients into community or village based groups who use NGO services. Local NGOs sometimes have their own reasons not to make use of existing institutions and traditions, in order to implement their programmes and to deliver their services.

Different NGOs acting at different levels and a growing number of NGOs play an important role in improving the living conditions of the poor coastal people.

National NGOs with a good overview of pressing coastal issues, can assist both in monitoring coastal processes and helping coastal inhabitants both before and after hazard events. An example of such an NGO is “Bangladesh Centre of Advanced Studies” (BCAS website), bridging international and national coastal efforts for local people. BCAS co-produced for instance the valuable Bangladesh Vulnerability Assessment (CCC II-1-1).



Bangladesh during severe 2007 flooding.
(photo: www.tear.org.au)

Example of the role of NGOs: Water for life

There is no well in this village of Shyamnagar Upazila in Satkhira district, as the groundwater is too saline. The pond is the only source of water and the water is filthy. Diarrhoea, dysentery skin diseases were common in almost every household.

Sripati Kumar Mondol is an affluent farmer. He has donated a 0.37-acre pond for community use. The pond was re-excavated and cleaned with project support from Caritas Bangladesh in August 2000. Water is reserved for use for drinking and cooking purpose. A water-storage area has been made with brick and cement at one corner of the pond with a sand-filtering system and a hand pump to take water from the storage area. *Sushilon*, a local NGO,

introduced the pond-sand-filtering technology. Women from about five hundred neighbouring households come with buckets and pots to take water from here. Many fisher-boatmen also take water for their boat before they sail for hours on the river. The incidence of water-borne diseases has dropped considerably.

The pond is cleaned once in every three months. A five-member committee headed by Sripati oversees it. People call it the *grammo shebok committee* (rural volunteers' committee). The committee looks after the maintenance fund.



(photo: Mohiuddin Ahmad)

6. Partnership at the local level

NGOs have consultative status in different forums (committees) at the district and the upazila (sub-district) level where they participate in, and contribute to the implementation of selected programmes together with local government officials, representatives of local government institutions and members of the civil society. Table 1 provides a list of these committees/meetings.

Sl.	Name of the governmental committee & meeting
District level	
1	Agriculture Rehabilitation Committee
2	Disaster Management Committee
3	House Allotment Committee
4	Tree plantation Implementation, monitoring and evaluation committee
5	NGO Activity Monitoring Review Meeting
6	VGD (Vulnerable Group Development) Co-ordination Meeting
Upazila level	
1	Agriculture Rehabilitation Committee
2	Fertilizer and seeds monitoring Committee
3	NGO coordination meeting
4	Agriculture Development Committee
5	Disaster management committee meeting
6	Forest Retention Committee
7	VGD Committee
8	VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding) Committee

Table 1: List of governmental committees with NGO participation

While Government - NGO cooperation is promoted as an ideal instrument of programme implementation, government agencies and NGOs face the difficulties of working under project conditions. In many respects, they have to go beyond their conventional domains to work out arrangements with their counterparts in the programme.

NGOs feel encouraged when they are treated as ‘trustful partners’. However, they are often treated as paid ‘contractors’ in government projects, and complying with all contractual obligations may consume energy meant to help relieve the poor.

Example of the role of NGOs: Lighting nights and minds

Has anybody ever contemplated that the shanties in a remote *Munda* village in Satkhira district would sparkle with fluorescent bulbs? This is no longer a fairytale. Small solar panels stand out on bamboo tops at Mundapara. All the 48 households are connected. Centuries-old night gloom is gone and replaced by children’s reading schoolbooks.

A *poribesh* (environment) school was set up by Caritas Bangladesh at the edge of the neighbourhood where the children gather in the morning. The school was set up in 2000 and currently has 80 students. Sabita and Prasanta, a blissful young *Munda* couple from the village, work as teachers. They enlighten the minds of the children of their own community. Students enrol from Grade *Shishu* (nursery) to Grade-III. The National curriculum is used along with a separate course containing environmental messages.

The entire neighbourhood has changed its outlook. All the houses have water-sealed latrines. Earthen houses are clean and regularly mopped. Backyards are full of green vegetables. Men and women have accumulated savings of over taka 57,000. Income has increased by 30 per cent since June 2000. They do not feel vulnerable anymore.



(photo: Mohiuddin Ahmad)

Example of the role of NGOs: Adaptation to climate change (see also CCC III-3-3-8)

Flood and water logging is a common problem in Bangladesh. A vast area of Bangladesh is situated below mean sea level, affected by high tides. Climate change will aggravate the problem in the future. Evidences of adverse impacts are already visual. The main impacts are on the livelihood of people in terms of crop loss and food insecurity. Many communities have developed *baira* cultivation as an adaptation strategy to reduce their vulnerability. BCAS with local NGOs are providing training and material to local communities to improve the floating bed cultivation and to reduce seasonal food insecurity in the coastal villages.



(photo: Atiq Rahman)

7. Incorporating NGOs in ICZM

An effective way of incorporating NGOs in a structured ICZM fashion is to make use of a civil society forum. Such a forum, representing stakeholder interests, could review and monitor the functioning of the ICZM programmes. Several coastal NGOs participate in a fragmented manner, which requires better integration and coordination. A Coastwatch frame is proposed, that could function as a broad civil society platform and could develop into an umbrella organisation: a network of NGOs that have interest in coastal sustainable development.

The main activities of an umbrella organisation which will strengthen coastal coordination of NGO activities, could be dealing among other things with:

- Review ongoing developments in the coastal zone of Bangladesh, annually reporting;
- Liaise and interact with different stakeholders in the coastal zone and with institutions at the policy level that have involvement in the coastal zone and periodically disseminate information on coastal issues through newsletters;
- Help government agencies to adhere to the principles laid down in the coastal zone policy and strategy work as a civil society pressure group to realise the ICZM goals.

8. Conclusions

NGOs do have special capabilities that are essential for alleviating poverty and vulnerability that are amongst the objectives of ICZM. An important advantage is their efficiency and effectiveness in reaching out to the poor especially by channelling donor support towards them.

NGOs are also very valuable in providing a link between authorities and organisations, linking local, national and international sources of information and funding. Some examples of “International to local and vice versa” linkages are the identification of impacts and directions of solution dealing with climate change and perils of arsenic.

The introduction of an umbrella organisation, could increasingly help civil society to integrate within the national and local development processes. This may lead to greater awareness about coastal issues, better planning through stakeholder participation in media debate and promoting the voice and participation of the civil society.

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